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The Influence of Louvain Teaching on Jan Baptist Van Helmont's Adoption of Paracelsianism and Alchemy

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This article investigates the extent to which Louvain (Leuven) teaching could provide the foundations of a new learning and philosophy that included Paracelsianism and alchemy. The particular lens is through Van Helmont's studies in Louvain, taking place in the 1590s. It shows that teaching at Louvain had a profound impact on Van Helmont's thought. The paper further points out that Van Helmont's learning process did not include only traditional university courses, but also classes at the Jesuit college, and practical learning through Jesuits and artisans.

In 1599, Jan Baptist Van Helmont (1579–1644), then a nineteen-year-old Flemish student, graduated from the University of Louvain, or Leuven, as a medical doctor. By his own admission, he was not elated about his diploma – still, he took the degree out of practical concerns: he wanted to be able to practice medicine legally. As the seventh and last son of Christian de Helmont, a deceased master of the Chamber of Accounts of Brabant, he was born into privilege, but was still expected to establish a career path whereby he could support himself and his family. It seemed the stars were aligning for a successful, if perhaps undistinguished, medical career. Yet the young Van Helmont had bigger plans than to attend at the bedsides of the Flemish upper class. He wanted to contribute to the reformation of knowledge, radically altering the learning he had himself received at Louvain. This ambition set him on a collision course with other intellectuals and institutions, some of which sought to maintain the status quo and some of which were

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attempting to carry out their own reform. The battle of ideas he was involved in would eventually profoundly alter European knowledge, though not necessarily in the way he expected it to. It also led to a shift in the landscape of learning, with some universities setting themselves at the forefront of new ways of thinking ahead of traditional and increasingly less attractive ones. In the case of the Low Countries, the narrative is fairly well known: by the late 1600s, the new and dynamic University of Leiden came to dominate learning at the expense of the old University of Louvain. It is not in the scope of this paper to examine why Leiden came to triumph over Louvain. Instead, I would like to travel a path less taken and look at Louvain before this battle was settled, at a crucial point in its development: the turn of the seventeenth century. My interest is in identifying to what extent Louvain could provide the foundations of a new learning and philosophy that included Paracelsianism and alchemy. The particular lens is through Van Helmont's studies in Louvain in the 1590s. I will be specifically examining how, and to what extent, teaching at Louvain influenced Van Helmont's adoption of Paracelsianism and alchemy.

Van Helmont at the University of Louvain

When Van Helmont arrived at Louvain to follow the *Studium Generale Lovaniense*, he was following in the footsteps of many Flemish noblemen desirous of learning. For most of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the intellectual life of the Low Countries had been dominated by the University.

Louvain was founded in 1425 by Duke Jan IV of Brabant (1403–1427) as a *Studium Generale*.¹ At its foundation, it had three faculties: Arts, Law, and Medicine. In 1432, Pope Eugen IV (1388–1447) allowed the organisation of a Theology faculty, a supreme honour offered to a university at the time.² Louvain was made up of more than forty residential colleges, of which perhaps the most famous is the *Collegium Trilingue* (teaching three languages: Latin, Greek, and Hebrew), founded in 1517 as the first such institution in Europe.

In the 1590s, however, Louvain's centrality in the Low Countries was starting to be challenged by the newly established Protestant University of Leiden and the rapidly growing Jesuit colleges. This competition mirrored the doctrinal conflicts of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, with Louvain still holding on to its medieval Catholic roots. Yet, at this time, Louvain's fame still exerted strong sway over the Flemish Catholic upper and middle classes. The importance of Louvain in the period can be highlighted by the career of the renowned humanist and neo-Stoic philosopher Justus Lipsius, or Joost Lips (1547–1606), who began his studies at the Jesuit College in Cologne (1562–1564), spent thirteen years teaching at Leiden (1578–1591), but was always drawn back to his

¹ Leon Van der Essen, *L'Université de Louvain – Son origine, son histoire, son organisation 1425–1953* (Brussels: Office de Publicité, 1953), 5.

² Van der Essen, *L'Université de Louvain*, 7.

alma mater of Louvain, and spent the last years of his life there as professor of History and Latin.³

The Van Helmont family was more noble than that of Lipsius, and more conservative. It had a long tradition of sending its male members to study at Louvain.⁴ Van Helmont was sent to Louvain at a young age (around fourteen), though this was not in itself unusual.⁵ A studious man by nature, Van Helmont initially enjoyed the wealth of knowledge available there. Yet there were so many learning possibilities that, when he finished his Bachelor of Arts in 1596 at only seventeen,⁶ he was, by his own admission, confused and wavering about which path to take in his career.

Initially, Van Helmont seems to have considered giving up on his studies altogether and becoming a Capuchin monk. He saw the Capuchins as practicing the ideals of Christian Stoicism, a subject that he found highly compelling. Although Van Helmont only mentions having studied Seneca and Epictetus, it is undoubtable that his interest in Stoicism originated with Justus Lipsius.⁷ He must have at least perused Lipsius's masterpiece *De constantia* (1584), which advocated philosophical detachment.⁸ Yet his enthusiasm for this kind of thought was short lived. Stoicism left traces in his philosophy, but Van Helmont felt that the movement bore too many marks of paganism and had too little humility. Much more enticing seemed, for him, the promise of pursuing a theology career. Reminiscing about that time, an older Van Helmont claimed to have even been promised a canonship if he had done so.⁹

To understand the attraction of theology to Van Helmont, we must note that the Theology Faculty at Louvain was the most powerful institution in the university. The Faculty turned Louvain into one of the shining lights of late medieval Christendom through its focus on Augustinian studies, but it was the same Faculty that would contribute to its early modern decline. The reason for this was linked to the ambiguous status of Augustine in the post-Tridentine Catholic world.

³ On Justus Lipsius's philosophy, see particularly Jacqueline Lagrée, *Juste Lipse et la restauration du stoïcisme* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1994). Lipsius began as a Catholic, switched allegiances to Protestant (hence his position in Leiden), then returned to Catholicism again. On his Jesuit beginnings, see Jacques Kluyskens, "Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) and the Jesuits with Four Unpublished Letters," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 23 (1974): 244–70. For Lipsius's teaching in Leiden, see Karl Enenkel and Chris Heesakkers, eds., *Lipsius in Leiden: Studies in the Life and Works of a Great Humanist on the Occasion of His 450th Anniversary* (Voorthuizen: Bloemendaal/Florivallis, 1997). Lipsius's return to Louvain is analysed by Jeanine de Landtsheer, "Le retour de Juste Lipse de Leyden à Louvain selon sa correspondance, 1591–1594," in *Juste Lipse (1547–1606) en son temps: Actes du colloque de Strasbourg, 1994*, ed. Christian Mouchel (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996), 347–68.

⁴ On Van Helmont's roots, see Georgiana D. Hedesan, *An Alchemical Quest for Universal Knowledge: The "Christian Philosophy" of Jan Baptist Van Helmont (1579–1644)* (London: Routledge, 2016), 15. Eighteen members of the Helmont family are found in the matriculation register of Louvain between 1426 and 1555, according to <https://search.arch.be/fr/rechercher-des-personnes/> (accessed 19 October 2020).

⁵ Claude Bruneel, "L'Université aux xvii^e et xviii^e siècles," in *L'Université catholique de Louvain. Vie et mémoire d'une institution* (Brussels: Presses universitaires de Louvain, 1993), 69: "Les arrivants sont fort jeunes, parfois 14 ans à peine. Beaucoup achèvent leurs études aux Arts à 18–20 ans."

⁶ Van Helmont gave the year 1594 as his graduation date, but he seems to have mistaken his birth date as 1577 rather than 1579. It is unlikely he graduated at less than 17 years old. See Hedesan, *An Alchemical Quest for Universal Knowledge*, 15; Jan Baptist Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae* (Amsterdam: Elsevir, 1652), chap. 2, "Studia authoris," 14, §1.

⁷ Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, chap. 2, "Studia authoris," 14, §7.

⁸ *De constantia* is available in English translation with a modern introduction: Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy*, ed. John Sellars (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2006).

⁹ Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, chap. 2, "Studia authoris," 14, §6.

Augustine's emphasis on grace, predestination, and will became uncomfortable for some Counter-Reformation Catholics seeking to clearly separate their own beliefs from those of Protestants, especially from the upstart Calvinist confession. A new movement, with the Jesuit order at the forefront, tried to align Catholicism to the thought of Thomas Aquinas and other High Scholastic thinkers.

Louvain theology, however, moved in the opposite direction, seeking to reform Catholicism by bringing it even closer to Augustine than it had been. Michel de Bay or Baius (1513–1589), a distinguished Louvain professor of theology and Dean of the faculty (1575–1589), confronted High Scholasticism, proposing a doctrinal return to the theology of Augustine and other Church Fathers.¹⁰ Amongst his most controversial propositions was the idea that the original sin of Adam and Eve was sexual concupiscence, an interpretation that drew on his understanding of the concept of *libido* (desire) in Augustine.¹¹ Yet de Bay encountered the opposition of Counter-Reformation Rome, albeit somewhat ambivalently. Pope Pius V condemned his doctrines in the bull *Ex omnibus afflictionibus* of 1567.¹² In 1580, Gregory XIII republished the condemnation, this time naming de Bay as its author.¹³ Yet de Bay's doctrines did not disappear with these condemnations. The Theology Faculty continued to support his ideas more or less openly. A new movement grew, centred on the Bishop of Ypres, Cornelius Jansen or Jansenius (1585–1638), another graduate and professor of Louvain. Jansenius, who wrote his book *Augustinus* (1640) as a defence of de Bay, was condemned by the papacy in turn in 1642, despite protest by the university.¹⁴ This time the papal condemnation was damning. The Theology School fell into disrepute amongst mainstream Catholics and the taint of Jansenism touched the whole Louvain University. The decline was all the more pronounced as students chose to attend the younger Leiden University in the Netherlands or, if they were sympathetic to Jesuit doctrine, the University of Douai instead. Still, the University of Louvain survived up to 1797, when it was dismantled by Republican France.¹⁵

When Van Helmont was studying at Louvain in the early 1590s, Louvain Augustinianism was still in full bloom, and it left a lifelong mark on the physician's philosophy. The importance of Augustine in Van Helmont's thought has long been

¹⁰ For a presentation of Baius's ideas, albeit from a partisan Catholic point of view, see F. X. Jansen, *Baius et le Baianisme: Essai théologique* (Brussels: Dewit, 1927), 127–45. Jansen points out that Baius condemned Scholasticism and philosophy and tried to ground all Christian thought on Augustine. From a Catholic viewpoint Jansen condemns Baius's "cult" of Augustine and argues that Catholic doctrine is a "moderate" form of Augustinianism; see 132–37.

¹¹ Nigel Abercrombie, *The Origins of Jansenism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 87–93. On the meaning of concupiscence in Augustine, see Peter Burnell, "Concupiscence," in *Augustine throughout the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan Fitzgerald and John C. Cavadini (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1999), 224–27.

¹² The contents of the bull can be found in Appendix I of Jansen, *Baius et le Baianisme*, 185–95. Jansen notes that not all of the incriminated passages were actually those of Baius.

¹³ E. J. M. Van Eijl, "La controverse louvaniste autour de la Grace et du libre arbitre à la fin du XVI^e siècle," in *L'Augustinisme à l'ancienne faculté de théologie de Leuven*, ed. M. Lamberigts and L. Kenis (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994), 207–283 (on 215).

¹⁴ Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, 7 vols. (Brussels: Lamertin, 1920), vol. 3, 46.

¹⁵ Today, there are two universities in Louvain: the French-language UC Louvain (Université catholique de Louvain) and the Flemish-language KU Leuven (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven).

noticed; his emphasis on the African Church Father most likely originated from his Louvain studies, although it is possible that his reading of Paracelsus, another Augustinian supporter, may have also contributed to his interest.¹⁶ Although Van Helmont was careful not to attack Thomas Aquinas directly, he rejected High Scholasticism and its Aristotelian interpretation in line with the Louvain theological approach.

Louvain theology had an even deeper impact on Van Helmont's thought than a pro-Augustine and anti-Aristotle bias. Van Helmont's posthumous masterpiece *Ortus medicinae* (1648) stepped on dangerous theological ground by mirroring and even expanding on heretical Baianist and proto-Jansenist views. Van Helmont affirmed, along the lines of Baius, that the original sin was the sexual act, and that Adam and Eve were not created to be consorts, but companions. However, the devil interfered with God's plan, encouraging them to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which Van Helmont understood to be the "faculty of producing a fructifying Seed."¹⁷ Once the apple was eaten, Adam began to covet Eve and defiled her.¹⁸ There is of course no such passage in Genesis, but Van Helmont argued that the Bible purposefully avoided mentioning sex or rape out of shame.¹⁹

Van Helmont's controversial statements, published in his posthumous work, remained strangely echoless. The Jesuits, who had accused him of heresy during his lifetime, were unaware of his beliefs in the original sin and rested his accusations only on his Paracelsian support of the weapon salve. After his death, there was no attempt to specifically single out his statements for censorship – by that time Jesuit ammunition was most likely reserved for more influential Jansenist believers.

Louvain's Faculty of Medicine and Van Helmont's conversion to Paracelsianism

Despite Van Helmont's evident attraction to Louvain theology, he never enrolled in the school for a higher degree. It is not entirely clear why he did not. In his autobiography, he was evasive about the subject, only affirming that he was afraid that he would have to "eat the sins of the people" if he did so, an idea he drew from St Bernard of Clairvaux.²⁰ Certainly, there were other options out there for him, one of the most attractive of which was medicine.

¹⁶ Walter Pagel notes that Charles Singer drew attention to Van Helmont's debt to Augustinianism as early as 1929; see Walter Pagel, "J. B. Van Helmont, *De Tempore*, and Biological Time," *Osiris* 8 (1948): 346–417 (on 377 n. 25); for more on Augustine's influence on Van Helmont see Hedesan, *An Alchemical Quest for Universal Knowledge*, 13, 16, 17, 49, 50 and elsewhere (see index). On Augustine's influence on Paracelsus, see Andrew Sparling, "Providence and Alchemy: Paracelsus on How Knowledge Unfolded, Matter Developed, and Bodies Might Be Perfected," (Ph.D. diss., University of Nevada, Reno).

¹⁷ Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, chap. 92, "Thesis," 515, 517. The idea of "Adamical" generation transmitted through the seed is also Augustinian.

¹⁸ Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, chap. 93, "Demonstratur thesis," 527: "Manso autem pomo, statim aperti sunt oculi eorum, cepitque Adam libidinose concupiscere nudam virginem, eamque stupravit."

¹⁹ Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, chap. 93, "Demonstratur thesis," 527.

²⁰ Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, chap. 2, "Studia authoris," 14, §1.

The Faculty of Medicine at Louvain was based on the model of Paris and Cologne. At its foundation in 1429 there were two chairs, one dealing with Hippocrates and Galen, and the other with diseases and remedies.²¹ In 1558, an “extraordinary” chair was established by King Philip II of Spain (1556–1598); the new professor was in charge of the teaching of the *ars parva* of Galen, that is, general pathology. In addition, there were two professors called *prebendes* because they were also canons of the St Peter’s Church in Louvain.²²

Louvain medicine embraced Renaissance humanism early on, with the likes of Vesalius (1514–1564) receiving a solid humanist education. The tradition became increasingly focused on the study of Hippocrates, with the professor of medicine Hieremias Thriverius Brachelius (1504–1554) writing a commentary on Hippocrates’s *Aphorisms* as early as 1538.

The Hippocratic tradition was enhanced by the more famous Cornelius Gemma (1535–1578), who became professor of medicine in 1570.²³ Gemma authored two main works, *De arte cyclognomica* (1564) and *De naturae divinis characterismis* (1575). Son of the mathematician and professor of medicine Gemma Frisius (1508–1555), known for his early support of Copernicanism, Gemma continued the latter’s project of reforming the discipline of astrology, particularly focusing it on medicine.²⁴ Yet he also tried to conceive a universal philosophy by the name of the cyclognomic art.²⁵

Following in the footsteps of Jean Fernel (1497–1558) and Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576), Gemma focused on a Neoplatonic reading of Hippocrates. As Hiro Hirai has pointed out, Gemma placed Hippocrates as one of the chief ancient theologians in the Renaissance tradition of *prisca theologia*.²⁶ Gemma even tried to reconcile Hippocrates with the Bible by maintaining that the Greek physician’s elements fire and water were equivalent to what Moses called heaven and earth in Genesis.

Gemma’s interest in Hippocratism and the reconciliation of ancient knowledge with Christianity brought him closer to the Paracelsian movement. During his tenure at Louvain, Paracelsianism was quickly spreading throughout the Low Countries, as Robert Halleux has shown.²⁷ Gemma’s works also suggest a possible connection with the Paracelsian humanist Petrus Severinus or Peder Sørensen (1540–1602), a Danish physician who completed his degree in Paris. Hirai has

²¹ Corneille Broeckx, *Prodrome de l’histoire de la Faculté de médecine de l’ancienne université de Louvain* (Antwerp: Buschmann, 1865), 8–9.

²² Broeckx, *Prodrome*, 12. St Peter was also the patron of the University.

²³ On Cornelius Gemma, see Hiro Hirai, ed., *Cornelius Gemma: Cosmology, Medicine and Natural Philosophy in the Renaissance* (Pisa and Rome: Serra, 2008).

²⁴ On Gemma’s astrology, see Steven Vanden Broecke, *The Limits of Influence: Pico, Louvain, and the Crisis of Renaissance Astrology* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 186–91.

²⁵ On this topic, see Stephen Clucas, “Cornelius Gemma and Universal Method,” in Hirai, *Cornelius Gemma*, 111–26.

²⁶ Hiro Hirai, “‘Prisca theologia’ and Neoplatonic Reading of Hippocrates in Fernel, Cardano and Gemma,” in Hirai, *Cornelius Gemma*, 91–104.

²⁷ Robert Halleux, “Helmontiana I,” *Academiae Analecta* (Brussels: Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, 1983), 33–63.

suggested that there may have been a connection between Gemma and Severinus, given their similar interest in a Neoplatonic reading of Hippocrates.²⁸ Severinus wrote a highly influential treatise called *De idea medicinae philosophicae* (1571), which sought to set Paracelsus's writings within the humanist tradition.²⁹ The result was a Paracelsus who seemed in tune with Hippocrates, Renaissance Neoplatonism, and alchemy.

Certainly, young Van Helmont continued the tradition of a Neoplatonic reading of Hippocrates.³⁰ In 1607, he penned the *Eisagoge in artem medicam à Paracelso restitutam* (*Introduction to the medical art as restored by Paracelsus*), a treatise strongly influenced by the Severinian interpretation of Paracelsus.³¹ In this short unpublished work, Van Helmont followed the Severinian thesis that Paracelsus had restored the true ancient medicine of Hippocrates.³² This work was followed up by three unpublished commentaries on three Hippocratic works: *Regimen I*, *Nutritum*, and *Breaths* written somewhere between 1608 and 1634.³³

Although all these works evince the strong influence of Severinus, it is very likely that Van Helmont's interest in a Neoplatonic reading of Hippocrates can originally be ascribed to Gemma's influence in Louvain. Indeed, Van Helmont suggests that, apparently still in the *Studium Generale*, he became interested in mathematics (particularly Euclidean geometry). He then started reading Gemma's cyclognomic art and his "Metaphysics" (presumably *De naturae divinis characterismis*).³⁴ We could conjecture that, fascinated by Gemma's Neoplatonic reading, Van Helmont would have read further on the topic, eventually coming to Severinus. In turn, Severinus would have introduced the young Van Helmont to the ideas of Paracelsus, mediated by a Neoplatonic lens.³⁵

In typical fashion, Van Helmont attributed his "conversion" to Paracelsianism to a dream vision.³⁶ This, Van Helmont claimed in his early *Eisagoge*, was a dramatic event that occurred on a precise date, 24 September 1599, on the banks of the river

²⁸ Hirai, "'Prisca theologia' and Neoplatonic Reading of Hippocrates," 103–104.

²⁹ On Severinus, see Jole Shackelford, *A Philosophical Path for Paracelsian Medicine: The Ideas, Intellectual Context, and Influence of Petrus Severinus, 1540–1602* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004).

³⁰ On this topic, see Georgiana D. Hedesan, "From Interpretation to Integration: Van Helmont and His Medical-Alchemical Hippocratism," in *Alchemy and Medicine from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, ed. Jennifer M. Rampling and Peter M. Jones (London: Routledge, 2021).

³¹ As noted by Robert Halleux, "Theory and Experiment in the Early Writings of Johan Baptist Van Helmont," in *Theory and Experiment*, ed. Diderick Batens (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1988), 93–101 (on 97); Antonio Clericuzio, "From Van Helmont to Boyle: A Study of the Transmission of Helmontian Chemical and Medical Theories in Seventeenth-Century England," *British Journal for the History of Science* 26 (1993): 303–34 (on 307) and Hiro Hirai, *Le concept de semence dans les théories de la matière à la Renaissance, de Marsile Ficin à Pierre Gassendi* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 441–45. *Eisagoge* was published as Corneille Broeckx, "Le premier ouvrage de J. B. Van Helmont, Seigneur de Merode, Royenborch, Oirschot, Pellines, etc, publié pour la première fois," *Annales de L'Académie d'archéologie de Belgique*, 10 (1853): 327–92, and 11 (1854): 119–91.

³² Broeckx, "Le premier ouvrage de J.B. Van Helmont," 10: 347.

³³ Of these, the first two have been transcribed in a neat hand, probably by one of Van Helmont's amanuenses.

³⁴ Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, 14, §4: "fortuitum autem, ars Cyclognomica Cornelii Gemmae, velut altera Metaphysica in manus venit."

³⁵ This is not to say that Gemma did not know Paracelsus as well; see Hirai, "'Prisca theologia' and Neoplatonic Reading of Hippocrates," 103.

³⁶ On Van Helmont's reliance on dreams and visions for knowledge, see Hedesan, *An Alchemical Quest for Universal Knowledge*, 18–19.

Schelde (Escaut) near Antwerp.³⁷ There he had a vision of a great palace where alchemical adepts were gathered, with Hermes Trismegistus ruling over them.³⁸ Yet it was not Hermes, but the ghost (*Evestrum*) of Paracelsus that showed him alchemical secrets.

Van Helmont had a penchant for dramatic storytelling and imagery but it is unlikely that his knowledge of Paracelsus occurred so late in time: 1599 was the date when he finished and acquired his medical degree in Louvain. Of course, the dream-vision is metaphorical and does in no way imply that Van Helmont actually discovered Paracelsus in a dream. Rather, Van Helmont seems to suggest that this vision compelled, or convinced him, to follow the path of Paracelsianism. Thus, it is much more plausible that he had already encountered Paracelsian thought earlier at the university. In several classes that he attended, whether in the university itself or the Jesuit College, he would have been made aware of Paracelsian doctrine.

It is interesting to note that, at the time Van Helmont attended Louvain, Gemma's Neoplatonising influence seemed stronger in the mathematics curriculum than in medicine itself, and Van Helmont himself seems to suggest that his knowledge of Gemma came via the former rather than the latter. There was a new generation of medical professors when Van Helmont studied there, notably Thomas Fyenus or Feyens (1567–1631), Gerard de Villers (d. 1634), and Jan Stormius (1559–1650), and they did not seem particularly enthralled with Neoplatonic humanism. The most distinguished of them, Feyens, was particularly dedicated to anatomy, having studied the discipline in Italy.³⁹ He wrote a successful treatise called *Libri chirurgici XII* (1602) and then penned his most famous work, *De viribus imaginationis*, a treatise against the belief in the agency of imagination in embryology, in 1608.⁴⁰

This work, written in a Scholastic style,⁴¹ seeks to forge an idiosyncratic view of the topic. Feyens particularly takes aim at the belief of Paracelsians and of many Neoplatonic humanists in the extensive agency of imagination, which, according to them, is able to act not only within the body but at large distances.⁴² He particularly criticises notions of occult sympathy as developed by Jean Fernel. According to Feyens, imagination only “accidentally” or indirectly causes any changes in

³⁷ This dream or vision is transcribed and translated by Robert Halleux, “Helmontiana II: Le prologue de l'*Eisagoge*, la conversion de Van Helmont au Paracelsisme et les songes de Descartes,” *Academiae analecta* (Brussels: Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, 1987), 17–36 (on 20–25).

³⁸ On Van Helmont's view of adepts, see Hedesan, *An Alchemical Quest for Universal Knowledge*, 170–72; on adepts in general, Georgiana D. Hedesan, “The Transformation of the Notion of ‘Adept’: From Medieval Arabic Philosophy to Early Modern Alchemy,” in *Innovation in Esotericism from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Georgiana D. Hedesan and Tim Rudbøg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

³⁹ Jan Papy, “Aristotelian Biological Thought in the Louvain Medical Treatises during the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Century: The Case of Embryology,” in *Aristotle's Animals in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Carlos Steel et al. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999), 322.

⁴⁰ Thomas Fyenus, *De viribus imaginationis tractatus* (Louvain: Gerardus Rivius, 1608).

⁴¹ On Feyens's reformed Scholasticism, see Papy, “Aristotelian Biological Thought,” particularly 326 and 331. Feyens earned a praise for his free thinking from Pierre Gassendi; Papy, “Aristotelian Biological Thought,” 335.

⁴² Hiro Hirai, “Imagination, Maternal Desire and Embryology in Thomas Fyenus,” in *Professors, Physicians and Practices in the History of Medicine: Essay in Honor of Nancy Siraisi*, ed. Gideon Manning and Cynthia Klestinec (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017), 211–226 (on 213).

bodies.⁴³ Interestingly, he accepts that a mother can change the foetus during pregnancy, but this is done not by imagination, which is merely passive, but by an agency he calls “conformative power”.⁴⁴ Feyens seemed to at least partially be reacting against the influence of Gemma and Paracelsus in Louvain. Despite Feyens’s Scholastic style, we should not perhaps see him as a traditional medical professor; he wished to be perceived as an original thinker who criticised Aristotle as well as the Neoplatonists.⁴⁵

Feyens may perhaps have been surprised to discover that one of his brightest students, Van Helmont, was increasingly drawn to the very movement he was trying to stem. Feyens, Villers, and Stormius seemed to have appreciated Van Helmont’s interest in medicine enough to invite him to teach classes on surgery.⁴⁶ Initially flattered by the attention, Van Helmont became increasingly dissatisfied with the exclusively theoretical focus in the medical school and thought it would be presumptuous of him to teach the subject without having any kind of practical experience. He was perhaps unhappy with the theory itself; certainly, he gave up the position. The Louvain professors did not seem to take his change of heart very well; it is interesting to find Feyens and Villers amongst the signatories of a 1623 letter intended to censure Van Helmont’s writing *De magnetica vulnorum curatione* (1621).⁴⁷

The Jesuits’ new learning and Van Helmont’s discovery of practical alchemy

Around 1595, Van Helmont was attracted to the courses that the Jesuit College had established in Louvain.⁴⁸ The rapid spread of Jesuit colleges in the mid-to-late sixteenth century has been well recorded. In Flanders, no less than sixteen colleges were established, attended by thousands of students every year. Yet the Jesuits had their eyes set on penetrating the much older and more conservative University of Louvain. They came to Louvain as early as 1542, but encountered strong resistance from the university, particularly the Theology Faculty.⁴⁹ Although a part of the issue was power and influence, another was the remarkable doctrinal differences between Louvain and Jesuit theologies. Thus, when Leonard Lessius (1554–1623) was invited to teach at Louvain University in 1587, the Faculty of Theology

⁴³ Hirai, “Imagination,” 215.

⁴⁴ Hirai, “Imagination,” 218–23.

⁴⁵ As Papy points out, he was “breaking through Aristotle’s dominion without breaking up with him,” “Aristotelian Biological Thought,” 334.

⁴⁶ Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, “Tumulus pestis,” chap. 1, 833.

⁴⁷ See Hedesan, *An Alchemical Quest for Universal Knowledge*, 28.

⁴⁸ According to Van Helmont, the year was when the Jesuits tried to teach philosophy in Louvain, but were rebuked by the university and Pope Clement VIII, see below; Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, “Studia authoris,” 14, §6.

⁴⁹ On the fraught relationship between Louvain Theology and the Jesuit College, see also Jan Roegiers, “Awkward Neighbours: The Leuven Faculty of Theology and the Jesuits College (1542–1773),” in *The Jesuits of the Low Countries: Identity and Impact (1540–1773). Proceedings of the International Congress at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven (3–5 September 2009)*, ed. Leo Kenis and Rob Faesen (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 153–76.

protested that his doctrine of predestination and grace was in contrast with Augustinian teachings.⁵⁰ In September 1587, the *Doctrina Lovaniensis* was issued condemning Lessius's ideas as being semi-Pelagian.⁵¹

The conflict was seriously aggravated in 1593, when Jesuits sought to teach philosophy and metaphysics at Louvain permanently.⁵² A powerful Louvain party organised a stiff resistance to the Jesuit projects, and it benefited from deep ties to the Papal curia in Rome.⁵³ Under pressure, Pope Clement VIII issued the brief *Accepimus Nuper* in 1595, whereby the Jesuits were forbidden to teach physics and logic.⁵⁴ Later, the public course of theology taught by the Jesuits at Louvain was also banned (1625). These condemnations left the Jesuits a rather weak faction in the Flemish-speaking Southern Netherlands.

At the time of Van Helmont's stay in Louvain, however, the Jesuit star was still on the rise. At the turn of the seventeenth century, one of the Jesuit College's most famous members was Martin Delrio (1551–1608), now particularly renowned for his friendship with Justus Lipsius. Delrio, a Fleming of Spanish origins, was a graduate of Louvain and later became professor of Biblical exegesis at the college in 1594.⁵⁵ The young Van Helmont attended Delrio's public classes on magic, which began in August 1596 and lasted until around June 1597.⁵⁶ Delrio later wrote his most famous work, a compendium on magic called *Disquisitiones magicarum libri sex* (1599–1600). The work had a huge impact on contemporary demonology and is still recognised as one of the most reputed early modern contributions to the analysis of witchcraft.⁵⁷ Delrio's work took a hard line on magic, seeking to dispel the idea that there was such a thing as "white magic"; for Delrio, all forms of magic were demonic. Hence there was no place for "natural magic" in his system, not even the innocuous form propounded by Giovanni Giambattista della Porta (c.1535–1615) in the same period. Both Delrio and, just a while later, Feyens launched attacks on the principles of learned magic, which were linked to Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and Paracelsian currents. Theirs were the opening salvos

⁵⁰ Van Eijl, "La controverse louvaniste," 210–11.

⁵¹ Van Eijl, "La controverse louvaniste," 219–22.

⁵² Bruno Boute, *Academic Interests and Catholic Confessionalisation: The Leuven Privileges of Nomination to Ecclesiastical Benefices* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 271–313. Boute sees anti-Jesuit resistance stemming mainly from academic politics and privilege. Officially, indeed, the 1596 memorandum emphasised the importance of traditional promotion rituals for the school, rituals that were being put in jeopardy by the Jesuits' separate graduation ceremonies; see 295.

⁵³ Boute, *Academic Interests*, 304–06.

⁵⁴ Boute, *Academic Interests*, 275.

⁵⁵ On Martin Delrio, see Jan Machielsens, *Martin Delrio: Demonology and Scholarship in the Counter-Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵⁶ Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, "Studia authoris," 14, §6: "[...] alterque Professorum Martinus del Rio, qui prius Iudex Turmae Hispanicae, ac dein in Senatu Brabantico fessus, ad Societatem allectus, confluerat, Disquisitiones magicas exponebat. Utamque lectionem suscepi avide." Machielsens, *Martin Delrio*, 225–26, found evidence that Delrio was indeed hired as Professor at the Louvain Jesuit College in 1596, and taught from August 1596 until probably June 1597, when he left Leuven.

⁵⁷ P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, "Introduction," in *Martin Del Rio: Investigations into Magic*, ed. and trans. P. G. Maxwell-Stuart (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 1–15 (on 8).

of an intellectual war against magic, which was to start in full force with the Goclenius-Roberti weapon-salve controversy, detailed later.

Van Helmont eagerly took in Delrio's learning on the subject, but came to disagree with the Jesuit professor's perspective on magic as exclusively demonic. Delrio's knowledge of magic offered Van Helmont the background and confidence to make up his own mind. Eventually he would argue, against Delrio, that there was such a thing as natural magic, which worked by taking advantage of occult influences existing in nature.

If Delrio dismissed all magic as demonic, his attitude toward alchemy was surprisingly favourable.⁵⁸ Indeed, the *Disquisitiones magicarum* contain a long discussion of the subject and evince an in-depth knowledge of alchemical writings and philosophy. Van Helmont would have found in the *Disquisitiones* support for alchemy, particularly that of the medical variety. Delrio "praises" and "venerates" medical alchemy and expresses his admiration for potable gold.⁵⁹

Delrio is more cautious about transmutation, which he finds "plausible;" still, his careful analysis of arguments for and against transmutation suggests that he thought it was achievable, if extremely difficult. Essentially, he believed that only a select group of "philosophers" could have accomplished it, such as Arnold of Villanova or Raymond Lull.⁶⁰ Van Helmont would express similar beliefs, claiming that only a select number of "adepts" could reach the highest arcana of alchemy, which included the philosophers' stone, the universal medicine, and the medicine for the radical extension of life.⁶¹

If Delrio and Van Helmont disagreed on alchemical views, it was only on the possible agency of the devil in transmutation. Delrio thought that the difficulty of transmutation and the promise of wealth could lure some alchemists into making pacts with the devil to acquire it.⁶² Yet he thought that, if pursued by moral, and particularly wealthy men, alchemy was an acceptable, even desirable practice. This viewpoint left a lot of room for its practice within the Jesuit ranks.

The problem of the relationship of Jesuits and alchemy has been treated by Martha Baldwin.⁶³ Baldwin points out that "chemistry and alchemy fell outside the traditional, highly structured Jesuit curriculum" and hence did not interest the Jesuits in the same way as mathematics or other fields of natural philosophy.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ See also the summary in Martha Baldwin, "Alchemy and the Society of Jesus in the Seventeenth Century: Strange Bedfellows?" *Ambix* 40, no. 2 (1993), 41–64 (on 43–45). Note, however, that Baldwin oddly suggests that Delrio taught Van Helmont in Liège, not Louvain, on 45.

⁵⁹ Martin Delrio, *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex* (Lyon: Pilehotte, 1608), 30: "quam ego artem, qua medicinae adminiculatur, sanè laudo, & veneror; ut physiologiae foetum praestantissimum; inventricem auri potabilis, rei non minùs utilis ad sanandum; quam ad alendum, ac quoad fieri potest, vitam prorogandam."

⁶⁰ Delrio, *Disquisitionum magicarum*, 36–38.

⁶¹ Hedesan, *An Alchemical Quest for Universal Knowledge*, 170–72.

⁶² Delrio, *Disquisitionum magicarum*, 38–39.

⁶³ Baldwin, "Strange Bedfellows," and, to a lesser extent, "Alchemy and the Society of Jesus," in *Alchemy Revisited: Proceedings of the International Conference on the History of Alchemy at the University of Groningen 17–19 April 1989*, ed. Z. R. W. M. von Martels (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 182–87.

⁶⁴ Baldwin, "Strange Bedfellows," 42.

She maintains that “alchemy very much engaged their [the Jesuits] interests and talents, but never occupied a central place in their studies of natural philosophy.”⁶⁵

Certainly Delrio’s writings evince real interest in the possibilities of alchemy and may reflect a certain openness toward the practice, at least within the Jesuit ranks in the Southern Netherlands. In fact, it is striking that a younger contemporary Jesuit, François d’Aguilon (1567–1617), actually carried out alchemical work in the laboratory.⁶⁶ Like Delrio, d’Aguilon was a Flemish Jesuit of Spanish origin. His fame is now linked to mathematics and architecture, but we know he was interested in alchemy as well. According to Van Helmont’s testimony, found in a manuscript in the Mechelen Archbishopric Archives, d’Aguilon ran alchemical experiments around 1596 in Antwerp.⁶⁷ Van Helmont’s account was written in the context of disputing the Jesuit Jean Roberti’s description of *chrysopoeia* as “impious and accursed gold-making” (*impiam et meledictam [...] aurificinam*).⁶⁸ The Flemish physician countered that d’Aguilon, a man who Roberti had particularly praised, was in fact pursuing that very art. He stated that d’Aguilon had a laboratory at his house, where he explored alchemy with the help of an artisan goldsmith named Little Willem.⁶⁹ D’Aguilon supposedly had ornate glass vessels that bore the seal of the Society of Jesus. From this, the Flemish physician surmised that d’Aguilon’s experiments had actually been sanctioned by the Jesuit authorities.⁷⁰

Van Helmont claimed to have attended these experiments on several occasions together with a friend by the name of Jan Rubens. This mention opens an interesting avenue of future research, namely Van Helmont’s possible relationship with the Rubens family. It is well known that they moved to Antwerp from Siegen in Westphalia in 1589 after the death of the patriarch Jan Rubens (1530–1587), doctor of laws and Calvinist refugee to Germany during the Dutch Troubles. But can we identify this Jan Rubens? According to Peter Paul Rubens’s genealogy,⁷¹ Jan Rubens had seven children. The first of these was called Jan Baptist Rubens (1562–1600). It seems that this older brother of Peter Paul may have been the Jan Rubens Van Helmont referred to. The only problem is posed by the fact that Jan Baptist Rubens was thirty four in 1596, considerably older than Van Helmont, who

⁶⁵ Baldwin, “Strange Bedfellows,” 60.

⁶⁶ On d’Aguilon, see August Ziggelaar, *Francois de Aguilon S. J. (1567–1617): Scientist and Architect* (Rome: Institutum Historicum, 1983); see also G. H. W. Vanpaemel, “Jesuit Science in the Spanish Netherlands,” in *Jesuit Science and the Republic of Letters*, ed. Mordechai Feingold (London: MIT Press, 2003), 395–96, Sven Dupré, “Aguilon, Vitruvianism and his *Opticorum libri sex*,” in *Innovation and Experience in Early Baroque in the Southern Netherlands: The Case of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp*, ed. Piet Lombaerde (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 53–66. Aguilon’s *Opticorum libri sex* was illustrated by Peter Paul Rubens.

⁶⁷ This episode is also recounted in Halleux, “Helmontiana I,” 43, and Baldwin, “Strange Bedfellows,” 45–46.

⁶⁸ Corneille Broeckx, “Van Helmont: Ad Judicem neutrum causam appellat suam et suorum philadelphus,” *Annales de l’Académie d’archéologie de Belgique* 22 (1869): 72.

⁶⁹ Broeckx, “Van Helmont: Philadelphus,” 72: “memini D. Franciscum Aguillon [...] explorasse anno 1596 qui cum in mecanicis inexpertus, quemdam aurifabrum, quem passim *parvum Guillelmum* nominabant [...]”

⁷⁰ The whole passage runs as follows: “hic me, et Joannem Rubenium sapius advocat, operis spectatores, qui rem indubiam, propter societatis auctoritatem, splendidam tum putabamus, accurrimus, videmus vasa vitrea, cujus juncturae luto, sigilloque eidem impresso vestrae domus, munitae erant, unde suspicio est, non nisi mandato superiorum id accidisse,” Broeckx, “Van Helmont: Philadelphus,” 72.

⁷¹ Frédéric Verachter, *La généalogie de Pierre Paul Rubens et de sa famille* (Antwerp: de Lacroix, 1840), 11–13.

would have only been seventeen at the time. Closer in age were Philip Rubens (1574–1611), a graduate of Louvain University and pupil of Justus Lipsius, and Peter Paul himself (1577–1640), roughly the same age as Van Helmont. In any case, it is clear that Van Helmont was connected to a certain circle of painters in Antwerp because in one of his letters to Mersenne he says:

My little one, aged 11 years old, takes in his hand a chisel and in the other a piece of paper or parchment [and] without a delineation or portrait, cuts [it] according to the idea that was proposed to him, be it a history or some other fantasy. It's not surprising that people didn't believe him, seeing that the painters of Antwerp came to see it, not thinking it was possible; and yet he cut them the history of Acteon.⁷²

Van Helmont never clarifies who these “painters of Antwerp” were. It is, however, also interesting to note that Otto Van Veen or Venius (1556–1629), Peter Paul's teacher and a famous painter in his own right, had strong Paracelsian leanings.⁷³ In fact, Van Veen's work *Physicae et theologiae conclusiones* (1621) was condemned together with Van Helmont's treatise *De magnetica vulnorum curatione* as “published in the same demonic spirit” (*uno eodemque daemonis spiritu*) by the ecclesiastical curia of Mechelen. Both Van Veen and Van Helmont were considered “disciples instructed in the school of Paracelsus” (*in Paracelsi [...] scola institutos discipulos*).⁷⁴ This does not, of course, mean that Van Helmont and Van Veen knew each other personally, but a connection between the two deserves further investigation.

The path away from Louvain

Van Helmont's interest in Jesuit learning would soon come to an end. His leanings toward Louvain Augustinian theology naturally clashed with the Society's views and the Jesuits had little to offer in the subject of medicine.⁷⁵ Yet it was perhaps the experience with d'Aguilon that made him particularly dissatisfied. Reminiscing

⁷² “Jean-Baptiste Van Helmont, à Bruxelles, à Mersenne, à Paris,” 30 January 1631, no. 191, in Cornelis de Waard, *Correspondance du Marin Mersenne*, 17 vols. (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1936), vol. 3, 52–73 (on 53): “Mon petit eagé de 11 ans prend d'une main le ciseau et de l'autre une loppe de papier ou parchemin sans estre deline ou pourtraict, coupe selon l'idée luy propose, soit une histoire ou aultre phantasie. Et n'est merveille que l'on ne le croid pas, veu que les painctres d'Anvers le sont venu voir, ne croyant pas possible; toutefois il leur couppoit l'histoire d'Acteon.”

⁷³ See Otto Van Veen, *Physicae et Theologiae Conclusiones / Conclusiões de Physique et de Théologie* (1621), ed. Aline Smeesters, Agnès Guiderdoni, and Ralph Dekonick (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017) and Ralph Dekoninck and Agnès Guiderdoni, “Reasoning Pictures: Vaenius's *Physicae et Theologiae Conclusiones* (1621),” in *Otto Vaenius and his Emblem Books*, ed. S. McKeown (Glasgow: Glasgow Emblem Studies, 2012), 175–96; see also Halleux, “Helmontiana I”, 47–48; for the link between Van Veen and the court of Ernest of Bavaria, see also Robert Halleux and Anne-Catherine Bernès, “La cour savante d'Ernest de Bavière,” *Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Sciences* 45 (1995): 3–29. Rubens was also exposed to Paracelsianism through Van Veen and probably Johannes Faber of the Accademia dei Lincei; see Teresa Esposito, “Rubens's Encounter with Natural Philosophy and the ‘Occult Sciences’ in 17th century Italy,” in *Rubens e la cultura italiana nella prima metà del XVII secolo*, ed. Raffaella Morselli and Cecilia Paolini (Rome: Viella, 2020), 233–46.

⁷⁴ Mechelen (Malines), Archives of the Archbishopric of Mechelen, MS “Causa J.B. Helmontii medici,” 3 vols., vol. 2, pieces 3 and 4.

⁷⁵ As Baldwin points out, medical practice had been forbidden by Ignatius of Loyola himself; “Strange Bedfellows,” 42–43.

about d'Aguilon's experiments, an older Van Helmont recalled that they did not really lead anywhere. Apparently, d'Aguilon tried to convert silver into gold by the use of *aqua fortis* (*chrysulca*), but only succeeded in spoiling the silver.⁷⁶ Growing despondent with his failure, d'Aguilon then moved on to making fake precious stones. These, Van Helmont said, were inserted into necklaces and sold by the Jesuits throughout Italy.⁷⁷ Because of these experiments, Van Helmont derisively dismissed d'Aguillon as a "pseudochymist."

In spite of this, it is undeniable that Jan Baptist was first initiated into the practice of alchemy by a Jesuit. In a later writing (*Tumulus pestis*, 1644), he attributed his induction to an unnamed "idiot" (by which he seems to have meant an unlearned artisan), "who knew the art of the fire, or at least his practice."⁷⁸ In this testimony, his encounter with the artisan occurred after an intellectual crisis that made him question the value of his medical learning and prompted him to travel throughout Europe (somewhere around 1597–1599). Yet the older Van Helmont seems to have suppressed his experience of d'Aguilon's practice, which clearly occurred before he met the artisan.

It is difficult to say for certain if for Van Helmont it was Paracelsian theory that led to alchemical practice or vice versa. As already mentioned, it is likely that he first encountered Paracelsianism through Severinus, who he had discovered through the reading of Gemma. Assuming that Van Helmont was probably still in the *Studium Generale* when he encountered Gemma, exposure to Paracelsian theory would have come before his experience in the laboratory in 1596. Even so, Van Helmont described his exposure to practical alchemical processes as a turning point in his career,⁷⁹ so Paracelsian philosophy may not have been sufficient by itself to make him a dedicated medical alchemist.

Yet once Severinus's Paracelsianism and alchemical knowledge in the laboratory came together Van Helmont never looked back. He threw himself into this new path with religious zeal, perhaps in an attempt to emulate his religious hero Augustine. His enthusiasm made him disregard or misjudge the dangers of pursuing this new system. He entered into an academic dispute that quickly got out of hand, the so-called weapon salve controversy, which initially pitted Rudolf Goclenius, a professor at the newly founded University of Marburg, against Jean Roberti, a Jesuit professor at Douai.⁸⁰ The debate was centred on a Paracelsian remedy

⁷⁶ Broeckx, "Van Helmont: Philadelphus," 72: "erat autem Chrysulca, multoties super argentum repetita, atque tandem fracto vase, ut reperit se oleum, operam et tempus amisisse, et argenti magnam fecisse jacturam, mutata est animi sententia, latebras quaesivit."

⁷⁷ Broeckx, "Van Helmont: Philadelphus," 72: "[...] tempus deinde in adulterio gemmarum trivit, quas tamen in monilibus ecclesiae inseruit venundedit Societas et per totam Italiam disseminavit."

⁷⁸ Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, "Tumulus pestis," 834: "Idiota namque se mihi associabat, qui pyrotechniae, manualia saltem, noverat."

⁷⁹ Van Helmont, *Ortus medicinae*, "Tumulus pestis," 834: "Mox ego, ut penetrare quorundam corporum per ignem insepexi; comprehendi multorum separationes, tum libri nondum traditas, ac hodie aliquot incognitas. Dein indies crevit sciendi ac operandi aviditas."

⁸⁰ The most comprehensive treatment of the weapon-salve controversy is the work by Roberto Poma, *Magie et guérison: La rationalité de la médecine magique (XVIe–XVIIe)* (Paris: Orizons, 2009). For the early history of the debate and Van Helmont's role in it see also Mark A. Waddell, "The Perversion of Nature: Johannes Baptista

that claimed to cure at a distance, the weapon salve; the subject had wide ramifications for natural philosophy. Van Helmont intervened to position himself against both antagonists. In attacking both the Jesuits and the Protestants, Van Helmont may have thought that he would find support for a new Catholic view of Paracelsianism and natural magic. His dismissal of the Jesuits also seems to reflect a conviction that his views would be shared by other individuals harbouring anti-Jesuit feelings in Flemish theological and philosophical circles. Perhaps he even believed that his *alma mater* of Louvain might support his anti-Jesuit stance. In any case, he badly misjudged the situation. In 1621, Roberti denounced him to the Spanish Inquisition for heresy. From 1621 to 1637, Van Helmont would be caught in an avalanche of legal proceedings that would even see him put under house arrest for three years. If he had hoped to find strong protection from the Jesuits, he was in for a major disappointment. Although there was some hesitation in Flemish ecclesiastical courts to open legal proceedings against Van Helmont, they eventually did so. Perhaps more damaging was the 1630 censorship of his writings by the University of Louvain. It was signed by five theologians and two physicians, Thomas Fyenus and Gerard de Villers. His *alma mater* would not come to his support.

Still, if Louvain did not come to the rescue, Van Helmont was spared condemnation in the court. It seems Van Helmont did find a supporter after all – the president of the ecclesiastical court, Archbishop Jacob Boonen (1573–1655), another Louvain graduate, a staunch opposer of the Jesuits and a supporter of Jansenius. It is not known if Van Helmont knew Boonen before the trial, but the Archbishop eventually agreed to release the physician without charge. It was perhaps small comfort for the old and embittered Van Helmont, who spent the last years of his life frantically writing down his philosophical legacy, only to die before finishing his work. Before his death, he entrusted his manuscripts to his son Franciscus Mercurius, who would oversee their publication in Amsterdam in 1648 under the title of *Ortus medicinae*. His fame, fomented by his trial and the publication of four treatises in 1644 (*Opuscula medica inaudita*), would spread widely after the appearance of the *editio princeps*.

Van Helmont remained a Catholic to his death and his widow managed to obtain a formal exoneration after his passing. Yet Van Helmont lived to see Louvain doctrine condemned as heresy and his theological convictions denounced as heretical Jansenism. Caught up in this storm, Louvain took a long time to recover. In the meantime, Van Helmont's ideas and practices found a hearing at another university – Protestant Leiden.

⁸⁰ *Continued*

Van Helmont, the Society of Jesus, and the Magnetic Cure of Wounds," *Canadian Journal of History* 38 (2003): 182; and Carlos Ziller Camenietzki, "Jesuits and Alchemy in the Early Seventeenth Century: Father Johannes Roberti and the Weapon Salve Controversy," *Ambix* 48 (2001): 87–96.

Conclusions

Teaching at Louvain had a profound impact on Van Helmont's thought, not least on his complex attempt to unify philosophy and theology. First, it is highly likely that his Augustinian stance, anti-Scholasticism, and outspoken condemnation of Aristotelianism were drawn from the Louvain theological tradition. Second, Louvain mediated his knowledge of Neoplatonic Hippocratism via the writings and teachings of Cornelius Gemma, even as early as his *Studium generale*. Third, it is very likely that Van Helmont, who still read Paracelsianism in a Severinian guise as late as 1607, encountered Severinus through Gemma as well. He may have learned further about alchemy through the public classes offered by Martin Delrio at the Jesuit College.⁸¹

In any case, the uncrystallised interest in Paracelsianism must have been given a strong boost when Van Helmont actually experienced practical alchemy via the Jesuits. Once d'Aguilon showed him the laboratory, Van Helmont was hooked. He went in search of Paracelsian and alchemical knowledge away from his *alma mater* of Louvain. Complemented by his knowledge of Paracelsian philosophy, Van Helmont would return to his estates in Vilvoorde and Brussels as a thoroughly converted alchemist and alchemical philosopher.

It is fairly clear that Louvain itself could offer only theoretical knowledge of Paracelsianism as a philosophy that was increasingly focused on alchemy in this period. For the practical knowledge of medical alchemy that Van Helmont so craved, he had to go outside the university curriculum: to the Jesuits, to the artisans, and to other physicians he may have encountered during his travels – someone like the English scholar Hugh Platt (1552–1608), whose knowledge Van Helmont praised. This practical knowledge, in turn, would feed back into a philosophy that was built on the foundations of his Louvain learning, but would also radically differ from it in its experimental tendency and theoretical conclusions.

Note on contributor

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⁸¹ The curriculum that Delrio taught to his students is not currently known. However, as Machielsen points out (*Martin Delrio*, 225–26), there are two surviving student course notes in Brussels and Edinburgh, which deserve further study.