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### Alfie, Fabian, and Aileen F. Feng. The Poetry of Burchiello: Deep-fried Nouns, Hunchbacked Pumpkins, and Other Nonsense

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## Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

**Alfie, Fabian, and Aileen F. Feng.**

***The Poetry of Burchiello: Deep-fried Nouns, Hunchbacked Pumpkins, and Other Nonsense.***

Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 495. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017. Pp. vi, 313 + 4 ill. ISBN 978-0-86698-550-5 (hardcover) US\$65.

Fabian Alfie and Aileen F. Feng have taken on the gargantuan task of editing the first English translation of Burchiello, a fifteenth-century Italian poet and barber whose nonsensical poetry maintains a legacy in Italian literary circles. “Il Burchiello” (né Domenico di Giovanni) had a tumultuous relationship with the Florentine Medici, yet his portrait was commissioned by Cosimo I de’ Medici to hang in the Uffizi Gallery alongside Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Although he is unknown to most modern-day visitors of the gallery, Alfie and Feng point out that Burchiello is recognized as one of the “greatest Italian poets,” with his verse rivalling that of Dante and Petrarch (3). Burchiello was so influential to later generations of Italian poets that many would circulate their writing under his name, which was a “stamp of literary quality” (4). Indeed, Burchiello’s “incomprehensible” poetry has both puzzled and inspired consecutive Italian writers, hence Alfie and Feng’s comment that the fifteenth century can be rightly called the “age of Burchiello” (5), though it remains difficult to say whether Burchiello’s celebrity is based on the sheer quality of the poetry or the challenge it presents to those attempting to pinpoint sensical meaning.

The critical introduction to the book is strong. Alfie and Feng note that Burchiello’s verse is considered the model of cosmic poetry. Whereas Petrarch’s sonnets state a problem that is resolved in verses 10–14, Burchiello’s preferred form was the *sonetto caudate*—a sonnet with three extra verses. The structure of Burchiello’s poetry departs from the Petrarchian problem–resolution model, but what elevates his poetry to rival Petrarch’s is not its beauty but its mundane, “everyday” content—as experienced through the eyes of a barber. Alfie and Feng note that Burchiello combines references from high literary culture and classical sources with images of quotidian existence; the broad spectrum of content is one element of Burchiello’s poetry to which Alfie and Feng attribute

its lasting success. Importantly, the editors stress that the nonsensicality of Burchiello's poetry is not a consequence of modern readers' unfamiliarity with Italian culture and language; it was equally elusive to contemporaneous readers. Alfie and Feng explain that despite the nonsensical content, Burchiello's poetry retains the syntagmatic structures of language (7); nevertheless, Burchiello's poetry resists—and even “blocks”—intertextual interpretations of its readership. Alfie and Feng note that there are multiple interpretations that share little in common; using sonnet 10 as an example, the editors outline several arguments made by a collection of scholars, whose interpretations range from a narrative of Burchiello in a tavern, to comparisons to Aesop's comparison of grammar with cooking, to arguments that focus on homoerotic undertones.

The diversity of content in Burchiello's poetry results from the synthesis of high literature with the daily experiences of the working class. Alfie and Feng direct readers' attention to the conflict between the contemplative life and the working life, explaining that Burchiello's time to compose poetry was “brief” (23), except for a stint in prison that left the poet with plenty of time to compose poetry—but only after a friend was able to smuggle him some paper. Burchiello had a plenitude of lived experience with which to infuse his poetry, hence the vast thematic spectrum of his poetry. Not only does Burchiello satirize Florentine humanism, he also discusses bodily pleasure, peasantry, the working class (of which he was a part), anticlericalism, non-Florentine dialects, and homoeroticism. The latter of these themes has led several scholars to believe that the poetry is only “superficially incomprehensible” (14), but for the “initiated,” the sexual meanings were apparent. The barber-poet also wrote poems to his clients, in which he would offer remedies for medical issues like congestion, constipation, and the chills.

The editors have included two appendices; the first contains a collection of poems that critics believe could be attributed to Burchiello, though there has yet to be consensus on the authorship; the second includes his will and testament and a petition asserting his innocence to the Lords of Siena, who imprisoned him for robbery. Although Alfie and Feng state that the two appendices are critical to our understanding of Burchiello's poetry, I would have benefited from a deeper explanation; likewise, the editors explain that their goal was to translate Burchiello's poetry in such a way that it would be accessible to readers, but I am not entirely convinced that they have achieved this goal. In spite of the insight into Burchiello's life and work in the critical introduction, Alfie and

Feng appear to have assumed that readers will be familiar with the literature and history of *quindicesimo* Italy; at the same time, the critical introduction and footnotes may be unnecessary for scholars of Italian Renaissance literature. I would say Alfie and Feng's greatest success is their skill for translating nonsensical poetry into English without losing the poet's intended "meaning"; I say this is a success because translating meaning is particularly challenging when there has yet to be consensus on what Burchiello's words signify.

The genius of Burchiello's poetry is that it attracted—and continues to attract—highly educated writers and scholars who establish meaning from what often appears to be a collection of quasi-connected words; thus, scholarly interpretations appear to speak more to the beliefs, interests, and fascinations of the interpreter than to Burchiello's nonsensical verse. Based on Alfie and Feng's description of the author's life, I think it would be fair to say that Burchiello would be pleased by a multitude of discordant analyses.

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**Ancín, Miguel González, and Otis Towns.**

***Miguel Servet en España (1506–1527). Edición ampliada.***

La Vergne, TN: IngramSpark, 2018. Pp. 473. ISBN 978-0-6921-3883-0 (hardcover) US\$45.

In 1953 Roland Bainton published a fundamental book on Miguel Servetus: *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus, 1511–1553*. Here, Bainton discusses the fate of the Spanish physician—burnt in Geneva because of the Antitrinitarian ideas expressed in his *Christianismi restitutio* (1553)—but also outlines Servetus's scientific outcomes, such as the discovery of the lesser circulation of the blood. According to Bainton, Servetus's religious and scientific thoughts worked together. Some months after Servetus's death, Sebastien Castellion published his *De haereticis an sint persequendi* (1554), arguing that heresy could never justify the death penalty. Servetus and his trial sparked a long debate on toleration that involved humanists and philosophers all across Europe.