Book Reviews


Since the publication in 1889 by Ferdinand Tönnies of a new edition of *Behemoth*, based on the manuscript held by the library of St John's College, Oxford, no reconsideration of the composition, dissemination and publication history of this major work by Hobbes had been undertaken. The Italian and French translators of the work had added a few commentaries and minor corrections to Tönnies's work, but until Paul Seaward's major contribution, many problems raised by the text had remained very difficult to solve.

Thanks to his exhaustive study of the manuscripts and editions produced until 1683, Seaward solves quite a few enigmas. Technology also helped him to solve the main textual mystery of St John's MS 13, *i.e.* the deletions in the hands of Hobbes and of his amanuensis James Wheldon. The present reviewer tried several devices to read through the deletions when he worked on his French translation published in 1990, and has returned since to check the document, very much in vain. Using digital equipment, Seaward was able to read the text, and by comparing the manuscripts and the printed editions, he can eventually propose a sensible interpretation of those passages, to enlighten our understanding of the history of Hobbes's composition of the work.

The introduction (104 pp.) surveys all the major uncertainties. Authorial and external evidence are used to date the composition of the work. From Hobbes's Latin autobiography, in which he states that he composed his history of the troubles around his eightieth birthday, it had usually been estimated that Hobbes composed *Behemoth* between 1666 and 1669. Seaward narrows down the boundaries to July 1666 for the start of composition (based on a letter to Du Verdus), and between April 1668 and 1669 for the end (the year of his eightieth birthday). The comparison between Hobbes's treatment of some problems in the dialogues that he was composing at the same time allows the editor to formulate hypotheses as to the order in which some passages were written, but without venturing into dogmatic dating.

The main contribution of the introduction lies in the very rigorous analysis of the possible genealogy of the manuscripts and early editions. Seaward shows how the St John's manuscript, which he regards as a presentation copy for Lord Arlington, the Secretary of State, must have been derived from an original manuscript copy on which his printer-publisher Crooke was to base his own official first edition of 1682. The editor points to several variations in the text, notably on the history of the universities: when narrations appear twice in the first edition, the second is deleted in the St John's manuscript. This explains why it was so important to use the proper technical instruments before producing a worthwhile new edition of this often puzzling dialogue.

By working on the correspondences of Hobbes's close associates and friends like John Aubrey, and considering the surviving contemporary manuscripts, Seaward is able to suggest that the text of *Behemoth* must have been widely available to well-informed readers from Crooke's shop, before the unauthorised printings of 1679-1680. This is the very best attempt since Onofrio
Nicastro’s introduction to his Italian translation which, regrettably, is not mentioned in the notes, to examine the context of the production and publication of the dialogues. In the textual introduction, the editor provides us with an unprecedentedly careful collation of the manuscripts and printed editions.

Another moot point among the scholars who have worked on *Behemoth*, is the authenticity of the title itself. Like others before him, Seaward considers the possible meanings of the word, the cultural echoes that it could conjure up for the 17th-century readers of the text, and Hobbes’s own statements on the title, that some have understood as a rejection of “Behemoth” as “a foolish title”. Like this reviewer before, Seaward retains the hypothesis that Hobbes had intended the book to be called “Behemoth”, after the biblical beast. He also points to the fact that the title of the editions criticised by Hobbes did not include the name of the said mythical animal. Another probable source is to be found in Luther’s writings, that Hobbes was quoting in the same years, in which the Pope is identified with Behemoth, and the latter with Antichrist. Another possible inspiration (quoted in *Behemoth* itself) is Du Plessis Mornay’s *Mystery of Iniquity*. Seaward’s suggestion is that the title may be a late revision, like other elements in the St John’s manuscript. He follows the lead provided by Crooke’s own introduction in the 1682 printed version, which authenticates the title as being Hobbes’s own. More powerfully still, when the editor considers the status of *Behemoth* among literary and historical genres, he compares the two terms that appeared in Hobbes’s own statements on the book, and on title pages: “history” and “epitome”. He concludes that Hobbes was reluctant to have his work on the civil wars called a “history” because he had reservations as to the uses of history as a “magistra vitae”; he was loath to point positively to an academic practice that was attacked in the dialogues themselves. By choosing a title referring the reader to his previous masterpiece, he conveyed a political message in keeping with the conclusions of his study of the causes and consequences of the events he was reporting.

Not enough attention has been so far given to Hobbes’s use of Heath’s history of the same events, though the work is mentioned in the dedication to Arlington. Seaward offers an important new insight into Hobbes’s relationship to his sources. Though Heath’s *Chronicles* had a very bad reputation for their inaccuracy and for the lack of reliability of their own sources, Hobbes seems to have wandered into chronological error when he strayed from his source. The pages in which Seaward outlines a study of Heath and Hobbes are a very welcome addition to our knowledge, and should generate new research. Like many scholars who have once tried to draw parallels between the source and the dialogues, the present reviewer must confess that the often erratic composition of the *Chronicles* can easily baffle the readers. Seaward therefore deserves even more praise for undertaking such a parallel study.

The digital instruments used by Seaward add very much to our knowledge. To be persuaded, one should compare his reading of P43v on page 224, with Tönnies’s on page 89 of his edition. Though Tönnies managed to understand the general drift of the passage, much of Hobbes’s critical and satirical message against the complicity between the House of Commons and the Presbyterians was lost. Though the deleted passages now restored by the contraptions designed by the Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music located at Oxford University do not bring a revolution to our understanding of Hobbes’s work and thought, the restorations open new insights into Hobbes’s style and composition methods. A reappraisal of his dialogue-writing techniques can now begin.

The originality of this Clarendon edition also lies in the appendices that provide an edition of early-modern readers’ annotations to the manuscripts used towards the edition. This will add to our understanding of the contemporaries’ reception of Hobbes’s thought.

To conclude this too rapid study of such a grand achievement, Paul Seaward has produced a major piece of scholarship. It is difficult to imagine whether Hobbes and his contemporaries would have found it ironical or providential that this work on the excesses of the Long Parliament