

Dante's inferno notes

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



A huge and powerful warrior-king who virtually embodies defiance against his highest god, Capaneus is an exemplary blasphemer--with blasphemy understood as direct violence against God. Still, it is striking that Dante selects a pagan character to represent one of the few specifically religious sins punished in hell. Dante's portrayal of Capaneus in *Inferno* 14. 43-72--his large size and scornful account of Jove striking him down with thunderbolts--is based on the *Thebaid*, a late Roman epic (by Statius) treating a war waged by seven kings against the city of Thebes.

Capaneus' arrogant defiance of the gods is a running theme in the *Thebaid*, though Statius' description of the warrior's courage in the scenes leading up to his death reveals elements of Capaneus' nobility as well as his contempt for the gods. For instance, Capaneus refuses to follow his comrades in a deceitful military operation against the Theban forces under the cover of darkness, insisting instead on fighting fair and square out in the open. Nevertheless, Capaneus' boundless contempt ultimately leads to his demise when he climbs atop the walls protecting the city and directly challenges the gods: "come now, Jupiter, and strive with all your flames against me! Or are you braver at frightening timid maidens with your thunder, and razing the towers of your father-in-law Cadmus?" (*Thebaid* 10. 904-6).

Recalling the similar arrogance displayed by the Giants at Phlegra (and their subsequent defeat), the deity gathers his terrifying weapons and strikes Capaneus with a thunderbolt. His hair and helmet aflame, Capaneus feels the fatal fire burning within and falls from the walls to the ground below. He finally lies outstretched, his lifeless body as immense as that of a giant. This is the image inspiring Dante's depiction of Capaneus as a large figure

appearing in the defeated pose of the blasphemers, flat on their backs Ser Brunetto Latino = Round Three- Violence Against Nature

One of the most important figures in Dante's life and in the Divine Comedy, Brunetto Latini is featured among the sodomites in one of the central cantos of the Inferno. Although the poet imagines Brunetto in hell, Dante-character and Brunetto show great affection and respect for one another during their encounter in Inferno 15.

Brunetto (c. 1220 - 1294) was a prominent guelf who spent many years living in exile in Spain and France--where he composed his encyclopedic work, *Trésor* ("Treasure": Inf. 15. 119-20)--before returning to Florence in 1266 and assuming positions of great responsibility in the commune and region (notary, scribe, consul, prior). Such was Brunetto's reputation that chroniclers of the time praised him as the "initiator and master in refining the Florentines." While Brunetto's own writings--in terms of quality and significance--are far inferior to Dante's, he was perhaps the most influential promoter in the Middle Ages of the essential idea (derived from the Roman writer Cicero) that eloquence--in both oral and written forms--is beneficial to society only when combined with wisdom.

We understand from this episode that Brunetto played a major--if informal--part in Dante's education, most likely as a mentor through his example of using erudition and intelligence in the service of the city. Apart from the reputed frequency of sexual relations among males in this time and place, there is no independent documentation to explain Brunetto's appearance in Dante's poem among the sodomites. Brunetto was married with three--perhaps four--children. Many modern scholarly discussions of Dante's

Brunetto either posit a substitute vice for the sexual one--linguistic perversion, unnatural political affiliations, a quasi-Manichean heresy--or emphasize a symbolic form of sodomy over the literal act (e. g., rhetorical perversion, a failed theory of knowledge, a proto-humanist pursuit of immortality).

Geryon = Round Three- Violence Against Art(fraud) giant with three heads and bodies Geryon, merely described in Virgil's Aeneid as a " three-bodied shade" (he was a cruel king slain by Hercules), is one of Dante's most complex creatures. With an honest face, a colorful and intricately patterned reptilian hide, hairy paws, and a scorpion's tail, Geryon is an image of fraud (Inf. 17. 7-27)--the realm to which he transports Dante and Virgil (circles 8 and 9). Strange as he is, Geryon offers some of the best evidence of Dante's attention to realism. The poet compares Geryon's upward flight to the precise movements of a diverswimmingto the surface of the sea (Inf. 16. 130-6), and he helps us imagine Geryon's descent by noting the sensation of wind rising from below and striking the face of a traveler in flight (Inf. 17. 115-17).

By comparing Geryon to a sullen, resentful falcon (Inf. 17. 127-36), Dante also adds a touch of psychological realism to the episode: Geryon may in fact be bitter because he was tricked--when Virgil used Dante's knotted belt to lure the monster (Inf. 16. 106-23)--into helping the travelers. Dante had used this belt--he informs us long after the fact (Inf. 16. 106-8)--to try to capture the colorfully patterned leopard who impeded his ascent of the mountain in Inferno 1. 31-3. Suggestively associated with the sort of factual truth so wondrous that it appears to be false (Inf. 16. 124), Geryon is thought by

some readers to represent the poem itself or perhaps a negative double of the poem. Pier della Vigna = Round Two- Violence Against Themselves

Like Dante, Pier della Vigna (c. 1190 - 1249) was an accomplished poet--part of the " Sicilian School" of poetry, he wrote sonnets--and a victim of his own faithful service to the state. With a first-rate legal education and ample rhetorical talent, Pier rose quickly through the ranks of public service in the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily, from scribe and notary to judge and official spokesman for the imperial court of Frederick II. But his powers appear to have exceeded even these titles, as Pier claims to have had final say over Frederick's decisions (Inf. 13. 58-63).

While evidence of corruption casts some doubt on Pier's account of faithful service to the emperor, it is generally believed that he was indeed falsely accused of betraying Frederick's trust by envious colleagues and political enemies (Inf. 13. 64-9). In this way, Pier's story recalls that of Boethius, author of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, a well known book in the Middle Ages (and a favorite of Dante's) recounting the fall from power of another talented individual falsely accused of betraying his emperor. Medieval commentators relate that Frederick, believing the charges against Pier (perhaps for plotting with the pope against the emperor), had him imprisoned and blinded. Unable to accept this wretched fate, Pier brutally took his life by smashing his head against the wall (perhaps of a church) or possibly by leaping from a high window just as the emperor was passing below in the street.

Pier's name--Vigna means " vineyard"--undoubtedly made him an even more attractive candidate for Dante's suicide-trees. As an added part of the contrapasso for the suicides, the souls will not be reunited with their bodies

at the Last Judgment but will instead hang their retrieved corpses on the trees (Inf. 13. 103-8).

Minotaur

The path down to the three rings of circle 7 is covered with a mass of boulders that fell--as Virgil explains (Inf. 12. 31-45)--during the earthquake triggered by Christ's harrowing of hell. The Minotaur, a bull-man who appears on this broken slope (Inf. 12. 11-15), is most likely a guardian and symbol of the entire circle of violence. Dante does not specify whether the Minotaur has a man's head and bull's body or the other way around (sources support both possibilities), but he clearly underscores the bestial rage of the hybrid creature. At the sight of Dante and Virgil, the Minotaur bites himself, and his frenzied bucking--set off by Virgil's mention of the monster's executioner--allows the travelers to proceed unharmed.

Almost everything about the Minotaur's story--from his creation to his demise--contains some form of violence. Pasiphaë, wife of King Minos of Crete, lusted after a beautiful white bull and asked Daedalus to construct a "fake cow" (Inf. 12. 13) in which she could enter to induce the bull to mate with her; Daedalus obliged and the Minotaur was conceived. Minos wisely had Daedalus build an elaborate labyrinth to conceal and contain this monstrosity.

To punish the Athenians, who had killed his son, Minos supplied the Minotaur with an annual sacrificial offering of seven Athenian boys and seven Athenian girls. When Ariadne (the Minotaur's half-sister: Inf. 12. 20) fell in love with one of these boys (Theseus, Duke of Athens: Inf. 12. 16-18), the

two of them devised a plan to slay the Minotaur: Theseus entered the labyrinth with a sword and a ball of thread, which he unwound as he proceeded toward the center; having slain the Minotaur, Theseus was thus able to retrace his steps and escape the labyrinth Centaurs

The Centaurs--men from the waist up with lower bodies of horses--guard the first ring of circle 7, a river of blood in which the shades of murderers and bandits are immersed to varying depths. Armed with bows and arrows, thousands of Centaurs patrol the bank of the river, using their weapons to keep the souls at their allotted depth (Inf. 12. 73-5). In classical mythology, the Centaurs are perhaps best known for their uncouth, violent behavior: guests at a wedding, they attempted--their lust incited by wine--to carry off the bride and other women; a fierce battle ensued, described by Ovid in all its gory detail (Met. 12. 210-535), in which the horse-men suffered the heaviest losses. Two of the three Centaurs who approach Dante and Virgil fully earned this negative reputation.

Pholus, whom Virgil describes as "full of rage" (Inf. 12. 72), was one of the combatants at the wedding. Nessus, selected to carry Dante across the river in hell, was killed by Hercules--with a poisoned arrow--for his attempted rape of the hero's beautiful wife, Deianira, after Hercules had entrusted the Centaur to carry her across a river (Nessus avenged his own death: he gave his blood-soaked shirt to Deianira as a "love-charm," which she--not knowing the shirt was poisoned--later gave to Hercules when she doubted his love [Inf. 12. 67-9].) Chiron, the leader of the Centaurs, enjoyed a more favorable reputation as the wise tutor of both Hercules and Achilles (Inf. 12. 71).

Punishments of Each Ring

-First Ring- For violence against neighbors. Made to boil in blood, and shot by arrows if they set out higher than they are deemed worthy. Fitting because those tortured must boil in the blood they created in life by violence. Chief sinner: Alexander the Great, who was violent against many of his countrymen as a tyrant. · -Second Ring- For those violent against themselves they are turned into trees and are immobile. They are tortured and pecked at by Harpies. They will never be returned to their bodies because they didn't properly appreciate them in the first place. Chief Sinner: Pier della Vigna, who felt so ashamed by the lies of schemers, took his own life. · -Third Ring- For those violent against God. Three circles: · Blasphemers - Just on hot sand · Sodomites - Also rained upon my fire · Violent against art - also with purses around their necks Chief Sinner: Capaneus, Besieged Thebes. He is very defiant, still, and says hell shall never break him.

Allusions

· Phlegethon-Literally a "river of fire" (Aen. 6. 550-1), Phlegethon is the name Dante gives to the river of hot blood that serves as the first ring of circle 7: spillers of blood themselves, violent offenders against others are submerged in the river to a level corresponding to their guilt. Dante does not identify the river--described in detail in Inferno 12. 46-54 and 12. 100-39--until the travelers have crossed it (Dante on the back of Nessus) and passed through the forest of the suicides. Now they approach a red stream flowing out from the inner circumference of the forest across the plain of sand (Inf. 14. 76-84).

After Virgil explains the common source of all the rivers in hell, Dante still fails to realize--without further explanation--that the red stream in fact connects to the broader river of blood that he previously crossed, now identified as the Phlegethon (Inf. 14. 121-35). · Polydorus-If Dante had believed what he read in the Aeneid, Virgil would not have had to make him snap one of the branches to know that the suicide-shades and the trees are one and the same--this, at least, is what Virgil says to the wounded suicide-tree (Inf. 13. 46-51). Virgil here alludes to the episode of the "bleeding bush" from Aeneid 3. 22-68. The "bush" in this case is Polydorus, a young Trojan prince who was sent by his father (Priam, King of Troy) to the neighboring kingdom of Thrace when Troy was besieged by the Greeks.

Polydorus arrived bearing a large amount of gold, and the King of Thrace--to whose care the welfare of the young Trojan was entrusted--murdered Polydorus and took possession of his riches. Aeneas unwittingly discovers Polydorus' unburied corpse when he uproots three leafy branches to serve as cover for a sacrificial altar: the first two times, Aeneas freezes with terror when dark blood drips from the uprooted branch; the third time, a voice--rising from the ground--begs Aeneas to stop causing harm and identifies itself as Polydorus. The plant-man explains that the flurry of spears that pierced his body eventually took the form of the branches that Aeneas now plucks. The Trojans honor Polydorus with a proper burial before leaving the accursed land.

Old Man of Crete-Dante invents the story of the large statue of an old man--located in Mount Ida on the Island of Crete--for both practical and symbolic purposes (Inf. 14. 94-120). Constructed of a descending hierarchy of

materials--gold head, silver arms and chest, brass midsection, iron for the rest (except one clay foot)--the statue recalls the various ages of humankind (from the golden age to the iron age: Ovid, *Met.* 1. 89-150) in a pessimistic view of history and civilization devolving from best to worst. Dante's statue also closely recalls the statue appearing in King Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the Bible; this dream is revealed in a vision to Daniel, who informs the king that the composition of the statue signifies a declining succession of kingdoms all inferior to the eternal kingdom of God (Daniel 2: 31-45).

That the statue is off-balance--leaning more heavily on the clay foot--and facing Rome ("as if in a mirror") probably reflects Dante's conviction that society suffers from the excessive political power of the pope and the absence of a strong secular ruler. Although the statue is not itself found in hell, the tears that flow down the crack in its body (only the golden head is whole) represent all the suffering of humanity and thus become the river in hell that goes by different names according to region: Acheron, Styx, Phlegethon, Cocytus (*Inf.* 14. 112-20).

Phaethon and Icarus--As he descends aboard Geryon through the infernal atmosphere, Dante recalls the classical stories of previous aviators (*Inf.* 17. 106-14). Phaethon, attempting to confirm his genealogy as the son of Apollo, bearer of the sun, took the reins of the sun-chariot against his father's advice. Unable to control the horses, Phaethon scorched a large swath of the heavens; with the earth's fate hanging in the balance, Jove killed the boy with a thunderbolt (Ovid, *Met.* 1. 745-79; 2. 1-332).

Daedalus (see Minotaur above), to escape from the island of Crete, made wings for himself and his son by binding feathers with thread and wax.

Icarus, ignoring his father's warnings, flew too close to the sun; the wax melted and the boy crashed to the sea below (Met. 8. 203-35). So heartbroken was Daedalus that he was unable to depict Icarus' fall in his carvings upon the gates of a temple he built to honor Apollo (Aen. 6. 14-33). Experiencing flight for the first, and presumable only, time in his life--aboard a "filthy image of fraud," no less--Dante understandably identifies with these two figures whose reckless flying led to their tragic deaths.