

*"The last verse . . . is not yet  
sufficiently explicated" — Dryden*

*The*

# EXPLICATOR

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—*Richard J. Dunn*
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Richmond Professional Institute  
Richmond, Virginia

VOL. XXV, No. 2

OCTOBER, 1966

INFERNO, XIV, 13-15, 22-27

I' vidi, per le coste e per lo fondo,  
 Piena la pietra livida di fori,  
 D'un largo tutti, e ciascuno era tondo.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fuor della bocca a ciascun soperchiava  
 D'un peccatore i piedi, e delle gambe  
 Infino al grosso, e l'altro dentro stava.

Le piante erano accese a tutti intrambe;  
 Perchè sì forte guizzavan le giunte,  
 Che spezzate averian ritorte e strambe.

—DANTE ALIGHIERI

I saw along the walls and on the ground  
 long rows of holes cut in the livid stone;  
 all were cut to a size, and all were round.

\* \* \* \* \*

From every mouth a sinner's leg stuck out  
 as far as the calf. The soles were all ablaze  
 and the joints of the legs quivered and writhed about.

Withes and tethers would have snapped in their throes.  
 As oiled things blaze upon the surface only,  
 so did they burn from the heels to the points of their toes.

Above translation by John Ciardi.

A SONG TO MARY

Stanza 10

By righte tokninge thou art the hel  
 Of wan spelled Daniel;  
 Thou art Emaus, the riche castel,  
 That resteth alle werye;  
 Ine thee restede Emmanuel  
 Of wan ispeketh Isaye.

—WILLIAM OF SHOREHAM (?)

Above text from *MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LYRICS*, ed. by Reginald T. Davies, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 103.

15. DANTE'S INFERNO, XIX, 13-27

John Ciardi's excellent translation of Dante's *Inferno* can usually be trusted to give accurate and perceptive insights into Dante's symbolism, but I think Mr. Ciardi missed the main point in the punishment of the Simoniacs (who sold things of the Church for personal gain) in Canto XIX, lines 13-27. According to Ciardi, "the punishment is a symbolic retribution. Just as the Simoniacs made a mock of holy office, so are they turned upside down in a mockery of the baptismal font. Just as they made a mockery of the holy water of baptism, so is their hellish baptism by fire. . . . The oily fire that licks at their soles may also suggest a travesty on the oil used in Extreme Unction" (Mentor Books edition, p. 166).

I think Mr. Ciardi's interpretation is unnecessarily labored here. The symbolism that dominates the Simoniacs' canto does not pertain to baptismal fonts but to candles—the votive candles, very popular in the Middle Ages and very lucrative to the Church, which were lit (after a suitable offering had been rendered) as a mode of petition, frequently in connection with prayers for the dead. All the details smoothly fit the candle symbolism: the shape and uniformity of the holes ("all were cut to a size, and all were round"); the fact that they are banked in rows ("along the walls and on the ground / long rows of holes"); and the close resemblance between the sinners' legs and wicks of candles ("From every mouth a sinner's leg stuck out / As far as the calf. The soles were all ablaze. . ."). Since votive candles were obviously highly susceptible to abuse in the hands of rascal clergy, they would provide a perfect emblem of the sin of simony. In transforming those who sold God's candles into the votive candles of Hell, their feet the flaming wicks, Dante contributed that much more to the cathedral design of his whole masterpiece, joining moral and aesthetic satisfaction.

—VICTOR STRANDBERG, *Duke University*

16. WILLIAM OF SHOREHAM'S A SONG TO MARY, Stanza 10

In his edition entitled *Medieval English Lyrics* (Northwestern University Press, 1964, note to poem 34, p. 321) Reginald T. Davies asks why Mary is called the "Castle of Emmaus" in stanza 10 of the lyric "A Song to Mary" by William of Shoreham (?).

Before considering this title it may be well to recall why Mary is called a "castle." A castle is the residence of a king, and Christ, who is the King of kings, took up his abode in Mary; a castle is beautifully furnished with ornaments of gold and silver, and so the soul of Mary is adorned with all virtues; a castle is usually a fortified structure, and so those who seek Mary will be fortified against evil; a castle is ordinarily constructed on an elevated site, and so Mary is raised by her dignity as Mother of God above all creatures.

Mary is called the "Castle of Emmaus" because just as Christ rested at Emmaus and there revealed to his two disciples his identity as Christ (and therefore, King), so also in his journey from heaven to earth Christ found a resting-place in Mary and through her revealed himself