

Throne and Altar

C.J.F. Williams

This book is astonishing.¹ Its subject matter is not something that the modern educated reader is likely to have encountered before: a longish Latin poem together with a dedicatory epistle and several shorter poems published by what one cannot help describing as a court poet in the court of Pope Urban VIII—a man who was, surprisingly, a priest. The Latin is not easy, and one is grateful for the translation the Newmans have supplied. But the medium is not half so strange to the modern eye and ear as the message. It is adulation of a monarch of a kind which old fashioned Republicans like Tacitus found so unwelcome in the world of the Emperors: bad enough under Augustus; how much worse under a Nero or a Domitian! And it is to Domitian that the editors look as a precedent for the adulation accorded to Pope Urban.

The particular topic is the canopy recently made by Bernini for the central altar in St Peter's, which the poet, Guidiccioni, refers to as the "*Ara Maxima*". This is indeed the title of his poem, and one does not have to be a Protestant to feel uncomfortable with the paganism of the title itself. Worse still, a few lines into the epistle dedicatory, and one finds that the altar has become a throne—not the throne of God and his Christ, a theme which would have respectable Christian and Judaic precedents stretching back to the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant, but a throne for the Pope himself. When French royalists made the slogan "Throne and Altar" their battle cry, it was not envisaged that the same monarch would be enthroned on both: only the throne belonged to the Bourbon, the altar was God's. But for Guidiccioni the same architectural extravaganza is both an altar and a throne, and a throne not for God, but for the Barberini.

The Newmans, in their lengthy introduction trace back remorselessly the theme of throne and canopy to their origins in Antiquity. Most attention is paid to the Hellenistic world: Pope Urban is recognisable more as an heir to Antiochus Epiphanes than to the Maccabean martyrs who resisted his blasphemies. But the origins of canopies and their significance are traced further back than Cleopatra and the Seleucids: they reach backwards to the Empires of Persia and Babylon and to the Pharaohs themselves, as well as onwards through

Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors to Constantine and his successors in the New Rome. Of post-Renaissance leaders we should look rather to *le Roi Soleil* or to the Tsar of All the Russias than to Francis Xavier or John Wesley for an analogue of that *servus servorum Dei*, Pope Urban VIII. Before the Second Vatican Council, Catholics who were unhappy about the way the Church seemed to be going spoke disparagingly of “Papodulia” by analogy with “Hyperdulia”, the sort of worship theologians deemed suitable for the Blessed Virgin Mary. This volume is a study in Papodulia.

However, Papodulia is not the only theme. The canopy and altar which are the subject of Guidiccioni’s verses were executed by Bernini. It is not surprising, therefore, that the editors see the poems too as a product of the Baroque style. And here they introduce a fascinating theme, new to me at least. They see the Baroque as a prolongation, in the visual as well as in the literary arts, of the Hellenistic style of late antiquity. More ambitiously they see the Hellenistic style itself as a return to pre-Classical, pre-Attic, styles of writing, painting and sculpting. And there is a larger claim—the claim that what we call Hellenistic or Baroque, terms that have a nuance of decadence and collapse about them, represent what is truly the artistic norm. The lack of restraint, the exuberance, the carnival element to be found in artistic productions of this kind are said to be endemic to art. The classic reticence of Fifth and Fourth Century Athens (which nevertheless found room for Aeschylus and for Euripides’ *Bacchae*) appears as an erratic and temporary phenomenon, replacing the natural “gothicism” of all art only for a brief period. A daring claim which the editors make is that Hebrew writing (one cannot make similar judgements about any Hebrew contribution to the visual arts!) escaped altogether passing through a “classic” phase.²

The editors draw attention to the variety of themes to be found in Guidiccioni’s poems—the Greek word *poikilia* is used to describe this characteristic. Some of these themes are more endearing than others. An Englishman cannot but be fascinated by lines (658-709) in which the poet appeals to England to return to the fold of Peter. Pope Urban here assumes a more appealing guise, no longer the New Augustus, but the father of the Prodigal Son, ready with a kiss to receive the profligate back under the family roof. The mother of Elizabeth I is unflatteringly referred to in the words “*cessitque furentibus Annae / Incestae facibus* (It yielded to lewd Anne’s mad schemes of marriage-torches).³ Flattery is expended on the recalcitrant English: “Island of Mars, child once beloved by the mother of Christ! You are the bound of our world (*tu nostri terminus Orbis*), the glory of Europe, you alone are the sun’s

resting place: do not make darkness your haunt. Your Peter still throws open to you his doors—may it only be your wish to be bathed in Peter's light, to make prayer to the Prince and beg his pardon." Little chance of this appeal finding an audience in an England soon to reject even the moderate hierarchical forms of the Anglican Church.

Poikilia is a feature as much of the *Introduction and Commentary* as of the poems themselves. The editors jump around from references to Dostoevsky to references to Goethe. One leap takes us to no less a person than John Milton, and fascinating information is provided of Milton's visit as a young man to Rome, and indeed of his attendance as a guest at a reception in a Barberini palace.

Oh dear! Who is going to be able to match the scholarship, the prodigious scholarship of these editors, so as fully to appreciate their work. To do so the reader would need to be fluent in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Russian as well as French, German and Italian, although, to be fair, we are provided a translation of every word or phrase that occurs in a tongue other than English. The Newmans have been fortunate to find a publisher—where else but in Germany? -willing to pay for Greek, Hebrew and Russian scripts to be available for the printing of the work. The ideal reader needs to be, not only a consummate linguist, but an art historian and a literary critic of immense erudition. And of course she needs to be able to catch allusions to iconoclasts of the Eighth Century A.D. as well as to Lyric poets of the Fifth Century B.C. Even Einstein is called to give evidence at one point.

From time to time one becomes a little alarmed that the editors are enjoying the triumphalism of these verses too much. Their efforts to place them in an ever-widening framework of genres and *topoi* convey the impression that the massive inappropriateness of all this to the man who claimed to be Christ's representative on earth has passed them by. But this would be a bad mistake. The point is made, but in a typically allusive way. In the introduction much play is made with the contrast between the emphasis laid in Counter-Reformation Rome on the Basilica of St Peter's, inheritor of the imperial and pre-imperial traditions of the Circus Maximus, and the more truly Christian traditions of the real cathedral of Rome, the church of St John Lateran, the Archbasilica of the Saviour. This shift of attention is seen by the Newmans as a drift towards a political conception of the Papal power from a more ecclesiastical conception. And the very last words of the Introduction are eloquent on this issue. Speaking of an inscription erected in St Peter's by Innocent III, referring to it as "mother of all the churches", they say, "The usurpation of the Lateran's claims to be *mater et caput omnium ecclesiarum urbis et orbis* is patent. But a choice must

be made, between the Saviour and St. Peter: *Ego de Kepha ego de Christou* While Catholics hesitate, St. John Lateran, the former Church of the Most Holy Saviour, remains simply the headquarters of the diocese of Rome, and the Church of St. Peter the headquarters of the church universal. It seems a reversal of priorities unintelligible except by explanation, of which Guidiccioni supplies the evidence, that pagan, imperial Rome is more important than Christian.”

Popes call themselves servants of the servants of God, or, as the Latin phrase might more brutally be translated “slaves of God’s slaves”. What is the characteristic posture of the slave? The psalmist has an answer: “As the eye of a slave is on the hand of his master”—the picture is of the slave waiting at table, watching for the slightest sign of his master’s hand indicating a wish for more wine, for a plate to be removed, for a sweetmeat to be offered to a guest. The slave is there, ready to fulfil the whim of the master: “Fetch me this, take that to the mistress, pull off my boots.” The great thing is not to keep the master waiting. Prompt obedience is the chief desideratum in a slave. For this the slave himself has always to be waiting, waiting on the master, waiting *for* the master: the master must never be kept waiting. If X needs Y’s help, somebody has to be kept waiting: is it to be X, or Y? A disabled person knows this well: he needs help with getting up, with dressing; he has to wait until the helper arrives to get him up. And even then he will find that the helper will busy herself with a hundred useful tasks, and only come to perform the next helping act when she has finished the task she is engaged in. “Wait a moment. I’m just folding the blankets. I’ll put your other sock on when I’ve finished.” It is always the person being helped who has to wait. Helpers cannot bear to “hang on” to be ready at just the moment the person they are helping needs them. With the slave it is quite otherwise. He stands there, sock in hand, waiting for the precise moment when his master needs it. If you have ever seen a Pontifical High Mass, you will know how it is with the servers waiting around to give the pontiff the crozier, the ring, the towel, nowadays the microphone, at the precise moment it is required. How much more so with a Papal Mass! It is a measure of grandeur how much, or how little a person has to wait. Every one waits for the moment when the surgeon, the chief executive, the University President is ready. When did these great persons last have to wait for someone else? When did a pope last have to wait for someone else? I shall begin to take seriously the papal claim to be the servants’ servant when I hear of a pope, not merely visiting a hospital, but when he gets there, having to hang around for a quarter of an hour while the person he is visiting has her hair washed. That would be a theme for a poem. But I fancy

Guidiccioni would not be the man to write it. His contemporary George Herbert could have done it beautifully. But he would have found little to inspire him in Pope Urban VIII.

- 1 Lelio Guidiccioni, *Latin Poems, Rome 1633 and 1639*, Edited with Introduction, Translation and Commentary by John Kevin Newman and Frances Stickney Newman, Hildesheim: Weidmann, 1992.
- 2 I have become nervous about any wholesale contrast between Hebrew thought and literature and those of Greece after reading some of the work of Professor James Barr, most particularly and most recently his *The Garden of Eden and Human Immortality*, Fortress Press and S.C.M.Press, 1992.
- 3 The editors comment: "She is *incesta* because the divorce with Catherine was not recognised by the Pope, and because her daughter, later Elizabeth I, was conceived before she was nominally married" (p. 233). But I wonder whether *incesta* has not a more specific reference to incest: Henry VIII claimed to have conscientious scruples about his marriage to Catherine of Aragon on the grounds that she had previously been betrothed to his elder brother Arthur, and marriage to the spouse of a sibling was incestuous, i.e., within the prohibited degrees. However, Anne's elder sister had been a mistress of Henry's before Anne herself, and this in the eyes of canon law would have made his liaison with Anne equally incestuous—an irony of the situation which would not have been missed in Counter-Reformation circles.

The Mysterious Affair at Mâcon: The Bishops and the Souls of Women

Michael Nolan

The decree of the Council of Mâcon (585 AD) that women do not have a soul has the honoured place in liberal demonology given to historical events that never happened. It is a tale to treasure. As the eponymous wine is sipped at elegant tables, the misguided deeds of bishops can be recalled, and the only regret must be that no Synod of Brie or Council of Camembert offers occasion for further mirth. On these occasions, facts become such skimble-skamble stuff as puts men from their dreams.

For the Council, of course, never decreed any such thing, if only for the persuasive reason that some of the bishops may themselves have