

Leon Battista Alberti. *Momus*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. xxv + 407 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00754-3.

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Momus's Star Turn

Sarah Knight and Virginia Brown's critical Latin edition and English translation of Leon Battista Alberti's *Momus* is the eighth volume to appear in Harvard University Press's superb I Tatti Renaissance Library, under the general editorship of James Hankins. An epic satire focused on the little-known classical god Momus, archetype of the critic and troublemaker, this work represents a notable contribution to neo-Latin satire in general and an eccentric addition to Alberti's corpus in particular. Burckhardt's exemplar of the "uomo universale," Alberti wrote a wide range of works in both Latin and Italian, including treatises on painting, architecture, the learned professions, horse-training, cryptography, and love; dialogues on the family and moral philosophy; and comic dialogues, fables, epics, and orations, including one on the death of his dog, all in addition to his endeavors as an architect. The appearance of an English version of *Momus* is a welcome complement to David Marsh's translations of two other Latin comic works by Alberti, the *Intercenales* (1987) and the Aesopic *Apologi* (2004).[1]

In his preface Alberti places his four-book work in the tradition of ancient poets such as Homer, Pindar, and Sophocles, who used the classical gods to explore moral archetypes, though he apologizes for doing so in prose. Although Alberti does not cite him, his truest model is actually Lucian, whose satirical dialogues, such as *Parliament of the Gods*, *Charon*, *Zeus Rants*, *The Parasite*, and *Icaromenippus* are all sources for *Momus*. As for the purpose of Alberti's divine allegory, he claims that his work contains "a number of ideas which have a view of the shaping of the best prince â? ¦ [and] not a few things

which pertain to analyzing the behavior of the prince's entourage" (p. 9). In fact, one of the 1520 editions of the work gives "De principe" as its title and this has been carried down as a subtitle in subsequent editions of the work. Certainly, Jupiter in the story plays the role of an incompetent, indecisive prince, who does not think through his creations, makes rash decisions, does not heed the best sources of advice, and only too late sees the light at the very end of the story, where Alberti inserts the skeleton of a princely advice manual. As much as with Jupiter, however, the story deals with the supporting cast of gods, including Momus, who represent the array of troublesome, self-interested, scheming courtiers.

The real target of Alberti's satire is a matter of debate. According to Knight and Brown, some argue that it is the Papacy. In this interpretation—based on the dating of the work to ca. 1443-1450, upon Alberti's return to Rome from Florence—Jupiter's hasty plan to re-design the world mirrors Nicholas V's plans for refurbishing Rome. Alternatively, because of an incident in the story in which Momus has his beard torn out by philosophers, Francesco Filelfo—to whom this actually happened—wrote Alberti to ask if the story was about him, and the naughty Momus would be an apt alter ego for the contentious humanist. Finally, one of the surviving manuscripts of *Momus* includes an anonymous hand's comment that the work is the "story of Bartolomeo Fazio" (p. xxii).

Whatever its true target is, the anti-hero of the story is Momus, who finally wins a starring role in an epic story. Momus, whom Alberti characterizes as "an ag-

gressive obstructionist, hostile and annoying,” had only minor appearances in classical literature (p. 13). In one of Aesop’s fables, which Alberti refigures in the opening of his work, Momus criticizes the creations of various gods and is exiled by Zeus for his cavils. In Lucian’s *Parliament of the Gods* and *Zeus Rants*, on which Alberti also drew, he rebukes the gods for their moral laxity and flawed sense of justice toward mortals. Alberti’s Momus stirs up trouble not only at the divine but also at the human level. He is something of an anti-Promethean figure as he eventually gets chained to a rock, and, in fact, for all the havoc he wreaks he is almost a comic adumbration of Milton’s Lucifer two centuries hence.

The plot of the story is so absurdly intricate as to preclude a full summary here, but in broadest terms: Momus flees from heaven on the eve of his trial for treason for criticizing the creations of various gods, and especially Jupiter’s shortsightedness in creating mortals with such grandeur that they engendered the envy of the gods, necessitating as an afterthought his afflicting them with all manner of hardships. In exile on earth, Momus undermines mortals’ appreciation of the gods, but then, for his encouraging women to make votive offerings to enhance their beauty, he is recalled to heaven, where he is determined to survive now by simulation in the divine court. Eventually the humans’ offerings and demands become so nettlesome, as Momus intended, that Jupiter decides that he needs to re-create the world, with all the courtier gods giving advice on his ambitious scheme. Momus offers up a notebook of precepts from philosophers, a rare authentic act to help, which Jupiter ignores, preferring to make his own journey down to earth. Eventually Jupiter decides that he does not need to re-fashion the world because he realizes that mortals cherish the gods after all, and that Momus has libeled them. Momus, who earlier had been castrated by Juno and other goddesses for his contemptuous attitude toward women—a reflection of Alberti’s own misogyny in evidence throughout the story—is now chained to a rock in the sea. Jupiter, after losing control of the divine sphere and scrapping his plans to reconstruct the mortal one, eventually reads the notebook of philosophical advice for princes that Momus assembled for him.

The story in broadest terms depicts the hard-won education of Jupiter as a bumbling prince who foolishly honored Momus when he was most dissembling and ignored him when he was most earnest. But the targets of Alberti’s satire extend well beyond the foibles of princes, popes, and courtiers. The various visitations to earth by those from above (Momus and Jupiter) as well as those

from below (Charon) offer many opportunities to criticize various worldly pursuits and archetypes: professions including the military life, kingship, and commerce are dismissed in ironic preference to the life of the beggar after Lucian’s *The Parasite*; philosophers are lampooned for theorizing about nature, moral duty, and happiness but having no appreciation for the natural world, meager capacity for charity, and little hope for happiness (owing to their poverty); the clergy or theologians are presumably indicted in Alberti’s depiction of those who “would use the fear of the gods to fortify and render impregnable their arms, their camps and their empires” (p. 155); and, finally, humanity in general is implicated in one story that explains how mortals’ masks are at last removed upon their arrival at Acheron. As the editors suggest, this last theme, that of hypocrisy, reinforced by the frequency in the text of the words “simulation” and “dissimulation,” is a major one in the work and perhaps appropriately so in an epic featuring the god of candor (pp. xxi-xxii). At times, however, it appears that Alberti might himself be using the mask of classical mythology to offer up his own pessimistic challenge to a divine scheme that has gods (God) visit hardships upon mortals as a perverse afterthought. At an even more personal level, a cynical intellectual who makes similar theological complaints in book 2 also charges that “the gods hate ingenious and active people” (“sollertes agentesque oderint,” pp. 166-167). This is almost certainly an autobiographical lament, given the theme of creative industry and work that characterized so much of Alberti’s life and vernacular writings. The use of “agentes” here perhaps has its counterpart in the language of “adoperarsi” and “esercitarsi” that Joan Gadol isolated in Alberti’s vernacular dialogues in her wonderful study of the author.[2]

The Latin text by Brown and Knight and the English translation by Knight have been expertly rendered. The two prior modern editions by Giuseppe Martini (1942) and Rino Consolo (1986) apparently did not make use of the two most authoritative manuscripts containing autograph revisions, a study of which Alessandro Perosa had begun (1988) but did not complete before his death. The editors have used these manuscripts in their editions, providing a technical apparatus offering variant readings, cancellations, etc. from the manuscripts Perosa collated, and alternate readings from the 1941 and 1986 editions. Drawing upon and expanding Consolo’s source identifications, footnotes to the translation provide an excellent guide to classical sources and cross-references to Alberti’s other works, especially the *Intercenales*. The translation is fluid, graceful, and appropriately colloquial

at times; Alberti would be pleased with the deft capturing of his sometimes bawdy tone. The decision to translate the goddess Fraus, with whom Momus has a love/hate relationship, as “Mischief” rather than “Fraud” is a bit baffling, especially given the work’s theme of dissimulation.

Alberti’s revival of Momus offers him the chance to add a new epic to classical comedy. Although pilfering Lucian, he does offer an imaginative and bizarre biography of the neglected god of candor, criticism, and conflict. As archetype of the naysayer, Momus would surface again in a notable role as a character in the prologue to Tomaso Garzoni’s 1585 *Piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*, where he appears as the embodiment of potential critics of Garzoni’s work.[3] Momus as faultfinder, however, would find little to complain about in Knight and Brown’s fine edition of Alberti’s strange satire.

Notes

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[1]. *Dinner Pieces: A Translation of the Intercenales*, trans. David Marsh (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1987); *Renaissance Fables: Aesopic Prose by Leon Battista Alberti, Bartolomeo Scala, Leonardo da Vinci, Bernardino Baldi*, trans. David Marsh (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004).

[2]. Joan Gadol, *Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Man of the Early Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 225-231. As for the character in book 2, perhaps this figure should be connected with the philosopher Gelastus, with whom Momus meets up with again in bk. 4 and whom Eugenio Garin identified as having autobiographical traits (see editors’ note at p. 395, n10).

[3]. Tomaso Garzoni, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*, ed. Paolo Cherchi and Beatrice Collina (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), pp. 29-62.