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Dante's Francesca and Paolo: "She Loves You, Yeah, Yeah, Yeah"

In Canto V of *The Inferno*, Dante offers what seems to be a sympathetic portrait of two medieval lovers caught and condemned after re-enacting a passionate scene from Arthurian Romance. A modern reader will probably find the story of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta moving, especially when the narrator himself swoons with pity at the cantos end. It's true that in Dante's ethical scheme, the sin of Paolo and Francesca is not among the worst: the two lovers are guilty of "incontinence" rather than bestial intemperance, and the elegant, literary way in which they sin only increases our desire to excuse the sin itself. Even so, we should remember that in *The Inferno*, sinners experience God's Love as perpetual Justice. Our task as readers, Dante would surely say, is to align our will with God's plan, not to lament the sinners' fate. A thorough examination of two key sections in Canto V—namely, Francesca's conversations with the narrator—will show that the Canto distances us from the narrator's empathetic reaction, asking us to move beyond our own pity and towards proper reflection on the misreading that threatens to lead us into violation of the commands leveled by Dante's god.

Early on, Canto V tempts us to pity Francesca and Paolo. As Duane Bogus points out in "Dante's Women in *The Divine Comedy*" (2006), the list of lost souls that Virgil offers to satisfy the narrator's curiosity from lines 52-68 evokes a literary tradition that Dante must have known well (37). Semiramis of Assyria, Cleopatra, Helen of Sparta, Paris of Troy, and Tristan of Romance fame are just a few among the countless lovers condemned to eternal buffeting by what

Virgil calls “the hellish hurricane, which never rests, / [and] drives on the spirits with its violence” (30-31). The narrator knows these figures and their stories well; such stories are the lifeblood of epic and romance. Not even Virgil’s stern explanation of Semíramis’ conduct and sentence—”Her vice of lust became so customary that she made license licit in her laws” (56)—is enough to prevent the narrator from being seized by pity for the whole group as if from a force outside himself: “No sooner had I heard my teacher name / the ancient ladies and the knights, than pity / seized me, and I was like a man astray” (70-72). When Paolo and Francesca are borne into view, the narrator can’t hold back from speaking with “those two who go together there / and seem so lightly carried by the wind” (73-74).

The initial conversation between the narrator and Francesca (who speaks for Paolo) consists in a finely told summary on her part and a response of “sorrow and [. . .] pity” (117) on the narrator’s. As Francesca explains her downfall,

Love, that can quickly seize the gentle heart,
took hold of him because of the fair body
taken from me—how that was done still wounds me.

Love, that releases no beloved from loving,
took hold of me so strongly through his beauty
that, as you see, it has not left me yet.

Love led the two of us unto one death. (100-06)

This explanation is moving, but it contains hints about why the narrator’s response is too accepting, too sympathetic. First, Francesca speaks of love in a manner more pagan than Christian—she tells us that love can “seize” the heart, much as the Greeks and Romans might say that Eros or Cupid has struck someone with his arrow, and implies that she and Paolo were

powerless to free themselves from love's grasp. Francesca argues that Paolo's attractive form struck her eyes with so much force that she could not have behaved otherwise than she did, with tragic result. The narrator, therefore, responds to an essentially pagan erotic and poetic tradition, one to which he feels strong ties thanks to his own poetic sensibilities and aspirations.

The narrator's strong interest in the psychological process by which Francesca and Paolo strayed from God's will leads to one final encounter. In that encounter, Francesca describes the process in a way that is both moving and yet austere, leaving no doubt that Canto V's main goal is to drive us through and beyond mere pity and towards an acceptance of the moral law that governs Dante's universe. Francesca explains that one day she and Paolo were reading about Sir Lancelot, and almost managed to get through the romantic story without going astray, when a brief moment too close to their own situation proved their undoing:

And time and time again that reading led
our eyes to meet, and made our faces pale,
and yet one point alone defeated us.

When we had read how the desired smile
was kissed by one who was so true a lover,
this one, who never shall be parted from me,
while all his body trembled, kissed my mouth.

A Gallehault indeed, that book and he
who wrote it, too; that day we read no more. (130-38)

Francesca and her brother-in-law Paolo, at the mercy of their passions, repeat the scene from Arthurian romance, identifying themselves with the adulterous Lancelot. The moment is perhaps the most famous one in which, to borrow a line from Oscar Wilde, "Life imitates art,"

and by their imitation, Paolo and Francesca condemn themselves to an eternity of incontinent repetition. They will be buffeted about forever by forces over which, at last, they truly have no control. Dante's lesson is clear: books have power to lead us astray, and we must read the stories in them with a larger frame in mind—our ultimate place in god's divine and moral hierarchy. As the sparseness of Francesca's narration of sin reminds us, that lesson applies as much to readers of Dante's *Divine Comedy* as it does to medieval readers of Arthurian romance: it will not do to dwell at length in Dante's dramatization of his narrator's pity for the souls condemned in love. The passions are to be kept in check, and when they flow, readers are at least as responsible for the direction those passions take as the narrator is to guide them along the right path.

[Meta-note: place works cited list at beginning of next page, same document. See below >]

Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1980.

Bogus, Duane F. "Dante's Women in *The Divine Comedy*." *The Dantean and Medievalist Review* 44 (2006): 29-57. [Meta-note: page numbers refer readers to the entire article.]

The following are only basic points: for further details and illustration, see [DEDUCTIVE ESSAYS](#) and, on grammar and style, my [GRAMMAR GUIDE](#), especially the sections on *Quotation Problems* and *MLA Guidelines Problems*.

SUBSTANTIVE THINGS TO NOTE ABOUT THE ABOVE PAPER

1) The thesis does more than repeat the plot of the canto I'm interested in; my thesis paragraph begins with a general but *relevant* set of observations and accurate naming of author and work. Then it narrows down to a small number of sentences that tell readers exactly what parts of the fifth canto I will examine, and, briefly, what the analytic point of examining them will be. You know what I am going to do and why – this is my "contract" with the reader.

2) The analysis carries out the tasks I promised to perform—I examine the parts of Canto V that I said I would, and my strategic retelling of the canto's plot provides a sense of structural and thematic coherence for my quotations. If I simply dropped in my quotations in isolation from the Canto's story and aims as a whole, readers wouldn't understand why I was using them.

3) Each sentence should flow from and be followed by one that is clearly and logically, but not ostentatiously, connected to it. The same should hold for the transitions from one paragraph to the next. The conclusion should do more than simply repeat the thesis – it should reflect upon and drive home the thesis at the same time.

4) Notice that I use the active voice ("the narrator says," not "*it is said* by the narrator") unless there is a logical reason not to do so. Notice also that I employ the present tense to tell the story, only departing from the present when I need to refer to an event that occurred *before* the part that occurs in the present. I have tried to avoid overusing adjectives and adverbs – the advice someone offered Hemingway ("Ernie, write without adjectives") is *excellent* advice. Finally, you won't find vague references to "people in general" or to time frames such as "throughout history"; that's because I am examining a specific part of a specific poem written at a specific time. It is also best to use "I" instead of heavy, science-paper stock phrases like, "it will be demonstrated that," etc. You aren't writing an impersonal, impartial science paper.

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GRAMMAR / STYLE MATTERS TO NOTE ABOUT THE ABOVE PAPER

1. One-inch margins on all sides; the visible border is only included in the sample document for illustrative purposes. Titles of long works like *The Inferno* or *Macbeth* are italicized; short poems, article titles, etc. take “.” Manuscript, including quotations, is double-spaced, and is *not* justified at the right but instead is left ragged, i.e. “left-aligned.” Proofread and spellcheck even your rough drafts, if you want me to go over them. Hint: many small infelicities will go away if you read your draft aloud. If your paper doesn’t sound good as “cleaned-up” spoken English, it won’t *read* well, either.
2. *Long quotations (more than four lines) are indented one inch from the left margin.* Shorter verse quotations are included in the paragraph body and separated by forward-slash marks: “those two who go together there / and seem so lightly carried by the wind” (73-74). Notice also how in this example the period is placed *outside* the parentheses containing page numbers. When there aren’t any parentheses following the quoted material, commas and periods go inside the “”: “quick brown fox,” and “quick brown fox.” Semicolons and most other punctuation would go outside: “Quick brown fox”; she said this forcefully.
3. *Quotations must be introduced smoothly and grammatically,* surrounded with plot-context and with reference to the ideas or themes one means to draw from them. Usually, a colon introduces long, indented quotations, while either a comma or a colon, depending on the sentence’s flow, is the right way to connect your introductory words with the quotation. A comma splice or a run-on sentence is just as bad when it stems from bad integration of quotations as when it appears in a quotationless sentence.
4. A *works cited* page must always be included, even if you cite only the primary text being analyzed. Don’t create a separate file for it; just place it at the top of the page following the last regular page in your essay.

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