

'Gold tried in the Fire'. The Prophet TheaurauJohn Tany and the English Revolution

Review Number:

655

Publish date:

Monday, 31 March, 2008

Author:

Ariel Hessayon

ISBN:

9780754655978

Date of Publication:

2007

Price:

£45.00

Pages:

487pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Place of Publication:

Aldershot

Reviewer:

Mario Caricchio

'Gold tried in the Fire'. The Prophet TheaurauJohn Tany and the English Revolution is not an ordinary history book, for many reasons: the daring task of rescuing the mental world of the most idiosyncratic of the prophets of the English revolution; the mastery of the archival and printed sources as well as the biblical and religious literature demonstrated by Ariel Hessayon; the awareness with which he controls his prose; and, his aim of questioning historical writing in the very act of writing history. On each of these points the book achieves relevant results and succeeds in stimulating new questions.

On the basis of this book, we now know the biographical background of Thomas Totney, the Lincolnshire-born goldsmith of London who God renamed on 23 November 1649. We discover the range of contacts, the possible readings and the cultural materials which contributed to shaping his identity as a prophet and his astonishing rewriting of biblical myths. Even if nothing is conceded to Christopher Hill's account of the 'revolt within the revolution', we learn, as well, that we cannot take for granted John Colin Davis's dismissal of the printed sources of the 1650s as pure fiction without first researching the archival sources. Finally, this book tries to let the sources speak for themselves by taking into account and exploiting the active role of the reader.

TheaurauJohn Tany is one of those 'ordinary people' who took the floor to express their view on religion and politics and found their way to publication during the 1640s and 1650s. Like a number of them, his only memory in history had for a long time been that of the 'extravagant fanatic' and the 'madman'. However, his fate was reversed together with that of the Ranters in the 1970s, following Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*

, which gave to the so-called 'lunatic fringe' the dignity of history. Since then, Tany has been evoked in many studies. He has been described, following Hill, as a Ranter or something similar. Davis contested this view in his *Fear, Myth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Others paid particular attention to his conflicting relationship with the two founders of the Muggletonian sect, John Reeve and Lodowick Muggleton. The influence on Tany of Jacob Boehme's texts and his significant place in the Judaising of early modern England have been discussed. All of these encounters with the words and thoughts of Tany have, nonetheless, been hindered by the objective difficulty of penetrating the sense of a corpus of writing which may look, at first sight, as confused printed mumbling; hence, the usual reminder of many commentators that Tany's interesting views are to be discerned under the veil of a probably real insanity. Moreover, nothing was known of Tany's biography except for a few cryptic references in his writings or the newsbooks' accounts of his activities in and around London during the 1650s. Hessayon's book, in three sections suggestively entitled 'Genesis', 'Genealogy of the High Priest' and 'King of the Jews', puts an end to the shortcomings of previous studies.

'Genesis' is the reconstruction of Totney's life up to his new 'birth' in 1649 as the prophet TheaurauJohn Tany. Hessayon tracks down details of his early life at Little Shelford, Cambridgeshire, in a family of modest yeomen farmers. It seems that the local community was not characterised by any 'irresistible rise of the godly'. Nonetheless, all clues in the sources seem to indicate that the future prophet had grown up within a godly environment, though one unacknowledged as such by the surrounding people. Coherently, he entered the godly community of London, where he was apprenticed and set up his shop in the parish of St Kathrine Creechurch. St Kathrine Creechurch had been troubled by Stephen Denison's denunciation of a Familist conventicle in the 1620s - one of the main cases in which the divisions which fissured the London puritan community came to the public eye, as the studies of Peter Lake and David Como have shown. (1) Totney was permanently marked, as Hessayon is able to point out in his writings, by the frightening and uncompromising sermons which Denison continued to preach on the doctrine of election and reprobation in the 1630s. Moreover, Totney's refusal to baptise his first son, and his marriage by licence during the period of Lent, point at some kind of 'confrontational godliness', and also entail disagreement with the minister of the parish. It appears that Totney refused to act diligently as a ship money collector in 1640, that he took the Protestation Oath, probably participated in iconoclastic practice and enlisted in Parliament's army, in the regiment of Cromwell or Middleton. The 'birth of the prophet' TheaurauJohn Tany is understandable, as the last chapter of the section shows, within the culture of puritan penitence and of the mystical ideas of purgation, illumination and union with God.

The second section of *'Gold tried in the Fire'* shows at first how the God who renamed Thomas Totney, TheaurauJohn Tany and made him the high priest of 'Aaron's order' and 'of the tribe of Reuben' had consulted heraldic records and read some of the books circulating in England in late 1640s. The genealogy of his surname from Totney to Tany and the adoption of a coat of arms, which is reproduced and recalled several times in the prophet's pamphlets, were only made possible through research in an ordinary of arms compiled by Robert Glover in the 16th century. Decoding Tany's genealogical and heraldic language, current in the 17th century but oddly extraneous to modern commentators, Hessayon demonstrates that, so to speak, God's intention was to link the London goldsmith to a Norman baron, who had supposedly arrived in England with William the Conqueror. The prophet's God-given name, while containing that of the noble ancestor, also echoed hidden meanings connected to letters of the Greek and Hebrew alphabets. In the first part, the Greek letter *theta* and the Hebrew *thau* were represented, signifying the Spirit of God and the divine vision; in the middle, *aurau* recalled Tany's former trade and the title of Boehme's first book, *Aurora*. The name John obviously recalled Christ's disciple and, through the transliteration of the Hebrew, the 'Dove', which symbolised God's love. Proclaiming himself a 'Jew of the tribe of Reuben', Tany fashioned his God-given identity so as to circumvent the prescription of the Mosaic laws about prophets having to be free from 'any blemish' - this was promptly understood by John Reeve and Lodowick Muggleton, who threw in Tany's face the fact that he stuttered. All this meant, therefore, that the London goldsmith was part of social networks in which he could gain access to rare heraldic information, to some meagre knowledge of Hebrew, Latin and Greek, and to the basics of Boehme's concept of signatures and of the Kabbalistic doctrines. He had to be aware also of the writings on the dispersion of the Hebrews, in which theories about the tribe of

Reuben were circulating at that time. *The Hope of Israel* by Menasseh ben Israel printed in English in 1650, some months after Tany's re-birth, is one such work. On this, Hessayon limits himself to showing that some of Tany's contacts, notably his patron and disciple Robert Norwood, had links - for example, with John Sadler, who in turn was connected to Menasseh ben Israel via John Dury - which can explain Tany's access to books and theories otherwise out of reach to an ordinary London artisan. Similarly, Hessayon presents ample evidence that Tany had more than simply occasional contacts with the bookseller Giles Calvert, and frequented John Pordage's family in Bradfield, where Richard Coppin, Abiezer Coppe, and the prophetess Elizabeth Poole had also found hospitality. Tany certainly came into contact there with the magus and digger William Everard and could, quite plausibly, have been exposed to Behmenist meditations and alchemical knowledge.

Against the backdrop of his genealogical culture, moreover, Hessayon is able to situate Tany's agenda for social reformation in respect of the people with whom he has often been associated. It presupposed an interpretation of pure and undefiled religion as active love, drawn from the Epistle of James. For Tany this meant acts and not just words, as it did also for William Walwyn, Abiezer Coppe and Gerrard Winstanley, among others. His agenda also implied some knowledge of Sir Edward Coke's *Institutes*, and opposition to the 'Norman Yoke'. But for Tany, unlike the others, social levelling also entailed appropriating a Norman ancestry to fight 'tyrannical power' on equal terms, as in a trial by combat. Significantly (or not?), he defied William Algernon Percy, earl of Northumberland, who had led the opposition to the King's trial in the House of Lords and had headed the parliamentary committee against 'abuses in heraldry' (p. 189-90).

Like Coppe and Pordage, TheaurauJohn and Robert Norwood came up against the strictures of the law for their religious opinions. Hessayon demonstrates that the charges were shaped so as to associate them with the Ranters, and that they were condemned under the Blasphemy Act. They were then released six months later by a jury wishing to stick to the letter of the law and not to mingle the intricacies of theology. In actual fact, it had been plain that Tany and Norwood had held that there was no local hell, as opposed to claiming there was 'neither heaven nor hell' (the opinion indicted by the Blasphemy Act). Showing the orthodox representation of heterodoxy and also the orthodox's failure to understand the heterodox is, in Hessayon's scheme, the way to definitely penetrate the veils of Tany's obscure religion and world-view.

Hessayon's most interesting findings in this respect are contained in the third and last section. He decodes TheaurauJohn's language by referring back to its sources, such as the New Testament and the writings of Boheme. He shows and follows this prophet's way of reasoning by giving meaning to the 'radaxes' of words - which evoked the Hebrew philological understanding of words as being composed of root and functional letters - and to his references to the number seven, including the seven languages which Tany claimed to know.

Hessayon's procedure is quite peculiar. He does not simply present the results of his inquiry, but leads the reader to an understanding of what TheaurauJohn could have read or listened to. Sometimes this ends in the conclusion that any direct borrowing from a source is undemonstrable anyway, except for a single but distinguishable echo - as in the case of the *Apocrypha*. The reader is, therefore, plunged into canonical and extra-canonical texts; neoplatonic, hermetic and syncretist sets of ideas; Pythagorean numerology, astrology and Jewish Kabbalah; and, the texts of Ficino, Pico, Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus, before returning to single lines of Theaurajohn's text. It is the mediation of Boehme - who 'with the exception of canonical sources' was 'the most important influence' on TheaurauJohn Tany's thought - which conveys many of these echoes. For this reason, Hessayon also devotes space to the networks through which the translations of Boheme's works were promoted and realised during the 1640s and 1650s. The contours of their diffusion and of their readership - also analysed in greater depth in some other of Hessayon's essays (2) - is greatly clarified by this effort. It is true to say that Tany's vocabulary is indeed distinguished by the presence of the neologisms which John Sparrow and John Ellistone, the translators of Boehme's works, coined to render his meditations into English.

In this way, individual sections of TheaurauJohn's text are progressively elucidated. In the end it is, therefore, possible for Hessayon to attempt a reconstruction of the text as a whole. Chapter 12, 'The Book of

Theos-ologi According to TheaurauJohn', whose first version startled me in Hessayon's PhD thesis, is this attempt; and it is entirely constructed of quotations which are only co-ordinated by punctuation and conjunctions. These are pages which must be read and cannot be summed up. Tany's ideas on the Creation as the 'unfolding' of God; Adam and Eve 'as the whole creations of God'; hell as 'separation from happiness'; and, 'this Earthly prison', 'the Trinity in Unity', the fall of Lucifer and God the 'Center' 'all over all' 'and nothing', come forth in the full force of their originality. However, this is proposed just as an incitement to read the original. Wishing to avoid the trap of an anachronistic or orthodox reading of heterodoxy, Hessayon acknowledges that he is unwittingly compelled to 'sacrifice the original on the altar of expediency', by selecting quotations to give them coherence and render them intelligible.

The final chapter and coda constitute the exposition of the last part of the life of the self-proclaimed 'King of the Jews'. There it is possible, with a high rate of probability and almost certainty, to account for his dramatic millenarian gestures in and around London. It is also possible to establish that Tany, like the Quakers, set sail to cross the channel to the United Provinces and that he drowned on the way back to England in December 1659. Hessayon refers to the fact that Tany was undoubtedly deemed mad by most of his contemporaries, and shows that his 'posthumous reputation was mixed' between admiration and contempt. Notwithstanding that, his books still continued to be read and annotated into the 18th century.

The real end is, however, represented in the chapter 'The Book of Theos-ologi'. There the central statements of the entire work of *'Gold tried in the Fire'* occur. In the general scheme of things, 'interpretation inevitably renders violence to the texts'. In the particular, 'we do not know nor can we know what Tany intended, what Tany had in mind when he wrote his words' (p. 352).

As Hessayon declares in his introduction, and as is indeed implied in his style of writing history, the ambition of *'Gold tried in the Fire'* is 'to ask questions about the nature of History and how it should be written' (p. 18). It is not that Hessayon is unaware that his is an interpretation competing with others. Rather, he seems to consider his as less 'fictional' than others, indeed as more 'persuasive', because it sticks to the sources and eliminates linguistic terms and concepts which are accused of conveying the ideological problems of the present into the account of the past. Hessayon does not make use of concepts which are often at the centre of the historical debate when historians deal with figures like TheaurauJohn. The terms 'Radical', in the substantive as well as in the adjective form, or the 'English revolution' (despite the title), are nowhere to be found in his book, apart from the introduction where his entire discussion of relevant studies in the field is also confined. Even when 'all seems to say the same thing' - that the young Thomas Totney was a puritan, for example - Hessayon immediately draws back by underlining that this could also be 'what we wish to read into what we choose to see' (p. 81). While we are led to follow the paths of his research hypotheses concerning the networks of socially heterogeneous like-minded individuals surrounding Tany, Hessayon constantly refrains from advancing assertions that would imply a too-straightforward interpretative presence, and leaves it to the reader to draw his conclusion. As the reader progresses through the more than 400 pages of this book it becomes more and more clear that Hessayon's project is, in a way, similar to that of his chosen protagonist: to purge the 'gold' from the 'dross', that is, in my reading, to recover a sort of historical objectivity bypassing the stratification of decades of historical interpretations; as if a sort of 'death of the historian' could allow TheaurauJohn Tany (or any historical subject) to better emerge as he (it) was.

'Gold tried in the Fire' is, from this point of view, highly problematic. As Carlo Ginzburg has argued, the 'micro' has to enlighten the 'macro' perspective. Both approaches together can enlighten phenomena which are lost to them if singularly pursued, and it is the crux of the historian to allow them to dialogue, by moving constantly between the 'close ups' and the 'extreme long shots'. Hessayon's way of dealing with the problems of the false, the fictional and the truth in historical writing recalls that of Ginzburg, whose *Il formaggio e i vermi* is cited in the 'Introduction' as an important model. *'Gold tried in the Fire'* reveals the hypotheses, questions, doubts and uncertainties of the historian; and warns the reader of the gaps in the documentation, of the 'maybes' and conditional statements. In this way, it leads the reader through the truth-seeking process up to the (necessarily incomplete) achieved truth. (3) Hessayon's way of 'marry[ing] the particular to the general', however, is one-sided: he wishes to 'establish some kind of certainty of the minute details so as to speak with authority of the bigger picture' (p. 18), but he discounts the inverse; how the 'extreme long shots'

can enlighten the 'close ups'. This is why, in a manner of speaking, what could be a script for a great historical movie, turns out to be actually a great script for a documentary.

The issue raised by Hessayon's book is whether we get closer to truth by leaving historiographical debates aside and purging historical language from allegedly present-oriented terms. If it is a legitimate dialogue between past and present in history writing and if questions arising from the present are to be allowed in inquiring the past; then my answer is yes. Not all the recoverable past is indeed significant in the same way at all times.

Therefore, my question in the face of the book's conclusion: 'Nothing that has taken place should be lost to History' (p. 394), is why? In other words, what sense does the history of TheaurauJohn Tany have for us today? '*Gold tried in the fire*' does not answer this question. It does, however, raise the problem with exceptional clarity and answers many of the questions about the world of the 'Radicals' of the 'English revolution', and we have to thank Hessayon for this.

Notes

1. P. Lake, *The Boxmaker's Revenge: Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy and the Politics of the Parish in Early Stuart London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); D. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (California: Stanford, 2004). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. 'Jacob Boehme and the early Quakers', *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*, 60 (2005); "'The Teutonicks writings": translating Jacob Boehme into English and Welsh', *Esoterica*, 9 (2007); A. Hessayon, 'Jacob Boehme, Emanuel Swedenborg and their readers', in *The Arms of Morpheus: Essays on Swedenborg and Mysticism*, ed. S. McNeilly (The Swedenborg Society: 2007), pp.17-56. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C. Ginzburg, 'Microstoria: due o tre cose che so di lei', in *Il filo e le tracce. vero falso finto*, ed. Ginzburg (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2006), p. 256. [Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

oxford journals

<http://ahr.oxfordjournals.org/content/113/4/1232.full> [2]

muse

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ren/summary/v061/61.4.flinker.html> [3]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/655>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3629>

[2] <http://ahr.oxfordjournals.org/content/113/4/1232.full>

[3] <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ren/summary/v061/61.4.flinker.html>