

RENAISSANCE HISTORY, ART AND CULTURE

Michaela Valente

# Johann Wier

Debating the Devil and Witches  
in Early Modern Europe

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Johann Wier



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# Renaissance History, Art and Culture

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*Debating the Devil and Witches in Early Modern Europe*

*Michaela Valente*

*Translated by  
Theresa Federici*

Amsterdam University Press



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There's a sign on the wall, but she wants to be sure  
'Cause you know sometimes words have two meanings  
In a tree by the brook, there's a songbird who sings  
Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiven  
You know  
R. Plant- J. Page, *Stairway to Heaven*



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# Introduction

## Abstract

This book deals with a fascinating and original claim in sixteenth-century Europe: witches should be cured, not executed. It was with this claim that the physician and scholar Johann Wier (1515–1588) challenged the dominant idea. For his defence of witches, more than three centuries later Sigmund Freud chose to put Wier's work among his ten books to be read by everyone. According to Wier, Satan is responsible for seducing witches; therefore, witches do not deserve to be executed, but they must be cured for their melancholy. When witch-hunting was rising, Wier was the first to use some of the arguments adopted in the emerging debate on religious tolerance in defence of witches.

This is the first overall study of Wier that offers an innovative view of his thought by highlighting Wier's sources and his attempts to involve theologians, physicians, and philosophers in his fight against cruel witch-hunts. *Johann Wier: Debating the Devil and Witches* situates and explains his claim as a result of a moral and religious path as well as the outcome of his medical experience. The book aims at providing an insightful examination of Wier's works in order to read his pleas while simultaneously emphasizing the duty of every good Christian to not abandon anyone who strays from the flock of Christ. For these reasons, Wier was overwhelmed by bitter confutations such as those of Jean Bodin, but he was also celebrated for his outstanding and prolific heritage in debating religious tolerance.

In 1563, Johann Wier, a physician from Brabant, published his work, the *De praestigiiis daemonum*, in Basel at the printing house of Oporinus into Europe of his day: a dominating Europe that looked out at the world and sought to conquer it. In this work, Wier presents witches as victims of demonic illusion, who did not deserve the death penalty, but who were, rather, in need of re-education. Drawing upon a complex analysis of the phenomenon of witchcraft, Wier expounded the initial ideas that set forth

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the very process that was to lead to the gradual abandonment of arguments based on the supernatural element to explain otherwise inexplicable events and phenomena.

Despite his deeply held conviction of the reality and existence of demonic action, he triggered the process of questioning the supernatural, demonstrating the inconsistencies that underpinned some of the premises used to justify the witch-hunts. With a wealth of practical experience in the field of medicine, Wier scrupulously investigated many cases of presumed witchcraft, unmasking the tricks used by some imposters who exploited people's credulity for financial gain or to condemn their enemies. Albeit Wier never called into question the existence of the devil, indeed, from the very title of his work, it is evident that his attention was focussed on the devil and his army, nonetheless reaffirming that all actions fell within the divine plan. In this way, Wier took up a position against the risk of attributing to the devil a power that was equal to the divine, falling into Manichaeism. As we shall see, however, his orthodox position implied contradictions and aporias, which engendered furious debate amongst his illustrious readers, both contemporary and over the ages, thus rendering Wier's work the test bed for demonological debate for many generations. The strength and lucidity of his arguments contributed unequivocally to the process of "disenchantment" with the world and to the death of the devil. Wier's objectives, however, extended further and opened into scientific and medical reflections, embracing the political condition of an age ravaged by war and by religious violence, reaching a proposal that cannot be limited to women accused of witchcraft. The shadow of Erasmus fell long over Wier, together with his own often-dramatic first-hand experience of coercion practices that highlighted all their inherent limits. His plea to abandon an entire system of belief and practices in favour of a return to the evangelical messages clearly resounds on every page of his work. For too long, Wier's thought has been confined to the defence of witches, which is, as I shall demonstrate, limiting. For a variety of reasons, Wier can be considered an exponent of an idea that had initially been defeated, then, overcoming much resistance, progressively become asserted and imposed. His investigation of demonic tricks persuaded him that human consciousness is fallible and, therefore, that yielding to the message of the Gospels, the only message able to guiding people towards the righteous path, is fundamental. For this reason, Wier defended the right to err and to become lost, in order to retrace one's steps and find, once again, the path of righteousness.

This work was first published in 2003 in the prestigious series edited by Antonio Rotondò, *Studi e testi per la storia religiosa del Cinquecento*, by Olschki. 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. I have attempted to consider and to respond to some observations that, over the years, have been raised directly to me or that have emerged from the lively and boundless debate within historiography.

The completion of a monograph is an opportunity to reflect on the various stages of life and study. The need to express gratitude combines with the pleasure of partaking in scholarly exchange and returning a crumb of what has been so generously received. I have found answers to my growing questions, my doubts, but also stimuli and ideas for reflection in conversations, sometimes daily, other times occasional. Margherita Isnardi Parente, Antonio Rotondò, and Paolo Simoncelli supported and encouraged me in this work from the very start, scholars, whose love and passion for research is contagious, and advocates of the effectiveness of teaching as a civic duty, I am grateful to them for having tolerated with pleasant irony my recurrent enthusiasm and disappointments. Twenty years on from my earlier work, my Ph.D. Thesis, on Wier, I remain profoundly and sincerely grateful to them. Equally important were my conversations with Eugenio Canone, Matteo Duni, Germana Ernst, Carlos Gilly, Lucia Felici, Erik C. Midelfort, Giovanni Romeo, and Paola Zambelli, who read and discussed various versions of the work. Alberto Aubert, Anna Maria Lazzarino del Grosso, and Mario F. Leonardi all followed my research from the very start.

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Rome, September 2020.

M. V.

