

Fame and glory: can
they be divine?



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“ What is fame? Fame is but a slow decay Even this shall pass away.”

Theodore Tilton The Divine Comedy, by Dante Alighieri, is a poem laden with such Christian themes as love, the search for happiness, and the desire to see God. Among these Christian themes, however, is Dante's obsession with and desire for fame, which seems to be a surprising departure from conventional medieval Christian morality. Indeed, as the poem progresses, a striking contradiction emerges. Dante the writer, in keeping with Christian doctrine, presents the desire for fame and glory among the souls of Inferno in order to replace it with humility among the souls of Purgatorio. Yet this purification of desire is not entirely embraced by Dante, who seems preoccupied with his own personal fame and glory. Therefore, how do we reconcile the seemingly hypocritical stance that the souls must strip themselves of pride and become humble, yet Dante can continue in his quest for fame and glory and still be saved? This contradiction is developed as the reader and the character Dante travel through Inferno and Purgatorio and is resolved in the second sphere of Paradise. It is this sphere, which allows for fame and glory for honorable reasons, that permits us, as readers, to resolve this tension. It is in this sphere that Dante elucidates that fame is not always bad, but only becomes so when one's motives are impure. The power of fame and glory is nowhere more powerful than among the souls of Inferno. The importance of earthly fame is particularly apparent in the figures of the several shades who have asked Dante to recall their names and stories on Earth. In fact, it is this promise of fame that induces most of the souls to speak with Dante. “ But tell him who you were, so that he may, to make amends, refresh your fame within the world above, where he can still return,” says Virgil to Pier della Vigna in the wood of the suicides

(Inferno, Canto XIII, Lines 52-54). To which Pier replies, “ Your sweet speech draws me so that I cannot be still” (Inferno, Canto XIII, Lines 55-56). Even Dante is spurred on by promises of fame while in Inferno. During the difficult ascent to the seventh pouch in the eighth circle, Virgil emphasizes the importance of fame to urge Dante to persevere. He says, “ Now you must cast aside your laziness, for he who rests on down or under covers cannot come to fame” (Inferno, Canto XXIV, Lines 46-47). Indeed the willingness to be bribed by earthly fame is an aspect unique to those souls in hell. As Dante travels towards God and towards perfection, through Purgatory and finally through Paradise, he will find that the bargaining power of earthly fame is markedly diminished as souls become less and less interested in and motivated by fame. As Dante continues to Purgatorio the theme of humility starts to overshadow that of fame and glory, especially in Dante’s encounter with Oderisi, Guido Guinizzelli and Statius. In Canto XI, Dante meets Oderisi, a respected artist. After Dante praises him, Oderisi quickly points out that Franco Bolognese is now more famous: “ Brother, the pages painted by the brush of Franco Bolognese smile more brightly: all the glory now is his; mine, but a part” (Purgatorio, Canto XI, Lines 82-85). His earthly fame was short-lived and he claims “ O empty glory of the powers of humans! How briefly green endure upon the peak unless an age of dullness follow it” (Purgatorio, Canto XI, Lines 92-93). He is quick to point out to Dante that fame does not last unless an age utterly devoid of talent and artistry follows. He also cites the example of Giotto and how he is now acclaimed instead of Cimabue. “ In painting Cimabue thought he held the field, and now it’s Giotto they acclaim the former only keeps a shadowed fame” (Purgatorio, Canto XI, Lines 94-96). But even Giotto will soon be forgotten when someone else will chase

him “ out of the nest.” Oderisi is trying very hard to point out how fleeting fame can be and how dangerous the pride that precedes it is. The very punishment in this sphere is a caution to Dante about the dangers of wanting earthly fame. Oderisi would not be in the fires of purgatory if he had avoided the prideful desire for fame in the first place. These very same things are echoed later when Dante encounters Guido Guinizzelli and Arnaut Daniel in Canto XXVI. When Dante begins to praise Guido, Guido quickly defers his skill to that of Arnaut with the same tone of modesty and humility evidenced in the encounter with Oderisi. He says to Dante, “ He there, whom I point out to you he was a better artisan of the mother tongue, surpassing all those who wrote their poems of love or prose romances” (Purgatorio, Canto XXVI, Lines 115-119). Yet, when Dante approaches Arnaut Daniel, he doesn’t even speak about his fame. Rather than those souls found in Inferno who want Dante to bring them earthly fame, these souls are quick to demonstrate humility. In fact, when Dante encounters Statius it becomes apparent that even if one’s fame on earth were to persist, it is not enough. In Canto XXI he says of himself, “ I had sufficient fame beyond; I bore the name that lasts the longest and honors most but faith was not yet mine. On earth my name is still remembered.” (Purgatorio, Canto XXI, Lines 85-91). Statius, although famous, has still had to pay his penance in Purgatory fame was not enough to save him nor will it be enough to save Dante. Yet among all this talk of humility, Dante’s desire for his own personal fame and glory is ever present and is never more transparent than in his dealings with the poets found in Limbo. Indeed, one of his main goals seems to be to prove his superiority to these poets. When Dante comes face to face with these poets he says,” And so I saw that splendid school assembled, led by the lord of song

incomparable, who like an eagle soars above the rest. Soon after they had talked a while together, they turned to me, saluting cordially; and having witnessed this, my master smiled; and even greater honor then was mine, for they invited me to join their ranks. I was the sixth among such intellects” (Inferno, Canto IV, Lines 94-102). Dante doesn’t hesitate to place himself with these renowned poets. Yet even when he meets these talented poets of old, his attitude toward them combines respect and condescension. He respects their poetic talent yet even when he meets them he is ever conscious of the fact that they will remain in hell while he continues to Paradise. Even later when Dante exalts the classical poetry of Virgil that was able to convert a soul like Statius, he can’t help but underline its limits. No matter how effective Virgil’s Latin poetry was, he will always, always, be an unsaved soul. Dante continues to take opportunities to advance his own glory as the poem progresses. Rarely modest about his own poetic gifts, he uses the power of infernal scenes to support his claim of superiority over the ancient poets. He devises a grotesquely fitting penalty for the Thieves: having stolen in life, they must constantly steal one another’s forms and constantly have their own forms stolen from them. He portrays the punishment in lucid and imaginative detail. Halfway through his description of these horrors, however, Dante declares outright that he has outdone both Ovid and Lucan in his ability to write scenes of metamorphosis and transformation: “ Let Lucan now be silent, where he sings of sad Sabellus and Nasidius, and wait to hear what flies off from my bow. Let Ovid now be silent, where he tells of Cadmus, Arethusa; if his verse has made of one a serpent, one a fountain, I do not envy him; he never did transmute two natures, face to face” (Inferno, Canto XXV, Lines 94-101). Dante touts both

his ingenuity in envisioning these monstrous transformations and his poetic skill in rendering them. In both aspects, he claims to surpass the two classical poets most renowned for their mythological inventions and vivid imagery. As Dante ascends from Inferno to Purgatorio he seems to become more conscious of his prideful desire for fame. When he enters the First Terrace, the terrace of the prideful, he immediately assumes their same bent-over posture, as if, he too, were weighed down by the heavy weight of pride. Even after he leaves the terrace, Virgil must rebuke him for being absorbed in that terrace and its punishment. By the time he reaches the terrace of the envious, however, Dante himself admits to succumbing to pride. He says, “ My eyes will be denied me here, but only briefly; the offense of envy was not committed often by their gaze. I fear much more the punishment below [pride]; my soul is anxious, in suspense; already I feel the heavy weights of the first terrace” (Purgatorio, Canto XIII, Lines 133-138). Yet, Dante does ascend from the terrace of the prideful and the P on his forehead is erased by the Angel of God as he ascends to the next terrace. Dante will not be punished in this terrace. So, although Dante himself admits that he has committed sins of pride, somehow he is not being held accountable for them. Therefore, a reconciliation between his desire for fame and its proper punishment, must be found later. It is as Purgatorio comes to a close that the reader is given the first glimpse of this reconciliation. After the assurance from Beatrice that he is one of the elect, Dante is invested with his poetic and prophetic mission, “ And thus, to profit that world which lives badly, watch the chariot steadfastly and, when you have returned beyond, transcribe what you have seen” (Purgatorio, Canto XXXII, Lines 103-106). Until now, Dante’s journey might have seemed to be directed to his

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personal salvation; now its universal, exemplary aspect becomes explicit. Beatrice has now given Dante a specific mission to help the world out of the “dark forest” of sin. This mission to save the world becomes the transcendent link between Dante’s desire for fame and its dangers. In Dante’s mind, worldly glory and the glory of God’s kingdom are intimately connected. As long as one’s glory arises from honest work, it can improve one’s lot in the afterlife. This viewpoint illustrated in Limbo is also illustrated through the example of Justinian in the second sphere in Paradiso, the sphere of Mercury. Justinian, whose greatest accomplishment was the codification of Roman Law, said of this work, “As soon as my steps shared the Church’s path, God, of His grace, inspired my high task as pleased Him.” (Paradiso, Canto VI, Lines 22-24). After he was converted to the true church, it was God who inspired him to produce the Codex. In a similar fashion, Dante would have us believe that he is the mere mouthpiece for God—a scribe inspired to create an important work to save the world from the avaricious “she-wolf.” Therefore, although Dante cannot deny his desire for fame and glory, he has done so for righteous reasons. With the popularity of *The Divine Comedy* would come the knowledge that people are reading his work and that he may be helping them out of the dark forest of sin. As Justinian said of the Sphere of Mercury, “This little planet is adorned with spirits whose acts were righteous, but who acted for the honor and the fame that they would gain: and when desires tend toward earthly ends, then, so deflected, rays of the true love mount toward the life above with lesser force. But part of our delight is measuring rewards against our merit, and we see that our rewards are neither less nor more. Thus does the Living Justice make so sweet the sentiments in us, that we are free of any turning toward

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iniquity” (Paradiso, Canto VI, Lines 112-123). Thus, Dante will ultimately be saved by God’s divine grace because of his righteous motives. Surprisingly, the idea that the desire for ‘ fame and glory’ is not entirely sinful is actually one of the first themes to appear in *The Divine Comedy*, but we, the readers, and Dante the character, are not ready we must all travel through hell in order to receive illumination. When Dante comes across the poets that reside in the “ noble castle” in Limbo, the first circle of *Inferno*, he asks why these souls reside apart. Virgil replies, “ The honor of their name, which echoes up above within your life, gains Heaven’s grace, and that advances them” (*Inferno*, Canto IV, Lines 76-78). The idea that earthly fame can affect a soul’s eternal judgment seems contradictory to Christian doctrine. Since Christ urged His disciples to shun worldly glory and focus instead on the glory of God’s kingdom, this appears to be a striking discrepancy. Unprepared at the beginning of the journey to delve into the meaning of this contradictory statement, Dante must travel through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* towards the illuminating light of *Paradiso*. As with many other themes elucidated in *The Divine Comedy*, the theme of fame and glory is not fully understandable until we enter *Paradise*. Thus, the closer we come to God and his immutable truths, the more clear Dante’s secondary themes become. So, while Dante’s preoccupation with and quest for fame seems to contradict his subsequent condemnation of it, this paradox is reconciled in the second sphere of *Paradise* when we find that fame can have a place in *paradise* if it is sought for righteous reasons.