CHAPTER 11

The Italian Job: John Wolfe, Giacomo Castelvetro and Printing Pietro Aretino

Kate De Rycker

Imagine that you are an Italian living in London during the 1580s: where do you go to find Italian books? You could try your luck with various booksellers who may have imported titles, but to be certain you could decide to head to Distaff Lane, south east of St Paul's Churchyard, and find John Wolfe's shop.

Between 1581 and 1591, Wolfe specialised in Italian works, printing around 50 titles in ten years; John Charlewood, Wolfe's next greatest competitor, published only sixteen Italian books. Wolfe also sent the most books, 17 titles, to the Frankfurt Book Fair over eight years, followed by Thomas Vautrollier who sent 11 titles to Frankfurt over a ten year period.1 Wolfe had worked in Florence during the 1570s, and once back in England became the de facto leader of the printers’ rebellion in 1582. Despite his defiantly individualistic beginnings, Wolfe was brought into the fold of the Stationers’ Company in 1584, and was made the company beadle three years later.2

Perhaps thanks to his Florentine apprenticeship, a clique of Italian authors and editors soon formed around his print-shop. Pettrucio Ubaldini, in his preface to the first Italian work printed by Wolfe, La Vita di Carlo Magno (1581), says that “Italian works can be printed no less easily in London than they are printed elsewhere (this being the first), through the skill and diligence of John Wolfe her own citizen, by whose efforts you could have other works in the same language day by day”.3 Wolfe may have turned to printing Italian texts because of


3 Petruccio Ubaldini, La vita di Carlo Magno Imperadore (London, 1581), p. 4. Translation from the original Italian. Ubaldini was wrong about this being the first Italian work printed in London, that honour goes to the Cathechismo of Michelangelo Florio (father of the famous John Florio) in 1553.
connections made in Florence, or because there were not as many restrictions for printing foreign works as there were for those in English. Maybe he saw the opportunity to trade banned books back to Italy. Why he suddenly stopped printing Italian texts in 1591 is the more interesting question. In this year, the titles he had previously entered into the Stationers’ Register were either abandoned or handed over to other printers. In addition, Wolfe ceased to send books to the Frankfurt Fair, and as if to mark this break from Italian writing, in August of the same year he printed an anonymous pamphlet which was bitterly anti-Italian: *A Discovery of the great Subtlety and Wonderful Wisdom of the Italians*, itself a translation from French. Our journey into this Elizabethan ‘Italian job’ therefore begins with the following question: why would Wolfe, the leading specialist in England, suddenly let go of his Italian account?

**Lone Wolfe?**

Perhaps the problem with this question is on focussing too narrowly on Wolfe himself. Thanks to the work of critics such as Zachary Lesser and Douglas A. Brooks, the role of a publisher such as Wolfe is now recognised as being of equal importance in the creation of a text as that of the writer. However, by emphasising the role of the printing houses in the period, the power and authority of the individual ‘creator’ has, in some respects, merely been transferred from the ‘author’ to a figure such as Wolfe, to the cost of other collaborators within the process. Wolfe’s life-story holds enough imaginative power to make him appear as the outsider of the London book trade and very much the ‘lone Wolfe’, yet by the late 1580s he held increasingly important positions in the Stationers’ Company and often gave the job of ‘sourcing’ texts to others. In this light, his specialisation in Italian works can be shown to be much more of a collaborative affair than we previously thought.

One such collaborator was the editor Giacomo Castelvetro. Castelvetro was an Italian Protestant and nephew of the humanist scholar Lodovico Castelvetro. Both fled to Geneva after Lodovico was denounced for heresy. Giacomo travelled around Europe to cities such as Lyon, Basel and Vienna before moving to London.

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5 This appears to have been common practice for Wolfe, see his dedicatory epistle to John Huighen van Linschoten, *His discours of voyages into the Easte and West Indies* (London, 1598).