

Chaucer's Inferno: Dantean Burlesques in *The Canterbury Tales* _____

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After telling the story of Count Ugolino, the unfortunate lord who, along with his young sons, was locked in a tower to starve to death, Chaucer's monk cites his sources. For those who would like to know more about Ugolino, the monk has a recommendation:

Whoso wol here it in a lenger wise,
Redeth the grete poete of Ytaille
That highte Dant, for he kan al devyse
Fro point to point, nat o word wol he faille.
(VII.2459-62)

Those who wish more, and on a nobler scale,
Should turn and read the great Italian poet
Dante by name; they will not find him fail
In any point or syllable, I know it.
(203)¹

The monk is speaking for Chaucer himself, who knew Dante's *Commedia* well enough to appropriate it here and elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales*. The Monk's Tale, for example, draws quite explicitly from Canto XXXIII of the *Inferno*, while the prologues to both The Prioress's Tale and The Second Nun's Tale are adaptations of a prayer in the *Paradiso* (Fisher 242, 311). While these may be two of the more obvious of Chaucer's adaptations of Dante, the English poet is indebted to his Italian counterpart in several other and more subtle respects. Like Dante, Chaucer composed in the vernacular rather than in Latin, organized his work by means of the frame story of a guided pilgrimage, and included himself as a character in the journey that he describes. Yet Chaucer gives each of these elements a carnivalesque turn, so that the serious matter of Dante's *Commedia* becomes, in *The Canterbury Tales*, the stuff of comedy. In particular, the two poets' contrasting depictions of Satan illustrate the difference between their solemn and comic sensibilities, and may also write large two modes of medieval thought and imagination.

As a courtier, a bureaucrat, and a diplomat, Chaucer knew several European languages and bodies of literature. He spoke the English of the street and the French of the court, read and wrote Latin, which was the language of record keeping and the Church, and read Italian. He traveled to France as a young man and to Italy in middle age, and therefore would have been exposed

to European vernacular verse. In his earlier work he was heavily influenced by French literature; the *Romaunt of the Rose* is the best example of Chaucer recasting a French work into English. By the 1370s, however, Chaucer's primary influences seem to have been the Italian poets and writers. He began to compose *The Canterbury Tales* under the sway of Boccaccio and Dante, close contemporaries who were creating a new vernacular literature in Italy. Like these two, Chaucer eschewed Latin in favor of composing verse in the language he actually spoke. Much as Boccaccio and Dante would establish the dialect of Tuscany as the standard Italian language, so Chaucer would establish the London dialect as the standard for written English. The Italian poets also served as a font of stories, myths, and characters on which Chaucer drew. The Knight's Tale, for example, is an adaptation of Boccaccio's *Il Teseida* (Fisher 8).

As Boccaccio had in *The Decameron*, Chaucer used a frame story to allow for many speakers to trade tales in a range of voices, genres, and forms. The frame story of *The Decameron*, however, is a static one in which a group of young aristocrats trade tales after they have fled from a plague-ridden Florence to a country villa. In choosing the motif of the pilgrimage, and in making himself one of the pilgrims, Chaucer echoes the overall framework not of Boccaccio's *Decameron* but of Dante's *Commedia*. Dante's work begins, of course, with the narrator discovering that he is lost in a dark wood:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
chè la dirrita via era smarrita.

(I.1-3)

Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in some dark woods
for I had wandered off from the straight path.²

The shade of the poet Virgil comes to Dante's aid, offering to lead him through Hell so that he may eventually ascend the Mount of Purgatory to Paradise. Virgil is a wholly dependable guide; commissioned by the angelic Beatrice, he has only Dante's best interests in mind. Moreover, as the author of the *Aeneid*, which Dante considered the greatest poem of antiquity, Virgil is a uniquely appropriate guide for a poet. Dante says,

Tu sé lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore;
tu sé solo colui da cu' io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore.

(I.87-89)