

*H-France Review* Vol. 10 (July 2010), No. 97

Luc Foisneau, general editor, *The Dictionary of Seventeenth-Century Philosophers*. London and New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2008. 2 volumes, xxvi + 1313 pp., index. \$795 (cl.). ISBN: 978-0-82641-861-6.

Review by April Shelford, American University.

Pierre-Daniel Huet, the seventeenth-century French *érudit*, had a dim view of reference works. Prepared by scholars with the laudable intention of smoothing the path of learning, such efforts had a paradoxical result: a decrease in learning (if not intellectual pretension) as their users acquired too easily and superficially the fruits of others' labors. A proliferation of reference works exposed scholars to criticism, too. Pierre Bayle (himself no stranger to the genre!) dissented from his colleagues' generally high regard for the Huguenot scholar Samuel Bochart by dismissing him as a mere peruser of dictionaries.[1] Possessors of hard-earned advanced degrees and instructors frustrated by students' uncritical use of *Wikipedia* may well agree with Huet that, to be worthy of the name, learning should be difficult. Yet, as harried scholars and lecturers, we frequently rely on reference works (even guiltily consult the much-scorned *Wikipedia*). At their best, though, reference works do more than satisfy a need for information efficiently and reliably; they may begin, not end, an engagement with learning. Such is *The Dictionary of Seventeenth-Century French Philosophers*. [2]

Why do we need a reference work that focuses exclusively on this subject? The editors aspire to dispel the notion that French philosophy during the Grand Siècle begins and ends with Descartes or that only the self-consciously "great" years of the Sun King's reign matter. They want to illustrate the diverse intellectual concerns considered "philosophical" at the time which we, wearing our disciplinary blinders, are either ignorant of or ignore. "The [seventeenth-century] philosopher ... combin[ed] in a single person elements that can today appear to us heterogeneous" (p. ix), including ethical, scientific, religious, and other concerns. Because "there are often several lives within a philosopher's life" (p. ix), a biographical approach helps to avoid our intellectual balkanization by sketching a "plural and complex vision of the French philosophers' seventeenth century" (p. viii). The editors also seek to avoid imposing interpretations by eschewing thematic treatments that slot intellectually protean individuals into constrictive intellectual spaces such as quarrels or philosophical schools. Rather, they encourage the reader to "progressively compos[e]" her own synthesis by "successive readings of the entries from cross-reference to cross-reference" (I:viii). Consistent with these objectives, the editors cast a wide and finely meshed net, one that snares sardines as well as swordfish. They avoid the assumptions inherent in periodization by defining "the seventeenth century" in its most precise, yet arbitrary sense, 1601–1700. To be included, an individual must have published at least one work during those years. The result is two thick volumes of nearly 1400 pages with articles on nearly 600 hundred philosophers; each article includes a biography and a bibliography, which includes suggestions for further reading and, if relevant, manuscript materials and additional contemporary works. By including intellectual careers that began before 1601 or extended beyond 1700, the *Dictionary* also organically links the sixteenth with the seventeenth century, the seventeenth with the eighteenth.

As an intellectual historian who has engaged with the pleasures (and challenges) of writing on a seventeenth-century polymath, I find the editors' objectives and methods laudable, welcome, and consistent with recent scholarly trends, including an emphasis on the workings of the Republic of

Letters. While contingent factors prompted my own concentration on the seventeenth century, it has held my attention precisely because of its intellectually diverse, even anarchic character. While temperamentally inclined to biography, I also agree that a biographical approach enables us to better capture the intellectual integrity (or fascinating inconsistencies) of these thinkers. But that experience has also made me wary of the editors' claims—or perhaps a tad worried about their confidence in making them.

A reference work is a historical artifact, too, thus captive to contemporary intellectual concerns and contexts. Being a polymath came naturally to someone like Huet, and seventeenth-century philosophers just as naturally linked religious and scientific questions. But scholars today are trained more narrowly as classicists, historians of gender or science, theologians, literary critics, etc. It also seems a bit inconsistent with the stated objectives that ten "supervising editors" in different thematic areas managed the *Dictionary's* workload (see footnote 8). Apparently, we cannot do without categories—nor need we if we remain mindful of their shortcomings. Scholarship of seventeenth-century intellectual life has focused particularly on how institutional contexts shaped it. What is the impact, then, of the "Frenchness" of the *Dictionary* despite its publication in English and the international flavor of its list of contributors? [3] It is a great strength that so many leading scholars resident in France contributed to the project, but the intellectual culture of French research institutes and universities has no doubt shaped this endeavor in important ways.

Ultimately, though, we must seek proof of the editors' claims in the articles themselves. Here I consider how well they accomplish their objectives in the context of three basic tasks: presenting each subject's thought comprehensibly and concisely; evaluating his significance in a wider context (more on gender below); and providing solid bibliographic leads for further investigation. As test cases, I selected two subjects: Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676) and Jean LeClerc (1657-1736). I chose them for the same reason that any scholar or student might consult the *Dictionary*, that is, a need-to-know prompted by current research interests. Given the editors' ambitions—and the *Dictionary's* hefty price tag—does it accomplish these tasks better than some already reasonably available alternatives? In each case, then, I compared the *Dictionary's* articles with those found in other reference works devoted to philosophy: the Routledge *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, both the print (1998) and online versions, the 2006 version of Macmillan's *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and, as a counterpoint, *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (2003), which was edited by Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers and which adopts a thematic approach. [4] In both cases, the *Dictionary's* treatments are not merely up-to-date, but superior to those found in either the Routledge or the MacMillan encyclopedias.

In fact, no entry for La Peyrère appears in Routledge's print or online versions. Indeed, he is precisely the intellectual type likely to be excluded under a more restrictive definition of "philosophy." La Peyrère prompted both Catholic and Protestant attacks by asserting that the Genesis account simply could not explain human diversity; thus, there had to be men and women before Adam and Eve. The entry by Richard Popkin in MacMillan's encyclopedia remains very useful. His inclusion of a contemporary's characterization of La Peyrère as "the best man in the world, the sweetest, who tranquilly believed very little" demonstrates how well an apt quotation may say about a subject. Popkin also mentions La Peyrère in the chapter "Religious Background" appearing in the *Cambridge History*, and he devoted a monograph to him. Elisabeth Quennehen, the author of the *Dictionary's* article, has clearly picked up the baton of La Peyrère scholarship. She gives us a richer biographical sketch, which in itself reveals much about the opportunities and risks of seventeenth-century intellectual life, and she ably explicates the heterodox ideas of this infamous and influential intellectual.

The article on Le Clerc by Antony McKenna, who served as consulting editor and who contributed several other excellent articles, exhibits particularly well the strengths of the *Dictionary's* approach. As the editors admit, defining the "French" in "French philosophers" poses its own problems. Thus, Le Clerc, a Genevan, appears here because of his residence in France (especially at Saumur, an important

center of Calvinist scholarship); the extensive connections he maintained with French thinkers after settling permanently in the Netherlands; and his importance as an intellectual mediator between England and the Continent through his correspondence and his periodicals. [5] McKenna details Le Clerc's travels, which, like La Peyrère's, were not incidental to his intellectual development. He gives Le Clerc's labors in the erudite, yet central endeavors of textual criticism their due, and he elaborates usefully on Le Clerc's network of intellectual connections. Thanks to McKenna, we learn of LeClerc's first published work in which the Calvinist pastor already appears to have been breaking bad; there he suggested (perhaps mischievously?) the ambiguity of central Christian doctrines by portraying two imaginary and assiduous students of the Bible responding to identical questions in divergent ways, one as a Calvinist, one as a Socinian. McKenna's bibliography is also very rich. In short, Le Clerc's ideas appear more complex and more worthy of our attention than in the *Cambridge History*, which mentions Le Clerc briefly in connection with a discussion of religious toleration, or in the articles found in Routledge's online encyclopedia or in MacMillan's encyclopedia.

Ultimately, the utility and even intellectual pleasures of a project like this are not what the *Dictionary* tells us about people we already know, but what we learn about people who do not usually appear in the conventional pantheon of seventeenth-century French philosophy. Knowing about them adds important nuances to our understanding of seventeenth-century developments, and they potentially challenge what we think we already know and what we think matters. Thus, Olivier Bloch's lively article on Molière demonstrates that philosophic concerns were central to the playwright's work, not just convenient targets for his satiric barbs. Sylvie Taussig's article on David Derodon—his irregular life (he lost an early position because of "his customary debauchery and dissoluteness" (I:335)), confessional side-switching, and ideas that vexed both Jesuits and the Calvinists—is a learned romp.[6] Anne-Lise Rey profiles the inventive Denis Papin, Christiaan Huygens' assistant in Paris who conceived and built prototypes of the steam engine and the submarine in a peripatetic life that took him to London, Venice, and Hesse-Cassel. General Editor Luc Foisneau introduces us to Claude Pithois—a religious who obviously found the vow of obedience irksome and who eventually converted to Protestantism—because of his writings, which marked "an important state in the criticism of superstition in the first half of the seventeenth century" (II:1014). With more than eighty articles, Jacob Schmutz, the supervising editor on scholastic philosophy and theology, makes clear how absolutely central pedagogy and religious controversy were to the making of seventeenth-century French philosophy. Although the editors acknowledge that philosophy, however liberally defined, remained an overwhelmingly male endeavor, they nonetheless include women whenever possible. Thus, Montaigne's first editor, Marie de Gournay, receives a sympathetic treatment from Philippe Desan, while she is only mentioned in articles on Montaigne and feminism in the Routledge online encyclopedia. Jacques Prévot discusses Mademoiselle de Scudéry's popular *Conversations* in the context of moral philosophy, showing how well she knew her Ancients and Moderns, while Anne Frostin introduces us to Hortense Mancini, one of Cardinal Mazarin's nieces and an "unclassable libertine" whose "singular turn of mind" is much in evidence in her *Mémoires* (II:814).

In short, the reader will find both capable and stimulating articles everywhere he or she looks in the *Dictionary* despite some disappointments (surprisingly, the article on Descartes) and some unfortunate copyediting and odd translation. Yet however rich the *Dictionary's* material, I suspect that it will chiefly benefit specialists. The lack of adequate finding aids militates against wider utility,[7] and the expense makes widespread availability unlikely. I am no expert in the economics of academic publishing, but I wondered why the publisher did not create a fully searchable digital version. Such would greatly facilitate the efforts of the researcher—and it would put less faith in the reader whom the editors envision "progressively compos[ing]" her own synthesis through a leisurely pursuit of *renvois*. A digital version has pedagogical applications, too. Like it or not, our students will continue to rely—and increasingly, as do we—on electronic databases, and electronic sources can easily be incorporated into teaching.[8] This matters in an institutional setting where I am frequently—and rightly—asked how a proposed purchase will benefit my students.

The question of form, print or digital, returns us to the early modern period, which created the modern reference work as we know it. For Huet, learning had to be difficult because he also believed that only an intellectual elite deserved to possess it. His grumpy comments implicitly acknowledged the democratization of knowledge implicit in creating reference works, especially those published in the vernacular. Of course, the editors and authors of the *Encyclopédie* self-consciously embraced precisely that possibility just a few decades after Huet's death. Digitization today confronts publishers and editors with similar choices. The audience for a publication like the *Dictionary* is inevitably more limited than the other reference works mentioned in this review, though its interdisciplinary character makes it appealing to more than philosophers. Colleagues of mine frequently complain about the decline in seventeenth-century studies. A single reference work cannot revive a field, of course. Nevertheless, one in English that makes the intrinsic interest of its subject so apparent deserves more readers than specialists fortunate enough to live near a major research library.

## NOTES

[1] April G. Shelford, *Transforming the Republic of Letters: Pierre-Daniel Huet and European Intellectual Life, 1650–1720* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 177, 28.

[2] Some disclaimers: As an intellectual historian who has published on François de La Mothe Le Vayer and Pierre-Daniel Huet, both included in the *Dictionary*, I am disappointed that a couple of my earlier articles did not appear in the fine treatments, respectively, of Françoise Charles-Daubert and Dinah Ribard. Elena Rapetti's *Pierre-Daniel Huet: Erudizione, filosofia, apologetica* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1999) should also have appeared in the Huet bibliography.

[3] By my rough count, contributors within France (just over one hundred) outnumber those elsewhere by nearly three times. Most scholars living outside the Hexagon rarely contributed even a handful of articles. Roger Ariew is a notable exception with seventeen contributions. Please note that I have not attempted to distinguish between "French" and "non-French" in terms of nationality, but have only distinguished institutional contexts.

[4] I might also have consulted reference works in other specialties, such as science or religion, but more conventional reference works on philosophy provided a better way to illuminate the editors' intentions—and life is short.

[5] In contrast, the inclusion of Cardinal Mazarin makes very little sense.

[6] She does just as fine a job with more "canonical" figures such as Pierre Gassendi; indeed, her contributions are notable for both quality and quantity (more than forty).

[7] At the end of the second volume there are lists of names organized by the topics covered by the supervising editors: freethinkers and clandestine literature, Cartesians and anti-Cartesians; political thought; religious controversies; humanism, arts and techniques; scientists and scientific academies; Port-Royal and its adversaries; the secret sciences (alchemy, cabbala, astrology); scholastic philosophy and theology; and moralists and theorists of literature. These are helpful, but flawed because of omissions, some quite serious. In any event, an index with judiciously selected subject headings would have accomplished the same and more. The index that is included covers only the names of people with articles in the *Dictionary*, places, and organizations. It is impossible, for example, to look up "Jesuit," "Epicurus," "pedagogy," "amour propre," or "Battle of the Ancients and the Moderns."

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[8] Precisely what I do now with the *Europe, 1450-1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World*, published by Scribner's in 2003.

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ISSN 1553-9172