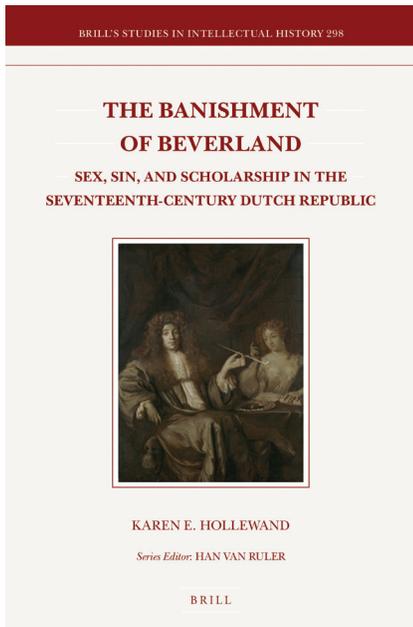


Review

Karen Hollewand, *The Banishment of Beverland. Sex, Sin, and Scholarship in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic*, Leiden, Brill, 2019, 310 pp. ISBN 9789004344969.



Hadriaan Beverland, the author of one of the most controversial early modern treatises on mankind's original sin, was banished from Holland in 1679. Accused of atheism and abandoned by his humanist friends, Beverland left for England, where instead of looking back on a stellar career as a scholar he died a broken man, his reputation in tatters, having spent the last thirty-six years of his life in exile. How had this once promising humanist, Karen Hollewand asks in this new study of Beverland's infamous banishment, 'gotten himself into so much trouble' (3)? What had gone wrong? It would be tempting, as historians have done in the past, to point to Beverland's *Peccatum Originale* of 1678, which argued forcefully and in no uncertain terms that sexual lust was mankind's original sin. It is equally enticing to signal Beverland's seemingly provocative studies on sex and sexuality – his MA thesis was on ancient pros-

titutes and later in life he asked his friends for passages about 'whores and related things' and for any material they had about 'lesbians who masturbate' (160).

Yet Hollewand shows in four dense and thematically-organised chapters that examining Beverland's scholarship on sex and original sin offers only partial answers to these questions. Her careful readings of Beverland's correspondence and publications succeed in demonstrating that much about his scholarship on sex was no aberration and could thus not be the *sole* reason for his eventual conviction and banishment. Chapter one places Beverland's interpretation of original sin as sexual lust in a long tradition of Christian literature on this subject. Hollewand's succinct discussions of a wide range of authors – from Paul and Augustine to Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim and Jan Baptist

van Helmont – show that Beverland was not the first to identify mankind’s original sin with sexual lust. Neither were Beverland’s views on the Bible, the subject of chapter two, more radical than those of other scholars in the Dutch Republic. He did believe that Scripture was a historical document and ought therefore to be subjected to rigorous philological scrutiny, but so did many others at the time. For only when the Biblical texts were read ‘critically, with reference to the historical context of their creation’ (86), Beverland and his colleagues agreed, would God’s Word reveal its mysteries.

Hollewand goes on to demonstrate how it was a combination of factors that led to Beverland’s conviction and subsequent banishment: not the content of his scholarly work *per se* but their satirical style and defiant tone, which Beverland used to mock Reformed doctrine and the Republic’s ministers and theologians, caused offence. His humanist colleagues did not rally to his defense, as chapter three suggests, because Beverland’s ‘relentless focus on the obscene content of the classical canon threatened [...] the enterprise of Christian humanism’ (242). Beverland’s advocacy for sexual liberty – he believed in the ‘unavoidable presence of desire’ (225) in society and aimed for a frank discussion of this topic – as well as his criticism of the political elites’ double standards also got him into trouble: according to Beverland, the Republic’s magistrates forbade any premarital or extramarital sexual relations publicly (and in legislation) but privately they, too, were involved in illicit sexual affairs and frequented prostitutes. It was exactly this kind of hypocrisy, which he believed had tainted not only the Republic’s magistrates but also its theologians and his humanist colleagues, that Beverland loathed and veraciously denounced in his writings. Unsurprisingly, then, it was also this uncompromising stance that eventually led to his downfall.

That is not to say that Beverland was not to some extent pushing things further than any of his contemporaries. He believed, for instance, in legalising prostitution rather than forcing men to repress their lust (and cited Cicero in his defense). Beverland’s own lewd lifestyle – Hollewand reminds us frequently how ‘he enjoyed books as much as he loved brothels’ (242) – was not exceptional for students of his generation. Yet few respectable scholars of the period sought to promote their self-image the way Beverland did: his most famous portrait, now in the Rijksmuseum and possibly meant to adorn his book on ancient prostitution, depicts him leisurely smoking a pipe, donned in his Japanese robe, and enjoying a glass of wine in the company of a prostitute (who is, in fact, reading Beverland’s book). Beverland’s gaze is directed confidently at the onlooker.

The Beverland that thus emerges from Hollewand’s meticulous study of his correspondence and publications is a defiant and obstinate individual, whose unbending character and genuine commitment to the subject of sex offer us insights into the mechanics of scholarly life and learned sociability in the late seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. The many phenomenal quotations from Beverland’s letters and published works, carefully translated from the original Latin, also neatly illustrate the Baroque style of his writing. It is a missed opportunity, though, that with such rich source material Hollewand does not attempt a full explanation of Beverland’s inner life and his obsession with everything sexual. His gendered interpretations of sexual lust and his often deeply misogynistic views – particularly visible in his work on female lust (*De Stolatae Virginitatis Iure Lucubratio Academica*) and in his relationship with his maid, Rebecca Tibbith,

whom he continually suspected of adultery – are given rather short shrift but analyses thereof would have been of interest to historians of sexuality and scholarship alike.

In developing her arguments, Hollewand also aimed to shed new light on the Dutch Republic in the last decades of the seventeenth century. Here her conclusions are not equally convincing. She rightly points out that previous characterisations of Beverland as a libertine, Spinozist, or radical thinker fail to explain the nature of his scholarship. For Hollewand aptly shows that Beverland ‘used whatever he could get his hands on to fit into his theory of sex’ (104) even when this meant entering heterodox territory. Her examination of Beverland’s manuscript collection of ‘obscene’ images (195–206), which demonstrates how his inquiry was as textual as it was material and visual, is equally exciting and should be of interest to historians of early modern material texts.

Hollewand’s insistence, on the other hand, that ‘the hegemony of humanist scholarship in the realm of learning’ (15) was challenged in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by new forms of learning and the new philosophy of Descartes and others unwittingly reproduces the once triumphant (but now somewhat antiquated) Enlightenment narrative about the decline of humanism. It also does not fully explain Beverland’s scholarship and banishment. Neither is it made sufficiently clear how the alleged stagnation of the Dutch economy, the *Rampjaar* of 1672, and this altogether ‘tense context of change’ (243) had any direct influence on Beverland’s trial and conviction. This undeniably *was* a turbulent period in the history of the burgeoning Dutch Republic, but this does not mean, as Hollewand states, that Leiden’s magistrates simply ‘did not care to consider the ideas of a student on the subject of sex, whose works had revealed an uncomfortable truth in an audacious manner’ (243) because they had more pressing issues on their mind.

Hollewand’s argument that Beverland’s humanist colleagues let him hang because his interest in the obscene content of ancient texts threatened the project of Christian humanism implies, in the eyes of this reviewer, too sharp a distinction between humanist scholarship and Christian morale. She posits that Beverland’s study of expurgated passages from authors such as Ovid and Juvenal was exposing what she infelicitously calls ‘the secret of humanist scholarship’ (168). Yet few documents cited in the book support this conclusion. It seems more likely to have been Beverland’s obstinate character, as Hollewand herself suggests several times, his deliberately satirical tone, and his callous indifference to the decorum of different textual genres that really rubbed his humanist friends the wrong way.

Hollewand’s otherwise lucid analyses are occasionally marred by unnecessary repetition and lists of comparisons that collapse under their own weight. Often a more circumscribed selection of examples, treated in more depth, would have produced a richer context for Beverland and his scholarship. Chapter three, which includes a lengthy discussion of the various ways in which not only early modern scholars but also early-twentieth century classicists purged ancient texts from their lewd content, is a case in point. Here an analysis of Beverland’s unpublished manuscripts and especially his unbound papers and notes on Juvenal, Martial, Persius, and Petronius – listed and described in the bibliography but in the book only scarcely mentioned – would have given readers a more precise portrait of his scholarship and offered some exciting insights into how Beverland’s own ideas about sex shaped his reading of classical authors.

Overall, though, Hollewand has produced a thoughtful study of Beverland and his scholarship. Her precise analyses of his writings introduce a hitherto neglected but fascinating set of sources, which illuminates an important chapter in the history of scholarship and the history of sexuality. As such, *The Banishment of Beverland* will be an obvious point of reference for any future study of Beverland, his scholarship, and his context. It is to be hoped that Hollewand's forthcoming translation of the *De Peccato Originali* is not long in coming.

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