

# The British Journal for the History of Science

<http://journals.cambridge.org/BJH>

Additional services for *The British Journal for the History of Science*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

**Mary Quinlan-McGrath, *Influences: Art, Optics, and Astrology in the Italian Renaissance*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. Pp. xi+284. ISBN 978-0-226-92284-3. \ \$35.00 (hardback).**

Steven Vanden Broecke

The British Journal for the History of Science / Volume 47 / Issue 02 / June 2014, pp 374 - 375  
DOI: 10.1017/S0007087414000247, Published online: 01 May 2014

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0007087414000247](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0007087414000247)

**How to cite this article:**

Steven Vanden Broecke (2014). The British Journal for the History of Science, 47, pp 374-375  
doi:10.1017/S0007087414000247

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

of those of you student readers who have such a wonderful Marauder's Map (another Harry Potter reference) to help you navigate your way through those early days of graduate school.

NEERAJA SANKARAN  
Yonsei University, Seoul

MARY QUINLAN-MCGRATH, *Influences: Art, Optics, and Astrology in the Italian Renaissance*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. Pp. xi+284. ISBN 978-0-226-92284-3. \$35.00 (hardback).  
doi:10.1017/S0007087414000247

Beginning with Fritz Saxl's 1934 study of the horoscope ceiling which Baldassare Peruzzi painted for Agostino Chigi in the Villa Farnesina (1511), art historians have been fascinated by the monumental astrological vaults of Renaissance architecture. These lavish productions are often interpreted as rhetorical tools for naturalizing the legitimacy of the ruler among the ruled by associating the former's position with astrological fate. According to Mary Quinlan-McGrath, this was not at all how the patrons of such vaults interpreted their significance and use. Instead, she claims, these vaults were built as instruments for purifying and protecting the bodies, spirits, and minds of these patrons and their kin.

There is very little evidence for actors' understandings of these starry vaults. One precious exception, which is central to Quinlan-McGrath's argument, occurs in Chapter III.19 of Marsilio Ficino's influential *De vita*, where Ficino concludes an extensive discussion of astrological images with the advice for a man to construct, 'in the very depth of his house . . . a chamber, vaulted and marked with these figures and colors, and he should spend most of his waking hours there and also sleep' (p. 161). The distinguishing feat of Quinlan-McGrath's book is to carefully explore how such advice could have made perfect sense for the elites of Renaissance Italy, embedded as it was in widely shared intellectual presuppositions reaching back as far as Plato's *Timaeus*.

The planning and ambit of this exploration, carried out in eight chapters, are simply breathtaking. In terms of planning, the author privileges a select number of presuppositions ('gazing' as the default relation between patrons and their vaults; vision as a (meta)physical mediator between things, rather than as a transmission of visual content; the self and architectural art as equally embedded in a divinely given, astrologically shaped nature and fate; artificial figures as privileged sites for capturing such celestial powers), and carefully shows how each of these was connected with another. This yields an elegant, Russian doll-like structure 'from the larger concepts to the more particular' (p. x).

In terms of ambit, it is clear that the author has waded through an enormous literature on premodern metaphysics, epistemology, astrology, mathematics, natural philosophy, psychology and art history, in supplying the reader with 'the tools' by which to 'judge the case' (p. 198). No less impressive is her judicious selection of what to include in the main body of the text (two hundred pages), and what to relegate to the particularly insightful endnotes (fifty pages).

So how is the case to be judged after reading this book? At the very least, Quinlan-McGrath's thesis is far less anachronistic than anything else which is on offer concerning this topic. This is not to say, of course, that her precise interpretation of the Renaissance equivalent of the oxygen tent is definitive. Consider her interpretation of Book III of Ficino's *De vita*. As early as Chapter III.8, Ficino introduces doubt and uncertainty about amulets as suitable recipients of portable celestial power; his subsequent discussion of *figurae* never really abandons these suspicions. Ficino, who articulates this in terms of 'medicine' versus 'magic', does grant the possibility of demonic agency in the effectiveness of *figurae*, and repeatedly takes the position that the heat released when inscribing a figure, not the inscription as such, is the source of its effectiveness. This makes the distance between him and a theologian like Aquinas less large than Quinlan-McGrath tends

to suggest. Likewise, it remains unclear whether Ficino's talk of harmonies obtaining between images speaks the language of 'sympathy' or 'copy', of *ressemblance* or 'representation'. Further research may also highlight Ficino's tendency to advance a strong distinction between the sub- and superlunary realms, as well as his apparent investment in an anagogy of the spirit towards the celestial and supra-celestial realm, rather than in sublunary empowerment per se. Finally, it remains to be seen what we should make of Ficino's frequent adoption of metaphors of preparation and accommodation in describing the relation between spirits and 'celestial gifts'. Is the Ficinian self really an embodied being which *also* has spirits, or rather a 'spirit in the material world'?

The simple fact remains, however, that Quinlan-McGrath's fresh look at these astrological canopies opens up entire new vistas of Renaissance intellectual life. This alone makes it required reading for anyone interested in Renaissance visual culture, architecture, and history of natural philosophy. But it can also serve as a model of scholarship. Over the past few decades, it has become far less uncommon for art historians to sink their teeth into premodern intellectual history and history of science. *Influences* crowns them all in tenaciousness and thoughtfulness.

STEVEN VANDEN BROECKE  
Ghent University

GIDEON MANNING (ed.), *Matter and Form in Early Modern Science and Philosophy*. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2012. Pp. x+248. ISBN 978-90-04-21870-3. €105.00 (hardback). doi:10.1017/S0007087414000259

Historians of both science and philosophy have often discussed the relation between matter and form in the early modern period. The intricacies of this issue are caused by the various meanings associated with each of these terms, and the emphasis placed by different historical actors on either of the two. Despite becoming a classic theme in the literature, the problems of how matter and form relate to each other and how their meanings change in the early modern period still requires careful analysis. This is why the present volume makes a valuable contribution to an ongoing debate.

In his foreword to the volume, Mordechai Feingold acknowledges that *Matter and Form in Early Modern Science and Philosophy* puts together nine papers that were presented at a conference at the California Institute of Technology in 2010. Gideon Manning opens the volume with a study of the term 'hylomorphism'. After tracing its origins to the final decades of the nineteenth century, Manning turns to three historical cases: Aristotle himself, Scipion Duplex (a late Scholastic) and Jacques Rohault (a Cartesian). The main aim of this chapter is to argue against the view that a commonly shared doctrine of hylomorphism endured in the early modern period. Thus his chapter makes a nice introduction to the volume, as the other contributions document a rich variety of early modern views about matter and form. In the second chapter, Michael Edwards explores a body of scholastic texts on the *scientia de anima* and compares them with the 'science of human nature' (p. 52) that one can find in their contemporary Protestant authors. He argues convincingly that anatomy and its newly associated imagery played an important role in reshaping the terms of the debate, revealing among other things 'semi-permeable' disciplinary boundaries that raised the problem of authority (p. 44). Hiro Hirai is the author of the third chapter, in which he provides a careful analysis of Daniel Sennert's theory of seeds. Based on his prior work on the concept of 'seed' in the Renaissance and the early modern period, Hirai gives a convincing account, concluding that in Sennert's view the seeds are similar to substantial forms. The next chapter is again focused on Sennert, but this time it deals to a larger extent with his chymical views. William Newman compares Sennert with Etienne-François Geoffroy, who almost a century later advanced his famous theory of affinities. Newman gives textual support for the claim that a pre-theory of affinities can already be found in Sennert, reacting in this way to some