**Doubting the Divine in Early Modern Europe**

In this book, George McClure examines the intellectual tradition of challenges to religious and literary authority in the early modern era. He explores the hidden history of unbelief through the lens of Momus, the Greek god of criticism and mockery. Surveying his revival in Italy, France, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, and England, McClure shows how Momus became a code for religious doubt in an age when such writings remained dangerous for authors. Momus ("Blame") emerged as a persistent and subversive critic of divine governance and, at times, divinity itself. As an emblem or as an epithet for agnosticism or atheism, he was invoked by writers such as Leon Battista Alberti, Anton Francesco Doni, Giordano Bruno, Luther, and possibly, in veiled form, by Milton in his depiction of Lucifer. The critic of gods also acted, in sometimes related fashion, as a critic of texts, leading the army of Moderns in Swift's *Battle of the Books*, and offering a heretical archetype for the literary critic.

George McClure is Professor of History at the University of Alabama, where he has taught since 1986. He is the author of *Sorrow and Consolation in Italian Humanism*, which won the Marraro Prize of the Society for Italian Historical Studies, *The Culture of Profession in Late Renaissance Italy*, and *Parlour Games and the Public Life of Women in Renaissance Italy*, which received Honorable Mention for Best Book Prize of the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women.

# Doubting the Divine in Early Modern Europe

*The Revival of Momus, the Agnostic God*

GEORGE McCLURE
*University of Alabama*

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# Preface

Why did the relatively obscure and uncelebrated Greek god Momus ("Blame") come to have such an enduring and sometimes subversive history in Western culture? Certainly, this pesky god of criticism and mockery – expelled from heaven for his mischief – stirred up trouble both in this world and the one above. From his birth in Hesiod in the eighth century BCE he has had a persistent presence: among classical fabulists and satirists, Renaissance humanists, Reformation heretics, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary critics, nineteenth-century Bohemians, twentieth-century existentialists, and contemporary Mardi Gras revelers. Focusing on his reincarnations in the early modern period in Italy, France, Spain, Germany, England, and Holland, this book examines how Momus became a medium for dangerous challenges to religious belief and a literary trope for challenges to literary and intellectual authority – and shows how at times these two roles intersected. The study argues that in this period Momus simultaneously signaled the emergence of the Agnostic in the theological realm while reifying the Critic in the literary realm. Understanding this dual role sheds new light on the hidden, or coded, history of unbelief, traces the connections between theological and literary doubt, and explains why such connections coalesced in an era of growing secularization.

In his many epiphanies in Western culture the protean Momus sometimes resembled the transgressive Prometheus, sometimes

the rebellious Lucifer, sometimes the brazen Adversary in Job, sometimes the naughty Pasquino of the Renaissance pasquinade, and sometimes the insolent court jester. Although his skeptical stance and mordant tongue could target various authorities, it was his assault on his own tribe (the gods) that was the most controversial – whether it be explicitly the Greek pantheon of Olympian gods in the ancient period or implicitly the Judeo-Christian God in the early modern era. Momus's vocation of apostasy could have serious consequences for the writers he inspired: for Lucian, whose Momus may have clinched his reputation as an atheist, and for Giordano Bruno, whose use of him likely contributed to his execution for heresy in 1600. In other cases, Momus made his entrance more quietly, like Sandburg's fog, "on little cat feet." Rousting this stealthier Momus as he peeks around doors and from under beds offers new insight into the covert ways in which writers explored the possibility of unbelief.

Momus's birth was a rather unceremonial one announced by Hesiod in the *Theogony* 211, where he is named as one of the many children of Night, along with such entities as Doom, Fate, Death, and Distress. His persona, however, remained largely undefined until enlivened by Aesop, who ensured that "Blame" would be more than an abstraction and would persist as a personified god. He did so by assigning Momus his first controversial act: to judge a contest between Zeus, Poseidon, and Athena as to who could create the most beautiful thing. Momus, however, found fault with all three creations: Poseidon's bull, for not having horns beneath his eyes so that he could see to hit his target; Athena's house for mortals, for not being portable; Zeus's man, for not having a grill over his heart so that his true sentiments could be seen. This fable, the most cited of all of Aesop's Momus tales, established him as a saucy critic of the greater gods. Equally important, his insightful critique of ever-dissembling mortals indirectly reveals what would be Momus's own distinctive feature as one who does *not* conceal his heart, who speaks truth to power, and who is arguably the creator of *parrhesia* (frank speech).

Aesop's use of Momus as a divine critic – challenging, as Leslie Kurke argues, *mythos* with *logos* – was more fully realized centuries later by the second-century CE satirist Lucian, who included the god in nine of his dialogues. In two of these, Momus plays a major part and poses a radical challenge to the Greek pantheon, exposing the flawed justice of the gods, the ambiguous and incompetent oracles of Apollo, and the many "aliens" and unworthy demigods who have entered the pantheon. He assails Zeus's consorting with mortal women as starting a trend that produced such gods, and he extends his reproach to attack the array of Hellenistic, Egyptian, and mystery-religion gods, as well as the philosophical, conceptual gods such as Virtue, Destiny, and others. Momus's attack, though in the guise of protecting the reputation of the pantheon, satirically exposes it as questionable and mocks all belief with an assertion of religious relativism. Lucian's Momus dialogues display most dramatically the Greek tradition of *parrhesia*, a truth-telling that explains Aesop's vague allusion to Momus's departure from the Olympian court.

When Momus reappeared in the Italian Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti honored him with his own epic, in which he extends Lucian's episodic portrait to a full biography. In the first Latin novel of the Renaissance, *Momus* (*c.* 1450), he explains exactly why Momus was kicked out of heaven, how he roiled both the divine and human worlds with his antics, and how he was victimized and largely ignored by Jupiter and other gods. Alberti's story simultaneously makes of Momus a hero (for his *parrhesia*) and an antihero (for cynically becoming a dissembler to match the norms of a decadent culture). Alberti frames his epic as a political allegory of the wayward prince or pope – and certainly that is one layer of its meaning. In fact, however, he may have had a more important target. He uses the persona of Momus (with whom he pairs another figure clearly intended as Alberti's alter ego) to pose doubts about the divine governance of the Christian world in the guise of a naughty god who does so in the safer setting of pagan theology. Hints of unbelief – influenced by the recent recovery of Hermetic and Lucretian texts in Italy – occur in all four books of *Momus*. As a proud and

envious troublemaker – and yet heroically tragic figure chained to a rock as an explicit analogue to Prometheus – Momus is endowed by Alberti with both cosmic agency and tormented interiority that likely inspired a later, more famous divine rebel.

Because Alberti preceded the Reformation – and because he identified his work as an allegory concerning political rule rather than divine rule – his *Momus* did not immediately stir the attention of the censors. In the next century, however, Momus's persona became more suspect as a closet heretical or blasphemous voice. A Spanish translation of Alberti's epic in 1553 purged various passages and took pains to allegorize entire sections that could be read as heterodox or anti-religious. An angry Luther labeled the satirical Erasmus as a "true Momus, mocking all religion and Christ," even though Erasmus – probably with clear intention – did *not* include the Momus dialogues among his thirty-six translations of Lucian. Other satirists and writers both in Italy and France used the Momus model or Momus voice for challenging the divine. Most dramatically, Giordano Bruno's *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* (1584) deploys the god to blasphemously mock the Eucharist and the dual nature of Christ. Worse, his Momus depicts Neptune's son Orion as a Christ-like figure who can walk on water and perform miracles, and he recommends that he be sent to earth to convince mortals that white is black and Nature a "whorish prostitute." No wonder this treatise was explicitly cited as the work that confirmed Bruno as an atheist in the lead-up to his trial and execution.

In the seventeenth century, the Momus story interpenetrated with the Lucifer legend: Lucifer giving theological depth to Momus's expulsion from the heavens, and Momus offering secular plausibility to Lucifer's fall. These unacknowledged borrowings would culminate in *Paradise Lost*. While in Italy in 1638–39, Milton spent considerable time in Florence and Rome. Textual evidence suggests that he may have had occasion to read Alberti's *Momus*, whether in one of the two 1520 Latin editions or the 1568 Italian translation. Further, according to Milton's daughter via Voltaire, he saw a performance of Giovan Battista Andreini's *Adam*. This play itself revealed the influence

of the Momus story in Andreini's *Dialogo fra Momo e la Verità* and inspired Milton's early conception of *Paradise Lost* in two skeletal dramas of the early 1640s entitled "Paradise Lost" and "Adam Unparadiz'd." Coincidentally (more likely, than causally), a few years after the initial version of *Paradise Lost* appeared, Baruch Spinoza also noted the similarities between Momus and Lucifer, as he argued that the Satan figure in the Book of Job was in fact Momus.

Gradually Momus's theological relevance began to wane, and his identity became more wedded to intellectual and literary criticism. Jonathan Swift, in particular, was emblematic of this shift, as Momus was a figure in the "Digression on Criticks" in his *Tale of a Tub* and the leader of the Moderns in his *Battel of the Books*. Some theological resonance of Momus the Agnostic remained, but the transition to Momus the Critic gained momentum. By the eighteenth century, he became increasingly a figure resembling an Epicurean bon vivant, buffoon, and court jester. Even here, however, he attached to the counter-cultural sentiments of Henri Murger's Bohemians, who, as immortalized by Puccini, made the Café Momus one of their chief gathering places. In the late nineteenth century he made his way to America in Mardi Gras celebrations, in which the Momus Krewe continues to this day to have a presence in parades. For all of this softening in the modern era, however, a residue of theological mystery may have remained in at least one case, as Kafka appears to have intended him as a perverse version of divine mediator in the Absurdist tale of *The Castle*. Perhaps the distance between Alberti and Kafka is not so great if Momus is understood as the coded message of unbelief in the early modern era. From Aesop onward Momus has signaled the revolt against authority – whether divine, literary, or even political. His starring moment in the early modern era when both the religious Agnostic and the literary Critic began to take shape – in the likes of Alberti, Anton Francesco Doni, Tomaso Garzoni, Bruno, Milton, Swift, and Spinoza – suggests that the god of criticism and "frank speech" played a significant role in heralding the modern world.

As a reception study, this book proceeds on two fronts simultaneously. On the one hand, it is a diachronic study that traces a trope from the classical world to the modern era. Here the goal is to examine how Momus authors spoke to one another across time, largely sustaining his generally arch attitude but transforming the targets of his bile and derision. On the other hand, the book aims to offer a synchronic analysis of the thought of various writers within the context of their particular time and body of work. In this sense, the question is why did these particular authors resurrect Momus, and how did they do so in the context of their other writings and intellectual influences?

Because the core of this book is about Momus's use as a vehicle for religious doubt, let me offer a few clarifications and caveats. First, by religious doubt, I mean two things: doubt about divine justice or governance; and, more radically, doubt about belief itself. Sometimes these two forms of skepticism overlap, sometimes not. In any case, I make no claims to pronounce with any certainty on any author's personal belief. I would not presume to do this in regard to my familiars, much less in figures from a different time and religious climate. I hope, however, that readers will keep two points in mind. The humorous depiction of religion does not necessarily signal unbelief. Conversely, expressions of orthodoxy do not necessarily certify belief – especially in the Renaissance and early modern era, when overt declarations of agnosticism or atheism were still quite dangerous. Such professions could lose one his position, if a cleric; or his life, if, like Bruno, he went a step too far. Momus's use as trope for religious satire may in fact inhabit the middle zone between these extremes, offering a writer a means to safely air, disguise, or exorcise religious doubt. Certainly, Aesop and especially Lucian offered a template for humorous challenges to religious authority that had an enduring appeal, even when the target shifted from pagan gods to the God of Alberti or Spinoza. My study attempts to show how Momus reveals the range of religious humor in the early modern period, when his invocation could signal a moderate questioning of divine justice or a radical, and necessarily coded, assault on Christianity or theism.

Aside from being a reception study, this book is even more a work of intellectual history. In examining Momus as a metonym for religious uncertainty, it enters the sometimes contentious debate over the currency of unbelief prior to the Enlightenment. Lucien Febvre famously threw down the gauntlet for this historiographical contest in his 1942 *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, an overheated rejection of Abel Lefranc's characterization of Rabelais's "atheism" in the preface to his 1922 edition of *Pantagruel*. More recently, this debate has been reinvigorated with a series of studies regarding the reintroduction of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* in Italy in 1417, including most notably Stephen Greenblatt's 2011 *The Swerve*. My study engages this question by showing how the appearance of Momus in fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century writers – sometimes in conjunction with a new reading of Lucretian materialism – adds further evidence for the view that unbelief may have been more common in the Renaissance than Febvre allowed. At the same time, the book examines how the challenge to divine authority intersected with the assault on literary authority, as some writers used Momus to defend or embody the critique of literary tradition. In this nexus Momus became something of an emblem for a modernism that bespoke both secularism in the face of the divine, and revolt in the face of literary and cultural convention.

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