

## **Inferno: Notes on Sowers of Discord**

Note: Thomas Peterson quotes from a different translation of Inferno, so the spellings of names, quotations and line references are different from the Ciardi translation.

### **Canto XXVIII      Circle 8, Bolgia 9**

“The main theme of Canto XXVII is that of secular and spiritual schism. Those who foment discord within justly unified religious, political, or family groups, ‘the sowers of dissension and scandal’ (l.35-36), are punished by the splitting of their bodies. The canto is widely known as that of Bertran de Born, the twelfth-century Provençal troubadour praised in [Dante’s] *De vulgari eloquentia* as the exemplary poet of arms and in the *Convivio* for his liberality. The most degraded example of a hideous form of fraud, Bertran, who glorified war as the justly heroic means by which man guarantees his survival and health (*salus*), has been decapitated and carries his head like a lantern, the eyes now sources rather than receivers of light. The canto closes with Bertran’s pronouncement of the principle commonly accepted as the central juridical principle of the *Inferno*:

‘And thus, in me  
one sees the law of counter-penalty.’

The structure of the canto is fairly straightforward: a lengthy prologue...and then encounters with five ‘sowers of dissension and scandal.’ Each of them is mutilated in a different manner, though each is forced to walk a circular path and be riven anew by the sword of a devil upon completion of the circuit” (Peterson 368-89). “The circular route of the schismatics, who heal only to be split again, is a wheel of fortune from which all fortune has been removed” (Peterson 375).

### **Sowers of Religious Discord      Mahomet, Ali (his son-in-law), Fra Dolcino**

**Literal/Historical** seems dominant in this canto, in that Mahomet is literally cut in half vertically, in a disgracefully grotesque symbolic retribution. Dante sees Mahomet as responsible for the schism between Christianity and Islam. His own misunderstanding of Islam shows all too clearly here, perhaps because of the last Crusade having been fought so recently. Dante includes Ali, who may be seen as less responsible for the schism because he is not cut as deeply as Mahomet.

Mahomet sends a warning to Fra Dolcino, the Friar who started a community of goods and women, and who starved out and then burned at the stake as a heretic. Several of the Sowers of Discord send warnings to others; do they do this to create (sow) discord? Do they want influence or power? Do they seek to help or do they regret their errors? This last possibility seems unlikely, in that these sinners, like others in hell, do not learn from their errors or their punishment, which makes the first two options more likely.

Peterson says that the dead envy the living. “The canto addresses the theme of the desire of the dead to communicate with the living and connects ...to the figure of Guido da Montefeltro. Whereas Guido, a former ‘man of arms’ who became a fraudulent counselor, dreaded that others might know of his fate..., two of this canto’s denizens, Mohammed and Pier da Medicina, wish to communicate on matters of arms to those in the world above. There is obvious envy in these vain communiqués, as there was in

Guido's speech. The presence of Purgatory of Guido's son, Bonconte, himself a genuine man of arms, is generally recognized as an indication of the indifference of divine justice to questions of family relations. That dialectic, while absent in the impersonal and polemical canto, emerges at the opening of Canto XXIX when Dante sees his father's cousin" (Peterson 375).

**Spiritual:** Dante seems to expect spiritual unity, to believe that religious discord is the cause of the existence of different (non-Catholic) religions. To Dante, everyone who isn't a faithful Catholic will be sent to hell.

### **Sowers of Political Discord                      Pier da Medicina, Curio, Mosca dei Lamberti**

Pier da Medicina warns Guido and Angiolello that they will be "thrown from their ships into the sea/and drown in the raging tides near La Cattolica/ to satisfy a tyrant's treachery" (Dante, XXVIII: 79-81). Is the location (La Cattolica ) significant? He and the other two seem to want to be remembered, like many of the sinners Dante meets in hell. Also, like the Sowers of Religious Discord, de Medicina's warning may not be generously given; rather, it may show off his power or insight, or show his desire to make trouble (create political discord).

**Political:** Dante feels that the political body (city or country) is a metaphor for the individual human body. Political treachery is a betrayal of the potential unity and peace of the ideal city he imagines to be possible. As a young man, Dante felt that Florence was the ideal city. One wonders whether there is political discord in the city of Dis, the infernal city.

**Moral:** Pier da Medicina warns about fraud, the lying and luring people into a situation where they are supposed to be negotiating for peace, and then killing them. Peterson comments that "The force of metaphor to teach ethics is at the center of this canto's message about commutative justice, which concerns a penalty equally weighted to the crime (as in the biblical injunction, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'), and not distributive justice, which also involves 'reparation' and the extra weighting of the judgement in consideration of an individual's greater or less importance in the society" (Peterson 375-76)). "The sins of lower hell are committed by illustrious persons; yet they are banal to the point of being disgusting. Lest the living be deceived by the eloquence of the fraudulent (Pier da Medicina, for example), Dante reduces their words to crude material, and their material remains to an anatomy lesson. Their consciousness is revealed in their language, which ranges from the executive (Mohammed) to the oratorical (pier) to the almost remorseful (Bertrand). The sinners persist in their delusion of nobility. They are at once self-naming exemplars and self-damning judges" (Peterson 376).

### **Sowers of Discord among Kinsmen                      Bertrand de Born**

**Literal/Historical:** Counsellor Young King Henry to overthrow his father, Henry II, so his head is severed from his body, in what even he sees as just retribution, saying "and since I parted those who should be one/in duty and in love, I bear my brain/ divided from its source within this trunk/ and walk here where my evil turns to pain/ an eye for an eye for all eternity: thus is the law of Hell observed in me" (Dante XXVIII: 138-143).

**Moral/Psychological:** By undermining the sacred bonds of kinship, especially the father-son relationship, Bertrand de Born undermines society. This is especially true in the case of a royal family, such as Henry II and his son.

#### Works Cited

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