‘ALL BOOKS ARE MADE OF PAPER; ALL BOOKS ARE UNFINISHED; WE ALL SEARCH FOR THE ULTIMATE BOOK’.[1]

I

> ‘There had never been a book that hadn’t contained fibres of other books; to write you have to read first. Could he be a person that had nothing of others in him? Was there any one else who worried about no one eating fish in *The Illiad*? And who else remembered the thirty-three terms of abuse for tax collectors gathered by Pollux of Naucrates? At the same time wondering if Apuleius’s lost novel *Hermagoras* would ever turn up? While not forgetting to ponder if the *De tribus Impostoribus Mundi* had ever existed’.[2]

IN a recent collection of short stories by Tibor Fischer a character, described as ‘The bookcruncher’, sets out to read a copy of every book in the world ever written. Starting from the shelves of south wing 5 in Cambridge University Library, the figure is seen, a book in each hand to speed up consumption, haunting the mega-bibliopoli of America after dark. The themes of the story (at least for my purpose) of the unending and intricate inter-relatedness of all printed literature, and the consequent pointlessness of reading, are useful starting points for a consideration of the historiography of the *Traité des trois imposteurs*.

Writing upon the history of the composition, distribution and consumption of the treatises on imposture has had a strange and meandering path, an itinerary very often determined by the cultural geographies of different scholarly traditions. The first encounter with the text was some half a century before its creation in the bibliographical researches of the Englishman Richard Smith and the anxieties of the secretary of the Royal Society, Henry Oldenburg. Although there were sporadic references to the work from the 1670s to the 1700s, the real concentration of interest in the existence, nature and composer of the work can be found in the orthodoxy anxieties of literary journalists like the Frenchman Bernard de la Monnoye in the early 1710s who published a bibliographical essay (remarkably similar in content to that of Smith’s) in one of the more mainstream literary publications of the day. The purpose of his contribution was to deny the existence of such a work. The response to this literary denial was a flurry of scribal circulations, and ultimately the composition or compilation of the work.

It may seem an eccentric place to start an essay about the history of the clandestine and blasphemous text, *Le traité des trois imposteurs*, also known as (but distinct from) *de tribus impostoribus*, but the researches of M.R. James, writer of ghost stories, and successively Provost of King’s College, Cambridge, Eton College and Vice Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, might have provided the ideal point of departure. A dedicated biblical scholar from his teens, James was famous for his scholarly catalogues of the holdings of the great collegiate libraries of England. He was especially skilful in his erudite descriptions of Old Testament, New Testament, patristic and medieval manuscripts. A forensic and well travelled scholar, much of James’ work still remains in the Cambridge archives he knew so well.

Of particular interest, for the question that concerns me here, is the working notes he prepared for a study of the life and times of Daniel Salthenius (d. 1747), sometime devil worshipper and ultimately Professor of Divinity at Konigsberg in the early eighteenth century [call-mark Codex Salthenius No. 9/tti/6 fols 3-167, originally held in the Diplomatic Archives of the Knights of Uppsalla]. Photostatic copies of these original notes made by James have recently come to light as a consequence of the building works to extend the private archives of Hemingford Hall, Cambridge. The course of James’ work had taken him through Uppsalla, Leiden, Hannover and Vienna, in pursuit of the academic and intellectual career of Salthenius, who (belying his later career as Professor of Divinity) had mixed in the *libertin* circles of the early republic of letters. One of the most important transcriptions made by James (and the one that concerns us here), was of portions of Salthenius’ commonplace book [linen bound, octavo, 347 pages, Latin, Greek, French, Aramaic texts: see the recorded details in the sales catalogue *Bibliotheca Cauldiesnsis* (London: John Bowles, 1789) p. 220, entry 2897]. Although full details of prices (£2 10 shillings 6d), and dates of sale (22nd December) are recorded, the destination of the volume after 1789 is unknown until inventories of works destroyed in the second war in the library of the Dutchman Gaspard Coffin, eminent bibliophile, were published in the late 1970s (in the proceedings of the *Society for the Advancement of Biblical Scholarship* New series volume 56 number 3, (1979) pp234-45), which suggest that the volume was purchased by a little known Hispano-Belgian ‘illuminist’ Garcia Hendryx. The works remained in his possession until at least the late 1930s.

A distant, but frequent, correspondent of many other eighteenth century figures like Anthony Collins and Martin Aedler (for a detailed consideration of this figure see the website of the Australian scholar Fredricka Van Lubbe at http://users.ox.ac.uk/~cram/iss30/lubbe.htm), Salthenius in the mid 1710s, had shown a less than devout interest in the status of the apocryphal texts of the Old and New Testaments (a subject close to James’ own intellectual curiosity). The notes on the commonplace book indicate that the Dane in his investigations of matters of canonicity had used a

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[1] Louis Zangwill *On authors and readers*, (Zutphen, 1947; translated by P. Heywaard, Chicago, 1999) p. xxi.

[2] T. Fischer ‘The bookcruncher’ in *Don’t read this book if you’re stupid* (Secker & Warburg, 2000) p. 171.

variety of learned sources (orthodox and unorthodox). The works of Johann Albertus Fabricius, Frederic Spanheim, Henry Dodwell, and Louis Lenain Tillemont knocked elbows with those of Richard Simon, Isaac La Peyrere and Benedict Spinoza. James was not discerning in his transcription of the volume, and along with detailed extracts from rabbinical commentaries, he included a chapter summary of a work by 'Tholan' *Respublica Mosaica* and extensive notes made by Isaac Newton on the 'two notable corruptions' (in French). Of further interest were passages supposedly drawn from John Locke's *Third Treatise on Resistance* (interestingly this fragment of some 50 close written pages was dated July 14th 1681, and endorsed by both Algernon Sidney and the Earl of Shaftesbury), and a calendar of correspondence between Prince Eugene of Savoy and a series of London booksellers such as Ranew Robinson, John Roberts and Samuel Buckley.

One of the most important sections of the commonplace book comprised of notes, commentary and supplemental material on a French language manuscript described by Salthenius as a 'digest of impiety' describing the 'Legislators' of the three great religions as political impostors. Importantly, the commonplace book gave some account of the provenance of the work. Salthenius, having earlier studied briefly at the theological faculty in Leiden, commonly returned to the Netherlands, ostensibly in pursuit of orthodox Christian learning (possibly under the tuition of Spanheim), but was frequently distracted from his critical studies and found examining the wares of the various *libraires* of Rotterdam and Amsterdam like Thomas Johnson and N. Bos. His interest in the history of the Inquisition, at one point led him to the house of Benjamin Furly to examine the famous *liber*, eventually published by Limborch.

As the commonplace book noted, he had only consulted the *Traité* briefly during the course of a week-end stay in the lodgings of Susanna Dolphin in Langebrugge Steeg, Leiden (c. July 1714: it was here that John Toland stayed as a young student in the early 1690s. It is perhaps significant that little research has been either funded or undertaken to investigate the role of women like Susanna Dolphin performed in the dissemination of ideas in the period). Focusing his attention on the chapters and passages that dealt with the life of Moses, the most detailed notes indicate that he had seen a copy of the work that ultimately ended up in the Viennese library of Prince Eugene of Savoy.

This is of course fantasy: but who can say whether such a collection ever existed or not. Much of the above rests lightly upon discrete historical facts: the combination and context are fictional. The historical points that might be derived from the exercise could arguably be seen to be an emphasis upon the permeability of the social milieux which produced clandestine literature in the period, and the essential inter-textuality of its intellectual fabric.

II

Depending on where you are reading this essay, invoking the name of the *Traité* will either ring the bell of recognition or only provoke the faintest reverberation of familiarity. Although there has been a considerable amount of scholarly labour devoted to 'imposture' studies it cannot be claimed that the text has achieved canonical status in the traditions of intellectual history. If we took the evidence of the 'Cambridge school' of the history of ideas as representative, in one sense, of the textual state of play of the canon, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the reputation of the *Traité* and *de tribus* was not only marginal, but virtually sub-liminal. Although the methodology of the 'Cambridge school' has powerfully asserted the need for a broad contextualism in the study of ideas in the early modern period the circumference of this textual penumbra has been relatively confined. Those texts that have reached the status of publication in the 'blue books' of the Cambridge Texts Series, do not look too dissimilar to those works published in the standard editions earlier in the century.

Of course it could be argued that the *Traité* is neither political thought, nor important, but only significant as an indication of the intellectual dissidence of a tiny group of elite and erudite men. The complicated textual history of the work, both scribal and printed, suggests on the contrary that it was one of the most important and significant works of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. Certainly as a vibrant intellectual resource its readership was significant and diverse from the 1700s to the 1800s.

Indeed there has been a strangely distorted geography to scholarly studies of the origins, circulation and intellectual content of the work. Perhaps the first point to clarify is that, until relatively recently, the scholarly community has not been in entire agreement about whether it was talking about the same text when the treatise of three impostors was mentioned. The *de tribus impostoribus* and the *Traité des trois imposteurs* were, and are, distinct texts. The former has been the object of intensive study by German historians of ideas, most notably and most recently by Winfred Schroder who has published a parallel Latin and German edition with full annotation (*De imposturis religionum (De tribus impostoribus) Von den Betrugereyen der Religionen* frommann-holzboog: Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1999), while the latter has been examined by (mainly) Francophone scholars. Indeed it is one of the odd facets of the historiography of the Latin text that the vast bulk of research before the 1990s was undertaken by scholars in the former East Germany. Scholarly research into the French treatise has also flourished in the last decade which has seen the publications, first, of Silvia Berti's Franco-Italian edition, and more recently, of Francoise Charles-Daubert's magisterial volume which has established the groundwork for a taxonomy of the distinct and inter-related textual traditions (both scribal and printed). A modern English language translation of the key printed text of 1777 edition has been contributed by Brom Anderson.

Although it seems unlikely to those of us privileged to be familiar with the recent scholarship on the texts, it is clear that, reflecting the uncertainty of early eighteenth century understandings, for a long time modern historiography confused the two distinct traditions. Now as the detailed and forensic codicological researches of especially Miguel Benitez, (but also) Winfred Schroder, Silvia Berti, and Francoise Charles-Daubert have established collectively (if not collaboratively) there were two distinct textual traditions with different provenances but with sometimes converging readerships and circulations. It seems likely that origins of the Latin text was the result of student high spirits in the context of academic disputation in the theological faculties of Germany, while the French treatise, in its most commonplace form was the product of the literary erudition of a mixed circle of *erudits*, pamphleteers, journalists, *libraires*, and heretics who moved through the house of the radical merchant Benjamin Furly in Rotterdam.

While precise datings and authors of these works are still the result of fiercely contested historical debate, it is undeniable that the literary history of both texts converged in the mid to late 1710s when the foremost royal patron of elite and literate irreligion, Prince Eugene of Savoy, allowed copies of the works to be made and distributed across Europe with his permission. As David Womersley has recently shown, even the copy of the text owned by Edward Gibbon had the standard provenance indicated: ‘copied with permission’ from the library of Eugene. The involvement of one of the greatest military figures of the Protestant alliance in the 1700s in the distribution of such an impious and corrosive work remains to be told in precise detail.

III

There is also a general historiographical assumption that, as Tibor Fischer’s character put it ‘if the *De tribus impostoribus mundi* had not existed someone would have had to write it’. But whom, when and why? Seventeenth century intellectual life was predisposed to literary forgery and imposture: the *Bibliotheca Abscondita* of Thomas Browne, or John Donne’s *The Courtier’s Library* give excellent examples of the ludic expression of the period. Inventing classical texts, translating fictional gospels, remodelling ancient charters and editing the literary remains of non-existent contemporaries were the pastimes of learned, erudite and imaginative scholars. Whether compiling sources for the creation of national or theological mytheopoeia, the assertion of authenticity in the clothes of ‘discovery’ of ancient texts, displaced inquiries about the truth of a work into discussions about the scholarly presentation of the volume: the evidences of marginalia, footnotes, collations, various readings, lacunae and provenances made textual integrity.

The cultural combination of textual fabrication with irreligion and blasphemy was a potent and intriguing mixture. Apocryphal texts, religious or philosophical, which undermined the sanctity of orthodox canons of religious, political and social subordination transfixed many of the learned and erudite. The intellectual encounter with ‘other’ texts, from classical antiquity, from the early church, and from non-Christian cultures both intrigued and dismayed the early modern scholar. Hermes Trismigestus, the Sibylline Oracles, the druidical runes, and the hieroglyphs of Egypt were all artefactual resources that might be ‘saved’ for Christian orthodoxy through the labours of humanist scholarship. The ‘discovery’ of such works both laid the ground for the construction of yet further proofs of the divinity of Christian revelation, but also made the foundations for the ‘reputation’ and ‘credit’ of the scholar: by editing such texts ‘authority’ was made both in a textual and social sense.

Although many of these works of scholarship had their origins in the recovery, *ad fontes*, of ancient manuscripts, the form by which they reached the *respublica litterorum* exploited the powerful medium of print. The study of letters found its trajectory completed in the articulation of the printed page. As the combined writings of Michel de Certeau, Roger Chartier, Anthony Grafton and Steven Shapin have suggested print culture helped the projection of social power: print was not merely the medium for the value-free transmission of knowledge, but was one of the places where social credibility and typography colluded to make knowledge. Unsurprisingly, although conceptions of the *auctor* were powerful in the classical and scholastic world of rhetoric, the idea of the ‘author’ and the concomitant notions of cultural authority were closely in step with the developments of print technology.

The fiction of ‘recovering’ an ancient text was then a commonplace strategy of erudite culture. While Henry Dodwell devoted his learning to publishing editions of Ireneaus, and Christopher Pfaff ‘made’ texts from the early Church, this essay will be concerned to examine the tradition of the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, a text supposedly restored from twelfth century obscurity. Unusually for such a ‘recovery’ the *Traité* was disseminated neither in print form, nor with an author or editor readily identified: circulated anonymously in scribal form at the start of the eighteenth century the text became one of the canonical clandestine works of the radical enlightenment. A powerfully corrosive work, compiled from a range of classical and *libertin* sources, without a named editor and ‘published’ in an almost endless variety of textual forms, the manuscript tradition poses a series of challenges to the commonplaces of contemporary historiography, and in particular about the relationship between print culture and the diffusion of ideas in the public sphere.

The *Traité* is not a dense and complex intellectual document in comparison with the work of a Hobbes, a Spinoza or a Leibniz. Indeed its complexity can be found in the juxtaposition of sources rather than any immediate originality of thought. Admittedly, there is innovation in the work. As Berti has established the French work contains the first vernacular translation of passages from Spinoza's *Ethics* as well as extracts from amongst many others, Cicero, Vanini, Machiavelli and Hobbes. In the Latin text, as Schroder has shown, similar sources accompanied by citations from Herbert of Cherbury and other deviant works like the *Symbolum sapientiae.*

Although both works are modelled around the standard suggestion that Moses, Christ and Mohammed were political legislators who employed religion in the service of the pursuit of civil power the French and Latin works have profound intellectual differences. The Latin work is much more concerned with questions of epistemology than political tyranny. Perhaps reflecting the constituent role that the writings of Herbert of Cherbury play in the formation of the text, the central question focuses upon the issue of the status of religious knowledge. How do we know which religion, which revelation, which doctrine is true? Applying the rules of 'strict criticism' to the claims of the Pentateuch, the New Testament and the Koran the authorial voice effects a neutral relativism about the competing truth claims of the three great religions.

The French work, a much more reader friendly production with its chapters, sections and numbered paragraphs (compared with the rather rambling academic dialogue form of *de tribus impostoribus*) has a more intense political quality manifest in its profound anticlericalism. Deviant, corrupt and tyrannical priests had manipulated a natural instinct to religious belief into a tool of political domination. Priests joined hands with kings to cultivate religious ignorance and establish civil tyranny. Whereas the Latin text worried in a sceptical and anxious way at the status of religious truth, the French work anatomised the psychological mechanics of false religion. Emplotted within the different textual styles and intellectual agendas were the related issues of readership and political intention. The Latin text advances a individualistic corrosion of religious certainties: every reasonable man will deconstruct orthodox shibboleths by the exercise of their rational faculties. For the French text, the assumption is that most people (most readers too) will be so immersed in their ignorance that only a new political legislator or intellectual elite will be able to overturn the pillars of priestcraft.

It might be possible to characterise the different textual traditions as academic and republican. Certainly what we now know about the circle that produced and disseminated the French work tends to support this description. The involvement of John Toland, a man responsible almost singlehandedly for the re-invention of republican political theory in the early eighteenth century adapting it to the exigencies of Williamite monarchy in England, underscores the purchase of the political reading of the *Traité*. It is quite clear however that the original circle (or scribal community) that both produced and consumed the manuscript was soon displaced or expanded by the ever increasing diffusion of the work after its print publication in 1719. How far this widening circle of readers understood and/or adapted the illocutionary intention of the compilers of the text is still to be explored in detail. The fact that a text produced (probably) in the library of a radical Anglo-Dutch merchant in the late 1700s, still had a powerful impact and purchase upon (for example) French political culture in the 1770s and 1780s ought to prompt historians to investigate not simply the intellectual or philosophical content of such a work, but also the powerful way in which readers could 'make' such ideas pertinent or important.

A further important issue that the imposture works cause to be addressed is the question of the relationship between clandestinity and radicalism. As scholars like Silvia Berti, Francoise Charles-Daubert, Miguel Benitez and many others have established, the *Traité* contained many ideas drawn from printed texts: did the nature of its 'clandestine' circulation (and reading strategies of the audience) change the nature and reception of these ideas? In both the *Traité* and the *de tribus impostoribus,* philosophical ideas were articulated without attribution, unanchored from the broader context of their intellectual foundations, and very often rendered the intimates of strange intellectual bedfellows. It has become a commonplace legacy of Quentin Skinner's methodological labour for historians to search for context and illocutionary intention: the writers or compilers of both these works, unconcerned with such (commendable) counsel, cut and pasted ideas, arguments, illustrations as need insisted. An important question to raise might be was 'meaning' in this *bricolage* achieved by the reader's intellectual reconstruction of the sources of each element? Since it seems more than likely that the 'ur' text was the result of a collaborative effort of Dutch, French and English minds: it may well be that the 'function' of the text when circulated and reproduced was a very different thing than when the initial composition took place. Reader reception, rather than authorial intention may then be a priority in exhuming the nature of the work.

IV

The search for the author and thus the 'authority' of the texts had bedevilled interest in the works since the seventeenth century. Mirroring the strategies of scholars devoted to the reconstruction of the Christian canon rumours of a 'lost' manuscript of the ‘three impostors’ had been voiced from the times of Frederick Barbarossa. As the intensity of the researches of an ever expanding worldwide network of scholars focuses on the question of authorial origins more and more candidates are thrust forward. In the seventeenth century the literary rumour of the text and its composer(s) became more frequent and assertive after the 1650s. As Richard Popkin has forcefully argued, Henry Oldenburg, Adam Boreel and others were so sure that such a text existed (probably from the pen of some wicked Spinozist) that a lengthy Latin reply was commissioned from Boreel, intended as an urgent prophylactic against incipient irreligion. But as early as 1619 a correspondent of the eminent Biblical scholar James Ussher had enquired about the work. As the Hungarian historian Jozsef Barnab has pointed out John Biddle the radical unitarian was also accused of writing the work (as well as translating the Koran).

By the 1660s the question of the authorship had become a classic of bibliographical enquiry: Richard Smith obsessive bookcollector circulated a short account of the rumoured text along with a careful consideration of the possible candidates for authorship in the 1670s. While it is clear that Smith had not seen a work the evidence of his account suggests that it was possible for a literate reader to ‘imagine’ how such a text might have been written and by whom. Smith plumbed for the thirteenth century contemporary of Matthew Paris, Simon of Tournai. Such bibliographical speculations tell us a great deal about the anxieties of orthodox culture. In anglophone historiography, saturated as it is with accounts of the impieties of Thomas Hobbes and the legacies of the heterodoxies of the English revolution, little attention has been paid to the cultural generation of the treatises of imposture. Whether this is because the text is somehow regarded as ‘Continental’ rather than ‘English’ or because traditions of study of scribal or clandestine works are simply unfashionable is a debatable point.

By 1719 a text, under the name of *Le Traité des trois imposteurs,* had been printed. The historical account of the tradition then became canonical in the writings of Prosper Marchand, a man intimately involved in the circle most connected with the printed work, if not the provenance of the scribal texts, who wrote the ‘official’ history of the works in his *Dictionaire Historique* in the 1740s. Marchand’s intimacy with the circle that produced and circulated the texts, did not, of course mean that his account was any more truthful than the earlier narratives. Indeed it seems likely that in constructing his account Marchand was concerned to lay as many false trails as possible.

After the 1768 printed edition the textual history of the treatise became much more public. It was a staple work of irreligion, anticlericalism and anti-monarchical revolution: no longer clandestine the text was appropriated to a number of different polemical functions throughout the remainder of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Editions were still being published in the twentieth century by different political interests: anarchist, socialist, erastian. Cheap, popular editions are still I believe, available in the radical bookshops around the Sorbonne. Certainly I purchase an 1938 edition for ten francs in the bookshop *Libre Pense* in the mid-1990s: nestling amongst the works of Marx, Trotsky and other leftist writings, the *Traité* was clearly still considered an important contribution to the war against the Church commonly identified as *laicité.*

The rebirth of scholarly interest in the genesis and function of the text can be seen in the nineteenth century scholarship of men like Gustav Brunet who re-worked the writings of earlier men (Smith, de la Monnoye, Rousset de Missey, Marchand etc) and blended them with a more precise bibliography (at least of the printed variant) into a more sophisticated historical account. By the time, American scholars like Ira Wade and Don Cameron Allen devoted their considerable energies to examining the significance and meaning of such clandestine literature to the intellectual world of the late Renaissance and Enlightenment they were able to draw upon an enormous archive of historiographical study.

Although the contributions of historians like Wade and Allen established the ground work for an account of the relationship between the textual tradition and broader intellectual or cultural change, the treatises of imposture did not achieve canonical status within the major studies of ideas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The massive two volume work on the intellectual sources and achievements of ‘the Enlightenment’ by Peter Gay barely touched upon the subject.

Later in the 1970s and 1980s, when historians like Chartier and Darnton began to explore the ‘literary underground’ of eighteenth century intellectual life, works like the *Traité* became part of a counter-cultural canon of ‘forbidden literature’. Whether symptomatic or causal, such works became an historical identifier of the cultural dimensions of political change. Perhaps more widely read than the works of Rousseau and other ‘proper’ texts in the Enlightenment pantheon, the *Traité* (along with a rag-bag of other clandestine literature catalogued in Miguel Benitez indispensable work) became a key work for the study of the textual corrosion of *ancien regime* commonplaces of divinely ordained order in church, state and society.

Perhaps the most bold use of the text, and the communities of readers, writers and transmitters that were involved in its production and consumption is to be found in Margaret Jacob’s classic study of the radical Enlightenment (1981). For Jacob, the *Traité* was at the heart of a radical project for over-turning the shibboleths of the status quo: republican, democratic, materialist and atheistic the text inscribed a vision of politics and social order that challenged not only the clerical and monarchist certainties, but also the more moderate, respectable ‘Enlightenment’ of Locke, Newton and

Hume. The conditions of production and the clandestine circulation of the work itself became a powerful example of the radical conspiracy focused upon a pan-European connections of Masons and monarchomachs.

The next significant landmark in the process of re-locating the tradition of the treatises on imposture into the mainstream of the history of the ideas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the month long series of seminars held in the University of Leiden and sponsored by the Foundation for Intellectual History in the summer of 1990. Directed by the powerful insights of Richard Popkin into the inter-connectedness of religious scepticism in the period, and aided by Silvia Berti and Francoise Charles-Daubert, the results of the research were published in a massive volume in 1996. The importance of this work has been manifold, not the least for bringing together a number of different intellectual and historiographical approaches to the history of ideas and texts. In the volume the investigation of the precise codicological relationships between the various manuscripts can be read alongside careful and detailed studies of the intellectual components of both the works and responses to the tradition. Importantly the printed collection also included a republication of Prosper Marchand's article 'Impostoribus' from the *Dictionnaire historique* (1758), providing a starting point for the study of the tradition. Providing a broad European canvas for the exploration of the production and reception of the manuscripts has stimulated a number of scholars in France, Germany, England and America to explore cognate literatures.

V

Where do we stand now? One thing is clear that building upon the powerful researches of scholars like Benitez, Berti, Charles-Daubert and Schroder, as well as the continuing contribution of the important journal *La lettre clandestine*, that an textual infrastructure of clandestine philosophical literature has been established. Many decades ago Daniel Mornet posed a simple question about the relationship between ideas and cultural change: how did reading make revolution (or not)? Since the 1970s a series of scholars have advanced every more sophisticated and powerful answers to this question. Darnton has explored the canon of the 'forbidden' bestsellers, extending the carapace of ideas into the world of vulgar ballads and pornography. Chartier, in charting the cultural dimensions of political and intellectual change in French culture, has also re-integrated ideas into the mainstream of political narratives. There is still much more to do.

One of the overwhelming traits of contemporary historiography of ideas, as exemplified perhaps in the treatment of the treatises of imposture is the almost resolutely Continental emphasis of the subject matter. Eighteenth century historians of ideas in England tend to examine either the works of the established canon (Locke, Hume, Smith, Gibbon), or to be more interested in the production of learned orthodox writers like Warburton, Law and Burke. Although increasingly there is a flourishing historiography concerned to examine the intellectual contours of radical attacks upon religion and social order in the 1780s and 1790s there is very little evidence of any connection being made with earlier irreligious traditions.

The intellectual culture that produced and disseminated the treatises of imposture was learned and ludic, philosophical and irreligious, steeped in religion and anticlerical. It was also a permeable community in terms of both sociability, national identity and political culture. Benjamin Furly was an Essex man who ended up in Rotterdam; John Toland was born in Ireland and died in Putney; Thomas Johnson was a Scotsman who plied his trade in the Low Countries; Jean Aymon was a renegade French priest who first took refuge in England. Prince Eugene of Savoy, soldier and book collector, feted in London, Rotterdam and Vienna, was also complicit in the viral distribution of the work. These men, and others, produced a text (in French) that had audiences around Europe: the radicalism of the work was in its intellectual portability rather than simple propositional content of its arguments. As my own ongoing studies of these circles and intellectual communities suggests, all of these men considered themselves engaged in a dangerous and necessary war against political and religious tyranny regardless of national identity. Key figures like John Toland acted as 'connectors' across intellectual, cultural and national boundaries, bringing very often recondite erudition into the forum of the public sphere by repackaging key ideas for a still literate but less learned audience. Such figures were players in a number of different and inter-related political and intellectual communities: the circulation of scribal material like the treatises of imposture acted not only as philosophical stimulation, but also a means for reinforcing political sociability. As the case of Toland establishes, with his intimate friendships with elite figures like Sophia of Hannover, Lord Robert Molesworth and the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, such ideas projected their authors into the highest echelons of political power.

The history of the survival and various adaptations of the texts throughout the eighteenth century may tell us yet more about the nature of reading, and the relationship between reading and political belief and action. Considering the different print and scribal form of the texts will allow an assessment of the nature of the various and perhaps distinct audiences for the work. As the work of the literary scholar Harold Love on scribal culture has encouraged seventeenth century historians to explore the literary form of intellectual and political argument, it will also be incumbent upon eighteenth century historians of ideas to address and consider the relationships between literary form and intellectual content, as a means for engaging with the increasingly important question of the nature of reading and audience. In particular, the relationship between clandestinity and the communities of readers of the *Traité* is one the urgent themes to be pursued.

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