

Franco Mormando. *Bernini: His Life and His Rome*.

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Domenico Bernini. *The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini by Domenico Bernini: A Translation and Critical Edition, with Introduction and Commentary*.

Ed. and trans. Franco Mormando. University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2011. xvi + 482 pp. \$99.95. ISBN: 978-0-271-03748-6.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini was one of the most famous men of seventeenth-century Europe, and certainly the most influential and powerful artist working in Rome when the city was still the artistic capital of the Continent. Yet his life is relatively unknown. Bernini's star began to fade in the last decade of his long life, prompting his family to enlist the Florentine art historian Filippo Baldinucci to write a biography mythologizing the great artist in 1682. Domenico Bernini, the artist's son, produced an expanded biography of his father in 1713. Neither work resuscitated Bernini's reputation. Indeed, both texts were largely ignored until 1966 when Catherine Engass translated Baldinucci's *Vita* into English and Cesare d'Onofrio wrote an article arguing for the primacy of Domenico's version. So things remained until 2002 when an international conference, *Bernini's Biographies*, was held in Rome and attention was again directed toward biographical studies of Bernini. Publications followed: a volume of essays stemming from the 2002 conference was published (Delbeke, Levy, and Ostrow, eds., *Bernini's Biographies* [2007]), and Engass's translation was reissued in 2007. Most recently, Franco Mormando has contributed to this resurgence in Bernini studies with the first-ever English translation (and first translation into any language since 1713) of Domenico

Bernini's *Vita del Cavalier Gio. Lorenzo Bernini*, as well as the first English-language biography of the artist, *Bernini: His Life and His Rome*. Mormando's translations and biography are indispensable to students of Bernini, Rome, and Baroque art.

The Life of Gian Lorenzo Bernini translates three invaluable biographical texts on Bernini, complementing them with insightful and extensive explanatory notes. Mormando also offers an introductory essay on "The Anatomy of Baroque Biography," in which he discusses the basics of early modern artists' biographies, explaining their literary rhetoric designed to mythologize the artist. Mormando then gives a brief biographical sketch of Domenico Bernini as well as a history of his *Vita*. This is followed with three important sections: an explanation for the origin of the biography, a study of the intertextuality of Domenico and Baldinucci's biographies, and then finally an analysis of the text's structure.

Mormando's translation of the *Vita* is thoroughly grounded in the scholarly literature on Bernini and complemented by the author's own discoveries. Mormando's annotations complete, correct, and corroborate Domenico's biography. An illustrative example of this is the account of the Bernini's funeral. Mormando compares Domenico's account with Baldinucci's, cites archival documents such as Bernini's will, references Bernini scholars such as Frascchetti and Lavin, describes his own work looking (in vain) for archival records in Santa Maria Maggiore regarding the funeral, contrasts Bernini's funeral to Michelangelo's, and discusses seventeenth-century Italian funerary practices, all of which enhances our consideration of Bernini's funeral, an illuminating episode when one considers that the man who was probably the single greatest artistic force in the appearance of Rome hardly received a funerary monument and his bones have long since disappeared. The basic facts recounted in the notes are woven into a fine narrative in Mormando's biography.

Mormando also translates two lesser-known biographical sketches of Bernini: *The Vita Brevis* (ca. 1680) and the "Éloge du Cavalier Bernin" (1681). *The Vita Brevis* provides core stories from which the later biographies were composed, including Pietro Bernini pushing the young Gian Lorenzo to work harder; the trio of stories centered on Pope Paul V; visits by noble patrons to Bernini in his home; Annibale Carracci's prophecy regarding great works in St. Peter's; Bernini's dedication to art demonstrated when he burned his own leg in order to perfect his *St. Lawrence on the Gridiron*; and Bernini's final carved work, the *Salvator Mundi*, offered as proof of both Bernini's great artistic ability and deep religious piety. The "Éloge" attempts to revive Bernini's reputation in France some fifteen years after his difficult visit to that country. The postmortem tribute to Bernini appeared in *Le Mercure Galant*, a periodical known for its glorification of King Louis XIV, and it therefore likely expressed the king's own opinion about Bernini. The eulogy celebrates Bernini's work across multiple media, hails his universal genius, and concludes with a sonnet that states that of all of the great benefits Bernini "received from the heavens, the favor of LOUIS has been the most precious" (246).

A highly readable text for all audiences, *Bernini: His Life and His Rome* displays an impressive command of scholarly literature and presents vivid portraits of Bernini and Baroque Rome. Mormando combines information provided by

Bernini's contemporary biographers with letters, journals, archival records, and *avissi*, and he fill in gaps in the factual record with his own in-depth knowledge of the period. For example, Mormando's discussion of dissimulation in Roman court life illuminates Bernini's interaction with his patrons. Mormando also adroitly explores Bernini's art, using it as primary evidence (note, for example, the evocative discussion of *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy*). Mormando engages in speculation when necessary, but never veers from solid ground and is always clear about what is fact and what is hypothesis. The book is also a portrait of Rome and Roman society, and Mormando expertly weaves the two narratives. Particularly expressive passages detail the shocking excesses of Scipione Borghese, the scandalous debauchery of Antonio Barberini, and the sinister machinations of Olympia Pamphili. High society is contrasted with the city's underbelly, with descriptions of popular anger vented over projects like the *Four Rivers Fountain* or the Colonnade in Piazza San Pietro, bread prices and the poor's daily struggle for survival, and the social position of women. All of this set within a vivid portrait of the city of Rome itself, from the euphoric architectural triumphs to the Tiber's miserable flooding.

Mormando's personal yet informed impression of Bernini documents the artist's relentless ambition and desire for control, his sexual and romantic passions, his failings and triumphs, and his relationship with his family, patrons, collaborators, and rivals. At times the image of Bernini is not flattering, from the Cavaliere's angling to win the commission for the *Four Rivers Fountain* to conniving to poach a house from a deserving rival. Even more shocking episodes include Bernini's poor treatment of his daughter and the outrageous physical assault of Costanza Bonarelli. In other instances, Bernini comes across much better: Mormando's insightful observations of Bernini's theatrical productions not only reveal the artist's many talents, but presents him as a shrewd and independent observer of life in Rome and certainly not an automaton repeating the dogma of the papacy's oppressive religion and politics. As a portrait of an artist and his times, Mormando's biography compares favorably with, for example, William Wallace's excellent *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and His Times* (2010).

Mormando's portrait of Bernini is correctly at variance with the glowing reports from the seventeenth century; still, at times he seems perhaps unnecessarily critical. Though Mormando is aware of the literary liberties taken in Baroque biographies, he is quick to correct Bernini's biographers: comments like "it's a good story, but probably not true" (220) and "asserted, not proven" (349) privilege a modern notion of objective truth over the kind of truth suggested by biographical anecdote. In Mormando's "Anatomy" essay, he likens Baroque biography to sculpted portraiture, and so if biography is an art, it is right to remember that, as Picasso said, "art is a lie that helps us see the truth." In no way, however, does this detract from Mormando's excellent work. These books are essential contributions to Bernini studies, and because of them, we know Bernini better.

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