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A CRUX IN DANTE'S *INFERNO*

By BERTHE M. MARTI

FEW lines in the *Divina Commedia* have caused more trouble or given rise to more far-fetched interpretations than the beginning of the seventh canto of the *Inferno*:

'Papè Satan, papè Satan, aleppe'
Cominciò Pluto con la voce chioccia.

Unable to understand the strange words, many among the early commentators interpreted 'papè' as a Greek or Latin interjection and 'aleppe' as the Hebrew *aleph*, the first letter of the alphabet. The latter they explained either as a simple exclamation (as, for instance, in the beginning of Jeremiah's lament) or as a metaphor for the head, the first and foremost. Thus, the line would mean: 'Oh! our foremost demon, as aleppe is the first letter of the alphabet' — that is, 'Oh! Satan, o Satan, god, king.' Others held that Pluto is represented by Dante as speaking either French, Greek, or Hebrew. He may, some suggest, be saying: 'Paix, paix, Satan; paix, paix, Satan, allez, paix;' or again: pas paix, Satan; pas paix, Satan, à l'épée.' If he is using Hebrew, the words read: 'Bab-e-sciatan, bab-e-sciatan, alep,' to signify that Hell has conquered, the phrase being the exact opposite of that spoken by Christ in the Gospel according to St Matthew (xvi, 18: ' . . . and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it'). These are only a few among the many suggestions that have been offered to solve the problem of *Inferno*, vii, 1-2. They show how a brilliant display of learning and ingenuity may occasionally serve to hide the commentators' frustrated bafflement.¹ Why should Dante so depart from his usual technique as to hide his meaning under obscure French, Greek, or Hebrew allusions? Those who would see in the words a series of meaningless sounds, uttered in such a way as to indicate the mad fury of the demon, are at least attempting to explain a literary text, not a crossword puzzle.² It is probable, they say, that Dante in this passage makes Pluto scream in a hoarse, clucking voice what sounds like articulate language but in reality defies grammatical analysis. The obscurity of the line is thus deliberate, since Pluto's aim is to increase the poet's terror by pronouncing mysterious, unintelligible words.

This may be true. But there is an element of selection in Dante's choice of these meaningless words. For even when he chooses to express himself darkly, a poet does not use sounds or words at random. The most hermetic writers have something to communicate and, like all artists, select with what skill they possess the tools best adapted to produce the effect they are striving for. Dante, clearest of poets, must have had some purpose in mind when he began this canto with the obscure phrase 'papè Satan.' Though meaningless without their context, both words have a very precise signification. Any contemporary reader would be jolted

¹ For further interpretations, references, and bibliography see T. Casini, *La Divina Commedia* (6th edition, 'rinovata e accresciuta per cura di S. A. Barbi,' Florence, 1923), p. 59.

² C. Grabher, *La Divina Commedia* (12th edition, Milan, 1950), I, 85.

by their juxtaposition, for the one clearly starts a chain of association which has to do with popes and princes of the church, while the other just as unavoidably brings to the imagination the prince of darkness and evil. These words, at the beginning of a new canto, are as two chords struck loudly and solemnly at the start of a new movement in a symphony. They are not placed in any recognizable context, yet they appear to be introducing a new theme. They seem to announce motives which will be treated in this canto and the abruptness with which they are ejaculated by the demon mysteriously adds to their force. If it serves any purpose at all, the first line must therefore be studied not in itself only but as a part of the whole canto. This we must do briefly before a new interpretation can be suggested.

In the fourth circle those who have misused their wealth are punished. The misers in one half of the circle and the prodigals in the other are chastised by having to roll weights in an ever-revolving dance, in which the two separate semicircular bands wheel round, clash with frightful shock, and turn back again in order to perform anew the never-ending evolutions of their nightmarish pantomime. This is the only circle in which Dante fails to identify individuals. Vergil explains to his companion that all those he sees were distorted beings who knew no moderation in their use of money. The ones on the left are the misers:

Questi fuor cherici, che no han coperchio
piloso al capo, e papi e cardinali,
in cui usa avarizia il suo soperchio.

These men, whom avarice has condemned to motions as futile and endless as that of the two seas which collide at Charybdis, are popes and cardinals, 'clerics in whom avarice practises its worse excess.' The description of their twofold encounter and of the darkness caused by their sin, which makes individual recognition impossible, is the climax of the canto.

We now turn back to the obscure line which introduces the shadowy sinners of the seventh canto. Here is Pluto, god of the underworld, who is also widely connected with riches. His appearance is the first clear indication of what is to follow and prepares the reader for the subject of the first part of this canto. It seems obvious that, while the demon's screaming achieves the desired effect of striking terror in Dante's heart, the sounds he utters are themselves connected with the content of the canto. For its subject, at least in the first part, is the punishment of nameless popes and cardinals whose allegiance on earth has been not to their Master but to Satan. 'Papè Satan' is not a sentence — not even a phrase — but an exclamation which would inevitably recall recent events and persons when read at a time when the quarrels between church and state were rife and when high ecclesiastical dignitaries were harshly criticized for their cupidity and splendid possessions. The two words, *papè Satan*, *papè Satan*, repeated as they are in the first line, are meant to echo throughout in the background of the description of the fourth circle. Their resonance is felt when Dante, whose heart is as if stricken, asks who the tonsured ones on his left are. It is felt when these former prelates are pictured as barking, reduced now by their sin to the state of animals. It is

felt again when Vergil states that these church dignitaries are indistinguishable as individuals. They are not any particular cardinal, not one pope or another, but a collective plural, *papae*.

I suggested that these words would bring to mind recent people and recent events. But even more, their apparently arbitrary and illogical juxtaposition would recall contemporary satirical texts. I submit that in a manuscript at Copenhagen we may have a fragment of a satire so well known and so effective that the mere mention of the key words '*papa Satan*' would suffice to bring a rich background of literary reminiscences to the minds of Dante's readers. This was published in 1935 by Paul Lehman from a codex containing some hitherto unknown mediaeval verse, written for the most part in the twelfth century.³ On folio 75 the following lines are found:

In Honorium papam

Dum sedet aut graditur loquiturque quibusque serenum,
 inficit exhalans horrida papa Sathan.
 Bubo sedens, bubalus gradiens, infausta loquens strix
 et tandem totus non homo, sed pavor est.
 Italicumque suum larvali corneus ore,
 dum crepitat, Daci Theutonicique timent.
 Sed neque Cerberus est neque Demogergon eodem,
 cum ridet, si parrideat, horridior.
 O nova secta lucri sic desperata misellis,
 carius hospitibus gratia vendet eum.
 Hinc non immerito rem nomine dissimulante.
 Dictus Honorius est non quod honor sed onus.

A somewhat longer quotation from the same poem is found, again with no indication of date or authorship, in a manuscript of the municipal library at Rouen (Ms A 376 [479], fol. 179):⁴

Iam iam cis Alpes premasticabat ad aurum
 Gallorum, Rome non saturanda fames.
 Set, miserante Deo, textus, calices, crucifixos
 occidit, olfaciens Gallica sacra Draco. Gel.
 Dum sedet aut graditur, loquiturque quibusque serenum
 inficit exhalans horrida, Papa Sathan.
 Bubo sedens, bubalus gradiens, infausta loquens strix
 et tandem totus non homo set pavor est.
 Imperio Pluto, Draco voce, Typhoeus actu,
 Tartara seva, solum, sidera terrificat. Hon.

The only clue to the author of this brilliant and virulent satire is found in an unpublished commentary to the *Pharsalia* written at the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century by Arnulf of Orléans.⁵ After stating that the Romans have at all times been attracted by the wealth of Gaul, he adds: 'Diu est quod nos spoliare auro ceperunt Romani, unde quidam noster Aure-

³ Paul Lehmann, 'Eine Sammlung mittellateinischer Gedichte aus dem Ende des 12. Jahrhunderts,' *Historische Vierteljahrschrift*, xxx (1935), 20-58 (see especially p. 43 f.).

⁴ I am indebted for this reference to Dr Bernhard Bischoff of the University of Munich.

⁵ I quote from my forthcoming edition of the commentary.

lianensis de quodam papa qui in Galliam ueniens circa Alpes interiit hos uersus edidit:

Iam iam trans Alpes premasticabat ad aurum
Gallorum Rome non satianda fames.⁶

The text from Rouen suggests that we are dealing with a connected series of invectives against different popes, only a brief section of which is preserved, with minor variants, in the two manuscripts and in Arnulf's quotation. '*Papa Sathan*,' in this anonymous piece, is Pope Honorius. The author was, according to Arnulf, a native of or a teacher at Orléans. His verse reads like the work of a mature poet, sure of his art, a master of words and invective, and in his violence a disciple of Juvenal. What distinguishes it from most contemporary satire is the almost flawless workmanship, the strength and power of the diction. Such skill is not common and one is tempted to attribute these lines to the famous Orléans poet, Hugh, known as the Primate of Orléans. Arnulf's casual mention of 'quidam noster Aurelianensis' reminds one of Richard of Poitiers' description of Hugh: 'his etenim diebus viguit apud Parisios quidam scholasticus, Hugo nomine,' whom he later refers to as 'Hugone lo Primat Aurelianensi.'⁶ The vigor of expression, the style, and the composition of this satire against the contemporary popes, Honorius and Gelasius, are similar to, and not unworthy of, Hugh's genuine works.

Be that as it may, this satirical verse is shown by the two copies and Arnulf's casual reference to have been well known. The words '*papa Sathan*' used to describe Honorius would, by their very impropriety, stick forever in the readers' memory and their repetition in Dante would bring the content of the whole satire to their mind. In both texts the locale is Hell, Pluto is present, and high ecclesiastics are likened to animals. The anonymous poet calls Honorius a *draco* and identifies him with several beasts, while in Dante the ghostly popes and cardinals bark like dogs, since they, like all the inmates of the first five circles, have acquired some of the characteristics of their guardian, Cerberus. The atmosphere in both texts is one of terror, created during their lifetime by the wickedness of the popes denounced by the anonymous poet and after their death by the punishment of their crimes in Dante's *Inferno*. In the Latin satire the cruel and powerful pope is likened to Pluto himself, but in Dante the popes have become Pluto's tortured subjects. Most important, the theme of both texts is avarice. Either deliberately or unconsciously, as is the way with poets, Dante seems to have echoed this satirical piece in the apparently senseless scream of Pluto at the opening of the seventh canto. Ignorance of the Latin poem has made it impossible for later readers to recognize the setting, the theme, and political allusions easily identified by contemporaries familiar with it. Had more of the Latin satire survived we might be in a position to account also for the still unexplained word *aleppe*.

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⁶ *M.G.H.*, SS., xxvi, 81; cf. F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Secular Latin Poetry in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1934), II, 171 ff.; M. Manitius, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters*, III (1931), 973-978.