

**BOOK REVIEWS**

**Soll, Jacob. *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-472-11690-4. Pp. 277. \$65.**

Jacob Soll's extensively researched, engagingly written, and fascinating book explores Jean-Baptiste Colbert's relentless campaign to marshal information in the defense and service of Louis XIV's France. Soll convincingly argues that Colbert innovated not merely in the methods he used to organize information, but in the very information that he chose to gather. As Soll reminds the reader through a combination of broad brush strokes and exquisite detail, before Colbert's tenure as the Sun King's finance minister, information had been lovingly collected and eccentrically organized by the disinterested and genteel humanists and jurists comprising the transnational Republic of Letters, a world which existed alongside the rapidly growing world of international trade, with its rapid development of recordkeeping and finance. Colbert brought these worlds together, at times dishonestly and violently, seizing the carefully constructed libraries of prominent scholars and severely restricting outside access to state documents. Not content with collecting existing information, Colbert also worked tirelessly to *create* knowledge, deploying scrupulously trained and loyal *intendants* who were sent forth into the French countryside to count cows and assess armaments. Colbert's rigorous training extended to Louis XIV himself, for whom he created golden pocket notebooks containing state ledgers (64).

While Soll amply documents Colbert's incredible success in revolutionizing state knowledge, he is careful to note the minister's failures. The resistance that Colbert encountered during his 1666 campaign to verify the legitimacy of the aristocracy's claims to the fiscal privileges of nobility forced him to modify and moderate his inquiries. However, as Soll documents in a particularly fascinating section of the book, the very enthusiasm with which Colbert pursued the classification and creation of archival culture led to a curious blindness with regard to the French colonies in the New World. Since these lands lacked a preexisting bureaucracy, Colbert

was at a loss as to how to begin to understand them, and completely neglected the local sources that he exploited with such success inside of his own country. As Soll concludes, “For Colbert, there was no Atlantic world, only the weak reflection of ancient Europe, its laws and its hierarchy of power and knowledge, all of which was seated in paperwork and archives” (118).

Soll’s riveting account of managerial innovation, undertaken with the complicity and approval of Louis XIV, leads him to deploy, frequently and provocatively, the term “absolutism” to describe Colbert’s unrelenting drive towards centralization and control. This term has fallen out of use in recent scholarship, as many historians, noting its anachronism, have questioned the ability of any French king to impose his will upon a country whose traditions and alternate sites of power and resistance were not as easily bypassed as “absolutism” implies. Indeed, it could well be argued that what we refer to as absolutism would have been recognized and described during the seventeenth century, quite simply, as tyranny. Soll’s work is therefore an eloquent argument not only for the often hidden richness of archives and information management, but also for a renewed appreciation of the significance of human agency and initiative in historical narrative.

Soll’s liberal use of “absolutism” also raises the question of the precise relationship between Colbert and Louis XIV. As the book’s final chapter reveals, Colbert’s system fell apart after his death, as the king, aware of the intricate relationship between the control of information and political sovereignty, sought to regain dominance by playing the Colbert and Louvois families against each other. Louis XIV’s pointed rejection of Colbert’s methods implicitly points to the question of the minister’s motivations in reforming the French state. Was Colbert motivated by personal ambition, deep loyalty to the king, or by a love of archives and documents, which Soll clearly shares? Soll seems to imply that a sort of proto-patriotism, an emotional attachment to the state that he was in the very process of creating, lay behind the minister’s actions. In many ways, however, as the eventual collapse of the system demonstrates, Colbert’s passionate determination seems to have been unique. Soll’s fascinating reading of the contentious correspondence between Colbert and his son, the marquis de

**BOOK REVIEWS**

Seignelay, demonstrates that Colbert's system did not, in and of itself, compel enthusiasm. Combined with Soll's equally compelling account of the career of Nicolas-Joseph Foucault, the *intendant* who efficiently established the controversial *droit de regale* in the French southwest, Seignelay's resistance tantalizingly evokes the wide range of responses that Colbert's rather merciless dehumanization of state service appears to have elicited among his many agents.

Of course, the desire to know more about how the *intendants* and other servants of the state felt about the unprecedented work they were being asked to perform is itself a demonstration of how convincingly Soll makes his argument about Colbert's central role in the development of France. As such, *The Information Master* provides a beautiful and nuanced portrait of one man's unrelenting effort to create the French state, while also gesturing to the origins of current conflicts between those who define themselves as humanists and those who seek greater efficiency and centralization through the control and manipulation of data. Soll's groundbreaking work should be required reading for anyone interested in early modern politics, culture, and the history of administration.

**Ellen McClure, University of Illinois at Chicago**

**Grisé, Catherine. *Jean de La Fontaine: Tromperies et illusions*.  
Tübingen: Narr Verlag 2010. ISBN 978-3-8233-6573-0. Pp.  
251. 58 Euros**

False perceptions, whether they are brought about by lies, tricks, ruses, or shams, inform the world of Jean de La Fontaine according to Catherine Grisé. In her recent study on the fabulist, Grisé investigates the different kinds of trickery as well as the various manifestations of illusions and delusions that occur throughout the *Fables* and *Les Contes et nouvels*. That she should pursue this line of inquiry is not entirely unexpected, since it represents a continuation of previous work done on the subject.

However, her present methodology offers a departure from the past. Whereas in her book *Cognitive Space and Patterns of Deceit in La Fontaine's Contes* (Rookwood Press, 1998) Gris e relied heavily on the models of frame analysis put forth by Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffmann, she now employs a more fluid critical approach, one that blends careful close readings of texts with a consideration of seventeenth-century debates in science, philosophy, theology, and culture. As a result, Gris e reveals the degree to which La Fontaine's *oeuvre* is at once an engaged and playful response to the issues of his time.

The monograph is divided into two sections. The first part, "Illusions et fausses perspectives," contains three chapters while four chapters comprise the second part, which is entitled "Paroles pi g es et d tournements." The study lacks, however, a coherent, overarching structure. The author asserts that this is deliberate, for as we learn in the introduction, Gris e sees La Fontaine's work as being so complex that it resists "une analyse m thodique et compl te" (13). Although I am in agreement concerning the complexity of La Fontaine, scholarly studies by David Lee Rubin and Michael Vincent suggest that the poet's works lend themselves to more defined methodologies. But this is just a quibble on my part. Her examination of La Fontaine's fascination with deception ranges from offering a taxonomy of cognitive and moral relativisms (chapter 1) to cataloguing types of lies (chapter 4) and false promises (chapter 6) to exploring how magic (chapter 2) and casuistry (chapter 5) falsify our perceptions to engaging in extended analyses of "Les Filles de Min e" (chapter 3) and "La Clochette" (chapter 7). Given the different perspectives from which Gris e approaches the problem, readers may wish to focus, according to their interests, on specific chapters since each chapter represents a self-contained unit.

The book as a whole does bear witness to the author's deep understanding of La Fontaine. While all the chapters are strong, two in particular are most noteworthy. The first is chapter 4, "Mensonges strat giques," which investigates, as its title suggests, the issue of lying. What role does intention play in telling lies? Are there instances in which lies are not only acceptable but necessary? Is keeping silent the same as telling a lie? To answer these

**BOOK REVIEWS**

questions, Gris  draws upon the writings of Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas as well as seventeenth-century views concerning lying. From there, she develops an index of different kinds of lies, based on their purpose, which she then discusses within the context of fables and tales such as “Le D positaire infid le,” “Le Loup et le Renard,” “Le Cuvier,” or “Richard Minutolo.” The chapter reveals not only how acts of lying permeate the very fabric of the poet’s work but also provides us with an original schema of lies that has application beyond La Fontaine. The second is chapter 7 in which Gris  performs a highly nuanced analysis of the tale “La Clochette.” Her reading is remarkable in several respects: it handles a difficult subject matter (the rape of a young girl) with sensitivity; it demonstrates how different forms of deception are simultaneously at play; and it illustrates how La Fontaine transforms the medieval *pastourelle* into “un conte d’avertissement.” As a consequence of her detailed consideration, we have a greater appreciation of how “La Clochette” goes beyond a simple moral tale. Indeed, we may see the tale’s depth reflected in the image of the bell itself, which becomes simultaneously “un instrument d’avertissement,” “une figure du texte lui-m me,” and “un instrument ludique” (222-23).

In conclusion, *Jean de La Fontaine: Tromperies et illusions* offers insights into the poet’s major works that will undoubtedly stimulate further explorations. Even though she focuses on false perceptions, Gris ’s own perception of La Fontaine reflects a thorough, meticulous, and informed understanding of texts and contexts. This study will be of interest to both La Fontaine specialists and those not familiar with his work, since it furnishes useful categories for organizing and speaking about types of trickery and deception.

**Anne L. Birberick, Northern Illinois University**

**Postert, Kirsten. *Tragédie historique ou Histoire en Tragédie? Les sujets d'histoire moderne dans la tragédie française (1550-1715)*. Tübingen: Narr Verlag, 2010. ISBN 978-3-8233-6553-2. Pp. 440.**

This study of French tragedies based on modern (defined as post-1492) history provides a systematic overview of a subgenre that has typically been viewed as anomalous and inconsequential. Kirsten Postert demonstrates that the phenomenon was not really rare (she has found 32 such tragedies from the period under review) or viewed at the time as unacceptable (some theorists deem them legitimate and discuss the feasibility of writing them). She goes beyond previous studies by formulating a categorization for the plays based on such factors as the author's explicitly stated motivation for writing, the privileging of either character study or of historical causality, and the attempt (or lack thereof) to make the text conform to literary conventions. She also situates the discussion of the subgenre within the broader context of how thinkers of the classical era understood the intersection of history and drama.

The opening chapter provides a theoretical underpinning for the new critical approach by juxtaposing overviews of the development of historiographic theory and poetic theory in France during the period in question and by showing how in the seventeenth century the two were not as far apart as we might imagine today. Given that the most widely read historians emphasized aesthetic excellence and moral instruction, along with an emphasis on what is timeless, rather than erudition and emphasis on factual accuracy, the principle of *vraisemblance* overlaps the two realms. The discussion of how the latter principle functioned in classical dramatic theory retraces familiar ground, but the collation of texts referring to the writing of tragedy based on French and/or recent history brings to light many unfamiliar texts.

Postert logically divides the analytical chapters into three groups based on geography: the episodes from modern history chosen by writers of tragedy were derived almost exclusively from

**BOOK REVIEWS**

France, England and the Orient (mainly Turkey). Each chapter consists of two parts: a general treatment of the corpus as a whole, followed by a detailed analysis of two tragedies deemed to be especially significant or representative. This allows her to avoid the pitfall of providing little more than a catalogue of plot synopses. The chapter on France is prefaced by an intriguing analysis of plays based on French history or current events in the periods just preceding 1550 and just following 1715. The former group of works, labeled as moralities, reveal one of the tendencies that will also dominate some of the later tragedies: they feature a polemic or propagandistic perspective, trying to shape popular perception of events.

Given that one of the practical difficulties in writing tragedies about modern history, as often noted at the time, is the lack of distance, which tends to restrict the poet's freedom of invention and may prevent the characters from attaining the heroic elevation associated with the remote past, writers resort to a variety of strategies. For France, where geographical proximity is unavoidable, this was especially tricky. Writers of propagandistic plays often used onomastic semi-disguise: the names of easily recognizable persons are replaced by anagrams or initials or by Greek names that hint at their roles. Another method was to introduce supernatural events or personages, such as a representative of God or Satan, thus deemphasizing the psychological dimension (the characters are mere puppets of cosmic forces). For non-French subjects, aesthetic distance was based on both geographic distance and radical differences in mores: in fact, authors played on popular stereotypes of the countries as barbaric. England was widely viewed as both isolated (being an island) and filled with harsh, cruel inhabitants. The Ottomans, alien in far more ways than the English, were an object of both fascination and fear.

The analyses of individual plays make for interesting reading and contain much new material. In some cases the comprehensive review of possible historical sources for the plays includes works not considered by previous scholars. However, Postert goes beyond the usual inquiry into the degree of fidelity to the historical

sources at the playwright's disposal to try to determine how each playwright viewed history in general and how and why he manipulated the factual material. Among the elements she studies is local color (the number and importance of references to the geography of the country where the action is set and to relevant historical events outside the basic plot); these are often far fewer than we might expect. Non-propagandistic authors from the Renaissance tended to treat their material in a highly abstract fashion, using the specific historical event merely as an exemplum in order to teach philosophical and moral lessons: even the powerful are subject to forces beyond human control (fate or divine providence). In plays from the last third of the seventeenth century the notion of "secret history," which likewise dominated the fictional production of the time, led to a privileging to love plots and purely psychological motivations at the expense of political considerations.

Postert also provides plausible hypotheses about why certain types of subject matter were chosen. In the case of plays dealing with France, the focus tends to be on periods of civil war or other national dangers: the denouement typically points to a resolution of the crisis in which the monarchy is preserved and peace is restored. If tragedies based on English history are limited to the period of the Tudors, with most featuring Elizabeth I, it is mainly because that was the era when England suffered several phenomena that France was spared, including the official triumph of Protestantism and the presence on the throne of a woman (and one thought to be dominated by passion and caprice). At the same time, the most reused subjects seemed to resonate with French audiences in special ways. Mary Stuart, of course, had been Queen of France, and many French writers believed that she was persecuted for that very reason. The Earl of Essex seems to have embodied for the French public the spirit of aristocratic resistance to absolutism found in works like *Le Cid*. Thomas More was viewed as a Catholic martyr who resisted both earthly tyranny and religious heresy. The Turks, with their sumptuous lifestyle and reputation for excessive passion, especially violence, were especially appealing to baroque sensibilities. Moreover, the Ottoman royal family was especially suitable for the type of plot recommended by

**BOOK REVIEWS**

Aristotle (conflicts between close relatives) because of the constant and bloody power struggles within families. Both societies could serve either to criticize flaws in the “other” or to make veiled criticism of France itself.

Another of Postert’s strong points is the problematizing of the concept of history. She notes the degree and varieties of bias found in historical materials of the time, including an obvious pro-French attitude in dealing with non-French lands, a pro-Catholic attitude in dealing with Protestant rulers, and a general abhorrence of the mores of “orientals.” Historians, no less than playwrights, sometimes added material of their own invention. Moreover, dramatists treating historical subjects frequently relied on fictional sources for their plots. On the other hand, tragedies composed at the time of the events they dramatize or shortly thereafter could be seen as a part of the historical record, documenting how people perceived recent events and trying to set down for posterity what the author deemed the correct interpretation.

The main flaw of this book is the lack of careful proofreading. There are numerous errors involving everything from typography to grammar and punctuation to misspelled names to facts (Mary Stuart was born “cinq ans après la mort de son père”). In some passages sentences or paragraphs do not flow well, or information seems to be in the wrong place. But despite those minor deficiencies, this is a useful study that goes beyond the scope of existing scholarship and proves that a largely neglected group of tragedies deserves renewed attention.

**Perry Gethner, Oklahoma State University**

**Brian Brazeau, *Writing a New France, 1604-1632: Empire and Early Modern French Identity*. Ashgate, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6112-2. Pp. 142.**

Brian Brazeau’s first book makes a series of useful connections between fields that too often have remained hermetically separated from each other. Instead of reading early modern Canada largely in

terms of later Canadian national development, Brazeau seeks to understand how metropolitan French concerns about identity and history were played out across the Atlantic; thus, the project of settling new territory is presented in the context of the years following the Wars of Religion. Brazeau asks how French debates with which many readers will be familiar might be imagined differently in the context of new world realities, and in so doing pushes us all to think farther afield.

Brazeau's book gives a precise account of developments in New France; it would serve as a well-structured introduction for anyone eager to learn more about France's missions and settlements in the new world. The book carefully delineates its historical remit, addressing the first period of French writing about North America, taking in authors such as Samuel de Champlain, Marc Lescarbot, and the early years of the Jesuit Relations. Brazeau describes how Nouvelle France could be imagined as just that, a new version of the old, and sets out a number of ways in which the relation between self and other were understood, both more broadly in this period and in the writings that first introduced the territories of Nouvelle France to a readership back home.

The book consists of an introduction and four chapters, all of which raise engaging questions. The first chapter addresses the French insistence that Canada was an appropriate territory for viticulture. Faced with the surprise of bitter winters, French settlers described the potential for winemaking in order to make the colonial project seem more viable. This chapter provides a wealth of charming material; I particularly liked Lescarbot's account of those on the journey who were too sick to sip at their wine and instead had it brought to them in hosepipes. Though I would have appreciated a more historically engaged reading of French viticulture, this chapter is impressive for its careful reading of the language of conversion and community evinced by these early modern assessments of wine.

The second chapter addresses the French evaluations and translations of indigenous languages such as Gabriel Sagard's Huron dictionary, serving as a useful correction of platitudinous assumptions about French respect for Amerindian cultures. It gives

**BOOK REVIEWS**

a solid account of French/Amerindian dictionaries and grammars and the problems of translation, putting this linguistic work into the context of mid seventeenth-century debates about language in metropolitan France.

The third chapter reads Marc Lescarbot's *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France* in relation to Renaissance historiography, showing how the "new" France was understood in relation to a particular vision of French history and progress. If both the Gauls and the Amerindians could be imagined to have Noah as a common ancestor, then, as Brazeau deftly puts it, the project of New France could be said to be a form of family reunion.

The fourth chapter takes up the relation between missionaries and merchants in New France, and though it is strong on specifics (setting Lescarbot and Champlain in dialog with contemporary mercantilist theory) ventures into rather uncertain territory in making claims about the relation between religion and commerce, arguing that "France...traditionally insulated the religious from the economic." I found this argument rather less convincing than those in other chapters, but I appreciated the comparative elements of this chapter, which deftly contrast English approaches in the New World with those of the French.

Brazeau's book will open up an area that remains opaque to many readers, and it takes the important step of indicating the complex relations, imaginary and economic, between the two Frances, "old" and "new."

**Katherine Ibbett, University College, London**

**Wallis, Andrew. *Traits d'union : L'anti-roman et ses espaces*.  
Tübingen : Narr Verlag, 2011. ISBN 978-3-8233-6605-8.  
Pp. 142.**

L'étude d'Andrew Wallis parvient à cerner un corpus imposant, depuis les "trois œuvres maîtresses du siècle" que sont,

d'après Serroy, les romans de Sorel, Scarron et Furetière, en passant par le récit largement autobiographique de Tristan L'Hermite sans oublier des textes moins connus comme *Le Gascon extravagant* ou *Le Parasite mormon*. La veine des histoires comiques a déjà fait l'objet d'études d'envergure mais la perspective novatrice ici consiste à mettre en évidence un genre anti-romanesque, défini comme un espace hybride, un entre-deux littéraire. Alors qu'il est commun de dire que ces auteurs ont ouvert la voie au roman moderne, l'approche de Wallis consiste à montrer qu'ils se positionnent encore par rapport au romanesque "traditionnel", construisant un pont entre deux états de l'histoire du genre.

La démonstration selon laquelle ces textes s'inscrivent en faux par rapport au roman héroïque dominant, ses longueurs, son invraisemblance, son esthétique idéalisante, en particulier en brisant l'illusion mimétique, est tout à fait convaincante. Ce travail est d'autant plus nécessaire que, comme les grands romans en vogue au XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle nous sont à présent relativement mal connus, on risque de passer à côté de la parodie et de l'intention subversive qui motive le roman "comique". Wallis se livre ainsi à des comparaisons particulièrement productives entre les personnages figés et immuables des romans traditionnels, et des héros "parés d'un certain devenir" (19) comme Francion ou le narrateur des *Fragments d'une Histoire comique*. On regrette cependant que les procédés de réécriture ne soient pas plus systématiquement mis en évidence : le premier chapitre se clôt sur une définition de l'anti-roman qui tient insuffisamment compte de l'hétérogénéité du corpus.

On comprend toutefois qu'une des intentions de l'auteur a été de dépasser l'impression de foisonnement et d'éclatement qui se dégage de cette veine romanesque en mettant en lumière une architecture commune. Un point fort de l'étude est l'analyse de la représentation de l'espace, en particulier à travers la métaphore du palais et la démystification des lieux romanesques, visible dans les frontispices des anti-romans. Wallis fait ainsi apparaître "un réseau symbolique d'où jaillissent des espaces en opposition" (60) tout en se livrant à des lectures fines de certains passages (la caverne dans le rêve de Francion). L'attention au détail est d'ailleurs une des

**BOOK REVIEWS**

grandes qualités de cet ouvrage, qui fait utilement le point sur des personnages secondaires et des épisodes peu commentés.

On suit moins Wallis par contre dans son développement sur les héros fous, appuyé sur une histoire de la folie au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle qui ne nous semble pas particulièrement éclairer ces textes. Prendre la folie de Lysis, dans le *Berger extravagant*, au pied de la lettre, c'est négliger qu'il s'agit encore là d'un ressort de la satire, le rire devant sanctionner, à travers ces extravagances, les romans de bergerie qui empoisonnent l'esprit de leurs lecteurs. L'argument de la folie s'inverse ainsi en un appel au bon sens. Wallis constate que "par la digression, par les histoires intercalaires, par les interventions des narrateurs et d'autres procédés, les auteurs anti-romanesques invitent le lecteur à la coproduction de leurs textes". Cette liberté apparente dissimule pourtant un pacte de lecture particulièrement contraignant, visant à remplacer l'immersion fictionnelle, génératrice de crédulité, par l'ironie et la distance critique.

En somme, la perspective adoptée par Wallis a le mérite de sortir des catégorisations traditionnelles (visant par exemple à distinguer dans ces romans une dimension sociale et une dimension philosophique) pour porter le débat sur un terrain extrêmement productif, celui d'une pratique subversive de la littérature conçue comme une machine à réformer le lecteur. Cette approche aurait sans doute gagné à être plus systématiquement problématisée. Ainsi, la notion essentielle de *parasitage*, développée dans le dernier chapitre, nous semble délayée dans un discours critique qui juxtapose l'analyse rhétorique, structurale et psychanalytique sans parvenir à dégager une unité.

Enfin, l'ouvrage pâtit assurément d'une relecture insuffisante, qui a laissé passer un grand nombre d'erreurs syntaxiques, grammaticales et lexicales. Ce déficit du style mis à part, l'étude de Wallis propose une perspective stimulante et innovante dans un domaine qui mérite tout notre intérêt.

**Nathalie Freidel, Wilfrid Laurier University**