

“YOUR SHIT IS  
THE BEST THING  
ABOUT YOU”

ENTERING PARACELSUS'  
TREASURE HOUSE  
OF INSULTS

FRATER ACHER





*"Your shit is the best thing about you"*



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## *Preamble*

This essay attempts to walk the fine line between grandiose spectacle and serious contemplation. On the one hand, the sheer unbroken joy of Paracelsus' juicy and highly creative rantings is long overdue being shared with a wider audience outside the German-speaking world. Inevitably, this pleasure is fueled by a childish delight in offensive fecal language and a completely intentional break with the genre. On the other, beyond the shitting cats, puking dogs and pigs that will drag you through the trough, we will encounter aspects of Paracelsus that lead us to a deeper appreciation of his character as a lifelong outsider.

I am especially pleased that my long-time friend and masterful artist José Gabriel Alegría Sabogal has lent his hand to the project. The original drawings in this essay fill me with so much joy, as they graphically express the spirit of Paracelsus' rants. I hope the following pages will inspire hearty laughter, an occasional blush and at least a few new insights.

LVX,  
Frater Acher

*May the serpent bite its tail.*



# Attack

Attack is the best form of defence. A new house is best built from the ruins of an entire city. The hand that creates is dependent upon the hand that destroys. For the human mind is like a small clearing surrounded by darkness, and the space in which new ideas can take root in this clearing is fiercely contested. There are rare moments when something truly new emerges from the slow transmutation of the familiar. Much more reliably, creative destruction eats its way through what exists to achieve freedom. Grime, ash, and bone are excellent raw materials for the creation of a golem.

Such are the thoughts that must have haunted Paracelsus throughout his life. His Great Work was to create an entirely new medical-theological doctrine and practice, and to do so not in the language of the ancient and wise, but in that of the lower classes, the vernacular of the peasants, tavern keepers and cobblers. There were many obstacles to such a bold venture. But, in the first place, it could only be successful if there was a space opened up to think in a wholly new way about the body and mind, about health and disease, the cosmos and the state of being human within it. Thus, the statues of Aristotle and Galen had to be toppled, the gown wearers chased away, and the dust of the academies traded for the stain and stink of hospitals and charnel houses. Creative destruction was a necessary prerequisite for creating a clearing amidst the cultural hegemony of his age. And for protecting the younger generation from the ossified, anaemic, experience-poor, bookish wisdom of the old.

All this weighed on the shoulders of this “frail little man, barely forty, rickety, hunchbacked and with a huge skull.”<sup>1</sup> The entire academy and pharma-

1 Prof. Dr Eduard Stäuble, Laudatio zur Verleihung des Bodensee-Literaturpreises der Stadt Überlingen 1993 an Pirmin Meier für sein Buch *Paracelsus, Arzt und Prophet*, <https://cms.ueberlingen.de/mediamanager/2022/08/bodensee-literaturpre->

ceutical industry of his time had to go up in smoke to make way for his new medicine, an art and an applied practice rooted in the light of nature and in the service of life.

In the following pages, we will witness the furious tirades, the corrosive rage and the blazing fire with which Paracelsus insulted, spat at and defiled his opponents. We do this in the interest of better understanding Paracelsus as a person. But also with the aim of recognising in him a clear example of someone who, as a social outcast, defended himself brutally and fearlessly throughout his life. For Paracelsus, attack was always the best defence. In the following work we will look at some of these attacks, and their concise and exuberant linguistic inventiveness. We do so with the aim of serving up a ladleful of scalding courage to all the outcasts and marginalised of today who would make their own occulted paths.

I admit that you make [the sick do] a great job of shitting. I'll also admit that you do a nasty thing to the arse. What is all this? Where does syphilis come from? [...] That you cure syphilis this way would be an arcanum. Where are you filth-makers then? Any peasant with six measures of wine can do that to an arse, and you think it's an art.<sup>2</sup>

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is-1993.pdf / accessed 25.01.2024 / translation by author.

<sup>2</sup> HC, 257b.

# *Paracelsus*

Before we immerse ourselves in the rantings of cats, dogs and pigs who seem to enjoy emptying their bowels over the abused, it must be noted that Paracelsus had good reason to be so angry at the doctors, theologians and rulers of his day. His attacks were not born from pure iconoclasm, but, to create the space for a radically new approach to the human condition in the midst of the created cosmos. His profoundly animistic view of the world, in which the immanence of God is the basis of all understanding and endeavour, could not seamlessly be sewn into the philosophy of a Galen or an Aristotle, but demanded an open mind, ready to see, understand and experience the world in a completely new way. Neither was he unprovoked; Paracelsus' invectives were a response to the attacks and intrigues directed against him.

The breach Paracelsus sought to make with the authorities of the past was so radical and unapologetic that he remained alone in his struggle throughout his life. His works remained largely unpublished and his healing successes largely unnoticed. His profound influence on western medicine – and, underground, on western magic – was only recognised after his death, in the last quarter of the sixteenth century.

So the question must be asked, what enabled this man not only to be ahead of his time in so many ways, but also to endure such a lonely life? How did he not give up or be crushed by the real-life consequences of his extreme ideas? This is where the scientific analysis of the human remains of Paracelsus, first published in 1993, comes in. The attribution of the bones to Paracelsus can be proved with relative certainty, not only on the basis of the data we have on his burial and the history of his remains, but also on the basis of the historically documented unusual size of his skull.

From the examination of his skeletal remains, we know that Paracelsus most probably suffered from congenital adrenogenital syndrome. This is a condition based on a recessive inherited defect in the formation of enzymes

that are important for steps in the biosynthesis of adrenal hormones. The disease is caused by a genetic disorder that leads to premature puberty (*pubertas praecox*) in affected individuals. Initially, “the children grow faster than normal and are therefore taller than their peers, but also experience prematurely arrested growth as a result of early closure of the growth plates. As adults, they barely reach 1.6 metres in height. Early on, in the third decade of life, marked frontal hair loss begins. Those affected are often of above-average intelligence, but are psychologically difficult, tend to be short-tempered, are often shy and usually lead a reclusive life. They tend to be sexually uninterested.”<sup>3</sup>

If this medical diagnosis was correct for Paracelsus, it should by no means be regarded as the sole explanation for his tirades. On the other hand, the latter cannot be discussed completely independent of this medical diagnosis. It seems important to see Paracelsus as a person first: short and hunch-backed, with an oversized skull and half bald head, and with a eunuch-like, misshapen figure. Adding to that his sharp eye, unbridled temperament, recurrent depression, and inclination to drink, we can see him travel throughout his life on an unsteady, lonely journey from farm to farm, hostel to hostel, beer mug to wine barrel, leaving a trail of caustic insults, enmities, and persecutions in his wake.

We then encounter an unresolved contradiction in his biography: We hear Bombastus refer to himself as someone who lacked eloquence, who perhaps even suffered from a speech impediment. When Paracelsus speaks of his “stammering tongue,”<sup>4</sup> do we have to imagine him as a stammerer too? We cannot know for sure.<sup>5</sup> We do know, however, of several situations in which

3 Kritscher H., Hauser G., Reiter C., Szilvassy J., Vycudilik W. Forensisch-Anthropologische Untersuchungen der Skelettreste des Paracelsus, in Heinz Dopsch et al., *Paracelsus (1493–1541): “Keines andern Knecht ...”*, Salzburg: Verlag Anton Pustet, 1993. This description of the psychosocial effects of congenital adrenogenital syndrome and the associated *pubertas praecox* is probably a little too deterministic. Due to the rare occurrence of cases that are not treated with medication and hormones.

4 Katharina Biegger, *De invocatione beatae Mariae virginis: Paracelsus und die Marienverehrung*. Stuttgart: Steiner (1990), 201/206.

5 We have several authentic reports of Paracelsus taking up the pen himself and spending long periods at his desk, as well as of him dictating new writings directly to his secretaries. Thus, his speech impediment, while it may have hindered him in public battles of words, could not have been so severe as to prevent him from dictating in private. (Karl Sudhoff, *Paracelsus: Sämtliche Werke*, vol. VIII, München: Otto Wilhelm Barth, 1924, 9) at an early stage, there are few studies that scientifically

he expressly felt himself to be the inferior in verbal duels, a shortfall he would subsequently explain in letters and epistles.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, however, it is reported by at least one of his private students that Paracelsus produced a lot of his writing by dictation. A letter from the later very important printer Johannes Oporinus (1507-1564)<sup>7</sup> to the equally well-known Johannes Weyer (1516-1588) from 1555 has been preserved. Oporinus was Paracelsus' famulus from 1527 to 1529, a role of which he was later very ashamed, but the letter gives us some important, possibly exaggerated, impressions:

Nevertheless, when he was at his most drunken, and used to dictate some of his philosophy to me when he came home, it seemed to hang together so neatly that it could not have been improved upon by a sober man. I endeavoured to translate it into Latin, and there are some of these books which have been translated into Latin, partly by myself and partly by others. All night long, while I was with him, he never undressed, which I attributed to his drunkenness. And very often he came home at midnight, always drunk, to sleep. Dressed as he was, with his sword, which he said he had received as a gift from a torturer or executioner, he threw himself on the bed, and now and then, in the middle of the night, when he had hardly slept, he would get up like a madman with his sword drawn, and throw it against the wall, so that sometimes I thought he was going to cut off my head, and was afraid of it.<sup>8</sup>

assess the effects as they would have occurred for Paracelsus. However, the description of those affected as "troubled, depressed, aggressive, socially withdrawn, and moody" can be found throughout the older literature. See: Sonis, W.A., Comite, F., Blue, J., Pescovitz, O. H., Rahn, C. W., Hench, K. D., et al. (1985). Behavior problems and social competence in girls with true precocious puberty. *J. Pediatr.* 106, 156-160. doi: 10.1016/S0022-3476(85)80489-3.

6 Pia Holenstein Weidmann, "Der Dreck ist das best an euch": Angriff und Verteidigung in Paracelsus' Rhetorik, in *Nova Acta Paracelsica, Neue Folge* 29, New York: Peter Lang, 2021, 21.

7 Carlos Gilly, *Die Manuskripte in der Bibliothek des Johannes Oporinus. Verzeichnis der Manuskripte und Druckvorlagen aus dem Nachlass Oporins anhand des von Theodor Zwinger und Basilius Amerbach erstellten Inventariums, Schriften der Universitätsbibliothek Basel*. Bd. 3, Basel: Schwabe, 2001.

8 1555 letter from Johannes Oporinus to Johannes Weyer, quoted after: Will-Erich Peuckert, *Theophrastus Paracelsus*, New York: Georg Oslo Verlag, 1976, p. 143-145.

We can see the special significance of the written word for Paracelsus, in a social world in which he was by nature the inferior and interloper, writing offered him his own sovereign space. Here he remained uninterrupted, here he had space to express his radically innovative thoughts in original form and language, here he could defend himself with a sharp blade and style himself as the sole reigning medical saviour. How much of the creativity and harshness of his invectives was due to midnight dictation under the strong influence of alcohol, we will never know. For, especially in later life, both his drunkenness and his wild, raging insults became a constant.



## Zeitgeist

To place Paracelsus' treasure house of insults in its proper context, we must not only consider his personality, but also his era. Three aspects in particular should be mentioned here, which the twenty-first century reader may only espy at second glance, but which had a significant influence on the work of Paracelsus and his contemporaries.

The sixteenth century is often exaggeratedly referred to as the age of *Grobiane* or ruffians. The German term *Grobian* first appears in the *Vocabularius teutonicus* of 1482 as a translation of the Latin *rusticus* (peasant). Soon after, we encounter St Grobianus as the invented patron saint of the uncouth and vulgar. Beyond these playful expressions, however, the term *Grobian* evokes the notion of the seemingly barbaric Germanic people. Such echoes reverberate from Herodotus in the fifth century BCE, who characterised the self-image of the Greeks as Hellenes, in drastic contrast and radical distinction from the foreign barbarians.<sup>9</sup> This artificial division and demarcation of cultures is still present in the concept of the *Grobian*, or ruffian, in whom we find the satirical counter-image to the nobleman, the knight and the medieval hero.

<sup>9</sup> The word *barbaros* is intended to convey an incomprehensible language, which to the Greeks sounded rough due to the accumulation of the sound *br*, perceived as stammering or stuttering. To this day, the use of a foreign language and the emphasis and interpretation of particularly striking features is a characteristic of cultures that are perceived as foreign, and language in general is constitutive of collective identities in images of others and of the self. Volker Gallé, "Dem Volk aufs Maul geschaut: Ambivalenzen des Grobianismus im 16. Jahrhundert," lecture held in July 2021 as part of a series organised by the Nibelungenlied-Gesellschaft Worms e.V. on literature from Luther's time to mark the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's refusal to recant at the Diet of Worms in 1521, <https://www.nibelungenlied-gesellschaft.de/nlg/beitraege/dem-volk-aufs-maul-geschaut/> accessed 25.01.2024, translation by author.

From the Mediterranean perspective, the North could be understood as a model of republican virtue as well as of barbaric terror, a *furor teutonicus*, which was evidenced by experience. The milder form of this was the criticism of civilisation, the harsher the warlike image of the enemy. All these narrative conceptual worlds, with their variations and ambivalences, were available as an arsenal for the sixteenth century in Europe.<sup>10</sup>

From a literary perspective, the sixteenth century was the time in which satirical humanist works – for example Sebastian Brandt's *Das Narrenschiff* and the newly emerging Schwankliteratur with books such as *Till Eulenspiegel* or François Rabelais' *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* – captivated a wide audience. In opposition to the increasingly fragile canon of positive behaviour of the dawning modern age, these books illustrated in a jocular, wild and crude manner a wealth of misconduct in terms of social and table manners, hygiene, discipline and morality.

This first aspect of the literary history of Paracelsus' time, cannot be separated from the second, even more essential aspect. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther heralded the age of the Reformation, which did not only lead to an irreparable loss of power for the Catholic Church. Rather, the rebellion of the reformers called for a general assault on the bastions of medieval authorities, rulers, and their institutions. I examined these dynamics in more detail in my book on the magic of the Rosicrucians,<sup>11</sup> who were concerned not only with a spiritual but with a universal reform (*Universalreform*) of all aspects of society.

Here, too, the rebellion against authority often took place in an environment characterised by earthiness, vulgar invectives and deliberate proximity to the common people. Thomas Mann's remarks on Martin Luther, given in a lecture in 1945, are characteristic of this. Once again, the barbaric nature of the Teutons shines through the historic silhouette of Luther.

Martin Luther, a gigantic incarnation of the German spirit, was exceptionally musical. I frankly confess that I do not love him. Germanism in its unalloyed state, the Separatist, Anti-Roman, Anti-European shocks

<sup>10</sup> Gallé (2021), <https://www.nibelungenlied-gesellschaft.de/nlg/beitraege/dem-volk-aufs-maul-geschaut/> / accessed 25.01.2024, translation by author.

<sup>11</sup> Frater Acher (2021). *Rosicrucian Magic: A Reader on Becoming Alike to the Angelic Mind*. Exeter: TaDehent Press.

me and frightens me, even when it appears in the guise of evangelical freedom and spiritual emancipation; and the specifically Lutheran, the choleric coarseness, the invective, the fuming and raging, the extravagant rudeness coupled with tender depth of feeling and with the most clumsy superstition and belief in demons, incubi, and changelings, arouses my instinctive antipathy. I should not have liked to be Luther's dinner guest; I should probably have felt as comfortable as in the cozy home of an ogre [...].<sup>12</sup>

If the raw force with which the Reformation broke into late medieval society was at least partly fuelled by the *furor teutonicus*, its thrust and aim were quite different. In overcoming the old (ecclesiastical) power structures and in abandoning the essential figure of the priest as the sole mediator between man and God, its central mission was about unleashing the individual. "Self-knowledge, self-control and self-analysis"<sup>13</sup> in light of one's personal conscience and a personal relationship with God were its core concepts. As such, the Reformation promoted a "religious subjectivism that stripped away all ecclesiasticism and referred everyone exclusively to his own conscience."<sup>14</sup> As we know, however, freedom is a two-edged sword.<sup>15</sup> This liberation from the orthodox and enforced social power structures of the Catholic Church led to a "new responsibility [of] action"<sup>16</sup> for each individual: "Every Christian was [now] an equal member of his community and had to live in self-responsibility according to God."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Mann, *Germany and the Germans*: Address delivered by Dr. Mann in the Coolidge Auditorium in the Library of Congress on the evening of May 29, 1945, Washington: Library of Congress, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Dülmen (2016). *Die Entdeckung des Individuums: 1500–1800*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Dülmen (2016), 24.

<sup>15</sup> All aspects of freedom are negotiated in a field of pronounced polarity. Too much on either side quickly overwhelms most of us, and where the centre lies between these poles is highly controversial and rarely unanimous. If only we knew how to deal with the freedom we so vehemently demand? And if actual liberation were not immediately followed by calls for new boundaries and relief from the pressure of personal responsibility. For a most decisive study of this tension, please refer to Parsons' essays: Jack Parsons (1989) *Freedom is Two-Edged Sword and Other Essays*. The Oriflamme 1, Las Vegas: Falcon Press.

<sup>16</sup> Dülmen (2016), 21

<sup>17</sup> Dülmen (2016), 21

In light of the above, we understand why the magical concepts of theurgy and gnosis held such a fascination for some of the Christian mystics of the reform period. The pursuit of an independent, Promethean path close to the gods is a deeply heretical trait of Western magic, which can be traced back all the way to the *goēteia* of the ancient Greeks. Whether it was practised through incantation and ritualism (theurgy), through prayer and inner contemplation (gnosis), or through pragmatic hybrids of its many different techniques, is of little relevance here. The sixteenth century, however, found itself once again at a crossroads, where this ancient current resurfaced and merged with the zeitgeist, calling upon the mystics and enthusiasts of the time to follow their own independent, “self-devised” paths to God.<sup>18</sup>

I have spoken to Paracelsus many times on matters of religion and theology. In none of these conversations was there any sign of orthodoxy, but a great deal of self-devised magic. If you had seen him, you would not have expected him to be a doctor, but rather a coachman. He also took a peculiar liking to the company of such people. He seldom went to religious meetings; he seemed to care little for God and divine things.<sup>19</sup>

If in spiritual terms the reform movement of the sixteenth century was about achieving a personal relationship with the divine, in social terms it was about the struggle for, and subsequent accountability for, a deeply individualistic concept of freedom. What the modern citizen gained from the Reformation was the freedom to have and express their opinions and attitudes. What the same citizen lost was the freedom not to have opinions of their own, the privilege to simply submit to the natural order of things and go about their daily business. As much as the Reformation was a liberating blow for the individual, it was also extremely challenging for the average citizen to live up to the ideal of personal responsibility and the new compulsion to develop a personal stance.

A pinch of independence, a touch less oppression and a little less paternalism was what most of his contemporaries wanted. Not the self-commitment to be a Luther, a Zwingli, a Huss, or even a new Apollonius of Tyana.

18 The ‘black abbot’ Johannes Trithemius should be mentioned here as a key precursor and pioneer of this influential movement. See also Frater Acher (2021).

19 Such is the verdict of one of the main representatives of the Reformation in Switzerland, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) on Paracelsus, in Biegger (1990), 12.

Paracelsus, on the other hand, accepted this challenge with both hands and a swelling heart, which we find unmistakably expressed in his motto: *Alterius non sit qui suus esse potest* (let no man belong to another who can belong to himself).<sup>20</sup>

However, the sixteenth century was not only the age of the Reformation and ruffians, but also the age of the widespread use of the printing press. This is the foundation of the third historical influence that we should bear in mind when we study the work of Paracelsus.

As we enter the “anarchic” age of the “single-sheet relief print”<sup>21</sup> or broadsides, we immediately find ourselves caught in the tension between emerging tabloid mass entertainment and deliberate fake news employed for political and religious agitation. The curious variety of content in sixteenth-century pamphlets ranges from “monster births (both animal and human), violence, the Turks, politics, exotic animals and savages”<sup>22</sup> to astrological-astronomical interpretations of celestial phenomena and a wide range of targeted propaganda and misinformation. Regardless of the questionable motivation of all contributors<sup>23</sup> on this spectrum, the broadsides themselves considerably accelerated the emergence of a participatory public sphere, as they fostered a broad opinion-forming process stimulated by the new media.<sup>24</sup>

20 Compare the banner in the so-called second Augustin Hirschvogel engraving by Paracelsus from 1540, in Piermin Meier (2013). *Paracelsus: Physician and Prophet*. Zurich: Unionsverlag, no page number.

21 Peter Parshall (2009). The Modern Historiography of Early Printmaking. *Studies in the History of Art 75, Symposium Papers LII: The Woodcut in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, 9–15.

22 Owen Gingerich (1976). Essay Review: Sixteenth-Century Broadsides, Erschröckliche und warhafftige Wunderzeichen 1543–1586. Faksimiledruck von Einblattgedrucken aus der Sammlung Wikiana in der Zentralbibliothek Zürich. *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 7(2), 145.

23 With Luhmann, it should be noted here that the profession of journalist only developed in the course of the technology of almost mass-media, propagandistically motivated news dissemination. (Niklas Luhman (2017) *Die Realität der Massenmedien*. Berlin: Springer Verlag, 40.

24 Examples of this captured in ink are not only the pamphlets themselves, but also the flood of autobiographies as well as the new culture of personal, intimate letter correspondence that gripped the sixteenth century. (For further reference see Rudolf Schlögl (2008) POLITIK BEOBACHTEN: Öffentlichkeit und Medien in der Frühen Neuzeit, in *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 35(4), 2008, 581–616, as well as the already mentioned source text: Richard van Dülmen (2016). *Die Entdeckung des Individuums: 1500–1800*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer.

Since the publications of Niklas Luhmann, there has been a consensus among historians that the new forms of media led to an initial overstimulation and overload of the newly emerging public sphere.<sup>25</sup> Imagine the (largely male) village community gathered in the tavern of the sixteenth century, gripped by seemingly never-ending turmoil: gone were the quiet times when their own village – and perhaps the foothills of the neighbouring countryside – defined the boundaries of the socially acceptable collective mindset. In place of the lone wandering minstrel – who was both the entertainer and the bringer of news from afar – the anonymous printed sheets now literally flew over the pub tables.<sup>26</sup> Pamphlets had begun to cover the country, spreading rumours or information at breakneck speed, and every man was challenged to form their own opinion based on their content. Simply being a Christian and a farmer was apparently no longer good enough. The ideal of the Enlightenment, which emerged about two hundred years later in the same region, was that of “independence and freedom from any foreign opinion” for all citizens. In the sixteenth century we saw the stark opposite, official doctrines rapidly dissolved, old institutions were radically questioned, and individuals in their rural worlds found themselves overwhelmed by competing and unreliable “truths,” as well as the pressure to hold an opinion on everything.<sup>27</sup>

25 Niklas Luhmann (1995). *Die Realität der Massenmedien*. Opladen: Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften; in our context see especially chapter 5: Nachrichten und Berichte.

26 Schlögl (2008), 593.

27 Werner Faulstich's book *Medien zwischen Herrschaft und Revolte (Media between Rule and Revolt)* provides an in-depth look at the revolutionary significance of the sixteenth century. Here is a key section: “[...] the idea of immediacy, of attaining salvation without an intermediate priestly authority, had a counterpart in the desire of the citizens to no longer be subjects and to participate in power. It was about the freedom of the Christian human. Luther stands for the change from the collectivity of faith to the individual as the highest instance of sociality, from the subject of revelation to the revelation of the subject, as Hans-Georg Söeffner succinctly puts it: ‘a self-observing, self-interpreting, a narrated and a narrating subject.’ As is well known, this was associated with a moral reevaluation of labour, including physical activity. The scholastic-medieval esteem of the *vita contemplativa* was replaced by the worldly-practical *vita activa*, or at least placed on an equal footing with it. In the ‘worldly’ sphere, the Christian man now defined himself through work and professional practice – the centrepiece of the so-called ‘Protestant ethic’ (Max Weber) as a step towards capitalist consciousness.” (Werner Faulstich (1998). *Medien zwischen Herrschaft und Revolte: Die Medienkultur der frühen Neuzeit (1400-1700)*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 23–24).

The parallel to our current situation in the twenty-first century seems to have gone largely unnoticed by academia. Five hundred years ago, we had the precursors of today's social media overload, in which instant judgement of every geopolitical conflict in every corner of the world must fit into the pocket of every man.

Like all creative works, Paracelsus' invectives must be read in their historical context. Its rough contours can be traced in three broad strokes: the sixteenth century as the so-called age of ruffians, the radical upheavals of the Reformation and the golden age of the printing press and the new media sensation of pamphlets. Together, these created an atmosphere in which even the harshest criticism of those in power was possible, in which anti-heroes and worlds of inverted values and lifestyles became conceivable, and in which the individual began to search for their own vision and voice. This is the background, like the crackle of an old record, against which we can hear the distinctive voice of Paracelsus.

The life of Paracelsus is mostly that of a country traveller: a sixteenth century tramp who in search of the true gold of alchemy, the Arcana, the remedies from the light of nature, has to "eat his shoe and hat."<sup>28</sup>

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28 Meier (2013), 11, who refers here to an original quotation from Paracelsus, which can be found in Sudhoff, vol.XI (1928), 145: "I conceal other things, which he who goes to and fro in the knowledge of many a person, in the experience of all kinds of customs and manners, would consume his shoe and hat only to know them. I conceal greater things than these. Now a wooer goes a long way to see a pretty woman; how much further does one go after a pretty art." (translation by author).

## *Invective*

Paracelsus' most severe insults are by no means evenly distributed throughout his enormous oeuvre. Paracelsus was certainly "hot-blooded"<sup>29</sup> all his life, as one of his connoisseurs put it, and never lacked for sharp criticism of his many opponents. However, his pithy words are rarely found as densely packed, concentrated and charged with furious rage as in the lines we will come to, these mainly stem from a single work which we have in several versions, his book *Paragranum*.<sup>30</sup>

In 1530, when he committed the work to paper, Paracelsus was thirty-six years old. He had survived his disgraceful expulsion from Basel, completed his great work on the radical new treatment for syphilis, and had left the manuscript with the printer in Nuremberg. Now he travelled again through the Bavarian countryside. It seems likely that he wrote the most brutal version of his preface to the *Paragranum* before he learnt of the printing ban imposed upon him by the doctors of Leipzig. In other words, the disappointment and anger that his great work on 'the French disease' would not see the light of day cannot be given as a reason for the sharpness of his hostility towards the doctors of his age. The anger expressed here was not a momentary reaction against a fresh wound. Rather, we hear the voice of Paracelsus as it had developed over many years. It was hardened and sharpened in the fight against rampant pharmacists, ignorant doctors and the pharmaceutical industry of his time, which was making big money with ineffective miracle cures, such as the new treatment of syphilis with guaiac wood, which Paracelsus had attacked so fiercely.

Throughout his life, Paracelsus wrote with the "self-confidence of a scien-

29 Sudhoff (1924), 10/11.

30 For a detailed overview of the genesis of this important work in Paracelsus' oeuvre, see Sudhoff (1924), 5-15.



tifical vanguard.”<sup>31</sup> As such, he had no problem combining his elucidations on the high moral demands of the Philosophy, as he called the art of healing founded upon natural magic, with the most savage insults flung at his opponents. When he speaks of himself as a turtledove that has fallen prey to wrath, we recognise his simultaneous deep devotion to the gifts of nature and healing of the sick, as well as the willingness to wage a devastating battle against all those who betrayed this sacred art.

Before we turn to Paracelsus’ own words, let us consider the most famous attack from his opponents. It is a poem, originally in Latin, which was allegedly written by some of Paracelsus’ students in Basel, at the instigation of the city’s agitated medics, and nailed to the church doors at night ...

The *manes* of Galenus against Theophrastus, or rather Cacophrastus. Listen, you who blaspheme our fame, to you I am but a babbler, a mental cripple. I am said to have had no knowledge of the art of Machaon;<sup>32</sup> if I had, I would not have made use of it: who can endure such a thing! Perhaps I didn’t know the peasant herbs of leeks and onions. But I knew the hellebore, which I send to heal your sick head and at the same time ask all of Anticyra for help. I confess that I do not know your spagyric dreams, you good-for-nothing, I do not know what your “Ares,” your “Yliadus” is, or the “Essatum” and the holy, invulnerable “Taphneus” and your “Archaeus,” the founder of all natural forces. Not the marvellous Africa knew such monstrosities, and you want to fight proud word battles with me? Why have you caved in so shamefully to Wendelinus? I will die if you are worthy to carry the potty after Hippocrates, or to tend my pigs, you good-for-nothing. Why do you adorn yourself with stolen feathers? Your gloriousness has short legs. What do you want to say in your lectures? You only live on stolen insights! The best thing for you is a rope on which you can hang yourself after your windbagery has been recognised ...<sup>33</sup>

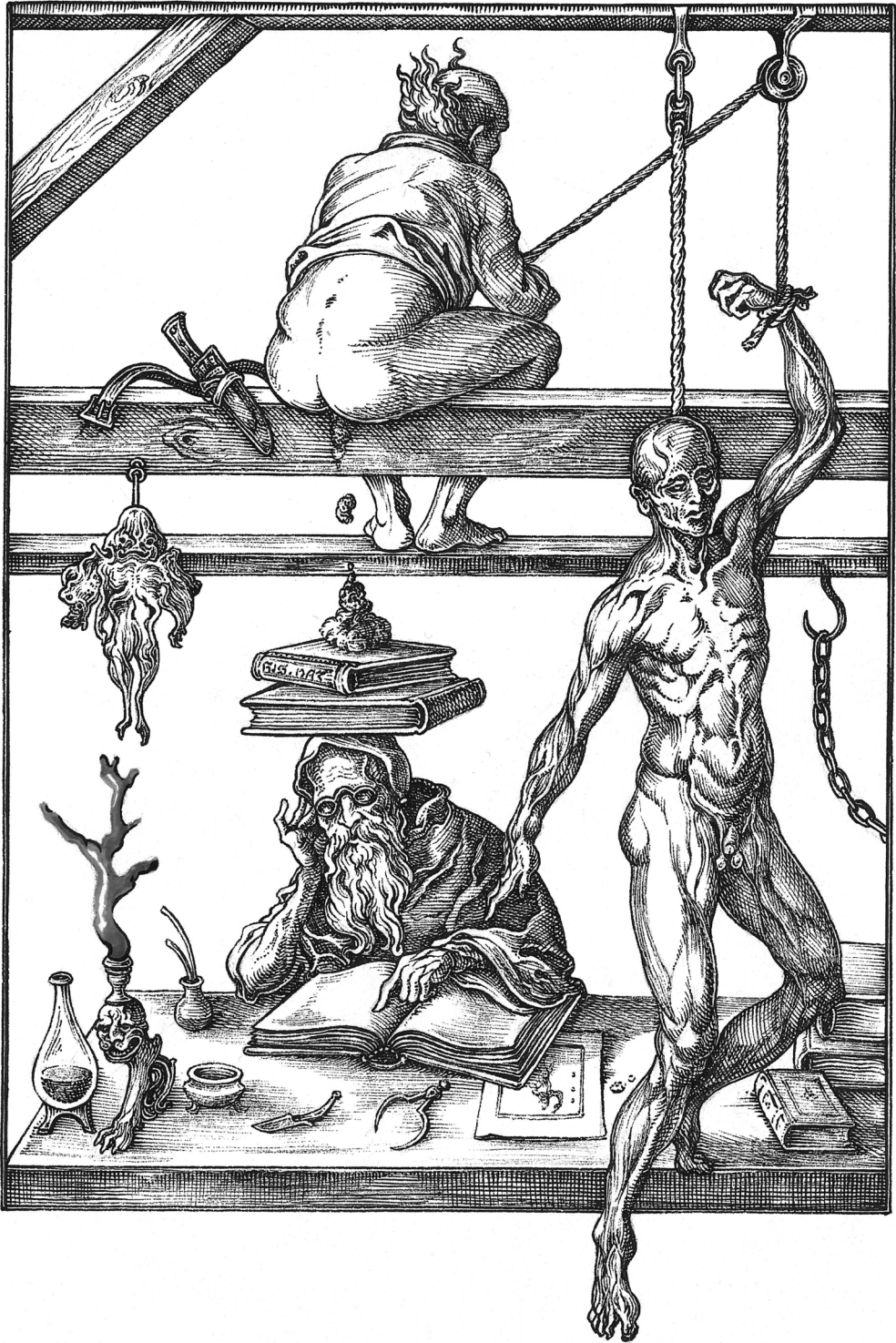
So, with this, let us watch Paracelsus unsheathe his sword in response.<sup>34</sup>

31 Ute Frietsch (2013). *Häresie und Wissenschaft: Genealogie der paracelsischen Alchemie*. München: Wilhelm Fink, 9.

32 In Greek mythology, Machaon was a son of Asclepius, the hero and god of medicine. Both Machaon and his brother Podalirius were highly esteemed surgeons and medics.

33 Peuckert (1976), 151–152, translation by author.

34 The following references are given according to the University of Zurich’s



Such is the arrogance and envy that is deeply ingrained in doctors. And truly, if the eyes of men could see the mind and heart as nature sees the sick, how do you think we would fare? Skin and hair would tremble, and we would spit on the gold rings and the hats decorated with marten fur.<sup>35</sup>

.

For there are many who want to be artists, but are only rogues. They want to talk about the elements and yet cannot talk about the stones. You have to take a different approach. And until the dogs puke, you want to strike me down. But many more arrows will be shot into you.<sup>36</sup>

.

Woe to your art! If you learn such [i.e. deception] in the high schools, learn it [i.e. medicine] properly in the lower ones. But with you it is like the goats: they gnaw at the highest leaf. They think that the higher they climb, the more clever their brains become. They think that the lowest [leaf] is poisoned, and they don't know that there are only leaves above and below. What makes the top leaf better than the bottom leaf? Nothing at all. Then what is the high school compared to the lower one? Nothing at all. You can learn to screw someone anywhere, but you can only learn piety in the lower school. Because those in power sit in the high chairs where there is no truth, while those at the bottom have the truth. What are you doing up there, Doctor Fartly? Are you looking for cobwebs to seal the art with?<sup>37</sup>

.

O your poor Galen's soul, if he had remained undead in medicine, his *manes*<sup>38</sup> would not have been buried in the abyss of hell, from where he wrote to me a letter dated in hell. I would not have thought, I [really] would not have

Paracelsus database. The abbreviation HE refers to the first complete edition of Paracelsus by Johann Huser (1589–1591, 1605), followed by the location reference in the complete works. The concordance between the two editions can be found in the appendix of the 14th volume of the newer edition by Karl Sudhoff (1922–1933). This makes it easy to compare the relevant passages. All sources in their original German form can also be found online in the THEO database: <https://www.paracelsus-project.org>. All translations by the author.

35 HC, 310b.

36 HE 5, 182.

37 HE 5, 171.

38 i.e. the spirit of the dead.

thought that the prince of medicine had gone up the devil's arse! But his pupils are following him, or at least his mother to the F.L.<sup>39</sup> Is that supposed to be a prince of medicine, and the medicine [supposed to] stand on him? Then [it follows that] the greatest rogues are [to be found] in medicine, and as they live under the sun, they prove that they faithfully follow him.<sup>40</sup>

So medicine is populated by whores and knaves,<sup>41</sup> and every fool is allowed to whinge in it. But you yourselves see that you bite the worm off my hook: for you will not frighten me out of my strange diction, of which I have the honour. It is foreign to you, for you have never been outside, and beyond the weekly market you know neither goat nor buck.<sup>42</sup>

•

If they deny me in front of the sick, they accept my teachings secretly, without my knowledge and will, apply them for half the money and say they know my art and have learnt it from me. As soon as they leave, they don't want to know of me any more, and neither do the patients. By the time I find out, the villainy is already a trade. Such has been done to me by doctors, barbers, bathers, disciples, servants and knaves: is that what should make a lamb? No, in the end this will make a wolf. With him I must trot on foot, while the others ride on horseback.<sup>43</sup>

•

What do you doctors think, if you can learn a righteous art from a man, you remain deceivers and still use it to deceive?<sup>44</sup> It comes from the devil, but the art comes from God. Your custom and nature is of the devil, and whether you gain much by it is the same as one who gains by stolen goods and becomes rich by theft. What is he with God? A thief.<sup>45</sup>

•

39 Unknown acronym "F.L." in the original manuscript.

40 HE 2, 11.

41 Here the German term *Knabe* (knave) is a pejorative in the sense of rogue, rascal.

42 HC, 265a.

43 HE 2, 184-185.

44 Paracelsus refers to the fact that the doctors took from his teachings to still deceive their customers.

45 HE 2, 87.

A turtledove might get angry with such lousy *villi*.<sup>46</sup>

.

I can do this and I can do more and I can do so much that the dogs will have to piss on you and that one will have to spit on you and the sick will have to scream at you: Fool, fool! And I can do so much that it will come to pass that you will have to give account of your ruin and to the sick whom you are strangling. How do you like this soup?<sup>47</sup>

.

But what is certain, as I am the one to teach you this, I must be a magus, a madman, and the like. But if you cannot conceal your lies and ignorance other than to say he is mad, he is a magus, then you still remain cheats and scoundrels.<sup>48</sup>

.

You know what helps make shitting and the puking. However, as for the cures and arcana that have been reported by all, you are Brother Spoon. Tell me, who is to be believed in the arts and powers of natural things: those who have written about them but have not tried them, or those who have tried them but have not written about them?<sup>49</sup>

.

You know what stimulates the brain, the head, the mother,<sup>50</sup> the shitting and the pissing. But you don't know what stimulates the disease.<sup>51</sup>

.

If the dead were brought back to life, and the sick restored to health, they would shit on your noses before they would call you my lord again.<sup>52</sup>

.

46 HE 2, 184.

47 HE 5, 181.

48 HE 4, 308.

49 HE 2, 70.

50 i.e. the uterus.

51 HE 2, 64.

52 HE 2, 12.

You make yourselves popular by bowing, stooping, “gracious sir,” “dear sir,” “see the lord again,” “there he is the lord again,” and as soon as the lord is in his [sick] bed and you are supposed to show friendship, you stand there like a *Dutenkolb*<sup>53</sup> and do nothing but cheat and conceal. If the sick whom you have strangled were to rise from the dead again and continue to show you discipline and honour in life, they would shit on your nose and also on your prince Aboali Abinschini.<sup>54</sup> Ugh! Shame on you for taking six days to diagnose even lice-ridden men.<sup>55</sup>

So understand how I derive the foundation of medicine and what I build on. Namely, on philosophy, then on astronomy, and finally on alchemy (and fourthly on the virtues). And remember, you too must recognise these and be experienced in them, for you will expose yourselves even to the peasants in all the villages, as without these three you are cheats and nothing but deceivers of princes, lords, cities, and countries.<sup>56</sup>

However poor they may be in the kitchen, on the street, in church and at the dance, they must dress up like a cat about to shit. Such is their art, they have neither reason nor truth, so fantasy alone must serve them as foundation.<sup>57</sup>

But consider, dear readers, what great things there are in astronomy: I do not mean the pillow-astronomy, the praise of which is written in shithouses.<sup>58</sup>

They must be wicked beginners who dare to deceive and are not satisfied with it, but teach it to others so that the deception does not die out! If you

53 The meaning of the word *Dutenkolb* is unclear, though some authors interpret it as a colloquial idiom for cheater and swindler.

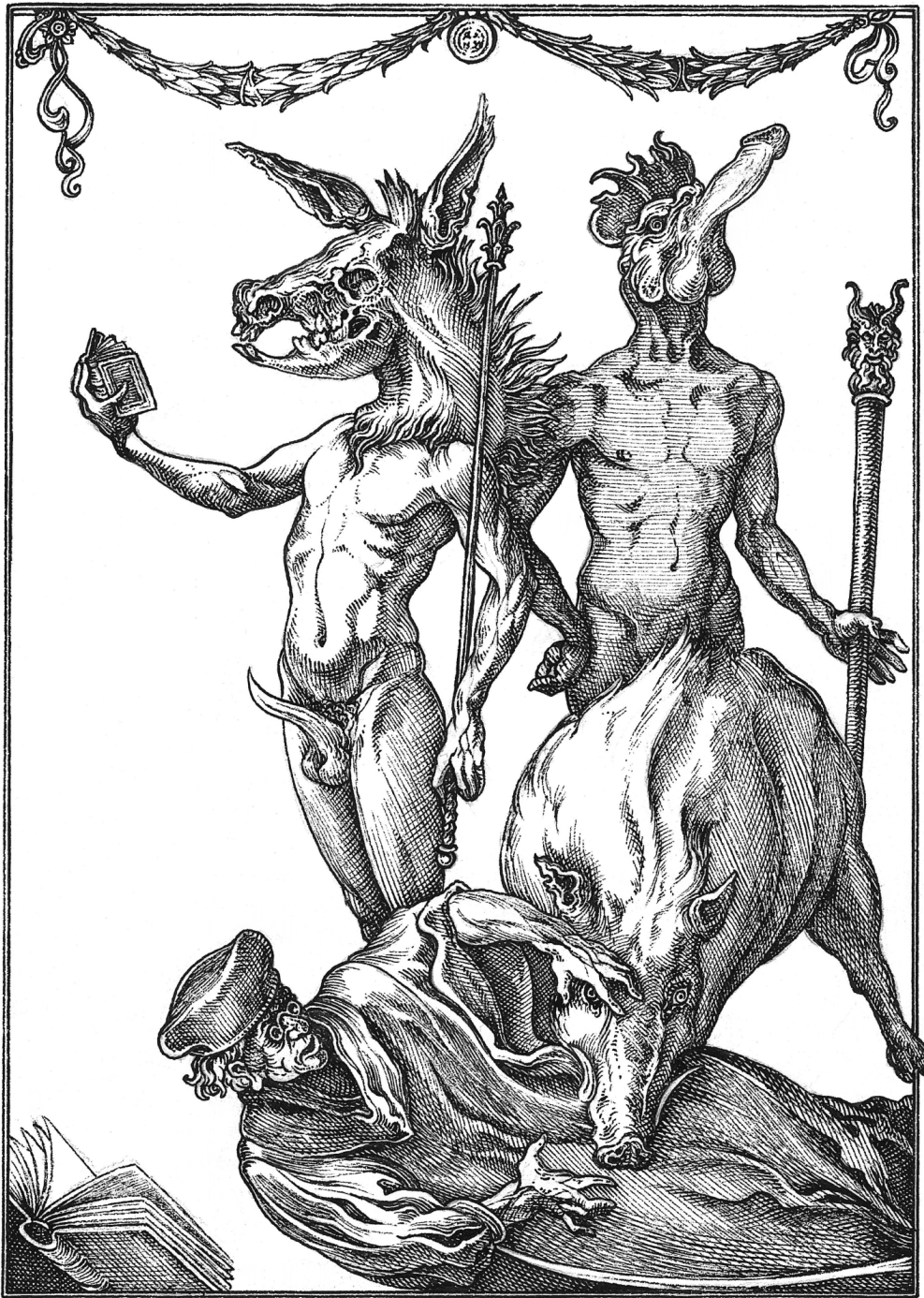
54 The name Aboali Abinschini seems to have been invented by Paracelsus, probably as a deliberate malapropism of ancient or even simply invented sources to which inexperienced physicians referred in their ignorance. If one were to pronounce this name in Paracelsus' dialect, an onomatopoeic invective would be conceivable.

55 HE 2, 103.

56 HE 2, 102.

57 HE 2, 114.

58 HE 10A, 269.



are so bold as to do this, you are also so bold as to write against me, for the devil does not stand idle when you touch his children. Considering the benefit of the sick, you would have to find another profession – but it is all an evil scam without any substance. It is enough that you have faith on your side, whether your works are dead or alive. If people only believe in you, your kitchen is fat. You have faith without works; that is dead faith.<sup>59</sup>

I am so much that you can't even untie my shoelaces. And even if you think I'm nothing more than a nigromancer, a geomancer, a hydromancer or a magus, you must still be under my feet. And if you use all your art and all your knowledge, none of it will help you.<sup>60</sup>

I will send back to you the devil whom you ascribe to me, for he belongs to you and not to me. But it is the way of all deceivers, and the way of the belly-pharisees and hypocrites, that they hide and protect themselves. You attribute to others what is in yourselves and what you are obsessed with. Nothing helps and nothing needs to be done against you, city donkeys and calf doctors of the princes and you doctors of fame in the high schools. You bear witness to yourselves that you are of this kind, and [only] your clientele is good and just. [...] Who has given you your teachings? The fool stings you. It has become a proper trade. For if what you evaluate, compose, and ordain were true, who would still be ill? But therefore it is nothing, for who can be well?<sup>61</sup>

Who among the scholars would not value the rock of their craft above the sand? Only the horned academic bacchants,<sup>62</sup> whose reason gives them their name [...]. So let them remain doctors in make-up: For if they did not go about pro forma all done up and rouged as doctors, who would recognise

59 HE 2, 109.

60 HE 2, 120.

61 HE 2, 121.

62 Bacchant, a travelling student, often already in adulthood, a half-educated man who travelled the countryside begging and stealing and earned his living through all kinds of jugglery and deception, including by teaching adolescent students entrusted to his care. (*Frühneuhochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, [http://fwb-online.de/go/bacchant.s.om\\_1668855712](http://fwb-online.de/go/bacchant.s.om_1668855712) accessed 25.01.2024 / translation by author).



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Romae



them as such? No one would recognise them by their work. So they are pretty on the outside, but inside they are corpses and false oiled idols.<sup>63</sup> But what scholar and experienced person looks for the doctor in his outward appearance? None of them. But who looks for him in his outward appearance: the simple-minded man.<sup>64</sup>

How will you Cornutes<sup>65</sup> like it that Theophrastus will be the prince of the monarchy and you Calefactores?<sup>66</sup> How do you like it that you will have to accept my philosophy and shit on your Pliny and Aristotle and piss on your Albertus, Thomas, Scotus, etc.? And you will speak: The news lies well and subtly, how great fools we and our ancients were, that they and we never realised it.<sup>67</sup>

What will it be like for you Cornutes when your Cacophrastus becomes prince of the monarchy? And you Calefactores will be chimney sweeps: how will you feel when the Theophrasti sect triumphs? And you will have to enter into my philosophy and call your Pliny Cacoplinus and your Aristotle Cacoaristotle, and I will baptise them and your Porphirius and Albertus in my filth, together with your godfathers.<sup>68</sup>

You Italy, you Dalmatia, you Sarmatia, you Athens, you Greece, you Arabia, you Israel, follow me and don't follow yourself! Or none of you will remain in the furthest corner that the dogs won't piss on. [...] How do you like Cacophrastus? You have to eat this filth.<sup>69</sup>

63 *Ölgötze*, old German term for an idol anointed with oil or painted with oils. Not detectable before the sixteenth century and used during the Reformation as a term of derision against the wooden images of the Catholics, also against those who worshipped them, as well as against Catholic priests anointed with holy oil. Later it was used colloquially as a derisive or derogatory term for a stiff and dumb person, like an idol, in the sense of a haughty bore.

64 HE 2, 9; also see HE 2,102.

65 *Cornuten*, apprentice who has completed his apprenticeship but has not yet been made a journeyman and therefore has to wear horns among the others.

66 *Calefactor*, parlour heater or stableboy.

67 HE 2,104.

68 HE 2,10.

69 HE 2,10.

So it is with you doctors: you have devised and made with your speculation [technical terms] that no one can talk you into your business, that is, you have made it so Welsh and Dutch that no Biedermann can understand you and so they must leave you unchastised [...]! So cheaply you hold yourselves special and above all scholars with your dictionibus and vocabulis, indications and names, for if one should understand it, then all the world would smell that you are shitting on them with your deceit.<sup>70</sup>

.

But it is the way of the faeces: they are like foam in the harbour, which is nothing but shit and still floats above the good, and flies highest. But it will be thrown down into the ashes and to the excrements, and the soup as the good will remain in the harbour. So the false philosophers will be foamed and thrown into the dunghill, and I and my philosophy will remain. And the eaters will be satisfied by us and not by the foam as before: for they are all foam-doctors to be thrown into the pig trough with punches.<sup>71</sup>

.

The medicine runs around worse than the whores on the ditch.<sup>72</sup>

.

That's how much I want to be understood against you knaves, that you have to distance yourselves from the imposters, or the cats must piss on you.<sup>73</sup>

.

Now taste who I am, you hoodlums.<sup>74</sup>

.

It will taste bitter that your reason and your philosophy must go down into the mud, and you with them. And the pigs will have to rummage through you and they will find nothing useful in you but the filth. For there really is nothing useful about you, your shit is the best thing about you. The rest is vain, blindworms and newts nest in your red hoods and hawthorn-crowned

70 HE 2,108.

71 HE 2, 104.

72 HC, 312c.

73 HE 5, 182.

74 HE 5, 179.



heads. Oh, what a great shame it will be when you and your Aristotle and Avicenna, etc., are dragged through the puddles, and the children in the street laugh at you fools.<sup>75</sup>

.

I also say that the spiky hair on the back of my neck knows more than you and your scribes. And my shoelaces are more learned than your Galen and Avicenna, and my beard is more experienced than all your high schools. I will seize the hour, to make the swine drag you through the shitty dunghill. How do you now like Peregrinus?<sup>76</sup> How do you now like the forest donkey of Einsiedeln?<sup>77</sup>

You are of the serpent kind, and you do not stop your poisoning, but where you refrain from it, it must be so; therefore you are hateful to me in the manner of Leviathan.<sup>78</sup>

.

And just as a stag, when he is at his most arrogant and proud, falls into the net, so you, with your horns, which you have not yet shed,<sup>79</sup> will fall into the puddle where the bacchants are buried.<sup>80</sup>

.

I can well recognise that nothing changes before the time and no haste helps, it must hatch.<sup>81</sup>

.

75 HE 2, 116.

76 *Peregrinus*, from the Latin for “stranger, foreigner, wanderer.”

77 HE 2, 18.

78 HE 5, 165.

79 The German expression *sich die Hörner abstoßen* can also be translated in English as “to sow one’s wild oats.” The German expression comes from an old student initiation ritual in which the neophyte was disguised as a stag and had to shed his horns without using his hands, symbolically shedding his animal past. As such, the idiom’s meaning is to become more relaxed and experienced and to get rid of one’s youthful arrogance and ignorance.

80 HE 2, 128.

81 HE 4, 364.

## Neologisms

Paracelsus' neologisms are notorious.<sup>82</sup> As early as 1887, Franz Hartmann did a marvellous job of providing us with a small lexicon of the most essential terms from Paracelsus' peculiar vocabulary.<sup>83</sup> Much later, Karl-Heinz Weimann made a further contribution to deciphering these often enigmatic neologisms.<sup>84</sup>

Given the seriousness of these publications, and their focus on recognising and restoring Paracelsus' work, it is no surprise that his many wonderful neologisms of a pejorative nature were omitted.<sup>85</sup> To do justice to this omission, we would like to conclude here with more than a dozen of the most common insults from Paracelsus' works. We can admire the range of invectives here, from *Arschkratzer* (arse-scratcher) to *Wustbuben* (filthy-knave).<sup>86</sup>

Paracelsus is credited by some with laying the foundation for modern chemotherapy with his discoveries on the importance of metals in internal medicine. Be that as it may, we see from the following list of sharp invectives that he was in any case responsible for giving us the concept of the so-called armchair-magician in its earliest form. Namely, the *Polsterdrucker* (cushion-presser), i.e. the lazy, purely theoretically educated, but in practice

82 Frietsch (2013), 28.

83 Franz Hartmann (1887). *The Life and the Doctrines of Philippus Theophrastus Bombast of Hohenheim Known as Paracelsus*. New York: Lovell, Coryell & Company.

84 Kurt Goldammer (ed.) (1955). *Paracelsus: Die Kärntner Schriften*. Klagenfurt: Amt der Kärntner Landesregierung, 277–288.

85 The vexed question as to what extent these terms present genuine neologisms coined by Paracelsus or rather local insults from the German and Swiss vernacular of his time will not be considered here.

86 Equally, this short list highlights the peculiarity of the German language to create new compound words in a very simple way by stringing together two separate terms.

completely ignorant professional idiot. We present these spicy insults in the hope that they will once again flavour our language. May we encounter again Brother Spoon, Doctor Fartly and the Filth-cook in books and pamphlets from the twenty-first century. For if indeed we have to insult each other, then let's set to the task with ingenuity and humour.

*Meister Arschkratzer* Master Arse-scratcher.

*Bruder Löffel* Brother Spoon; not explained in detail, probably to be translated as dumb as a spoon. This is derived from the fact that in the Early Modern period the spoon was one of the barest of possessions, the loss of which can be thus equated with complete poverty. The idiom of brother spoon therefore refers to the intellectually and/or worldly poor.

*Dellerschlecker* Plate-licker.

*Dickendacker* Fool, dolt.

*Doctor Fürtzli* Doctor Fartly, i.e. a doctor that is useless and stinks of farts.

*Fastnachtbutzy* Carnival-dread.

*Holhipper* Used since the sixteenth century to mean scoffer, blasphemer.

*Hundschlager* Dog-beater.

*Hurenwirt* Whores' innkeeper.

*Läusekämmer* Lice-comber.

*Wolfsärzte* Wolf-doctors, i.e. doctors behaving to humans as wolves behave to lambs. Paracelsus adds elsewhere "like a sheep in the jaws of a wolf, these ill people are in the doctor's hands."

*Suppenwüst* Soup-filth.

*Sudelkoch* Filth-cook.

*Parfoten* The term actually refers to barefoot mendicant monks, but it was often used in the sense of a cheat, hypocrite, swindler, crook, and especially a fraudulent beggar.

*Polsterdrucker* Cushion-presser, a lazy, comfortable couch potato with no practical experience.

*Polsterarzt* Pillow-doctor, a lazy erudite person who possesses no practical experience of medicine.

*Schnargekhen* Drinkers and gluttons.

*Schwaderlappen* Prater, rattler, gossiper.

*Wustbuben* Literally, filthy-knave; a liar, swindler, imposter, deceiver.

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