

POGGIO AND ALBERTI REVISITED

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ABSTRACT: The careers of the Curial secretaries Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) and Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) reveal many parallels. In 1437–1438 the Este court of Ferrara, where Eugenius IV convoked a church council, provided a focal point for their friendship. It was to the Ferrarese canon Francesco Marescalchi that Poggio dedicated Book 1 of his Latin epistles (1436), and Alberti his *Hundred Apologues* (1437). Both men were inspired to critiques of contemporary society by the Greek satirist Lucian, and both indulged in composing brief witticisms that expose human vice: Poggio in his *Facetiae* (*Jests*) and Alberti in his *Apologi* (*Fables*) and *Vita* (*Autobiography*). From Lucian, they also learned to dramatize human foibles on the imagined stage of the *theatrum mundi*, or theater of the world: Poggio in his dialogues, and Alberti in both the *Intercentales* and *Momus*. Despite such literary affinities, their approach to ethical questions differed, especially concerning the validity of allegory, which Poggio rejected but Alberti embraced. As a tribute to his colleague, Alberti dedicated Book 4 of his *Intercentales* to Poggio; he prefaced the work with an ironic Aesopic fable that asserts the superiority of recondite scientific research over commonplace humanistic studies. Eventually, Alberti's status as an outsider in Florence was reflected in the deterioration in his relations with Poggio. The rift was widened in 1441, when Alberti organized the Italian poetic competition called the Certame Coronario that was held in the Florence cathedral on October 22. Poggio was a member of the jury that, to Alberti's chagrin, refused to declare a winner.

KEYWORDS: Aesopic fables, Leon Battista Alberti, Este court in Ferrara, Francesco Filelfo, Lucian of Samosata, *theatrum mundi* (theater of the world), Virgil and allegory.

In his dialogue on the papal Curia, written just months before his death in 1438, Lapo da Castiglionchio included an honor roll of his learned colleagues that mentions both Poggio Bracciolini and Leon Battista Alberti:

Veniam [...] ad [...] Poggium Florentinum, pontificis maximi a secretis, in quo summa inest cum eruditio, tum singularis gravitas salibus multis et urbanitate condita [...] non praetermittam [...] et aequalem meum Baptistam Albertum, cuius ingenium ita laudo ut hac laude cum eo neminem comparem, ita admiror ut magnum mihi nescio quid portendere in posterum videatur. Est enim eiusmodi ut ad quancumque se animo conferat facultatem, in ea facile ac brevi ceteris antecellat (Celenza, 1999: 154–56).

I come to Poggio the Florentine, a papal secretary, who possesses the deepest learning and singular gravity mixed with urbanity and many witty remarks [...] Nor shall I overlook my contemporary Battista Alberti, whose talent I praise so highly that I can compare no one to him; so much do I wonder that he seems to promise something great in future. His talent is such that, in applying himself to any discipline whatsoever, he soon and easily surpasses all others.

Strikingly, it is precisely at this time that we have tangible evidence of the friendship between the two men. An important nexus was provided by the Este court at Ferrara. On 12 October 1437, Poggio wrote a letter (*Epistle* V, 22) to Leonello d'Este in praise of Alberti and his Latin comedy *Philodoxus* (Bracciolini, 1984-1987: 2.260): «Baptista de Albertis, vir singularis ingenii mihi que amicissimus, scripsit fabulam quandam quam *Filodoxeos* appellat [...]» In the same year, Alberti dedicated a second version of his Latin comedy *Philodoxus* to Leonello d'Este, the future marquis of Ferrara (1441-1450). What's more, the two humanists shared the friendship of the Ferrarese canon Francesco Marescalchi. In 1436, Poggio dedicated Book 1 of his correspondence – the letters to Niccolò Niccoli – to Marescalchi, to whom in 1459 he addressed his last extant letter, on the death of Giovanni Aurispa (Bracciolini, 1984-1987: 1.3-4). In 1437, Alberti dedicated his one hundred *Apologi* to the learned canon, who eventually owned some ten codices of Albertian works (Borsi, 2004: 187-188; Gargan, 2002). As Martin McLaughlin has pointed out, it is in his dedications to his Ferrarese friends that Alberti first uses his new tripartite name Leo Baptista Albertus; and the choice of «Leo» may reflect sympathy with Leonello, who shared with Alberti the stigma of an illegitimate birth and an enthusiasm for humanistic studies, particularly the comedies of Terence, whose *Adelphoe* (lines 911-14) offers a model for the sobriquet Lepidus (McLaughlin, 2016: 25-29).

Inevitably, Alberti's status as an outsider in Florence was reflected in the deterioration in his relations with Poggio. When Alberti dedicated Book 4 of his *Intercenales* to his colleague, he prefaced the work with an ironic Aesopic fable. In it, water buffaloes chide a goat for grazing at a dangerous height, but the goat replies that it prefers such lofty fare to the lowly forage that is open to everyone. The rift was widened in 1441, when Alberti organized the Italian poetic competition called the Certame Coronario that was held in the Florence cathedral on October 22. Poggio was a member of the jury that, to Alberti's chagrin, refused to declare a winner (Gorni, 1972; Bertolini, 1993). In later years, it seems that the two men drifted apart (Borsi, 2003: 83). Stung by the failure of the Certame – in which Poggio as a jurist was complicit *ex officio* – Alberti complained in two works. Within days, he wrote an Italian *Protesta* that he circulated anonymously; and sometime later he wrote a Latin apologue, now the preface to Book 8 of the *Intercenales*, in which a crow refuses to judge a singing contest between a frog and a cicada (Gorni, 1972: 167-72; Alberti, 2003a: 530-33; Alberti, 2010: 425).

For both Poggio and Alberti, the Greek satirist Lucian provided an indispensable model for literary invention and social critique. Here too we find a coincidence when we recall that Poggio translated Lucian's *Jupiter confutatus* under the Latin title *Cinicus sive de fato*; and Stefano Pitagala has argued that Alberti's similarly named dinner piece *Cinicus* is

indebted to Poggio's version (Pittaluga, 2007: 382; cf. Marsh, 1983). Pittaluga has also shown how both humanists share a Lucianic penchant for humor, which they call *hilaritas*: witness Poggio's preface to his *Facetiae*, and Alberti's preface to Book 1 of the *Intercenales*, addressed to Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanello (Pittaluga, 2007: 380–81). (A classical antecedent may be seen in Cicero's *Academica* 1.2.8, in which Varro says that he has seasoned his Menippean satires with humor: *in illis veteribus nostris, que Menippum imitati non interpretati quadam hilaritate conspersimus*.) Indeed, just as Lapo praises Poggio for seasoning his works with «many witty sayings» (*multis salibus*), we may note that Alberti offers his readers witty sayings in both his *Apologi (Fables)* and his *Vita (Autobiography)*.

Like Lucian, Poggio and Alberti both insist that we must look beyond the superficial ostentation of human posturing and pomp, and Davide Canfora has observed that they both use the Latin verb «introspicere» to denote the act of looking within the words and deeds of individuals (Bracciolini, 1998: XLIII; Cardini, 1993: 70). What's more, the topos of the «theater of the world» – a recurrent theme in Lucian – was readily adopted by both Poggio and Alberti. Where Riccardo Fubini has demonstrated the centrality of the *theatrum mundi* to Poggio's dialogues, Lucia Cesarini Martinelli has traced Alberti's recurrent allusions to the theater from his comedy *Philodoxus* to his novel *Momus* (Fubini, 1982: 1–92; Cesarini Martinelli, 1989). In a detailed comparison of common themes in Poggio's *De infelicitate principum* (1440) and Alberti's *Momus sive De principe* (1443–1450), Davide Canfora notes that the image of the theater is already found at the end of Lapo's *De curiae commodis*:

Hoc autem est theatrum maximum et amplissimum in quod spectaculum nationes plurimae convenerunt, in quo praeclarum nihil geri potest, quod non iis omnibus innotescat, omnibus laudibus illustretur (Bracciolini, 1998: XXVII–XXVIII).

This is the great and impressive theater on whose stage many nations are gathered, and in which nothing illustrious can be achieved without becoming known to them all and exalted with universal praise.

Indeed, if we compare these two meditations on the pitfalls of power, we find moral animadversions on rulers that exploit the image of the theater. In writing about rulers, Poggio refers to their symbolic appearance in Greek tragedy:

omitto antiquas tragedias principum infelicitatis copiosissimas testes, *Edipodem, Troadem, Atrium, Thiestum, Medeam, Agamemnona* ceterosque permultos, quorum exemplo Greci illi sapientissimi poete infelicitatem quasi familiarem principibus expresserunt [...] (Bracciolini, 1998: 72)

I pass over the ancient tragedies that bear witness to the unhappiness of rulers – *Oedipus*, *Troas*, *Atreus*, *Thyestes*, *Medea*, *Agamemnon* and many others – by whose example those wise Greek poets showed that unhappiness is an intimate companion of rulers [...]

Later, he returns to the simile of the tragic theater: «constat enim vitam principum tragediam quandam esse calamitatum plenam, ex qua multi actus confici possent ad representandam tanquam in theatro eorum infelicitatem» («It is clear that the life of rulers is a sort of tragedy filled with disasters, from which many acts could be composed to represent their unhappiness as if in a theater», Bracciolini, 1998: 90). In the conclusion of the dialogue, Niccoli describes how wise men disdain rulers as masked characters: «Sed sapientes illi [...] tanquam ex superiori loco in quadam specula positi, tum ceteros, tum precipue reges veluti personatos quosdam homines ac ridiculos spernunt ac despiciunt» («But wise men [...] as if placed on high in a lookout, spurn and despise other men, especially kings, as maskers and buffoons», Bracciolini, 1998: 101).

Yet where Poggio employs the topos as a simple metaphor, we find Alberti portraying human (and divine) existence as a sort of allegorical drama, as he comments in this passage in Book 4 of *Momus*:

Itaque haec in theatro. Quae scio videri posse iis qui nostris opusculis legendis delectentur si non admodum, alioquin scurrilia, at nostris ab moribus et scribendi legibus aliena, qui quidem semper et factis et dictis cavimus ne qui minus grave et sanctum adoriremur quam litterarum religio et religionis cultus pateretur. Sed si pensitaris quid conati simus cum totis libellis, tum hoc loco exprimere, intelleges profecto principes voluptati deditos incidere in opprobria longe graviora quam quae recensuimus. Eaque de re nos velim magis secutos initam institutionem iudices quam pristinam studiorum et vitae rationem. Sed plura fortassis diximus quam volebamus, pauciora profecto diximus quam postulaverit res. Verum de his hactenus: ad rem redeo.

All this took place in the theater. I know that, to those who enjoy reading our little books, this circumstance may seem alien to my literary principles, if not positively vulgar, and I have always avoided in word and deed tackling subjects that were less grave and sacred than my literary conscience and piety would allow. But if you think again of what I'm trying to express in all these books, and in this passage specifically, you'll surely realize that princes who are devoted to pleasure commit far more disgraceful acts than any we've recounted. For that reason, I would have you judge me as someone who is following the logic of a given plot rather than some antique standard of life and learning. But perhaps we've said more than we wished, and we've surely said less than the circumstances demanded. Enough of this; I'll get back to the story (Alberti, 2003b: 292–29).

Alberti defends his fiction for its moral teaching, in other words, as a sort of allegory. In his 1437 dedication of *Philodoxus* to Leonello d'Este, he prefaced it with an explicit outline of its allegorical characters (Grund, 2005: 72–75).

This distinguishes him from his colleague Poggio, who in the definitive version of his first published work, the dialogue *De avaritia*, decries the simplistic allegories of the late-classical tradition. In particular, Virgil's description of the Harpies (*Aeneid* 3.212–44), cited by his fellow curialist Bartolomeo Aragazzi da Montepulciano as symbolic of avarice, comes under attack by Antonio Loschi:

Quod autem in Virgilii fabula avaritiae descriptionem voluisti contineri, in quo plurimum verborum effudisti, perridicula atque inepta michi videtur, non tua solum, sed ceterorum quoque curiosa et indigna docto viro interpretatio, qui similibus fabellis aliud preter aurum delectationem quesitum putatis. Nam si eadem in meam sententiam traducere voluero, nullo negotio ostendam avaritiam illis describi non magis quam luxuriam, superbiam, crudelitatem. Itaque contempsi semper hanc insulsam auctoritatis et sapientiae suspitionem, quam nonnulli superstitiosa ambage poetarum fabulis inclusam suspicantur, cum et ipse Seneca etiam dicat hoc esse propositum poetis, ut oblectent aures et fabulas connectant... Quam ob rem istis tuis tanquam tragediis, quas nullo fundamento in avaritiam concitasti, nihil digne respondere potest, nisi te in explicanda perlevi fabella nimis accuratam et verbosam diligentiam attulisse, in qua meo iudicio omnem operam perdidisti (Bracciolini, 1994: 80–81; Garin, 1952: 1129–30).

Now, if you think that Virgil's myth contains a description of avarice, as you so verbosely argue, this laborious and unscholarly interpretation, which you share with others, strikes me as utterly ridiculous and foolish, for you think that similar fables have some purpose besides delighting our ears. If I chose to adapt it to my own way of thinking, I could with little effort show that it applies no more to avarice than to lust, pride, or cruelty. I have always disdained the fatuous fantasies of many who by superstitious distortions imagine that poetic fables embody authority and wisdom. For doesn't Seneca say that the goal of poets is to delight the ear and to string together myths? [...] As a result, one cannot reply to the tragic rants you have unjustifiably stirred up against avarice, except to say that, in interpreting an insubstantial myth, you displayed overly meticulous and verbose care: in my opinion you completely wasted your time.

By contrast, Alberti is fond of employing animals and even plants as ethical symbols. His dinner piece *Fame* features a botanical monster (called Suspicion) that clearly evokes the celebrated Virgilian allegory of *Fama* (Rumor) in *Aeneid* 4.173–90:

Extemplo Libyae magnas it Fama per urbes,
 Fama, malum qua non aliud velocius ullum:
 mobilitate viget virisque acquirit eundo,
 parva metu primo, mox sese attollit in auras
 ingrediturque solo et caput inter nubila condit.
 illam Terra parens ira iniritata deorum extremam,
 ut perhibent, Coeo Enceladoque sororem
 progenuit pedibus celerem et perniciousis alis.
 monstrum horrendum, ingens, cui quot sunt corpore plumae,
 tot vigiles oculi subter (mirabile dictu),
 tot linguae, totidem ora sonant, tot subrigit auris.
 nocte volat caeli medio terraeque per umbram
 stridens, nec dulci declinat lumina somno;
 luce sedet custos aut summi culmine tecti
 turribus aut altis, et magnas territat urbes,
 tam ficti pravique tenax quam nuntia veri.
 haec tum multiplici populos sermone replebat
 gaudens, et pariter facta atque infecta canebat.

Book 4 of Alberti's dinner pieces represents his most notable tribute to Poggio, although not without ironic undertones, as in his dedication of Book 2 to Leonardo Bruni. Two of the dialogues feature Lepidus (Alberti's *alter ego*) and Libripeta, the «book hunter» Niccolò Niccoli – Poggio's good friend and Alberti's nemesis (Ponte, 1972; Marsh, 2007a: 129–30). In *Somnium*, Libripeta emerges from a sewer to tell Lepidus (Alberti) about his underworld adventures, which would inspire Ariosto's episode of Astolfo on the moon. In *Fama*, Libripeta recounts the slaughter of an ox on the steps of a temple – an anecdote that finds a parallel in an episode narrated in Poggio's *De infelicitate principum* (Marsh, 2007b: 43).

The second dialogue in Book 4 of the *Intercenales*, *Corolle*, features Lepidus without Libripeta. In this work, the goddess Praise refuses to grant diadems to ambitious suitors from various fields: a rhetorician, a poet, a rich man, a detractor, and finally Lepidus. (By a strange coincidence, the friendship between Alberti and Poggio would be soured when a jury of curialists refused to award a crown in the poetic contest held in Florence in 1441.) The third dialogue *Cinicus* examines similar ways of life as groups of souls arrive in the world of the afterlife. Here the title character, who is credited with reviving ancient learning, unmasks the hypocrisy of elevated and powerful people – a theme common in Poggio's writings. (The remaining dialogues in Book 4, *Erumna* and *Servus*, feature a more dialectical approach to ethical questions.)

Two essential elements of Albertian satire emerge from these dialogues: a penchant for impersonating contemporaries – the «masked» characters Lepidus and Libripeta – and a predilection for symbolic animals in an

ethical context. By contrast, Poggio prefers to describe figures from history, and his metaphorical theater of the world has no room for animals.

If we turn now in the *Intercenales* to the Albertian prefaces linked to Poggio – those to Book 4 and Book 8 – we find that both feature animals in Aesopic fables filled with conflict and rivalry. In Book 4, a goat reproves a number of water buffaloes for their ignoble sloth; and in Book 8 a crow scoffs at the singing skills of a frog and a cicada. Now, if we recall that Alberti's *Apologi* are dedicated to Poggio's friend Francesco Marescalchi, it is hardly surprising to find animals as the central theme of several works composed by Alberti between 1438 and 1442: besides the *Apologi* and the Poggian prefaces, we find *Canis*, *Musca*, *De equo animante*, and the seven Aesopic fables of Book 10 of the *Intercenales*, which expand Aesop's fables much as *Momus* elaborates themes from Lucian's short dialogues (Alberti, 1984: 15–40). There are further examples. In the 1990s, a dinner piece titled *Simie*, or *Monkeys*, came to light; and the symbolic rings in Alberti's allegory *Anuli* feature as emblems a swarm of flies and a Pegasean horse (Alberti, 2010: 615; Marsh, 2010: 103–09). Alberti's evocation of the animal world often offers a darker picture of reality, as the *Favole* of Leonardo da Vinci would do later. The novel *Momus* begins with the title character filling the world with noxious insects. And Stefano Ugo Baldassarri has recently interpreted Alberti's *Canis* as a parody of the serious funeral oration, for which the humanist model was established by Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini – the dedicatees of Alberti's second and fourth books of *Intercenales* (Baldassarri & Boschetto, 2015: 227)!

Let us now examine Alberti's prefaces more closely, beginning with the fable that opens Book 4 of the *Dinner Pieces*:

Bubulas limoso in litore inter palustres herbas proiectas capram quandam, que maceriem vetustissimi cuiusdam scrupeum supra saxum collapsi templi consererat, his verbis admonuisse ferunt: «Yo, quenam te isthuc temeritas, o lasciva, rapuit, ut herboso spreto litore isthec ardua et penitus inuia affectes? An non prestare intelligis dulci et succoso gramine exsaturari, quam aspera continuo rudera et amarum alte caprificum sitiendo carpere? Velim tibi quidem consulas, ut quanto deinceps cum periculo verucas istas ipsas ambias non peniteat». Bubulis aiunt capram huiusmodi verbis respondisse: «He hen! An quidem, gravissima et tristissima mollipes, tu ignara es, ut os ventri, ori pedes operam sedulo suppeditent; mihi autem non bubulus, sed capreus stomachus est. Tibi quidem si que ipsa carpo eo sunt ingrate, quod datum est eadem ut nequeas attingere, mihi tua isthec ulva eo non grata est, quo passim vel desidiossimis omnibus *pecudibus* pateat. Quod si supinam te aliorum pericula sollicitam reddunt, vultures quidem que ab ipso sub stellis ethere exangue aliquod *pervestigant* cadaver, admonuisse decuit: namque illis quam nobis omnis est casus longe periculosior».

Equidem, mi Poggi, hoc ipsum nobis, dum his conscribendis inter-cenalibus occupamur, evenire plane sentio: ut sint *plerique*, qui nostrum ingenium cupiant uberioribus et commodioribus in campis eloquentie ali et depasci, atque iidem, quod difficillimis istis et non illiusmodi inventionibus delectemur, que succo vulgatoris eloquentiae et bonis fortune sint refertiores, vituperant. Quid quidem si capram hanc nostrum audierint, nihil erit quod nos, uti arbitror, reprehendendos ducant; aut enim, si id vitio dabunt, quod nostram nos non invite naturam, spretis reliquis nummularis artibus, sequamur, mathematicos quoque omnes illi, et eos qui astrorum cognition, et eos qui rebus penitus repositis dediti sunt, vitio partier adscribant necesse est. Namque illi quidem, si ab ea spe, qua tam alte animos sublevarunt, ut celorum usque ultimos orbis mente et cogitatione pervadant, ceciderunt, quis non eosdem quanto sint detrimento corruituri perspicit? Nemo tamen eos liberale quippiam sectari inficiatur. At nos rara hec delectant, que inter lautiores cenas ditiorum quam me esse profitear scriptorum, veluti in pulmento subamare interdum herbe, sint non reicienda. Tum etiam in ea re, si nostre iuvant industrie periculum facere, in qua quidem ingenio stadium et studio assiduitas subeat, quid ab huiusmodi varias et rarissimas inventiones promendis sua nos invidia abducat? At enim qui nostra lectitarint, et quibus in rebus quamquam variis versari viderint [...] (Alberti, 2003a: 222–24; Alberti, 2010: 325).

While wallowing in the lowly swamp-grass of a muddy river bank, some buffaloes, they say, saw a she-goat seated on the ruins of an ancient temple which had collapsed atop a rocky crag, and admonished her in these words: «You there, wanton one, what temerity possesses you, that you spurn this verdant bank and attempt that arduous and virtually inaccessible height? Don't you see that it is better to fill yourself with sweet and juicy grass than always to graze thirstily amid jagged ruins, nourished on bitter wild figs? Take care that you don't come to regret your dangerous rambles on such precipices».

The she-goat, they say, replied to the buffaloes in these words: «Ha! Grave, ill-humored, tender-footed beasts! Don't you know that the mouth carefully serves the stomach, and the feet the mouth? I have a goat's stomach, not a cow's. If you disdain what I graze on because you can't reach it, I spurn your swamp-grass because it is everywhere accessible to even the idlest cattle. And if the dangers that others face worry you as a slothful creature, you should more properly have admonished the vultures, who from the highest reaches of heaven go exploring for some lifeless carcass. Their fall is far more dangerous than mine».

Now, the very same thing, dear Poggio, I find happens to me as I engage in writing these *Dinner Pieces*. For many today would have me seek food and sustenance in the easier and more fertile fields of eloquence. And the same people censure me for delighting in difficult pursuits, rather than in those filled with the juice of commonplace eloquence and material reward. But if these critics heed the goat in the fable, I think they will find

no cause to reproach me. If they blame me for choosing to spurn other lucrative arts and for following my natural abilities, then they must also blame the mathematicians and all others who devote themselves to understanding the stars and profoundly recondite subjects. Can't everyone see how ruinously they fail when they fall short of the hope that led them to contemplate the farthest realms of the heavens? Yet no one denies that they pursue a liberal goal.

For myself, I take pleasure in rare subjects which, like piquant herbs in a condiment, should not be excluded from the lavish dinners of writers who I confess are richer than myself. Besides, if I wish to prove my diligence in this field—in which zeal furthers talents, and application zeal—whose envy can distract me from bringing forth diverse and rare inventions like these? For when they read my works and see the variety of their subjects [...] (Alberti, 1987: 65–66).

We find similar remarks in Poggio's dialogue *De infelicitate principum*, in which Niccoli contrasts his friend Poggio's energy in hunting for manuscripts to the sloth and greed of worldly rulers:

Suscepit hic – me intuens – olim diligentiam et laborem peragrande Alamanie librorum perquirendorum gratia, qui in ergastulis apud illos reclusi detinentur in tenebris et carcere ceco [...] Hec cum ab eo fuissent in lucem edita [...] nunquis postea aut princeps aut pontifex vel minimum opere aut auxilii adhibuit ad liberandos preclarissimos illos viros ex ergastulis barbarorum?

In voluptatibus, in rebus nulla laude dignis, in bellis, re pestifera et pernitiōsa hominibus, etatem et pecunias consumunt. In *peruestigandis* vero excellentium virorum monumentis... obtorpescunt atque obdormiunt, vitam *plerique* more *pecorum* agentes (Bracciolini, 1998: 11–12).

Our friend here, he said, looking at me, once devoted diligent efforts to scouring Germany in order to discover books that, chained in prisons, were held in “obscurity and dark dungeons” [Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.734]. But when these had been brought to light, did any prince or pontiff display the least effort in liberating these distinguished authors from the prisons of the barbarians?

They spend their time and money on pleasures, on worthless things, and on wars, that pestilent and pernicious bane of humankind. But in exploring the records of excellent men, they are dumb and doze, generally living like cattle.

The peroration of the work, also spoken by Niccoli, likewise contrasts the noble pursuits of scholars to the ignoble ambitions of princes:

Hi [*sc. privati*], tanquam virtutum sacerdotes, pacis atque otii amici, soli felicem vitam assecuntur. *Posthabitis enim atque abiectis opibus*, imperiis, dignitatibus, *contemptis divitiis*, in excolenda matre virtutum philosophia,

in rerum occultarum *pervestigatione* versati, ad liberalium artium disciplinas et humanitatis studia velut in portum tranquillum confugerunt [...] (Bracciolini, 1998: 59)

Like priests of virtue and friends of peace and leisure, private citizens alone attain the happy life. For rejecting and disdainng riches, power, and advancement, and despising wealth, they live to pursue philosophy – the mother of virtues – and to explore recondite subjects, taking safe haven in the branches of the liberal arts and in the studies of humanity.

The echoes are clear, even if Alberti compares his own studies to mathematics and astronomy, while Poggio asserts the supremacy of the liberal arts. Both men praise the human beings who look higher than grazing beasts in their pursuit of lofty knowledge and virtue.

As we have seen, the debacle of the Certame Coronario in October 1441 moved Alberti to write the Latin fable that serves as the preface to Book 8 of the *Intercenales*. Since Poggio was one of the jurors who failed to award a prize, the piece has some relevance to our story:

Inter cicadam atque ranam summa et diu apud cornicem arbitram huiusmodi fuerat controversia: quenam illarum musica in arte esset preferenda. Nam et cicadam quidem, aiebat rana, queque caneret, eadem uno spiritu canere, nulla didicisse uti varietate, nullos nosse afferre novas canendi modos, nullas mutare conversiones, nullas vocum inflexiones obire; denique fastidio esse hanc assiduam iterationem peracute et constrepentis vocis. Contra autem cicada, quid inter se et loquacem ranam interesset, hoc pacto referebat: «Tibi quidem, cum canis, fauces tument, lingua retunditur oculique pre labore indecentissime exsiliunt. Mihi vox facilis, peraratum pectus, expedita latera omniaque ad dicendum suppeditant; tu neque comicum, neque tragicum, neque lyricum, neque elegum, neque heroicum quidem canis. Atque dum, repugnante Minerva, multa et varia pertentas, frustra musicam dici te affectas. Neque tu quidem quid in quaqua re possis, sed quantum in nulla penitus valeas, inepte ostentas. Ego autem, etsi leve id et tenue sit, quicquid tamen edo apertum clarum et elegans est». Itaque huiusmodi inter se convitio apud cornicem de musice principatu et gloria contendebant, atque ut sententiam proferret exposcebant. Etenim cicada «Dic, dic» canere non desinebat. Rana «O rex» et eiusmodi exquisitissima contra exordiri occiperat. Tandem cum petulce et garrule ille bestiole instarent et quando esset futurum ut pronuntiarent flagitarent, plena cornix voce et quasi alis execrando: «Cras, cras» inquit et avolavit.

Consueveram in istiusmodi apologis, quos prologi loco ad hos intercenalium libellos adiungebam, quid ipse de tota re interpreter, edicere. Id hoc loco non sine causa a me esse pretermittendum statuo. Tantum non preteribo, o invidi: posteritas de nobis quid sentiat, libere iudicabit. Nos demum inter vos garrire desinamus (Alberti, 2003a: 530–532; Alberti, 2010: 425).

With a crow as judge, a cicada and a frog held a weighty and lengthy debate to decide which of them was superior in the art of music. No matter what the cicada sang, the frog said she sang in a monotone: she hadn't learned to employ variety, and she knew nothing of introducing new harmonies, of shifting and modulating, or of inflecting her voice. In short, the incessant repetition of the cicada's shrill and noisy song was cloying. In reply, the cicada contrasted herself to the chattering frog as follows: «When you sing, your throat swells, your tongue flattens, and your eyes bulge out grotesquely with your effort. I have an unforced voice, a furrowed chest, and an ample torso – in short, everything I need for singing. You sing nothing that is purely comic, tragic, lyric, elegiac, or epic. Thus, by trying every varied style without talent, you strive in vain to win the name of musician. Fool, instead of showing skill in any style, you display your incompetence in all. What I sing may be weak and thin, but at least it is clear, distinct, and elegant».

Thus the two insulted each other before the crow, as they contended for supremacy and renown in music, and begged him to pronounce his verdict. The cicada kept singing *dic dic* [«speak, speak»], while the frog began to sing *O rex* [«O king»] and other choice greetings. At length, when the wanton and garrulous little creatures persisted in demanding that the crow set a time for his verdict, the crow seemed to curse them with his wings, crying loudly *cras cras* [«tomorrow, tomorrow»], he flew away.

I used to state my own opinion on each matter in fables like this, which I added as a sort of prologue to these books of dinner pieces. But in this case, I think I should refrain from doing so, not without reason. Yet let me say one thing. Posterity will freely judge my work. So let me cease to chatter in your midst (Alberti, 1987: 149).

With uncharacteristic reticence, Alberti says it is unwise to explicate the fable, perhaps fearing the reaction of his fellow curialists or their Medici patrons. Such a fear of reprisals reminds us of passages in Poggio's dialogues, in which his interlocutors choose not to name contemporaries. (Marsh, 1980: 52-53).

We find a curious intersection of Poggio's *theatrum mundi* and Alberti's Aesopic menagerie in the *Commentationes florentinae de exilio* of Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481). Exiled from Florence in 1434 by Cosimo de' Medici, the vindictive Filelfo composed a literary dialogue in three books, of which Book 2 treats the topic of disgrace, *infamia*. The main speaker is Palla Strozzi, who analyzes the nature of the ethical good, *bonum*, according to Aristotelian categories. His discourse is interrupted by Poggio Bracciolini, portrayed by Filelfo as an ignoramus and glutton. In this passage, Poggio characterizes his two unpublished dialogues, *De nobilitate* and *De infelicitate principum*, as satirizing the interlocutors Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici:

Pallas. Sit sane ut vis, sed quid tandem bovem definis esse?

Poggius. Bos est Laurentius Medices. Num habes quicquam quod huic definitioni obiicias? Aspice Laurentii latera, aspice palearia, incessum consydera. Nonne cum loquitur, mugit? Os vide et linguam e naribus mucum lingentem. Caput cornibus totum insigne est. Ita, mediusfidius, bovem mihi videor aptissime definire esse Laurentium Medicem, ut et lupum Averardum et vulpem Cosmum. Nam et ille fur ac latro, et hic fallax et subdolos.

Pallas. Etiamne in Cosmum tuum, Poggi, cavillaris? Quid si rescierit?

Poggius. At est mihi apud eum fides. Et quo magis mireris quam est nescius sui, libellos duos scripsi, quos nondum aedidi: alterum *De nobilitate*, alterum *De infelicitate principum*, quibus homo ineptus se laudari putat, cum vituperetur ab me maxime, quippe quem et ignobilem esse doceo et infelicem.

Pallas. Assentaris igitur Cosmo?

Poggius. Et quidnam aliud?

Pallas. Sed facis tu quidem iniuste?

Poggius. Minime omnium. Nam homini reddo quod suum est. Deposuit apud me loculos plaerosque assentationum plenos, ea lege ut ipse pro arbitrio uteretur et mihi quoque liceret uti cum vellem.

Palla. How do you define an ox?

Poggio. Lorenzo de' Medici is an ox. Do you have any objection to this definition? Look at Lorenzo's flanks, look at his dewlaps! Consider his gait. Doesn't he bellow when he speaks? See his mouth, and his tongue licking the snot from his nostrils. His head is distinguished by its horns. By Jove, I seem most aptly to define an ox as Lorenzo de' Medici, just as I define a wolf as Averardo, and a fox as Cosimo: for the former is a thief and a bandit, and the latter wily and deceitful.

Palla. So, Poggio, do you mock even your friend Cosimo? What if he finds out?

Poggio. Well, I have his trust. And so that his lack of self-knowledge may surprise you even more, I have written two little books that I have not yet published: one *On Nobility*, and the other *On the Unhappiness of Rulers*. The foolish fellow thinks that they praise him, when in fact I greatly criticize him by showing that he is both ignoble and unhappy.

Palla. Then you flatter Cosimo?

Poggio. What else?

Palla. But you act unjustly.

Poggio. By no means. For I pay the fellow in his own coin. He entrusted me with several strongboxes filled with flatteries, on condition that he himself could use them at will, and that I can too when I wish (Filelfo, 2013: 256–59; cf. Field, 2017: 226).

Thus, Filelfo has metamorphosized Poggio's protagonists in the theater of the world into the Albertian beasts of *Cinicus*.

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