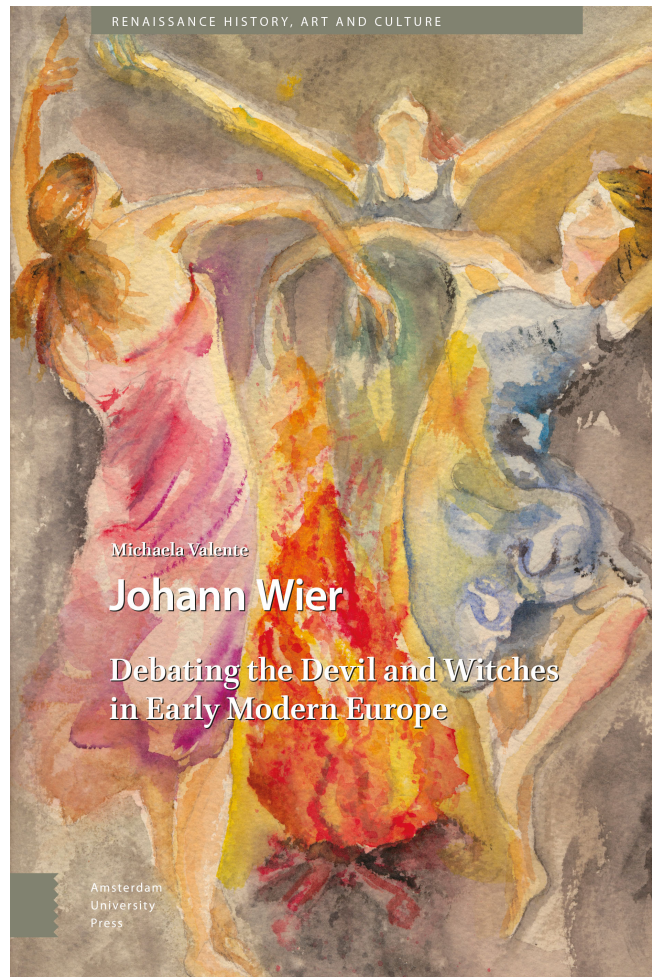


Review
Michaela Valente:
***Johann Wier: Debating the devil and witches
in early modern Europe***
Theresa Federici (trans.)
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Reviewed by Hans de Waardt



In 1563 Johan Wier (1515-1588), first physician to Duke William of Cleves, Jülich, and Berg (1516-1592), published his *De praestigiis daemonum* ('On the delusions of demons'). I prefer to spell his first name with just one n, as he himself did in signing his correspondence (see for instance the photo of a letter sent on July 12, 1582, in Dooren 1940, 134). In his book Wier stated that it was senseless to prosecute and execute human beings for witchcraft. In the region where he lived, that is the Low Countries and the Rhineland, it was almost exclusively women who fell victim to such trials. To exonerate them he underlined that nature could only obey the rules laid out by God and that therefore no human being was able to do what these females were accused of. When their spells did seem to be effective, it was not they but demons that brought this about. According to him women were generally too feeble minded to understand what they were doing when performing witchcraft. Females who themselves believed they were guilty and confessed without pressure or torture were suffering from melancholia, an excess of black bile that darkened their minds. Supported by Roman law he underlined that such mental issues pulled away the legal basis for criminal actions against these 'demented old women' ("*vetulas illas dementatas*," Wier 1563, 24) as he termed them. Instead of torturing them into confession and sentencing them to be burnt, they should be handed over for treatment to professional physicians like himself.

Wier's views came under heavy attack from some of his readers, but received a warm welcome from others. In this monograph the Italian scholar Michaela Valente, associate professor of Early Modern History at La Sapienza, Università di Roma, focuses on an analysis of Wier's arguments on the one hand and the debate he instigated on the other. In two senses her book really is a classic history of ideas. Classic in the sense that it ties in with a long and respected tradition, but also classic because the result of her minute probing is a new standard for the way in which the debate between Wier and his opponents should be understood.

After 1563 five new editions of the Latin version of *De praestigiis* were issued, each time reviewed, sometimes very drastically. Apart from major changes in the layout, Wier also introduced alterations in the content. In each of the five new editions sentences, paragraphs, even whole chapters were reformulated, added, or removed. Soon after its first appearance an unauthorized translation was issued which prompted Wier to publish a vernacular version of his own in 1567, a second edition of which appeared in 1578. This text in lower German may be considered a book in its own right on grounds Wier himself disclosed in his foreword where he wrote (in my translation): 'In the Latin version much has furthermore been written that not everybody can put into words or understand in the German language. [...] Many things that for scholars can be phrased in Latin,

cannot be served to simple people [...] Whoever reads my German books and compares these to the other ones, will discover much that is not mentioned or described in the Latin version' (Wier 1567, Vorred, b*ijj). In her Introduction, Valente explains in terms not very dissimilar to Wier's considerations why this English edition is not simply a translation of the Italian original, *Johann Wier: Agli albori*: "This work was first published in 2003. [...] In that edition the reader can find a number of detailed studies and references to original sources. The current text is different, updated in respect of new research, and aimed not only at academic readers" (11). It is, in my view, a pity that readers who are unable to understand Italian can now not check her statements by an inspection of the sources. Be it as it may, this English version is indeed less voluminous than the Italian one that counts vi + 337 pages.

The main results of Valente's initial investigations are still the backbone of her description. After a rather short and, as will be discussed later in this review, not exactly flawless survey of Wier's biography, Valente shifts to a meticulous analysis of Wier's argumentation in *De praestigiis*, his intellectual sources, and the debate his book engendered. It is beyond the scope of this review to sum up all the views by opponents and supporters whose reactions she discusses. But a few of them may be mentioned here. For example, there is the Lutheran pastor Johannes Brenz (1499-1570) who had had an essential role in the Lutheran Reformation of the Duchy of Württemberg. Brenz held that Anabaptists should not be executed and had also proclaimed that it was futile to persecute supposed witches for causing devastating storms. This of course caused Wier to believe that he could enlist him as an ally, but to his disappointment Brenz replied that witches should be punished because they had the wish to cause havoc for their community.

Thomas Erastus (1524-1583), first physician to the Reformed Elector of the Palatinate and professor at the University of Heidelberg, proved to be an even more outspoken opponent of Wier's views regarding the witch trials. This Zwinglian colleague of Wier argued that even if witches were in themselves powerless, they should be executed, nevertheless. The demonic pact made them guilty of apostasy and by asking demons to harm fellow human beings they had caused mishap, which was enough reason to execute them.

The French lawyer and political philosopher Jean Bodin (ca. 1530-1596) went a major step further than Brenz or Erastus by accusing Wier of himself being an accomplice of Satan. Valente stipulates that the gap between Wier and Bodin stemmed for a large part from the fact that the physician from Cleves and Jülich based much of his argumentation on the New Testament, whereas the French lawyer preferred the Old Testament as a basis for his argumentation. Wier's God

was always willing to forgive, while Bodin's supreme being was a vengeful judge unwilling to show mercy.

The Croatian philosopher Paulus Scalichius (1534-1573) attacked Wier for the reason that by acknowledging that the human soul and demons were corporeal beings the physician had opened the door to a road that ended in atheism. Basing his answer on the 11th-century Byzantine monk Michael Psellus, Wier replied that the devil's corporeality was of a spiritual nature. Demons were therefore unable to take on material bodies and people who believed to have seen such a physical demonic presence were the victims of phantasy.

The quality of Valente's analysis of the reception of Wier's plea is doubtlessly of a very high level. However, I am afraid that my assessment about other parts of the book is less favourable. The number of larger and smaller errors as well as inaccuracies in the other sections is slightly disturbing. Some of these issues were, by the way, already present in the Italian original. For instance, in the index of both editions the first name of this reviewer is given as 'Hand'. I readily admit that this manual consistency does not pose a grave danger to the understanding of the text, but also that I find it a bit annoying. A similar error occurs on p. 27 where the Dutch physician Jan Jacob Cobben is introduced, whose dissertation on Wier appeared in Dutch in 1960 and in English in 1976 (Cobben 1976). According to Valente he was a neurologist, whereas he was in fact a radiologist. In the context of this monograph this again may be minor, but inaccuracies like these erode confidence in the author's work. The same effect occurred by the remark that in 1562 Wier's employer established a university in a town called "Duisberg" (49). Certainly, the Duke of Cleves and Jülich has invested much time and energy in his efforts to found a university in Duisburg, correctly spelled with a second u, but this project failed and it was only in 1655 that such an institution opened its doors there.

Other errors are not so inconsequential. A sentence on p. 65 about the number of Latin editions of *De praestigiis* is indeed confusing: "Over the following 20 years, eight Latin editions were published (1563, 1564, 1566, 1568, 1577, and 1583)." I only count six edition years here and that is actually the correct number. One would, by the way, expect the editors of Amsterdam University Press to notice such a slip of the pen. More serious is the claim that the Palatinate "largely adopted Wier's recommendations concerning witch trials" (183), which is simply wrong. Already in the year 2000 the German historian Jürgen-Michael Schmidt concluded in his detailed dissertation about the history of the witch trials in that part of Germany, that the absence of such trials there had nothing to do with Johan Wier (Schmidt 2000, 124-125, 137-38). Already a year before the first appearance of *De praestigiis*, so in 1562, the Elector's chancellor Christoph Probus had made it the Palatinate's official policy to prevent all witch trials.

I am afraid that Valente's appraisal of the influence that Johan's youngest brother Matthias has exerted on Wier's thinking is also not flawless. Matthias acted as a spiritualist guide for his two brothers Johan and Arnold and several other people. Gary Waite and I have argued that it was initially the Dutch spiritualist prophet David Joris who inspired Johan and Matthias. But in 1555 or 1556 Matthias assumed an independent role as spiritualist guidesman and his oldest brother fully accepted his guidance. After Matthias's death in 1560, three collections of his letters, sayings and other texts were issued that enable us to reconstruct his line of thinking ([Wier, Matthias], *Dat boeck der sproecken*, ca. 1560; [Wier, Matthias]. *Eyn kort Bericht*, 1563; [Wier, Matthias], *Grondelicke onderrichtinghe*, 1579). According to Valente, Matthias "participated in the Reformation, and was in contact with the main reformer theologians" (57). But none of his letters were addressed to a leader of the Reformation, not to Calvin or Bullinger, not to Melanchthon, not even to Menno Simons, the reformer whose thinking was in some respects quite close to his. Even more, in one of his letters he in no uncertain terms rejected Calvin's dogma of the predestination and there is not a trace of Luther's *sola fide* ('through faith alone') in his texts. Matthias himself explained that his inspiration came from the medieval mystical writings of Tauler, Thomas a Kempis, and the *Theologia Deutsch*. A true Christian, he held, should purify himself by austerity, abstinence, and mortification. In other words, a true believer had to earn salvation by the quality of her or his life and that fitted in more with the Catholic view on how to achieve salvation.

Valente gives a similar overhasty statement when she claims, "there is incontrovertible evidence that [...] Matthias was connected to" (58) the Family of Love, but the existing evidence does not warrant such an indisputable conclusion. What happened was that Johan had received from fellow courtiers some texts written by Hendrick Niclaes, the founder of the Family, and had passed these on to his brother. After reading this third hand information Matthias rejected the contents on the basis that initially Hendrick Niclaes had followed the right path but had then gone astray and was now too "carnal." Niclaes tended to demand ever more obedience from his followers, which caused his family to fall apart. A few years earlier this had also happened among David Joris's followers when the Wier brothers also broke off their relations with him. So, it is highly unlikely that they, after leaving one authoritarian leader, namely David Joris, submitted themselves to a following one in the person of Hendrick Niclaes.

But despite these and other similar errors Valente reaches the conclusion "that Wier ascribed to a form of doctrinal indifferentism that defies all definition" (59). She attributes this to the combined influence of Wier's former teacher Agrippa, of Erasmus, the Irenicist Flemish thinker Cassander, and the Family of

Love. If in this summing up, “the Family of Love” were to be replaced by “David Joris and especially Matthias Wier,” I could agree with this assessment.

So, all in all my review of this monograph is of a mixed character. We can applaud the sections in which Wier’s book and the intense debates it engendered are analyzed, but other sections should be handled with considerable caution.

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About the reviewer

Hans de Waardt studied medieval history at the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands). In 1991 he received his doctorate from Erasmus University in Rotterdam for his dissertation about the history of witchcraft *Toverij en samenleving. Holland 1500-1800*, which was supervised by prof. dr. Willem Frijhoff. He has worked as a history teacher at schools for secondary education and as a postdoc researcher and assistant professor at Erasmus University, the Faculty of Medicine of Utrecht University, and the Faculties of Humanities and Medicine of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, where he also coordinated a Master’s program of medical history. His publications in Dutch, English, German and French are on the history of witchcraft, medical history, the history of universities, and the radical Reformation. Currently he is working on a biography of Johan Wier, the 16th-century physician who is known for his plea against the witch trials, as well as a tract against the limitless aggressiveness that dominated the wars of religion, and a number of medical case histories.