



**Ingrid D. Rowland.** *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008. 282 pp. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9524-7.



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## A Problematic, if Engaging, Introduction

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) is still one of the sixteenth century's more controversial figures—celebrated by many, disdained by some, judged to be over-promoted by others. Ingrid D. Rowland's *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic* is a biography about him that a general, educated readership will find informative, engaging, and accessible. Rowland should be thanked for writing a biography free of the polemics that, in other popular writings, have lionized or vilified Bruno for centuries. The minimal scholarly apparatus as well as the book's high level of generalization and some problematic points of analysis, however, will make the book of limited usefulness for researchers and university instructors.

Most readers of this review will already have some familiarity with the biographical background of Bruno's reputation as a martyr for free thought and scientific progress during the Renaissance. Rowland's work follows the most up-to-date research: Bruno was a Dominican friar and philosopher who drew from an eclectic mix of Neo-Platonist authors, ancient and contemporary, to develop novel ideas about, among other topics,

the structure of the universe. The concerns his theological opinions raised in Rome, as well as the ill will his abrasive manner of promoting them inspired, compelled him to about fifteen years of self-imposed exile. During this time, he wandered to and was expelled from many of Europe's greatest centers of learning, religion, and political power. In 1600 the Roman Inquisition formally declared Bruno, already excommunicated by major Protestant confessions and the prisoner of inquisitions in Rome and Venice for the previous eight years, an "impenitent, pertinacious, and obstinate heretic." On February 17 of the same year, he was burned at the stake on the Campo de' Fiori. His tragic demise was shaped by two *bâtes noires*, chillingly described by Rowland: One was Bruno's host in 1591 in Venice, Giovanni Mocenigo, who handed Bruno over to the Venetian inquisitors with a list of accusations ranging from blasphemy to criminal conspiracy that could largely have been laughed off as absurdly fanciful, had its consequences not been so severe. The other was the Roman inquisitor Robert Belarmino, whose fame—as one of the Jesuit order's first car-

dinals, its first papal inquisitor, and a participant in the investigations of Galileo Galilei some years later—serves to heighten in retrospect the significance of Bruno’s condemnation. Bruno’s effigy, accusatorily facing the Vatican, looms today over the markets of the Campo de’ Fiori, placed there by Italian nationalists and European liberals in the late nineteenth century.

Rowland’s account relies on trustworthy sources and scholarly antecedents. She uses the principal editions of the primary material, where they exist; and she is sufficiently familiar with the relevant archives to provide a concise and helpful evaluation of the editions in the introduction to her bibliography. Because of limited sources—much important archivalia was lost at the beginning of the nineteenth century on its way to Paris due to Napoleon Bonaparte’s antiquarian acquisitiveness—and the interest Bruno inspired among Italian nationalists in the nineteenth century and historians of science more recently, the challenge of presenting anything new about Bruno is nearly insurmountable. Rowland’s analysis of Bruno’s intellectual formation in the Dominican order before 1576 is among her most important and interesting contributions. The vivid exposition of his early life—the image she conjures of Naples’s sewers being scoured for damning marginalia and florilegia by the young mendicant (ultimately successfully) is riveting and revolting at the same time—is based on more meticulous scholarship she has published elsewhere.

Two themes that are not new to Bruno scholarship but that Rowland expertly elucidates have to do with his literary accomplishment and with the peripatetic dimension of his career. Interestingly, the article on Bruno in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* also introduces him not only as a philosopher but also as a poet. Rowland verifies this claim by incorporating poetic verses and passages from his philosophical dialogues into the text and as epigraphs to chapters. The quotations are in translation, and the usefulness of translations has its limits, of course. Still, her translations both from Latin and the vernacular are her own and elegant, and she succeeds in introducing her Anglophone audience to a side of Bruno with which it is likely unfamiliar.

For more than half of the book, Bruno is on the road. This road takes him all over Europe—to Geneva, London, Paris, Prague, Wittenberg, Venice, Zurich, and other important sixteenth-century cities. It is well known that Bruno traveled, but what Rowland communicates so well to the reader is the *mise en scene* of each stop and its significance. She insinuates Bruno into a network of

scholars and an expatriate Italian community that extended throughout Europe across national and confessional frontiers. These networks helped make Bruno’s travels logistically possible and intellectually fruitful. On this point, Rowland has tapped into some of the most important research to have emerged over the last two decades about communities of learning in the Renaissance and demonstrated with her analysis of one concrete example how scholars—especially those as controversial and unsettled as Bruno—fostered learned exchange.

Despite these strengths, or perhaps because of some of them, however, Rowland’s book will be of limited usefulness for teaching or further scholarship. The book is too long and includes too many narrative detours to be assigned to undergraduates in the context of a lecture or seminar. It also lacks the scholarly apparatus needed by graduate students and other researchers looking for an introduction to Bruno, whether as philosopher or poet; the endnotes, comprising sixteen pages, are listed by chapter and page number at the end of the book, and no symbols in the text alert the reader to specific notes. Moreover, their content is meager. The bibliography is decent and conveniently serves to point readers to the more substantial secondary literature, much of which is in Italian.

While those characteristics of the book may not detract from its appeal to a general audience, one weakness of the work—how certain points of Bruno’s thought have been situated into the intellectual history of the West—is unfortunate, regardless of the intended readership. In some instances the historical connections Rowland draws could be judged simply incautious or overly simplifying; for example, she calls Bruno’s argument that the Bible is better used for moral guidance than for mapping the heavens an anticipation of Galileo. But with no evidence of Galileo’s dependence on Bruno in this regard, why not call Bruno’s point a development on Augustine of Hippo’s distinction between the books of scripture and of nature? Or, if Rowland’s aim is to enhance Bruno’s historical significance by association with the Galileo Affair, then why not cite Bruno’s contemporary, Caesar Cardinal Baronius, who quipped (and was later famously quoted by Galileo), “the Bible teaches how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go”?

A more distressing example—an imprecise generalization that turns into an outright error of analysis—can be found in Rowland’s concluding evaluation of Bruno’s rejection of Eucharistic transubstantiation. This point of

Bruno's thought is of central significance because it is explicitly enumerated in the inquisitors' judgment against him. Rowland begins by proposing that this rejection was not novel. True enough. And such a position would indeed have warranted the condemnation that the Roman Inquisition made. But then she proceeds to argue that Bruno's thought was "thoroughly Protestant" by invoking Thomas Cranmer's "Thirty-Nine Articles" (1563), which asserts that "the Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten ... only after an heavenly and spiritual manner" (p. 273). This analytical point is problematic, or even potentially misleading, because Bruno did not develop a systematic doctrine of Christ's sacramental presence in the Eucharist or argue for one consistently, and both his pantheism and his rejection of Jesus's divinity make it difficult for him to have had one. Moreover, theological objection to transubstantiation antedated the Reformation; "real presence" was a theological point that divided Protestant confessions from each other as much as it divided any of them from the Roman church; and many Protestant theologians would have had as much difficulty with Bruno's utterances on the Eucharist as their Catholic counterparts. Rowland did not need to associate Bruno with the "Thirty-Nine Articles," but since she did, the reader deserves a more thorough and precise explanation.

Rowland continues this unnecessary extension of her analysis by declaring that Thomas Aquinas had more in common with Bruno and Cranmer regarding doctrines of real presence than with Robert Bellarmine. Her proof-text is a verse from the "Lauda Sion," Aquinas's sequence for the feast of Corpus Christi, "signis tamen

et non rebus" ("in symbol, not in actuality," her translation) (p. 273). Rowland does not quote from the same hymn the earlier line "the bread changes into flesh [*transit in carnem*] and the wine into blood" or from the *Summa Theologiae* "for the whole substance of the bread is changed into the whole substance of Christ's body, and the whole substance of the wine into the whole substance of Christ's blood. Hence this is not a formal, but a substantial conversion; ... it can be called transubstantiation."<sup>[1]</sup> Rowland appears not to understand either the theories of real presence she refers to or the not atypical scholastic use of the word *signum* that in no wise precludes the kind of substantial change to the consecrated elements that Cranmer and Bruno varyingly rejected and that Aquinas and Bellarmine unequivocally affirmed. Both gaffes would have horrified all four churchmen.

In sum, Rowland's *Giordano Bruno* deserves to be recognized for making Bruno's life—from his quiet birth in Nola to his wretched death in Rome—accessible to an Anglophone audience as never before. Her analysis is generally fair; the expository style, engaging. At the same time, the minimal scholarly apparatus, the high degree of historical generalization, and several factual errors of varying significance hamper the book's usefulness for university instructors and researchers.

#### Note

[1]. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Peabody: Bartlett Publishing, 2001), 3, 75, 4.

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