David Gorlæus (1591-1612)

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I came across the name of David Gorlaeus for the first time while working on my doctoral dissertation on seventeenth-century matter theory in the early 1990s. The dazzling diversity of the authors who pleaded for the existence of atoms in the period 1590-1630 puzzled me greatly as I could find neither a coherent pattern nor an overarching concern in the various antiquarian, historical, theological, metaphysical, physical, alchemical and microscopic reasons that they offered. In a number of publications I have since examined a range of particularly puzzling figures or types of argumentation in favor of the existence of atoms. When life’s circumstances took me to the Netherlands, where I have settled, I could not avoid turning my attention to David Gorlaeus, who seemed to me a particularly elusive figure. After all, very little was known about his life, and his ideas were particularly hard to place as they mixed metaphysics and natural philosophy in a markedly unusual way and in unexpected moments added observations taken from the fields of astronomy, optics and chemistry. When I read that the author had passed away at age 21, and that he was moreover starting out as a theology student and was not a person engaged in empirical research, my initial curiosity increased even further, turning into a detective’s quest for the reconstruction of the circumstances that led to an inexplicable fact. The more I searched, the more I became convinced that Gorlaeus was an unusually talented thinker of extraordinary originality and maturity, notably when one considered the young age at which he wrote his works. In fact, I remain persuaded that his philosophical synthesis renders him one of the early seventeenth century’s most brilliant Dutch intellects. Had he been granted more years to live and the chance to develop his thoughts further, so I now imagine, he might well have become as radical and famous a thinker as Spinoza. Although such counterfactual musings do not belong to the historian’s task, they do in this particular case explain one of the main emotional reasons for investigating the short life of this talented thinker.

Some of my findings concerning Gorlaeus have been published before, but in places that are not easily accessible. When it was decided to organize an academic celebration on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of Gorlaeus’ death, to be held in Cornjum on 27 April 2012, it was pointed out to me that in the absence of any
monographic study of this thinker, it would be difficult to persuade the larger public of the status that I wished to claim for my young thinker. This justified observation has led me to write down everything I have so far managed to uncover about the life, circumstances and thoughts of David Gorlaeus. I realize of course that much remains to be found, in manuscript and published sources, about his family, personal circumstances and impact on the evolution of seventeenth-century philosophy and science. For this reason, the present book cannot offer more than a provisional account and is written in the hope that the story told here will inspire other historians of philosophy, science and theology to take over where I have left off.

It gives me great pleasure to thank a number of persons who have helped me in this enterprise. The long section on Gorlaeus’ teacher Henricus de Veno has benefited enormously from the contribution of Leen Spruit, who found De Veno’s inquisitorial acts in the Vatican. Arjen Dijkstra has joined me in the hunt for Gorlaeus’ Frisian circumstances; a profound expert on early modern Friesland, he has uncovered a number of important facts, texts, and connections that I am pleased to acknowledge in the relevant passages. Gerben Wierda, a formidable archival hunter, has contributed considerably to my attempts to reconstruct Gorlaeus’ family circumstances. Once again, whatever I owe to him is gratefully acknowledged in the footnotes. My research on Gorlaeus has also benefitted from the expert advice of Sander de Boer, Theo Bögels, Erik-Jan Bos, Jos van den Broek, Robin Buning, Davide Cellamare, Paul Dijstelberge, Martin Engels, Paul Hoftijzer, Ulrich G. Leinsle, Ferenc Postma, Jarich Renema, Jacob van Sluis, Jaap van der Veen and Huib Zuidervaart, all of whom I would like to thank most emphatically.

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I dedicate this book to Carla Rita Palmerino, with whom I enthusiastically share a home, a university office and thus my entire life, and to our two boys, Tommaso and Filippo, who are growing up far too quickly.