Dante's Justly Damned:

Investigating the Justice in Dante's Damnation of Virgil, Francesca and Count Ugolino

Among the vivid and defining images of Christianity—Orthodox Catholicism in particular—the visions of fiery Hell and beatific Paradise burn themselves the deepest into a person's imagination. These images have inspired artists and authors across the centuries, and among the poems that have attempted to capture the images, Dante Alighieri's *Commedia* reigns supreme as the epic that tries to paint it all. In one hundred Cantos and three books Dante describes the journey of a pilgrim, also named Dante, through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. As the author, Dante plays God; he decides where the characters he has created will reside for eternity, whether damned to Hell or allowed to work towards and achieve Paradise.

One of the most disturbing concepts that emerges throughout the three books of *Commedia* is the similarity between the individuals on all levels. Virgil in particular seems to exemplify a nobility of endurance in Limbo, a quality of stature that is not seen in all the occupants of Purgatory or even Paradise. Some of those who live in Paradise—or who are working through Purgatory—seem angry or proud in a way that seems better suited for Hell. The differences become even less discernible when the audience recognizes that many of the sins being purged in Purgatory are the same sins souls were damned for in Hell. Dante the poet seems to have performed his duties as a judge with a very whimsical pen.

Considering that Dante was a genius and that *Commedia* was his magnum opus, it seems

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1 Neither Dante (presumably) nor I (naturally) intend our work to be actual reflections on where the historical figures who take part in the story will eventually will placed—some of the Popes as well as some of Dante's political enemies excepted on Dante's part. Those particular damnings seem less intended for a creative or educative purpose and more of a personal vendetta of the author.
unlikely that he actually did damn or redeem souls randomly. The second option is to assume that Dante intentionally made souls from the different degrees similar to each other, not because he wished to imply that the designation of souls to their glories was a random judgment, but because he wanted to show more subtle differences between the damned and redeemed than the typical stereotypes of perfect saints and vile sinners would allow. The fact that there are smaller differences discernible in the text only supports the idea that Dante designed his character's similarities with a purpose.

Francesca the adulterer and Count Ugolino the traitor and most especially Virgil the poet initially appear catastrophically misplaced in their damnation, the fact that they get to present their own stories only enhances the impression that some terrible mistake has been made. Through recognizing their counterparts in Paradise—as well as investigating further clues in the text—the justice of their damnation is revealed. In comparison to those who reside in Paradise or Purgatory, the three occupants of Hell no longer seem noble in their damnation, instead it becomes clear that it is due to their own choices and weaknesses that they are in Hell. Furthermore, Hell offers exactly what they seek.

In order for their damnation to be just, the three must have made choices. The philosophy behind the idea of “just deserts” and its intimate relationship with choice is explained by Paul G. Chevigny in his article, “From Betrayal to Violence: Dante's Inferno and the Social Construction of Crime,” where he states, “the chief source of the legitimacy of grading crimes according to 'desert' has always been the claim that the offender 'chooses' and action that leads to social harm.” He further explains that “the 'choice' is of course rooted in the Christian notion of the sinner's exercise of free will” (Chevigny 801). Therefore sin, and thereby damnation, must be rooted in choice.

As Dante's only guide through two thirds of his adventure, the audience must rely on Virgil's interpretations of events as there is no other authoritative guide until Beatrice. Virgil proves himself to be a capable guide: not only does he have the courage to take Dante through each circle of Hell, he is honored by his admirers in Purgatory—he even succeeds in climbing each terrace of Purgatory. And
yet—in poetic fulfillment of his damnation—he disappears before he can behold Paradise. Considering the fact that he is able to guide Dante through Purgatory it seems even more illogical and unfair that Virgil is condemned to Hell, simply for being born in the wrong time.

Surely the pilgrim Dante was not able to comprehend why his mentor was denied salvation, just as he pitied many other souls in Hell, he must have pitied his idol trapped hell. However, James Wetzel postulates in his essay, “A Meditation on Hell: Lessons from Dante”, that “[Dante] eventually comes to realize that any image of virtue in hell—the courage of his guide included— is bound to be fatally misleading” (Wetzel 384). In her comparison of evil forces at work in both Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy and Dante's *Commedia*, Judith Caesar makes the point that whole reason Dante even embarks on this journey is because “Dante must come to a recognition of sin before he can be redeemed” (Caesar 167). This recognition of and disillusionment with sin must occur even with his mentor through Hell and Purgatory—Virgil himself—in order for Dante to recognize the true purity of Paradise.

Of course, if Virgil does deserve his place in Hell, Virgil himself is the worst person to ask on the matter. He does get a chance to explain himself in *Inferno* and he adamantly denies having any sin at all, explaining to Dante that:

Now you should know before we go on farther,

they [those in Limbo] have not sinned. But their great worth alone

was not enough, for they did not know Baptism . . .

I myself am a member of this group.

For this defect, and for no other guilt,

we here are lost. In this alone we suffer:

cut off from hope, we live on in desire. (Dante, *Inferno* 20 IV.33-42) ²

He is emphatic enough that one might easily take him at his word (Wetzel 385) but Judith

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² The citations for Dante quotations should be read: book, page in *The Portable Dante*, Canto and line.
Caesar reminds us why the opinions of the damned—especially with regard to their own sins—cannot to be trusted, since “they no longer have the power to recognize the evil of their actions” (Caesar 169). Wetzel scoffs at Virgil's proclamation of innocence saying, “to hear him tell of it, his torment in Hell is the one truly pitiable fate there . . . he is, he imagines, part of a unique and exclusive circle of Hell's own . . . condemned for their bad luck and not for their vices” (Wetzel 384). But isn't this how each member of Hell must view their state? There is no more reason to trust Virgil's opinion of himself more than any of the other biased accounts of the other damned souls.

Virgil describes the punishment of those in limbo saying, “we are lost, afflicted only this one way: that having no hope, we live in longing” (qtd. in Wetzel 385). It appears to be a case of people caught in the eternal circle of seeking and seeking but never finding. The situation is reminiscent of C. S. Lewis' vignette in *The Great Divorce* describing the meeting of two men who had been old friends in life. The ghost, a scholar who has just ridden the bus up from Hell, tries to get the Spirit from Heaven to chat with him about the good old days when they used to “[talk] seriously” (Lewis 34); he champions “honest opinions fearlessly followed” (Lewis 36) and the idea that “to travel hopefully is better than to arrive” (Lewis 40). The Spirit gently tries to explain to the ghost that they did not actually fearlessly pursue their ideas and that *arriving* at truth is the point (Lewis 34-40). In this short encounter Lewis recognizes a possible sin of intellectual pursuits, an idea that sheds some light on Virgil's predicament.

Upon first entering Limbo, Virgil not only seeks to clear his name of all shame, he also implies that he has been unjustly damned, a mistake that would make God unjust. Wetzel argues that, “Virgil has no desire to learn the ways of God from God” (Wetzel 385). Virgil deceives himself thinking he was damned because:

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3 At this point in her article Caesar is comparing the “spiritual conditions” that belong both to the demons and damned souls of Dante's *Inferno* and the orcs, the demons and damned souls of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

4 This is a different translation of the same line quoted on the bottom of page 3.
right worship and ritual is more important to God than desire for the truth—a view that makes God out to be superstitious. Not far beneath the surface of Virgil's apology, then, is a cultured pagan's indictment of Christianity. Virgil, a seeker of truth, affect to defend himself against a God whose favor of one person over another is taken to be without reason. (Wetzel 385)

Like the ghost from *The Great Divorce*, Virgil makes his pursuits more noble than those of God, deceiving himself as well as Dante the pilgrim. But Virgil's worst sin lies in not having faith in God's ability to be a just God. Wetzel concludes, “Virgil sins not because he has come to the wrong view of God, but because his confidence in his own rectitude has left him without a God to seek . . . [he] surrounds [himself] with those who confirm [his] rectitude and excludes the rest” (Wetzel 386).

In Hell, Virgil is allowed to appear noble. He claims the dignity of having enough courage to endure his unfair damnation. Not only does he have status in Hell he goes so far as to say, when introducing Dante to the other inhabitants of Limbo, that “they honor me and do well doing so” (Dante, *Inferno* 22 4.93). If Virgil's sin is a unsatisfied desire for fame or recognition, Limbo could actually be considered his reward. Perhaps, if Virgil would only acknowledge it, he is exactly in the place he would wish to be: a place where he is allowed to desire without having to achieve, a place where he can receive honor without having to endure Purgatory. He has the privilege of being selected as a mentor to the visiting Dante, along the way he receives further recognition from souls in Purgatory, and finally, he is allowed to return to his seat of honor in the Inferno. And perhaps Virgil himself would have chosen to disappear from the story at the precise moment he did; his disappearance allows him to remain the tragic character rather than face the light of Beatrice and be forced to recognize how poorly they compare.

This is where Dante's *Paradiso* can shed some light: no being in paradise questions the judgment of God—a fact that is made abundantly clear in the First Sphere of Paradise. When Dante
the pilgrim reaches this lowest, dimmest Sphere of Paradise, he asks the inconstant nuns residing there
if they yearn to be in a higher sphere. Piccarda Donati respond to Dante's question:

Brother, the virtue of our heavenly love,

tempers our will and makes us want no more

than what we have—we thirst for this alone,

If we desired to be higher up,

then our desires would not be in accord

with His will Who assigns us to this sphere;

think carefully what love is and you'll see

such discord has no place within these rounds,

since to be here is to exist in Love. (Dante, Paradiso 406 3.70-78)

Piccarda's desire to conform her will with God's is at the very root of her redemption: despite
the fact that she has received the least glory given in Paradise she is not only content but also full of
perfect joy and love. It is interesting to note that she and Virgil are neighbors in glory, with Virgil in
the highest level of Hell and Piccarda in the lowest level of Paradise (purgatory naturally not included
as it is only a transition between Hell and Paradise). The difference between the two becomes even
more poignant when one considers that whatever their difference was, it was the difference between
Paradise and Hell for Virgil. Virgil's inability to really pursue or accept God's will resulted in his
damnation.

The adulteress Francesca da Rimini is similar to Virgil in that she too instantly tries proclaim
her innocence to gain Dante's sympathy for her plight. She presents herself as a woman compelled by
love to commit the sin that damned her. Francesca endured a loveless marriage (which she doesn't
mention) and was caught up in the passion of a reading of Lancelot and Guinevere, a story that leads to
her affair with Paolo da Rimini, her husband's brother. In his analysis of the language of Francesca's
Canto, “Dante's Francesca and the Tactics of Language,” Glauco Cambon points out that Francesca
refuses to even name her husband, allowing herself to keep her modest veneer and also show just how little she ever cared for him, additionally she avoids having to admit that she betrayed the sacred bond of matrimony (Cambon 64).

The misunderstanding that stems from the language Francesca uses is that it present her and her lover as innocent and allows them to stand as noble examples of true love in the midst of their damnation. They become the ultimate star-crossed lovers, forced in life to break social and moral boundaries to satisfy their desires and remaining ever faithful lovers in Hell, forever holding hands and weeping as they are tossed in the winds of the Second Circle. As is the pattern for the punishments and rewards met out in Commedia this punishment of the wind reveals a deeper look at Dante's view of the sin. The fact that they are blown about to be knocked against whatever they might happen to hit is a symbol for how they allowed themselves to be driven on every wind of passion. The wind actually is what signifies that they had more of a choice than Francesca lets on: it implies that in life they allowed themselves to be blown about, and now they feel what it really means to be forced into motion. In life, they lacked the sure foundation of a disciplined character that would have saved them from Hell.

The second indicator that perhaps the couple is more fit for their place in hell, just as Virgil, is the fact that they too still remain faithful to their sin. Dante the pilgrim perceives their holding hands as proof of their faithfulness to each other and is touched by it; instead it symbolizes how they cling to their sin. Despite their presence in Hell, they (like Virgil) do not recognize the evil (defined as the breaking with God's will) that they have committed. Instead, they shamelessly advertise that they are still slaves to the feelings that sent them to Hell in the first place.

In Hell they may appear to be pitifully harmless sinners, yet once again it is their counterpart in Paradise that clarifies how far from the mark their love is. For all the sympathy Dante the pilgrim might have felt for Paolo da Rimini and Francesca while he was in hell, looking back from Paradise the difference between the da Rimini's love and Divine Love could not have been more obvious. In fact,
Cambon suggests that Paolo and Francesca serve as a foil for Dante and Beatrice saying, “Dante is instructed by Francesca in love, as he will be later on by Beatrice, but how differently and how important it is to realize that the couple Paolo-Francesca is what the other couple, Dante-Beatrice, might have become had they yielded to expediency” (Cambon 8).

Immediately the pair become distasteful under the comparison of what they should have been, that is, perfectly chaste and pointing each other to Paradise. The effort Beatrice puts forth to lead Dante aright, both during life as well as in the afterlife, make Francesca's “love” appear as the selfish, pleasing seeking lust that it was, certainly it could not be farther from the strength and virtue of Beatrice. It seems unfair to compare the two, one being a member of the damned souls in hell and the other being a resident of the White Rose, but that's the point. There should be a radical difference between the souls in Hell and the souls in Paradise: tragically for Francesca it is this difference that makes her place in the *Inferno* just.

The final pitiably and memorable party of hell, Count Ugolino della Gherardesca, also gets to tell his own story. Once again it must be assumed by the audience that he leaves out or changes parts of his story to confuse the reader as to why he could possibly be in Hell. One interesting comparison to note between his story and Francesca's is the point that they both begin with the disclaimer that it pains them to relate their stories and the warning that they will likely weep the whole way through (Dante, *Inferno* 31 6.121-123; Dante, *Inferno* 180 33.4-9) If there is anything that tries to prepare the audience for the pathos that the two characters will use, it is likely that opening device. Count Ugolino's story is equal parts tragic and disturbing, reliving in graphic detail the starvation of himself and his two sons and two grandsons. For a crime of treachery, Count Ugolino is condemned to Hell to forever gnaw on the head of the man who killed him and his family, the Archbishop, Ruggieri. Both are buried together, frozen, in the ice.

He begins the story with a strange dream of a Lord and a hunting party pursuing a wolf and her
cubs, ending with their bloody demise, when he awakens it is to the sound of his sons’ sobbing for food. They then hear the sound of nails being driven into planks of wood, barring the door to their cell. For days he listens to his children begging him first not to look so sad and then second to help them, save them. One by one each of his children die of hunger, leaving Ugolino in misery. He closes his tale with the devastating lines, “Though they were dead, two days I called their names./Then hunger proved more powerful than grief” (Dante, *Inferno* 182 33.74-75).

This final line has a queer effect on how the audience feels about his damnation. Whether he meant that at this point in the story he finally died or that he gave in and consumed his own family is left enigmatic. Either way he gets to spend eternity gnawing on the face and neck of the man who killed him. Once again the question must be asked, if he could leave his place in hell, would he? Would he give up his ability to revenge himself and his family every day if he was offered heaven? Where a false love consumed and controlled Francesca, Ugolino is controlled and frozen in Hell by an intense hatred. It seems interesting to note that Ugolino was originally damned for being a traitor to country, no doubt motivated by his longing for power and wealth. What ironic justice is in the fact that he is rewarded in Hell with the opportunity to forever have power over the man who stole the power Ugolino originally turned traitor to possess. The fact that he is willing to be a part of another person’s eternal punishment, though, seems to answer the question of how well Count Ugolino would fit into Heaven. Such beastliness would be radically out of place in any of the calm, soothing realms of Paradise.

Initially there are many Saints in Paradise who could compare in sheer fury with Ugolino, especially anger towards those who abuse their legacy and position. St. Peter’s attack on the wicked Popes is particularly fiery (Dante, *Paradiso* 547 27.19-66). There are two important distinctions to be made between the two men (Peter and Ugolino). First and foremost, Peter and the other Saints leave

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5 Ugolino refers to both his own two sons and his two grandsons as sons, as will I throughout the remainder of this paper.
the vengeance to be decided by God, in contrast, Ugolino shoulders the task of avenging himself.

Secondly, there is the hypocrisy of Ugolino. Considering that the real pathos of his story arises from the tragic demise of his innocent sons, it is interesting to note that the betrayal that originally damned him happened when he allied himself with Ruggieri to drive his own grandson from Pisa. This betrayal led to the weakening of the Ghilbelline party that had been led by Ugolino and his grandson, and in turn it also led to the deaths of himself and his sons and finally his own damnation (Reynolds 221). St. Peter's anger is more than completely free of hypocrisy. Peter was the first Pope, he performed his duties with exactness (evidenced by his ascension to Paradise) and therefore is justified in his righteous indignation against those defiling his hold seat. There are no longer any real similarities between the anger of the two men.

Initially these three damned souls appear to suffer unjustly, their only weaknesses appearing not so different from those that the souls in Purgatory or Paradise seem to possess. Ugolino's fury does not seem that much worse than St. Peter's, Francesca's love not so different from Beatrice's and Virgil's wisdom far surpassing the nuns in the first Sphere. However, a different picture emerges when the pairs are actually placed side by side. Suddenly, the differences become apparent: Ugolino's anger is ugly and steeped in hypocrisy considering his own actions, Francesca's love is not so much love as lust and Virgil's wisdom is not wisdom at all since he can't even recognize the justice of God.

Any noble stature the three might gain in *Inferno* is properly whittled down by a comparison with the great men and women residing in higher glories. While the similarities might feel eerily similar during an initial read through, actually placing the characters side by side clarifies that Dante did not make any rash, thoughtless decisions when deciding which characters were put where, instead he uses the similar characteristics to allow for subtler insights on the nature of sin and damnation.

**Works Cited**

Caesar, Judith. "Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings' and Dante's 'Inferno.'" *Explicator* 64.3 (2006):

