Review Essay

Grand Designs: Mutio Oddi in Exile from Urbino

Eileen Reeves
Princeton University, USA
ereeves@Princeton.edu


Alexander Marr’s complex study of the early modern mathematician, architect, tutor, and cultural broker Mutio Oddi begins when its protagonist is about forty years of age, and experiencing a rebirth of sorts. Liberated after several years of incarceration in 1610, Oddi found himself exiled from his native Urbino, and obliged to seek employment outside the Duchy first in busy, striving Milan and then in the provincial backwater of Lucca; return to the patria would be denied him until 1636. In leaving prison for this uncertain future, Oddi carried with him the most extraordinary documents: drafts of mathematical treatises scratched with ink made of soot on paper of his own manufacture, and whimsical architectural sketches of the city he would be forced to abandon. To judge from the few references to his “disgrace” in his eventual publications, he bore little in the way of resentment towards his former patron, Duke Francesco Maria II della Rovere, but excessive optimism about the prospect of repatriation.

The depiction of the cell at once as a site of privation, misery, and despair, and of febrile creativity and enduring insight was perhaps a familiar fiction in the early modern period. Benvenuto Cellini, Torquato Tasso, Tommaso Campanella variously produced drawings, sonnets, letters, and treatises in similar circumstances, and Oddi’s contemporary Galileo Galilei would
identify the place where he wrote his last works as his "prison in Arcetri." Oddi’s compositions, unlike theirs, have long since slipped beneath the threshold of notice. Marr’s effort is to reanimate the world of that exiled scholar by showing the range and the contours of his interest in mathematics, the sorts of professional opportunities available to him after his expulsion from Urbino, the logic of his trade in publications and instruments, and above all the still visible traces of his career, friendships, and beliefs through analysis of two remarkable paintings. This meticulous reconstruction of Oddi’s ambient – both the actual setting of Milan, and the idealized memory of Urbino – acts as a counterweight to much of what we know of Galileo’s Padua and Florence. At the same time, the fact that Galilean scholarship has addressed of late the dynamics of patronage and gift giving, Galileo’s cultural interests, his management of what he regarded as his intellectual property, and his early connections with Oddi’s mentor Guidobaldo del Monte make it possible to compare several aspects of their very different lives. The sustained attention to the place of geometry within Renaissance culture, moreover, offers an important backdrop for Marr’s case study.

The initial stages of Oddi’s career are obscure, but the crucial event seems to have been the doubtless unhappy discovery that some defect in his vision would impede his development as an apprentice to Federico Barocci, Urbino’s most prominent living painter, the evident successor to Raphael, and among the greatest of early modern colorists. With the support of Barocci and perhaps of Duke Francesco Maria II himself, Oddi concentrated instead on the study of perspective, eventually pursuing mathematics under the tutelage of Marquis Guidobaldo del Monte, and developing skills as an architect. Given the strong overlap in the education of artists and engineers in the period, and their common reliance on draftsmanship, the alteration in Oddi’s professional trajectory was perhaps not dramatic.

1 Galileo Galilei, Opere, 20 vols., Vol. 16: 1634-1636 (Florence: Tipografia Barbèra, 1905), p. 400. This and all subsequent translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.


3 On the two sorts of education see Matteo Valleriani, Galileo Engineer (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), pp. 7-12; for the range in meaning of disegno for the sculptor and architect in