Jan Machielsen


This is an outstanding and important book. Based on a PhD dissertation from the University of Oxford, this monograph explains the important position of demonology within the setting of late Renaissance Humanism, early Jesuit concerns, and the Counter Reformation. At the same time, it is part of a recent surge in intellectual biographies of demonologists. Following Stuart Clark’s magisterial *Thinking with Demons* (1997) and other recent works, no one questions anymore the theological and philosophical importance of early modern demonology for the working through major contemporary concerns—not all of them directly related to witches or demons. But while much previous work has been organized thematically or topically, this book discusses the contexts of demonology by following the career of Martin Delrio (1551–1608). The Antwerp-born Spanish Jesuit taught in Salamanca, Douai, Liège, Graz, and, above all, Leuven, where he spent most of his career. Delrio is best known for his *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex* [Six Books of Investigation into Magic, 1599–1600], a three-volume compilation of all things superstitious. The book was republished in numerous editions in early modern Europe, frequently quoted, and used as a core reference throughout the seventeenth century. While one of Machielsen’s concerns is to make sense of the book’s internal logic and its popularity, he also addresses its author’s motivations and other intellectual interests, both theological and Humanistic.

By the time Delrio started compiling his book, he was already a distinguished author and a friend of Justus Lipsius, and was soon to become a rival of Joseph Scaliger. Earlier in his career, as a rising Humanist, he published a three-volume commentary on Seneca’s tragedies. A Christianized Seneca, as Machielsen reminds us, played a major role in early Jesuit culture, and Senecan tragedies were part of the Society’s curricula and missionary activities. Using Humanistic philological methods, Delrio established Seneca’s authorship of some of the tragedies and refuted his authorship of others. In this scholarly enterprise, Delrio managed to walk a fine line between trusting one’s philological method and the *vulgata lectio*—respecting and preserving tradition—just as he manages to follow the Jesuit manner of merging eloquence and morality.

Last but not least, publishing his huge Senecan commentary was a way for Delrio to fashion his own scholarly persona, a point crucial for understanding his turn to demonology. The study of witches, Machielsen convincingly argues, was good for making one’s reputation. Unlike most other demonologists, Delrio never encountered a “real” witch and he was not an inquisitor. All his
witches, from Seneca’s Medea on, were textual. But Delrio was a pioneer in making purely scholarly witches a legitimate field of study, a stage on which one could display one’s erudition. In this new field of knowledge, persuasion rested not on personal experience of witches, but rather on quoting sources. And here Delrio was as good as they come. He cited or mentioned more than a thousand authors, piling reference upon reference. In addition to witchcraft, his Disquisitiones addressed divination, demonic procreation, superstition, lot-casting, and learned magic.

Insisting on the predominantly scholarly nature of Delrio’s project is not to deny, of course, that the fear of witches was very real during the second half of the sixteenth century, a period when anxieties about both heresy and learned magic proliferated. Jesuits in the Low Countries were involved with witch trials and exorcisms of demons from possessed bodies—and Delrio probably knew the men involved—while other members of the Society encountered new forms of magic in the New World, and some of their reports made their way into Delrio’s summa. Interest in witchcraft and demonism was growing steadily, and Machielsen devotes a few interesting pages to the print and marketing histories of the book. The Disquisitiones, he summarizes, “made demonology into a textual science” (234). Unlike scholastic authors, however, Delrio did not attempt to prove by logical reasoning but rather by quotation, and by multiplying examples from history, theology, and medieval saints’ lives.

Machielsen does not stop here, asking what exactly were Delrio’s editorial decisions and how he chose what to include in his summa, what to exclude, and how and why he organized and grouped his exempla. This section of the book, which deals with the history of early modern production of knowledge, places the Disquisitiones within the setting of other Counter-Reformation compilations, first and foremost Cesare Baronio’s Annales ecclesiastici (12 vols, 1588–1607). Delrio, Machielsen suggests, was following these compilations and the Jesuit method of excerpting and note-taking. In his scholarly pursuits and methods, then, and in his literalist attitude to his sources, Delrio was typical of early modern Catholicism, always reluctant to question the truth of received accounts. As important as his compilation was, however, it was attacked on two counts: first, in putting together so much magical data, it could be used as a how-to manual; secondly, as thorough as it was, it did not supply any help to practicing judges.

Delrio’s career did not end with the Disquisitiones. In the last years of his life he became an anti-Protestant polemicist. He defended the cult of Mary and the Immaculate Conception and conducted a vehement debate with Joseph Scaliger regarding the authenticity of the texts attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite. In all of these pursuits, he insisted on loyalty to tradition as
the guarantor of truthfulness, thus remaining loyal to his Jesuit identity. This was directly related to his refusal to rule on the veracity of individual cases of demonism, as demons could always distort and subvert all evidence. The authority of demonology and theology as fields of knowledge hinged for him on the trustworthiness of the many, not the one, on the scholarly accumulation of facts rather than on anyone witch trial or anyone testimony. In connecting the dots and presenting a multifaceted Delrio, Machielsen reminds us of both the coherence and the varieties of early modern Catholic scholarship.

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