EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

George McClure, *Doubting the Divine in Early Modern Europe: The Revival of Momus, the Agnostic God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). xiii + 268 pp. ISBN 978 1 1084 7027 8.

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The little-known Greek god of criticism and ridicule, Momus, may not be able to claim a celebrated position in the pantheon of Olympian deities, but it is his modest — and mysterious — origins that, for historian Charles McClure, allowed Momus to emerge as an unlikely figure in the history of doubt and unbelief. Despite his lack of biography, to say nothing of his infrequent appearances in classical literature, Momus became in the hands of a long line of enthusiasts more than a mere literary character or persona: he evolved into, as McClure assiduously outlines, a "medium" (p. vii), "a trope" (p. 227), and "a code" (p. 241) for writers intent on providing "a check on unquestioned authority" (p. 241). More specifically, where the inveterate troublemaker Momus left his most distinctive mark is on the history of "dangerous challenges to religious belief" and to "literary and intellectual authority" (p. vii).

This legacy is the subject of McClure's *Doubting the Divine in Early Modern Europe: The Revival of Momus, the Agnostic God*. On one level, the book uncovers the reception and ideological repurposing of Momus, mainly in his "starring moment in the early modern era", as the often petulant yet sometimes playful god sees his status as carping critic grow ever more complicated and, in McClure's opinion, surprisingly vital (p. xi). But as readers will rapidly perceive, there are deeper intellectual and theological resonances waiting to be revealed in Momus's story. As the terms "doubting" and "agnostic" from the book's title indicate, the author positions his subject — and the many works in which he appears —

against the sweeping changes, and religious violence, of Reformation and post-Reformation Europe, including the growth of skepticism and the rise of rational thought.

There has been no shortage of treatments on the practices and forms of doubt, of course, especially as it relates to the work of such writers as Lucretius, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Spinoza.[1] And like much of the most recent scholarship on the topic, McClure's study brings together material and concerns from several fields — religion, literature, philosophy — to craft his response to a question that he reiterates, by means of summary, in the book's conclusion: "What was the over-arching function of the Momus trope in Western culture and why was his reception in the early modern era so highly charged and controversial?" (p. 227). The answer is to be found in the close relationship between religious belief and authorial legitimacy, or more broadly, in the "connections between theological and literary doubt" (p. vii). These connections, according to McClure, eventually deteriorate during the Enlightenment, as Momus's "theological relevance began to wane, and his identity became more wedded to intellectual and literary criticism" (p. xi). But by that time, Momus's power as an agent of frank speech or even revolt had been assured, and with it, the unmistakable tradition that his name and reputation could — and did — evoke in works as varied as Puccini's *La Bohème*, Kafka's *The Castle*, and the Mardi Gras customs of the Momus Krewe in New Orleans.

Doubting the Divine is divided into seven chapters, the first and last of which cover material far removed from the early modern writers and thinkers at the heart of McClure's book. While the conclusion traces nineteenth- and twentieth-century reprisals of Momus (see above paragraph), chapter one provides background on the two classical writers — Aesop and Lucian — most responsible for shaping the Momus myth in the centuries after the god first enters the historical record in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Scholars of early modern English culture will recognize Aesop's contribution to this myth in the oft-repeated aphorism about the dangers of peering through a window into man's breast. With Lucian, the Momus inheritance is more complex, though ultimately more influential given the popularity of and, later, ambivalence towards the second-century satirist and his comic dialogues in the Renaissance. McClure devotes more than 20 pages to Lucian, focusing on the two dialogues — *Zeus Rants* and *Parliament of the Gods* — in which Momus becomes

[1] Studies mentioned by McClure include Allison Brown's *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (2010), Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (2011), and Ada Palmer's *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (2014). Studies not mentioned by McClure include Michelle Zerba's *Doubt and Skepticism in Antiquity and the Renaissance* (2013) and any works devoted to Montaigne and skepticism.

the ‘champion of a divine purge’ by exercising, to devastating effect, his right to free speech (*parrhesia*). Although there is perhaps too much attention to Lucian’s biography here, McClure clearly grounds the subsequent ‘revival’ of the Momus myth in early modern Europe on Lucian’s role in elevating ‘the Momus of Hesiod and Aesop into the most iconoclastic god of the ancient world’ (p. 33).

McClure next pivots to the Italian Renaissance in chapter two and, then, in chapter three, to the satire of Reformation Europe, allowing the dimensions of *Doubting the Divine* to come into sharper focus for readers. Although the book follows the evolution of the Momus myth chronologically, the texts analyzed in the middle chapters fall into two categories: those that expand the portrait of the ‘divine rebel’ drawn by the Italian humanist Leon Battista Alberti and those that enthusiastically embrace what Erasmus termed the ‘black wit’ of the envious god (pp. x, 85). As McClure explains, the ‘dual role’ of Momus bequeathed to the Renaissance by Lucian eventually fades once the linkages ‘between theological and literary doubt’ collapsed and ‘the transition to Momus the Critic gained momentum’ (p. xi). Chapters two and three lay the groundwork for this shift. In this regard, then, they are integral to the rest of the book. As I will explain in a moment, though, more sustained attention to Erasmus’s role in this transition might have productively extended McClure’s overall argument.

Alberti’s Latin novel *Momus* (c.1450, published 1520) clearly lies at the heart of McClure’s work, for the long chapter tracing the rebirth of Momus as “Renaissance antihero” not only demonstrates the iconoclasm of this text but also its impact on such later writers as Anton Francesco Doni, Tomaso Garzoni, Giordano Bruno, and Milton. After an extensive review of Alberti’s biography, career, and literary output (pp. 36–52), McClure demonstrates how the writer’s long history of ‘secular self-reliance’ gave birth to ‘the modern world’s first great antihero replete with deep recesses of self-reflective interiority and insightful challenges to both the divine and human worlds’ (pp. 47, 52). The grandness of the claim may startle readers at first. But since McClure’s attention to pertinent historical contexts has already prompted us to see *Momus* in a ‘theologically fraught, heterodox light’, readers (especially those familiar with Milton’s *Paradise Lost*) can appreciate the creative avenues explored by Alberti in transforming Momus into a ‘Luciferian figure’ (p. 36). As McClure works through the four books of the novel, he attends to Alberti’s satirical targets. More importantly, he also charts how the author merges classical and biblical precedents to form this new version of Momus who ‘is no orthodox hero, but as truth-teller…fully reveal[s] his

heart and mind in frank speech and…offer[s] powerful criticism of the heavenly and earthy world' (p. 73).

Contrasted with the figure of 'cosmic agency and rich introspection' developed by Alberti, the Momus who emerges in Erasmus' and Luther's writings can seem downright dull (p. 73). But ultimately, it was this image of Momus, one who played a leading role in rhetorical and literary criticism, that outlasted that of the religious rebel developed by Alberti. As McClure demonstrates, both Erasmus and Luther understood the 'theological dangers of the Momus persona' and chose to adopt 'the Folly guise' in their works instead (p. 88). For Erasmus, that decision also led him to avoid translating the Lucianic dialogues featuring Momus and shaping the dialogue form of *Praise of Folly*. For Luther, who famously denounced Erasmus as a 'true Momus', the dangers of rhetorical mockery appear more acute than the threat posed by religious doubt, though clearly the two remain joined in his imagination (p. 90). The point is that in Reformation religious satire we can paradoxically detect the seeds of the later growth of Momus into an arch-critic for whom 'challenge[s] to authority' primarily meant 'correction to overbearing masters or tradition' rather than to 'agon with the divine' (pp. 240, 75).

McClure does not revisit this specific redeployment of Momus until the book's sixth chapter, entitled 'God of Modern Criticks', in which he analyzes Jonathan Swift's use of the Momus trope in the 'Digression on Criticks' in *The Tale of the Tub* and in the *Battle of the Books*. But in doing so McClure omits the rich and expansive history of Momus in early modern England — a history that saw Momus's name invoked hundreds of times in book prefaces and poems and, by the 1600s, in the theater.[2] In this tradition, depictions of Momus quickly migrated beyond the world of theological controversy, as writers primarily embraced and, in their own way, celebrated the view of Momus as a malicious detractor. As a result, while Swift no doubt moved 'Momus fully from his role as Agnostic to the role of Critic', he had a great many predecessors — including Thomas Lodge, John Harington, and Ben Jonson, to name just a few (p. 212).

In the remainder of the book, McClure is mainly concerned with early modern writers' refashioning or extension of the anti-hero Momus trope created by Alberti. Chapter four looks at what might be the most perilous literary deployment of Momus, Giordano Bruno's *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* — a work whose publication was used to help

[2] In a forthcoming article in *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, I examine the place of Momus in the early modern English tradition through 1642.

condemn its author to death for atheism. McClure draws on the marginal notes of an anonymous commentator of *The Expulsion* and official documents to show how Bruno 'proceeds with a case for naturalism and materialism' (p. 129). Momus's role, in McClure's telling, is to voice 'scurrilous analogies to and ridicule of Christ' (p. 135). The Albertian influence is acknowledged, too, in the text's allusions to Prometheus and the general shape of the plot with its exile and rehabilitation of Momus. McClure gestures towards additional sources of inspiration (such as the Hermetic tradition) and later elaborations on the 'Momus meme' in Spinoza's works and the infamous book known as *The Treatise of the Three Imposters* (p. 142).

By the time readers reach chapter five, McClure has already laid the foundation for the most provocative, if speculative, chapter of *Doubting the Divine*. As earlier references to Alberti's Momus as a 'Luciferian figure' imply, McClure argues that in *Paradise Lost* Momus 'lurks as a figure skulking around the edges, whispering doubts about divine justice and offering a template for Lucifer's rebellion' (p. 144). The evidence for such a claim is multifaceted and laid out in methodical detail. First, McClure elucidates Milton's interest in classical mythology and his familiarity with Thomas Carew's masque *Coelum Britannicum*, which features a Momus who seeks to reform the heavens. An analysis of Milton's visit to Italy in 1638–39 follows wherein McClure revisits the theory that *Paradise Lost* is indebted to an Italian play, *L'Adamo*. The drama's author, Giovan Battista Andreini, had intimate experience with Momus in his own writing, in his familiarity with Alberti's *Momus*, and in performing the role of Momus on stage. In *L'Adamo*, according to McClure, Andreini 'presents…a rhetorical challenge to and rational critique of the divine Architect': as a critic and defender of *parrhesia*, his Lucifer is not 'merely proud and envious' but 'a cerebral critic in the spirit of the Momus of Aesop, Lucian, and Alberti' (pp. 155, 156).

The remaining two thirds of the chapter uncovers how, and under what circumstances, Milton might have come in contact with Alberti's *Momus* during his time in Florence. While McClure confidently asserts that Milton's Lucifer draws on Andreini's Momic version ('the influence', he says, 'is unquestionable'), to his credit he is more judicious in his efforts to prove that Milton read Alberti's *Momus* (p. 156). The biographical and historical evidence, which occupies several pages (pp. 156–158), provides tantalizing yet 'circumstantial clues' on the matter, but ultimately the argument rests on an analysis of the similarities between the two texts. McClure finds three such parallels particularly compelling: the 'political triangulation between divine elements (gods vs. gods, or God vs. angels) and mortals' (p. 160); the 'fickle or perverse attitude' exhibited by the chief deity

'toward the newly created mortals' (p. 161); and the 'interiority of the antihero' built upon a 'common hatred of or contempt for authority' (pp. 162, 164). Approaching *Paradise Lost* 'through the lens of Momus helps contextualize [Milton's] larger interests in "frank speech" in regard to religious orthodoxy' (p. 169) — a perspective McClure then ties to Milton's longstanding interests in the Biblical figure of Job and Lucretian 'currents' (p. 177).

Through his analysis of the controversial and provocative figure of Momus, McClure provides readers with a fluid, fast-moving study of one thread in the enduring tradition of unbelief. *Doubting the Divine* thus contributes to our knowledge of early modern religious — and, eventually, literary — doubt and (though it goes largely unremarked upon) the history of criticism. Moreover, it does so in way that always seems grounded and relevant. By the end of the study, it appears McClure's appreciation for Momus has itself evolved, for the book ends on a note of urgency rather than mere respect for the god of *parrhesia* — a figure, who despite his obscure origins, 'became one of the classical tradition's most vexing and necessary gods' and one who helped fuel the 'vital engine of Western rationalism and cultural change' (p. 241).

Works Cited

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