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0521026652 - Human Vices and Human Worth in Dante's Comedy

Patrick Boyde

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Patrick Boyde brings Dante's thought and poetry into focus for the modern reader by restoring the *Comedy* to its intellectual and literary context in 1300. He begins by describing the authorities that Dante acknowledged in the field of ethics and the modes of thought he shared with the great thinkers of his time. After giving a clear account of the differing approaches and ideals embodied in Aristotelian philosophy, Christianity and courtly literature, Boyde concentrates on the poetic representation of the most important vices and virtues in the *Comedy*. He stresses the heterogeneity and originality of Dante's treatment, and the challenges posed by his desire to harmonise these divergent value-systems. The book ends with a detailed case-study of the 'worth and vices' of Ulysses in which Boyde throws light on recent controversies by deliberately remaining within the framework of the thirteenth-century assumptions, methods and concepts explored in previous chapters.

Patrick Boyde is Serena Professor of Italian in the University of Cambridge and Fellow of St John's College. He is the author of *Dante's Style in his Lyric Poetry* (Cambridge, 1971) and *Night Thoughts on Italian Poetry and Art* (Cambridge, 1985). *Human Vices and Human Worth in Dante's 'Comedy'* is the third book in his trilogy, which also comprises *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos* (Cambridge, 1981), and *Perception and Passion in Dante's 'Comedy'* (Cambridge, 1993).

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Non similiter in omni materia certitudo quaerenda est, sed secundum quod natura rei subiectae recipit.

ARISTOTLE, *Ethics*, I, iii, 4, quoted by Dante, *Monarchia*, II, ii, 7

'Ex omni ligno paradisi comede. De ligno autem *scientiae boni et mali* ne comedas, in quocumque enim die comederis ex eo, morte morieris.'

'Scit enim Deus quod in quocumque die comederitis ex eo, aperientur oculi vestri et eritis sicut dii, *scientes bonum et malum*.'

GENESIS 2.16–17; 3.5

De finibus *bonorum et malorum*

CICERO (title)

Juris prudentia est divinarum atque humanarum rerum notitia, *justi atque injusti scientia*.

JUSTINIAN, *Institutes*, I, i, pr.

Haec exposuimus ut vobis possibile sit summo digito et quasi per indicem ea tetigisse.

Ibid. IV, xviii, 12

Neither in inward *worth* nor outward fair.

SHAKESPEARE, *Sonnets*, 16, 11

Worth makes the man, and want of it the fellow:
The rest is all but leather or prunella.

POPE, *Essay on Man*, IV, 203

'I wish . . . that her birth were equal to her fortune, as I am sure that her *worth* is superior to them both.'

TROLLOPE, *Dr Thorne*, chapter 46

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Figures

- 1 The Tree of the Vices. British Library, Arundel 83, *page* 54
fol. 128 verso. Reproduced by permission of The British
Library.
- 2 The Tree of the Virtues. British Library, Arundel 83, 55
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Preface

This is the third book I have devoted to the study of the interactions between Dante's poetry and thought. It stands on its own and presupposes no familiarity with its predecessors (*Dante Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos*, 1981; *Perception and Passion in Dante's 'Comedy'*, 1993). But given that it is written in the same spirit, and as part of the same enterprise, it may be worth restating two points made in the preface to the second volume. First, the book's main claim to originality lies in the connections it seeks to re-establish between a medieval poem and medieval ideas. Second, the adjective 'philomythical' is occasionally used as a correlative to 'philosophical' in order to signify the kind of creative writing that is open to and nourished by philosophy. Anyone who is curious to know how I conceive the relationship between *mythos* and *sophia* in Dante, or who would like to read my own sketch of his development and his other works, is referred to the Introduction to the first volume.

The editions of Dante's works and the abbreviations used are listed on p. 273 below, at the beginning of the Notes. All unattributed translations are my own. (They are intended primarily as guides to the syntax and the meaning of the individual words in the original text.) It should go without saying that all italicisations for emphasis in classical and medieval texts are mine.

My warmest thanks are due to the colleagues and friends who read the draft during the year in which the book was taking its present form and who gave me their reactions cheerfully, frankly and promptly. Richard Beadle, Joseph Cremona, Meera Frost, Lino Leonardi, Laura Lepschy, John Marenbon and Gianni Vaggi read individual chapters within the field of their special competence. The following were kind enough to read the whole book in draft and to make many suggestions for improvement: Piero Boitani, Peter Brand, Francesco Calvo, Virginia Cox, Simon Gilson, Catherine Keen, Robin Kirkpatrick,

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PREFACE

Alison Morgan, Elizabeth Mozzillo-Howell, Christopher Ryan, Max Saint, John Scott and Jill Tilden. My particular thanks go to Robbie Carroll and David Gibbons who not only read and criticised the final draft chapter by chapter, but gave me invaluable practical help in revising the text, finalising the notes, and streamlining the bibliography. All of those named have helped to make the book more accurate, more useful and more readable; but any errors of fact or judgement and the remaining infelicities of expression are of course my own responsibility.

This is also the place to record my debt to the staff of the Cambridge University Press for their encouragement and good advice at every turn, and for their firmness in keeping me to a timetable and a word-limit. My gratitude goes in particular to the editor, Linda Bree, and to the copy-editor, Rosemary Williams.