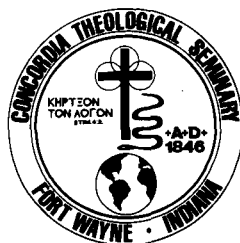


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Hymnody as Teacher of the Faith

Richard C. Resch

Hymns are teachers. In every period of church history the great minds have commented on this subject and often their words have included caution. The teaching influence of hymnody is important because, more often than we might realize or like to admit, both young and old learn about matters such as theology through the texts which they sing. St. John Chrysostom made this assertion:

When God saw that the majority of men were slothful and that they approached spiritual reading with reluctance and submitted to the effort involved without pleasure, wishing to make the task more agreeable and to relieve the sense of laboriousness, He mixed melody with prophecy so that, enticed by the rhythm and melody, all might raise sacred hymns to Him with great eagerness. For nothing so arouses the soul, gives it wing, sets it free from the earth, releases it from the prison of the body, teaches it to love wisdom and to condemn all the things of this life, as concordant melody and sacred song composed in rhythm.¹

St. Basil the Great added this observation:

Now the Prophets teach certain things, the Historians and the Law teach others, and Proverbs provides still a different sort of advice, but the Book of Psalms encompasses the benefit of them all. It foretells what is to come and memorializes history; it legislates for life, gives advice on practical matters, and serves in general as a repository of good teachings. The Spirit mixed sweetness of melody with doctrine so that inadvertently we would absorb the benefit of the words through gentleness and ease of hearing. O the wise invention of the teacher who contrives that in our singing we learn what is profitable, and that thereby doctrine is somehow more deeply impressed upon our souls.²

Basil was describing a hymn according to God's model, the psalm. Such singing is not a mindless activity; it is rather an activity that teaches the mind. Luther stated: "When setting forth their theology, the prophets did it not as geometry, not as arithmetic, not as astronomy, but as music, so that they held theology and music most tightly connected and proclaimed the truth through psalms and songs."³

Obviously hymns will teach truth to hearts and minds if it is truth that is being sung. Just because of the inherent power of music, however, hymns have frequently been used in the history of the church as teachers of things which are clearly the antithesis of truth. For example, we learn from Athanasius that Arius used songs, specifically one called "Thalia," to carry his heretical teaching concerning the nature of Christ to the people.⁴ Likewise Tertullian speaks words of caution concerning two very different types of psalms: "The psalms also come to our aid, not the psalms of that apostate, heretic, and Platonist, Valentinus, but those of the most holy and illustrious prophet David. He sings among us of Christ, and through him Christ indeed sang of Himself."⁵

Centuries later Luther commented on what had happened to the church's song under the papacy:

There are splendid, beautiful songs and music, but these are used to adorn all sorts of impure and idolatrous texts. Therefore, we have unclothed these idolatrous, lifeless, and foolish texts, and divested them of their beautiful music. We have put this music on the living and holy word of God in order to sing, praise, and honor it. We want the beautiful art of music to be properly used to serve her dear Creator and His Christians. He is thereby praised and honored and we are made better and stronger in faith when His holy word is impressed on our hearts by music.⁶

Three hundred years later, unfortunately, Samuel S. Schmucker not only returned to the use of "impure, . . . idolatrous, . . . and foolish texts," but also abandoned the churchly music of Luther in favor of any popular form of the day including the songs of revivalistic tent-meetings. Here is one of many texts included in Schmucker's *General Synod Hymnal* of 1832 which teach "decision theology":

*Today, if you will hear His voice,
Now is the time to make your choice;
Say, will you be forever blest,
And with the glorious Jesus rest?*

*Behold, He's waiting at your door!
 Make now your choice; O halt no more!
 Say, sinner, say, what will you do?
 Say, will you have this Christ or no?'*

Here is another song from the same "Lutheran" hymnal which is no way Lutheran:

*My former hopes are fled,
 My terror now begins;
 I feel, alas, that I am dead
 In trespasses and sins.*

*Ah, whither shall I fly?
 I hear the thunder roar;
 The law proclaims destruction nigh,
 And vengeance at the door.*

*When I review my ways,
 I dread impending doom;
 But sure a friendly whisper says,
 "Flee from the wrath to come."*

*I see, or think I see,
 A glimm'ring from afar;
 A beam of day that shines for me,
 To save me from despair.*

*Forerunner of the sun,
 It marks the pilgrim's way;
 I'll gaze upon it while I run,
 And watch the rising day.⁸*

The singing sinner is left to identify the "glimmering" and "beam" that he *thinks* he sees. The song is here teaching the sinner about despair and misses the opportunity to teach about the Lord of the cross who has dealt with man's despair. Of what good is it for the Christian or the non-Christian to sing such a text?

Now again, one hundred and fifty years after Schmucker, much of the church seems willing to give up anything for the sake of numerical growth, even if it is at the expense, which it usually is, of

spiritual growth. Surveys become respected tools that discover what hymns people really want to sing. Since most of those hymns are not in Lutheran hymnals, the church must look elsewhere.

According to Dave Anderson, the most popular book meeting this need in the Missouri Synod is his publication of 1984, *The Other Song Book*.⁹ It is difficult to consider this songbook as a hymnal in the traditional sense until one realizes that it is being used as such and that people are learning from it. What are they learning? As with Schmucker's hymnal, one hardly knows where to begin; whole discourses could be written on the didactic influences of these collections. Much of Anderson's book is experiential religion. Immediate revelation is taught in "He walks with me and He talks with me" (#261).¹⁰ The centrality of feeling is taught in these examples: "Let us feel His love begun" (#260); "O let us feel His presence" (#188); "Feel the oneness that He brings" (#223); "Feel the faith swell up inside you" (#242). Synergism, blatant and subtle, appears throughout *The Other Song Book*: "I have decided to follow Jesus" (#87); "Accept Him with your whole heart, Oooo" (#242); "If you want joy, you must sing for it; if you want joy, you must shout for it; if you want joy, you must jump for it" (#205). Mantra-like texts of praise round out this book as the individual, the congregation, and even a synod are encouraged to feast on the theology of glory.

Music seems so harmless. Erroneous words dressed up with notes seem possessed of innocence. But it is a deceptive innocence that over the years has often proven an enemy within. The devil is the great deceiver, and it is obvious to anyone who looks carefully that one of his favorite disguises is the "innocence" of the church's singing. The guardians of doctrine, even if they can spot an error miles away in teaching, preaching, and writing, have not always been watchful of the church's sung confession. Pastors and parents are part of that guardian group who have heard children singing without listening to their words. These are people who care deeply about what the child grows up believing but do not perceive that song is a teacher of belief. This disjunction is most evident in the double standard exemplified in the usages of the vacation Bible school, the Sunday school and, all too often, even in the parochial

school.

What are children learning today about their faith from the songs which they sing? Could it be that most pastors have no idea? With so much on his mind that seems of greater importance, the pastor willingly delegates his responsibility to anyone who will accept it. Music leaders pressed into service without guidance often choose musical material on the basis of these two rules: (1.) Children must be able to learn it and love it immediately. (2.) Parents should see that their children are enjoying themselves. To accomplish these ends leaders turn to sources other than the official hymnals of the church.

In this way we miss a pivotal opportunity to teach a true understanding of who we are as Lutherans to the age group most open to learning. The teaching of our ethos does not start as adults, and yet we often wait until our members are adults before we treat the hymnal seriously. We give very young children songs that are mostly irreverent, trivial ditties. We give teenagers different songs based on whatever the informal musical trend is of the decade, which has nothing to do with the Lutheran prayerbook. Because of what we give them, children learn of a church that is quite different from the one which we hope they will call their own as adults.

Catechesis has its beginnings in the sung truths of those members of the flock who are just learning to walk. The greatest minds in church history have told us that this is the case; but the church, especially in recent times, is reluctant to acknowledge this fact. As a result, ecclesiastical song is teaching whatever is easy and popular, with little or no regard for the content and long-term consequences. Also overlooked is the responsibility which we have as pastors, teachers, and parents to make the most of the years when children are most open to learning such matters. It is easier to teach liturgy and hymnody to children before they reach the sixth grade than it is to teach it to any other age-group in the church.

Matters of worth are never learned without effort. If a child sees a teacher loving and exalting a subject, the child will work, no matter how much effort it takes, to learn what that teacher cares about so deeply. The problem is that children rarely see their

teachers exalting matters of worth. Children know when they are being included in important and, indeed, sacred things. They also know when adults treat sacred matters lightly in their presence, but then have a different standard for themselves.

When pastors teach these matters as a part of preparation for confirmation, they are often frustrated by the response of apathy or perhaps outright rebellion. The pastor may not realize something that is clear to the whole class: all of a sudden the church is doing a turn-about. Now there is a seriousness about something that has been a mere game for as long as the youngsters can remember. Making the transition from one standard to another proves problematic. It is surely telling that those who argue for a musical double standard in the church never discuss "how," in fact, a transition can be made from the enticing standard of childhood to the substantive standard of adulthood. It is difficult to defend an approach when the starting point is misrepresentation.

A youth is saying by his apathetic response in class that the church has chosen *the* most awkward time in his life to become serious about musical-liturgical matters. This is the time when he is most self-conscious about the use of his voice in any kind of public singing. This is the time when he is most aware of how his peers view him. The age is past when he will freely join in and learn whatever the teacher loves. But the main, unspoken reason is that long ago he started forming opinions on these matters based on what he thought his church was. Now the pastor is telling him something quite different.

To put it another way, waiting until the age of confirmation to teach worship practice affects not just hymnody and liturgy, but also the teaching of the faith. Pastors may have to change a theology which has been learned within the walls of the church itself. Many a pastor is puzzled by the presence of so much foreign theology in his parish. He sees evidence of it in all age-groups and cannot understand whence it is coming since the people in question are in church every Sunday.

The mystery is often easily solved by a look at all of the music in a person's life. A growing segment, indeed, of today's secular

world is concerned about the teaching power of words set to music. Even in that realm, to be sure, the cause is not a popular one because it goes against the flow of the times and deals with something that most people want to believe is harmless. Alan Bloom has warned in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* that the music of our time is one of its most powerful teachers. He focuses on a most serious aspect of the problem when he says that the major authority figures in a child's life (parents, pastors, teachers, etc.) have no idea what a child is learning from the music in his life. In many cases it is being piped directly to the child's brain quite privately by means of the walkman.¹¹ The concern in the secular world about these matters is, without a doubt, well-founded. What is sad and quite incredible is that in the church, where teaching influence is of the greatest importance, there is either silence or a quiet acceptance. In this area, in fact, the church is not just in neutral gear but in reverse with her foot to the floor. It would appear that she no longer believes that her practice teaches.

Prosper of Aquitaine, Luther, Walther, Sasse, and many others have wisely cautioned the church about such things down through the centuries. Their cry was *lex orandi lex credendi*, which is to say that the practice of the church teaches the church. Wilhelm Loehle said in his *Three Books about the Church* that the true faith is not only expressed in the sermon but also prayed in the prayers and sung in the hymns of the church. He said that through the church's practice people learn without even noticing it. In this way the practice of the church serves the church as a holy weapon of defense and offense in the Lord's battles. Prayerbooks or hymnals are living books of proof and instruction.¹² We are ignoring the lessons of history, the wisdom of the church fathers, and an important part of the commission of our Lord to "teach all things whatsoever I have commanded you" when we allow our practice to misrepresent us.

One of the main ways in which Lutheranism is being misrepresented is through a theology of glory in hymnody. Hermann Sasse called this theology "the prevailing theology of Christendom" and warned that today we have a gospel that men fashion for themselves.¹³ The sad result is that the theology of the cross, which by its nature has always been a mystery to the world, is becoming more

and more of a mystery to the church, even the Lutheran church. The profoundly beautiful, yet puzzling wisdom of the cross is not the main teaching in the church. Instead, it appears as if the church is choosing the easy route, and clearly the cross has never been the easy route. According to Luther these two opposing theologies of the cross and glory are no less than a matter of true and false doctrine.¹⁴

Since, then, both true and false theology are taught quite effectively through hymns, it follows that the church is clearly obligated to pay close attention to how the faith is being taught through the sung word. The proposal of this essay, therefore, is a very simple two-part plan which is not at all new but may seem new to many because of how far our worship practice has strayed from the basics. It is a plan in which our sung confession will be consistent with our spoken and written confession. (1.) The first step is to use our hymnals. (2.) The second step is to teach our hymnals.

Part One: Using Our Hymnals

Recently many in the LCMS have begun to advocate a fresh, creative approach to weekly worship. It is often an attempt to avoid being labeled a church "on automatic" whose worship is dull and in a rut. The movement is encouraged by a popular resource produced by Concordia Publishing House with the theologically bankrupt title of *Creative Worship*. In the parishes where this movement prevails all manner of weekly creativity gives the impression that someone is hard at work keeping worship alive. As well as denying the creative power of the one who is truly at work in Christian worship (the Chief Shepherd, not the undershepherd and his staff), this movement sends worship leaders scurrying about weekly to any resource that will accomplish crowd-pleasing feats. The bottom line of this on-going, creative compilation is not what is being taught but how it is being received.

A wise, old professor once told the author: "Never speak of challenging people when you are planning worship, because every minute of earthly life holds some kind of challenge, and the last thing people need is to have someone with a private agenda deciding how they will be challenged when they come to be fed by their

Lord." For the sake of the person in the pew it would be good if more of today's students of theology and church music heard such sound pastoral advice and took it to heart. A stable worship practice is needed now more than ever. It is worth noting that, while Lutheran hymnody and liturgy is somewhat difficult to learn, as are most things of worth, it is far more difficult for the person in the pew to learn new material every time he comes into the church. One sad result of creative worship is that people are not learning anything. For the sake of "freshness" the memory is disallowed its function. Thereby is the fact ignored that the church has always learned by rote through a week-after-week and year-after-year practice that taught the memory of the faithful.

Hymnals, moreover, unite a church in practice and belief. What is the future, then, of a church body where increasingly its hymnals sit untouched in the pew-racks of its congregations? What is its future when all of its congregational singing comes from printed bulletins and supplemental books? Eventually, of course, its unity in practice and belief will suffer. We do not have to wait long or look far to see evidence of increasing disunity in our church. Twenty years ago it would not have been necessary to defend and encourage the use of Lutheran hymnals in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. However, several developments have changed the status and use of our hymnals since that time.

1. The use of three hymnals within the Missouri Synod since 1978 has split the synod three ways and opened the door for yet further division in practice. According to a recent survey, *The Lutheran Hymnal* is the most frequently used hymnal in 32% of its congregations, *Lutheran Worship* in 49%, and *Lutheran Book of Worship* in 7.9%¹⁵

2. The same survey revealed that supplemental hymnals are the most frequently used hymnals in 11% of synodical parishes, an alarming 8.6% more than in 1989. This increase means that approximately two hundred and fifty parishes abandoned (or, at least, significantly decreased) the use of any distinctively Lutheran hymnal in the course of a single year.

3. The computer and in-house copy machines have turned the

local parish into its own publishing house—lacking, however, any process of doctrinal review.

4. Recent programs from sources that "market" the church blatantly place hymns and other church music in the realm of entertainment and manipulation. Cantor Paul Westermeyer of Northwestern Seminary has written: "I expect that the vision of the church as Disneyland and entertainment will increase over the next years; this perspective is being argued not only from television evangelists, but also from leaders of large and successful mainline churches."¹⁶

5. It is well-known that much of the church-growth movement considers any distinctively Lutheran hymnal a barrier to growth. Such a hymnal is too heavy in a literal sense, and its hymns are too heavy doctrinally. There is a fear that people will not return because the music is not "user-friendly." (It is worthy of note that the concerns of the church-growth movement always relate to numerical growth, not spiritual growth.)

6. The music of evangelicalism surrounds us. It is teaching—through radio programs, concerts, compact discs, television, the walkman—an ethos foreign to that of Lutheranism and its hymnals. For many Lutherans this music is the main teacher of matters spiritual outside of the worship hour.

It is clearly essential, therefore, that pastors and musicians teach the Lutheran faith effectively through a consistent Lutheran practice utilizing a Lutheran hymnal unfettered by the trends of the times and the whims of individual leaders. Traditional Lutheran hymnals may have flaws, but for the most part they are trusty collections of songs which have served our confession well. They bring together solid musical and poetic expressions of Lutheran theology from the past and the present. It is important that we all confess and learn the same thing, so long as this thing be the biblical and Lutheran truth.

Part Two: Teaching Our Hymnals

We have already spoken of the importance of teaching a Lutheran ethos to the young, but a few points may be added. There was a time, not too long ago, when an orthodox pastor had all of the

teachers in his parochial school on his side in this undertaking. Such unanimity is now, unfortunately, history. There was also a time, not too long ago, when a pastor could count on the musicians of the church to be its best teachers of Lutheran practice. Such is still the case in some parishes, but their number, sadly, is on the decline. Thus, the pastor may at first find himself alone in his understanding of the principle of *lex orandi lex credendi*. But as he daily and consistently imparts this understanding through every aspect of his pastoral practice, the worship at the center of the church's life will serve as a beautiful and painless teacher of the faith. All pastors make decisions on a weekly basis about the resources to be used from the hymnal. However, when the hymnal becomes an integral part of pastoral practice, the decisions become daily ones—decisions that reflect careful thought as to what is being proclaimed by a hymn in the school chapel or by a short liturgy at the bedside, decisions that always take into account where the church is in her progression through the church year, decisions that consistently treat the hymn as teacher of the faith even in the shortest devotion before a meeting.

Next to the catechism, the hymnal has traditionally been the most important book in teaching the faith. This teaching is done by putting doctrine into a hymnic form that is understood by everyone and is memorized through repeated use. The hymn is a form that applies doctrine to life. Until recently the faithful treasured their hymnals as their main devotional resource. Through a regular—often daily use—they often memorized more from their hymnals than they did from their Bibles. The hymnal was the Lutheran prayerbook; it was one of the main teachers of what it meant to be Lutheran. There seems to be a reluctance today on the part of many worship leaders to let people open the Lutheran prayerbook in worship. The increasingly common practice of printing all the hymn texts in the service-folder is one that leaves the hymnal sitting in the pew-rack untouched and unlearned. Worshippers cannot learn to love a hymnal which they never open. The printing of liturgies can be justified, but the printing of hymns that could be sung from the hymnal cannot. The faithful learn their way around a prayerbook by using it. Then they are more likely to turn to it in times of need and times of rejoicing; it serves them in both public and private

devotional life. So one very simple point in teaching from the hymnal is to let people use the book.

A second point is to use only one hymnal in a given parish. The practice of having different hymnals for the very young, for teenagers, for single's groups, for nursing homes, for home circle groups, for alternate contemporary services—to name a few possibilities—is a grave pedagogical mistake. It is also potentially divisive. What does this use of everything but the main hymnal in the life of the parish say about the main hymnal? Furthermore, pre-service sing-alongs of "hymns you like to sing" from non-Lutheran songbooks is an apology to visitors and members for the use of the Lutheran hymnal that will follow.

A third point is to encourage the use of the hymnal in the home. Concordia Publishing House has a commendable new resource called *At Home in Our Hymnal* which introduces this concept to families and shows them how to make use of the vast resources of the hymnal on a daily basis in the home. Eventually this process could lead to every family member having his own personal copy of the hymnal, which he uses daily and then brings with him to corporate worship. Older members can help younger ones to learn the hymnal by pointing out the appropriate place in a child's hymnal so as to guide him through the worship service. Suggestions from the pastor go a long way toward changing attitudes and practice.

A fourth point is to make certain that all leaders in the parish understand that the hymn is a teacher of doctrine. This role sets it apart from its common status as a pleasurable but insignificant filler which is inserted on the way to something important. A *kerygmatic* understanding of the hymn on the part of these key people in the life of the parish is crucial in making the practice of the parish consistent with what comes from the pulpit. The application of *lex orandi lex credendi* knows no age limit. Very young children are able to learn bits and pieces of what we hope will be their prayer-book for the rest of their lives. In fact, the prime years in which to lay the foundation of a Lutheran ethos are the early years. Any problem of standards in teaching has little or nothing to do with the children. It is and always has been a problem of adults not understanding the long-term influence of the role which they are to

exercise as teachers.

A fifth point is to enlist the efforts of the choirs in the parish. Voices are the best teachers of other voices. Choirs which are encouraged and nurtured in their role as teachers of the church at worship are comfortable and often zealous in their work of leading the parish in the singing of hymns and liturgy. Included, of course, is the joyful work of children's choirs; their function is no different than that of adult choirs. In fact, the place to start a reformation of practice is with the children, for they are the present and the future church.

A reformation may, indeed, be needed. Luther observed, "Without the theology of the cross, man misuses the best in the worst manner."¹⁷ Such misuse has befallen the hymn; it is now used in the service of the theology of glory. Such hymnody has as its starting point man—man's decision, man's experience, man's sacrifice, man's sincerity, man's desire to appease through service, man's self-satisfying triumphalism which delights in a custom-made theology. Hymns that have man as a starting point will also have man as an ending point. Even though Christ may be mentioned along the way, He will not be at the center of the text. The theology of glory has found a great teacher in the hymn. It would be difficult, indeed, to find a more effective teacher. One does not have to look far to see the results of this teaching campaign in the modern church.

Even in the LCMS, as previously noted, hymnals which take man as the starting point have already assumed dominance in 11% of its parishes. This percentage does not begin, of course, to represent all the parishes which use such material without yet according it dominance. Much less does this percentage reflect the use of such material with the children of synodical parishes. Hymns have been involved in reformations of the church. Both Luther and C. F. W. Walther used hymnals to aid the reformations which they fostered. In the early nineteenth and now in the late twentieth century hymnals expressive of unbiblical theology have played a major role in creating the need for reformations.

The theology of the cross also has a great teacher in the hymn.

In this respect the Lutheran church has been uniquely blest. Our Lord has seen fit to lavish upon this communion theologians, poets, and musicians of unequalled quality who have taken as their starting point what God has done for man in Christ. The theology of the cross is well exemplified by Luther's assertion: "Man hides what is his in order to conceal it, but God conceals what is His in order to reveal it."¹⁸ The Lutheran church has been blessed with writers who have believed the theology of the cross and who have been able to impart its profound truth through verse and song for use even by the young. This is a wondrous gift from God and should be seen as such. It is a gift that transcends culture and time. It is a wealth of instruction in the theology of the cross that has been handed down to us today. There is such richness, for instance, in just four lines of Paul Gerhardt:

He whom the sea and wind obey
Doth come to serve the sinner in great meekness.
Thou, God's own Son, with us art one,
Dost join us and our children in our weakness.¹⁹

Gesenius (1601-1673), too, proves the point:

Oh, what a wondrous off'ring!
See how the Master spares His servants, and their suff'ring
And grief for them He bears.
God comes down from His throne on high
For me, His guilty creature,
And deigns as man to die.

My manifold transgression,
Forgiven, harms me none
Since Jesus' blood and passion
For me God's grace has won.
His lifeblood all my debt has paid;
Of hell and all its torments
I am no more afraid.²⁰

In our own century Martin Franzmann bears witness to the same truth:

From the cross Thy wisdom shining
Breaketh forth in conqu'ring might;
From the cross forever beameth
All Thy bright redeeming light.²¹

These are but three examples of the many Lutheran hymns of sublime beauty that teach the theology of the cross. It is true that such hymns are more difficult textually and musically than expressions of the theology of glory—as we should expect, for they are expressions of divine truth. They are well-crafted confessions carried by worthy music which we have a life-time to learn and use, confessions that our grandparents used, and confessions that we hope our grandchildren too will be given the opportunity to use. Such hymns are to us both gifts and teachers.

Endnotes

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2. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.
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5. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
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7. *Hymns Selected and Original*, ed. S. S. Schmucker (Baltimore: Lucas and Deaver, 1832), Hymn 796, stanzas 1 and 4.
8. *Ibid.*, Hymn 264 (complete).
9. Dave Anderson, telephone interview, November 1991.

10. *The Other Song Book*, ed. Dave Anderson (Edina, Minnesota: The Fellowship Publications, 1984), Song Numbers 261, 260, 188, 223, 242, 87, 242, 205.
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17. *LW*, 31, p. 41.
18. *LW*, 51, p. 18.
19. *The Lutheran Hymnal*, 81, stanza 2.
20. *Lutheran Worship*, 367, stanzas 2 and 3.
21. *Ibid.*, 328, stanza 4.