

## Inferno: The Simoniacs

Note: Charles T. Davis quotes from a different translation of *Inferno*, so the spellings of names, quotations and line references are different from the Ciardi translation.

### Canto XIX : Simoniacs

**Literal/Historical:** “The theme of seduction persists [from Canto XVIII] in Canto SIS, where a greater and more abstract whore is invoked, and so does the tone of mockery, this time in a more mordant key. The canto begins (1-21) with an apostrophe from Dante the poet denouncing simony, and exalting the divine art for creating the hideous hellscape of livid rock full of round, fiery openings that Dante the pilgrim now beholds. It ends (88-133) with a sermon from the pilgrim about the wickedness of the contemporary papacy and warm approval for his pupil from Virgil, who then picks him up and carries him toward the next valley. In between the canto recounts the punishment by fire of the simoniacs and the conversation the pilgrim has with one of them, Pope Nicholas III. This pontiff, upside down in his hole, mistakes Dante for Pope Boniface VIII and condemns himself, Boniface, and their successor Clement V for having deceived and dishonored the ‘lovely Lady’ (57), the Church. Such self-accusation wins no sympathy from the pilgrim, who rapidly loses all his shyness and, even at this early stage in his journey, assumes his full role as reformer-prophet....At its end the pilgrim denounces the wicked popes....At the conclusion of his tirade the pilgrim also condemns the Donation of Constantine, the alleged gift of the western part of the empire that the Middle Ages believed he made to Sylvester I in gratitude for having been cured of leprosy by baptism. Dante says the donation was the mother of later ecclesiastical evil” (Davis 262-263).

“The name [simony] comes from that of Simon Magus, the magician of Samaria who, according to Acts 8:9-20, tried to buy from the apostles Peter and John their gift of imparting the Holy Spirit to the faithful and was in consequence cursed by Peter. By Dante’s time the sin of simony was often interpreted broadly to include any worldly and selfish use of ecclesiastical authority. Dante shared this view, and simony aroused in him not only anger but the deepest contempt, a contempt he expressed in the imagery as well as in the words of Canto XIX. In the account in Acts, Simon Magus is also scorned by Simon Peter and cursed for his temerity (Davis 264).

**Political (which in this canto blends with the spiritual analysis):** When Dante tells Pope Nicholas III “that he is not Boniface, Nicholas answers with an especially violent kick. He [then] describes himself as the beat (a play on the name of his family Orsini) who was so eager to advance the little bears...that ‘I/pursued wealth above while here I purse myself.’ Boniface, who died in 1303, will not have to occupy his position as long as Nicholas, already dead in 1280; soon another even worse pastor will come: Clement V, who died in 1314. Nicholas says that the king of France (Philip IV) will be as ‘soft’ to Clement as the king Antiochus IV was to the high priest Jason, who secured his office by promising to pay the king 440 talents. Clement was supposed to have promised Philip future payments for helping him attain the papal throne. The adjective *molle* suggests the fornication of the harlot with the kings in Apocalypse 17, and the pilgrim seems to allude to the image for his own tirade against the popes” (Davis 265-6).

In some detail, Davis discusses the image of the whore, “The great harlot...from Apocalypse 17....She is the new Babylon, Rome, who has fornicated with the kings of

the earth...[T]he gloss [to Apocalypse 17:9-18] says that the woman is the great city, that the heads are seven mountains and seven kings, that the horns are ten kings, and that the waters are the peoples of the earth. Obviously one meaning of the heads is the seven hills of Rome. Dante eliminates the beast and gives the seven heads to the woman, thereby identifying her firmly with Rome, the papal as well as the imperial city: 'She who was born with seven heads and had/the power and support of the ten horns,/ as long as virtue was her husband's pleasure'(109-111)" (Davis 269). "The poet believed that the cause of [the harlot's] degradation was papal cunning taking advantage of imperial folly" as in the example of Constantine's donation mentioned in the literal/historical section. "The combination of imperial fecklessness and papal cupidity permitted the pope to ...poison the Church and ruin the world" (Davis 272).

**Moral/Psychological:** "Implicit in [the description] of the simoniacs' grotesquely appropriate punishment, [Dante's sarcasm] becomes explicit "in his contempt for simony (Davis 263). "Nowhere in the poem is he more personally involved. Nowhere does he seem to regard his message as more important to his purpose, describe by the author of the letter to Cangrande (probably Dante) as the intention 'to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and bring them to the state of happiness.' For Dante the main cause of this state of misery was the prevalence of cupidity, of which he believed simony was by far the most perverted and virulent result, since it produced a clergy that poisoned not only the clerical church but also the whole world" (Davis 263).

"Medieval moral theologians regarded simony as a particularly disgusting form of cupidity, since it perverted the Holy Spirit's gift of sacred orders by buying, selling, and otherwise befouling them in a selfish struggle for power and gain" (Davis 264).

**Spiritual:** "...[T]he predicament of the simoniacs is an image of the way in which they have betrayed the heavenly purpose of their office. Planted upside down in the hole of the rock as if still seeking only earthly things (the rock itself, according to Scott, is a parody of that solid foundation on which Christ told the other Simon he would build his church), they frantically kick their feet, which are licked by flames that issue from those holes. (Do these flames, as some of the early commentators suggest, represent cupidinous desire, in contrast to the warmth of charity by which these feet should have been moved to do good works? Or do the flames parody, as Kenelm Foster says, the tongues of fire that accompanied the first imposition of holy orders at Pentecost? or both?) The fact that the fire is playing over their soles as if over an oily surface is perhaps a reminder of the holy oil applied to the head in ordination" (Davis 264).

"The pilgrim timidly asks Virgil about one [Pope Nicholas III] who kicks more than the others, and whose feet are sucked at by a redder flame.... The fact that the fire is particularly red in this hole, which we learn is reserved for simoniac popes, may be intended not only to show the greater severity of Nicholas's punishment, but also, Gmelin suggests, as a sarcastic reference to the fact that the Roman pontiff wore red boots...." (Davis 264-5). "The poet ... describes the pilgrim as being in a position similar to that of a friar confessing the 'foul assassin' already with his head in the hole (and about to suffer the judicial punishment called 'planting'); before the hole is filled and he is buried alive upside down, he calls the friar back again in order to delay death. Dante the layman

stands in the place of the friar and Pope Nicholas in the place of the assassin. The simoniac is comparable to an assassin, observes Francesco da Buti ingeniously: the assassin sells the bond of natural love for money, and the simoniac sells likewise the bond of grace or divine love” (Davis 265).

#### Works Cited

- Alighieri, Dante. *The Inferno*. Trans. John Ciardi. New York: Mentor/Penguin, 1982.
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