

## De Pestilitate and Paracelsian Cosmology

Didier Kahn

► **To cite this version:**

Didier Kahn. De Pestilitate and Paracelsian Cosmology. *Daphnis - Zeitschrift für Mittlere Deutsche Literatur und Kultur der Frühen Neuzeit*, Rodopi, 2020, 48 (1-2), pp.65-86. 10.1163/18796583-04801014. halshs-02984824

**HAL Id: halshs-02984824**

**<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-02984824>**

Submitted on 9 Nov 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

*Didier Kahn*

CNRS, Cellf 16-18 (Sorbonne Université, Paris, France)

*dkahn@msh-paris.fr*

## ***De Pestilitate* and Paracelsian Cosmology**

### **Abstract**

*De pestilitate* is an interesting treatise on plague falsely attributed to Paracelsus and published as such by Johann Huser (who believed it authentic) in Paracelsus's *Bücher und Schriften* (1589-1591). It can be dated from before 1578. This article shows that it features conflicting cosmologies issued of different works of Paracelsus. We also discuss its theory of plague, based on the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, as compared with the authentic plague theory of Paracelsus.

### **Keywords**

Paracelsus – plague – spurious works – cosmology – prime matter – four elements – Biblical Creation – magical imagination

Among Paracelsus's treatises on the plague, *De pestilitate* has been considered by Sudhoff as spurious, without much explanations. In a general discussion of Paracelsus's plague treatises eventually focusing on *De pestilitate*, Charles Gunnoe has recently pointed out a number of inconsistencies leaving little room for doubt about the clearly spurious nature of this otherwise interesting treatise.<sup>1</sup> After adding some further arguments to Gunnoe's demonstration, I will try to explain how sources drawn from two authentic, yet different cosmologies of Paracelsus actually merge in *De pestilitate* in a contradictory way, presenting the reader with a seemingly plausible, yet intrinsically conflicting cosmological scheme. I will then give an idea of how the plague

---

<sup>1</sup> Gunnoe, [forthcoming]. I warmly thank Charles Gunnoe and an anonymous referee for their corrections and remarks.

theory of the treatise rests on this peculiar cosmology, and compare it with that of Paracelsus himself.

### **1 A clearly spurious text**

*De pestilitate* was first published by Johann Huser in 1589 in the third volume of Paracelsus's *Bücher und Schrifften* "from the manuscript of Johannes Montanus and other people", a statement that applies to both *De pestilitate* and the authentic treatise on the plague adressed by Paracelsus to the city of Sterzingen.<sup>2</sup> Thus, contrary to Sudhoff's statement in his edition of Paracelsus,<sup>3</sup> the text of *De pestilitate* was not necessarily printed by Huser from a Montanus manuscript. No manuscript is currently known. Textual evidence only leads to assume that the text was composed before 1578.<sup>4</sup> Thus the history of the transmission of this text is late and elusive.

Some excerpts likely to have passed unnoticed in early modern times can now raise a legitimate suspicion in the mind of modern readers: after an explanation on comets, said to be born "durch den *Spiritum Imaginationis Majoris Mundi*", the treatise *De pestilitate* refers to a book of Paracelsus on the soul and spirit of the world ("ein *Volumen de Anima et Spiritu Mundi*"; or: "in meiner *Philosophia de Anima Mundi*"). The soul and spirit of the world are two Neoplatonist concepts never used by Paracelsus, to the best of my knowledge. There is even a reference to Paracelsus' interpretation of the Revelation (an unheard-of treatise), which must not fall into the hands of the common people.<sup>5</sup> Paracelsus discussing the world soul might be an

---

<sup>2</sup> Huser, III: fol. Aaa iij v°.

<sup>3</sup> Sudhoff, XIV: XXXIII.

<sup>4</sup> Gunnoe, [forthcoming]; Strein, Telle, 2003: 349–370.

<sup>5</sup> *De pestilitate*, book I (Huser, III: 44): "Aber in der außlegung uber die Offenbarung *Johannis* werde ich noch deutlicher darvon schreiben: Allein in des gemeinen Mannes Hende muß unnd soll diese geschriff nicht kommen. Darauff wird folgen ein *Volumen de Anima et Spiritu Mundi*." See also 47: "Dann die Welt mit ihrer Imagination ist gleich einem Affen: denn alles so der Mensehe thut / will im der Affe nachthun. Also auch die *Anima & Spiritus Mundi* alles nach Imaginirt / so der Mensehe fürnimpt." And book II, chap. 1 (Huser, III: 87): "als ihr weitleuffiger finden unnd lesen werdet / in meiner *Philosophia de Anima Mundi*".

interesting reading indeed; but it is quite implausible: his now well-known reception of Florentine Neoplatonism never went this far.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, pseudo-Paracelsus praises the authentic comments of Galen and Avicenna, the reading of which will demonstrate that he is actually more of a Galenist than all his opponents. In this rather surprising excerpt we discover Paracelsus in the guise of a true humanist, knowledgeable about cloisters preserving valuable manuscripts, including – in Hamburg, so we are told – autograph manuscripts of Galen and Avicenna (“des *Galen* unnd *Avicennae* eigens Handtschriefften”).<sup>7</sup> Here we learn at last of Paracelsus as a distinguished Hellenist, and even Arabist (Avicenna’s autographs!). In the same vein, the author once refers to *Musalogia nostra*, a most surprising title, coming from Paracelsus.<sup>8</sup> It could be added that *De pestilitate* repeatedly mentions the *evestrum*, or more exactly, the “secret and hidden *Evestralisch* being and spirit” that lies in the sun.<sup>9</sup> Now the notion of *Evestrum* is only found in four other treatises which are actually spurious or possibly spurious works: the *Philosophia ad Athenienses*, where it is extensively discussed (book II, §18-23), the *De occulta philosophia*, the *Liber Azoth*, and *De natura rerum*, where it is just mentioned in the end of book 9.<sup>10</sup> An odd kind of philosophy is also mentioned: the “Techellische *Philosophia*”, a notion clearly derived from the character of Techellus the Jew, “ein grosser Meister in Israel / unnd ein rechter Naturkündiger” who mastered the “höchsten Kunst *Magica* und *Cabalia*”. This spurious character appeared in 1570 in an

---

<sup>6</sup> See the discussion in Daniel, 2015: 217–223.

<sup>7</sup> *De pestilitate*, book I (Huser, III: 60): “Ihr werdet befinden / das ich besser Galenisch erfunden werde / dann ihr alle. Dann ihr werdet in der Statt Braunaw / inn unnd auff den Böhemischen Grentzen in einem Kloster ein Buch finden / da die rechten ungefelschten *Commentaria Galeni* unnd *Avicennae* rechtschaffen innen geschrieben seindt: Ist ein Buch / grösser dann sechs Mannes Spannen lang / unnd dreyer Spannen breit / unnd anderthalb oder schier zweyer grosser Spannen dicke / welches noch heütte den leuten gezeigt wirdt [...] Deren eins [grosser Schatz] hab ich auch inn einem Kloster / im Land zu Sachsen gesehen / in der Statt Braunschweig : Ist aber durch die unwissenden Esel verbrennet worden : Welches Buch noch seines gleichen bey einem alten Burger inn der Statt Hamburg verhanden ist / unnd noch viel auff Bircken Rinden unnd Wächsine Tafeln / des *Galen* unnd *Auicennae* eigene Handtschriefften.”

<sup>8</sup> *De pestilitate*, book II, chap. 2 (Huser, III: 89): “Also geschicht auch im Menschen ein solche wirckung / das der sein eigen giff in ihm selbst gebieret / *ut in Musalogia nostra latius, etc.*”

<sup>9</sup> Huser, III: 73 (*De pestilitate*, book 2): “Wie *Pestis* ubernatürlich im Menschen wirdt”: “Ihr *Naturales* sollet alle / wie viel Ewer sein / wissen / auch ihr *Theologi*, das in der Sonnen ist ein heimlich unnd verborgens *Evestralischs* wesen unnd *Spiritus*”; see also 74 and 78.

<sup>10</sup> Huser, VIII: 34–39; IX: 338, 341; X, Appendix: 9–10; and VI: 361–362.

equally spurious treatise, the pseudo-Paracelsian *Liber Principiorum*.<sup>11</sup> Thus a number of instances exclude the authorship of Paracelsus himself and suggest the work of some unidentified Paracelsian. It is nonetheless interesting, and even instructive, to delve deeper into the cosmological and anthropological ideas of *De pestilitate*.

## 2 Anthropology

This treatise claims to be grounded on terrestrial philosophy (“Tellurische Philosophie”), for it does not deal with theological matters, as repeatedly claimed by the author.<sup>12</sup> It opens with a description of the six locations of the human body that are affected by plague, namely two behind the ears, two under the armpits and two in the folds of the groin. These locations are the same as those described by Paracelsus in the authentic plague treatises, mostly that dedicated to the city of Nördlingen in 1529 or 1530, and the later *De peste libri tres*, both major sources of *De pestilitate*.<sup>13</sup> The heavens are responsible for infecting the body with the poison of plague. This influence is detailed as follows: Saturn acts on the ears location with the Moon’s properties; Mars and the Sun act on the armpits; Jupiter and Venus act on the groin. However, there is also a seventh location disclosed by the “Techellischen *Philosophia*”. This location is that of Mercury, which is to be explained, it is said, further on.<sup>14</sup>

Then the author states that man’s earthly body, as an offspring of the macrocosm, is made up of water and earth, while his earthly, animal life (“Irrdischen Thierischen lebens”), is made up of fire and air. This life is different, however, from the life coming from the soul, i.e. coming from God’s breath; for it is not the author’s intention to deal with theological, but only medical

---

<sup>11</sup> Huser, III: 24: “Es befindet sich auch nach der Techellischen *Philosophia*, das uber die vorgemelten vj. stellen noch eine (nemlich die siebende stelle) dieser grossen krankheit erkennen soll werden.” See *Liber Principiorum*, chap. 5 and 6 (Huser, VII: 283, 285). On this text, see Sudhoff, XIV: XXVIII–XXIX. On Techellus, see Pagel, 1960.

<sup>12</sup> Huser, III: 24. See Huser, III: 25–26: “Ich verstehe alhier nicht das Leben / welchs Leben auß der Seelen / das ist / auß dem Athem Gottes / entspringt: Dann meine meinung ist an diesem orth nicht Theologisch / sondern Artzneyisch: Sondern / ich verstehe das Leben / welchs Thierisch unnd zergenglich ist”. See also 29: theology uses no earthly philosophy (“keiner Irrdischen Philosophie”); on the contrary, the author will only use the latter: “Darumb / so werde ich jetzund Philosophisch von Irdischen und natürlichen / und nit von ubernatürlichen Menschen reden und Philosophieren.”

<sup>13</sup> Huser, III: 24, 128, and 152.

<sup>14</sup> Huser, III: 25.

matters. Man's earthly life, then, is twofold: animal and sidereal, both united within the earthly body. More precisely, there is a sidereal spirit giving the body its motion, thus providing it with animal life.<sup>15</sup> This animal life comes from the properties and the strength of the heavens. Or, in other words, the heavens rule our life, the elements rule our body.<sup>16</sup> Since our body consists of water and earth, and our life of fire and air, the author states that water and earth are ruled by fire and air. Further on, it is said that man has been created after all animals and partially in their image (having been of course created first and foremost in the image of God).<sup>17</sup> Thus he has two kinds of knowledge: one relates to the animal nature and comes from the stars; the other is supernatural and comes from God.

All this clearly sounds close (though only similar) to the anthropology of the *Astronomia magna*. However, Paracelsus explained in the *Astronomia magna* that man has two bodies (not a twofold life): one elemental, and one sidereal, both mortal. Paracelsus also explained that man has in him both a rational and an irrational part, both coming from the stars. The irrational part is the ability to take in food and grow. The rational part, specifically human, is his wisdom, reason and skill ("sein tödtliche Weißheit / Vernunfft / Kunst"). Man's soul alone does not come from the stars, but from God (in the image of which man was created), and the soul is taught supernaturally by the eternal wisdom.<sup>18</sup> The set of ideas from *De pestilitate* summarized above, though not perfectly consistent with the *Astronomia magna*, is, thus, quite close to it. The author also states that man has been made up from the *limbus*, which is (he writes) the dust of the earth.<sup>19</sup> Again, this is not what Paracelsus intended with this word in the *Astronomia magna*,<sup>20</sup> but we cannot help not to be reminded of the *Astronomia* when coming across this statement.

---

<sup>15</sup> Huser III: 26: "Dann der Thierische unnd Syderische leib ist ein ding unnd nicht zwey / unnd das also. Der Leib ist todt das ist / das *Corpus*, als Fleisch unnd Blut / ist alleweg todt: Aber der Syderische Geist / darauß der Mensch sein Thierisch Leben hatt / machet / daß das *Corpus*, das ist / der leib / bewegt werde."

<sup>16</sup> Huser, III: 26: "der Himmel regiert das Leben des Menschen: Die *Elementa* regieren das *Corpus* des Menschen."

<sup>17</sup> Huser, III: 26–27 ("Vom Ebenbildt des Thierischen Menschen").

<sup>18</sup> *Astronomia magna*, I, 1 (Huser, X: 16–17).

<sup>19</sup> Huser, III: 29.

<sup>20</sup> According to Paracelsus, man was created from an extract of the prime matter of the whole Creation: after everything was created *ex nihilo*, God made man from an extract of the whole. This whole was called by Paracelsus *limbus* or *limus terrae*, after the Bible (Gen. 2, 7). See *Astronomia magna*, I, 2 (Huser, X: 28–29); Daniel, 2008–2009; Kahn, 2016: 61–62.

### 3 Cosmology

The next section of *De pestilitate*, designed to explain which matter man has been made of, is called “*Cabala*”. This rather un-Paracelsian title sounds really odd in this context, since the topic dealt with (as we will see) is certainly not magic, but cosmology.<sup>21</sup> Its origin is certainly derived, however, from the Nördlingen plague treatise, where Paracelsus praised “the entire cabalistic art”, insisting that the plague was not a natural, but supernatural disease.<sup>22</sup>

The distribution of the four elements previously made in *De pestilitate*, namely water and earth composing our body, and fire and air providing us with life, enables the author to locate the four elements in two globes: one inferior, made of water and earth, and one superior, made of fire and air<sup>23</sup> – a cosmological scheme clearly reminiscent of the meteorological tracts of Paracelsus, namely the *Philosophia de generationibus et fructibus quatuor elementorum* and *De meteoris*. However, since the former was not printed before 1590, we might want to favour the latter (printed as early as 1566).<sup>24</sup> Besides, in the same excerpt of *De pestilitate* the author mentions “der Himmel und die ander drey Element / Lufft / Erden und Wasser”; now only in *De meteoris* had Paracelsus removed fire from the four elements and replaced it with the element of heavens: the author of *De pestilitate* takes up this replacement. Since he makes several references to the meteorological writings of Paracelsus elsewhere in the treatise,<sup>25</sup> there is no doubt that *De*

---

<sup>21</sup> See Rudolph, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Huser, III: 133-134 (see below, section 4.1); see also the preface to book II (Huser, III: 140).

<sup>23</sup> Huser, III: 36: “Diß Leben in allen Viech wirt von zweyen Sphæren geregiret: Als von der Obern Sphær welche Lufft und Fewr ist: Unnd von der Untern Sphær / welche Wasser und Erden ist.”

<sup>24</sup> I have wrongly asserted that the scheme of the two globes was abandoned in *De meteoris* (Kahn, 2016: 96). Actually it is not. See e.g. *De meteoris*, chap. 4 (Huser, VIII: 200): “Was uns nach grobem verstand in der untern Sphaer unnd Globul angezeigt wirdt / dasselbige gibt uns ein Exempel / das auch in den Obern Sphaeren und in der obern Globul / dergleichen auch dermassen ein Gleichnuß sein muß”.

<sup>25</sup> Huser, III: 43: “Darumb diese ding eigentlich unnd vollkommen zuverstehen / müssen die *Meteora* wol verstanden werden: Unnd nicht allein die *Meteora* der grossen Welt / sondern noch viel mehr die Meteorischen werck *Microcosmi*. Der dann das weiß / kan / unnd verstehet / der ist ein Artzt unnd Doctor.” See also Huser, III: 63.

*meteoris* was known to our author and used by him. Evidence can be found throughout the whole *De pestilitate*.<sup>26</sup>

Be it as it may, the section called “*Cabala*” begins with these words:

Earth, Water, Air and Fire originate from three things, which were not created before Earth, Water, Fire and Air: those three things were, and still are, Fire, Air, Water and Earth. Those three things had one single mother from which they have been created: Water was this mother. For when the whole world was created, the Spirit of God hovered upon the waters; then, through the word *Fiat*, Water has been created first, and then from Water all other creatures, both dead and living ones (i.e. both living and inanimate). And the right names of these three things are *Sulphur*, *Mercury* and *Salt*. This is the basis and the true matter from which all animals, and then man, were created.<sup>27</sup>

Thus the four elements originate from the three principles, although both the four elements and the three principles were created all at once. *And* the three principles originate from water – even if water itself originates from the three principles (water being one of the four elements). The first paradox is entirely possible in Paracelsus’s cosmology via the Trinitarian conception of the word *Fiat*, especially in *De meteoris*.<sup>28</sup> The second paradox, however, is utterly absurd.<sup>29</sup> This sheer absurdity is tempered, however, by the immediate reference to the Biblical Creation, which echoes, in the reader’s mind, a well-known treatise of Paracelsus: *De matrice*. This double

---

<sup>26</sup> Thus the *Excrementa Stellarum* mentioned in *De pestilitate* (Huser, III: 48, 61) are a recurrent topic of *De meteoris*, chap. 10 (*De Exhalationibus : id est, de Excrementis stellarum, Draconibus volantibus, tribus Solibus, &c. Item de Iride*: Huser, VIII: 246 ff.). The explanation of thunder in *De pestilitate* (Huser, III: 63-64) is clearly an adaptation of *De meteoris*, chap. 8. The use of elemental beings is partly drawn from *De meteoris* as well, but this topic certainly requires further study.

<sup>27</sup> *De pestilitate*, book 1, “*Cabala*” (Huser, III: 30): “Der Erdboden / das Wasser / der Luft / das Feuer / haben ihren ursprung auß dreyen dingen: Dise drey ding sind nit eher / dann der Erdboden / das Wasser / Fewr und Luft geschaffen worden. Diese drey ding sind gewesen / und sind noch / Fewr / Luft / Wasser und Erden: Dise drey ding haben Eine Mutter gehabt / darauß sie beschaffen worden: das ist gewesen die Mutter / nemlich das Wasser. Dann da die gantze Welt ist beschaffen worden / da hat der Geist Gottes geschwebet auff den Wassern: Dann durch das wort *FIAT*, ist am Ersten das Wasser beschaffen worden / und hernach auß dem Wasser alle andere Creaturen / todt und lebendig. Und werden also dise drey ding mit ihrem rechten Namen genennet / *Sulphur*, *Mercurius* und *Sal*. Das ist nun der grund und die wahrhaftige *Materia*, darauß alle Thiere / darauß ferner der Mensch beschaffen worden / beschaffen sind.”

<sup>28</sup> See the problem of the prime matter of Creation in Kahn, 2016: 76 and 93.

<sup>29</sup> Even the nonsense about *prima* and *ultima materia* in Paracelsus’s *De mineralibus* (Huser, VIII: 335-336) at least *might* convey some sense.



reference is powerful enough to make the reader overcome the nonsense he has just come across and continue his reading.

This excerpt is, thus, quite problematic, and in more than one way. It is evidently derived from *De meteoris*, where the creation of both the four elements and the three principles are related to the word *Fiat*.<sup>30</sup> But in *De pestilitate* this part of *De meteoris*, once modified, has been grafted on an excerpt from *De matrice* where water is mentioned as the first, primordial element. Now it is quite problematic for the cosmology of *De pestilitate* to be rooted in distinctive features borrowed from contradictory treatises. Whereas the treatise *De meteoris* acknowledges the heavens (a redefinition of the element of fire) as the most prominent element, *De matrice* privileges water first and foremost. Thus we are faced with a patchwork of sources for *De pestilitate*, all drawn from authentic writings of Paracelsus but not quite consistent with each other. This is another strong reason to reject the authenticity of *De pestilitate*. Admittedly it often happens that several theories of Paracelsus contradict each other (although in this case they are rather alternative, successive theories, since *De matrice* was apparently written a few years before *De meteoris*);<sup>31</sup> but we never find pieces of so obviously conflicting theories merging in one and the same treatise.

Now I would like to investigate the problem of water as the primordial element a bit further, first by comparing *De pestilitate* with *De matrice*. My question is: did the author of *De pestilitate* have a correct reading of Paracelsus's *De matrice*? The question is certainly irrelevant from the point of view of the reception of *De pestilitate* in early modern times. Yet it is not inconsequential from a historiographical point of view, especially since Walter Pagel maintained that Paracelsus believed water to be the *Urmaterie* of the world.<sup>32</sup> See Table 1.

## TABLE 1

---

<sup>30</sup> *De meteoris*, chap. 2 (Huser, VIII: 184): “Nuhn sollend ihr aber wissen / das alle vier *Corpora* der vier Elementen gemacht seind auß nichts / dz ist / allein gemacht durch das Wort Gottes / das (*FIAT*) geheissen hat. [...] Dasselbige *Corpus* aller vier Elementen / ist in drey *Species* getheilt: Also daß das wort *Fiat* ist worden ein dreyfach *Corpus*, das ist / getheilt in dreyerley *Corpora*: Dann also ist die Erden drey Theil / das ist dreyerley / das Wasser auch dreyerley in seinem *Corpus* / dergleichen der Lufft / dergleichen der Himmel.”

<sup>31</sup> See Kahn, 2016: 67–69.

<sup>32</sup> Pagel, 1962: 77–85.

Comparison between *De pestilitate* and *De matrice* (English translation followed by the German text)<sup>33</sup>

---

*De pestilitate*

*De matrice*

---

---

<sup>33</sup> I quote the English translation of *De matrice* (Huser, I: 202) by Andrew Weeks. See Paracelsus, 2008: 644–645.

---

Earth, Water, Air and Fire originate from three things, which were not created before Earth, Water, Fire and Air: those three things were, and still are, Fire, Air, Water and Earth. Those three things had one single mother from which they have been created: Water was this mother. For when the whole world was created, the spirit of God hovered upon the waters; then, through the word *FIAT*, Water has been created first, and then from Water all other creatures, both dead and living ones [i.e. both living and inanimate]. And the right names of those three things are *Sulphur*, *Mercury* and *Salt*. This is the basis and the true matter from which all animals, and then man, were created.

Der Erdboden / das Wasser / der Luft / das Feuer / haben ihren Ursprung auß dreyen Dingen: Dise drey Ding sind nit eher / dann der Erdboden / das Wasser / Fewr und Luft geschaffen worden. Diese drey Ding sind gewesen / und sind noch / Fewr / Luft / Wasser und Erden: Dise drey Ding haben Eine Mutter gehabt / darauß sie beschaffen worden: das ist gewesen die Mutter / nemlich das Wasser. Dann da die gantze Welt ist beschaffen worden / da hat der Geist Gottes geschwebet auff den Wassern: Dann durch das wort *FIAT*, ist am Ersten das Wasser beschaffen worden / und hernach auß dem Wasser alle andere Creaturen / todt und lebendig. Und werden also dise drey Ding mit ihrem rechten Namen genennet / *Sulphur*, *Mercurius* und *Sal*. Das ist nun der Grund und die wahrhaftige *Materia*, darauß alle Thiere / darauß ferner der Mensch beschaffen worden / beschaffen sind.

Before heaven and earth were created, the spirit of God hovered upon the water and was carried by it. This water was *matrix*. For in this water heavens and earth were created, not in any other *matrix* other than this. In it the spirit of God was carried [...]. When the world was a nothingness, nothing except a water, and the spirit of the Lord was upon the water, the water turned into the world, which is the *matrix* of the world, and in it are all further creatures. Now it was yet again a *matrix* of the human being, in which God created for the human being, for his spirit, a housing in flesh. This same *matrix* of the human being was the entire world; his seed was the *limbus*, a seed in which the entire world was present. That is the origin of the first human being.

Vor dem und Himmel und Erden beschaffen wardt / da schwebet der Geist Gottes auff dem Wasser / unnd wardt ob ihm tragen: Diß Wasser war *Matrix*. Dann in dem Wasser wardt beschaffen Himmel unnd Erden / unnd in keiner andern *Matrix* nicht. In deren wardt der Geist Gottes tragen [...]. Da nun also die Welt nichts war / sondern ein Wasser / und der Geist des Herren war auff dem Wasser / do wardt das Wasser zu der Welt / das ist nun *Matrix* der Welt / unnd in ihm weiter alle geschöpff. Nun waß es noch alles ein *Matrix* des Menschen / in der beschuff Gott dem Menschen / seim Geist ein behausung in das fleisch: Dieselbige Menschen *Matrix* war die gantze Welt / sein Sahmen war der *Limbus* / ein Sahmen darinn die gantze Welt stundt. Das ist nun des ersten Menschen herkommen.

---

As we can see, the author of *De pestilitate* directly borrowed his cosmology from this excerpt of *De matrice*. But what was the meaning of this text? What is striking in it is Paracelsus's effort to stay close to the Biblical story of Creation, a couple of years before the treatise *De meteoris* witnessed the same need to build more of a Bible-based cosmology (although in a different way). At first sight, there is a more than blatant contradiction between the cosmology of *De matrice* (which happens to be a part of the vast *Opus Paramirum*, completed in 1531)<sup>34</sup> and that of both the *Philosophia de generationibus et fructibus quatuor elementorum* (ca. 1527) and the later tract *De meteoris* (after 1531).<sup>35</sup> These last two treatises share more or less a similar cosmology, based on the four elements divided into two globes, among which air (in the *Philosophia*) or the heavens (in *De meteoris*) feature as the very first element. *De matrice*, however, offers a contradictory statement with water featured even before the very beginning of the world.

Yet if we try to follow the logic of Paracelsus in his interpretation of the Creation of the world, it may appear that these primordial waters cannot be the element of water. A comparison can be made with a treatise of Paracelsus apparently written in the same months as *De matrice*: his commentary on Psalms.<sup>36</sup> There, too, Paracelsus mentioned the primordial waters. He understood them as “the true sea which is unknown to us”, and he located it “above and beyond everything which surrounds us like an [egg] shell”, alluding to the world of the four elements, composed of the earthy globe and the heavens, stars and planets.<sup>37</sup> Beyond the egg-shell of the elemental world there is the “true sea”, the primordial waters of Genesis.<sup>38</sup> Let us now return to the text of *De matrice*: “Da nun also die Welt nichts war / sondern ein Wasser / und der Geist des

---

<sup>34</sup> On the *Opus Paramirum* see Benzenhöfer, 2003: 88–90.

<sup>35</sup> For the dating of the *Philosophia de generationibus et fructibus*, see Paracelsus, 2008: 712, note a. For the dating of *De meteoris*, see Kahn, 2016: 67–69.

<sup>36</sup>For the dating of the *Psalmenkommentar*, see Paracelsus, 1955–1995, IV: XLV–XLVIII.

<sup>37</sup> The metaphor of the egg-shell as the enclosure of the created world is a distinctive feature of the *Philosophia de generationibus et fructibus*. Beyond this shell is the realm of God. See the diagrams in Kahn, 2016: 79 and 84.

<sup>38</sup> Paracelsus, 1955–1995, vol. V: 2–3, commentary on Psalm 103, 3 (Vulg.): “Qui tegis aquis superiora ejus”: “Also auch wie wir den himel sehent bei uns zu rings weis umb die erden und umb das mer: zu gleicherweis wie ein schal umb ein ei. nun aber ob demselbigen himel, das ist ob dem firmament, ob dem gestirn, ob dem allen, das uns wie ein schal bedeckt, außerhalb demselbigen allem ist das recht mer, das uns nit bekannt ist. das ist das wasser, davon hie David redt. dann aus demselbigen himel des wassers steigen auf uns die regen, dis schne etc. [ut in suis meteororum], nit nach aristotlischer beschreibung, sunder nach beschreibung des liechts der natur.” We do not quote the next sentences for they cannot be properly understood without Goldammer's footnotes.

Herren war auff dem Wasser / do wardt das Wasser zu der Welt / das ist nun *Matrix* der Welt / unnd in ihm weiter alle geschöpff.” It is of course entirely possible that Paracelsus interpreted the primordial waters here as the very element of water, just for the sake of his main point: to build a high-scale, Bible-based analogy between the womb of the mother and the macrocosmic womb of the world. However, if his current background cosmology still was that of the *Philosophia de generationibus et fructibus*, then the primordial waters might have been a kind of *Yliaster*, just like the prime matter in this *Philosophia*: a sort of *massa confusa* which Paracelsus had named *Yliaster* in that treatise and had defined as “nothing”, out of which God extracted the four elements. In this case, the primordial waters might not be confused, then, with the element of water. When Paracelsus mentioned them, we can imagine that he probably referred to another, prior stage of Creation than the creation of the elemental world – both in his interpretation of Psalms and in *De matrice*: at least this is not too implausible a hypothesis.

It was of course quite natural to see this excerpt of *De matrice* as a mere statement that water was the prime matter of all things. The author of *De pestilitate* clearly took up this idea, which he certainly believed to have been genuinely that of Paracelsus. Thus, in his view, water was the single mother of the three principles; it was the very waters upon which the Spirit of God hovered, and the first creation produced by the word *Fiat*. He went so far as to base one of his theories of plague on this very idea.

#### ***4 Authentic and spurious theories of plague***

Let us first summarize the authentic theory of Paracelsus before comparing it with that of *De pestilitate*.

##### ***4.1 The Nördlingen treatise and De peste libri tres***

In the Nördlingen treatise, Paracelsus reminds the reader that the correspondence microcosm/macrocosm implies that the four elements also abide in man. The ears, armpit, and groin area are

the three locations of plague in the human body, both microcosmic and macrocosmic.<sup>39</sup> Some of the correspondences between the heavens and man result in intoxications. In the case of the plague, it is as if the human body were covered by an armour protecting it from this disease – except in these three locations.<sup>40</sup>

Thus the plague has no other causative agent than the heavens. The heavens can send influences on earth which are invisible at first: the rain comes from invisible things, but then it becomes visible. So, the weapons of the heavens are invisible as they wound us. Their impressions enter our body; should they reach a mortal location there, then they prove to be lethal. However we must understand that while diseases are natural, the plague is not: it does not originate in one of the four elements, for it is not the result of a natural correspondence between man and the heavens. Thus it does not result from a blood poisoning coming from the heavens, nor is it the result of corrupt air (as stated by the physicians), but it comes from the strength of imagination, which is the principle of every magical action (“ein anfang ist aller Magischen wercken”). Furthermore, it is known that a great power abides in characters (“in den *Characteribus*”): while these are not of a natural origin, they heal, however, illnesses that they did not cause, like contractures, paralysis. Such is the origin of plague. Most physicians never even mention cabala (“der gantzen *Cabalistica ars*”), which is part of magic, through which the great deeds of Apollo (or Apollonius of Tyana) were performed.<sup>41</sup> They rely instead on the humoral theory and attribute to nature that which, in Paracelsus’s view, is above nature (“uber Natur”), namely that which affects the body magically, the evil as well as the good: and this is precisely the case of plague.<sup>42</sup>

There is no plague in the heavens. All supernatural diseases originate in us; yet they do not have any power until they reach the heavens. It is only in the heavens that they are generated and

---

<sup>39</sup> Nördlingen treatise, chap. 2 (Huser, III: 131): “Vier theil sind in der grossen Creatur / also seind auch vier theil im *Microcosmo*. [...] Nun sind die drey theil hie nit zu achten / aber dz vierdt ist ein stück deß theils deß Himmels: das ist / bey den Ohren / Uchsen und Schlichten / darumb greiff der Himmel seinen theil an.”

<sup>40</sup> Nördlingen treatise, chap. 2 (Huser, III: 130-132).

<sup>41</sup> According to Rudolph, 2003: 111–112, “die grossen thaten *Apollinis*” refer to Apollonius of Tyana. William Newman, however, remains doubtful (oral communication). The problem might be solved by a systematic research throughout the works of Paracelsus.

<sup>42</sup> Nördlingen treatise, chap. 3 (Huser, III: 132–134).

come back to us. This is how astronomers can predict illnesses or bad events: what they can see is the infection of the heavens. Thus Regiomontanus predicted syphilis not from its true origin, which is in man, but from its preparation in the heavens. For things always happen via mediums; without a medium man cannot have any knowledge of nature. Thus we should not attribute any power to the stars: they are but a medium. Should not we infect them through our imagination, then no astral influence would come down to us. There Paracelsus uses an analogy between macrocosm/microcosm and father/son relations: should you anger your father, then you make him a medium that sends you back that which you just put into it, and thus the father unleashes his wrath upon you. This is what happens with plague. Since the great world is like our father, magical imagination goes from us to it, and then back from it to ourselves. Therefore the “magical intellect” (“*Magicus Intellectus*”) is the light illuminating the fundament of every supernatural disease. Through this father/son analogy the end of chapter 4 strongly suggests that plague is the result of the Father’s divine wrath against us. This topic is more fully developed in the first book of *De peste libri tres*,<sup>43</sup> where Paracelsus explains that whereas the heavens are not set against us, it can so happen that we poison them, and in such cases they send the poison back to us. This poisoning is performed through our imagination which conveys all sorts of sins like jealousy, greed, and dishonesty. Should one feel these impressions strongly enough, then his strong overflowing imagination will reach the heavens and the stars will be the means through which the plague generated there will reach us back.<sup>44</sup>

Since all the parts of microcosm (i.e. man) are mineral – which alludes to the fact that man is made up from the three principles, mercury, sulphur and salt – any infection is of a mineral nature. In the case of the plague, the *materia peccans* (i.e. the material cause of the disease) is sulphur, which is the medium between mercury and salt. Now Mars is sulphur’s spirit (“Was ist Mars als der Geist des Sulphurs?”) and may become corporeal in the frame of a supernatural disease. It actually does this, but only in its proper places, which are the three aforementioned locations of the plague in the body. So Mars acts just like the heat imparted to the body by the Sun: Mars ignites the sulphur, which in turn inflames the body. Now there are as many kinds of

---

<sup>43</sup> *De peste libri tres* (*Drey Bücher von der Pestilenz*), book 1, “Impressio in altum” (Huser, III: 162–163).

<sup>44</sup> Nördlingen treatise, chap. 4 (Huser, III: 134–136).

sulphur in the firmament as there are stars ruling a part of the body. There is one in Saturn; one in the Moon, and so on. Thus there are many *materiae peccantes*. In these, i.e. in the sulphurs, lies the harm that the physicians must counteract.<sup>45</sup> As for the plague, there are three kinds of sulphur: *Sulphur Antimoniale* in the groin, *Sulphur Arsenicale* in the armpit, and *Sulphur Marcasitarum* in the ears. These are the dry wood or tinder that arouses Mars's fire. Where they are not present, no fire can start. Therefore you must strive to know these three sulphurs well – their poison, their nature, their disease and death – and then search for the *Arcana* that remedy them.<sup>46</sup>

Thereafter Paracelsus explains that the reason why this ignition of sulphur yields only plague is the same as the cause of the production of a basilisk: such a creature is supernaturally produced because it lacks a mother<sup>47</sup>. Should the ignition of sulphur not lack a mother, then it would only yield fevers. But as long as there is no mother, and the father is the only progenitor, the sulphur turns into a plague, just like the egg yolk issued from a father yields a basilisk.<sup>48</sup> Just as the look of a basilisk is lethal, so is the look of Mars. And just as the look of a basilisk acts materially, so acts the spirit of Mars. Thus the plague occurs when Mars magically generates a *Basiliscum Caeli* in the yolk, which is the sulphur.

#### **4.2 Theories of plague in *De pestilitate***

We have seen how water is defined as the origin of the three principles, and thus of all things, in *De pestilitate*. However, as soon as it is a question of giving birth to a living creature, water begins to lose its prominent place. A *matrix* cannot give birth, the author argues, without having been impregnated with a seed. Thus a father is needed as well.<sup>49</sup> Here the author makes a connection with the three chemical principles. Salt is what gives all things their colour and their

---

<sup>45</sup> Nördlingen treatise, chap. 5 (Huser, III: 136–138).

<sup>46</sup> I quote from both the Nördlingen treatise (Huser, III: 137) and its twin, the *Drey Bücher von der Pestilentz*, book 1, “Materia” (Huser, III: 166).

<sup>47</sup> Nördlingen treatise, chap. 5 (Huser, III: 137); *Drey Bücher von der Pestilentz*, book 1, “Materia” (Huser, III: 166).

<sup>48</sup> Nördlingen treatise, chap. 5 (Huser, III: 137): “Wo aber die Mutter außbleibet / und der Vatter ist vollkommer Geberer: jtz verandelt sich der *Sulphur* in ein Pestilentz / wie der Dotter der vom Vatter kommet in ein Basilißken.” On the topic of the basilisk, see Newman [forthcoming]. As Newman shows, the basilisk in *De pestilitate* might have been inspired by that of pseudo-Paracelsus's *De natura rerum*.

<sup>49</sup> Huser, III: 32 and 33–34.



form; sulphur gives them their body and the ability to grow, be digested, etc.<sup>50</sup> Salt, a product of water, is dominated by the moon; sulphur, a product of fire, is dominated by the sun.<sup>51</sup> Thus water and the moon are the *matrix*, fire and the sun are the father, who bears the seed and injects it into the *matrix*. The seed of the fruits is mercury, which needs sulphur and salt to reach its perfection.<sup>52</sup> This scheme does not match any cosmological model, it seems, in the authentic writings of Paracelsus: in the genuine cosmologies of Paracelsus the three principles are the prime matter of everything, including the sun and moon. Here the insistence that the moon acts as mother and the sun as father<sup>53</sup> might be due to the influence of the alchemical *Emerald Table* (“Its father is the sun, its mother the moon”), an influence far from significant, conversely, in the works of Paracelsus.<sup>54</sup> However this cosmology of *De pestilitate* is consistent with its theory of plague. This theory (here only roughly summarized) rests on the metaphor of seminal generation. The element of water is the field, the human imagination is the seed, and the heavens cook and prepare the seed, being its spirit and its formative agent to cook and prepare it up to its *ultimam materiam*. These three – the element of water, the heavens, and human imagination – generate the plague.<sup>55</sup> Thus the scheme of the plague conceived without a mother has been given up, due to the important role of water as *matrix*. Should a virgin conceive impure thoughts, her imagination will offend the chaste Venus of the Macrocosm which abides in the heavens. The Venus of the Macrocosm will, in turn, punish her with plague: for she is infuriated and inflamed and will

---

<sup>50</sup> Huser, III: 31: “Das Saltz gibt allen Creaturen die Form unnd Farb / der *Sulphur* aber gibt das *Corpus*, das wachsen / unnd die dewung / etc.” – The idea that salt gives colours to all things is a genuine idea of Paracelsus, already found here and there in the *Philosophia de generationibus et fructibus* (e.g. Huser, VIII: 84, 121, 154). But its most decisive formulation, and the obvious source of *De pestilitate*, is *De mineralibus*: “alle Farben kommen auß dem Saltz / dann das Saltz gibt die Farben / den Balsam / unnd Coagulation: Der Sulphur gibt das *Corpus*, die Substantz / und *Aedificum*: Der *Mercurius* gibt die *Virtutes, Vires, Arcana*” (Huser, VIII: 345).

<sup>51</sup> Huser, III: 30.

<sup>52</sup> Huser, III: 34.

<sup>53</sup> Huser, III: 32, 34, 35, etc.

<sup>54</sup> Perhaps Paracelsus quoted the *Emerald Table* in his *Paragranum*; but if he really did, it was scarcely noticeable. See Paracelsus, 2008: 170: “So aber das wesen des oberen verstands soll angehen und fürgenommen werden / so finden wir / daß es ein ding ist / das Ober und das Under”.

<sup>55</sup> Huser, III: 45: “Und ob schon der Himmel nit ist der Acker / so ist er aber der Bereiter und Koch / der Geist und Formirer alles Samens. Das Element Wasser aber / das ist der Acker: die *Imaginatio Hominis* ist der Same. Der Himmel und Imagination *Microcosmi* ist der Koch und Bereiter des Samens in sein *ultimam Materiam* zubringen / welcher Sahme auß der Imagination der Menschen geboren wirt: Die drey ding geben die *Pestem*.”

mentally strike. While the heavens maintain the balsam of our body through the grace of God so that our body does not decay, this care is no longer provided when impure imagination reaches the heavens. Now human imagination is a seed that becomes material when prepared in the heavens; more precisely, imagination proceeds from the heart, which is the microcosmic sun, from which it reaches the sun of the macrocosm (for the soul and spirit of the world mimic through their imagination every action and intention of man). In the macrocosmic sun human imagination becomes material and turns into a seed. It is prepared by the father, which is the sun, and ejected into its proper field, namely the element of water. This is why water first is infected by the heavens. No poison able to yield the plague can indeed reach man but through both elements of fire (i.e. the heavens) and water (without which man cannot live). Thus water is infected and generates a prime matter of a poisonous nature, which does not seem poisonous but becomes plague in the human body. A wise doctor can even understand and foretell when and how the plague will strike – but not whom – only by examining the excretions of the stars.<sup>56</sup>

As we can see, strong resemblances are noticeable between *De pestilitate* and its authentic counterparts. Yet the parental scheme is clearly preferred here to the lack of a mother in the generation of plague. As a consequence of this, plague is not presented as a supernatural disease, and the topic of the basilisk only appears metaphorically when the author mentions the different ways in which plague can infect the body: through the mouth, through the skin (as it occurs with certain poisons) or through contact with infected clothes, through the sight – just like a basilisk poisons men with its eyes – and thus women who are menstruating in a time of plague infect nearly every man through their eyes by mere sight.<sup>57</sup>

Other topics from the authentic plague treatises are taken up in *De pestilitate* as well: sulphur and salt are means of explaining the nature of buboes and how they can be healed (sulphur and saltpeter are said to be the *materia peccans* of fever).<sup>58</sup> And what else are the sun, the stars, and

---

<sup>56</sup> Huser, III: 46–48.

<sup>57</sup> Huser, III: 52–53.

<sup>58</sup> Huser, III: 64–66.

fire but the spirit of fire and sulphur? This sentence obviously mimics one in the Nördlingen treatise.<sup>59</sup>

The basilisk, however, reappears later on as *Basiliscum Cæli et Aquæ* when the author finally turns to supernatural plague.<sup>60</sup> Should men lead a life so bestial that they offend God, then he will punish them through the means of the great parental figure, namely macrocosm. Now the heavens do not have feet and hands as men; but their hands and wooden sticks are the stars, which can throw illnesses down to us if the sun, acting as the father, provides them with such punishment; for there is no star that does not have some hidden arsenical, antimonial, or realgaric poisoning power within itself. Thus the stars inflame the sulphur secretly lying just under man's skin in a hidden way through the power of salt, sulphur and the sun, via the element of water: for the stars have power over the *mumia* abiding in the element of water, a power similar to that of burning mirrors. So they send a glow like a basilisk's eyes to the water through their brightness and covertly poison even the fishes within, and herbs and fruits on the earth. As soon as men take it as their food they contract the plague, but in a supernatural way. Thus the element of water is infected by the basilisk eyes of the stars. But it can also happen that men of a delicate and subtle complexion are infected more easily by the mere look of the stars through their skin, without any infection of the water they drink.<sup>61</sup>

Elemental beings are also brought about in the next part of the treatise as a means to convey supernatural plague, for the author seems to attribute them the power to bring illnesses to men through their own imagination, each kind of them in its own way.<sup>62</sup> Still another means of contracting plague supernaturally is sheer fright and terror, if such feelings are caused by people losing faith in God in a time of plague. Such lack of faith causes a fear so strong that all the thoughts are focused on death and illness, which generates a strong will and the most powerful

---

<sup>59</sup> Huser, III: 77. See above, summary of chap. 5 of the Nördlingen treatise.

<sup>60</sup> Huser, III: 73: "Wie *Pestis* ubernatürlich im Menschen wirdt / und *per Basiliscum Cæli & Aquæ* in Menschen kompt, *Cabalisticè per Unarium*."

<sup>61</sup> Huser, III: 73–77.

<sup>62</sup> Huser, III: 86–87.

imagination. Thus one creates the *basiliscum Cœli* of the microcosmic firmament in one's own imagination.<sup>63</sup>

There is much more content in *De pestilitate*, including ways of healing or preventing the plague along with many recipes of remedies, that will be set aside for now. In addition, such topics as signatures, magnetism, or homunculus, appear in the last parts of the treatise as well. Astrology is used here and there throughout the work, in ways that should be properly discussed. Even a theory of comets is expressed: comets, like all sorts of wonderous signs, are produced in the heavens by the spirit of the imagination of the macrocosm (“durch den *Spiritum Imaginationis Maioris Mundi*”), which is much more powerful than that of men and women.<sup>64</sup> More precisely, comets and wandering stars are spiritually (not materially) produced by the imagination of the world soul (“*per Imaginationem Animae maioris Mundi*”); this kind of stars are weeds (“ein *Zizanium*”) in the heavens: just as the world soul imagines and gives birth to a monster as its fruit, so do the heavens as well.<sup>65</sup> This theory is not far removed from that of Paracelsus himself. In the *Liber de nymphis* (probably 1536/1537) and in the *Ußlegung des Cometen erschynen im Hochbirg* (1531) Paracelsus described comets as a kind of monsters in the heavens, similar to monsters that sometimes appear on earth; as such they are omens of ongoing or future events.<sup>66</sup> The author of *De pestilitate* is not so much interested in comets in themselves, however, and he does not retain the prophetic nature of comets strongly emphasized by Paracelsus. But conversely, he applies the metaphor of comets to the plague: a plague, he writes, is a comet of the microcosm (by which he means an impure production of an indecent woman's imagination).<sup>67</sup>

## 5 Provisional conclusions

Apart from these last two means of contracting supernatural plague mentioned above, the author of *De pestilitate* generally follows the ideas of Paracelsus quite faithfully, while adapting them to his own purpose. It seems that the author, inspired by reading the authentic plague treatises, attempted to emulate them, drawing on his comprehensive knowledge of Paracelsian ideas.

---

<sup>63</sup> Huser, III: 88.

<sup>64</sup> Huser, III: 44. See above, p. 000.

<sup>65</sup> Huser, III: 87 (tract II, end of chap. 1): “Aber im Himmel ist auch auß arth der Sternen ein *Zizanium*, nicht Materialisch / sondern Spiritualisch / *per Imaginationem Animae maioris Mundi*: Ich mein die *Cometen* und die irrige Sternen. Und wie die *Anima Mundi* Imaginirt unnd ein *monstrum* seiner frucht gebieret: Also auch thut der.”

<sup>66</sup> See Kahn, 2016: 103–106.

<sup>67</sup> Huser, III: 46: “dann eine Pestilentz ist ein Comet *Microcosmi*.”

Beside the authentic plague treatises, it is easy to detect the influence of many authentic and inauthentic treatises: *De meteoris* is a most important source, but the *Astronomia magna* (first published in 1571 in its entirety), *De matrice* of course, and *De mineralibus* should not be excluded.<sup>68</sup>

A distinctive feature of *De pestilitate* is its cosmology, mainly based upon *De matrice*. This treatise of Paracelsus has been interpreted by the author of *De pestilitate* very much in the same way as Walter Pagel did, favouring the idea that Paracelsus conceived water (generally speaking) as *Urmaterie*, instead of specifically the primordial waters of Genesis. Thus Pagel felt justified to consider *De pestilitate* as authentic, neglecting (or perhaps forgetting) Sudhoff's rejection of the text. This may remind us to never blindly follow even an authoritative specialist of Paracelsus, such as Pagel, without checking his assertions first. It seems that better knowledge of the works of Paracelsus can only be attained through careful criticism and open-minded collaboration, as opposed to isolated research.

A number of occasional borrowings, in *De pestilitate*, from one treatise or the other among the Paracelsian corpus are either explicit or easy to identify, but they are so numerous that it would lead nowhere to list them all, although the possible borrowing of the basilisk topic from *De natura rerum* deserves more attention and further study. The most significant remark that we can add regarding the sources is that no unprinted source seems to have been used. A good example is the *Philosophia de generationibus et fructibus quatuor elementorum* (published only in 1590): every excerpt of *De pestilitate* likely to have been drawn from this treatise may just have plausibly been based on parallel passages from either *De meteoris* or *De mineralibus*. Admittedly the composition of *De pestilitate* must have taken place somewhere in the middle seventies of the sixteenth century, or not much earlier. A huge number of printed works were already available then. The *Volumen medicinæ Paramirum*, which is the only work of Paracelsus featuring the doctrine of the "fünfft Entien", can be considered an interesting landmark: there is a section on the five *entia* in the end of *De pestilitate*.<sup>69</sup> Now the *Volumen medicinæ Paramirum*

---

<sup>68</sup> For *De mineralibus*, see above, fn. 50. A sentence in the chapter "Cabala" (Huser, III: 33: "derwegen hat Gott allen Creaturen ihren eigenen Herbst und Erndt verordnet") is also obviously derived from *De mineralibus* (Huser, VIII: 337: "Dann hatt Gott die Zeitt beschaffen / das ein Ernde ist im Korn / ein Herbst im ObB: So hatt er auch beschaffen dem Element Wasser sein Ernd / und Herbst auch: Also das alle ding zu seiner zeit sein Ernd und Herbst haben.").

<sup>69</sup> Huser, III: 99-100.

was published only twice in the sixteenth century: once in 1575 and again in the Huser edition (1589). Thus *De pestilitate* might be tentatively dated between 1575 and 1578, when it – or a first version of it at least – was summarized by Bartholomäus Scultetus in the so-called *Tabula de pestilitate*.<sup>70</sup>

All in all, it seems that the author definitely wanted to redefine plague within the framework of the parental scheme, perhaps motivated by the authority of the *Tabula smaragdina*. A distinctive flavour of Neoplatonic thinking can be detected through the recurrent notions of *anima* and *spiritus mundi*, but this is so common among late-sixteenth century Paracelsians that it is hardly a means to identify our author. A common characteristic of many pseudo-Paracelsica is the use of elemental beings: the *Philosophia ad Athenienses* and the treatise *De natura rerum* are good examples of this tendency – as is *De pestilitate*. Further study is still required to learn more, if possible, about the author.

The treatise reached a large audience through its inclusion in the Huser edition, where it featured in the first position in the series of the plague treatises of Paracelsus. It was one of the few treatises negatively quoted by the German physician and Papal botanist Johannes Faber in his report about the works of Paracelsus made in 1616 at the request of the Roman Congregation for the Index.<sup>71</sup> Even the peculiar conception of comets as weeds of the heavens was not entirely forgotten: at least we find it mentioned in 1657 by the German lawyer Philipp Knipschild (1595-1657) in a chapter on the signs of the destruction of states and empires. There Knipschild first mentioned the views on comets expressed by Kepler in 1608 (there are no less comets in the heavens than birds in the air, fishes in the sea, animals and plants on earth);<sup>72</sup> then he added the idea of Paracelsus that comets and stars are plants (*herbae*) of the heavens and that they multiply

---

<sup>70</sup> This folio sheet was published in Görlitz in 1586 with a colophon mentioning Scultetus as the author of the *Tabula* excerpted by him in 1578. The text has been reprinted by Strein, Telle, 2003: 361–366. See the discussion in Gunnoe [forthcoming].

<sup>71</sup> See de Vries and Spruit, 2018: 227–228 n. 17–18, and 246.

<sup>72</sup> Kepler, 1608: fol. Aij r<sup>o</sup>–v<sup>o</sup>: “Von den Cometen ist diß mein einfältige Meynung / das wie es natürlich / das auß jeder Erden ein Kraut wachse / auch ohne Saamen / und in jedem Wasser / sonderlich im weiten Meer / Fische wachsen / und darinnen umschwaben / also das auch das grosse öde Meer *Oceanus* nicht allerdings leer bleibe / [...] Allermassen sey es auch mit der himlischen / uberall durchgängigen und ledigen Luft beschaffen / daß nemlich dieselbige diese Art habe / auß ihr selber die Cometen zu gebären / damit sie / wie weit die auch sey / an allen Orten von den Cometen durchgangen werde / und also nicht allerdings läer bleibe. [...] Solcher Cometen halte ich der Himmel so voll seye / als das Meer voller Fische ist. Das man aber selten solcher Cometen ansichtig wird / geschicht wegen der unermeßlichen weite der himlischen Luft.”

like other creatures.<sup>73</sup> Finally, the insistence of *De pestilitate* that water is the prime matter of all things might have contributed, along with *De matrice* and of course *De mineralibus*, to shape this very idea in the young Joan Baptista van Helmont's mind.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Knipschild, 1657, book I, chap. 16: 149b: “Quamvis etiam Cometæ & id genus alia insolita phænomena, secundum Aristotelem, *lib. I. meteorolog. cap. 7* naturales suas habeant causas, ob quas apparent, & Keplerus de Cometa *anno 1607*. scribat, quod non magis cælum sit sine Cometis, ac aër sine avibus, mare sine piscibus, ac terra sine animalibus & plantis, cum, ut Paracelsus alicubi habet, Cornetæ ac stellæ cœli sint herbæ, sese instar aliarum creaturarum multiplicantes”. I did not find, however, where either Paracelsus or the author of *De pestilitate* writes that comets multiply themselves.

<sup>74</sup> On the genesis of Van Helmont's idea of water as prime matter of all things, the best account is that of Hirai, 2005: 447–449 and 453–456. Hirai did not evoke *De pestilitate* in this context. Since Van Helmont was heavily dependent on Severinus as well as Paracelsus, perhaps a reference to *De pestilitate* is irrelevant or unnecessary.

## Bibliography

- Benzenhöfer, Udo. *Paracelsus*, third edition (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2003).
- Daniel, Dane T. “Medieval alchemy and Paracelsus’ theology: Pseudo-Lull’s *Testamentum* and Paracelsus’ *Astronomia Magna*.” *Nova Acta Paracelsica N.F.* 2–23 (2008–2009), 121–135.
- Daniel, Dane T. “Paracelsus on the Sidereal Powers. Revisiting the Historiographical Debate between Walter Pagel and Kurt Goldammer.” In *Bridging Traditions. Alchemy, Chemistry, and Paracelsian Practices in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Karen Hunger Parshall et al. (Kirksville: Truman State Univ. Press, 2015), 209–225.
- Gunnoe, Charles D. “Paracelsus, the Plague, and *De Pestilitate*.” *Early Science and Medicine* 24 (2019) [forthcoming].
- Hirai, Hiro. *Le Concept de semence dans les théories de la matière à la Renaissance: de Marsile Ficin à Pierre Gassendi* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).
- Huser: see Paracelsus (1589–1591).
- Kahn, Didier. “Paracelsus’ Ideas on the Heavens, Stars and Comets.” In *Unifying Heaven and Earth: Essays in the History of Early Modern Cosmology*, ed. Miguel Ángel Granada et al. (Barcelona: Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2016), 59–116.
- Kepler, Johann. *Außführlicher Bericht / Von dem newlich im Monat Septembri und Octobri diß 1607. Jahrs erschienenen Haarstern / oder Cometen / und seinen Bedeutungen* (Halle, Saale: Erasmus Hynitzsch, 1608).
- Knipschild, Philipp. *Tractatus Politico-Historico-Juridicus de juribus et privilegiis Civitatum Imperialium* (Ulm: Balthasar Kühne, 1657).
- Newman, William R. “Bad Chemistry: Basilisks and Women in Paracelsus and pseudo-Paracelsus.” *Ambix* 67 (2020) [forthcoming].
- Pagel, Walter. “Paracelsus and Techellus the Jew.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 34 (1960), 274–277.
- Pagel, Walter. *Das medizinische Weltbild von Paracelsus: Seine Zusammenhänge mit Neuplatonismus und Gnosis* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1962).
- Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim). *Bücher vnd Schrifften*, ed. Johann Huser, 10 vols. (Basel: Conrad Waldkirch, 1589–1591).
- Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim). *Sämtliche Werke. I. Abteilung, Medizinische, naturwissenschaftliche und philosophische Schriften*, ed. Karl Sudhoff, 14 vols. (München, Berlin: Barth und Oldenbourg, 1922–1933).



- Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim). *Sämtliche Werke. 2. Abteilung, Theologische und religionsphilosophische Schriften*, ed. Kurt Goldammer, vol. 4–7 and Register (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1955-1995).
- Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim). *Paracelsus: Essential Theoretical Writings*, transl. by Andrew Weeks (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008).
- Rudolph, Hartmut. “Die Kabbala im Werk des Paracelsus.” In *Christliche Kabbala*, ed. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2003), 109–120.
- Strein, Jürgen, Joachim Telle. “Deutsche Pseudoparacelsica über die Pest: Ein ‘Begriff zur Pestdiagnose’ (1553) und die *Tabula de pestilitate* von Bartholomäus Scultetus (1578).” In *Medizin in Geschichte, Philologie und Ethnologie: Festschrift für Gundolf Keil*, ed. Dominik Groß und Monika Reininger (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2003), 349–370.
- Sudhoff: see Paracelsus (1922–1933).
- Vries, Lyke de, Leen Spruit. “Paracelsus and Roman censorship – Johannes Faber’s 1616 report in context.” *Intellectual History Review* 28 (2018), 225–254 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2017.1361060>).