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NOTES ET DISCUSSIONS

Vitruvius, 'Caecius', *Nero*, and Philip Massinger

In *Nero*, an anonymous play published in 1624, the emperor tells Poppaea in Act 4, scene 1 that

> This kiss, sweet love, I force from thee, and this
> And of such spoils and victories be more proud
> Than if I had the fierce Pannonian
> Or gray-eyed German ten times overcome [1].

That curious epithet – 'gray-eyed' – was picked up two years later in Philip Massinger's *Roman Actor* (staged in 1626, and published in 1629), where, in Act 1, scene 4, Domitian comments:

> When I but name the Daci,
> And gray ey'd *Germans* whom I have subdu'd,
> The Ghost of *Iulius* will look pale with envie [2]

In their note to this passage, Massinger's editors remark that "Tacitus, *Germany*, iv, refers to the *caerulei oculi* of the German tribes [3]", and leave it at that. However, *caeruleus* (notwithstanding a chromatic versatility that also encompasses dark blue and green) would, for seventeenth-century dramatists, more ordinarily have been the blue evoked by 'azure'. This is not to say that they would have been unaware of Tacitus' description *Germania*, but rather to suggest that they, or at least the author of *Nero* (if Massinger borrowed from him), might well have adduced an additional source for 'gray-eyed' (which, after all, is *not* a synonym for 'blue-eyed'). If one or both playwrights had been working only with Tacitus – *truces et caerulei oculi, rutilae comae, magna corpora et tantum ad impetum ualida* [4] – they would not have

1. *Nero and Other Plays*, ed. by H. P. HORNE, H. ELLIS, A. SYMONS and A. W. VERITY, London, Vizetelly, 1988, p. 55.

2. *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger*, ed. by P. EDWARDS and C. GIBSON, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, vol. 3, p. 34.

3. *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 185.

4. Tacitus. *Agricola. Germania. Dialogus*, trans. by M. HUTTON and W. PETERSON, rev. by. R. M. OGILVIE, E. H. WARMINGTON and M. WINTERBOTTOM, London, William Heinemann, 1970, p. 136.

rendered *caeruleus* as 'gray' or even as 'caerulean' since the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites that adjective as having entered the written language only in 1677. 'Blue' would have been their most probable choice, were it not for the fact that they seem to have accessed another source altogether, and one that Tacitus himself might have consulted. The Loeb introduction to *Germania* (98 CE) tells us that its sources were Posidonius, Julius Caesar and Pliny the Elder, as well as the "evidence of Roman officers who served in campaigns and of merchants who had travelled to Germany [5]." However, it omits a fifth possibility – indeed a probability – viz, Vitruvius' *De Architectura* (6, 1, 3), written more than a century before:

> *Ex eo quoque <quae> sub septentrionibus nutriuntur gentes, inmanibus corporibus, candidis coloribus, derecto capillo et rufo, oculis caesis* [*sic*], *sanguine multo ab umoris plenitate caelique refrigerationibus sunt conformati …* [6]

Lewis and Short gloss *caesius* as "*bluish-gray*", and flag it as "very rare, and only of the eyes" [7]. It's to this rare adjective that we should probably trace the impulse of our dramatists to talk in (unerotic and well below fifty!) shades of gray. Certainly England, with its Danish and Anglo-Saxon heritage, had blue-eyed subjects in abundance, whereas in pre-Lombardic Italy, *oculi caerulei* aut *caesii* would have been something of a rarity. Indeed, if the blonde infusion to the north had occurred a century before it did, one wonders whether Gregory the Great would have felt quite so impelled to missionize England, given the legend that the blue-eyed Angli of a Roman slave market struck him as *angeli*. Such sights would have proved more common after the Lombards trickled south.

Given the widespread occurrence of blue eyes in England, it seems likely that, trying to suggest an appropriately Germanic 'otherness', the *Nero* author and Massinger simplified *caesius*, which is properly an *intermediate* gradation between two colours, into an absolute 'gray', and did so because, as an iris chrome, it is rare enough to evoke the exotic. And it seems equally likely that they found inspiration for this decision in the ambivalence of the adjective *caesius*, brought to their attention by Vitruvius, rediscovered and popularized by the Renaissance. I should be also like to have seen the original text (presumably Latin rather than Dutch) in which Erasmus sketched his vignette of Thomas More – "Ten years before Holbein painted his portrait, Erasmus described More as having an open face with a clean complexion, set with blue-grey eyes and set off with auburn hair and a thin beard" [8] – but the author unfortunately fails to source it. There is a *prima facie* likelihood, however, given the popularity of Vitruvius, that the adjective in question might have been *caesius* as well.

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5. *Ibid*., p. 121.

6. Vitruvius, *On Architecture,* ed. from the Harleian Manuscript and trans. by F. GRANGER, London, William Heinemann, 1934, vol. 2, p. 12.

7. Ch. T. LEWIS and Ch. SHORT, *A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1879, p. 265.

8. N. WILLIAMS, *Henry VIII and His Court*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, p. 85.

The Object of Absolution in the *Dies Irae*

In my pre-Latin days, the name of the Catholic church in my neighbourhood meant nothing to me, but when, at the age of twelve, I was at last able to translate *mater Dei*, the phrase caused my mind to reel. Catholics brought up from infancy with this paradox from the Council of Ephesus no doubt take it in their stride; those who encounter it much later will probably find it as electrifying as I did. That paradoxically inverted parentage – reinvented in part by Wordsworth's 'Child is father of the Man' [1] – seemed suddenly to cast light on Mater Dei's west front, modelled on that of an Italian basilica. The apex of its classical pediment was surmounted by an image of the Virgin, and, since triangles are often invoked to image the Trinity (as in the reredos of the Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge), the ensemble seemed to offer itself as a stone-rendered parable of Mariolatry.

However, familiarity breeds acceptance as well as contempt, and before long I passed and repassed the west front of Mater Dei without receiving the mental jolt that she had at first occasioned. A new shock lay in store, however, this time in Verdi's *Requiem*. Having digested the dizzying notion of a mothered God, I had now to process the idea that she stood in need of absolution – or so I thought when first I encountered the *Dies Irae*. Commentators subsequently informed me that I had been guilty of a misprision and that when he wrote *Qui Mariam absolvisti* [2], the author of the poem (putatively Tomasso da Celano, and henceforth referred to as Tomasso) was referring to Mary Magdalene. Certainly once the *mater Dei* had been banished from the line, it became more digestible and intellectually tamer. But were those critics right in so dispensing with her? I chanced to hear the *Ingemisco* on the wireless some weeks ago, and it suddenly struck me that I my so-called misprision might well have been nothing of the sort. A case *can* be made for the absolution of the *mater Dei* rather than her sinful homonym, as I shall attempt to show.

To begin with, the woman absolved by Jesus of her sins is not identified as Mary Magdalene in the gospels, and the connection obtains only in Catholic tradition. Of course this tradition enjoyed near-scriptural authority in the Middle Ages, and it's entirely probable that the author of the *Dies Irae* accepted it without question. But then again, there is nothing to prove categorically that he did. A more cogent argument, however, would centre on the obvious ambiguity of *Qui Mariam absolvisti* as we encounter it on the page. The fact that some libretti explicitly tell the listener that we are dealing with Mary Magdalene proves that my 'misprision'

1. William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. by Th. HUTCHINSON, rev. by E. DE SELINCOURT, Oxford, University Press, 1969, p. 62.

2. *Verdi's Requiem (Composed in Memory of Alessandro Manzoni) for Four Solo Voices and Chorus. The English Translation by C. L. Kenney. Voice and Pianoforte,* London, G. Ricordi, no date, p. 76.

must be widely shared. Our first thought, when reading *Mariam* without a toponymic agnomen, will be of the *mater Dei* and not of the *in civitate peccatrix* (Luke 7.37). The authorities of the Roman church certainly think so, for, as part of their reforms to the liturgy, they have rewritten the line to forestall the unqualified accusative's implied accusation, the accusation of a *mater Dei peccatrix* :

> In the liturgical reforms of 1969-71, stanza 19 was deleted and the poem divided into three sections: 1-6 (for Office of Readings), 7-12 (for Lauds) and 13-18 (for Vespers). In addition, "Qui Mariam absolvisti" in stanza 13 was replaced by "Peccatricem qui solvisti" so that that line would now mean, "You who freed / absolved the sinful woman" [3].

It goes without saying that such a solution, or others like it (say, *Magdalenam qui solvisti*), would have been available to the lyrist himself, and yet he chose not adopt them. Why? one might ask.

The answer, I would argue, can be found in a dogma that had come to prominence in the twelfth century shortly before the poem's composition. I am not a theologian, but have, after publishing books on Muriel Spark and on the poets of the Oxford Movement, acquired a moderate knowledge of Roman doctrine, and have certainly come some way since the days when *mater Dei* sent me into an intellectual tail-spin. Unless firm evidence contra can be adduced, I am now ready to believe now that Tommaso might well have been referring to the 'mother of God' in 'Qui Mariam absolvisti'. While the immaculate conception became *de fide* only in the *ottocento medio*, it had been current for many centuries before. According to the *Catholic Encylopedia*:

> In the Constitution Ineffabilis Deus of 8 December, 1854, Pius IX pronounced and defined that the Blessed Virgin Mary "in the first instance of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace granted by God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved exempt from all stain of original sin" [4].

The same source avows that a version of this belief had gathered strength in England before the Norman conquest:

> No controversy arose over the Immaculate Conception on the European continent before the twelfth century. The Norman clergy abolished the feast in some monasteries of England where it had been established by the Anglo-Saxon monks. But towards the end of the eleventh century, through the efforts of Anselm the Younger, it was taken up again in several Anglo-Norman establishments[5].

It then moved into the European mainstream, where it became the subject of widespread controversy:

> It seems to have been St Bernard [of Clairvaux] who, in the 12th century, raised the question of the Immaculate Conception. […] In doing so, he takes

3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dies_Irae. Accessed on March 13th, 2016.

4. http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=6056. Accessed on March 13th, 2016.

5. *Ibidem*.

> occasion to repudiate altogether the view that the Conception of Mary was sinless. […]
> Saint Thomas Aquinas […] refused to admit the Immaculate Conception, on the ground that, unless the Blessed Virgin had at one time or other been one of the sinful, she could not justly be said to have been redeemed by Christ.
> St Bonaventura […] hesitated to accept it for a similar reason [6].

Given its controversial nature, this dogma would have been widely discussed, and would seem to have found its most ardent defenders among the Franciscans, Duns Scotus being responsible for its eventual ascendancy. It's surely not irrelevant to note that Tomasso was also a Friar Minor. To quote the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* once again:

> The celebrated John Duns Scotus (d. 1308), a Franciscan like St Bonaventura, argued, on the contrary, that from a rational point of view it was certainly as little derogatory to the merits of Christ to assert that Mary was by him preserved from all taint of sin, as to say that she first contracted it and then was delivered. His arguments, combined with a better acquaintance with the language of the early Fathers, gradually prevailed in the schools of the Western Church [7].

Arguing as a literary scholar (as I am qualified to do) rather than as a theologian (a discipline in which I have no formal training), I can acknowledge that it is possible to adduce arguments for each of the two Marys in hand. Those with little appetite for paradox will prefer to invoke the Magdalene, for, read in these terms, the line will link two comparable figures of sin, and so create a homogeneous pattern of absolution for prostitute and thief:

> *Qui Mariam absolvisti,*
> *Et latronem exaudisti,*
> *Mihi quoque spem dedisti.* (p. 76-77.)

But is the speaker's hope founded on these *ad hominem* instances of absolution, or on the larger project of Christian redemption? There is evidence elsewhere in the text that the latter, global perspective obtains:

> *Recordare, Jesu pie,*
> *Quod sum causa tuae viae,*
> *Ne me perdas illa die.*
>
> *Quaerens me, sedisti lassus,*
> *Redemisti crucem passus;*
> *Tantus labor non sit cassus.* (p. 71-73.)

The arc of that *via* extends from the incarnation to the consummation of the *passio crucis*, the whole being conceived as a great Herculean enterprise: *Tantus labor*. Would not a more comprehensive reading of *Qui Mariam absolvisti* encompass both the *initium tanti laboris* – Jesus' entering the womb (its immaculacy assured by the mother's proleptic absolution) to the *perfectio tanti laboris* on Calvary, which conclusion the poet evokes through the co-crucified thief. This would bookend the work of redemption with two *opposed* (rather than commutable) metonyms:

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6. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1911, p. 334.
7. *Ibidem*.

‘*virgo*’ (*vice* ‘*meretrix*’) on the one hand, and ‘*latro*’ on the other. The *mater Dei*, being human, needed a purgative absolution to fit herself for her *maternitas deifica* – a purgation that was either retrospective *secundum* Bernard, or anticipatory *secundum* Duns Scotus.

The fact that she, in all her purity, was believed to have needed additional absolution would surely have enhanced the foundation of the speaker’s ‘*spes quoque data*’, for the *Dies Irae* is all about the terror of damnation. One trembling line, above all, admits as much: *Cum vix justus sit securus* (p. 52-53). The thought that that mediaeval paragon of sanctity, *Maria justissima* had herself to be indemnified from sin must have afforded the writer some comfort. It is, after all, a crucial step in the execution of *tantus labor* – a labour begun with an immaculate conception and concluded with the forgiveness of an errant world, metonymized through the crucified robber. And between the poles of that continuum arching between sinlessness and flagrant sin, the speaker seems tentatively and hopefully to insert himself.

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