Dante and Peraldus: The *aqua falsa* of Maestro Adamo (A Note on *Inferno* 30. 64–69)

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In Memoriam Judson Boyce Allen (1932–1985)

When Dante and Virgil first encounter Maestro Adamo, in canto 30 of the *Inferno*, he laments his torments to them and, at one point, he complains:

Li ruscelletti che d'i verdi colli
del Casentin discendon giuso in Arno,
faccendo i lor canali freddi e molli,
sempre mi stanno innanzi, e non indarno,
che l'*imagine* lor *vie più m'asciuga*
che 'l male ond'io nel volto mi discarno.

(*Inf.* 30.64–69; emphasis added)

Images of water that dry or parch are such a surprising and arresting figure in this passage just because water and its image are so naturally and, we would perhaps say, immediately perceived *to do the opposite*. Under normal conditions in this world, water and its image cool and refresh an observer. So much is this the case that it seems unnatural or perverse for water or its image to do the opposite. In such an event, normal conditions obviously do not obtain, and such conditions as do obtain are precisely hellish. And such unnaturalness and hellishness are exactly what Dante relies on to articulate and emphasize the kind and the degree of Adamo's punishment.

For Adamo, as we know, is a counterfeiter or falsifier (*Inf.* 30.115); and as his *contrapasso*, the counterfeiter suffers from counterfeit or *falsified* images of water. The images are real, very real for Adamo, but they are not *true*, even as counterfeit coins are real but not true. The images, in short, *look like* water, but they are not true to the nature of water—they falsify it. In a book which I published some years ago, I studied this *contrapasso* and its implications at some

length (Shoaf 39–48). At the time I wrote this book, however, I was unaware of a piece of evidence which goes far toward confirming the interpretation of the *contrapasso* which I offer there and here. The purpose of the present note is to document this new evidence and demonstrate its relevance to the episode in *Inferno*.

As part of a long-term study of the figuration of *avaritia* in medieval literature generally, and in Dante in particular, I have been examining the lengthy chapter on this vice in the *Summa Virtutum ac Vitiorum* of Guillaume Peraldus.¹ Peraldus in this chapter repeats and continues the ancient tradition of the avaricious man as suffering from or at least resembling one who suffers from hydropsy (Peraldus 2: 57–58).² This, we know, is the disease from which Maestro Adamo suffers (*Inf.* 30.52–57); and it is, of course, consonant with his sin that he should suffer the disease traditionally associated with the avaricious: after all, his prime motive for counterfeiting would have been avarice, which is the root of all evil (1 Tim. 6.10).

After citing this tradition, Peraldus goes on to explain why the avaricious or hydroptic man can never be filled, never satisfied:

Qui vult sitim cupiditatis suae divitiis sedare, similis est illi, qui vult sitim corporalem extinguere *falsam aquam* bibendo. Aqua falsa ex eo quod aqua, nata est sitim extinguere, et *eo quod falsa nata est eam provocare*: Sic divitiae in quantum aliquem defectum supplent, sitim sedant, in quantum vero multos defectus, secum afferunt, sitim provocant (2: 59; emphasis added).

The relevance of this explanation to Dante's figure of the images of water that parch should be obvious. Those images are *aqua falsa*, counterfeit or *falsified* water, precisely because, like it, they are "born to provoke thirst," not to extinguish it—they look like water but they are not true to the nature of it.

Numerous other sources doubtless inform Dante's episode.³ But it seems almost certain that one of his sources was Peraldus on the vice of avarice: Peraldus's image of "false water" corresponds tellingly to Dante's words "l'immagine lor vie . . . m'asciuga." Moreover, given the enormous popularity of the *Summa*, the relationship proposed here is certainly plausible. But what may be more important finally is the additional suggestion that Dante turned to Peraldus not just because he was popular but also because he, Dante, was interested in figuring lower hell as the space of avarice, as the place where

the *root* of all evil is exposed and punished. Although much more research will be needed to confirm the matter, I suspect and speculate that medieval treatises on avarice are going to tell us a very great deal about the structure and the imagery of the lower cantos of *Inferno*.⁴

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NOTES

- 1 On the importance, popularity and great influence of this book, see Bloomfield 124–25 and Tuve 81 and 113n., 114n. and 134.
- 2 On this tradition see Bloomfield 80 and 362, n. 102. Also consult Durling 61–93, esp. 67–70. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the family and the estate of the late Judson Boyce Allen for granting me access to the Peraldus edition in his private collection of rare books and manuscripts.
- 3 See, in addition to the numerous sources discussed by Durling, my own account of Dante's use of Ovid's Narcissus narrative (*Metamorphoses* 3.339–510) in Shoaf 24–29.
- 4 I hope to report on this further research in a book now in progress, entitled *The Crisis of Convention in the Commedia*, a study of the 126 occurrences of the word *convenire* in the *Comedy*.

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