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Nick Havely

Excerpt

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Introduction

Soon after the death of Clement V on 20 April 1314, Dante wrote a letter to the Italian cardinals assembled at Avignon to elect the next pope.¹ Accusing them repeatedly of abusing the 'bride of Christ', of leading the chariot of the Church astray, and of failing to act as true pastors, he cited, as the root cause of their betrayal, their Pharisaical greed and their 'marriage' to avarice.² Dante speaks here as 'the least of the sheep in Christ's pastures': the authority of his prophetic voice derives, he claims, not from office or power but from 'the grace of God' and even, he ironically implies, from the condition of poverty itself: 'I have no pastoral authority to abuse, since I have no wealth.'³

By the time this letter was written poverty had become a recurrent theme in Dante's work. It had featured in some of his early poems, in texts from the first decade of his exile, in the *Convivio* and the *Inferno*, whilst his concerns in the *Commedia* were coming increasingly to focus upon those who had been called 'the poor with Peter' and upon the role of voluntary or 'evangelical' poverty within a vision of renewed religious and ecclesiastical order.⁴ As he acknowledges at the beginning of the *Convivio*, Dante's own poverty was due to the misfortune of

¹ On the dating of the letter (*Ep.* 11) to the Avignon cardinals – probably May or June 1314 – see Toynbee (ed.) 1966: 124–6, C. Frugoni 1969: 79–80, and Ahern in *DE* 354.

² *Ep.* 11. 1 and 4–7; see Toynbee (ed.) 1966: 127, 130–5 and 143–5.

³ 'Nulla pastoralis auctoritate abutens quoniam divitiae mecum non sunt', *Ep.* 11. 5.

⁴ On the distinction between 'pauperes cum Petro', the voluntary or 'holy' poor, and 'pauperes cum Lazaro', the involuntary or 'truly' poor, see for example Mollat 1986: 103–4 and Wolf 2003: throughout (esp. 4, 7, 37 and 85). Wolf's study (*The Poverty of Riches: St Francis of Assisi Reconsidered*), which appeared when this book was very near completion, is a stimulating (if occasionally over-simplified) account of the ironies of Franciscanism endorsing 'a very specific kind of poverty that only Christians of means could effectively embrace' (37).

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exile rather than vocational choice. His developing emphasis upon the value of poverty, however, converges with contemporary arguments on the subject, especially in the contributions of the rigorist, or 'Spiritual', Franciscans to the increasingly acrimonious dispute on that subject. The composition of the *Commedia* also coincides chronologically with periods of papal involvement in the controversy about Franciscan poverty: around 1309–12, when Clement V was formally investigating the Franciscan Spirituals; and from 1317 onwards, when John XXII was actively engaged in suppressing them.⁵ Voluntary or evangelical poverty, and the tensions within and around the Franciscan Order, were thus significant and urgent issues for Dante and others of his time. Concern about the Franciscans, poverty and their relationship to ecclesiastical authority forms an important part of the *Commedia's* political vision – a subject with which a substantial amount of modern Dante criticism has been concerned.⁶

The present study aims to extend understanding of the *Commedia's* politics by reading it in relation to Franciscan controversies, particularly those involving poverty and the role of the Papacy. Its objective is neither to identify Dante as a crypto-Spiritual nor to revive the legend of his 'Franciscan vocation'.⁷ What will, however, be acknowledged and explored throughout is what several commentators have described as the 'consonance' between the ideas and language of evangelical poverty in the *Commedia* and in contemporary Franciscan writing.⁸ The Franciscan traditions and discourses that informed the controversies about poverty will thus be treated here not as a code but as a context for the reading of the poem. By tracing Dante's indebtedness to certain Franciscan traditions (in visual art, drama and poetry), and his appropriation of certain Franciscan discourses as a way of confronting papal authority, the purpose is also to illuminate some further features of the poet's role as lay and vernacular author.

⁵ The main guides on this controversy are Lambert 1961 (rev. 1998); Leff 1967 (Part I); and more recently Burr 1989, 1993 (chs. 9–11) and 2001.

⁶ Particularly significant here has been the work of Davis (1955 and 1984); Ferrante (1984); Armour (1989); and Scott (1996).

⁷ On this tradition, see Chapter 1 below, p. 32 with n. 85.

⁸ See Da Campagnola 1971: 293; also CL 2: 932. The Italian term used in both is *consonanza*. For the view that Franciscan poverty 'colors . . . the entire *Commedia*', see Petrocchi 1967: 51–2.

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Franciscan politics are of course intricately entwined with Franciscan piety; but since this book's concern is chiefly with the former, it will not lay stress upon orthodox Franciscan mystical writing, important as this may be for the *Commedia's* broader cultural context.⁹ Its approach to Dante's text will, on the other hand, draw upon a variety of sources for the ecclesiastical politics and the Franciscan culture of the period. It will make use of the main prophetic and polemical texts in the protracted dispute about Franciscan poverty, including the writings of Spirituals, such as Petrus Iohannis Olivi and Ubertino da Casale, and papal pronouncements on the subject, such as those by Nicholas III, Clement V and John XXII. It will also take account of the various media (such as the early Lives of St Francis, the dramatic *Laude*, panel-paintings, manuscript illustrations) through which images of evangelical poverty were disseminated up to, during and beyond Dante's time.¹⁰

Within such contexts this approach to the *Commedia* attempts to draw together three of the poem's main concerns. They can be briefly defined as Franciscanism, papal power and the vernacular poet's voice. Their drawing together has been chiefly by means of a concept and context which relates all three: that of evangelical poverty and the authority deriving from it. In the *Commedia* and elsewhere (notably the *Convivio* and the *Monarchia*) Dante's writing explores and relates various kinds of authority – that of the Empire, the Papacy, philosophy and the pagan writers, as well as that of Scripture and the poet.¹¹ Dante's approach to the contentious issue of Franciscan poverty, I shall argue, forms an intrinsic part of this project. As his view of 'pastoral authority' in the letter to the cardinals implies, evangelical poverty has both scriptural and political dimensions, and the process of authorizing it is, as I hope to show, closely bound up with the lengthy process of authorizing the writer's poetic and prophetic voice.¹²

⁹ For example, on Bonaventura's *Itinerarium* as an analogue for Dante's journey in the *Commedia*, see Freccero 1961; Hagman 1988; and Scrivano 1989.

¹⁰ On the Franciscan art of the period, reference will be made particularly to the work of Miller 1961, Stein 1976, Moleta 1983, Stubblebine 1985, C. Frugoni 1988 and 1993, Goffen 1988, and Cook 1989 and 1999.

¹¹ On kinds of authority (epistemological, institutional and poetic) in medieval thought and in Dante's writing, see Ascoli in *DE*, 72–5. On authority, authorship and Dante, see Minnis 1988: 10–12, 116–17, 214–16, and 279 n. 123; also *ED*, vol. 1, 454–60.

¹² On this process, see Hawkins 1999: esp. 66–71. For an early Trecento example of the authorizing of the *Commedia* in prophetic and Scriptural terms, see the Prologue to

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To speak of 'authorizing' poverty thus implies that the *Commedia* and other Dantean texts are engaged in several related procedures: first, that of recognizing the value of poverty in individual spiritual terms (as in *canzoni* such as 'Tre donne' and 'Doglia mi reca', in *Conv.* 4, *Purg.* 12 and 20, *Par.* 6 and 11 etc.); secondly, that of representing voluntary poverty as the basis of the Church's and the Papacy's institutional authority (as in *Mon.* 3, *Inf.* 19, *Purg.* 9 and 19, *Par.* 9 and 21 etc.); and finally, that of drawing upon the discourses of voluntary and Franciscan poverty to articulate a vision of history, to portray particular apostolic figures (such as St Peter), and to endow the vernacular writer with prophetic status (as in *Ep.* 11, *Inf.* 19, *Purg.* 32, *Par.* 25 and 27 etc.).

These texts convey a variety of attitudes to poverty, yet a certain progression is discernible in works preceding the *Commedia*. The initial stages of that progression are the subject of Chapter 1. Traditional 'negative' views of poverty as disgrace predominate in Dante's earliest writing, such as the exchange of sonnets with Forese Donati; and they even recur in the midst of *Paradiso*.¹³ Conversely, several poems of his early years of exile (such as 'Tre donne' and 'Doglia mi reca') glimpse honour and virtue behind the humiliation; whilst the *Convivio* begins to negotiate a route from the shame bred by the 'parching wind' to the value of poverty's 'unrecognized wealth'. Awareness of the traditions of thought about voluntary poverty was probably fostered in Dante by the 'schools of the religious' to which the *Convivio* refers (2.12.7); and his encounters with the Franciscans at Santa Croce would have intensified awareness of the various confrontations between poverty and power and between the Franciscans and the Papacy. This first chapter thus moves from the view of poverty as shame and disgrace to recognition of its value and authority in the eremitical and Franciscan traditions and in the texts of Dante's early exile.¹⁴ The political implications of this process of 'valuing' poverty are also important both for Dante and for the Franciscans; and the chapter concludes by surveying one further

Guido da Pisa's commentary on the *Inferno*, ed. Jenaro-MacLennan 1974: 124–30, and translated in Minnis and Scott 1991: 469–76 (esp. 470 and 473).

¹³ See, for example, Cacciaguیدا's lines on the hardship of exile in *Par.* 17.55–60, and the comments at the beginning of Chapter 1 below, p. 8.

¹⁴ The work resulting from Michel Mollat's research group, *Etudes sur l'histoire de la pauvreté* (Mollat 1974) is contextually relevant to this whole process; so also are the first two chapters of Bronislaw Geremek's *Poverty: A History* (translated into English in 1994).

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part of the context: the Franciscans' relationship with the Papacy and the incipient debate about evangelical poverty. The Papacy's role, the debate about evangelical poverty and related discourses of Franciscan culture constitute the main contexts for the reading of the *Commedia* that is undertaken in the following three chapters, each of which addresses relevant episodes, encounters and developments in one of the poem's three *cantiche*.

Hence, in the *Inferno* we find the Dante persona beginning to challenge and to claim authority (especially in canto 19), by speaking out against the 'avarice of high position' that is said to have beset such popes as Nicholas III, Boniface VIII and Clement V.¹⁵ In the *Inferno* the ideals of evangelical poverty and Franciscanism are, like other religious and political values, defined largely by their absence; hence the portrayal of St Francis himself (at the end of canto 27) significantly gives him no voice. Chapter 2 primarily addresses *Inferno*'s recurrent concern with the (broadly defined) 'avarice' of the clergy, giving particular attention to three popes (Nicholas III, Boniface VIII and Clement V) and their Franciscan contexts. It also shows how the emergent Franciscanism here contributes to the confidence of the pilgrim's stance and voice and prepares for his ascent and the extension of his vision in the next *cantica*.

Progress through Dante's Purgatory is on a number of occasions signalled by Franciscan figures, images and allusions; and these are traced in Chapter 3. In *Purgatorio* 12, the citing of the first Beatitude ('Beati pauperes spiritu') carries implications for the whole ascent of the mountain – as does the Franciscan-like habit of the angelic gatekeeper in canto 9. Especially in Purgatory proper (from canto 9 on), souls are envisaged as a restored religious order – a community *in via* which includes the pilgrim as member. The *cantica*'s concerns with poverty, community and authority are intensified, for example, by the portrayal of a Pope (Hadrian V) who repents of avarice, addresses Dante as 'frate' (brother) and urges him to 'rise up'. 'Brotherhood' and the sense of religious community also actively foster the pilgrim's developing vision of the Church's history – a vision which culminates in the apocalyptic scenes of canto 32 – where the 'sense of an ending' converges in some respects with Spiritual Franciscan eschatology, especially that of

¹⁵ For the origin of the term 'avarice of high position', see Chapter 2 below, p. 46 with n. 4.

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Petrus Iohannis Olivi's *Lectura super Apocalypsim*. Here and elsewhere *Purgatorio* has structural and thematic parallels with another important Franciscan text, the *Sacrum commercium*; and Chapter 3 will show how both texts engage with the issues of poverty and avarice in comparable ways.

Dante's continuing ascent through the *Paradiso* is accompanied from its early stages by the celebration of poverty and of Franciscan ideals; and Chapter 4 begins by identifying three 'forerunners' of Dante's St Francis (Piccarda, Romieu and Folquet) in cantos 3, 6 and 9. It then shows how, in the 'canto of St Francis' itself (canto 11), Dante draws upon the rich textual and visual traditions of Franciscanism – traditions that for the vernacular poet furnish an important link with the popular culture of his time. *Paradiso* is not, however, solely devoted to celebration. The discrepancy between the perfected circles of Paradise and the wild trajectory of humanity's course generates tension throughout the *cantica*; and the *Commedia* here continues to register the impact of contemporary issues and controversies. Like the *Monarchia* (which may have been composed near the same time), the *Paradiso* concerns itself with the earthly order, the founding principles of the Church and the Papacy's claims to temporal wealth and power. The later stages of Chapter 4 thus investigate the anti-apostolic role of the last pope of Dante's lifetime, John XXII (especially in cantos 18 and 27); and they present the papal persecution of the Spiritual Franciscans (beginning in 1317) as part of the context for the apocalyptic voices and visions towards the end of the *Paradiso*. Voices that concentrate such concerns by challenging the contemporary leadership of the Church include the hermit Peter Damian (canto 21), the apostle Peter (canto 27), and Beatrice (at the end of canto 30). These voices and this challenge are subsumed into the voice of the poet who has to return to earth, as St Peter says, 'because of the burden of mortality' (*Par.* 27. 64).

Many previous accounts of Franciscan influences on and parallels to Dante's work have contributed to this study. Nearly a century ago Felice Tocco (who was to go on to explore the 'question of poverty' more widely in the Trecento) presented a reading of *Purgatorio* 32 that related Dante's apocalyptic vision there explicitly and persuasively to the eschatology of the Spiritual Franciscans' mentor, Petrus Iohannis

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Olivi.¹⁶ Later scholars – notably Raoul Manselli and Charles Davis – continued (in the 1950s and onwards) to extend awareness of this polemical context for Dantean prophecy; others have continued to explore the relationship between mendicant and imperial ideas in Dante's reformist vision; and much important work on Dante and Franciscanism has since appeared in Italy, the United States and Britain.¹⁷ In setting out to explore aspects of Franciscanism throughout the *Commedia*, the present work takes account of recent research on Franciscan literature, culture and ideology, and it seeks to give due weight to both the politics and the poetics of poverty in Dante's work.

¹⁶ See Tocco 1902.

¹⁷ See especially Manselli 1959 and 1965a; Davis 1957, 1963 and 1984; and Park 1970. Important recent research can be found in the two collections of essays edited in Mellone (ed.) 1987 and 1992; in Comollo's 1990 study of Dante and religious dissidence; and in the articles and essays by Herzman 1982 and 1992, Moleta 1983, Barański 1994, Mineo 1993 and 1998, and Meekins (*DE* 416–19). For essential recent work on Franciscan poverty in general, see especially: Burr 1981, 1989, 1992, 1993 and 2001; Lambertini 1999 and 2000; and Wolf 2003.

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I

From shame to honour: Tuscan and Franciscan poverty

Poverty in medieval society generated a variety of co-existing attitudes and doctrines; and in this period an individual writer's views on the subject can be complex and even inconsistent.¹ Variety and complexity continue to be evident in Dante's mature discourse of poverty. In two cantos of *Paradiso*, for instance, he can both celebrate the imagined austerity of twelfth-century Florence (*Par.* 15.97–132) and deplore the actual hardship of being penniless in Verona (17.55–60). Such diversity is also evident in what we know of his cultural and intellectual milieu during the decade before his exile in 1301/2. In the 1290s he was absorbing the influences of Tuscan burlesque and experimenting with low-style encounters through mockery of his friend Forese's imagined penury. At the same time (according to *Conv.* 2.12) he was frequenting the 'schools of the religious' and becoming aware of the teaching and ideology of Franciscan scholars such as Petrus Iohannis Olivi and Ubertino da Casale.

Tuscan vernacular literature and Franciscan culture and politics in Central Italy are thus the main contexts that will here need to be taken into account when considering how Dante in his early writing – from his sonnets of the 1290s to the *Convivio* and the *canzoni* of the first years of exile – negotiates a wide range of ideas about poverty: as persecutress and bringer of shame, and as source of 'ignota ricchezza', 'unrecognized wealth'.

¹ On 'the great variety of attitudes and doctrines concerning poverty which existed and developed side by side in medieval society' see Geremek 1997: 31; and on further complexities and contradictions in individual attitudes, see Manselli in Mollat 1974: 649.

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POVERTY AND SHAME IN TUSCAN POETRY

The notion of involuntary poverty as a moral and social danger, or even as a fate worse than death, is, as Geremek has noted, 'frequent in Italian literature of the fourteenth century'.² In rather more detail, Manselli has surveyed Florentine Trecento writing on poverty and has argued for a 'transformation of values' on the subject in the course of the century.³ Manselli sees this transformation as conditioned partly by socio-economic factors and partly by cultural ones, such as the hostility to the Spiritual Franciscans that is evident in the anonymous *canzone* (perhaps of the 1320s and attributed to Giotto) 'Molti son que' che lodan povertate'.⁴ This 'transformation of values', which (for Manselli) is marked particularly by the *canzone*, is perceived to be in sharp contrast to the attitude of Dante, for whom 'poverty is an *ideal* which has to be affirmed and defended, because greed is a vice that poisons the whole world'.⁵ As Manselli recognized, such transformations take time to mature, and the attitudes and values that it is convenient for us to categorize are 'not always clear and consistent, even in the same individual'.⁶ He did not, however, seek to trace any of the roots of the 'negative' Trecento views on poverty, nor did he consider their possible implications for Dante's developing attitude. The formation and articulation of such views in the work of Tuscan writers of the Duecento will need to be reckoned with, before they are considered in relation to Dante's early work.

Concern about the *poveri vergognosi* (the shamefaced poor) is not hard to find among the poets of this period. For instance, a late Duecento collection of proverbs declares that 'the shamefaced poor man keeps his worth hidden'.⁷ The eclipsing of worth is a consequence of poverty that Dante will stress in *Convivio* 1.3, but the subject is also developed in various less solemn ways by other Tuscan writers and even (as we shall see) by Dante himself. The theme seems indeed to be particularly associated with the comic and parodic work of the *giullari* ('jongleurs') of the later

² Geremek 1997: 31. ³ Manselli in Mollat 1974: 653.

⁴ Manselli in Mollat 1974: 649; Sapegno 1952: 439–42. See also below, p. 14 and n. 24.

⁵ Manselli in Mollat 1974: 645. ⁶ Manselli in Mollat 1974: 649.

⁷ 'Povero vergognoso / suo valor tien nascoso'. The lines occur in the 'Proverbi' of 'Garzo', no. 161, in Contini 1960: 2. 307.

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Duecento and early Trecento, and perhaps its fullest development in this form is in the burlesque 'Canzone del fi' Aldobrandino'.⁸

Known only by this patronymic and by one manuscript, the writer of this *canzone* stages what could be seen as a comic equivalent of the scenario at the end of Dante's *Epistola* 2 (where Lady Poverty is seen as a 'persecutrix' who, like some romance enchantress, holds her knight in prison). The 'fi' Aldobrandino' represents himself as betrothed to the cadaverous and gouty 'mon[n]a Povertade', whose gloomy gang of personified relatives (Sorrow, Beggary, Longing, Distress etc.) and leaky, comfortless house he describes in some detail; and the scenario takes on an intimately sinister edge as the lady possessively keeps her arms round her lover's neck all the time, runs mad with jealousy if anyone wealthy approaches him, and insists on feeding, dressing and undressing him herself (ll. 61–75). Discourse of involuntary poverty thus converges in this *canzone* with that of vernacular misogyny. Lady Poverty – who had appeared by this time as a romance heroine in the Franciscan *Sacrum Commercium* and was to do so again in *Paradiso* 11 – here becomes a kind of *fabliau* wife – abject in some respects, demonized in others. Her luckless fiancé himself is eventually portrayed in the poem's final stanza as an outcast figure, from whom people flee and hide 'as they would from a rabid dog' (ll. 95–105).⁹

This final stanza and much else in the 'Canzone del fi' Aldobrandino' have some affinities with the wry representations of the penniless and shamefaced lover in the work of the Sieneese poet Cecco Angiolieri (c.1260–1312). Lack of *danari*, *forini*, *aquilini*, or *lo ritondo* ('the round stuff') is a constant burden in Cecco's sonnets; and the man without money speaks in them of being avoided, ignored and treated like a leper and of slinking around with his head held low, 'more shamefaced than a dog from out of town' ('più vergognoso ch'un can foretano').¹⁰ His complaint-sonnet 'Or udite, signor, s'i ho ragione' plays some further

⁸ Ed. Contini 1960: 2. 437–40.

⁹ For this part of the scenario in the *canzone*, see ll. 31–60; Contini (1960: 2. 435) places these within the tradition of the *Roman de la Rose*. On the broader traditions of representing Poverty as a woman, see Wolf 2003: 31. Lady Poverty in the Franciscan *Sacrum commercium* describes her repellent and outcast status by citing Job 30: 14: 'abominentur me et fugiunt longe a me, et faciem meam conspuere non verentur'; see Brufani 1990: 164.

¹⁰ Sonnet 76.1–2 ('Quando non ho denar') in Cavalli 1975; and sonnets 87.4 and 92.6 in Lanza 1990.