

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Walton, Michael T. Genesis and the Chemical Philosophy: True Christian Science in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Sergius Kodera

Volume 35, numéro 4, automne 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105739ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i4.19716>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Kodera, S. (2012). Compte rendu de [Walton, Michael T. Genesis and the Chemical Philosophy: True Christian Science in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 35(4), 174–176. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i4.19716>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2013

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

the dynamics of the Italian Renaissance, providing the reader not only with a colourful image of the artist as a man, but also of the vibrant times in which he lived and worked.

SEBASTIANO BAZZICHETTO, *University of Toronto*

Walton, Michael T.

Genesis and the Chemical Philosophy: True Christian Science in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.

AMS Studies in the Renaissance 45. New York: AMS Press, 2011. Pp. xiii, 172. ISBN 978-0-404-62345-6 (hardback) \$92.50.

It is a well-known fact that during the Renaissance and early modern period alchemy was not just concerned with the making of elixirs or gold; the art also encompassed a spiritual approach towards nature; and it assumed a distinctly Christian guise. Walton's study examines these developments in such "chemical philosophers" as Paracelsus, Gerhard Dorn, Oswald Croll, Heinrich Khunrath, Robert Fludd, and Jean Baptiste van Helmont. It is a formidably difficult territory for historiographers, as Walton, himself an expert in the field, rightly emphasizes. Although his chosen scholars were in one way or another adherents to the Paracelsian tradition, they developed very heterogeneous and individual ideas. For this reviewer, at least, the treatment of von Helmont's connections between his discovery of "Gas" and the first verses of Genesis belong to the most interesting and well-documented pages of the book (89–97). Walton here convincingly demonstrates the extent to which Bible study closely interlocks with very innovative seventeenth-century laboratory practice.

The reader might wonder, later, why the author does not tie the above section to Van Helmont's remarks on fermentation (123–25); instead, Walton refers us to a previous publication of his own. Unfortunately, it is not the only abrupt transition: *Genesis and the Chemical Philosophy*, from its very start, is not very clearly structured. Both the general reader (at whom the book is aimed) and the specialist would benefit from a longer, general introduction that carefully outlines the content of chapters, and that explains why particular texts

were chosen for study. Each chapter has its own brief introduction, but these are nearly undocumented and of limited help to the reader.

The first chapter begins with Jewish and Christian exegetes of Genesis 1:1, such as Philo of Alexandria, Origen, and St. Basil. Walton then leaps to the High Middle Ages (with Robert Grosseteste), only to move chronologically back the Rabbinic tradition, to Rashi and Maimonides, ending with Renaissance authors such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Martin Luther, and Agostino Steuco. It is unclear why certain names are excluded: Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, for example, or the highly influential Jewish source for sixteenth-century Christian authors, Leone Ebreo. In fact, Ebreo would have been a formidable occasion to include a discussion of sexual imagery in the alchemical process (as on p. 44), particularly in the context of Genesis; or to address the question of what Walton calls alchemy's Gnostic essence (with little elaboration of the term) on pages 27 and 40–41. Halfway through the first chapter, we learn that Walton intends to introduce "... the Hebrew tradition of textual commentary that influenced Christian biblical commentators of the sixteenth century." However, this interesting (and, one may add, thorny) issue is not pursued further. Subsequent chapters say little about which of these Hebrew sources could have (directly or indirectly) been referred to by Walton's "chymical" authors.

There is, throughout *Genesis and the Chemical Philosophy*, a tacit bias toward English texts—which is not made explicit by the author. For example, when Walton presents Joseph Duchesne's *Ad veritatem hermeticae medicinae*, he uses Thomas Thymme's English version, which considerably modified the source (67–68, 107–08). It is unclear why Walton is not using Duchesne's more influential text. Elsewhere, the slip may simply be editorial: We learn, on p. 52, that "Paracelsus was regarded ... a chemical Luther." When—after a two-page digression on R. Bostocke's ideas (which in this case literally begins with Adam!)—the reader finally gets to the relevant quotation, it is not Luther to whom Paracelsus is compared, but rather the English scholar John Wycliffe.

The book is further marred by editorial shortcomings: repetitions in the text (e.g., 92–95), illustrations that are superficially described and of a very low quality (Fig. II and III, pp. 46–47), and doxographic summaries that lack proper references or clear connections to the book's main argument. Alchemy is admittedly a difficult subject, but here one would have expected a clearer explanation as to why certain doctrines are mentioned. Furthermore, the secondary literature is often not up to date: while important authors in the field

(such as Brian P. Copenhaver) are referred to, their more recent publications on the topic are not cited. In many cases, Walton refers to important primary sources only from secondary literature; and it is hard to understand why, because Walton has considerable philological skills—at times translating from Hebrew or Middle High German.

For this reviewer, *Genesis and the Chemical Philosophy* remains in many ways as hermetic as the sources it seeks to elucidate. Yet, for a limited circle of true adepts of the art, Walton's book may well contain grains of philosophical gold—there for patient mining.

SERGIUS KODERA, *University of Vienna*

Wolff, Martha (ed.).

Kings, Queens, and Courtiers: Art in Early Renaissance France.

Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago / New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. Pp. 208 + 190 ill. ISBN 978-0-300-17025-2 (hardcover) \$60.

The art of France in the years 1480–1515, a transitional period between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, has often been overlooked in favour of the works created after 1515 during the reign of Francis I, a true Renaissance monarch. A major exhibition of the art of all media (painting, sculpture, metalwork, stained glass, illuminated manuscripts, printed books, and tapestry) which travelled in 2011 from Paris to Chicago sought to restore the balance. Rarely seen in public, objects in a style that unites flamboyant late Gothic forms with a new antique vocabulary were brought together in an exhibition that presented the opportunity for a general audience and scholars alike to explore in depth the French artistic culture from around the turn of the sixteenth century.

Kings, Queens, and Courtiers: Art in Early Renaissance France—the beautifully illustrated catalogue accompanying the exhibition—is the first full treatment of this subject in English. It contains four main essays and eleven short articles, in addition to detailed entries on each object, including information on provenance, technical aspects, and a comprehensive bibliography. The texts, by distinguished American and French scholars, give an excellent though brief overview of the historical, political, and economic situation in France during