

“Arguments against the Christian Religion in Amsterdam” by Saul Levi Morteira, Spinoza’s Rabbi. Gregory B. Kaplan, ed. and trans.

Amsterdam Studies in the Dutch Golden Age. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017. 210 pp. €95.

This book contains the first translation of a Spanish manuscript by Saul Levi Morteira (ca. 1596–1660) into English; the manuscript was completed around 1650 in Amsterdam. Born in Venice, Morteira joined the Portuguese community of Amsterdam in 1616 as one of its rabbis, and would continue to serve it until his death. Morteira’s text has survived in a copy made in 1712, which today is kept in the Ets Haim library of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam.

Gregory Kaplan’s translation is preceded by a long introduction on the fascinating history of the *Arguments*, on Morteira’s intellectual background, and on the particular challenges the young rabbi faced within the newly established Portuguese community, comprised of former conversos from the Iberian Peninsula; the aim of the religious leadership was to convert them into halachic Jews. At the same time, it should be noted, this congregation was only tolerated in the emerging Dutch Republic and was not intended to cause offense in any way; this may well have played a major role in its decision to ban its most famous son, Baruch de Spinoza, in 1656.

It is against this background that Morteira’s *Arguments* should be read, as it explicates the tales of a joint trip of two conversos, or New Christians, from Orléans to Nantes in 1616. One converso, “the pilgrim,” was a student, desperately struggling to be admitted by Old Christians to the order of Jesuits; the other, “the friend,” was a member of the recently established Portuguese community of Amsterdam, who had finally come to experience the benefits of abandoning his “crypto-Judaism” and living a proper Jewish life. Kaplan goes to considerable lengths to demonstrate some of the Spanish sources of the *Arguments*, including the Spanish Golden Age theater and the anonymous *La vida de Lozarrillo de Lazarillo de Tormes*—the first Spanish picaresque novel, which was published in Antwerp in 1544 (and appropriated by the Dutch poet and playwright Bredero). The introductory chapters also include inquiries into which particular editions of the Old Testament Morteira used and on his reflections on the Apocalypse.

Kaplan’s translation is a pleasure to read and it succeeds in bringing out the literary quality of Morteira’s work. This should inspire further research. First, one could draw comparisons between the *Arguments*, which appears to have served essentially internal purposes, and similar early modern Jewish critiques of Christianity—some of which would be printed during the latter half of the eighteenth century by radical freethinkers and atheists with an essentially secular agenda. Thus, the specific nature and originality of Morteira’s anti-Christian arguments might emerge. Elijah Montalto, for instance, to whom Morteira as a young man served as secretary, was not only the celebrated physician of Maria de Medici, but also the author of two anti-Christian texts, one of which, on the

fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, was translated from the Portuguese and printed in London in 1790. Isaac Orobio de Castro is another instance—also a physician, he arrived in Amsterdam around the time Moreira passed away, and his *Prevenções divinas* were to end up in the Baron d'Holbach's *Israel vengé* of 1770. Second, another comparison can be made between Morreira's *Arguments* and his sermons, published in 2005 by Marc Saperstein, or his voluminous *Tradado da Verdade da Lei de Moisés* of 1659–60, edited in 1988 by Herman Prins Salomon. Future research will have to establish how the *Arguments* should be situated not only against their seventeenth-century Jewish background, but also in the context of Morreira's own religious and intellectual *Werdegang*.

This is an edition and translation; it is not an attempt to deliver an intellectual biography of Morreira. Nevertheless, Kaplan's rendering of the Amsterdam's rabbi's *Arguments* will turn out to be an invaluable source to anyone willing and able to write such a biography.

Wiep van Bunge, *Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam*
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Doubting the Divine in Early Modern Europe: The Revival of Momus, the Agnostic God. George McClure.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xiv + 268 pp. \$99.99.

George McClure's ambitious and erudite overview of the many incarnations of the Greek god Momus (blame) from antiquity to the eighteenth century seeks to present a new history of religious unbelief. Interrogating Lucien Febvre's claim that atheism was unthinkable in the early modern world, the book explores how the irreverent Momus, who never shied away from fearless criticism, became both "a medium for dangerous challenges to religious belief and a literary trope for challenges to literary and intellectual authority" (vii). The book's six chapters offer detailed interpretations of the texts where Momus appeared, including Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aesop's *Fables*, Lucian's dialogues, Leon Battista Alberti's *Momus*, Erasmus's *Adages*, Giordano Bruno's *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. These instances, for McClure, reveal the consistent ways that Momus represented *parrhesia* (frank speech) in challenging different forms of authority in various historical contexts. The author attempts to engage in a "diachronic study that traces a trope from the classical world to the modern era" and that seeks "to examine how Momus authors spoke to one another across time" (xii). McClure also seeks to discuss specific historical contexts that led a variety of authors to "resurrect Momus" (xii).

The book reconstructs the intellectual contexts where Momus was reincarnated. It is especially strong in describing Renaissance Italy, where "proto-atheistic" currents were flowing strongly (43), and in showing how Reformation theologians weaponized the god of criticism and mockery. Such expositions would benefit, however, from