

John Toland and ‘Remarques Critiques sur le Systême de Monsr. Leibnitz de l’Harmonie préétablie’*

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In 1716, volume 11 of the *Histoire critique de la Republique des Lettres*, published an anonymous article, ‘Remarques Critiques sur le Systême de Monsr. Leibnitz de l’Harmonie préétablie ... écrites par ordre de Sa Majesté la feuë Reine de Prusse’.¹ Dated ‘Berlin, 14 January 1703’, it took the form of an unsigned letter addressed to the Queen of Prussia, Sophie-Charlotte (died 1705). The focal object of its criticisms, is, as it says in its first paragraph, a piece by Leibniz which the Queen had earlier ‘put into [the] hands’ of the author of the ‘Remarques’ ‘in order to see what [he thought] of it’.²

A footnote, presumably by Samuel Masson, the editor of the *Histoire critique*, provides some explanation of the dozen-or-so-years gap between the article’s stated date of composition (1703) and its publication date (1716): ‘It is now some time since these remarks came to hand, but we were waiting for a suitable opportunity to include them in this *Histoire*’. Such an opportunity arose, the note goes on to say, when it became possible to publish not only the ‘Remarques’ but, along with it, the very article of Leibniz on which it comments.³ Thus, whilst printing the ‘Remarques’ as article 5, volume 11 of the *Histoire critique* prints, as article 4, Leibniz’s ‘Réponse ... aux reflexions ... de M. Bayle’.⁴

Who was the author of the anonymous ‘Remarques Critiques’? Following Gerhardt,⁵ himself perhaps following Leibniz’s own suspicions, the finger has often been pointed at John Toland (1670-1722), the freethinking deist author of *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696). But it is only recently that much evidence has really been collected and evaluated.⁶ Thanks to Antonio Lamarra, it is only now that ‘Toland’s authorship of the “Remarques critiques” may be considered reasonably proved’.⁷

In the course of his discussion of the matter Lamarra explains how Leibniz saw the anonymous article not long after it appeared and how, in a letter in the same year, he expressed two thoughts about whom its author might be.⁸ Jacques L’Enfant, Queen Sophie-Charlotte’s chaplain appeared as one possibility, and, considering that the article refers to Newton as a fellow countryman, Toland appeared as another: ‘I hardly know of any other Englishman with whom the Queen has been able to discuss philosophy’.

Lamarra also details the circumstances in which Toland came to be discussing philosophy with Sophie-Charlotte in the summer of 1702; and he explains how it could easily have come about that she showed Toland Leibniz's 'Réponse ... aux reflexions ... de M. Bayle'. But he favours an already expressed view⁹ that by January 14, 1703 (the purported date of the 'Remarques') Toland was no longer in Berlin, but back in England.

Indeed, Leibniz remarked to La Croze that he did not remember that Toland could have seen the Queen at that time. Moreover (what Lamarra does not mention) drafts of a letter from Leibniz to Bayle, indicate that Toland must have left Berlin, *en route* to England via Holland, by 30 November;¹⁰ in fact, according to a letter to Leibniz from the Queen's mother, Sophie, he had already passed through Hanover by 27 November.¹¹

Lamarra's hypothesis is that Toland dated the 'Remarques' some time after composing them, and was let down by his memory.¹² Presumably he has in mind that this was *much* later, for it is surely *prima facie* implausible that Toland would not remember whether he had left Berlin before or after Christmas and New Year. Indeed, Lamarra remarks that 'the reference in the ['Remarques'] footnote to Berkeley ... provided it is the author's and not the publisher's should make us think that the text must have been revised a short time before publication'¹³ — 1714 at the earliest in fact.

However, one thing Lamarra says nothing about is how Samuel Masson came to be in a position to publish the anonymous 'Remarques Critiques'; and on this matter there is some so-far undiscussed evidence, contained in manuscripts in the British Library, which needs to be brought into the picture.

In fact Masson had been sent the 'Remarques' from England by Pierre Desmaizeaux, who had been requested to send articles for publication in the *Histoire*.¹⁴ This is indicated by Masson's request, in September 1716, that Desmaizeaux give a copy of the volume which included the piece to its anonymous author.¹⁵

Of course it was by the same route, as its author well knew,¹⁶ that Masson later came by a copy of Leibniz's 'Réponse ... aux reflexions ... de M. Bayle', the piece to which the 'Remarques' are addressed, and which appeared as article 4 of volume 11. On 20 March 1716 he told Desmaizeaux that five weeks earlier he had sent off to the printer the first seven articles for the then-forthcoming volume 11 of the *Histoire*, of which the four pieces Desmaizeaux had recently sent constitute 'the second and following'.¹⁷

Masson also expressed keen interest as to the identity of the author of the 'Remarques'. But Desmaizeaux's reply of 31 July evidently gave no satisfaction on this point, for when Masson wrote on 18 September, thanking him for that letter, and also for the further piece which accompanied it, he again begged for 'some clue as to who furnished article 5 in volume 11'. 'He seems to me', he said, 'to be someone who has no less intellect than judgement. Consequently, his piece was extremely enjoyable. If I were allowed I would ask for his name.'¹⁸

In all further letters to Masson Desmaizeaux appears to have kept silent on the matter. But their correspondence does give a further clue as to the identity of the author of the 'Remarques'. Masson's letter of 20 March 1716, the letter which acknowledged receipt of the 'Remarques', expresses interest in seeing, with a view to publication in volume 12 of the *Histoire*, something that Desmaizeaux had evidently mentioned as having to hand — a piece on the theology of the ancient Egyptians. It is clear from Masson's letter that its author is also that of the 'Remarques'.¹⁹ However, just as Desmaizeaux never did identify this person for Masson, so, it appears, he never sent him the piece on the theology of the Egyptians. At any rate, neither volume 12, nor any later volume of the *Histoire* contains anything of that description.²⁰

Can that piece, and therefore perhaps its author, be identified in some way? For instance, how, in the first place, had Desmaizeaux come by the 'Remarques', and the piece on the theology of the Egyptians? If Toland is their author they would probably have come directly from him. After all, it was Desmaizeaux who edited the posthumous *A Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Toland, Now first published from his Original Manuscripts* (London, 1726).

Whether or not the 'Remarques Critiques' resulted from the conversations which undoubtedly took place between Toland and Sophie-Charlotte in the summer of 1702, it is generally accepted that the first three pieces in Toland's *Letters to Serena* (London, 1704) had their origin here. In that book's Preface ('being a Letter to a Gentleman in London, sent together with the foregoing Dissertations, and declaring the several Occasions of writing them'), Toland, writing from a foreign country, explains to his correspondent that 'the three first dissertations in the packet annexed' were written for 'a fair lady [who] ... was pleased to ask my opinion' concerning various subjects; and it is clear that the 'fair lady' Serena is Sophie-Charlotte. At any rate, we have Desmaizeaux's evidence that '[a]fter his return to England ... [Toland] put out in 1704 some Philosophical Letters, three of which were inscribed to Serena, that is the Queen of Prussia, who, he assures us, was

pleased to ask his opinion concerning the subjects of them'.²¹

Now in his Preface Toland says to his correspondent that besides the three enclosed letters to her 'I have written other letters to Serena but not having yet transcribed them fair, I send you instead of them two philosophical letters, written to a gentleman altogether unknown to you' (sects. 4, 14). The two 'philosophical letters' were published along with the others, in *Letters to Serena*.²² But what were the 'other letters to Serena' and what became of them?

There are various speculations one might go in for here: that Desmaizeaux is the 'gentleman in London' to whom Toland sent the letters of which he did have fair copies;²³ that it was Desmaizeaux who saw to their publication in *Letters to Serena*; that the anonymous 'Remarques' (which Desmaizeaux eventually sent to Masson), and the piece on the theology of the Egyptians (which Desmaizeaux never did send to Masson), are two of the 'other letters to Serena', letters which, when he had 'transcribed them fair', Toland also gave to Desmaizeaux.

It is no speculation, though, that Desmaizeaux did have a manuscript on the theology of the Egyptians in his possession, and that it came from the same hand as the 'Remarques Critiques'. Can it be identified with something Toland is known to have written? Certainly Toland had some interest in the matter, and around the time that the 'Remarques' purports to have been written: the second of the Serena letters, 'The History of the Soul's Immortality among the Heathens', spends some time on proving the Egyptians 'to be the Authors of the Chaldaean and Greek Religions', and to have been 'the first among the Heathens, who particularly asserted the Immortality of the Soul'.²⁴ But, unfortunately, there is no such piece in Desmaizeaux's edition of *A Collection of Several Pieces of John Toland*.²⁵

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Bibliographical Abbreviations and Further Bibliography

Dutens: Ludovicus Dutens, *G.G. Leibnitii ... Opera Omnia. Nunc primum collecta ...*, 6 vols. (Geneva, 1768).

K: Otto Klopp, *Die Werke von Leibniz*, 11 vols. (Hanover, 1864-84).

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WF: R.S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks (eds. & trans.), *Leibniz's 'New System' and Associated Contemporary Texts* (Oxford, 1997).

Notes

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¹'Remarques Critiques sur le Systême de Monsr. Leibnitz de l'Harmonie préétablie; où l'on recherche en passant pourquoi les Systêmes Metaphysiques des Mathematiciens ont moins de clarté, que ceux des autres; écrits par ordre de Sa Majesté la feuë Reine de Prusse', *Histoire Critique de la Republique des Lettres*, 1716, vol. 11, article 5, pp. 115-33.

²'*Ecrit*, que vous m'avez fait la grace de me mettre entre les mains, pour en savoir mon sentiment, m'est aussi peu intelligible que le langage des Hurons'.

³Il y a déjà du tems que ces Remarques nous sont tombées entre les mains, mais nous attendions toujourns une occasion favorable, pour pouvoir leur donner place dans cette *Histoire*; ce que nous faisons aujourd'hui, avec d'autant plus de plaisir que l'Auteur a eu devant les yeux l'*Ecrit* de l'illustre Mr. *Leibnitz*, qu'on vient de voir'.

⁴Réponse de M. Leibnitz aux Reflexions contenuës dans la seconde Edition du Dictionnaire Critique de M. Bayle, Article Rorarius, sur le Systême de l'Harmonie préétablie', pp. 78-115. (See WF, pp. 107-26 for translation.)

⁵GP 6.485-6.

⁶Antonio Lamarra, 'An anonymous criticism from Berlin to Leibniz's Philosophy: John Toland against Mathematical Abstractions', *Studia Leibnitiana*, sonderheft 16 (1990), pp. 89-102. A very valuable part of Lamarra's evidence is an assembly of verbal similarities between the 'Remarques' and Toland's *Letters to Serena*.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁸Leibniz to La Croze, Hanover, 9 October 1716 (Dutens 5.518). Mathurin La Croze was librarian, in Berlin, to the King of Prussia, Sophie-Charlotte's husband. Leibniz evidently though La Croze was well placed to have a view on the matter.

⁹G. Carabelli, *Tolandia. Materiali bibliografici per lo studio dell' opera e della fortuna di John Toland (1670-1722)* (Firenze, 1975), pp. 195-6.

¹⁰See WF, p. 126, n. 130.

¹¹K 8.402.

¹²p. 96; see also Carabelli, p. 195.

¹³p. 96, n. 54. The footnote refers to a review, in volume 6 (1714) of the *Histoire*,

of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*.

¹⁴Masson to Desmaizeaux, Dordrecht, 14 March 1714 (British Library, Add Mss 4285.154, 156). Besides articles, Desmaizeaux supplied Masson with 'Literary News'. Joseph Almagor (*Pierre Des Maizeaux (1673-1745), Journalist and English Correspondent for Franco-Dutch Periodicals, 1700-1720*, (Amsterdam & Maarssen, 1989), p. 105, n. 147) points out that letters to Desmaizeaux show that Masson received the 'Remarques' from him, but he enters into no detail.

¹⁵For this letter see note 19 below.

¹⁶See Leibniz to Desmaizeaux, 21 August 1716 (Add Mss 4284.210-11; reprinted GP 6.624-9, partially translated WF, chap. 9, appendix C).

¹⁷Masson to Desmaizeaux, Dordrecht 20 March 1716 (Add Mss 4285.170): 'Monsieur, L'obligeante lettre dont vous m'honorates le 29 de Novembre, les amples *Nouvelles* qui l'accompagnoient, et les quatre Articles qu'elle renfermoit, tout cela meritoit une prompte réponse, il y a cinq semaines, que j'envoyai les sept premiers articles du Tome XI. Vôtere pièce en fait le second et les autres suivent. ... Je serois bien aise, de connôitre l'auteur de la *Lettre à la feuë Reine de Prusse*, etc.; et de voir la pièce sur la *Theologie des Anciens Egyptiens*, qui j'insererai très volontiers dans le XII Tome. Mais je ne sais, si je ne suis point trop curieux?'. [*'Sir, the kind letter of 29 November you honoured me with, the ample News which accompanied it and the four articles which it enclosed, all these deserved a prompt reply. [F]ive weeks ago I sent off the first seven articles of volume 11. Your piece is the second, and the others follow. I would be very pleased to learn the identity of the author of the Letter to the late Queen of Prussia, etc. and to see the piece on the Theology of the Ancient Egyptians, which I would very willingly include in the twelfth volume. But I do not know whether I am being too curious.'*]

The four pieces must have included (i) Desmaizeaux's own 'Explication d'un passage d'Hippocrate, dans le Livre de la Diète, et du sentiment de Melisse et de Parmenide, sur la Durée des Substances, etc.: pour servir de Réponse à un endroit du nouveau système de Mr. Leibnitz, de la Nature et de la Communication des Substances, ou de l'Harmonie préétablie...', which appeared as article 2 (pp. 52-72; see WF, pp. 228-37 for translation); (ii) Leibniz's 'Lettre de Mr. Leibnitz à M. Des Maizeaux, contenant quelques Eclaircissemens sur l'Explication précédente, et sur d'autres endroits du système de l'Harmonie Préétablie, etc', which appeared as article 3 (pp. 72-8, see WF, pp. 238-40 for translation); (iii) 'Réponse de M. Leibnitz ... aux Reflexions ... de M. Bayle', article 4 (pp. 78-115). Article 5 was of course the 'Remarques Critiques' itself which, apparently, Desmaizeaux had sent

earlier. Articles 6 and 7 are, respectively, by Gabrielle Dumont of Leipzig, and J.H. Majus of Giesen. A further piece by Desmaizeaux himself, 'Nouvelle explication du passage d'Hippocrate, dont il est parlé dans le II Article de ce Volume', appeared as article 13 (pp. 290-7). But it must have been later that this was sent by Desmaizeaux to Masson, and then (along with articles 8 and following) by Masson to the printer. For, besides commenting on it, it includes printer's errors in article 2 and begins 'Je vous renvoie, Monsieur, la feuille de l'*Histoire critique*, ou l'on a bien voulu inserer l'*explication* que vous m'aviez demandée'.

¹⁸Samuel Masson to Desmaizeaux, Dordrecht, 18 September 1716 (Add Mss 4285.172): 'La lettre que vous m'avez fait l'honneur de m'écrire, en date du 31 Juillet v.st m'a été très bien rendûë, sept ou huit jours après, aussi-bien que la pièce qui l'accompagnoit. ... Je vous prie, sur-tout, d'en donner un exemplaire [of the *Histoire* from among a number sent to Desmaizeaux] à celui qui a fourni l'*Article V.* de ce Tome XI. Ce me paroît être une personne, qui n'a pas moins d'esprit que de jugement. Aussi la pièce a-t-elle été extrêmement goûtée. S'il étoit permis, je vous demanderois son nom. Mais je n'ai garde d'être si indiscret, puisque vous ne voulez pas tirer le rideau. Je prendrai seulement la liberté, de vous demander l'autre pièce de sa main, que vous m'avez promise il y a près d'un an, — sur la *Theologie* des Egyptiens pour le Tom XIII. J'ai une extrême impatience de la voir, bien persuadé qu'il ne peut sortir rien que de très bon d'une si excellente main'.
[The letter, dated 31 July, o.s., you honoured me with was safely delivered to me seven or eight days later, together with the piece which accompanied it. I beg you, above all, to give a copy [of the *Histoire* from a number sent to Desmaizeaux] to the person who provided **article 5** of volume 11. He seems to me to be someone who has no less intellect than judgement. Consequently, his piece was extremely enjoyable. If I were allowed I would ask for his name. But I am wary of being so indiscreet since you do not want to draw the curtain. I shall only take the liberty of asking you for the other piece written by him which you promised me nearly a year ago — on the *Theology* of the Egyptians, for volume 13. I am most impatient to see it, quite persuaded that nothing but what is very good can come from such an excellent hand.]

¹⁹Samuel Masson to Desmaizeaux, Dordrecht, 27 October 1716 (Add Mss 4285.176): 'Monsieur, La lettre du 12 de ce mois, v.st. dont vous m'avez honoré, et qui vient de m'être rendûë dans le moment même, est une nouvelle preuve de votre exactitude dans le commerce que vous entretenez avec vos amis. ... Si vous avez, Monsieur, quelque chose à insérer dans le XIII *Tome*, qu'on doit mettre bientôt

sous la presse, faites, je vous prie, toute la diligence possible, parce que nôtre dessein est de la faire parôître avant le nouvel an. Ainsi, comme je vois par votre lettre que la pièce que vous préparez souffrira quelques délais, et qu'il faudra peutêtre la renvoyer au J. XIV faites moi le plaisir de m'envoyer les *Nouvelles Litteraires* au plutôt aussi-bien que la pièce de L'auteur du V Art. du J. XI., si tant est qu'il soit disposé à la donner. Je suis gros de la voir.' [*Sir, the letter of the twelfth (o.s.) of this month which you honoured me with, and which arrived just now is fresh proof of your exactness in the dealings you maintain with your friends. Sir, if you have something to be included in volume 13, which will soon go to press, be as quick as possible, because our plan is that it will appear before the new year. Also, since I see from your letter that the piece you are preparing will be delayed and may need to be postponed until volume 14, give me the pleasure of sending the 'Literary News' instead as well as the piece by the author of article 5 of volume 11, provided he is disposed to give it. I am bursting to see it.*]

²⁰The *Histoire* ran until volume 15, 1718.

²¹A *Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Toland, Now first published from his Original Manuscripts: with Some Memoirs of his Life and Writings*, 2 volumes (London, 1726); vol. 1, pp.lvi-lvii.

²²Since the letters are to 'a Gentleman in Holland' perhaps Toland's Preface was written in Holland on his way home from Berlin.

²³In paragraph 17 of his Preface Toland tells his correspondent 'that I long to see you (which I hope to do very shortly) as much as any man in England'. Toland's friends Anthony Collins and Lord Shaftesbury are other candidates for 'the Gentleman in London'.

²⁴Page 40.

²⁵See note 21 above.