



Ruben Buys, *Sparks of Reason. Vernacular Rationalism in the Low Countries (1550-1670)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015, 299 pp., ISBN 978-90-8704-515-9)

Ruben Buys' new book *Sparks of Reason. Vernacular Rationalism in the Low Countries (1550-1670)* is the English translation of his Dutch dissertation, which was published in 2009 under the title *De kunst van het weldenken. Lekenfilosofie en volkstalig rationalisme in de Nederlanden (1550-1600)*. For this new edition Buys has rewritten most of the introduction and conclusion of his thesis, as well as including a new chapter on vernacular rationalism in the seventeenth century Dutch Republic. Although the English title suggests that the book contains an investigation of the philosophy of vernacular rationalism between 1550 and 1670, the book remains close to the original PhD and concentrates on the developments of the said philosophy during the late sixteenth century (23-24).

Central to Buys's study is the foundation of Dutch 'lay philosophy' in, and its evolution during, the late Middle Ages and Early Modern period. As such the book is greatly indebted to the work of literary historians such as Joris Reynaert and Herman Pleij, who in the 1980s and 1990s played a pioneering role in studying the pivotal contributions of medieval vernacular literary texts in the construction of Christian as well as worldly discourses about philosophy and ethics. Buys does not just summarise the work of these scholars and that of their followers, but fuses the research that has been done on this subject into a new and intriguing point of view which highlights the evolution of the philosophical discourse within these texts, while at the same time connecting this vernacular philosophy to the later developments of the Radical Enlightenment. The main question of the book concerns itself with the way in which sixteenth century laity – broadly defined as a diverse group of people interested in moral philosophy, but without academic schooling or knowledge of Latin (28) – thought about the function of reason in controlling the human passions and its role in bettering human existence.

Buys starts off by looking closely at the ideas of Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert (1522-1590), an obvious choice. Coornhert, a prolific writer as well as an ingenious engraver, is considered to have singlehandedly advanced the vernacular debate on rationality and faith through his highly original work. Specifically highlighted here is his magnum opus of 1586 *Zedekunst, dat is Wellevenskunste* ('Ethics, or the Art of Living Well') which concentrates on ethical living. Buys investigates how Coornhert developed his ideas on human reason, where those ideas came from and how they were imbedded in Dutch society. Coornhert was not the first lay person in the Low Countries to consider human reason to be of the utmost importance in dealing with everyday life.

Starting with the thirteenth century Flemish author Jacob van Maerlant, Buys shows how medieval vernacular writers dealt with the concept of rationality and its use in deliberating ethical questions. Netherlandish writers, poets and printers such as Boendale, Potter and Thomas Van der Noot all have their place here, but Buys also looks at more anonymous contributions, for instance the plays and poetry originating from the so called chambers of rhetoric (amateur literary guilds that dominated the literary culture of the Late Medieval and Early Modern Low Countries). Buys demonstrates convincingly that the discourse on human reason was already well in place in lay texts from the thirteenth century onwards and that it defined rationality as utilitarian in purpose, to be used to gain control over one's own emotions and to effectively counter the complications of everyday life. Such medieval vernacular texts on philosophy seem to have functioned as all-encompassing ethical encyclopaedia (101-102) in which the reader could find a broad selection of past wisdom to guide them through life, and that contained the highlights of classical philosophy (for instance wise lessons from Aristotle and Seneca) as well as Christian teachings (the Bible and writings of the Church Fathers).

In the next three chapters, Buys considers the way in which contemporaries of Coornhert reflected on human reason. First, the texts of vernacular poets, printers, translators and members of the chambers of rhetoric are examined. Subsequently, Buys relates these views to the intellectual movements of humanism and reformation that dominated the sixteenth century. Together, these chapters form the core of the book. They describe how in the second half of the sixteenth century an intellectual movement manifests itself within the vibrant urban communities of the Low Countries, a movement that Buys aptly names *Good-Thinkers*. These *Good-Thinkers*, with Coornhert as their unofficial spokesman, attempted to construct a coherent ethical system from the late medieval tradition, while at the same time attempting to find a synthesis between classical philosophy and Christian spirituality. Central in this system was human reason, which was considered the only viable way to realise the true divine potential within mankind.

By not only studying Dutch philosophical and religious texts, but also taking the literary contribution of the rhetoricians into account, Buys sets himself a challenge. This is certainly commendable. In the last decade the research of Anne-Laure Van Bruaene and Arjan van Dixhoorn has shown how crucial these chambers of rhetoric were as urban institutions of knowledge and devotion. By studying the literary production of the chambers of rhetoric, Buys enables the reader to consider the way laymen translated abstract philosophical ideas about reason for the use on stage for an urban (and probably mostly uneducated) audience.

However, Buys's analyses are not always as precise here. For instance, when studying three theatre competitions (Ghent, Rotterdam and Antwerp) for the presence of Reason as a stage character he rarely contextualises the

competitions themselves, which gives the impression that his conclusions are somewhat inadequate. He correctly observes an ambiguous attitude towards reason in rhetorician drama: sometimes it plays an evil seducer, other times it is a force of good. Nevertheless, Buys fails to consider properly that such a different perspective might be dependent on the central theme of the competition. The pursuit of true piety is the main motive of the allegorical plays performed in Ghent (1539) and Rotterdam (1561). As such, human reason is viewed as a distraction at best, even a possible adversary. During the Antwerp competition (1561), the plays had a more worldly interest, inquiring after the origin and purpose of human knowledge. Reason was believed to have an important, if not crucial role to play in answering such a question. Throughout the sixteenth century, the chambers of rhetoric thus showed considerable flexibility in their discourses on rationality, an outlook they shared with *Good-Thinkers* such as Marcus Antonius Gillis, who himself writes that reason should stay clear of the territory of 'divine things' (110). That Buys's arguments sometimes lack the necessary context is also apparent in his occasional omission of the most recent academic literature on the cultural environment in which rhetorician competitions took place (for instance, my own publications on the Antwerp Landjuweel). A better appreciation of the historical and cultural circumstances in which these texts were produced moreover would add substance to his claim that the vernacular interest in rationalism can be seen as an appealing strategy to overcome the religious, social and intellectual unrest of the late sixteenth century (216-218).

A similar issue concerns Buys' vision on the intellectual climate that characterised the vernacular rationalists. He describes how by the second half of the sixteenth century, a 'cultural avant-garde of vernacular thinkers, artists and poets' came into being who held ethical rationalism as their personal philosophy (143). Such an intellectual movement consisted of a loose network of well-educated individuals who 'dwelled in the cultural centers of the Low Countries' (144) and counted among its members intellectuals such as Coornhert, the Antwerp translator Cornelis van Ghistele and Amsterdam merchant-scholar Hendrik Spiegel. However, Buys neglects to explain how this elite group (who were all well versed in Latin) also came to include lesser known figures, such as François van Ballaer, a Brussels embroidery worker, Jan Boomgart, a schoolmaster from Diest and Hendrick Luycxs, a guild attorney from Vilvoorde. The last three were the authors of rhetorician plays that Buys uses throughout his book and which he identifies as vehicles of the philosophy of ethical rationalism. How did these rather obscure individuals, two from relatively small towns in Brabant, gain access to the network of *Good-Thinkers*? Did they develop their ideas about rationalism on their own, without conferring with their local circle of friends and fellow rhetoricians? In the opinion of this reviewer the inclusion of members of several chambers of rhetoric in the group of *Good-Thinkers* suggests not so much an elite avant-garde of vernacular thinkers, but an intellectual movement that was inclusive

in its recruitment and much more widespread than Buys suggests. The last chapter of the book attempts to offer some suggestions concerning this question of reception and audience (224-227), but his answers only scratch the surface.

Notwithstanding these points of criticism, this reviewer considers *Sparks of Reason* an intellectually cohesive work, which is extremely enjoyable to read. Buys manages to entice the reader through his straightforward argumentation, and guides him well through the often mesmerising content of vernacular philosophy of the sixteenth century Low Countries. His book shows convincingly that more research needs to be done on the impact of lay texts and vernacular traditions in the Low Countries and how they functioned in relationship to Renaissance Humanism and Enlightenment thought.

Jeroen Vandommele, Utrecht University