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 studied mathematics 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 married 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 posthumously in one volume, Nagelaatene gedichten (1786), with a biography. Her interest in astronomical events became apparent from a poem about a comet that was observed in 1743 and 1744. Following the ideas of, amongst others, Balthasar Beek, 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 metaphor of a caterpillar into a butterfly as an argument for the existence of God.

De Timmerman had an extraordinary knowledge of the exact sciences and philosophical 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, Nollett, Reaumur, Leibniz, Mendelssohn, Reimarus and Boettiger. Her favourite philosopher was, however, Christian Wolff. She shrewdly made use of this knowledge she had acquired of her own accord. She maintained her interest in contemporary philosophy. For this reason she managed her household according to his principles, and in an extreme precision. Hennert sometimes ridiculed her behaviour, but she responded by quoting specific sections from Wolff’s writings.

Further Reading


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Nagelaatene gedichten (Utrecht, 1786).

Further Reading
