

**Model Syllabus: “The Late Medieval World and Dante’s *Inferno*”**  
**Michel de Konkoly Thege**

**Required Text:** *Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 1: Inferno*, Robert M. Durling, editor and translator, with notes by Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez (Oxford University Press, 1996)

**Reading the cantos in the round:** At the beginning of each class, we will read the relevant canto in the round, *terzina* by *terzina*.

**Canto Presentations:** Each student will be responsible for introducing at least one canto (and probably two) to the rest of the class, according to a schedule to be distributed separately to the class. The presentation should be about 15 minutes long. In order to prepare for the presentation, you should read the canto carefully and make notes. The critical points to touch upon are:

- Where are we as readers physically in the circles of hell? What is the sin that is being depicted in the canto and what is the *contrapasso* (“the punishment befitting the sin”)? How is the *contrapasso* appropriate for the sin?
- Who are the major personalities encountered by Dante-pilgrim and Virgil in the canto? Why are they lodged in this circle of hell?
- What are the significant language, symbols and allusions used by Dante-poet in this canto? Are there particularly striking poetic images in the canto and, if so, how do these images illuminate what is going on in this circle of hell? Do any of these images and language harken back to images and language in previous cantos and if so, what resonance is there between them?

**Within one week of your canto presentation, you must write a close reading essay of your canto and submit it to me for a grade.** The length of this essay should be three pages, 1.5-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font. An example of a close reading essay will be posted on the digital bulletin board for this class.

**Assessments:** In addition to the close reading essay described above, there will be three additional written assignments.

In the very first lines of Canto 1 of *Inferno*, Dante-pilgrim is described as having lost “the straight way.” The first written assignment will be a two- to three-page essay that addresses this question: Based on what you know so far of Dante’s life and times and his depiction of himself as the major character in his own poem, why do you think Dante is lost? In order to structure your thoughts on this assignment, you should address what Dante would have considered to be “the straight way” and what it means, from Dante’s personal, spiritual and political perspective, to be “lost.”

The second assignment is a two- to three-page essay that chooses a work of fiction, film, play, graphic novel, dance, music or other work of written, visual or performing art that you will argue deploys ideas, images, symbols and references to *Inferno*. You will have broad latitude to choose the work you focus on for this assignment, but you must clear your choice with me before the assignment is due. In this essay, you will be asked to identify the similarities and differences between the work you have chosen and *Inferno* and how these similarities and differences should be interpreted.

The final assignment will be a two- to three-page essay on the following topic: having now toured hell in the company of Dante and Virgil, what circle of hell would you add, based on your conception of sin in contemporary times? What is the sin being punished and what is the *contrapasso*? Who are the residents of your circle of hell and what actions in their lives have consigned them to hell? Based on precedents in *Inferno*, what symbols, images and physical setting and experiences would we see in your circle of hell? Extra credit will be awarded if you accompany your paper with a poem (in *terza rima* or otherwise) that gives poetic elaboration to your circle of hell.

**Class participation will be a critical part of the grade for this course.** I will expect all students to engage with the material by asking questions and contributing their thoughts and comments during class discussions. In order to prepare for class, you should carefully read the relevant canto and notes and any other material that is assigned. The Durling and Martinez text is yours to keep, so I will expect that you will mark it up and annotate it heavily. This text should be dog-eared by the time we are done with class.

**Acknowledgment:** I am indebted to Julia Heaton, my friend and former colleague and, for a number of years, an LREI English teacher, for allowing me to use the “Close Reading Model” posted on the home page of this class (and her amusing characterization of Canto 4 of *Inferno* as “the cocktail party in Limbo”). My first reading of *Inferno* took place under Julia’s

auspices, and I have since been inspired by her to read and re-read “The Divine Comedy.” Thanks to Julia, Dante has illuminated my intellectual and spiritual life in countless ways.

“And to achieve this I am striving as hard as I can, and this she truly knows.”

Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*

## Schedule and Syllabus:

**Class 1** – Course Expectations; Dante: Who was he?

Readings: Durling and Martinez, “Introduction,” pages 3-11 (ending with paragraph that begins “The *Vita Nuova* . . .”)

Durling and Martinez, Additional Notes, “Autobiography in Cantos 21-23,” pages 567-568

Music: “Highway to Hell,” AC DC

- Dante Alighieri, 1265-1321: poet, scholar, politician, soldier
- Issues marking Dante’s life:
  - His exile from Florence in January 1302, never to return.
  - His fierce opposition to the corruption and meddling in temporal affairs of the papacy.
  - His veneration of Beatrice Portinari, whom Dante met when he was 9 and Beatrice was 8. Beatrice dies, probably of plague, at 24. (“Of Dante’s wife, Gemma [Donati], there is no word.”)
- Dante-pilgrim (the complicated character) versus Dante-poet (the writer); “In a general sense a pilgrim is anyone who is out of his own country,” (*Vita Nuova*, XL)
- Dante’s ego (“Dante’s chin”) and the lure of the vernacular as a means to achieve literary fame
- The poles of justice and empathy/mercy; Thomas Aquinas: “Justice without mercy is cruelty, mercy without justice goes to waste.”

**Class 2** – The Late Medieval World: An Introduction

Readings: John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe, From the Renaissance to the Present, Third Edition* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York: 2010), pages 5-17 and 21-25

Poem: Sordel, *Planh*, “I shall grieve for Sir Blacatz to this sprightly tune”

- Florence as city-state in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century – three essential aspects:
  - Important commercial center, emerging from wool and silk trades to international banking and finance -- associated issues of economics and class and Dante’s concern with greed
  - City-state resisting the rise of centralizing monarchies (France, the Holy Roman Empire)
  - Riven by civil war and vendettas: the Guelfs (aligned with the Pope) vs. the Ghibellines (aligned with the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire); the Guelfs themselves split into the “White Guelfs” (the faction to which Dante’s family was associated) and the “Black Guelfs” (secretly aided by Boniface VIII)
- Papacy: its political importance and involvement in temporal affairs

**Class 3** – Organization of “Inferno”: Formal Aspects of *Inferno* and How to Read the Poem

Readings: Durling and Martinez, “Introduction,” pages 11-18 (ending with the paragraph that begins “The *Comedy* is much too complex . . .”); and “A Note on the Form of the Poem,” pages 20-23

Dan Hofstadter, “Dante’s Curse,” *New Criterion*, November 2017

- Three-part poem of 100 cantos in all:
  - *Inferno* (Hell: sin and its consequences) -- 34 cantos
  - *Purgatorio* (Purgatory: the expiation of sin) -- 33 cantos
  - *Paradiso* (Heaven: the vision of God for the redeemed) -- 33 cantos
  - *Inferno* must be understood in the context of the entire *Divine Comedy*
- In the vernacular: Tuscan Italian, not Latin
- Drawing on the tradition of troubadour poetry of southern France/northern Italy
- Two essential references: Bible and Vergil’s *Aeneid*
- Moral framework is the theology of Thomas Aquinas
- *Terzina*: three line stanzas, in which each line is composed of words that constitute 11 syllables (hendecasyllabic lines)
- *Terza rima*: aba, bcb, cdc and so forth -- “a ladder of rhyme”
- Numerology in *Inferno* (the importance of trinities and the number seven, among others)

- Issues of translation, and why the translation by Durling; importance of the notes by Durling and Martinez
- **Who:** Personalities: Dante-poet, Dante-pilgrim, Virgil-guide, Vergil-poet, and Beatrice – and the notable characters in hell: Francesca, Farinata, Brunetto Latini, Ulysses, Ugolino
- **What:** Depiction of sin and the consequences of sin
- **Where:** The intensely physical world of *Inferno*: map on page xvi, Doré illustrations
- **Contrapasso:** the fitting of the punishment to the sin

#### Class 4 – Canto 1, “The Dark Wood”

Music, “Moments in the Woods,” from Stephen Sondheim’s “Into the Woods”

- Dante-pilgrim as the central figure of the poem: the (alter) ego of Dante-poet
- Time in *Inferno*: past and present tenses, three-day voyage starting on Good Friday (*Commedia* is firmly situated in April 1300)
- Assertion of universality in very first line – “nostra vita”
- “mi ritrovi” = “I came to myself,” “I found myself”
- The notion of “sleep” and what it means to have lost “the straight way”
- Fear: the repeated word and the emotion
- Preview of the taxonomy of sin: leopard (fraud), lion (violence), she-wolf (disordered appetite)
- Meeting Virgil: the conundrum of the revered poet who is a pre-Christian pagan

#### Class 5 – Canto 2, “Conversing with Virgil and Encountering Beatrice”

Music: “Uptown Girl,” Billy Joel

- The war of journey and of pity: empathy with certain souls in hell
- Beatrice and Virgil as intermediaries and guides for Dante-pilgrim
- Cowardice and boldness: “I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul.”
- References to both classical world and the New Testament
- The trinity of the Virgin Mary, St. Lucia and Beatrice: quotes (Lucia) within quotes (Beatrice) within quotes (Virgil)
- Significance of intermediaries/intercessors on Dante-pilgrim’s behalf

#### Class 6 – Canto 3, “The Trimmers (‘The Neutrals’)”

- Hell’s Gate: its trinity of “THROUGH ME,” and despair of “Abandon every hope, you who enter”
- What’s so bad about those who hedge their bets? Ego and cowardice?
- Flag as lure/forced allegiance, wasps as stimuli
- Virgil as teacher, and Dante’s submission
- First river crossing: the Acheron and defying Charon, the first invocation of Dante-pilgrim’s right of passage through Hell – to whom does he owe this right of passage?
- Dante-pilgrim’s corporeality – the puzzlement of Charon (and many others encountered in hell)
- Prominent trimmers: Pontius Pilate and Pope Celestine V who abdicates to Boniface VIII
- Why a faint here?

#### Class 7 – Canto 4, “First Circle: ‘The Cocktail Party in Limbo’”

- Limbo in Catholic theology; Dante’s heterodoxy in situating figures from classical antiquity in Limbo
- Limbo – a curiously neutral kind of place – appropriately situated after the “antechamber” of Hell, where the neutrals are located [“grief without torture,” “neither happy nor sad.”]
- Dante as equal among the illustrious pagans; “no false modesty here”
- Why is such importance ascribed to the classical world: Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan, other Roman poets and philosophers; Muslim scientists?
- Derivative nature of Dante’s knowledge of ancient texts; cf. Ovid and Homer

#### Class 8 – Canto 5, “Second Circle: The Lustful”

Reading: Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, Chapter XXV, Michael Musa, translator (Oxford University Press, 1992) [Dante on love as a “bodily substance”]

Music: “Ring of Fire,” Johnny Cash

- First circle of intense suffering, lust as the first of the seven deadly sins
- Conundrum of the “corporeality” of souls – how can this be? And how does Dante-pilgrim traverse this world of souls and interact with them?
- The paradox of the written word (literature) as source of seductive danger; the poet as lyre/liar
- How the mortal Dante passes through hell: the second invocation of Dante’s right of passage through hell; dealing with the challenge of Minos
- Series of love triangles: profane trinities
- First of the memorable personalities in Inferno: Francesca (who speaks) and Paolo (who is silent)
- Reading as a lustful activity
- The double *contrapasso* of the lustful: whirlwind and the everlasting kiss
- The second faint: Dante’s own culpability for sin?

### **Class 9 – Canto 6, “Third Circle: The Gluttons”**

Music: “Fugue 1 / More Is More” from the album *Heaven and Hell*, Joe Jackson

- “Let it rain, let it pour”: filthy precipitation of the gluttons; Cerberus who claws and flays
- Images of insatiability for food/drink and its association with a desire for power
- “I am broken by the rain”: Ciaccio, the personality of the Third Circle who appeals for remembrance
- The evil of gluttony: failure of moderation
- Dante’s response to suffering of Ciaccio, and the prophecy/game of time of Ciaccio
- Dante’s settling of scores with the Florentines and Boniface VIII

### **Class 10 – Canto 7, “Fourth and Fifth Circles: The Avaricious and the Angry”**

- Confronting Plutus: third invocation of Dante’s right of passage through hell
- Images of avarice (lust/gluttony for money)
- Auction pit as *contrapasso* of greed
- Corruption of the “tensored ones”
- Florence as center of finance; banking as “bad giving and bad keeping”
- The angry tearing one another apart, the sullen wallowing in slime
- The amorality of Fortune (symbolized by wheel)

### **Class 11 – Canto 8, “Introduction to Lower Hell: Dis”**

Music: “Che faro senza Euridice,” from “Orfeo ed Euridice,” Christoph Willibald Gluck

- Second river crossing: crossing the Styx as dividing point between upper and lower hell
- Dante and Filippo Argenti, Black Guelph: Dante indulges in personal vengeance (Dante’s own anger)
- Continuity with Canto 7 via further images of anger in the treatment of Argenti
- Right of passage through Dis, the doubting and testing of Virgil
- Mosques and traditional Christian views of Muslims (schismatics versus heretics)

### **Class 12 – Canto 9, “Sixth Circle: The Heretics”**

- The travelers blocked: breaching the gates of Dis; canto is a long pause between upper Hell and Dis
- Virgil’s previous trip through Hell as assurance of ability to continue
- Eyes and the difficulty of sight – reading and interpretation, the dangers of Medusa; cf. Canto 5’s warnings about the power of text/literature.
- Passage provided by Michael the Archangel, enemy of the devils – and symbol of God’s grace
- Michael’s trinity of questions
- Images of tombs with lifted covers; cf. Etruscan tomb imagery

- Introduction to the heretics: rejection of orthodoxy and division of Church's unity
- Heretics in the Catholic tradition (Cathars)

**Class 13** – Canto 10, “Sixth Circle, Heretics Continued: Farinata”

- Heretics are “dead” forever, reside in their tombs forever
- “Your speech makes you manifest”: Farinata’s disdain of hell, desire to know lineage
- “Who were your forebears?”: introduction of issues of social class (“tu” and “voi”)
- Dante’s view of Farinata: Ghibelline, Cathar (heresy of dualism, body as the source of evil), prophet, conflicted political hero
- Cavalcante (Guelph), son Guido betrothed to Farinata’s daughter Beatrice (!) – the divisions of Florence laid bare; ambiguity of Dante-pilgrim’s hesitation on question whether Guido is dead
- Back to the future: prophecy of events already known
- Animus against Frederick II of Hohenstaufen

**Class 14** – Canto 11, “Descending Deeper into Hell: Preview of Violence, Fraud and Treachery”

- Lower hell and its increasing compression
- A paradox: why are murderers in a higher circle of lower hell than those who have committed fraud?
- Division of lower hell into three subdivisions: violence, simple fraud and treacherous fraud
- Virgil on physical injury and moral injury: fraud as corruption of the mind is unique to humans and weakens the bonds of civil society (cf. violence of the natural world).
- Aquinas: “Men cannot associate with each other unless they believe they are telling each other the truth.”
- Triad of violence against others, oneself and God
- Treacherous fraud as a violation of love and trust
- Levels of intent in sin: disregard (incontinence, punished outside Dis), malice (intent to harm, punished inside Dis), mad bestiality (depravity, punished in Cocytus)
- Usury, sodomy and the issue of homosexuality in *Inferno*

**Class 15** – Canto 12, “Seventh Circle, Sub-circle of the Violent Against Others”

- Minotaur, like centaurs (and like Charon, Minos, Cerberus), is a union of animal and human, irrational and rational; cf. Christ’s nature as human and divine
- How do Virgil and Dante-pilgrim move past the Minotaur?
- Emphasis in this canto of Dante-pilgrim’s corporeality [28-31, 80-82, 85, 94-97]
- Physical/geological manifestations of Christ’s death by [violent] crucifixion
- Violent are boiling in a river of blood, which is of varying depth
- Greed and anger as causes of violence
- Centaurs as mounted warriors (cf. Lapiths and Centaurs from Parthenon marbles)
- Why are the Centaurs immune from suffering in this circle? What connection might Dante-poet as a mounted warrior have had with Centaurs?

**Class 16** – Canto 13, “Seventh Circle, Sub-circle of the Violent Against Themselves”

Reading: From *City of God* by St. Augustine (354-430 CE), Chapter 20, “That Christians Have No Authority for Committing Suicide in Any Circumstances Whatever”

- Entering another dark wood, where nothing grows and vegetation is unnatural, as suicide is “unnatural”; why would Dante deliberately use the symbolism of the dark wood from Canto 1 in Canto 13?
- Suicides are plants that bleed when plucked or broken, symbolic of breaking of spirit and body
- Piero delle Vigne (note irony of name) wishes to have his story told (“fame in the world”)
- Piero as adviser and gatekeeper (symbols of keys) for Frederick II – envy of exclusive access leads to false accusation of conspiracy and then suicide
- Is Piero’s fate fair? How might we see his fate differently?
- Dante-pilgrim’s “pity” for the innocent Piero (false accusations that result in punishment)
- Spendthrifts are like suicides, wasting or burning their own riches

- Anonymous suicide as symbol of divided city [Florence], which destroys itself in civil war

**Class 17** – Canto 14, “Seventh Circle, Sub-circle of the Violent Against God”

- Poignancy of gathering together the scattered leaves at the beginning of the canto – metaphorical attempt to reunify Florence, which has destroyed itself.
- Violent against God and nature are in a desert, an anti-Eden, on which fire rains, causing these violent sinners to constantly brush fire off with their hands – “dancing” of wretched hands like distorted prayer
- Violent against God are blasphemers, sodomites, and usurers – sterility of these sins creates a desert
- Capaneus as one of the seven against Thebes, who disdains Jove and is struck down by thunderbolt – why a classical figure embodying violence against God?
- Debasement of Giant of Crete proceeds from head to toe; he has “a foot of clay” and a crack in his body, symbolic of Original Sin

**Class 18** – Canto 15, “The Sodomites: Brunetto Latini”

Reading: Durling and Martinez, eds., *Inferno*, Additional Note 4, “Dante and Brunetto Latini,” pages 557-559

- Dante’s reverence/affection for Brunetto Latini (cf. Francesca, Farinata, Piero delle Vigne)
- Latini as poet, teacher, paternal figure and perhaps more for Dante (“voi” and “tu” usage)
- More Florentine score-settling, via Latini, but also prediction of exile (as Ciaccio and Farinata did)
- Latini’s desire to be commemorated, importance of writing “to take note”
- “Equivocal language” (coded language) referring to homosexuality: verses 13-14, 22, 23, 25, 26, 28-29, 40, 66, 72, 89, 110, 114.
- Why is Virgil invisible in this canto?
- Literary glory as a theme of the canto
- How does Dante know Latini is a “sodomite” in the absence of historical evidence?
- What exactly is the sin here? What does it mean to commit violence against “God and Nature”?

**Class 19** – Canto 16, “More Sodomites and Political Lessons”

Reading: Durling and Martinez, eds., *Inferno*, Additional Notes, “Dante and Homosexuality,” pages 559-560

- Second canto devoted to the sodomites – why so important?
- Sins of Florence are expressed as pride and excess, resulting from newness and rapid gains
- Political sense of need for caution in the company of those who see actions and inner thoughts
- Florentine-Guelf political trio: contrast between public good and private actions
- Courtesy and valor as aristocratic values (cf. troubadour tradition)
- The problem of traversing the cliff that separates the 7<sup>th</sup> circle from lower hell
- Physical separation of lower hell as emphasis of further depth and compression

**Class 20** – Canto 17, “The Usurers, Geryon”

Reading: Durling and Martinez, eds., *Inferno*, Additional Notes, “Geryon’s Spiral Flight,” pages 560-563

- Usury as essential principle of capitalism and banking: money works while humans are idle/asleep
- How does a bank work, and why is usury/banking a sin? How is usury as sin “against Nature”?
- Trinity of usurers, who are both Guelphs and Ghibellines
- Geryon as three-part image of fraud, face of just man, torso of a lion and tail of a scorpion/snake: initial trust, complication and confusion, and the sting (cf. Bernie Madoff, Ponzi schemes)
- Three natures (a malevolent trinity) signal the transition from simple to compound sin and the descent from human to animal
- Night flight (descent through darkness) of Geryon contrasted with failed flights of Phaethon and Icarus
- But Geryon is deprived (defrauded?) of the sting

**Class 21** – Canto 18, “Eighth Circle, First and Second Pouches: Panders/Seducers and Flatterers”

- *Malebolge* – evil sacks/bags/pouches = accumulation and greed as spurs to fraud

- Procuring = coining
- *Contrapasso* of whip as panderers whip women on to prostitution
- Flatterers are those whose faces we can't see even though they "walk together with us."
- *Contrapasso* of flatterers is to be assailed with foul breath/speech, and being buried in dung
- Problematic relation of poetry/fiction to fraud
- Boniface VIII and the issue of indulgences in the Jubilee Year of 1300: anticipating Martin Luther – and what would Dante have thought about Martin Luther?

**Class 22** – Canto 19, "Eighth Circle, Third Pouch: Simoniacs"

- Simony (Simon Magus) is buying and selling of sacramental power or priestly offices
- *Contrapasso* is being planted upside down in a hole, subject to fire on the feet – inversion/perversion of sacraments due to corruption
- Multiple images of sacramental rites/elements
- Pentecostal imagery of fire/flames
- Denunciation of corrupt popes: Nicholas II, Boniface VIII, Clement V
- Dante-pilgrim as avenger of papal corruption/displaying smug cruelty: "you deserve your punishment"
- Dante's view on the need for "lay intervention in a situation where the clergy have proved inadequate"
- Dante's views on separation of secular and spiritual power via denunciation of the Donation of Constantine, according to which the emperor Constantine gave the popes supreme temporal power

**Class 23** – Canto 20, "Eighth Circle, Fourth Pouch: Fortune/Future-Tellers"

- Why is divination a sin? Can the future be changed, by prayer, by grace?
- Fortune-tellers/soothsayers as usurpers of divine power of foreknowledge
- *Contrapasso* of twisted face and torso/backward walking
- Why does Dante-pilgrim weep in this sub circle, and why does Virgil need to call Dante-pilgrim to order? "Raise your head, raise it"
- Concreteness of geography versus unreality of prediction; also, of the geography of *Inferno*?
- Examples of prediction and time-twisting in *Inferno* – is this "fortune/future-telling"?

**Class 24** – Canto 21, "Eighth Circle, Fifth Pouch: Graft, Corruption, and the Colorful Devils"

- Barrators/those guilty of graft: the evil of civic corruption
- Images of deal-making, defecating, obsession with hindquarters ("behind the back" dealings)
- *Contrapasso* is affliction of sticky pitch, as graft induces sticking together of the one corrupting and the one corrupted: turning "no" into "yes"
- Corrupters operate under the surface, are tortured with grappling hooks – symbols of entanglement
- Devils in Canto 21 are some of the most memorable characters in *Inferno* – why?
- Role of humor in *Inferno* – "talking out of one's ass"

**Class 25** – Canto 22, "More Corruption, and More Colorful Devils"

Music: "It's Tricky," Run DMC

- Dante on a literary roll: can't let go of a good thing (the devils)
- Why are sinners coming to the surface of the pitch, literally and metaphorically?
- Barrators experience more than punishment; *contrapasso* now has elements of torture, with images of ripping and tearing, as Black Guelfs rampaged in Florence; shock of wounds in verses 77-78
- Ciampolo was son of a spendthrift who committed suicide; Ciampolo admits graft; cf. Piero delle Vigne
- Barrators cheating one another: "I am really very tricky, if I procure more suffering for my own kind."
- Cat and mouse game/sport between Ciampolo and Harlequin
- Brawl among the devils and descent into the pitch reminds us they are fallen angels

**Class 26** – Canto 23, "Eighth Circle, Sixth Pouch: Hypocrites"

- Reiterated sense of fear driving Dante-pilgrim and Virgil through hell
- Paternal/maternal images of Virgil protecting the pilgrim, sliding down to the next circle
- Hypocrites are painted and hooded – sense of disguise, concealment
- *Contrapasso* is that hypocrites are cloaked outwardly in guilt but of lead inside, leading them to be laboriously heavy (robe suggests prelates: monks of Cluny)
- Conspiracy of Guelf (Catalano) and Ghibelline (Loderingo), hypocrites to foment violence and rule Florence
- Caiaphas is crucified, as Christ was (cf. blood libel of Jewish responsibility for death of Christ)

**Class 27** – Canto 24, “Eighth Circle, Seventh Pouch: Thieves”

- Extended opening sequence of peasant being spurred to work is image of honest labor (cf. thievery)
- Virgil’s doubt mirrored by Dante – circumstances in which Virgil protects the pilgrim, deflects his fear, and admonishes him (“cast off sloth”)
- The pilgrim and Virgil climb a literal mountain (difficulty and doubt)
- Circle of thieves is full of serpents, and *contrapasso* is that thieves have no place to hide (inversion, as they hide when attacking their victims) and are entwined with snakes, whose reputation is for stealth (cf. Garden of Eden, deceit of snake and theft of apple from the Tree of Knowledge)
- Aquinas: “Theft is . . . the concealed seizure of what belongs to others.”
- Burning down and rebirth of the thief is a parodic Ash Wednesday and reminder of futility of earthly things (“Thou are dust and unto dust thou shalt return”)
- Pistoia (town) as worthy lair for Vanni Fucci, robber of sacred objects
- More prophecy that is already known: divisions in Florence that will lead to Dante’s exile
- Vanni Fucci as thief of Dante-pilgrim’s tranquility

**Class 28** – Canto 25, “Eighth Circle, Seventh Pouch: Thieves Continued”

- Importance of property emphasized by two cantos devoted to thieves – property as extension of the body
- Vanni Fucci’s act of extreme blasphemy
- Dante-pilgrim indulges in the pleasure of retribution through a symbol of humankind’s fall: “From then on snakes have been my friend.”
- And then Dante wishes the incineration of Pistoia that this town “may not endure”; what is happening to Dante-pilgrim’s moral compass?
- Compare Cacus, the centaur full of rage, with the temperate centaurs of Canto 12
- Sixth direct address to readers as preamble to metamorphoses that are hard to believe
- Extended metamorphosis per Ovid: serpent and human entwined, “Siamese twins” as foreshadowing of descent into “wild bestiality” of lowest of circles of treacherous fraud
- Exploration of two natures (human and divine, human and animal), duality in temperaments (truth and lies), fratricidal opposition (Guelfs and Ghibellines, White Guelfs and Black Guelfs)
- Literary boasting by Dante, comparing himself to Lucan and Ovid

**Class 29** – Canto 26, “Eighth Circle, Eighth Pouch: Ulysses and Counselors of Fraud”

- Sarcastic salutation/denigration of Florence – Dante’s duality about his home city, his thirst for vengeance (beating of wings conjure the Evil Claws)
- “I’m too good at this for my own good”: Virgil’s injunction that Dante’s tongue should restrain itself, Dante’s proving his own sin by virtuosity of this canto; Dante-pilgrim leaning down in verses 43-45, 67
- Shining flames of this circle parodically symbolize speech and Pentecostal enlightenment; also, the *contrapasso* of the false counselors, who have been turned into tongues of flame
- Ulysses (Odysseus) is punished for a trinity of tricks: the Trojan Horse, the “abduction” of Achilles, and the theft of Pallas Athena from Troy – is “all fair in love and war”?
- Dante’s parallel sins in this canto: both taking from and seeking to surpass Homer and Virgil
- Opposition of the Greeks and the Trojans, who Dante claims are the antecedents of the Romans
- Ulysses is motivated by a desire to gain experience of the world – why is this punishable?

- Ulysses' sin is of hubris (sailing beyond the pillars of Hercules) and deceitful inspiring, by taking his companions to their death
- By comparison: Homer's version of Odysseus

**Class 30** – Canto 27, “Eighth Circle, Eighth Pouch: Counselors of Fraud Continued”

- Dante's geopolitical report to Guido de Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, about the seven cities – commonality of savagery and death
- Depictions of tongue wagging, wavering, roaring: Hell as Babel
- Virgil is recognized by his Lombard speech; cf. recognition of Dante-pilgrim as speaking Tuscan
- Romagna as scene of constant war of tyrants: cf. characterizations of Lucca, Bologna, Pistoia, Florence
- Similarities between Piero delle Vigne and Guido, but Guido initially changes his ways, unlike Piero
- Pope Boniface VIII, again, as villain (Prince of the new Pharisees)
- Guido's work as “fox” (fraud) not “lion” (violence), giving deceitful advice to Boniface (who is the willing recipient and then turns Guido's fate)

**Class 31** – Canto 28, “Eighth Circle, Ninth Pouch: Sowers of Discord”

Reading: Bertran de Born on war – *Half a sirventés I'll sing about two kings*

- Sowers of discord (advocates of violence, both religious and civic) are themselves repeatedly rent and torn as a *contrapasso* (which is explicitly referenced as such for the first and only time)
- References to Trojan wars in Italy, conflict between Guelfs and Ghibellines,
- Treatment of Mohammed as a schismatic/Ali as divider of Sunni and Shiite
- Virgil as speaker of truth in contrast to Ulysses in Canto 26 and Guido da Montefeltro in Canto 27
- Dolcino as heretic/schismatic, resistance to crusaders; Mohammed prophesizes Dolcino's fate, Pier of Medicina prophesizes fate of Guido and Angiolello of Fano
- Curio urging Caesar to cross the Rubicon, triggering civil war; speech as source of discord
- Mosca as originator of conflict between Guelfs and Ghibellines; Dante-pilgrim prophesizing “death” of Mosca's clan; cf. Vanni Fucci's prophecy
- Another view of Bertran de Born: as baron, seeking to ward off centralizing monarchs by playing off Young Henry Plantagenet and Henry II of England; also, as great troubadour

**Class 32** – Canto 29, “Sowers of Discord Continued; Tenth Pouch: Falsifiers/Alchemists”

- Dante and Virgil in a small discord in this canto, as Dante is transfixed by souls; cf. Medusa
- Dante as seeker of vengeance for Geri del Bello and therefore himself a sower of discord
- Diseased skin of falsifiers is akin to rotten exterior (lie) projected by them, or scales (like coins) made by alchemists/counterfeiters
- Alchemists as those who are “falsifiers” in the sense of producing debased imitations, although a distinction is made between permissible alchemy (aka “chemistry”) and fraudulent alchemy
- Dante's insults of Sieneese and Apulians as indication of rivalries among Italian city-states, but indicative of Dante as divisive
- Capocchio, like Vanni Fucci, “owns” his sin

**Class 33** – Canto 30, “Eighth Circle, Tenth Pouch Continued: Impersonators, Counterfeiters and False Witnesses”

Music: “O mio babino caro,” *Gianni Schicchi*, Giacomo Puccini

- Scenes of extreme cruelty involving children (Theban, Trojan) at start of the canto anticipating Canto 33
- Counterfeiters/impersonators take several forms: sexual, financial, legal
- *Contrapasso* is being turned into pigs, or afflicted with rabies (implied madness) or dropsy (distended limbs and lost flesh, adulteration) or extreme thirst
- Gianni Schicchi's impersonation violates rules of orderly conveyance of property; cf. Puccini
- Bickering between Sinon of Troy (false testimony) and Master Adam (counterfeiter: debaser of currency) is reminiscent of schoolyard taunting: ironic speaking of truth, and truth of Dante's fascination with suffering, and his vivid shame at Virgil's rebuke
- Why are the consequences of this sin so serious as to be placed deep in hell? “Money as the blood of the body politic”

- Dante’s persistent shame (versus guilt), and the pilgrim’s dependence on Virgil to “bring him back to his senses [of reason]”

**Class 34** – Canto 31, “The Giants and the Descent to Cocytus”

- Transition to Cocytus, deepest circles of the pit of hell, via giants/towers, symbol of pride (gravest of deadly sins) and brutishness
- Nimrod (related to Babel and confusion of tongues), Ephialtes (hubris, trying to reach the gods), Antaeus (destroyer of nature, symbol of rebellious sexuality)
- Giants/towers as symbol of vendetta, civil strife; cf. images of San Gimignano
- Compare the flight of Geryon and the lifting and placing down of the giants

**Class 35** – Canto 32, “Ninth Circle: Traitors to Family (Caina) and Traitors to Country (Antenora)”

- Paradox of Cocytus (“sorrow”): transition from fire to ice and the compression of the cold
- *Contrapasso* of Caina (sub circle of traitors to kindred/family) is to be encased in a lake of ice up to the neck (coldness of motivation to betray those for whom one should feel warmth)
- Transition from desire to be remembered to desire to be forgotten
- Dante now resumes role of administering punishment by arguing with and physically abusing (displaying brutishness of Cocytus) “anonymous” soul (Bocca degli Abati, “mouth”)
- Debasement of Antenora (traitors to country or party) is even more extreme: cannibalism of traitors, banishment of natural human relations within family
- Twins: Dante and Virgil, Napoleone and Alessandro Alberto, Cain and Abel, Blacks and Whites (Guelfs)
- Traitors to country are largely Tuscan (and Ghibelline)
- Two frozen in the hole, with one gnawing on the one’s brain, are not even given names until next canto: Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggeri

**Class 36** – Canto 33, “Ninth Circle: Traitors to Guests (Ptolomea)”

Reading: Durling and Martinez, eds., *Inferno*, Additional Notes, “Ugolino,” pages 578-580

- Now Ugolino wants Ruggieri’s notoriety broadcast to the upper world (commemoration to forgetting to notoriety/infamy)
- Ugolino’s monologue is the longest in “Inferno,” next to those of Francesca and Ulysses
- Does Ugolino deserve his fate, given his dilemma? Dante asks this question (Ugolino as a Ghibelline defecting to the Guelfs and then plotting with Ghibellines, in turn betrayed by Ruggieri, a Ghibelline) – and how reliable is Ugolino’s account (his “eyes askance”)?
- Cannibalism as civic body feeding on itself
- Dante wishes for the extermination of Pisa and Genoa!
- *Contrapasso* of traitors to guests is the “crystal visor” of frozen tears – hatred has blocked these sinners from the ability to see anything else
- Dante betrays Alberigo by promising help against identification but then not relieving Alberigo of his frozen tears
- More time-play: Dante consigns Alberigo to hell even though Alberigo is still alive when *Inferno* was written – vengeance writ large via body/soul separation
- Zombies: Alberigo thinks Branca Doria is dead, even though Branca Doria is alive

**Class 37** – Canto 34, “The Lowest Depth: Traitors to Lords and Benefactors (Judecca), and the Ascent to Purgatory”

- Satan as agent of ice (himself encased in ice), relative of the giants, an evil windmill, three faces (crimson, white/yellow, and black), a parodic crucifixion
- Dante’s address to the reader and subsequent episode of fainting
- *Contrapasso* is being fully encased in ice/being eaten by Satan (cf. Ugolino)
- Satan as mill/building recalls giants as towers – is this a depiction of cities in debased form?
- Unholy trinity of Judas Iscariot, Brutus and Cassius – joining of spiritual and temporal betrayal of lord
- Escape from hell: transported by Virgil, the duo paradoxically climbs down and up Satan and wind up (literally up) in the base of Purgatory
- Symbol of *stelle* – hope – that ends each of the three canticles in the *Divine Comedy*