

Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Spinoza

by Steven Nadler

About Spinoza and the life he led, much has been said and fantasized — especially when it comes to understand his exclusion from the Jewish community. M. Rovère reopened the case in a romanticized and original version of the story.

Reviewed: Maxime Rovere, [Le clan Spinoza: Amsterdam 1677, L'invention de la liberté](#), Paris, Flammarion, 2017, 560 p.

There may be no philosopher in history (with the possible exceptions of Socrates and Nietzsche) who has received greater attention in artistic, literary and popular culture than Bento (Benedictus) de Spinoza (1632-1677). His life, ideas and influence have been the subject of numerous novels, plays, poems, paintings, sculptures, even musical pieces and opera. His name and his visage have been used in the marketing of various items in the worlds of entertainment, leisure and consumption, from cafés to rock bands to bagels. (By contrast, how many Cartesian novels or Lockean operas or Humean ballets are there?¹)

Spinoza's in the Popular Mind

A relatively simple explanation for Spinoza's unusually high profile outside the walls of academia is at hand. Spinoza was the most radical and iconoclastic thinker of his time. His ideas on religion, politics, ethics, human psychology and metaphysics, presented in difficult and sometimes mystifying treatises, lay the groundwork for much of what we now regard as "modern." Perhaps most enticing of all, he was excommunicated from the Amsterdam

¹ I leave aside the delicious exception of Leibniz cookies, which only prove the rule.

Portuguese-Jewish community as a young man for reasons that remain obscure (although not hard to fathom). Everyone loves a rebel—especially one whose values they likely share and whom, they feel, was unjustly punished by those in power.

Most works of literature that bear a Spinozistic imprint, explicitly or implicitly, use him either as the inspirational object of some character's life-long devotion, or (if the novel is set in Spinoza's own time) as a fascinating figure who lurks in the background. With Maxime Rovere's *Le Clan Spinoza*, on the other hand, we have a well-crafted, historically informed and illuminating work of "fiction" about Spinoza himself, one that stands, as the author himself notes, as "a research project aimed at reaching the 'truth', by every possible literary means, of a world that no longer exists" (9). Rovere's book is not just an entertaining novelized account Spinoza's life and times—his family, his friends, his occupations, his writings, his controversies, all set in the tumultuous world of seventeenth-century Dutch politics and religion—but it also offers the non-specialist a learned and historically contextualized introduction to Spinoza's thought. "I wanted to study", Rovere says, "how thought finds its way into a concrete life" (558).

The cast of characters is familiar to Spinoza scholars. And what a colorful cast it is: rabbis from Venice, Portugal, Morocco, and Salonika, quite a few of whom did not get along at all; Dutch merchants, grocers, physicians, lawyers, theater directors, Latin teachers, and politicians, many of liberal and sometimes quite radical persuasion; theologians and ecclesiastics of various degrees of orthodoxy and unorthodoxy; even sympathetic landlords, conscientious notaries public, and unruly and murderous mobs. All of these make for good storytelling, and Rovere takes advantage of the opportunity.

The novel begins with Spinoza's not-too-distant ancestors—his grandparents as they flee Portugal in the wake of Manoel I's decree ordering the conversion of all Jews in his kingdom, followed by the Inquisition's pursuit of insincere New Christians who may be practicing Judaism in secret. The family, including Spinoza's father Miguel, pass through Nantes, France, and finally settle in Amsterdam, where the future philosopher is born. By the late-1630s, Miguel is himself a twice-widowed father, engaged in the importing and exporting of fruit, oil and wine, while his sons study in the school of the Sephardic congregation Talmud Torah. The family prospers, and they become relatively prominent in the Amsterdam Jewish community, with Miguel serving on the *ma'amad*, or board of directors, for the congregation. However, the family business suffers major losses when war and piracy on the high seas take their toll on Miguel's shipping. By the time Bento (along with his brother Gabriel) take over after their father's death in 1654, the firm is encumbered by serious debts that the young men cannot possibly meet (Spinoza seems not to have been cut out for the life of trade anyway; Rovere tells the story of Spinoza's rather inept and humiliating attempts to recoup funds from the arrogant and violent Alvares brothers.)

By early 1656, Spinoza is not only experiencing a loss of religious faith, but also turning his attention from the mercantile life to more intellectually satisfying pursuits. (For

some insight into this reorientation, see the rare autobiographical sketch that opens his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, composed around 1658 but soon abandoned incomplete.) He begins studying philosophy—and Latin, in order to access the works of Descartes and others—and is undoubtedly already forming the heterodox ideas that would scandalize his contemporaries.

The most momentous event of Spinoza's life, of course, is the *herem* (or ban) that he receives from Talmud Torah's lay leaders in July of 1656, when he is only twenty-three years old. Spinoza is ostracized for his "abominable heresies and monstrous deeds", although we are not told what precisely his offenses are. The extant document, a litany of curses and damnations, is harsher than anything ever pronounced by the community. Unlike most of the bans issued by the *ma'amad* in this period, it is never rescinded. Spinoza is now, by the terms of his *herem*, permanently "expelled from the nation of Israel.

Rovere combines rigorous historical scholarship with the skill of a novelist as he conjures up private thoughts and interpersonal dialogues that, while purely the product of his literary fancy, nonetheless strike one as eminently plausible. Thus, as Spinoza faces the prospect of bankruptcy, Rovere imagines the discussion between Spinoza and his brother over whether to accept some form of aid from the community—either a job in the library or school, or a ticket to the colonies in the New World:

In the privacy of their home, Spinoza discusses these possibilities with his brother while shaving. For once he shaves everything but a black moustache, in the shape of an inverted V, well trimmed above his upper lip. Somewhat surprised, he turns to Gabriel:

— Hey, what do you think about this?

Gabriel comes closer, touches his older brother's chin, turns it to the side.

— Don't know. You look more Spanish. Or French. Go ahead, speak French.

— *Veillez m'excuser, mon cher frère* [Pardon me, dear brother], Bento enunciates while dabbing at his cheeks with his towel, *je dois partir prendre des cours à l'école— Ne m'attendre point pour souper car je étudiai, non attends, je étudierai toute la soirée. Mais nous nous rêverons bientôt, je crois.* [I have to go to class. Do not wait for me for dinner because I studied...no, wait...I will study all night. But we will see each other again soon, I think.]

— Ahahahahah, cries Gabriel, slapping his thighs, brilliant! Brilliant! You sound like Dad! (171)

There is no evidence that any such discussion took place. We do not even know what, if any, remediation for his financial difficulties the community did offer Spinoza. But none of that is to the point. Rovere's imaginative reconstruction does not strain credulity, and it adds some personality and color (and even a little humor) to a period of Spinoza's life about which we really know very little.

Spinoza, in the end, does not accept any help from the community; nor does he abandon Holland. He reportedly accepted his ostracism with an easy mind. According to one early biographer, he is said to have replied "I gladly enter on the path this has opened to me, with the consolation that my departure will be more innocent than was the exodus of the early Hebrews from Egypt." Rovere sees it all as a liberating experience: "The decision taken by the

parnassim frees Spinoza from a real nightmare. From now on, he does not have to account for anything, and in return, he can no longer answer anything". (191). Still, a *herem* like Spinoza's must have been a very difficult, even painful thing to live through, entailing as it did the loss of practically everything he had known up until then: his family, his domicile, his livelihood, perhaps even his place in the world.

Spinoza's *herem*

Many scholars have speculated on the reasons for Spinoza's *herem*. Was it because he had turned to the Dutch authorities to have himself declared a minor and an orphan and thus find relief from the debts he inherited from his father (and, not incidentally, be named a preferential creditor on his mother's estate)? Such a legal maneuver was contrary both to the regulations of the Amsterdam Sephardim and to Jewish law, and it certainly would have earned one a ban from the merchants and professionals who led the community.² On the other hand, the extensive vitriol directed at Spinoza in his *herem* suggests that there was more to it than this, as does the mention of his "abominable heresies." More likely, Spinoza received his harsh punishment because of his ideas—indeed, just those ideas about God, the Bible, miracles and Jewish law that, within a couple of years, he would begin putting in writing. Rovere, on the other hand, throws his lot in with the legal-financial explanation. As for the mention of "abominable heresies", this is, on Rovere's telling, simply an insertion by the Chief Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera for the sake of asserting his authority and giving spiritual questions prominence above juridical ones (189).

Even if one accepts the legal-financial account—and I, for one, do not—philosophical factors should not be dismissed so trivially. After all, in the *Ethics*, which Spinoza began writing no more than seven years after the *herem*, he rejects the transcendent, providential, supernatural deity of the Abrahamic religions and identifies God with Nature. He claims, as well, that everything that happens in the cosmos is necessitated by Nature's inviolable principles. Miracles are, thus, metaphysically impossible. This absolute causal determinism applies as much to minds as to bodies, and thus there is no free will. Virtue and freedom consist simply in the pursuit one's own self-interest under the guidance not of the passions but of reason and understanding, while happiness is the equanimity and peace of mind that accompany an intellectual understanding of nature. Above all, there is no such thing as an afterlife or "world to come". The doctrine of the immortality of the soul and its eternal reward and punishment is nothing but a pernicious fiction employed by the leaders of organized religions to control peoples' lives through irrational hope and fear.

² See Odette Vlessing, "The Excommunication of Baruch Spinoza: The Birth of a Philosopher", in Jonathan Israel and Reinier Salverda, eds., *Dutch Jewry: Its History and Secular Culture, 1500-2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 141-72.

Meanwhile, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, begun in 1665, still less than ten years from the *herem*, Spinoza pursues his moral/political/religious project of freedom by undermining the authority of the Hebrew Bible and of those who wield it to gain power over private and public affairs. Scripture is, he insists, just a work of human literature, and a rather "corrupt and mutilated" one at that. Jewish law—especially that concerned with ceremonial observance—is, with the destruction of the ancient Temple and the end of the Israelite commonwealth, now without any *raison d'être*. True piety and religion, as opposed to superstition, consists simply in treating other human beings with justice and charity. On the political side of things, Spinoza (like Hobbes) argues that the state has its source in a natural covenant whereby individuals, seeking relief from the insecurities of the state of nature, give up certain rights and bind themselves to obedience to a sovereign. Its governance (including control over the practice of religion) should be in the hands solely of the civil authorities, not ecclesiastics.

These are not opinions likely to endear one to the rabbis or lay leaders of an early modern Jewish community. Indeed, such astoundingly bold philosophical theses will make Spinoza's name synonymous in the seventeenth century with atheism, irreligion, immorality, and (rather misleadingly) materialism. And there are good documentary reasons for thinking that Spinoza was entertaining (and maybe even proclaiming) such ideas around the time of his *herem*.

Within a few years of the ban, Spinoza has left Amsterdam and settled in the small village of Rijnsburg, outside Leiden; later, he decamps to Voorburg and, finally, The Hague. Over this second half of his life, his circle of acquaintances and correspondents expands in interesting ways: Henry Oldenburg, secretary to the Royal Society of England; the Huygens family; the chemist Robert Boyle; the Utrecht Cartesian Lambert van Velthuysen; a pesky grain merchant from Dordrecht named Willem van Blijenburgh; the German philosophers Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Walther Ehrenfried von Tshirnhaus, and many others. Through it all, though, and of the utmost importance, is Spinoza's inner circle, "le clan Spinoza"—long-time friends who are devoted to him and believe deeply in his projects. It includes such diverse personalities as Lodewijk Meijer, Jarig Jellesz, Pieter Balling, Johannes Bouwmeester, Simon Joosten de Vries, and Jan Rieuwertsz. These are the freethinkers, radicals and members of dissident Reformed sects who push Spinoza to develop his ideas and publish his writings; and it is they who, after Spinoza's death, courageously—given the outcry and condemnations following the publication in 1670 of Spinoza's "scandalous" *Theological-Political Treatise*—take it upon themselves to bring out Latin and Dutch editions of his as yet unpublished writings and correspondence.

The subjectivity of the historical novel

Rovere is careful to include as many certainties as possible in his narrative of Spinoza's life and milieu. He is also willing to let the reader figure out for himself what is spurious or an exaggeration. Despite his express desire “to be done with all the ‘myths’ that have accumulated around Spinoza” he is not above including in his story such apocryphal episodes as the alleged assassination attempt against Spinoza, for which there is only one source, Pierre Bayle, who did not know Spinoza personally and who was writing many years after the philosopher's death.

This eclectic approach, while making for a lively and engaging tale with lots of anecdotal detail, poses a real problem for many readers of this “novel.” Where does historical fact end and fictional storytelling begin? Will the non-specialist lay reader know that any conversation between Spinoza and his brother or Spinoza and the lawyer who helps him navigate his impending bankruptcy is totally made up, based on no documentary source material whatsoever? Will they come away thinking that we actually do have a notebook of Miguel de Spinoza's, in which he relates some important moments from his life in the Portuguese-Jewish community? Rovere also makes some odd choices in terms of chronology—such as putting the composition of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (which scholars date at 1658 at the earliest) before the *herem*. And then there is the occasional error of fact, such as the meeting between Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel and his brother Ephraim in Middleburg in 1657, after Menasseh's return from his failed mission to England on behalf of the readmission of the Jews to that country (208); in fact, Ephraim died in 1640.

Spinoza has finally found a novelist who is also a philosophical scholar. Rovere's narrative covers a lot of ground, and he does justice to the ideas, the personalities, and the events with great expertise. Moreover, he has clearly relied on a wealth of primary and secondary materials for his story, and he has made excellent use of them. Some of these, especially early biographical sources—such as the not-always-reliable Jean Maximilien Lucas—he cites. In the book itself, there is no mention, not even in a postscript or bibliography, of the many scholars who, over the centuries and through careful archival work, have shed light on Spinoza's life and ideas, the history of Amsterdam's Jewish communities, and the fickle political, religious and economic fortunes of the Dutch Golden Age. All of this is relegated to a website containing a large number of bibliographical references and footnotes. Rovere thereby acknowledges the efforts of those who essentially made it possible for him to write this engaging, entertaining, and informative (and, for the most part, very true to the facts) historical novel/novelistic history. However, most lay readers will not take the trouble to go to the website, at least while reading the book. I, for one, would have liked to have seen at least some acknowledgement of the more important scholarship in the book itself, but I suppose that's just a matter of taste.

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