

#### Zitierhinweis

Young, Francis: Rezension über: Jan Machielsen, *Demonology and Scholarship in the Counter-Reformation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, in: *Reviews in History*, 2015, May, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/2014/1763, heruntergeladen über Website



#### copyright

Dieser Beitrag kann vom Nutzer zu eigenen nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken heruntergeladen und/oder ausgedruckt werden. Darüber hinausgehende Nutzungen sind ohne weitere Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber nur im Rahmen der gesetzlichen Schrankenbestimmungen (§§ 44a-63a UrhG) zulässig.

Jan Machielsen's book is ostensibly the first modern biography of the Jesuit scholar Martin Delrio (1551–1608), a man best known today as the author of the treatise on witchcraft *Disquisitiones magicae* ('Investigations into magic'). However, to call this important book a biography does it an injustice, since it is so much more than this. Through his account of the diverse interests and complex career of Delrio, Machielsen challenges 'the primacy of social history' in the study of early modern witchcraft and demonology (p. 5), and calls on historians to meet the academic 'demonologists' on their own terms, rather than viewing the subject through the prism of the witch trials. Delrio, Machielsen frequently reminds us, probably never met an accused witch and developed his demonology almost entirely along theoretical lines. By insisting on a thorough 'three hundred and sixty degree' picture of Delrio, Machielsen is advancing what amounts to a revised historiography of witchcraft belief as well as the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and 'the aim is not to lay bare subterranean fears and anxieties but a surface that has long been hidden from view' (pp. 3–4). Machielsen is explicitly and implicitly critical of historians who have assumed, for too long, that Delrio was a hysterical bigot.

Machielsen warns us that we would not want to make friends with Delrio (p. 22) and, indeed, unattractive features of his character emerge. Machielsen paints a compelling portrait of a young man radicalised and driven towards a monochrome worldview by the upheavals of the Dutch Wars and the suffering experienced by his family (pp. 25–50). An outsider to both sides of the conflict, as a native Netherlander born to Spanish parents, Delrio seems to have sought solace in a simplistic religious analysis of the wars of his childhood. For the most part, however, Machielsen's thorough treatment has a humanising effect on his subject. The historian can certainly relate to Delrio's longing for the library of the Jesuit College at Leuven and his complaint that 'I am forced to halt here and there for lack of books' (p. 73). Translators might also cringe in sympathy at Delrio's embarrassing textual error in his *Adversaria*, where he mistook a mention of two bays by Cicero for the name of a fictitious scholar, 'Pestanus Vibonensis' (p. 133). Such humanising touches are all too often lacking in scholarly biographies.

Machielsen rightly insists on paying as much attention to Delrio's work as a textual scholar of Seneca as he does to the Jesuit's better known demonological work. In doing so, he reveals that Delrio's 'bifurcated legacy' (p. 15) is actually nothing of the kind – it is simply that scholars have approached Delrio expecting to find a stereotype of a demonologist, rather than treating the man for who he was. For Delrio, his reputation as a scholar was as important as his demonological interests, and his Senecan studies gave him (and the Society of Jesus) the credibility in the world of Counter-Reformation scholarship that made the *Disquisitiones* possible. The first part of the book accordingly takes us on a journey into the surprisingly unfamiliar world of early modern Neo-Latin culture, where historians have hitherto tended to focus on Protestant voices to the detriment of Catholic scholars like Delrio (p. 161). In chapters five and six, Machielsen explores in detail Delrio's ambivalent 'friendship' with Justus Lipsius, the Protestant humanist turned Catholic, which initially drew Delrio into the world of humanist letters. Delrio played a crucial role in editing the works of Seneca (or more properly 'Senecas', since Delrio distinguished more than one), and it is fortuitous that the publication of Machielsen's book coincides with the appearance of a new biography of Seneca by Emily Wilson.<sup>(1)</sup> However, I wonder whether Machielsen omits the obvious when trying to explain why Senecan tragedy was so popular in early modern Europe. The primary reason was that Seneca's were virtually the only Classical tragedies to survive in Latin, at a time when Greek drama was still appreciated by comparatively few. Given the prestige accorded to tragedy, it was inevitable that they would be performed again and again, in spite of their derivative relationship with earlier Greek models.

Machielsen argues convincingly that Delrio first became interested in demonology and witchcraft through his study of Seneca (whose *Medea* is, after all, one of the most formidable witches in fiction). The evolution of Delrio the dramatic critic into Delrio the demonologist

curiously mirrors the development of the historical study of demonology in the 19th and 20th centuries, which began with Thomas Alfred Spalding's Elizabethan Demonology (1888), inspired by the desire to explain the demonological world of Shakespeare. In fact, as Machielsen points out, Senecan tragedy was a major influence on the supernatural themes in Marlowe, Shakespeare and other Jacobean dramatists (pp. 109–10). However, it was not just the content of Seneca that influenced the development of Delrio's interests, but also the problems inherent in the method of *divinatio* deployed by early modern textual scholars. This intuitive guesswork reminded the Jesuit too closely of the other meaning of the Latin word: forbidden divination (pp. 164–5).

Using a memorable metaphor, Machielsen points out that Delrio's apparently effortless scholarship concealed considerable effort: 'Textual critics sought to appear like swans gliding gracefully across the water. Like swans, they did so by obscuring their ferocious paddling from view' (p. 163). It is perhaps the major scholarly achievement of this book to present the Counter-Reformation as a process of textual criticism, in contrast to the more familiar argument that the Catholic Reformation was institutionally driven (pp. 166–73). Although Machielsen presents us with a detailed study of just one author, the unusually enduring and influential nature of Delrio's work (*Disquisitiones magicae* was last reprinted in 1755) makes him the perfect subject for a case study advocating a much wider historiographical argument that has the potential to shift paradigms of the Counter-Reformation. Delrio, the scholarly demonologist fighting witches 'made of ink and paper' (p. 203), challenges our preconceptions of what the Counter-Reformation was, and Machielsen portrays it as a continuation of the humanist project as much as it was a reaction against it. By implication, the Counter-Reformation itself was also like the graceful swan of Machielsen's metaphor: a movement that portrayed itself as monolithic and self-confident, but which was driven in reality by the leg-work of scholars like Delrio.

Machielsen is at his most brilliant when analysing Delrio's method in the *Disquisitiones*, a treat well worth waiting for. Delrio claimed to unite in himself the skills of jurist, philosopher and theologian (p. 233), yet previous studies (such as P. G. Maxwell-Stuart's partial translation of the *Disquisitiones* (2)) tended to emphasise Delrio the jurist and theologian at the expense of Delrio the philosopher. Indeed, even Machielsen brushes over Delrio's early teaching of philosophy, without explaining what sort of philosophy he might have been teaching. However, in chapter ten he argues that Delrio appeared to follow Scholastic method in the *Disquisitiones*, but really subverted it in fundamental ways. He ignored the Scholastic 'quodlibetal' requirement to articulate possible objections before advancing his thesis (p. 244), and in doing so silenced sceptical voices on witchcraft from the Middle Ages, such as the Canon *episcopi*, whilst at the same time turning demonology into a 'textual science' (p. 234). Of course, the idea that the truth about witches can be derived from texts requires us to accept that witches exist, and Machielsen demonstrates that, in effect, Delrio was involved in a project to foist a much more credulous reading of witchcraft on his readers. Delrio's lasting contribution to demonology was to extend the scope of suspicion to include natural magic, by suggesting (*contra* Aquinas) that worshipping demons and seeking knowledge from them amounted to the same thing (p. 240). Also crucial was his definition of superstitious practices as activities where 'cause and effect did not line up', implying that superstition was wrong because demons were involved, rather than because superstitious people were misguided (p. 212). Delrio thus bears a significant weight of responsibility for extending the limits of what could be considered witchcraft, as well as for redefining witchcraft as a Satanic cult. I would have been interested to know if Delrio adopted this rather cavalier approach to late Scholasticism earlier in his career – but, of course, there may be no surviving evidence of his philosophy teaching.

Delrio's preference for textual evidence, as opposed to witness testimony, allowed him to proceed by means of definitions rather than by means of arguments in the true sense (p. 252), and indeed the reader of *Disquisitiones* is showered with a plethora of learned distinctions

which may have been partly intended to discourage the original readers from asking whether witches actually existed. Delrio, Machielsen argues, treated his exempla not so much as testimony to be judged but as commonplaces to be accepted and analysed. Whereas Maxwell-Stuart's partial translation tended to give the impression that Delrio brought his own experience to bear on his account of magic and witchcraft, Machielsen shows that, with a very few exceptions such as his account of the zahuris (water diviners) in Madrid (p. 187), Delrio's exempla were at second hand. The *Disquisitiones* was characterised by a unique (but subsequently very influential) 'textual fundamentalism' that made it a peculiarly dangerous work (p. 257). Even long after the witch trials had ended, the *Disquisitiones*, and the method Delrio had adopted in it, continued to testify to the historical reality of witchcraft. It thus supported the very common position adopted by Catholics and some Protestants until the early 19th century – that witchcraft did not exist, but had existed – which was preferred by many to an outright rationalist rejection of the theoretical possibility of witches.<sup>(3)</sup> However, as Machielsen points out, Delrio's work did not meet with universal acclaim, with some accusing him of credulity and others, such as the Dominican Thomas Malvenda, accusing him of 'discussing superstition too openly' (p. 269). Delrio risked the same fate as Reginald Scot in the 16th century, becoming an inspiration for the very practices he sought to condemn. He also faced the paradox that, if demons deceived witches, the testimony of witches presumably could not be accepted in court (p. 279). Ironically, the stronger his case was for demonic deception, the weaker the testimony of those accused. Machielsen's discussion of Delrio's approach to these legal issues reveals that Delrio the jurist still coexisted with Delrio the demonologist. The Jesuit wisely did not allow his sober legal judgement to be swayed by hatred towards witches, and he insisted on proper judicial procedure. However, Machielsen notes that Delrio's ultimate reliance on the integrity of judges undermined his presentation of demonology as 'a science of induction' based on 'the trustworthiness of the many, not the one' (p. 293). Although Machielsen does not go so far as to say this, the impression we are left with is that Delrio's demonology may have sown the seeds of its own eventual downfall.

The final part of the book treats Delrio as a theologian, paying particular attention to his Marian and exegetical works *Florida Mariana* (1598) and *Pharus sacrae sapientiae* (1608), composed during the final part of Delrio's career, when he was teaching in Salamanca. Just as he showed the crucial significance of demonology for the wider Counter-Reformation, here Machielsen explains the importance of Marian devotion for defining Catholicism at this period. However, Delrio's *Pharus* revealed his liking for polemic. This was a trait that emerged most clearly in his vituperative (yet entertaining) dispute with the humanist Joseph Scaliger, which resulted in a learned discussion by Delrio on whether 'Scaliger rather than Delrio is a beetle' (p. 322), while Scaliger simply referred to his fellow scholar as 'the devil's shit' (p. 340). However, Machielsen convincingly argues that Delrio's attack on Scaliger's scepticism about the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus was just an early battle in a much greater war of words which took in the legitimacy of monasticism, the credit of the Jesuits and the relationship between church and state. In chapter 13, Machielsen describes in detail the tactics of a number of Jesuit critics of Scaliger, co-ordinating their attacks to bring him down 'like a herd of velociraptors attacking a large herbivore' (p. 326). However, Delrio responded to Scaliger with a 'curious blend of imitation and opposition' (p. 355), and the Jesuit seems to emerge with more credit than the foul-mouthed Scaliger from this bruising encounter. Machielsen concludes his study with a consideration of the legacy of Delrio, as it was presented to the world by his disciple and biographer Heribert Rosweyde. Rosweyde was himself a participant in the Counter-Reformation's textual project, since his *Fasti sanctorum* (1607) was one inspiration for the monumental *Acta sanctorum*. Machielsen observes that the 'self-fashioning' of Counter-Reformation scholars is largely neglected (p. 383), and we can infer from this that many contemporary historians tend to accept at face value claims of self-abnegation like Rosweyde's portrayal of Delrio as the ideal, obedient Jesuit. The human

element is missed. However, ‘Delrio’s authorial presence was founded on his personal struggles, his relationship with others, and his membership of entities much larger than himself’ (pp. 383–4). Machielsen humanises Delrio in this book, but he also humanises the Counter-Reformation.

*Martin Delrio: Demonology and Scholarship in the Counter-Reformation* is a major scholarly achievement and a book that it is difficult to praise too highly for the scope of its engagement with all aspects of Delrio’s work, not just those which are well known amongst scholars of early modern demonology. It is difficult to imagine Machielsen’s book ever being surpassed as the definitive biography of Martin Delrio, but beyond this, it is also a book that ought to be read by all scholars of the Counter-Reformation, whether they are interested in demonologists and witchcraft or not. Machielsen makes significant contributions to the history of the Society of Jesus, the textual history of the Counter-Reformation and late humanism, as well as our understanding of late Scholasticism, Catholic scriptural exegesis and the reform of the cult of the saints, to name but a few. This is a book that deserves to be on the reading list of every course on the Counter-Reformation.

### Notes

1. Emily Wilson, *Seneca: A Life* (London, 2015).
2. P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Investigations into Magic* (Manchester, 2000).
3. Francis Young, *English Catholics and the Supernatural, 1553–1829* (Farnham, 2013), pp. 163–88.

The author would like to thank Dr Young for his thorough yet generous review, and for the valuable suggestions and points raised in it which the author is very happy to accept.