

MEN AND MEDICINE

Johannes Wier, Sixteenth-Century Psychiatrist

• "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" says the Bible (Exodus 22: 18), but this injunction was at first largely ignored, apparently because of the scarcity of witches. However, the rise and spread of heresies in the early fifteenth century led to an active search for witches, and during and after the pontificates of Innocent VIII and Julian II many thousands of men and women—some estimates go as high as a million—were burned as witches. The Papal Bull of 1483 stimulated the Inquisition to initiate a systematic search for those who had made pacts with Satan and the *Malleus Maleficarum* became the official procedural handbook for any person who wanted to destroy witches.

John Gerson, a theologian of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, was among the leading critics of the witchcraft mania. (His varied career included appointment to the chancellorship of the University of Paris in 1395 and his forced retirement to the Celestine monastery at Lyons in 1419 as a result of his opposition to papal authority). In 1415 he expressed the belief that the reports by confessed witches or their accusers of air-rides and orgies were delusions caused by brain disease. However, most of the learned and, of course, all of the ignorant believed otherwise.

The most influential proponent of Gerson's and related ideas was Johannes Wier (often called Weyer). He was born in 1515 in Grave, a

town on the Meuse River in what was then Brabant but is now part of the Netherlands. (Today the town still has a street that bears his name.) He studied medicine in Paris under Agrippa, a man who maintained a firm opposition to medical superstitions. Wier then returned to Grave, where he practiced medicine, and then went to Arnhem as town physician. He later became personal physician to the Protestant Duke of Julich and Cleves who encouraged Wier's advanced thinking and protected him from the Inquisition. Wier died in 1588 after a life of exposing superstition and combatting its effects.

Wier probably wrote his famous book *On the Delusion of Demons* while town physician at Arnhem. It was published in 1563. In the book

Wier not only expressed the idea that most of those who were accused of witchcraft were mentally ill but he also was apparently the first person to introduce the concept of delusions, i.e., "sickness of thinking," into medicine. In another book he clearly described self-accusation as a symptom of depression. He also wrote about hysterical paralysis and about malin-gering.

Wier's writings about witchcraft naturally attracted widespread attention. His views were attacked by many powerful and authoritative persons. A few supported his ideas. Reginald Scot, an English justice of the peace, wrote in 1584 that the diagnosis should be "not witchcraft but melancholie." Later supporters included Bekker, who wrote on the subject in 1693, and Westphal, whose book appeared in 1707. On the other hand, James I of England published a book in 1597 which denounced both Scot and Wier, and in 1604 he made the English (and Scottish) witchcraft laws much more severe. The laws were later repealed, but this did not destroy the belief in witchcraft. As late as the early nineteenth century Nelson, the English legal expert, wrote, "It seems that there must formerly have been such a crime as witchcraft, because divers statutes have been made against it."

Wier was, of course, a clinician and by studying the phenomenon that was called "witchcraft" by clinical methods he not only revealed its true nature but, in addition, he added new concepts to medicine itself. ■



Johann Weyer