Taide in *Inferno* 18 and Terence *Eunuchus* 937*

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... quella sozza e scapigliata fante
che là si graffia con l'unghie merdose
e or s'accoscia, e ora è in piede stante.
Taide è, la puttana che rispuose
al drudo suo, quando disse "Ho io grazie
grandi appo te?": "Anzi maravigliose."

(*Inf.* 18.130-35)

[... yonder filthy and dishevelled slut
scratching herself there with her nails dung-dyed,
who squats and stands up, turn and turn about.
That is the harlot, Thais, who, when cried
her leman to her "Am I, then, in great
favour with thee?." "Nay, marvellous!" replied.]¹

The description of Taide at the end of *Inferno* 18 and the "error" there in what is clearly a close, though free, translation of Terence *Eunuchus* 391-92 (*THR. Mag-nas vero agere gratias Thais mihi? / GN. ingentis*. ["THR. Was Thais really very grateful to me? GN. She was *tremendously* grateful."]) have stimulated much enquiry into the source that Dante drew on at this point of the *Commedia*. Most critics believe that Dante did not have first-hand knowledge of the text of Terence;² apart from the erroneous rendering here — the word *ingentis* ("maravigliose") is attributed to Taide, when in the Terentian context it is in fact spoken by Gnatho, the parasite and flatterer, in answer to a question put to him by the soldier Thraso — no other certain and specific echo of Terence has been identified in the works of Dante, a point that Zygmunt Barański ("Primo" 22; "Dante" 226) justifiably stresses.³ Moreover, *Eunuchus* 391-92 are quoted by Cicero in *De amicitia* 98 and by John of Salisbury in his discussion of the *ars adulandi* at *Polycraticus* 3.4 and both these works have been seen as Dante's source. Edward Moore (261) favoured Cicero, but that Dante was drawing on John of Salisbury rather than Cicero was argued persuasively by André Pézard, who won the support of Marino Barchiesi. The purpose of this note is not primarily to engage in the question of identifying the source or sources that

influenced Dante at this point but rather to point out an unnoticed connection between the medieval scholastic tradition of Terence's plays and Dante's description of Alessio and Taide in the second pouch of the Malebolge.

The striking feature of this description is the scatological ambience of these two characters in Hell. This has been seen as a development of the common image of flattery as *oleum*, which Dante has transformed into *stercus*.⁴ Barchiesi (161) admitted that "una punizione infernale nella forma specifica escogitata da Dante per i suoi adulatori è tutt'altro che comune . . . nella letteratura visionaria e mistica ed ecclesiastica in genere." At the same time he pointed out that the idea that the damned will be exposed to stench is not uncommon (compare, for example, *erit pro suavi odore fetor* ["There will be stench instead of sweet fragrance"] at *Isaiah* 3:24) and Pézard had earlier noted that John of Salisbury thinks of the effects of flattery in similar terms (*illuvio foeda*, *Polycraticus* 3.6).⁵ But Taide is described, inaccurately as far as Thais of Terence's play is concerned, as a *puttana* as well as an *adulatrix* and the association of prostitutes with *stercus* is not novel; Edward Moore (22) referred to *Ecclesiasticus* 9.10: *omnis mulier, quae est fornicaria, quasi stercus in via conculcabitur* ("Every woman who is a whore will be trampled in the street like dung").

It is with respect to this association of prostitutes with *merda* that a medieval gloss on Terence is relevant. At lines 926 ff. of the *Eunuchus* the slave Parmeno, who mistrusts the motives of Thais and has a low impression of courtesans as a whole, expresses pride not only in having engineered without expense the ravishing of a girl in the household of Thais but also in having provided an opportunity for a young man to find out what *meretrices* are really like. He then continues (934 ff.):

quae dum foris sunt nil videtur mundius
nec mage compositum quicquam nec magis elegans.
quae cum amatore cenam quom liguriunt.⁶
harum videre inluviem sordes inopiam,
quam inhonestae solae sint domi atque avidae cibi,
quo pacto ex iure hesterno panem atrum vorent,
nosse omnia haec salus est adolescentulis.

[In public no one seems more clean or more tidy or more elegant than courtesans; in the company of their lovers they daintily eat their dinner. To see them when they are alone in their own home, to see their filth, their squalor, their poverty, to see how unattractive they are, how greedy for food they are, how they gobble up black bread with yesterday's soup — to know all this is the salvation of young men.]

According to Parmeno the private life of courtesans is characterized by *inluvies*, *sordes* and *inopia*. By *inluvies* Terence simply means "dirt," "filth," or "squalor."

However, the *commentum Monacense* of Terence glosses the word with the phrase *nimiam satietatem ventris earum*: "the excessive fullness of their stomachs."⁷ Now *saturitas*, a synonym of *satietas*, can refer to excrement as the result of the superfluity of the food that has been eaten, as in Pliny *Hist. Nat.* 10.49.93: *notabili munditia egerunt excrementa pullorum, adultioresque circumagi docent et foris saturitatem emittere*: "they [swallows] remove the chicks' droppings with remarkable cleanliness, and teach the older ones to turn around and relieve themselves outside of the nest" (Loeb translation). Even without this near parallel for the meaning of *satietas* it would be natural to interpret the words of the medieval commentator as denoting human waste. The only other possibility would be the vomit that might result from overeating. So here in the Terence commentary tradition we find a picture of prostitutes, like Taide in Dante, befouled with excrement. Note too that Taide is *scapigliata*, a description that also has a counterpart in the Terentian passage. In public nothing is *mage compositum* (*Eun.* 935) in public than *meretrices*; the implication is that in private they are unkempt and dishevelled.

Not too much should be made of this link between Dante's description of Taide and the commentator's interpretation of *illuvies* in Terence *Eunuchus* 937 as excrement. After all, the association of sin and evil with filth is a common one and the particular manifestation of such filth as excrement has biblical precedents, as the verse from *Ecclesiasticus* shows. Pzard (9, note 2) refers also to 1 *Macc.* 2.62:⁸ *et a verbis viri peccatoris ne timueritis, quia gloria eius stercus et vermis est* ("Do not fear the words of a sinner because his glory will turn into dung and worms"). Moreover, it should be kept in mind that the excrement in the second pouch of the Malebolge has more to do with "the prostitution of words"⁹ than the prostitution of the flesh.

The echo of *Eun.* 391-92 at the end of *Inferno* 18 can be explained by a combination of circumstances without having to suppose that Dante was drawing directly from Terence. First of all, the Terentian words had become a stock *exemplum* of the *ars adulandi*, as is shown by the quotation of them in both Cicero and John of Salisbury. Secondly, the name Thais had become established as a stock name for the grasping and deceitful *meretrix*, as the first two lines of the section entitled *De iuvene et Thaide* in the so-called *Liber Esopi* (see Padoan 86 ff.) make clear:

arte sua Thais iuvenes irretit, amorem
figit et ex ficto fructus amore venit.

[Thais ensnares young men by her art, she pretends to be in love
and from this false love she reaps her harvest.]

In this regard a particularly interesting example of "Thais" as a generic name for a courtesan is to be found in Juvenal 3.93:

an melior, cum Thaida sustinet aut cum
uxorem comoedus agit vel Dorida nullo
cultam palliolo? mulier nempe ipsa videtur,
non persona, loqui!

[Can the male comic actor do better when he takes the role of Thais
or acts the part of a wife or of Doris without a cloak (*pallium*)?
You really think it's a woman speaking, not a masked actor!]

These lines occur in the section of the poem in which Juvenal complains bitterly of the presence of Greeks in Rome and of their character. The Greeks, he says, are a people most skilled in flattery (*adulandi gens prudentissima*, 86); they are a nation of actors (*natio comoeda est*, 100). In lines 93-96 Juvenal is simply comparing the *ars adulandi* of the Greeks with the skills of male actors playing female roles. But in the context it would not be surprising for a medieval reader to take this further and to see the point of the reference to Thais to be not just that she is a woman character in a comedy whose role is played by a man, but that she is a courtesan and, like the Greeks in Rome, expert in flattery and deceit.¹⁰ It is worth noting that John of Salisbury quotes three passages from this satire of Juvenal (86-91, 100-103, 104-107) in the same section of the *Polycraticus* on *adulatio* (3.4) in which he quotes the Terentian line from the *Eunuchus*.

Although the link between Dante and the Terentian scholiastic tradition does not, in my opinion, significantly affect the dispute about whether Dante was drawing directly from Terence at the end of *Inferno* 18, this unnoticed similarity in Dante's description of Taide and in the medieval scholiast's interpretation of *Eun.* 937 deserves a mention in modern commentaries of Dante.¹¹

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NOTES

- * This note originated in a response that Amilcare Iannucci invited me to give to Zygmunt Barański's essay ("Dante") at a conference in Toronto in December 1993. I am grateful to both for encouraging publication of this small contribution to the question of Dante's knowledge of Terence.
- 1 The translation is Geoffrey L. Bickersteth's.
- 2 For the most recent discussion of this question (with bibliography of its history) see Barański, "Primo" and Barański, "Dante".
- 3 Russo (212) cites two other echoes of Terence, but neither is at all convincing.
- 4 This goes back to Benvenuto da Imola (see Barchiesi 155).
- 5 Pézard (12) translates this as "ordure infecte" without demonstrating that *illuvio* actually does mean "ordure", as I think he ought. The Latin phrase could mean simply "stinking water".
- 6 I have doubts about line 936; it may be an interpolation, manufactured to create a contrast with details in the description of the courtesans in lines 938 and 939.
- 7 Also in the Terentian MS D (see Schlee 111).

- 8 Pézard cites this, erroneously, as 2 *Macc.* 2.62.
- 9 I borrow the phrase from Sayers (187) in a note in her Penguin translation of *The Divine Comedy*.
- 10 There is no indication of this, however, in the published editions of the scholia to Juvenal.
- 11 The most vigorous proponent of the view that Dante *did* have first-hand knowledge of Terence and was drawing from him at *Inferno* 18 is Claudia Villa (see Villa, *La 'lectura Terentii'* 141-85, and Villa, "Dante lettore" 96-97). In partial support of Villa I think it highly probable that at some time Dante had read some Terence and, consequently, the commentaries that accompanied the text. But Terence does not seem to have been an author to whom he returned or whose words stuck in his mind.

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