

Writing for Laughs

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A review of

Daniel C. Fouke, *Philosophy and Theology in a Burlesque Mode: John Toland and “The Way of Paradox”* (Humanity Books, Amherst New York, 2007), ISBN 978-1-59102-324-1, Hardback, \$65.00/ £54.50

The final chapter of Daniel Fouke’s thoughtful study of John Toland reads *Pantheisticon* (1720) as ‘a philosophical comedy with serious purposes’. (297) A strange, testing text, this late work by the Irish freethinker and grub street pamphleteer offers a mocking parody of the liturgy; mimicking the traditional red and black lettering while providing rituals for a society of pantheists – a term Toland may have coined. Read flat, it places Toland firmly within the tradition of thought associated with Benedict Spinoza which elsewhere Jonathan Israel isolates as the bedrock of the *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2001: Toland is treated there on pages 609-14). Set alongside Fouke’s helpful rendition of the ideas inside Toland’s *Letters to Serena* (1704), in which the device of an attack on Spinoza is used to outline the central ideas of the notorious provocateur, this reading allows us to plant Toland into the subculture of Arians, Socinians and Deists that perplexed and perturbed established religions in the first quarter of the eighteenth century.

So far, there is little here that does not aid and abet the study of Toland by Justin Champion (*Republican Learning: The Crisis of Christian Culture, 1696-1722*, Manchester, 2003) and complement more general studies such as those of Margaret Jacob and, further back, Paul Hazard.¹ Not that such cohesion does not have its merits. Fouke’s remit is clearly enunciated and he offers informative overviews of the debates within Anglicanism and the spectrum of freethought (chapters two and three respectively). While these tend to read rather like doctoral literary surveys, they set the ground for what is in fact the meat of the book; this in turn forces us to revisit the *Pantheisticon*.

In proposing that Toland was composing a comic work, Fouke moves beyond the standard renditions of the writer as a polemical freethinker, and posits the possibility that his real subversion lay in the rhetorical ambition of his writing. It was form, more than content, which drove his detractors to distraction. Fouke buttresses this opinion by providing a third survey – this time of ideas concerning laughter and wit (chapter four), outlining how one ambition shared by the heterodox was to deflate the pretensions of religion by laughing at its pride and pomp. This is the ‘philosophy in a burlesque mode’ to which the title alludes and which underpins Fouke’s reading of Toland. The literary complexity, the overweening scholarship, the layering of notes and commentary, the circular, sometimes self-contradictory quality of Toland’s writing is all the consequence of this central purpose. Toland is consistently puffing up religious forms only to burst them on the pin of his acuity and wit.

Fouke shows how Toland accomplishes this in a sequence of close readings, which culminate in his treatment of *Pantheisticon*. Drawing out the difference between exoteric and esoteric ideas, Fouke highlights how Toland was remarkably self-conscious about the mode his writing

¹ Margaret Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford, 1991); Paul Hazard, *The European Mind, 1680-1715: The Critical Years* (1935; London, 1953).

adopted, its public afterlife and its reception by clerical opponents. He revelled in thumbing his nose at authority and drawing out their absurd claims to power and wisdom.

Two contextual points might be made in response. First, the kind of effrontery and ironic desecration which Toland mastered seems to stand in contradiction to the Whig political values he enunciated in his political writings, and which do not receive anything above the cursory attention granted to them in the biographical first chapter. *Pantheisticon* was published in 1720 (albeit in Latin), around a decade after Richard Steele and Joseph Addison provided the Ur-texts of modern commercial Whiggery, *The Tatler* (1709-11) and *The Spectator* (1711-12). Their ideology of politeness has little or nothing to do with the barbed insulting prose found in *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696) or *Nazarenus* (1718). This schism within Whiggery inflected the government of the late 1710s, unable to connect the old Whig pursuit of virtue with the new Whig concern for well being, and it is worth noting that, in the person of Robert Walpole, it was the Addisonian brand of thought that eventually won out over the Commonwealth republicanism Toland politically favoured. In that sense, Toland was on the losing side of the argument.

However, in another sense, one not alluded to here, Toland's afterlife was remarkable. Although he is not mentioned in Vivian Mercer's *Irish Comic Tradition* of 1962, the portrayal of Toland that Fouke offers would make him a prime candidate for that study. While Fouke does not refer to Mercier's book, the tracing of 'an unbroken comic tradition from approximately the ninth century down to the present day' would certainly be aided by placing Toland into the canon. (Mercier, *Comic Tradition*, xii) Indeed, given his Gaelic and Catholic origins, and his English and Anglican adulthood, Toland would help resolve one difficulty which Mercier alluded to in his preface, namely working out the transition from one language to the other. Toland appears to have been fluent in both.

In situating Toland between the Irish-language poetic tradition of the seventeenth century and the witticisms of Oscar Wilde in the nineteenth century, the cultural significance of the 'Donegal Heretic', to use J.G. Simms apt description, is enhanced.² The liminal quality of his life, the elusive quality of his prose, and the subversive quality of his mind all locate him at the centre of a sustained literary tradition, if not a philosophical one. Recalling Richard Kearney's account of how David Berman's essay on Toland in *The Irish Mind* was denounced by Bishop Jerimiah Newman for including a man who wrote with English thought patterns, that Fouke's book suggests that Toland stands as one originator of a distinctly Irish English-language tradition of writing makes this book itself a subversive contribution to Irish studies.³

² J.G. Simms, 'John Toland, 1670-1722: A Donegal Heretic', *Irish Historical Studies*, 16 (1968), 304-20.

³ See Richard Kearney, 'John Toland: An Irish Philosopher?' in McGuinness, Harrison and Kearney (eds.), *John Toland's Christianity Not Mysterious*, 211; David Berman, 'The Irish Counter-Enlightenment' in Richard Kearney (ed.), *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions* (Dublin, 1985), 119-140.