

Compassion and Contempt: Dante's Moral Corrections of Shades in the Inferno

Katie L. Robertson

Abstract: In Dante's *Commedia*, he uses his *contrapasso* as an enforcing justice of punishment as the mirrored consequence of sinner's Earthly sin. The *contrapasso* is used as a tool of moral correction for how Dante responds to the shades' choices committed in sin. Dante's responses range from pity, contempt, and more rarely, violence. These instances of violence raise ethical questions to the reader that challenge preconceived notions about sin's severity of punishment. These instances also include disassembling the dichotomy that is Dante auctor and Dante agens, by raising questions of historical narrative into his treatment of certain shades. This question of justice is prompted by the poet for the reader and for himself as the pilgrim. His responses are often guided or scolded by Virgil, who serves as his personification of reason, offering Dante the opportunity to extend this influence of reason to those in Hell who betrayed it in life.

Major Department: History, Medieval Studies

There are several instances in the *Inferno* where Dante, the poet, constructs a thought experiment for the reader to guide themselves through moral questions of divine justice. However, as always, it can be more difficult for contemporary readers to completely grasp why Dante, the pilgrim, felt so strongly about certain shades. Even with well-rounded historical context, there are always plot holes that contemporaries may get stuck in, while the medieval reader could have inherently understood the poet's intentional political or social Florentine undertones. This becomes even more relevant when looking at the pilgrim's interactions with several different shades, read alongside his growing frustrations, as we reach the end of *Inferno*.

The pilgrims' intersections between controlled violence and Virgil's vigilance is worth noting. There are times where Virgil scolds Dante for treating shades "incorrectly"—by not responding or indulging into their quarrels—but it is more interesting when Dante is not corrected or is even praised by Virgil for responding to the shades, without pity, as the "proper" manner in Hell. This comes after Virgil emphasizes to the pilgrim that he must leave behind his pity in Canto II, although we see him struggle with this throughout the *inferno*. We see this especially with the lustful, where he faints from pity when seeing lovers Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta. The lustful are an easy group to feel pity for, considering they did nothing wrong other than being in love. This is also something that I would argue the pilgrim feels such strong pity for because he, much like many readers, can see themselves reflected in this sin. Cranston notes that that compassion for something pathetic, "without considering the justness of God's punishment—is a theological offence."¹ This is part of the moral question the poet plants; what is the right reaction to a sinner more harshly punished than what we think is fair and how can we grapple with pity for those supposedly receiving their divine justice in Hell? His system of punishment and truth

¹ Cranston, Mechthild. "Cruely, Curiosity, and Compassion in Dante's 'Inferno.'" *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 31 (1968). 38.

competes with itself in stimulating and provoking ways, often leaving the reader to acknowledge the larger truth while exploring these bits of doubt left by the poet, “He confronts us with absolute truths, while simultaneously rehearsing all the differentiating factors that apparently conflict with those truths.”² His methods of disassembling his own literary framework invite the reader to investigate the appropriate Christian response to sin and the sinner.

The most notable instance of moral ambiguity from violence is the pilgrim’s dramatic and explosive physical violence against Bocca degli Abati in canto XXXII. The interrogation of Bocca involved the pilgrim ripping chunks of his hair out after “accidentally” kicking his head and demanding he reveal his name and story.

“At that I grabbed him by the scruff and said:
‘you’ll have to name yourself to me or else
you won’t have even one hair left up here’” (Inf. XXXII, 97-99).

It is not hard to imagine why the poet detested Bocca, considering his serious betrayal of Florence, but this reaction seems less like justified anger towards a political betrayal, considering the amount of political traitors he has encountered without ripping their hair out. I would argue this is a combination of the author and the pilgrim’s frustrations. While the author expresses disdain for the treachery against Florence, the pilgrim seems to act with a damaged ego while working as a divine actor of justice, being referred to as “demon” by Buoso da Duera, who reveals Bocca’s name, and could be feeling a sense of entitlement with how successful his journey has been so far. It is also notable that this fight is a similar situation that Virgil had scolded the pilgrim for in canto

² Barolini, Teodolinda. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*. Princeton University Press, 1992.

XXX, when he tells Dante off for indulging in the petty quarrel between Master Adam and Sinon, “if you / insist on looking more, i’ll quarrel with you!” (Inf.XXX, 131-132).

Perhaps this violence, unexpected from the pilgrim, had only been possible by disconnecting from reason, in this case Virgil as personified reason, and ignoring the “rules” of hell and treatment of shades. This resulted in a visceral reaction from anger that finally boiled over nearing the end of his trip through Hell, especially with frustrations from Bocca’s refusal to provide his name. This can also be reflective of Dante serving the contrapasso back to the sinners, who are stuck in Cocytus because of their abuse of reason. We see the pilgrim give a similar reaction to Ugolino’s winded speech; while Ugolino gave no comfort to his starving sons that continued to prompt for a reaction, “Father you look so...What is wrong with you?”(XXXIII, 51) and, “Father, why do you not help me?” (XXXIII, 69). Count Ugolino della Gherardesca was a 13th-c. Pisan politician, who—very simply put—was a complicated actor of both the Guelphs and the Ghibellines.³ “Originally Ghibelline, Ugolino was exiled from Ghibelline Pisa in 1275. He returned with the help of Florentine Guelphs. In 1284 he became podestà of Pisa. To protect Pisa from Guelph threats he negotiated with Florence and Lucca and ceded three castles to them, an incident that Dante notes in ambiguous fashion.”⁴ Several scholars argue that Ugolino giving up Pisan castles—while historically the reason for his punishment—is not the main reason for his torture in the Inferno. Instead, it is understood that Dante is punishing Ugolino for the betrayal of his grandson Nino Visconti.⁵ Scholars also note Nino’s appearance in Purgatorio VIII, and the affection Dante shows

³ Complex political opponents in Tuscany around the 12th-c. Guelphs supported the Papacy while the Ghibellines supported the Holy Roman Emperor. In the late 13th-c. after the defeat of the Ghibellines, there was a split within the Florentin Guelphs; white (ones who supported independence as a city) and black (supported the Pope). Dante was a white Guelph.

⁴ Barolini. “Inferno 33: The Wolf and the Zombie.”

⁵ Barolini. “Inferno 33”

him.⁶ After the castles were ceded, Ugolino “agreed to Ghibelline demands that his grandson Nino be driven from the city, an order that was carried out--with Ugolino purposefully absent from the city--in 1288.”⁷ Although, when Ugolino returned, Archbishop Ruggieri degli Ubaldini had gotten the public to turn on Ugolino “by cleverly exploiting Ugolino's previous ‘betrayal of the castles’”,⁸ to take his seat as Chief Magistrate. In 1288,⁹ Ruggieri locked Ugolino, his sons, and his grandsons into the Torre dei Gualandi.¹⁰ They eventually starved to death when Ruggieri ordered the doors to be nailed shut and the key to be thrown in the Arno.¹¹ Four days later, Gaddo dies after pleading to his father for help, soon followed by the rest of the children up until the eighth day. At this point Ugolino was blind, and crawling over their bodies, and before succumbing to hunger himself says,

“Then hunger proved a greater
power than grief.” (Inf. 33.75)

This line is famously the point of ambiguity for the Count’s legacy, leaving interpretation to the reader on the possibly gruesome decision that Ugolino made, to either eat the children or die from starvation. Interestingly, Ugolino in postmodern response has received an overwhelmingly compassionate reaction. Even though it is clear that the pilgrim does not feel pity for Ugolino, this can also be a thought experiment the poet has set up for the reader to question the system of justice and rules of Hell. From an emotional standpoint, it is clearly difficult to not feel pity for Ugolino, who did truly suffer a horrible death along with his children. Here Dante, poet and pilgrim, feel pity for Ugolino’s innocent kin, who suffer as a source of leverage for political power. The poet

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Raffa, Guy P. *Dante's World*.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Vázquez, Patricia. “Dante’s Cannibal Count: Unnatural Hunger and Its Reckoning.” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 28, no. 1 (2020): 67–93.

¹⁰ Ugolino notes that the tower was renamed the Torre della Fame, “because of me, they call it now the hunger tower” (Inf. 33.23.)

¹¹ Raffa. *Dante's World*

leaves us with emotional insecurity of our stance on Ugolino and gently guides us to the “correct” response.

The pilgrim serves a moral lesson back to Ugolino, who has the longest speech of any shade in the *Inferno*, which is of course ironic considering he had nothing of comfort to say in life, by not responding to him the same way he failed to respond to his pleasing sons. Ugolino even prompts Dante for a response, and if you don’t weep now, when would you weep? (*Inf.* XXXIII.42). Again, with reason neglected by these sinners and speech being a part of God’s gift of reason, “Ugolino was — in Dante’s view — obliged to seek heroically to use language to console the inconsolable.”¹² Dante speaks to Pisa and says, “You had no right to crucify his children!” (*Inf.* 33.87). Barolini offers a deeper interpretation of Dante’s lack of pity.

“But the rules of Dante’s parlor game involve responding to what we learn, in imitation of the pilgrim. In this case, the pilgrim responds with silence to Ugolino — as Ugolino responded with silence to his children. Dante models the “correct” response to Ugolino, showing the Count no sympathy and leaving him without a word.”¹³

The idea that speech is connected to God-given reason is an important way that humans are separated from animals. In the *Inferno*, there is plenty of animalistic imagery and dehumanization of sinners by comparing them to animals. This is especially relevant in canto XXXII where there are comparisons of sinners to goats, sheep, frogs, rams, as well as Bocca barking and ending the canto with Ugolino stuck in the same hole as Ruggieri, frozen in ice up to their necks, while gnawing at the back of his skull. Similarly, earlier in the *Inferno*, Ugolino has a

¹² Barolini, Teodolinda. “*Inferno* 33: The Wolf and the Zombie.” *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2018.

¹³ *Ibid.*

dream that he is a wolf and his children as cubs. Dante uses the wolf as the representation of insatiable and animalistic greed (refer back to the she-wolf in canto I), implying that Ugolino's hunger, both for power and possible actual hunger, dehumanizes him to the point of betrayal of reason. The harsh language is also noted: "the rhymes in '-accia', '-ecca', '-ecchi', '-eschi', '-icchi', '-ogna', '-uca', and of the string of '-azzi' and '-ezzo' rhymes in lines 68–7".¹⁴ As the poet has done before, he speaks directly to the reader to emphasize the reality of this horror he is experiencing, before he witnesses the dehumanization of the shades is by literal animal transformation in canto XXV in the seventh bolgia, where there is gruesome metamorphosis of shades fusing with giant reptile creatures; their faces are ripped apart, limbs clasped between each others that mix like "warm wax", smoke pours out of their wounds, and their now forked tongues sputter with hisses. The shades here are thieves that are perversely changed and have their most fundamental self violated and stolen. It is clear in the text that this transformation is not only physically invasive but an explicit and violent bestial rape. This is clear not only in the relationship between serpents and phallacies but also how the reptile's tail is implied to probe at a shade's gentiles.

"it stretched its rear feet out along his thighs
and ran its tail along between the two,
then straightened it again behind his loins." (Inf. XXV, 55-58).

The three transformations are outlined tastefully by Barolini:

1. "Metamorphosis 1, Inferno 24.97-99: "Ed ecco a un ch'era da nostra proda, / s'avventò un serpente che 'l trafisse / là dove 'l collo a le spalle s'annoda" (And — there! — a serpent

¹⁴ Vittorio Montemaggi, Matthew Treherne, Abi Rowson. *Discover Dante*. The University of Leeds Centre for Dante Studies and the University of Notre Dame. 2007.

sprang with force at one / who stood upon our shore, transfixing him / just where the neck and shoulders form a knot)

2. Metamorphosis 2, Inferno 25.49-51: “Com’io tenea levate in lor le ciglia, / e un serpente con sei piè si lancia / dinanzi a l’uno, e tutto a lui s’appiglia” (As I kept my eyes fixed upon those sinners, / a serpent with six feet springs out against / one of the three, and clutches him completely)
3. Metamorphosis 3, Inferno 25.83-86: “un serpentello acceso, / livido e nero come gran di pepe; / e quella parte onde prima è preso / nostro alimento, a l’un di lor trafisse” (a blazing little serpent / moving against the bellies of the other two, / as black and livid as a peppercorn. / Attacking one of them, it pierced right through / the part where we first take our nourishment)”¹⁵

It is worth noting that the poet does not introduce the shades' names to us after they are absorbed and transformed into the reptile. Not only are they violated physically and psychologically, they are completely deprived of self-identity until they are in a body that is not their own. Scholars note the idea the poet introduces through this metamorphosis, where a ““perverse image” is formed that is “due e nessun”: “two and no one” (Inf. 25.77).”¹⁶ This canto is a reflection of the sinners and their punishments as perversions of basic nature, and an excellent example of *contrapasso*, where those who stole in life are now victims of the worst theft imaginable in Hell.

An important instance of moral correction and animosity against sinners is in canto VIII, when the pilgrim recognizes Filippo Argenti from life and they share a heated verbal exchange, before he is pushed back into the Styx by Virgil after trying to grab onto their boat. The pilgrims

¹⁵ Barolini, Teodolinda. “*Inferno*25: Shape, Substance, Sex, Self.” *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2018.

¹⁶ Barolini, Teodolinda. “*Inferno*25: Shape, Substance, Sex, Self.”

lack of compassion seeing Filippo punished is recognized and appreciated by Virgil, [he] “threw his arms around my neck / and kissed my face” (Inf. VIII, 43-44). Dante then expresses his clear satisfaction of the situation.

“O Master, I am very eager
to see that spirit soused within this broth
before we’ve made our way across the lake” (Inf. VIII, 52-54).

This satisfaction is claimed to be rooted in historical record of a personal vendetta that Filippo and Dante had because of political animosity, or Filippo’s brother’s claiming Dante’s property during his exile, or because Filippo slapped Dante.¹⁷ Dante here has given an example of *ira bona*—good wrath of punishing the sinful— but, some argue that this is *ira mala*, by giving into his anger, especially when he wishes Filippo would suffer more.

“Given his reaction to the sinners encountered in the three previous circles — he faints out of pity for the plight of lustful Francesca, he weeps for the fate of Ciaccio the glutton, and his heart was «almost pierced through» (7. 36: «quasi compunto») and saddened by the sight of the avaricious and prodigal —I believe it would be surprising if the Pilgrim suddenly knew how to treat a sinner in an appropriately detached manner, if he knew at this early point in his long journey how to recognize sin and judge sinners.”¹⁸

The pilgrim, with support from his guide, models a righteous anger,¹⁹ which he will continue to stray from through later cantos. The pilgrim continues with his path of anger into the next canto when he sees Fra Alberigo, whom he tricks into sharing his story by promising that he will remove

¹⁷ Dante Alighieri, 1265-1321, Allen Mandelbaum and Barry. Moser. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri Inferno, a Verse Translation* New York: Bantam Books, 2004.

¹⁸ Christopher Kleinhenz “Inferno 8: The Passage Across the Styx.” (Lecture, University of Virginia, April 6, 1988.)

¹⁹ Barolini, Teodolinda. “*Inferno* 8: In Medias Res . . . at the “Secret” Gate of Dis.” *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2018.

the frozen tears that are fused to his eyes. Similar to Ugolino and Bocca's contrapasso enforced by the pilgrim, he serves a betrayal back to the betrayer, by going back on his promise after learning how it was possible for Alberigo to be on Earth and in Hell through his demonic body double.

Dante the poet's use of violence is an efficient tool to not only express personal frustrations but to use an extension of himself, as the pilgrim, to discuss displeasure that would have been too blunt coming from him directly; such as having Boniface VIII named in Hell by Nicholas III in canto XIX, as if to say "hey, I didn't put him here...Nicholas did!" As always, Dante is ambiguous about the way we should feel towards certain shades, especially when we are given mixed signals from the pilgrim, the poet, and Virgil. This fosters an interesting setting to discuss how the pilgrim serves as a divine actor while the poet puts himself in, dare I say, a self-righteous position of God.

Works Cited

- Barolini, Teodolinda. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*. Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Barolini, Teodolinda *Commento Baroliniano, Digital Dante*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2018.
- Christopher Kleinhenz “Inferno 8: The Passage Across the Styx.” Lecture, University of Virginia, April 6, 1988.
- Cranston, Mechtchild. “Cruely, Curiosity, and Compassion in Dante’s Inferno” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 31 (1968): 27–44.
- Dante Alighieri, 1265-1321, Allen Mandelbaum and Barry. Moser. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri Inferno, a Verse Translation*. New York: Bantam Books, 2004.
- Raffa, Guy P. *Dante's World*. The University of Texas at Austin
- Vázquez, Patricia. “Dante’s Cannibal Count: Unnatural Hunger and Its Reckoning.” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 28, no. 1 (2020): 67–93.
- Vittorio Montemaggi, Matthew Treherne, Abi Rowson. *Discover Dante*. The University of Leeds Centre for Dante Studies and the University of Notre Dame. 2007.