

Elisio Calenzio. *La guerra della ranocchie: Croaco*.

Ed. Liliana Monti Sabia. Nova Itinera Humanitatis Latinae: Collana di Studi e Testi della Latinità medievale e umanistica 6. Naples: Loffredo Editore, 2008. 146 pp. €18. ISBN: 978-8-875-64289-1.

Born in Puglia, Elisio Calenzio (1430–1503) gained renown as a humanist poet at the court in Naples, where he joined the Accademia Antoniana (later Pontaniana), became tutor and secretary of Federico d’Aragona, and won the praise of his fellow poets Pontano and Sannazaro. When he was eighteen, he composed a mock epic poem in Latin hexameters based on Homer’s *Batrachomyomachia* (Battle of the Frogs and Mice), which had been translated into Latin by Carlo Marsuppini around 1430. Evidently, the young Calenzio thought it fitting to begin his poetic career with a neo-Virgilian *lusus*, and the subject later appealed to many others. In France, Calenzio’s poem was printed and translated several times in the next two centuries; by the time of Leopardi’s 1815 version, there were a dozen Italian translations of the Homeric original.

Liliana Monti Sabia, a noted editor of Pontano and Neapolitan humanistic texts, here offers a critical text of *De bello ranarum* with a rich introduction, ample notes, critical apparatus, and an Italian translation. She adds a series of relevant documents, likewise translated: letters by Calenzio and Pontano, and the poet’s testament. Whereas previous critics have dismissed the work as a cento or mere exercise, Monti Sabia finds a rich irony in its retelling of the story, which expands the 300-line original into three books (734 hexameters) laced with echoes of Roman poets, especially Virgil. In Pontano’s dialogue *Antonius* (printed in 1491), Calenzio appears under his academic name *Elisius Gallutius*, and is called upon to defend Virgil as an ardent devotee of his poetry: *maximi Poetae studiosissimus poeticae Elisius patrocinium suscipiat*. Monti Sabia believes that Calenzio knew most of Virgil by heart, but she also perceptively detects Ovid, Statius, and others behind passages in the poem.

The plot of Calenzio’s poem follows the Homeric original with some original touches. In book 1, the mouse-prince Olearus, drinking at a pond, encounters the frog-king Croacus. After an exchange of boasts and threats, Croacus offers Olearus a ride across the pond, but drops him in the water midway, and Olearus drowns. Seeing what has happened, his companion Cicerectus (Ciceretto) hastens to inform the mouse-king Rodilardus of his son’s death. The mice summon a

council, decide to retaliate, and arm themselves for battle. In book 2, Cicerectus makes a declaration of war to the frogs, but Croacus urges his subjects not to fear and soon the frog heroes are catalogued as they arm themselves. Rodilardus in turn prepares for war, offering to the gods three sacrificial animals — a lizard, an ant, and a snail. As the mouse commanders marshal their forces, Jupiter calls the imminent conflict to the attention of the Olympian gods, who laugh at the puny combatants. In book 3, the frogs and mice join battle in episodes described with epic magniloquence: thus Croaco resembles a boar, and Rodilardo a lion. As the frogs face defeat, Jupiter takes their side, hurling a lightning bolt and sending a host of crabs to repel the victorious mice. Rodilardo retreats with the surviving mice, lamenting that they have been abandoned by the gods.

Calenzio's works were published in Rome in 1503, the year he (and Pontano) died. Later, they were placed on the Index because of passages that seemed lascivious or irreverent. His autograph of *De bello ranarum* survives in Vat. lat. 3367, a fair copy that became his working copy and forms the basis of the present edition. (Another codex, dated 1515, survives in Stuttgart, probably made by a German studying in Rome.)

As one would expect of such a great scholar, the edition is impeccable, and offers the reader a wealth of literary and textual insights. If the editor treats Calenzio's trifle with high seriousness, her approach mirrors that of the text itself. This juvenile exercise is a successful *lusus* that sheds light on Quattrocento humanist poetics. The poet's use of grotesque proper names prefigures the macaronic verse of Folengo, and his mock epic gives us an idea of the sophistication possible in Neo-Latin poetry only a century after Petrarch attempted his *Africa*.

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