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The Classical Tradition

You never know how your children will turn out. Such was the case of the birth and life of Night's child Momus ("Blame") in the ancient world. Hesiod rather unceremoniously recorded the birth in his *Theogony* 211–25, where Night (herself the product of primeval Chaos and Erebus) gave birth to a string of largely gloomy children: hateful Doom, black Fate, Death, Blame, Woe, Nemesis, Strife, and others. But we learn no more of Night's Momus in Hesiod's mythography. What exactly did he mean by Blame, whom he paired with "painful Woe"?[1] The course of Momus's career in the ancient world reveals that he (and he does appear as male) variously kept company with envy, irrepressible criticism, and heresy, and had some parallels with the heroic rebel Prometheus. Charting his path from Hesiod to Lucian tells us how and why the classical world "needed" such a god.

The gods of Hesiod represented the universe of conditions, perceptions, fears, and hopes that attended mortal life. These included a mix of the realms of natural forces (Ocean, Earth, Night, Day, Zeus's thunderbolt), the cultural (Muses), the theological (Fates), the moral (Deceit), the physical (Sleep, Eros), the social (Friendship, Strife, Murder, Quarrels), and the political (endless battles of Zeus, Cronus, Typhoeus). Homer and, later, the dramatists added more anthropomorphic delineation

[1] Hesiod, 1936, 95.

to the pantheon of the twelve Olympian gods, their demigod pretenders, and their intercourse (in all senses) with mortals. The Olympian gods, as patrons of various arts and natural forces – Apollo of poetry and the sun, for instance – simply elevated human endeavor or demystified natural occurrences. But what of a personified god of Blame? What does he explain or exorcise? Envy – and, if so, envy of what? Skepticism – and, if so, skepticism of what?

We can find some clues in the un-personified presence of "momus" in language itself. In his discussion of the poetry of praise and blame, Gregory Nagy charts some oppositional uses of *momos* and *aineo* (praise). As the germ of epideictic rhetoric, this binary would normally mean praise of the worthy, and blame of the unworthy: in effect, literature's template for prescriptive morality. Yet "blame" can also be applied to the worthy, and this is where Momus starts to come to life. Pindar, in his *Olympian Ode* 6:74–75 in honor of Hagesias of Syracuse's victory in the mule chariot race, writes that *momos* (reproach) may issue from the envy (*phthonos*) regarding the winners of the contest. Bacchylides' *Ode* 13, celebrating victory in the Pancratium (Greek version of ultimate fighting), similarly urges that the "grip of envy" should be cast aside and recognizes that "mincing blame / dogs every work."[2] When personified, Momus will assume both roles: at times a reasonable, skeptical challenge to the unworthy; at other times an unreasonable, resentful assault of the worthy. The latter perhaps will take precedence as Momus often seems to embody the upstart who challenges higher authorities. And when he does this with a kernel of truth he broaches the satirical *lèse-majesté* of the court jester or renegade courtier.

Momus's first substantive appearance as a personality came in Aesop's fables, the provenance of which is murky. A freed Thracian slave of the sixth century BCE, Aesop has a dim and somewhat legendary biography. He apparently did not write his prose tales; only later in the fourth century BCE did a figure,

[2] Nagy, 1979, 222–24; Pindar, 1937, 63; Bacchylides, 1998, 41.

Demetrius of Phaleron, compile them in a rhetorical handbook that is no longer extant. This compilation was, however, available to the later poets Phaedrus, who identified himself as the "Freedman of Augustus," and Babrius, from the late first or second century CE. These writers versified the tales into Latin and Greek respectively to elevate the "lowly" prose into a "higher" literary form.[3] The single-most influential Momus story among the ancients is found in Babrius 59. Although the gods in question sometimes vary in its iteration, this is certainly the Ur-Momus tale in subsequent literature:

> Zeus and Poseidon, so they say, together with Athena, strove to see which one among them might create a thing of beauty. Zeus made man, preeminent of living creatures, Pallas a house for men, and Poseidon a bull. To judge these things Momus was chosen, for he was still living with the gods. Since it was his nature to hate them all, he proceeded accordingly. The first fault he found, right away, was with the bull, because his horns had not been placed beneath his eyes, that he might see where he struck. As for man, the trouble was, he had no windows in his breast, nor could it be opened up, so that what he plotted would be visible to his neighbor. The house, too, was a failure, so he judged, because it did not have iron wheels on its foundations, and could not go from place to place with its owners when they went away from town.
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> [What does this story tell us? Strive to create something, and let not Envy be the judge. Nothing whatever is entirely pleasing to the fault-finder.][4]

This fable lays out several legacies of the Momus meme. First, his primary target is aesthetic: namely, the creation of beauty. In this case, the gods attempt to create something beautiful in all the realms of the animal, human, and built world. Like Paris, in another famous beauty contest, Momus was deputed to judge. His status is vaguely defined: he is at the time "still living with the gods," implying his subsequent exile and his likely subaltern status. Certainly, he was not one of the big twelve Olympians – a slight that may partly explain why "it was his nature to hate (*echthrainon*) them." Momus was appointed to say which

[3] Ben Edwin Perry's Introduction in Babrius and Phaedrus, 1975, xi–cii; Kurke, 2011, 43–44.
[4] Babrius and Phaedrus, 1975, 75–77.

creation was most beautiful and yet subverted divine intention by ruling that none was truly beautiful. The epimythium, or moral, which was probably added later, suggests that Envy (*phthonon*) is the inevitable nemesis of all who try to create. And yet Momus's criticisms are all legitimate or at least plausible: the bull's horns are a bit inconveniently situated; man's true intentions should be more transparent; in fact, mobile homes and RVs (sadly) were eventually invented. So maybe this fable is not just about unwarranted Envy. Maybe it is about unvarnished Truth.[5] The criticism of humans in this regard is doubly meaningful. Not only does it speak to the universal propensity to dissimulation and artifice. It also implicitly announces Momus's own role in the world as one who does *not* conceal his heart or mince his words. He will be the bane of both gods, who presume to craft the perfect creation, and humans, who hide their true beliefs and intentions. Hovering between the divine and human worlds, Momus will be a subversive force in both, and Fable 59 will endure as the classic Momus *locus*.

We can never know for certain which of Babrius' fables were original to Aesop and which were interpolations of Demetrius of Phaleron or of Babrius himself. The affront to the gods, however, seems to befit the character of Aesop. In her remarkable *Aesopic Conversations*, Leslie Kurke views the Aesopic tradition in the context of the "little tradition" (popular culture) of the Greek world, "mediating" and sometimes challenging elite culture.[6] Thus, even the *Life of Aesop* had no clear, stable text or author, although various accounts of his life current by the mid fifth century BCE share many details. He was a slave bought by the philosopher Xanthus of Samos, and was freed and

[5] As for divine design flaws in the creation of humans, cf. Babrius 66, which disparages Prometheus for hanging on man two wallets: in the front, one containing the faults of other mortals; in the back, a bigger one containing one's own faults: obviously, a recipe for humans' lack of self-knowledge (Babrius and Phaedrus, 1975, 83).

[6] She cites Peter Burke's application of Robert Redfield's distinction between "little" and "great" traditions to early modern culture – including his revision of Redfield that elites could also participate in popular culture, but not vice versa (Kurke, 2011, 7–8; Burke, 1978, 23–29; Redfield, 1956, 69–72).

eventually ended up in Delphi. There he insulted the Delphians for their slavish worship of Apollo, for which he was framed for theft and forced to leap to his death.[7] He was, in short, a low-born contrarian who challenged the most cherished feature of Greek religion: Apollo and his oracle. His fables, furthermore, represent another assault on tradition. As Kurke argues, they represent part of the movement from poetry to prose, which might parallel the transition from *mythos* to *logos* in Greek culture.[8]

Indeed, aside from Babrius 59 several other fables ridicule or debunk the gods. Babrius 68 brings Apollo up short. When he boasts that no one, not even Zeus, can shoot an arrow farther than he, Zeus bounds in one leap to the destination of Apollo's arrow that reached the westward garden of the Hesperides at the end of the world; declaring that Apollo has nowhere left to shoot, Zeus declares victory.[9] Aside from this unflattering tale about Apollo, Aesop elsewhere accused the Delphians of being parasitically dependent upon the sacrifices pilgrims make to Apollo's oracle. Such transgressions, along with his preference of the Muses to Apollo as the true patrons of literature, cast him as a somewhat heretical figure, leading to the Delphians' persecution of him.[10] But Apollo is not the only target of the fables. Babrius 3 has Hermes complaining to a sculptor, who has fashioned his image for sale as a gravestone or an idol: "So then, my fate is being weighed in your balances: it remains to be seen whether you will make me a corpse or a god."[11] Clearly, the fable inverts the hierarchy of the god and his sculptor. Tales of Zeus are likewise cynical. In Babrius 142, when oak trees complain that they live only to be cut down, Zeus callously remarks that they themselves provide the wood for the axes that destroy them. Even worse is Babrius 127, in which Zeus tells Hermes to write down all the misdeeds of men, so he can punish them, but

[7] Kurke, 2011, 4–5, 16–22.
[8] Kurke, 2011, 15.
[9] Babrius and Phaedrus, 1975, 84–85.
[10] Kurke, 2011, 59–74, esp. 62–64, 66, and 72.
[11] Babrius and Phaedrus, 1975, 43.

then fails in his duty: "since the shards lie heaped up one upon another awaiting the time when he can examine them, some are late to fall into the hands of Zeus, others more prompt. We must not, therefore, be surprised if some evil doers who are quick to commit crimes are late to suffer for them."[12] Such a fable ventures beyond the realm of idle insult of the Olympians into the more serious territory of theodicy.

Whether Hermes' herm, Apollo's embarrassment, Zeus's negligence in administering justice, or Momus's criticisms in Babrius 59, these fables reveal an Aesop who shows little respect for divine culture. Possibly, he even held the beastly realm in higher regard. Certainly, the predominance of animals over gods in the collection is another measure of privileging "low" wisdom over "high." One index of the collected *Aesopica* contains fifty-five tales involving wolves and thirty-four on asses or donkeys, as compared to three on Apollo.[13] More to the point, one of Aesop's gods, the subaltern Momus, challenges the creations of his betters in critiques that are playful but also, in the case of mankind's deceits, true. Aesop's Momus thus fits into a larger scheme of opposing low truth to high, prose to poetry, animals to gods, and *logos* to *mythos*. Aesop brought Hesiod's vague Momus to life as the critic of gods' creations and man's faults.

Momus's status as unrivaled Critic was assured by the fourth century BCE, when Plato attests to his authority. In the *Republic* 6:487, he both affirms Momus's role as a critic and ties his judgment to the highest standards of Socratic *logos*. Having parsed the difference between opinion and knowledge, as represented by non-philosophers and philosophers, Socrates defines the qualities of such a philosopher who must then assume the reins of state. He asks Glaucon: "Is there any fault, then, that you can find with a pursuit [philosophy] which a man could not properly practice unless he were by nature of good memory, quick apprehension, magnificent, gracious, friendly, and akin to truth, justice, bravery, and sobriety?" Glaucon

[12] Babrius and Phaedrus, 1975, 165.
[13] Babrius and Phaedrus, 1975, 613–30.

answers: "Momus himself could not find fault with such a combination."[14] The judgment of Momus is thus equated with the wisdom of Socrates. Momus in this instance is not a vindictive, unreasonable critic, but rather the gold standard of logic.

Consider the fate of Socrates, which was akin to that of Aesop: death for his heretical stance toward the traditional worship of the gods. We might ponder whether Socrates himself, as a tireless and annoying critic of his fellow Athenians, was a type of Momus figure. Even in his professed devotion to Apollo in the *Apology*, he displays a rational doubt of the truth of the Delphic oracle that proclaimed that no one was wiser than he. He explains his whole life of questioning the politicians, poets, and craftsmen of Athens as a testing of the truth – or true meaning – of the oracle. And although he eventually proved the oracle to be ironically true – he was wiser than all these others for recognizing his own ignorance – this testing of the oracle did constitute a potential challenge of *logos* to the *mythos* of oracular prophecy.[15]

If Plato elevated Momus to the station of philosophical arbiter, most other classical references characterized him as uber-critic in more purely aesthetic realms, which resonates with his critique of the gods' beautiful creations in Babrius 59. The creative efforts of the gods, however, were readily transferred to the efforts of mortals, where Momus could be invoked as the canon

[14] Plato, 1961, 723.

[15] Kurke, 2011, 308, compares Socrates' self-description as a vexing "gadfly" (to the Athenians) to Aesop's "stance as challenger, debunker, and parodist of traditional wisdom." More generally, on Plato's ties to Aesop in regard to the development of mimetic prose (in contrast to high poetry) and low, plain speech (in contrast to the stylized speech of the Sophists), see Kurke, 2011, 241–64, and 325–60, esp. at 330. As Kurke suggests (2011, 251–55), Socrates' link to Aesop appears in the beginning of the *Phaedo*, when he is seen translating Aesop's fables into verse. Informed by a dream that he is to practice the "arts" – and wondering if philosophy indeed counted as one – he piously seeks on his deathbed to fulfill the will of the gods by composing hymns to Apollo and versifying Aesop (*Phaedo* 60d–61b). In both cases, philosophy and prose are opposed to theology and verse. While ostensibly a pious act, this deathbed gesture reinforces the possibility that Socrates' mission of philosophical *logos* and doubt may have been at odds with the traditional truths and literary medium of the divine.

of perfection in the realm of art or literature. An anonymous poem in the *Greek Anthology*, a compilation of classical and Byzantine poetry, praises the sculpture of Praxiteles as meeting the standards of Momus. Likewise, in the fourth century CE, the Greek writer Libanius claims that Julian (the Apostate) had a degree of virtue unassailable even by Momus.[16] More often, however, the appearances of the god are rather grudging or outright nasty. In the *Greek Anthology* two anonymous poems are devoted to him: one depicting him as quarrelsome and an envious foe of all that is good; another castigating his "poisonous jaws" as he bites into his targets.[17] Yet a third in that collection by Philippus of Thessalonica characterizes pedantic grammarians as the companions of Momus.[18] It is in this literary realm that he had a particularly prominent presence.

Momus's role in the ancient literary world is best illustrated by the fourth-century BCE Alexandrian poet Callimachus. In his *Hymn to Apollo*, he reveals the links between poetry and piety, and between envy and criticism, that foreshadow the complicated ties between literary criticism and heresy that will accompany Momus in various incarnations in Western culture. As god of prophecy and poetry (among other pursuits) and as deity of classical Greece's most important cult center, Apollo is an emblem of the divine status of poetry. Beginning with Hesiod's *Theogony*, poetry had served as the medium for theology, but it was the figure of Apollo who expressly joined the labor of the poet to a religious act. Those poets inspired by Apollo are his theologians and priests. In his *Hymn to Apollo* Callimachus exults that "Apollo will honor / my chorus: it sings to his liking."[19] But this gift is a product of divine election: "Not on everyone, but only on the noble / shines Apollo's light. He who has seen the god / is great, he who hasn't is of no account."[20] His hymn praises Apollo's other roles as patron of prophecy,

[16] *Greek Anthology V*, 315; Libanius, 1969, 93–95.
[17] *Greek Anthology V*, 317–19.
[18] *Greek Anthology IV*, 219.
[19] Callimachus, 2001, 24.
[20] Callimachus, 2001, 24.

archery, medicine, pastures, and then ends on a defiant note. Those who would diminish such lyric poetry as inferior to the grander epic genre, take heed. Apollo will put you in your place:

Envy (*Phthonos*) whispered into Apollo's ear:

> "I don't like a poet who doesn't sing
> Like the sea." Apollo kicked
> Envy aside and said: "The Assyrian river
> Rolls a massive stream, but it's mainly
> Silt and garbage that it sweeps along. The bees
> Bring water to Deo not from every source
> But where it bubbles up pure and undefiled
> From a holy spring, its very essence."
> Farewell, Lord! Let Criticism (*Momos*)
> go where Envy's gone![21]

Callimachus defends the special "nectar" of his poetry against the indiscriminate flood of literature (the Assyrian River) which carries everything in its current. In his *Aitia* 1, he similarly promotes his more original, minor-scale poetry over a "monotonous / uninterrupted poem featuring kings / and heroes in thousands of verses," although there it is he as a poet, not Apollo, who chides his critics, saying "To hell with you, then, / spiteful brood of Jealousy: from now on / we'll judge poetry by the art, / not by the mile."[22] Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo* is simultaneously an act of homage to the god of poetry (a religious act) and a defense of his own poetic style (an aesthetic claim). In terms of the latter, the nemesis is Envy, who is given equal stature with Momus – both assailed as unworthy foes rejected by Apollo. Certainly, this equation of Envy and Momus recalls the moral attached to Babrius 59: "Strive to create something, and let not Envy be the judge. Nothing whatever is entirely pleasing to the fault-finder." In fact, however, in Aesop's fable, the criticism of

[21] Callimachus, 2001, 27.

[22] Callimachus, 2001, 62–63. The religious dimension (proper worship) and the aesthetic one (originality) are also revealed: "my own / Lykian Apollo said to me: / 'Make your sacrifice / as fat as you can, poet, but keep / your Muse on slender rations. And see that you go / where no hackneys plod: avoid the ruts / carved in the boulevard, even if it means / driving along a narrower path'" (63).

the gods' creations had some satirical truth. The libelous tagline of Envy was presumably added later, but it clearly stuck. For Callimachus, Momus's complaints are purely the result of Envy and are deemed unworthy by Apollo himself. Momus's linkage to envy will be a steady one in his many invocations, especially as the literary function increasingly overtakes his theological symbolism in the early modern period.

And yet the theological dimension is inseparable from the literary one in Callimachus. Poetry of and to Apollo is a religious gesture, a somewhat priestly act. This nexus will inform the connection between heresy and criticism: challenging the poet (as priest) can constitute a challenge to the gods. This heretical dimension is emphasized by the fact that Momus and Envy are both excluded from the divine pantheon.[23] They themselves, as subaltern deities, are forever keen to confront their betters. And this moves the context of envy from the mortal sphere of poets to the divine sphere of the gods. This challenge will be the particular province of Lucian's use of Momus.

Lucian of Samosata (born *c.* 125 CE) makes use of Momus more than any other ancient writer. There is good reason for this, as Lucian's works represent a synthesis and culmination of several classical streams in which Momus could wade: satire, Cynicism, Epicureanism, frank speech (*parrhesia*), doubt (*apistia*), and religious unbelief. As for the last, Lucian was rather catholic in his attacks on religion, which embraced not only the traditional pantheon of Greek gods, but also the more recent Eastern deities, abstract deities (of which Momus as "Blame" was obviously one), and even Christianity. Such a wide range of targets could win him friends and foes, depending on whose ox was being gored. Certainly, some Christians would be able to find common cause with his ridicule of the Olympian gods and all the attendant practices of their worship.[24] Yet, others,

[23] Giangrande, 1992, 62, who confirms that the last line of the *Hymn to Apollo* indeed should read "*Phthonos*" (envy) rather than "*Phthoros*" (decay).

[24] Weinbrot, 2005, 63. Caster, 1937, 188–90, systematically compares the attacks on the myths of the Greek gods in the second-century CE *Apology* of Aristides of Athens to those found in Lucian's works.