

Book Reviews



Marc Fumaroli, *The Republic of Letters*, trans. Lara Vergnaud. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2018, xii+382 pp. ISBN 978-0-300-22160-2. (French version: 2015).

Marc Fumaroli's *The Republic of Letters*,¹ which appeared in 2015 in French as *La République des Lettres*, and which has now been published in the aptly entitled series 'Margellos' World Republic of Letters', testifies to a scholarly, or perhaps rather a literary, life dedicated to the largely forgotten tradition of a truly European scholarly social phenomenon: the 'Respublica litteraria'. This translation is to be welcomed; Fumaroli (1932–2020), as one of greatest pioneers of the study of the Republic of Letters, inspired an entire generation, predominantly in France, to continue along the routes he set out in the 1980s and 1990s. The volume allows students to gain insight into the historiographical development of the field by the previous generation, as well as to learn a great deal about the importance of rhetoric as a social phenomenon that served as a common interest to the early modern learned community. Whereas this volume is a most rewarding read and provides numerous joys—which I will sum up toward the end of this review—a collection of articles printed long ago, by its very nature, involves stumbling blocks.

First of all, the articles are simply out of date. Fourteen of the eighteen articles collected in this volume date from the period 1987–1999 (the remaining four were published in 1984, 2007, and 2012). Although these reprints are said to be 'modified' versions, none of them takes into account scholarship published afterwards, which dramatically limits their usefulness for an audience that needs to be persuaded of the vitality of the subject in the twenty-first century. The wonderful chapter on Peirecs's exemplarity, for example, was published

1 This review was written in the context of the ERC Consolidator project *SKILLNET: Sharing Knowledge in Learned and Literary Networks – the pan-European Republic of Letters as a knowledge society* (project no. 724972) at Utrecht University.

eight years before Peter N. Miller's monograph on the same subject, itself by now two decades old. Fumaroli, in fact, wrote a long and positive review essay of Miller's monograph in 2001. The articles reflect the development of Fumaroli's awe-inspiring erudition, but fail to take account of current scholarship. Even as markers to provide insight into the historiographical development of the study of the Republic of Letters, the articles lose their validity for literature published after the 1980s.

Second, the articles, while organized chronologically, leading the reader from the medieval *Respublica christiana* of Petrarch to the revolutionary times of Seroux d'Agincourt, never aim to create a cohesive narrative. We jump from biography (surely chapter 2 on the *Vita Peireskii* and chapter 10 on the *Vita Petri Puteani* might have been placed under part IV about 'Lives') to the history of rhetoric to a more institutional history of academies.

Third, but less important, are the numerous repetitions, served up in slightly new wordings, but without any cross-references. A quotation by the Abbot Le Beau is cited (300) that is already quoted and treated (283), where it is ascribed to Abbot Le Blanc; the actual fragment is annotated more precisely in the first source cited in the notes (224–225)—but with the author's name unspecified. He is identified as Mr. Le Beau, *secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie* in the second source cited by Fumaroli, where the page numbers (vii–viii) are supplied. In a like manner the discussion of Decembrio's *De politia litterata* (17) is reiterated twice (88, 193). Likewise, the line that runs from the *Vita Peireskii* to Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (34), reoccurs later (160, 249). Barclay's *Icon animorum* is wonderfully discussed in chapter 3, but subsequently is twice introduced as new (105, 159, as *Icon animorium*). Such repetitions are perhaps unavoidable if articles printed long ago are reprinted without significant modifications.

Apart from these stumbling blocks, there are limitations that largely suggest themselves owing to the title, which is too wide-ranging. While the title speaks of 'the' Republic of Letters, the articles address exclusively Italian and French figures, and focus on the 'princes' of the Republic of Letters, as Fumaroli repeatedly calls them (on 211 there even figures a 'co-prince' of the Republic of Letters): Petrarch, Aldus Manutius, Erasmus, Pinelli, Peiresc, Pierre Dupuy (plus the respective biographers of the last three, Gualdo, Gassendi, and Rigault), and Barclay, with a bias towards Italian and French authors (even Barclay is half-French). England and Germany make occasional entries while the Dutch Republic is ignored. The latter is surprising, for in 2018 there appeared a monograph by another grand-old student of the Republic of Letters: Hans Bots's new *De Republiek der Letteren*. That monograph, by nature more strictly organized, likewise ignores almost all scholarship of the past fifteen years, but does balance the predominance of France by underscoring the academic, social, economic, and infrastructural important of the Dutch Republic,

thus not only correcting the bias of Fumaroli's studies, but also balancing Fumaroli's discourse-based approach with a more empirically- and socially-rooted approach. In this context, it is worth drawing attention to the freely available 2018 volume *Reassembling the Republic of Letters in the Digital Age: Standards, Systems, Scholarship* that takes stock of the study of the Republic of Letters via digital media, an approach that drew attention only after the last article of Fumaroli was published.

There are other limitations to this collection. Fumaroli is a master in the history of rhetoric, but he ignores the history of philology, leading to few treatments of Turnebus, Budé, the Scaligers, Lipsius, and Casaubon to name a but a few scholars important even for French history. When Fumaroli identifies the 'three figureheads of the Republic of Letters' in 1599, he mentions Scaliger, Lipsius, and Pinelli (37), but Casaubon's rehabilitation during the past decade by Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg (to say nothing of Charles Nisard's 1852 inclusion of Casaubon in the 'triumvirate' alongside Lipsius and Scaliger) is not taken into account. While the Republic of Letters swarmed with biblical philologists and church historians, Fumaroli ignores these (as many others still do).

Likewise, Fumaroli seems to disacknowledge natural philosophers almost by default: the Republic of Letters is apparently concerned with rhetoric, not with the world of research opened up by astronomers, anatomists, microscopists, mathematicians, physicians, and collectors of natural facts. The Fumarolian Republic of Letters is a 'vast network of erudite philologists, archaeologists, and coin and medal collectors' (332), in which one looks in vain for the people populating the Académie Française and the Royal Society: Huygens makes an occasional entry, but overall this is a space in which we run into Bayle, not Boyle.

Universities do not belong to the Fumarolian universe of letters either, even though in Germany and the Dutch Republic the universities were not the hallmarks of scholastic conservatism that might have pervaded the universities of France and England. Whatever happened in the Spanish empire (within and beyond Europe) or in Scandinavia is ignored. 'After Peiresc's death in 1637, Europe would learn to rally behind a largely French Republic of Letters' (37), both in terms of space and language. Such lapidary statements of the *translatio studii* (or in this case the more applicable cognate *translatio imperii*) fail to acknowledge the vibrant discussions about the nature of the *Gelehrtenrepublik* at German universities from the late seventeenth century onwards, about which we have heard so much in recent years from the likes of Helmut Zedelmaier, Marian Füssel, Martin Mulsow, and Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen. When Fumaroli does mention Wilhelm Kühlman's pioneering work, he criticizes it for being limited geographically to Germany (67). Despite Fumaroli's critical assessment

of Barclays's francophilia (61), he himself seems to have fallen into the same trap. The dearth of scholarship on the Erasmian scholarship (identified 68) is true for 1988, but it has been mended by scholars such as Lisa Jardine, Erika Rummel, Constance M. Furey, and Hanan Yoran, who could only have been taken into account if the chapters would have been revised. There is no harm in limiting oneself to certain regions, of course—but then this book would have been more aptly titled 'Some aspects of the Republic of Letters'.

Ignoring a more socially-informed empirical approach appears not to be a confession of modesty. Fumaroli leaves few opportunities untapped to scoff at 'Marxist' approaches, which he aligns with a kind of modernity and commerciality he himself seems to abhor: we gain the impression that there is still a battle of the Ancients and the Moderns going on in the twenty-first century, with Fumaroli as one of the lone champions of the Ancients (266). The up-to-date preface starts with condemnations of Elisabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, a book that apparently exemplifies a barbarian belief in the progress of technology and democracy, to the detriment of higher domains of culture. Let's not forget, however, that Fumaroli's most often-referenced point of orientation, the first recorded use of the phrase 'Republic of Letters' in a letter of Francesco Barbaro in 1417, was not spotted by Fumaroli himself as he implies, for example, in chapter 4, which was published originally in 1988. (A previous English translation of this text appeared in *Diogenes* 36 (1988): 129–152, with a coda missing from the current version, based on the original French publication). It was actually Eisenstein who mentioned the letter (137, note 287), citing Phyllis Gordan's translation in *Two Renaissance Book Hunters* (New York, 1974, 199)—albeit Gordan does not discuss the usage of the term.² This letter is referenced by Fumaroli (207) for the sixth time (as if for the first time), explaining again its importance, but nowhere is Eisenstein credited for the find. Of course, Fumaroli might simply have missed Eisenstein's footnote.

Deep antipathy to the 'destructive nature of modernity' (276) pervades the almost nostalgic prose of Fumaroli, and while this creates space for him to serve the reader with his formidable intuition, sensitivity, and erudition in interpreting and connecting texts, and foregrounding them as the 'connecting tissue' of the Republic of Letters, it also fails to acknowledge the importance of material culture. Social and economic history is largely ignored, while political history is shrunken to discourses. In the chapters on Caylus and d'Agincourt, the author appears entirely in agreement with its subjects in condemning the Age of Reason for its potential tyranny, destroying the age in which

² I thank Manuel Llano for bringing this to my attention.

antiquarianism was a vital inspiration for a common program for Europe's selfless scholarly elite. According to Fumaroli, postmodern doubts about rational linear progress open up spaces for a rehabilitation of early modern forms of wisdom (33).

The afterword promises to reveal the 'secret of the Republic of Letters' but, in fact, is a recapitulation of the importance of pseudo-Longinus *On the Sublime*, both in its actual influence while it circulated (although we know little of the extent of that circulation), and its metaphorical importance, exemplifying how rhetoric expresses historical nostalgia.

Nevertheless, most of these troublesome aspects are handsomely compensated for. First of all by Fumaroli's supreme erudition. The way in which he traces the numerous inexplicit links between the Italian humanists and their French successors, or his sketch, in a few brush strokes of the importance of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, are rewarding, to say the least. The reader has the feeling of sitting at the foot of a prince of the Republic of Letters himself.

Second, the author very importantly points out on several occasions (24, 75, 201, 204, 248, and particularly in chapter 2) that we have to conduct a conceptual history of the phrase 'Republic of Letters'. He helpfully lists variants, thus expanding the semantic field of the 'Republic of Letters'. The interpretations of the phrase in the paratexts of Aldus Manutius' famous printed editions is masterful and highlights Aldus' importance, already acknowledged of course by historians of philology and biographers of Erasmus, in the moulding of a common transnational identity for classical scholars in Europe. The argument that *academia* is related to *Arcadia* and to *Parnassus*—albeit the latter two should be differentiated—and that, ultimately, these words inhabit the same semantic field as the 'Republic of Letters', lays the ground for a proper conceptual history: significant is the way in which cognate terms are identified and evaluated (70–71; 82–87; 194). It might turn out that the plea for a conceptual history undermines the pervasiveness of the Republic of Letters altogether: currently, its fifteenth-century career seems negligible until the 1480s. But terms and concepts are two different things, and Fumaroli reinforces the idea that it was Petrarch who created the models for a scholarly life that was made explicit only by his successors. Intriguingly, at times Fumaroli can't resist speaking of a 'Republic of the arts' (92, 197, 280, 285, 333), even if this was hardly an actors' category (I have come across two instances of a *Republique de la Peinture*).

This brings me to a third point: the fact that Fumaroli stresses the relation between letters and the pictorial arts (92–96). It is a plea for literary historians, historians of scholarship, and art historians, from early Renaissance scholars to dix-huitièmists, to work together more closely. Especially when it comes to 'antiquarianism', collaboration is still scarce.

Lastly, my critical comments may be attributed to the success of Fumaroli's texts in the first place. Much of the grand narrative presented in these pages comes across not so much as outdated, but as common knowledge amongst students of the Republic of Letters – the irony being that it has become so precisely because of the pioneering studies assembled here. But Fumaroli's calls reverberate also beyond the Republic of Letters. The emphasis on the importance of conversation 'within the epistemic tissue of the Republic of Letters' foreshadows the epistemic cultures, *Konstellationsforschung* and the epistemic communities of Karin Knorr Cetina, Dieter Henrich, and Peter M. Haas. Fumaroli's 1996 plea for a comparative study of the symbolism of nationalism (51) somehow manages to ignore Benedict Anderson and notes that other European countries have failed to follow in the footsteps of Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*. Surely, he must have been happy before his death last year to witness that the development of 'memory & identity' into a global paradigm; that the critical scrutiny of the function of canons has taught us much about what nations perceive and define as their essence – although he might not had been equally happy about the anti-essentialist nature of much of this critical body of thought. It's just slightly frustrating to read in 2015 (and in English in 2019) that 'several works and publications are currently [i.e., 2007] in progress' (279).

While the translator should be praised for rendering the grand prose of Fumaroli into fine English, the desk editors forgot to un-check the English spelling corrector, hyper-correcting at least thirty Latin words into English. (Apart from the well-known change of the ending *-tio* into *-tion*, my favourite three are *atrium* for *artium* (on three occasions), *fonts* for *fontes*, and the almost figurative *jocoseriu* for *jocoserium*). Not all Franco-Greek, Latin, or Italian names are Anglicized (Strabon, Lucien, Pic de la Mirandole, Demetrius de Phalerum; Poggio's discovery of Quintilian's '*Institution oratoire*'). But whether it is *Deipnosophistae*, *Deipnosophistes*, or *Deipnosophists*, it is a treat to sit at the table with a savant and be served 18 chapters with the results of a lifetime of erudition and rhetoric.

Dirk van Miert

Associate Professor of Early Modern History, Faculty of History and Art History, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

d.k.w.vanMiert@uu.nl