

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Valente, Michaela. Johann Wier: Debating the Devil and Witches in Early Modern Europe

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Volume 45, Number 2, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094854ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39797>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Krause, V. (2022). Review of [Valente, Michaela. Johann Wier: Debating the Devil and Witches in Early Modern Europe]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(2), 362–364. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39797>

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Valente, Michaela.

Johann Wier: Debating the Devil and Witches in Early Modern Europe.

Renaissance History, Art and Culture. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022. Pp. 263. ISBN 978-94-6298-872-9 (hardcover) €106.

This concise and yet broad-ranging study is a very welcome contribution to historiography of the European witch-hunts as well as to the history of science, no small undertaking, requiring both encyclopedic knowledge and strong synthesis. Michaela Valente is a scholar of European witchcraft and the Inquisition and an expert on Johann Wier (or Weyer), the subject of her magisterial *Johann Wier: Agli albori della critica razionale dell'occulto e del demoniaco nell'Europa del Cinquecento* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2003). With her *Johann Wier: Debating the Devil and Witches in Early Modern Europe*, Valente seeks to bring her 2003 study to a broader English-speaking audience and also to respond to recent scholarly debate within the field. Her intended audience is not only academics but also *esprits curieux* interested in the history of witchcraft and medicine. Valente's *Johann Wier* eschews polarizations in the field, presenting measured assessment of different positions regarding, for instance, Wier's religious confession (Nicodemite, Catholic, or Lutheran?) as well as his position in medical debates of his era. The notes alone offer a detailed mapping of scholarship on witchcraft and medicine making this book an excellent resource for readers across the disciplines.

Johann Wier (1515–88) was a physician from the Duchy of Brabant and author of a substantial medical corpus, including *De ira morbo* (a Neostoic meditation on anger mingling medical, theological, and philosophical aspects) and *De commentitiis jejuniis* (on fasting), which was added to his *Medicarum Observationum liber* and included in his *opera Omnia* (1660). Wier remains, however, best known for his influential position in demonological debates in sixteenth-century Europe. In contrast to contemporaries preaching the necessity of executing witches in the name of heresy or apostasy, Wier argued that women accused of witchcraft were not guilty of actual crimes but rather suffering from melancholy, according to a logic we now know as the insanity defence. Wier's *De praestigiis daemonum* (first published in 1563, but revised and especially expanded over several decades) did not question the metaphysical underpinnings of demonology. Wier did not put “science” before “religion,” despite nineteenth-century positivists' attempts to enlist him in their myth of

the triumph of science over religion. Johann Wier firmly believed that demons were real, and so was magic, but only when it was practised by male magicians. While male magicians constrained demons to do their bidding, women accused of witchcraft were the devil's victims—pitiful, but not threatening. Wier's *De praestigiis* forcefully argued that the phenomena attributed to (or confessed by) female witches were not real crimes but rather demonic-induced hallucinations and illusions.

Valente's *Johann Wier* begins with a broad survey of the historiography of witchcraft (introduction and chapter 1) before presenting Wier's biography (chapter 2), which begins with an early encounter with the world of spirits from his childhood when Wier's family benefited from the assistance of a household spirit, or *lares familiares*, which apparently made sacks of hops fall over to announce the arrival of merchants, thereby contributing to the family's commercial endeavours. At the age of fifteen, Wier met Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, the start of what Valente describes as a "period of profound sharing and sincere discipleship" (35). Agrippa imparted a broad intellectual training to his disciple and may also have contributed to Wier's future vocation as the "defender of witches." In 1519, when Agrippa was *orator* and *avocatus* in Metz, he successfully defended a peasant woman from the village of Voippy who was accused of witchcraft, events related in Agrippa's now lost work *Adversus lamiarum inquisitores* and disseminated in the demonological literature from the time (including Wier's *De praestigiis* and Bodin's *De la démonomanie des sorciers*). After his apprenticeship under Agrippa, Wier studied medicine in Paris where he mingled with some of the great physicians of this era, including Miguel Servet and Jean Fernel.

Johann Wier spent the majority of his career as a practising physician at the court of the Duchy of Cleves (from 1550 to 1578). Infused with Erasmian humanism, "the Duchy of Cleves," writes Valente, "was a political and cultural experiment within Europe, in which peaceful coexistence between Lutherans, Catholics, and Anabaptists (Münster was nearby) was both allowed and encouraged and where differences of faith were softened in order to avoid conflict" (50). During his nearly thirty years at the court of Cleves, Wier continued medical practice and scientific research, conducting, for instance, an autopsy on the Bishop of Cologne who died of a malarial fever in 1557 and successfully curing Duke William after a stroke in 1566. However, several years after Wier left the court of Cleves (succeeded by his son), the Duke of Cleves

reintroduced both trial by water and torture in trials for witchcraft with an edict of 1581, which Wier could only have experienced as a bitter disappointment.

Valente's portrait of Johann Wier reveals a man with a "pacifist nature" (111) who participated without vitriol in the scientific debates of his period surrounding not only the fate of the witch but also Paracelsus's challenges to medical orthodoxy. Valente attends to the finer points of the polemic Wier undertook against the Paracelsians, and in particular, against Jacques Gohory, the first advocate of Paracelsianism in France. Chapter 4 offers careful analysis of Gohory's *Compendium*, as well as of Wier's *Medicae Observationes* and *Liber Apologeticus*. Successive chapters examine the reception of Wier's works through the centuries and across the disciplines, from sixteenth-century witchcraft polemic (most notably Thomas Erastus and Jean Bodin, who both attacked Wier) to the "rediscovery" of *De praestigiis* in the emerging field of psychiatry. (Freud famously included the *De praestigiis* among the ten most important books.)

This brief synopsis does not do justice to Valente's thorough and careful work reconstructing debates, tracking the editorial history and reception of Wier's books, and documenting his work as a practising physician, since for Wier medical practice and scientific research remained tightly connected. This is a work of broad scope and meticulous scholarship that will be of keen interest to scholars of the history of witchcraft and medicine.

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<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39797>