



Jason P. Rosenblatt. *Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi: John Selden.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. ix + 324 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-928613-3.



Reviewed by Marcus Nevitt (The School of English, University of Sheffield)

Published on H-Albion (January, 2008)

The Troublesome Popularity of John Selden

When the Quaker administrator Anthony Pearson (1628-70) published his influential *The Great Case of Tythes truly stated, clearly opened, and fully resolved* in 1657 he promised his readers a definitive yet accessible account of this most controversial, compendious, and pressing of subjects. Acknowledging that the “countrymen, farmers and husbandmen of England” perhaps had other commitments which inhibited them from perusing the voluminous literature on the merits of the forced maintenance of a national clergy, he offered them the fruits of his two-year researches into the matter, “the substance of all that ever I could find written, or hear discoursed touching that point.”[1] Pearson’s assertion that he merely published the results of exhaustive inquiry for the good of all was one of the foundations of his anti-tithe position—it offered a rationalist basis for Quaker resistance to tithe payment—but it was a claim which relied on concealment as much as the dispassionate revelation of historical fact. This is because a significant proportion of Pearson’s arguments, supported by rich explanations of Latin, Greek, and Hebraic quotations, are derived or lifted verbatim from John Selden’s *The Historie of Tithes* (1618). Though Pearson does not make a single refer-

ence to Selden or his *Historie* in his 40-page pamphlet, his eighteenth-century Quaker editor was more frank about the matter. Praising the influence of Pearson and his work, Isaac Jackson paused to admit that “this short History of Tithes.... [is] taken chiefly from the *History of Tithes* by the learned Antiquary John Selden.”[2]

Jason Rosenblatt’s latest book, *Renaissance England’s Chief Rabbi: John Selden*, should caution us against being too severe against Pearson and his unacknowledged borrowings. Over the course of eleven rich, diverse, and occasionally very difficult chapters he painstakingly reveals how Selden’s reputation, scholarship, and writings were appropriated, “plunder[ed],” cherished, or misread by quite astonishing numbers of seventeenth-century readers and writers (p. 233). Abraham Cowley, Sir Matthew Hale, Thomas Hobbes, Ben Jonson, Samuel Parker, William Prynne, Andrew Marvell, Benedict Spinoza, Henry Stubbe, Jeremy Taylor, Sir John Vaughan, Giambattista Vico are just a few of the figures who strike up dialogues with Selden and his work in this book. It is John Milton, though, who, in two separate chapters and countless other references, Rosenblatt re-

veals to be Selden's most committed contemporary interlocutor. For instance, in a beautiful reading of the invocation of the Muse at the opening of book 3 to *Paradise Lost* (1667), Rosenblatt convincingly demonstrates that a passage from Selden's *De Jure Naturali* (1640) broods over Milton's reference to a light so pure it flows, a "bright effluence of bright essence increate" (p. 214). Similarly, in a reading of *Samson Agonistes* (1671) which "taps into the roots of early modern England's powerful and contradictory social, psychological and religious problems, but with sympathy for Judaic self-understanding" (p. 102), he shows how Milton relied upon Selden's exposition of the Jewish laws of marriage and divorce in both *De Jure* and his later study of the status of married women under Jewish Law, *Uxor Ebraica* (1646). At other stages, less flatteringly, Milton looks rather like Anthony Pearson when he "borrows [sections of *De Synedriis*] without acknowledgement" (p. 242) in his monumental *Defence of the People of England* (1651).

Rosenblatt's book is a storehouse of information on such intertextual references and fugitive borrowings. Its most important contribution, though, is to give a new direction to Selden studies in order to probe the complex question of Renaissance Judeophobia and the "surprising value" (p. 7) that humanists, poets, playwrights, and pamphleteers attributed to rabbinic exegesis in early modern England. He does this by departing from earlier authoritative studies of Selden by Paul Christianson, David Sandler Berkowitz, J. P. Sommerville, and Richard Tuck, which have emphasized Selden's parliamentary career, his take on natural law theory, his defense of the English common law, or his analysis of institutional practices and customs, to focus instead on the six major rabbinic works "that constitute his most mature scholarship" (p. 13).^[3] In laying bare the astounding historical and philological achievements of those works—*De Successionibus ad Leges Ebraeorum* (1631); *De Successione in Pontificatum Ebraeorum* (1636); *De Jure Naturali* (1640); *De Anno Civil* (1644); *Uxor Ebraica* (1646); *De Synedriis* (1650–55)—Rosenblatt reveals that Selden's formidable intellect developed out of a capacious tolerance and love for the learning and people of other religions, periods, and cultures.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that this exemplary, moving narrative has to struggle against some badly edited material. Some readers may well wonder, for example, why this book's opening chapter begins with a quite brilliant discussion of *Hamlet* (c. 1600) that counters an Oedipal reading of the play with an analysis of levirate marriage customs whose incest prohibitions "might posit

instead a relationship of concord between father and son" (p. 29). This opening seems discordant because Selden does not really feature in it for 30 pages, during which time the chapter moves to consider the weighty matter of Henry VIII's divorce and then offers a reading of Ben Jonson's Jacobean play, *Epicoene* (1609). The rationale for this promiscuous mixing of different periods, cultures, and genres is that it enables us "to consider in the most general way what it means when in an intolerant age, Christians rely on Jewish authority as if they themselves were Jewish, or as if the Jews were Christians" (p. 44). The problem with such a general consideration is that it masks some really rather important qualitative differences between Selden's careful reading of rabbinical texts and the ways which playwrights *might* have used such material for the purposes of theatrical entertainment. Not to dwell on such differences in the introduction to a book which focuses on Selden, and repeatedly refers to him as "the most learned man of his age," feels like a false start.

The lack of editorial touch in this introduction is felt especially keenly because passages from it are repeated verbatim elsewhere in the study. The discussion of the Columbia University Press edition of Milton on p. 3 reappears on pp. 169–170. Rosenblatt's impassioned reminder that Selden is one of "the courageous few who throughout history have refused to be swallowed up by the mob" is particularly insistent since it is printed both on p. 9 and p. 160. Similarly the "hope that an intellectual atmosphere that fosters a relationship between the cosmopolitan and politically powerful Selden and the learned Venetian rabbi might have contributed at least indirectly to the eventual readmission of Jews into England" (p. 8) makes a fervent return on p. 49. Such repetitions contribute to the impression that more work could have been done to highlight the developmental relationship between the arguments of successive chapters. Such infelicities aside, though, the precision of Rosenblatt's close readings and his encyclopedic knowledge of the uses to which Selden's work was put in the early modern period will ensure that *England's Chief Rabbi* remains a touchstone for all future work in the field.

Notes

[1]. Anthony Pearson, *The Great Case of Tythes Truly Stated* (London, 1657), sig. a2r.

[2]. Isaac Jackson, ed., *The Great Case of Tithes Truly Stated, Clearly Opened and Fully Resolved. By Anthony Pearson, Formerly A Justice of the Peace in Westmoreland* (London, 1756), sig. A3v.

[3]. Paul Christianson, *Discourse on History, Law and Governance in the Public Career of John Selden, 1610-1635* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); David Sandler Berkowitz, *John Selden's Formative Years: Politics and Society in Early Seventeenth-Century England* (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988); J. P. Somerville, "John Selden, the Law of Nature, and the Origins of Government," *Historical Journal* 27 (1984): 437-447; Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Marcus Nevitt. Review of Rosenblatt, Jason P., *Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi: John Selden*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14004>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.