

Elena Brambilla, *Corpi invasi e viaggi dell'anima: Santità, possessioni, esorcismo dalla teologia barocca alla medicina illuminista* (Roma, Viella, 2010), 302 pp., ISBN 978-88-8334-417-6.

by **Peter A. Mazur**

The trial of Galileo looms so large in the history of the Catholic Church's reaction to the scientific revolution that it is easy to forget that there also existed moments in which theology and scientific discovery could find common ground. *Corpi invasi*, which focuses on a moment during the late seventeenth century and at the beginning of the eighteenth when the scholastic epistemology that underlay Catholic theology gave way to a new conception of matter based on the discoveries of the scientific revolution, is part of a growing literature aimed at reconsidering the ways in which the Catholic Church confronted scientific discovery. The book is dedicated to a particular aspect of this confrontation, one that took place not in the incendiary pages of the *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres*, but in the quiet and proverbially secretive corridors of the Roman curia, where cardinals, confessors, and inquisitors, with the assistance of a few laymen, began to construct new ways of understanding the female body.

Supernatural explanations of demonic possession (an affliction to which women were considered particularly susceptible) and signs of female sanctity were dominant in Catholic theology, until, in the late seventeenth century, certain influential clerics became increasingly aware of the limitations of the Aristotelian paradigm. They began to adopt a new, scientific set of concepts and to apply them in their activities as censors and judges long before they became widely accepted within the church. Using a vast selection of treatises produced by canonists and theologians, as well as archival material from the two Vatican congregations where questions related to female sanctity and possession were debated and standards for practice established – Rites (responsible for the certification of sainthood and miracles) and the Holy Office – Brambilla traces how the dominant paradigm for the interpretation of certain behaviors by religious women changed from “diabolic invasion to uterine hysteria, and then to mental illness”, (p. 11)

This mechanistic, “antimystical turn,” (p. 13) fed by

late Cartesianism, took place even as the Church officially opposed the ideas of the philosopher and his successors. Brambilla argues that despite the condemnation of Descartes' works by the Congregation of the Index in 1663, there was nevertheless a lively interest in the philosopher and his successors in Rome, and his ideas were taken seriously on the margins of the curia as early as 1682. And even though Cartesianism remained under attack during the following two decades, defenders of the old scholastic order were gradually replaced in the most important positions of the curia by more moderate theologians who were to prove more amenable to these “novelties.” Prospero Lambertini, the future pope Benedict XIV, who served as prefect of the Congregation of Rites in the late seventeenth century, is a particularly significant figure in the book, a moderate cardinal who entertained scientific ideas alongside scholastic ones, and whose work as an adjudicator of sanctity presaged the church's increased acceptance of certain types of scientific investigation during his pontificate.

Corpi invasi is a valid attempt to unify two burgeoning fields of historical inquiry that have rarely converged in the past, and it is hoped that it will inspire further research on this and related topics. One possible point of departure is the book's evidentiary base, which could be expanded to include, especially for the crucial decades between 1660 and 1710, the vast amount of material regarding canonization inquiries in the Vatican. Additionally, given the highly personal nature of decision-making within the church, further attention to personal relationships and their role in the formation of intellectual consensus, along the lines of Stephen Shapin's histories of the English Royal Society, may shed more light on the political and cultural background in which these changes took place.

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