

BOOK REVIEW

Paola Bertucci, *In the Land of Marvels: Science, Fabricated Realities, and Industrial Espionage in the Age of the Grand Tour*

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023. Pp. 184. ISBN 978-1-4214-4710-0. \$54.95 (hardcover).

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In this brisk, engaging work, Paola Bertucci builds on her Italian-language *Viaggio nel paese delle meraviglie* to provide an account of a curious episode from the eighteenth century: the French experimental physicist Jean-Antoine Nollet's journey to the kingdoms of Italy. There, he engaged in a 'philosophical duel' with the Italian Gianfrancesco Pivati over a novel type of electrical medicine, secretly gathered intelligence about the region's silk industry for the French Crown and investigated unusual natural phenomena presented as marvels. Drawing on works from the history and sociology of science, as well as on histories of information and print culture, Bertucci uses Nollet's journey to juxtapose the ostensible openness of the Republic of Letters with the various forms of obfuscation, fictionalization and subterfuge practised by its participants.

The book, which is structured around Nollet's travels, is divided into four chapters. The first focuses on Nollet's journey to Piedmont, during which he performed scientific demonstrations for the court while compiling a secret report on the region's silk production to send back to France. Bertucci notes how Nollet opened doors with his connections and reputation as a member of the French Academy, claiming its ethic of intellectual openness even while gathering secrets of national interest. She also usefully points out the limitations of the term 'secret' in this context; although government officials sought to control the flow of information, they were rarely successful, making their insistence on espionage and secrecy its own kind of useful fiction.

The second chapter provides a general overview of electrical demonstrations in the eighteenth century, paying particular attention to their spectacular aspects. Bertucci argues that electricity's variable, highly visible effects made it the subject of both intense scholarly interest and accusations of charlatanism. This provides context for the third chapter, which discusses the 'philosophical duel' between Nollet and Pivati. After returning to France, Nollet published a work in which he claimed to have confronted Pivati and put his 'medicated tubes' – glass tubes filled with medicinal substances that the patient would hold while being subjected to an electrical current – to the test, ultimately finding them wanting. However, Bertucci argues that this 'duel' never took place. Nollet and Pivati's in-person dealings appear to have been cordial, and the confrontational description of their encounter given in Nollet's publication was a literary device designed to show its author in a particularly favourable light.

In his published account, Nollet cast himself as a dispassionate man of learning and his interlocutors as credulous marvel-seekers. This invoked regional stereotypes and put forward a particular vision of modernity, one in which a love of the marvellous was dismissed as old-fashioned and uneducated. Bertucci builds on this theme in the book's fourth and final chapter, which deals with natural marvels in Italy. Bertucci connects their depiction in travelogues with the development of national stereotypes, with writers from Northern Europe positioning themselves against a 'backwards', credulous Italy, even as Italian writers stereotyped them in turn as incurious and arrogant.

At times, this book can feel like two works in one: the first discussing the role played by natural philosophers in state secrecy and espionage projects and the second dealing with fictionalization in the print culture of the Republic of Letters. The decision to structure the book around Nollet's journey rather than around either of these topics means it deals rather briskly with both, tending to gesture to their broader implications rather than exploring these in detail. Likewise, the need to provide context for Nollet's wide-ranging activities leads to an uneven distribution of the book's most original elements, with parts of Chapters 2 and 4 occupied by general descriptions of electrical demonstrations and marvel-related travelogues, respectively. However, Bertucci brings new touches to the analysis of even these relatively well-examined topics, deftly highlighting women's roles in the story and mixing national perspectives to address each story from multiple angles.

Certain themes stand out across the work. Both the material on Nollet's secret silk-related mission and the discussion of his dispute with Pivati reflect on the role of institutional affiliations in securing prestige and support, for example, and both explore the centrality of demonstration and spectacle to the financial health of the period's natural philosophers. Likewise, as the title suggests, many of the episodes point to limitations in the self-conscious culture of openness associated with the Republic of Letters. Bertucci carefully distinguishes between the many categories of embellishment, genre conformity, strategic concealment and outright fraud available to period actors, noting both their pervasiveness and the period controversies that emerged around them. Lastly, the theme of 'enlightened travel' runs throughout, carving out a specific place for information-related work like Nollet's in the broader framework of Grand Tour-type travel through Italy.

The book's research is deep, drawing on a wide range of archival and printed sources from across France and Italy. Bertucci's investigation of the gaps between these – such as the differences between Nollet's published account of his journey, the version found in his journal and the information recorded by the bureaucrats who sponsored his silk-related investigation – provides many of the work's key insights. In the introduction and conclusion, Bertucci points to a broad selection of themes, ranging from historical work on espionage and data fabrication to topical issues such as 'fake news' and media presence. In doing so, Bertucci not only makes a valuable contribution to the literature on the Republic of Letters, but also indicates pathways for that literature to find broader relevance today.