



Vera Hoorens, ***Een ketterse arts voor de heksen. Jan Wier (1515-1588)*** (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2011, 634 pp., ISBN 978 90 351 3377 8).

In his *De praestigiis daemonum* (On the delusions of demons, first edition 1563) Johan Wier (1515–1588) asserted that the belief in witchcraft was nothing but a demonic delusion. In 1529 he had joined the household of Agrippa of Nettesheim as a pupil, and assistant to this humanist's experiments in natural magic. He then studied medicine in Paris, practised in Grave and Arnhem and became physician to the Duke of Cleves in 1550. In her biography Vera Hoorens, professor of social psychology at the University of Leuven, brings together an impressive number of new sources which in itself is indeed highly commendable. But can a similar laudatory judgment be pronounced regarding her description of Johan's life?

Hoorens claims that Wier had two motives to write his book: a wish to attack the Catholic Church and a desire to obtain a professorial chair at the university that his employer was planning to establish in Duisburg (229). Actually, Wier never pronounced any desire to attain a professorship and, might one ask, would such a move have been a positive career step? In 1543 his former fellow student Andreas Vesalius exchanged his professorship in Padua for the post of physician at the court of Charles V. Now, Toledo was of a different standing than Cleves, but so would Padua have been in comparison to Duisburg, had the university there been realized. However, that does not keep Hoorens from presenting her supposition as a positive certainty.

Similar objections can be made regarding Hoorens' claim that Wier was a convinced Protestant who wrote his book to damage the Catholic Church. Such a design would not have been helpful if he was indeed striving for a professorship. The Duke explicitly intended his university to be Catholic and applying for a post there by publishing an attack on the Catholic Church, would in that context have been a bit silly. But then, no contemporary of Wier acknowledged either of the two intentions Hoorens ascribes to this medical man. Actually, Wier himself explicitly stated that he wished to safeguard the women who were accused of witchcraft, but Hoorens brushes this aside (20-22, 186-187). To strengthen her claim, she alleges that there had not been a major quantitative upsurge of trials directly prior to 1563. That is simply not true. In the 1550s prosecutions increased dramatically in nearby Gelderland. Elsewhere in her book Hoorens quotes the relevant literature but she discards this information. If Wier did indeed intend to attack the

Roman-Catholic Church, it would actually not have been very smart to focus on witchcraft. Neither the Spanish nor the Papal Inquisition put up a great effort in its prosecution and those culprits they did try, stood a better chance of surviving than before secular courts, either Catholic or Protestant. It was indeed the German prince-(arch)bishoprics that saw the fiercest witch-hunts, but that was after 1580. Wier did attack mendicant friars and other Catholic clergy. But so did Erasmus and Wier's mentor Agrippa, and neither of them left the Catholic Church. Hoorens claims (294-297) that Wier by 1576 had become a Calvinist because he asked a reformed colleague to supervise the medical training of a nephew of his, sent his youngest son to the university of Heidelberg, and addressed another reformed physician as a member of 'our religion'. But is that enough to conclude that he was a Calvinist? Like so many contemporary students, his sons matriculated at a score of universities, some of them Protestant like Heidelberg, Montpellier, or Geneva, but others such as Paris, Padua, Bologna, and Cologne definitely Catholic. And as to these letters, in order to achieve something people sometimes assume a pose that they hope will call up a positive effect. In 1567 Wier himself sent a letter to the Stadholder of Gelderland in which he posed as a Roman-Catholic. This he certainly was not, but he wasn't very enthusiastic about the other established confessions either. In 1578 in the foreword to his German translation of *De praestigiis* he stated that the differences between the old and new confessions were really only about ceremonies or words, and that it was a shame that Catholics and Protestants were unwilling to put up with one another. Not only was this assessment in line with the Lower Rhine Reform-Catholicism that was advocated by the Duke of Cleves. It also fit in with the spiritualist persuasion that was quite popular amongst humanists there and in the Low Countries: the conviction that a Christian should strive for a highly individual contact with God, that ceremonies and rituals, either Catholic or Protestant, were rather pointless, and that a categorical tolerance was required.

In 2002 I proposed that Wier was inspired by this spiritualism, and Hoorens takes me to task for that (197-199). However, to do so she gives what at best can be called a caricature of this, to use a mild anachronism, rather anarchic movement. She reduces the spiritualist alignment to the semi-organisation that one of its prophets, Hendrick Niclaes, tried to set up. She then concludes that people like Castellio never were members of this Family of Love, and that's it. But what then do we do with the numerous people who felt inspired by Sebastian Franck, Caspar Schwenckfeld, David Joris, or indeed Castellio? Wier's youngest brother Matthias discussed the ideas of some of these protagonists in his letters. With a correspondent referred to as J.W., he considered the quality of Niclaes's teachings to be very weak. Matthias addressed this recipient as 'Dear Johan' and in the first letter he compared their relation with that of Esau and Jacob. But Hoorens refuses to acknowledge this Johan W. as Matthias's older brother. That would force her to accept that Wier was indeed a spiritualist. So, in discussing Erastus's remark that Wier might be influenced by Schwenckfeld (327), she claims that this could happen to anyone who fostered deviant ideas. Wier wrote that Michael Servetus was a close friend of his.

Now, Servetus was without doubt a spiritualist. Hoorens, however, claims that Calvin wanted the execution of this Aragonese libertine not so much for his heretical ideas, but out of envy of Servetus's commercial success as an author (82). Much has been written about Servetus, but this claim is an absolute novelty. Hoorens indeed fails to corroborate it with references to literature or sources.

As a historian I feel rather uncomfortable with Hoorens's methodology. By trade she is indeed not a historian but a social psychologist. Stapling, however, a bunch of a priori suppositions and unsubstantiated assumptions, and omitting data that do not support a predetermined interpretation, constitute no method at all and result in sloppy science. If anything, this book is certainly not the final biography of Johan Wier. Wier indeed is a fascinating figure. In a period when intolerance against supposed witches and religious dissidents was rapidly growing, when basic features of his medical profession had come under serious discussion and religious relations under severe stress, he tried to build up arguments that he hoped would convince an audience that was rapidly becoming more ambivalent. A careful discussion of the way in which he tried to achieve this, will shed light on the intellectual options and the latitude of advocates of tolerance like Wier or, for that matter, Sebastian Castellio.

Hans de Waardt, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam