“according to our custom”: Milton’s Papal Attacks and Their Italian Sources

David Boocker

On April 21, 1647, Milton wrote to Carlo Dati, one of a number of Italian intellectuals he had met in Florence. Coming just over a year after the publication of his Poems (1645), Milton’s letter includes a promise to Dati (a response to his “wish”) to send “that part of the poems which is in Latin,” along with an explanation as to why he had not sent the poems earlier:

... I should have sent it of my own accord long since, had I not suspected that they would be unpleasing to your ears because of those words spoken rather sharply on some pages against the Roman Pope. Now I beg you to obtain from my other friends (for of you I am certain) that same indulgence to freedom which, as you know, you have been used to granting in the past with singular kindness—I do not mean to your Dante and Petrarch in this case, but to me; I crave it now whenever mention be made of your religion according to our custom. (2: 764)

This explanation is important to our understanding of Milton’s anti-papal sentiments. In such poems as the “In Proditionem Bombardicam” group and “In Quintum Novembris” Milton suggests that the Pope was in league with Satan in the famous Gunpowder Plot to kill James I, and he justifies the
attack against Dati's "religion" as "according to our custom." Milton is aware of the possible negative effect of his papal attacks on Dati and his other Italian friends, and he begs the "same indulgence" that Dati and the others "have been used to granting in the past with singular kindness" to their fellow Italians Dante and Petrarch. This plea is especially important; it reveals that Milton was well aware of "Catholic" attacks on Catholicism and gives us an insight into Milton's method of also drawing heavily from Italian sources to attack the Catholic Church and the papacy.

Indeed, from the frequent references and allusions to Italian authors in his Commonplace Book and much of his prose, Milton reveals that he had a sharp eye for Italian critics of the papacy. Dante and Petrarch represented for Milton, among other things, witnesses to pre-reformation anti-papal sentiment. The Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla exposed the fraud of Constantine's donation to the Church. Others, such as Peter Martyr and Paolo Sarpi, worked courageously to reform the Catholic Church, thereby earning Milton's admiration. Sarpi, whom Milton called "the great Venetian Antagonist of the Pope" (1: 581) and "the great unmasker of the Trentine Councel" (2: 501), published his Historia del Concilio Tridentino in 1619, and all indications are that Milton began reading the work after his return from his Continental tour.

What is so significant about Milton's references to these Italian writers is what he selects from their works to utilize for his own purposes. So much of what Milton cites amounts to explicit criticism of the Roman Church and papacy. He cites Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto and even Pope Gregory the Great to prove that Constantine's donation corrupted the Roman Church, making it avaricious. He cites Dante again to warn of the dangers of combining ecclesiastical and civil forms of government, exemplified by the Roman Catholic Church. In Of Reformation, he quotes extensively from Sarpi to demonstrate how the Venetian fought to abolish papal