“Circle 6, Canto 10”
Guy P. Raffa

Heresy

Dante opts for the most generic conception of heresy--the denial of the soul's immortality (Inf. 10.15)--perhaps in deference to spiritual and philosophical positions of specific characters he wishes to feature here, or perhaps for the opportunity to present an especially effective form of contrapasso: heretical souls eternally tormented in fiery tombs. More commonly, heresy in the Middle Ages was a product of acrimonious disputes over Christian doctrine, in particular the theologically correct ways of understanding the Trinity and Christ. Crusades were waged against "heretical sects," and individuals accused of other crimes or sins--e.g., witchcraft, usury, sodomy--were frequently labeled heretics as well.

Heresy, according to a theological argument based on the dividing of Jesus' tunic by Roman soldiers (Matthew 27:35), was traditionally viewed as an act of division, a symbolic laceration in the community of "true" believers. This may help explain why divisive, partisan politics is such a prominent theme in Dante's encounter with Farinata.

Set in a northern Italian monastery, Umberto Eco's best-selling novel The Name of the Rose (1980)--made into a film (1986) starring Sean Connery, Christian Slater, and F. Murray Abraham--provides a learned and entertaining portrayal of heretics and their persecutors only a few decades after the time of Dante's poem.

Farinata

Farinata cuts an imposing figure--rising out of his burning tomb "from the waist up" and seeming to "have great contempt for hell"--when Dante turns to address him in the circle of the heretics (Inf. 10.31-6). His very first question to Dante--"Who were your ancestors?" (10.42)--reveals the tight relationship between family and politics in thirteenth-century Italy. As a Florentine leader of the ghibellines, Farinata was an enemy to the party of Dante's ancestors, the guelphs (before the ghibellines were defeated and the guelphs splintered into white and black factions). Although Farinata's ghibellines twice defeated the guelphs (in 1248 and 1260), the guelphs both times succeeded in returning to power--unlike the ghibellines following their defeat in 1266. Farinata's family (the Uberti) was explicitly excluded from later amnesties (he had died in 1264), and in 1283 he and his wife (both
posthumously charged with heresy) were excommunicated. Their bodies were disinterred and burned, and the possessions of their heirs confiscated.

These politically motivated wars and vendettas, in which victors banished their adversaries, literally divided Florence's populace. While there is certainly no love lost between Dante and Farinata, there is a measure of respect. Farinata, called magnanimo--"great-hearted"--by the narrator (10.73), put Florence above politics when he stood up to his victorious colleagues and argued against destroying the city completely (10.91-3). What does it say about Dante, himself an exiled victim of partisan politics, to present Farinata as both a political enemy and a defender of Florence?

**Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti**

Whereas Farinata cuts an imposing figure, extending out of his tomb and towering above his interlocutor, Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti lifts only his head above the edge of the same tomb. A member of a rich and powerful guelf family, Cavalcante--like Dante's ancestors--was an enemy to Farinata and the ghibellines. To help bridge the hostile guelf-ghibelline divide, Cavalcante married his son (see Guido Cavalcanti below) to Farinata's daughter (Beatrice degli Uberti). While Farinata's primary concern is politics, Cavalcante is obsessed with the fate of his son (Inf. 10.58-72), whom Dante in another work calls his best friend. Cavalcante's alleged heresy may be more a matter of guilt by association with his son's world-view than a reflection of his own spiritual beliefs.

**Guido Cavalcanti**

Dante's best friend, Guido Cavalcanti--a few years older than Dante--was an aristocratic white guelf and an erudite, accomplished poet in his own right. Guido's best known poem, *Donna me prega* ("A lady asks me"), is a stylistically sophisticated example of his philosophical view of love as a dark force that leads one to misery and often to death. When Dante says that Guido perhaps "held in disdain" someone connected with his friend's journey (Inf. 10.63), he may simply mean that Guido did not appreciate Beatrice's spiritual importance (she died in 1290). Guido's father, in any case, takes this past tense to mean that his son is already dead, while Dante-character in fact knows that Guido is still alive at the time of the journey (April 1300). But he will not live much longer. Worse still, Dante himself is partly--if indirectly--responsible for the death of his best friend in August 1300. As one of the priors of Florence (June 15 - August 15, 1300), Dante joined in a
decision to punish both parties--white and black guelphs--for recent fighting by banishing ring-leaders, one of whom was Guido Cavalcanti, of the two sides. Tragically, Guido fell ill--he likely contracted malaria--due to the bad climate of the region to which he was sent, and he died later that summer shortly after his return to Florence.

Epicurus

Epicurus was a Greek philosopher (341-270 B.C.E) who espoused the doctrine that pleasure--defined in terms of serenity, the absence of pain and passion--is the highest human good. By identifying the heretics as followers of Epicurus (Inf. 10.13-14), Dante condemns the Epicurean view that the soul--like the body--is mortal.

Frederick II

Apart from Farinata's mention of him here in the circle of heresy (Inf. 10.119), the emperor Frederick II was important to Dante as the last in the line of reigning Holy Roman Emperors. Raised in Palermo, in the Kingdom of Sicily, Frederick was crowned emperor in Rome in 1220. A central figure in the conflicting claims of the empire and the papacy, he was twice excommunicated--in 1227 and 1245--before his death in 1250. In placing Frederick among the heretics, Dante is likely following the accusations of the emperor's enemies. Elsewhere Dante praises Frederick--along with his son Manfred--as a paragon of nobility and integrity (De vulgari eloquentia 1.12.4). Frederick's court at Palermo was known as an intellectual and cultural capital, with fruitful interactions among talented individuals--philosophers, artists, musicians, scientists, and poets--from Latin, Arabic, Italian, Northern European, and Greek traditions. Frederick's court nourished the first major movement in Italian vernacular poetry; this so-called "Sicilian School" of poetry (in which the sonnet was first developed) contributed greatly to the establishment of the Italian literary tradition that influenced the young Dante.

Guelphs and Ghibellines

While the Florentine political parties of Dante's day were the white and black guelphs--the blacks more favorable to interests of the old noble class, the whites more aligned with the rising merchant class--Florence before Dante's childhood participated in the more general political struggle between guelphs and ghibellines on the Italian peninsular and in other parts of Europe.
Derived from two warring royal houses in Germany (Waiblingen and Welf), the sides came to be distinguished by their adherence to the claims of the emperor (ghibellines) or the pope (guelph). The guelpfh cause finally triumphed with the death of Manfred--son of Emperor Frederick II--at the battle of Benevento (in southern Italy) in 1266. Until this time, Florence alternated between guelph and ghibelline rule, beginning--according to medieval chronicles--with a violent conflict between two prominent families and their allies in 1215: young Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti, the story goes, was murdered by the Amidei clan on Easter Sunday after he broke his promise to marry an Amidei (as part of a peace arrangement) and married one of the Donati instead. This event came to be seen as the origin of the factional violence that would plague Florence for the next century and beyond.

Hyperopia

We learn from Farinata in Inferno 10 that the heretics--and apparently all the damned--possess the supernatural ability to "see" future events (Inf. 10.94-108). However, like those who suffer from hyperopia ("far-sightedness"), their visual acuity decreases as events come closer to the present. Because there will no longer be a future when the world ends (see Last Judgment), souls of the damned will have no external awareness to distract them from their eternal suffering.