

## Review

Jan Stronks, *Toverij, contramagie en bijgeloof (1580–1800). Geleerde debatten over duivelse zaken*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2021, 350 pp. ISBN 9789463727266.



Witchcraft proved a vexing issue for the early modern Dutch Reformed Church and its ministers, preachers, and theologians. In effect witchcraft pitted two of Calvinism's foundational elements – its biblicism and its exaltation of God's sovereignty – against each other. The Bible made it impossible to deny the existence and agency of devils and witches, and yet divine providence – the fact that everything happened according to God's will – also made them entirely superfluous. Whether those who debated the issue realized this or not, this was a circle that could not be squared, and related issues proved convenient distractions. The devil's role as a deceiver – he was the 'father of lies' (John 8:44) – redirected attention towards popular healers, white witches who led the common people astray. Superstition – of both the popular and papist kinds – also proved a welcome lightning rod.

Concerns about superstition in turn legitimated a sceptical attitude towards witchcraft as a practical rather than a theoretical matter. Sidestepping the troubling issue of the devil's power, Dutch Reformed theologians *en masse* expressed their doubts as to whether witchcraft as a crime could ever be successfully proven because the 'people' could not be trusted.

The paragraph above sketches, in a nutshell, the consensus that emerges from Jan Stronks's recent book. It will be instantly recognizable to those familiar with the views of many other Calvinist contributions to early modern demonology, particularly those of English Puritans. Stronks's subtitle, then, is rather misleading, as there really was not much debate at all. That such discussion was virtually absent is also reinforced by the author's chosen method of exposition. Much of the book consists of summaries of individual works stacked on top of each other. At first this approach seems refreshing and didactic – a valuable attempt to explain why elite thinkers might take the view they did

in their own words – yet it becomes quickly apparent that we are to remain stuck on the bottom, basically descriptive, rung of Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning. There is very little attempt at analysis or synthesis. Admittedly Stronks's summaries throw up some amazing or amusing anecdotes and examples. The catechist Ahasverus van den Berg, for instance, explained that the Old Testament magicians of Egypt had not really transformed rods into snakes but had only temporarily stunned the serpents so that they appeared rod-like at first.

For the most part, however, the endless parade of theologians, ministers, and preachers, almost all singing from the same hymn sheet, test the reader's patience beyond breaking point. Interesting or even remarkable observations by some of these authors – for instance, Josias van Houten's concerns that voluntary confessions were a form of suicide-by-judge – pass by without comment. When conclusions are drawn, they similarly appear buried, their significance not fully realized. Stronks's argument that Balthasar Bekker's famously sceptical *De Betoverde Weereld* (1691-1693) should be placed within this Reformed tradition (as opposed to a Cartesian framework) is undoubtedly right. By denying that the devil could take on a corporeal form, Bekker sought to resolve the contradictions with which we opened (and in the process he made them explicit). Stronks's suggestion that the grounds for scepticism shifted over time – from concerns for demonic deception to mere charlatanry – is very plausible.

The nature of the subject matter means that this was the inevitable result of Stronks's chosen approach. Early modern demonology is as slippery as the devils themselves and obviously so, as it exists to explain the inexplicable. Yet the limitations of Stronks's basically descriptive *modus operandi* already become apparent even before we come to the early modern theologians themselves. The work opens with a historiographical survey that takes very much the same approach. Stronks selects about a dozen historians whose views he proceeds to summarize. The limited nature and extent of these summaries give considerable pause for thought. 'In *Thinking with Demons. The Idea of Witchcraft* (1997) Stuart Clark discusses a range of European demonologists' and 'in 2004 Sara [read Sarah] Ferber published *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern France*' are just two examples of superficial summaries which cause concern, but the randomness of their selection (all but one of them are men) raises further questions. Indeed, further engagement with the historiography would have served Stronks well. He would have noticed, for instance, that his very plausible reading of Balthasar Bekker's confessional motivations aligns very well with the most recent work on the origins of Reginald Scot's witchcraft scepticism.

The problems signalled here may be due to the work's long gestation period. The work strikingly does not include any acknowledgements or any note on the author's biography, but it evidently builds on essays Stronks published in the late 1980s and early 1990s. If this book had appeared then, it would have been a valuable contribution to the then still emerging study of early modern demonology. Those who are working on the subject in the 2020s should give it the same amount of attention as the book awards them: that is to say, a passing glance and nothing more.