TIMMERMAN, Petronella Johanna de
(1724–86)

Petronella Johanna de Timmerman was born on 2 February 1724 in Middelburg. She was the first child of Susanna van Oordt and Pieter de Timmerman, who was a merchant and a member of the city council. Having mathe- matics and philosophy as a hobby, he taught his daughter the principles of these sciences, and showed her how to use physical instruments. In 1749 Petronella married the lawyer Abraham Haverkamp, who died nine years later. During and after this marriage she built up an impressive collection of books and physical instruments. In 1769 she remarried Johann Friedrich Hennert, professor in mathematics and philosophy at UTRECHT UNIVERSITY. A cerebral hemorrhage put an end to her life on 1 May 1786.

Already at the age of fourteen De Timmerman started writing poems. They were collected by Hennert and published posthu- mously in one volume, Nagelaatene gedichten (1786), with a biography. Her interest in astronomical events becomes apparent from a poem about a comet that was observed in 1743 and 1744. Following the ideas of, amongst others, Balthasar Becker, she strongly disputes the idea that comets are signals from God to announce evil. She argues that mathematical calculations can describe and predict a comet's movements. In another poem she follows the popular tradition of physico-theology by using the metempsychosis of a caterpillar into a but- terfly as an argument for the existence of God.

De Timmerman had an extraordinary knowledge of the exact sciences and philosophy. She wrote many treatises on astronomical and geometrical subjects, but unfortunately none of these manuscripts have survived. According to Hennert's biography, in which she is described as the ideal enlightened woman who managed to combine household tasks with intellectual activities, she read Van Musschenbroek, Nollet, Reaumur, Leibniz, Mendelssohn, Reimarus and Bonnet. Her favourite philosopher was, however, Christian Wolff. She studied his works very intensively and made notes to grasp complicated passages. She shared this philosophical preference with Christina Leocora de Nieuwville, one of the few other eighteenth-century women who had an in-depth knowledge of contemporary philosophy. According to Hennert, De Timmerman's admiration for Wolff went even so far that she managed her household according to his principles mathematically, economically, and with extreme precision. Hennert sometimes ridiculed her behaviour, but she responded by quoting specific sections from Wolff's writings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Nagelaatene gedichten (Utrecht, 1786).

Further Reading


Jensen, Lotte, 'Met de passer in de hand': Petronella Johanna de Timmerman, in Met een ander kwinkelwagentje, Schrijvers, pp. 256–262.

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