Directed Studies Literature
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"Both Soles of Every Sinner were on Fire": Contrapasso in Canto XIX

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Within the eighth circle of Dante's hell walks Bertran de Born, a political advisor whose bad counsel on earth has pitted a prince against a king. In retribution for figuratively dividing the royal family, Bertran is literally (and repeatedly) beheaded. Bertran's fate typifies the inferno's "law of counter-penalty"[1], or contrapasso, in which the punishment always fits the crime. While most of hell's penalties are clear illustrations of contrapasso, others are much less evident. The demons, for example, turn the simoniacal popes upside down and burn their upturned soles. How do the Simonists' inversion and the incineration fit their crimes? I will argue that through their inversion of Biblical dictates and rhetoric, these clerics have overturned the correct relationship between the religious guide and his disciple as portrayed by Dante and Beatrice. In punishment for upending traditional religious roles on earth, they are literally turned upside down in hell.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante's interactions with Beatrice embody the Scripture's ideal relationship between a religious guide and follower. When Jesus commands his Apostles to proselytize the masses, he proclaims that "the Spirit of [the] Father will speak through [them]."[2] This pattern, in which a spiritual guide speaks through his disciples, is replicated in Beatrice's control over Dante's language. After prophesizing divine vengeance against the corrupt church, she commands the poet to "take note" of her words, and to "transmit them…to those / who live

[1] Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum. Random House: New York, 2004: 28.142. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
[2] *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed., Michael D. Coogan. Oxford University Press: London. 2003: Matthew 10.20. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

the life that is a race to death."[3] The transcription of her prophecies throughout the *Divine Comedy* is testament to the fulfillment of this command; as Dante's religious guide, she literally speaks through his text.

Beatrice reinforces her status as an ideal spiritual companion to Dante by imitating Christ's storytelling genre: the parable. Mystified by Beatrice's parable of the dragon, the whore, and the giant, Dante asks: "But why does your desired word ascend / so high above my understanding that / the more I try, the more am I denied?" (*Purg.* 33.82-84). Beatrice insists that her tale must be obscure in order for Dante to realize that reason alone cannot "comprehend" the matters of God (*Purg.* 33.87). When the Apostles question the effectiveness of parables, Christ replies much as Beatrice does: "All these things are done in parables that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand" (Mark 4.11-12). Like Beatrice, Jesus contends that the confusion induced by parables reveals the inefficiency of reason in explaining the works of God. By replicating the pattern of Christ's storytelling and the Apostle's confusion, Beatrice and Dante exemplify the scriptural relationship between a spiritual teacher and follower.

This ideal interaction between a leader and disciple is underscored by Dante's journey itself. Just as spiritual leaders must guide their followers along the path of Jesus, so too does Beatrice bring about Dante's journey, which is made in imitation of Christ. After his crucifixion, Jesus "descend[s] into hell, and on the third day he [rises] again" (Apostles' Creed 37). This pattern of descent before ascent is reflected in Dante's own traverse through the netherworld of Hell. Indeed, upon his entrance to Purgatory, Dante replicates scriptural diction, proclaiming that he too has "rise[n] again from hell's dead realm" (*Purg*. 1.8). Beatrice's personal guidance then allows him to complete his spiritual journey to the Empyrean. Just as Jesus "ascend[s] into heaven" through the will of God (Apostles' Creed 39), Dante is drawn to paradise by a

[3] Dante, *Purgatorio*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum. Random House: New York, 2004: 33.52-54. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

"wonderful"[4] divine force. Beatrice's guidance and Dante's discipleship embody the ideal interactions between a leader and disciple.

This idyllic relationship is replicated in the connubial imagery used to describe Dante and Beatrice. Indeed, the scriptures often compare the health of the church to the well-being of a married couple. To explain why the apostles are not fasting during a religious holiday, for example, Jesus explains that "the wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bride-groom is with them" (Matthew 9.15). Having recently founded the Christian church, he compares himself to a newlywed and thereby establishes a relationship between marital and clerical success.

Similarly, Dante often depicts his relationship with Beatrice in matrimonial terms. She first appears to the poet wearing a "white veil" (*Purg.* 30.32) – the traditional attire of a bride. At the sight of his Muse, Dante is filled with the "mighty power of old love" (*Purg.* 30.38). As an ideal of courtly love, the couple also embodies the Biblical ideal of spiritual love between a husband and wife. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul proclaims that "the unbelieving husband is sanctified by his wife" (1 Cor. 7:14). In her capacity as the ideal wife, Beatrice attempts to lead Dante "toward the way of righteousness" (30.123) during her life and entreats the Lord to permit his spiritual journey when he strays towards the "untrue path" after her death (30.130). She even achieves her aim: after his journey, Dante sits "devoutly at the feet of her commandments, / and set[s] [his] mind and eyes where she wish[s] [him] to" (*Purg.* 32.106). By fulfilling her duties as the ideal wife, Beatrice has redirected Dante towards the path of God. The couple's emulation of both courtly and spiritual love thereby embodies the ideal spousal relationship.

While Dante and Beatrice exhibit the ideal relationship between leader and follower as well as husband and wife, the Simonists invert this established order. First, these sinners ignore the Biblical dictates that monetary donations play no role in admittance to heaven. When Jesus

[4] Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum. Random House: New York, 2004: 1.25. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

instructs his disciples to preach to the masses, he warns them: '"You received [salvation] without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts" (Matthew 10.8-9). Indeed, the Lord gives Peter "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:18) in exchange for his discipleship alone – not money. Rather than offering salvation in return for allegiance, as divine law dictates, the Simonists claim that deliverance can only be achieved through monetary donations to the church. Their sin offends Dante, and as a result, he asks them, "Then tell me now, how much gold did our Lord / ask that Saint Peter give to him before / he placed the keys within his care?" (*Inf.* 19.90-93). Promising salvation in exchange for gold, the Simonists have turned a basic Christian message on its head: they have made access to money the key to salvation, instead of an irrelevancy.

The Simonists also corrupt the ideal relationship between the spiritual leaders and the church of followers by inverting the traditional roles of husband and wife. While Beatrice is the "compassionate" (*Inf.* 2.133), "blessed" (*Inf.* 2.124), and "virtuous" (*Inf.* 2.86) companion to Dante, the church is corrupted as a result of the Simonists' control. Confusing Dante with his successor Boniface, Pope Nicholas III asks, "Are you so quickly sated with riches / for which you did not fear to take by guile / the Lovely Lady, then to violate her?" (*Inf.* 19.55-57). The Lovely Lady represents the church, and the pope's simony has figuratively violated her. The previously pure church has thus been contaminated.

Indeed, in the hands of the simoniacal popes, the things of God have become the sinful harlots rather than the lawful spouses of Christ: the church has become a whore "who sits upon the waters / and…fornicates with kings" (*Inf.* 19.106-107). The rhetoric of Dante's denunciation subtly inverts the apocalyptic rhetoric of the Bible, in which the seven angels with seven vials describe the Antichrist as a "great whore that sitteth upon many waters; with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication" (Rev. 17:1-3). The image of water alludes to the "darkness [that] covered the face of the deep…waters" (Genesis 1.1) before God's creation, and suggests an apocalyptic return to this "formless void" (*ibid*). While Dante retains the direful

prediction of Revelation, Dante subtly changes its diction: in his version, the *whore* fornicates with the kings whereas, in the biblical account, the *kings* fornicate with the whore. Dante's reversal of the subject places the guilt squarely on the prostitute – the representation of the church. According to this analogy, Dante suggests that the church and its leaders are responsible for the world's degradation – not its kings, or political heads. Dante's literary reversal of scriptural rhetoric mirrors the Simonists' literal inversion of Biblical laws.

This inversion is further reflected in the physical description of the prostitute. Dante describes this whore as a monster "born with seven heads and… / the power and support of the ten horns / as long as virtue was her husband's pleasure" (*Inf.* 19.108-11). In contrast, this figure in the Apocalypse sits "upon a scarlet colored beast, full of names and blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns" (Revelations 17:3). In the scriptural account of the Apocalypse, the whore, who symbolizes the Antichrist, rides and controls the beast, which symbolizes the church. In a metaphorical inversion of the religious tradition, Dante's whore *becomes* the Biblical beast; the church becomes a symbol of the Antichrist. Indeed, the monstrous woman, that is, the church, is supported by its ten horns – the Ten Commandments – and its seven heads – the seven sacraments. Even these basic tenets of Christianity have become perverse mutations as a result of the Simonists' misrule. Indeed, the prostitute does not control the beast as in the Book of Revelations; instead, she is controlled by her husband: the pope. This reversal shows that the pope controls the church and is therefore responsible for its degradation.

The Simonists' inversion of Biblical order explains the contrapasso of their punishment: they are literally turned upside down. But why are their soles scorched? Upturned sinners, whose feet are burned, invoke an inverted image of the Apostles at Pentecost. Frightened by "a sound like the rush of a violent wind," the Apostles perceive "divided flames…rest[ing] on each of them" (Acts 2.1-4). By giving them the ability to speak all languages, these flames allow the followers of Christ to disseminate his teachings and guide the church. This scene, however, is subtly altered in Dante's version of the inferno. The "three winds" (*Inf.* 33.127) generated by

Lucifer imitate the "violent wind" that precedes the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Just as the Simonists upturn the Apostles' missionary work, the popes' punishment is a reversal of the flames that illuminated the Apostles' heads: the fire scorching the sinners' soles are a punishment for having failed to guide the church.

Through their inversion of scriptural language and law, the Simonists have misdirected the proverbial ship of Saint Peter. While God condemns the church from high, exclaiming, "O my small bark, your freight is wickedness!" (*Purg.* 32.128-29), Dante describes his work as a "little vessel" coursing towards the Empyrean (*Purg*. 1.6). The poet's self-representation as a ship suggests that his text is seeking to redirect Christianity along a course of righteousness. In appropriating Biblical language almost word for word, Dante is not parodying the Bible, but making it his own. Before admonishing the simoniacal popes, he doubts the correctness of his remarks, saying: "*lo non so s'i' me fui qui troppo folle*" – I do not know if I was too rash here" (19.88). While Mandelbaum translates "folle" as rash, the word literally means "mad" in Italian. By questioning his own sanity, Dante places himself in the league of the biblical prophets. When discussing the Apostle's Pentecostal gift of tongues in his Letter to the Corinthians, Paul demands: "If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind?" (1 Corinthians 14:23). Dante thus invokes an image of insanity familiar to his contemporary audience to suggest that he is a prophet of his own day.