

## REVISIONS OF SCIENCE AND MAGIC

*From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science.* The Eddington Memorial Lectures delivered at Cambridge University, November 1980, by Charles Webster (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982). Pp. xii + 107. £12.50.

*Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance.* Edited, with an Introduction, by Brian Vickers (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984). Pp. xiv + 408. £27.50.

Every time a partial truth has been taken for the sole explanation of things, there has been a heavy price to pay. On the other hand, nobody would have arrived even at the partial truth if it had not been overestimated (*The man without qualities*, Robert Musil).

The two books under review, impeccably (if expensively) produced by Cambridge University Press, contain much new and valuable work. Their proper understanding, however, also requires them to be read in the context of two well-worn approaches to the relations between science and magic, or the occult. One approach, aiming at an understanding of the past in its own terms rather than through modern superimpositions, could perhaps be summed up by Lord Whitelaw's demanding dictum: "It is a great mistake ever to prejudge the past."<sup>1</sup> Allowing for significant differences between some of its subscribers, this school is represented by the work of Yates, Pagel, Walker, Rattansi, Debus and Rossi.<sup>2</sup> It developed partly as a reaction against earlier Whig or triumphalist accounts of science. Against these, it was asserted that resurgent Neoplatonism — including strong components of Hermetic magic, alchemy and astrology — was an important contributing factor to sixteenth and seventeenth century science. Emphasis is placed on congruences and continuities within the early modern period, and on the need to respect differences between that period and our own.

Unsurprisingly, there has been no lack of scholars ready to restate and defend the earlier position, or variants of it. That position embodies the opposite sentiment, that what is science now was (in all fundamental respects) science then, and the same, *mutatis mutandis*, for the occult; in short, that "Things have never been more like the way they are today in history" (Dwight D. Eisenhower). Proponents such as Hall, Hesse, Westman and McGuire, and Rossi (again) are anxious to emphasize the more narrowly 'internal' development of science, and its relative autonomy from its metaphysical and especially social context.<sup>3</sup>

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**Andrew D. Armitage**



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