

Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages

By Leah DeVun

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Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages By Leah DeVun

In the middle of the fourteenth century, the Franciscan friar John of Rupescissa sent a dramatic warning to his followers: the last days were coming; the apocalypse was near. Deemed insane by the Christian church, Rupescissa had spent more than a decade confined to prisons—in one case wrapped in chains and locked under a staircase—yet ill treatment could not silence the friar's apocalyptic message.

Religious figures who preached the end times were hardly rare in the late Middle Ages, but Rupescissa's teachings were unique. He claimed that knowledge of the natural world, and alchemy in particular, could act as a defense against the plagues and wars of the last days. His melding of apocalyptic prophecy and quasi-scientific inquiry gave rise to a new genre of alchemical writing and a novel cosmology of heaven and earth. Most important, the friar's research represented a remarkable convergence between science and religion.

In order to understand scientific knowledge today, Leah DeVun asks that we revisit Rupescissa's life and the critical events of his age—the Black Death, the Hundred Years' War, the Avignon Papacy—through his eyes. Rupescissa treated alchemy as medicine (his work was the conceptual forerunner of pharmacology) and represented the emerging technologies and views that sought to combat famine, plague, religious persecution, and war. The advances he pioneered, along with the exciting strides made by his contemporaries, shed critical light on later developments in medicine, pharmacology, and chemistry.

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Editorial Review

Review

DeVun's book is well-constructed, thoroughly documented, instructive, and very useful.

(Chara Crisciani *American Historical Review*)

[H]ighly readable text, amply supported by some fifty pages of endnotes, a bibliography, and a usefully compiled index, Leah DeVun has produced an original and valuable book.

(Stanton J. Linden, Washington State University *SPECULUM*)

This book offers the reader a tour of one of the more peculiar corners of medieval thought, a corner defined by the intersection of three enterprises: Spiritual Franciscanism, Joachite apocalypticism, and alchemical speculation.

(David E. Timmer *Church History*)

DeVun has written a splendid book about medieval alchemy and apocalyptic prophecy that is truly a pleasure to read. *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time* will be an essential item for anyone hoping to understand the history of science and religion in the later Middle Ages.

(Laura Ackerman Smoller *Medievalia et Humanistica*)

An excellent study.... not only for its careful description of an underappreciated figure, but also because of the important theoretical contributions [DeVun] makes to a more holistic approach to our understanding of the history of science and to late medieval culture.

(Gregory J. Miller *H-German*)

Review

Leah DeVun's study is original in conception, thoroughly researched, and written with distinction. Most important, it is fully persuasive concerning the ideological link between prophecy and alchemy in the agenda of its fascinating protagonist, John of Rupescissa. *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time* will be of interest to students of both apocalypticism and medieval scientific thought.

(Robert Lerner, Northwestern University)

Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time is a splendid book. In vivid, accessible prose, Leah DeVun brings to life the mental and spiritual worlds of a fourteenth-century seer and alchemist. DeVun is the first to examine John of Rupescissa as a whole person, placing his alchemical writings squarely in an apocalyptic

context. Deftly crossing a number of disciplinary boundaries, she masterfully demonstrates that our modern distinction between 'science' and 'religion' is meaningless when applied to Rupescissa's fourteenth-century context. A genuine pleasure to read, this book will appeal to scholars in a number of fields and will provide the general reader with a compelling introduction to the effort made by medieval authors to use human reason in approaching the secrets of God.

(Laura Ackerman Smoller, University of Arkansas at Little Rock)

About the Author

Leah DeVun is associate professor of history at Rutgers University. Her research focuses on the history of the human body in premodern Europe and the legacy of that history in the modern world. Her published work centers on issues of gender and technology.

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