Dante, Virgil, Statius, and Christianity: Biblical Allusion and Clueless Pagans in Inferno IV

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The nature of Dante’s relationship to the virtuous pagans, most especially Virgil, has long been a point of contention among Dante scholars. Dante himself seemingly invites confusion and debate over the relationship by creating the “nobile castello” of Inferno IV (“noble castle”; Inferno 4. 106) as a place of honor for the heroes, thinkers, and poets of the ancient world – a place of honor that is nonetheless located in hell, where, in Virgil’s words, “sanza speme vivemo in di sio” (“without hope we live in desire”; Inferno 4. 42).¹ Most Dante scholars would probably agree that at the heart of Dante’s ambivalent relationship to classical antiquity is his sense of a fundamental difference between paganism and Christianity. I would like to explore here the specific nature of that difference by putting the “nobile castello” of Inferno IV in the context of several passages about light and sin from the First Epistle of John, to which Dante seems to be alluding in his portrayal of Limbo. I would also like to place Dante’s portrayal of Virgil in the context of the Thebaid of Statius, noting differences between Virgil and Statius as poets in terms of their understanding of human nature and virtue – differences that might have guided Dante’s portrayal of them as pagan and Christian. By looking at Inferno IV together with 1 John and the Thebaid, I hope to show that, for Dante, the difference between Christianity and paganism is not simply a matter of theological accuracy or inaccuracy but, much more importantly, of philosophical honesty and moral courage in the candid recognition of fundamental truths about human nature.
Dante’s criticism of Virgil’s pagan limitations has become an increasingly common theme among Dante scholars. Teodolinda Barolini, for example, sees Dante as “furnishing – with respect to Vergil’s persona – simultaneous accolade and displacement, and – with respect to his text – simultaneous citation and revision” (250). Even more critical, Michael Putnam observes, “Dante’s Virgil is finally a figure of hopelessness, incapable of transcending the limitations of reason and therefore forced to return . . . to Limbo, whence his journey began” (97). While some current scholars emphasize Dante’s admiration for Virgil (e.g., Lansing and Raffa), see Virgil as having an “aura of pathos surrounding his figure in the Comedy” (Kleinhenz), and, in some cases, even speculate on the possibility of Virgil’s future salvation (e.g., Allan, Iliescu, and King), most current views of Dante’s Virgil (e.g., Ball, Biow, Brownlee, Gerhard, Grlic, Hawkins, Hollander, Howard, Iannucci, Picone, Schnapp, and Wetherbee) share little in common with Kenelm Foster’s observation in the 1970s that “whatever blame one might eventually have to attach to Virgil on theological grounds . . . [t]he only sin that we as readers are permitted to ascribe to Virgil is the ‘rebellion’ which he himself confesses on his first meeting with Dante in the Dark Wood. But this sin, so far as the reader can see, entails no flaw in his humanity. . . . In short, the moral nobility of Virgil as a visible persona in the Poem is intact” (247).

Kenelm Foster’s assessment of Virgil’s flawless integrity is certainly Virgil’s own perception of himself in the poem. According to Virgil’s description of his final resting place and its significance, his placement in Limbo seems to be the result of theological legalism and bad luck rather than of a flaw in his humanity or a crack in his moral nobility. In Inferno IV, Virgil tells Dante that the inhabitants of Limbo “non peccaro; e
s’elli hanno mercedi, / non basta, perché non ebber battesmo” (“have not sinned; and if
they have merit, it is not enough, because they did not have baptism”; Inferno 4. 34-35).
According to Virgil, “s’e’ furon dinanzi al cristianesmo, / non adorar debitamente a Dio: / . . . Per tai difetti, non per altro rio, / semo perduti” (“if they were before Christianity,
they did not adore God as was due. . . . Through such defects, not through another crime,
we are lost”; Inferno 4. 37-41). Of those who, like Virgil, abide in the “nobile castello,” a
region of Limbo illuminated by “un foco / ch’emisperio di tenebre vincia” (“a fire that
conquers the hemisphere of shadows”; Inferno 4. 68-69), Virgil explains that “L’onrata
nominanza / che di lor suona sù ne la tua vita, / grazïa acquista in ciel che sì li avanza”
(“The honored reputation that of them sounds above in your life gained grace in heaven
that thus advances them”; Inferno 4. 76-78).

Virgil’s description of his eternal home seems to stress three themes – sinlessness,
Christian faith (or its lack), and light. Interestingly, these same three themes are present
in – and central to – 1 John. Indeed, in an epistle of just five short chapters, the author of
1 John returns again and again to the topics of sinlessness, faith in Jesus, and light’s
contrast with darkness. The very first chapter of 1 John focuses the bulk of its attention
on the difference between light and darkness, as well as on the truth of claims to
sinlessness, such as those offered by Dante’s Virgil (Inferno 4. 34; cf. 1 John 1: 5-10).
The presence of these shared themes seems more than coincidental and indicates that 1
John may have significantly informed Dante’s writing of Inferno IV, as well as Dante’s
understanding of Christianity and its view of human salvation. As a result, our reading of
Inferno IV – and of Virgil’s character within the Divine Comedy – might benefit from
comparison to the epistle. The dividing line between pagan and Christian in the 
*Commedia* may be coterminous with the divide between light and darkness in 1 John.

At first glance, 1 John seems to affirm and reinforce Virgil’s claims about the reasons for his damnation to Limbo. Virgil notes of those in Limbo, “s’elli hanno mercedi, / non basta, perché non ebbero battesmo, / ch’è porta de la fede che tu credi” (“if they have merit, it is not enough, because they did not have baptism, which is the gateway to the faith that you believe”; *Inferno* 4. 34-35). According to Virgil, only those who are baptized Christians and who believe in Jesus Christ have a chance of eluding hell, since merit alone cannot gain a person entrance into heaven. Similarly, the author of 1 John stresses again and again the crucial importance to salvation of belief in Christ. Without equivocation, 1 John states that “this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 3: 23). Near the end of the letter, we read, “These things I write to you, that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5: 13). In contrast to true believers, according to 1 John, “[w]hosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father” (1 John 2: 23a; cf. 1 John 4: 15, 5: 1).

But despite 1 John’s affirmations of the importance of Christian faith for salvation (a common enough sentiment in the New Testament – e.g., John 6: 29, 11: 25, Romans 10: 9-11), other elements of the epistle seem to contradict Virgil’s thinking in *Inferno* IV. Virgil says, for example, of himself and the other inhabitants of Limbo, “ei non peccaro” (“they have not sinned”; *Inferno* 4. 34). But 1 John develops a theology of sin and a vision of human nature that definitively belies this claim. In the epistle’s very first chapter, the author states categorically that, “[i]f we say that we have no sin, we deceive
ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1: 8). The assumption behind this statement is that no human being is without flaw – no human being is without cracks in his or her moral nobility. Indeed, the pervasiveness of sin in human nature is precisely what motivates Christ’s incarnation and passion, since “[h]e that committeth sin is of the devil…. For this purpose, the Son of God appeared, that he might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3: 8). Christ destroys the works of the devil by serving as “an advocate with the Father…. And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2: 1-2).

As a result, “[w]hosoever is born of God, committeth not sin: for [God’s] seed abideth in him, and he can not sin, because he is born of God” (1 John 3: 9). Sinlessness is therefore not a simple human accomplishment, easily achieved by the self-control and hard work of honorable men and women, but rather an act of transcendence by which humans, with divine assistance or by divine example, rise above their own limitations and weaknesses. The author of 1 John essentially argues that the sacrifice of Jesus was a gracious act of undeserved compassion, freely offered for the redemption of our flawed human nature. If we are “born of God” (that is, if we acknowledge Jesus as divine and, as a result, recognize the remarkable graciousness of his sacrifice), we will be filled with a spirit of gratitude that will prompt us to behave in a way that overcomes our sinful nature through the power of love. As 1 John notes, “My dearest, if God hath so loved us; we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4: 11; see also 1 John 3: 16). Similarly, Augustine writes in a commentary on 1 John, “Si pigri eramus ad amandum, non simus pigri ad redamandum. Prior amavit nos; nec sic nos amamus” (“If we were lazy in loving,
let us not be lazy in loving back. He loved us first; and we do not [yet] love thus”; 35. 2032). 

As Augustine notes, “non potest homo quamdiu carnem portat, nisi habere vel levia peccata” (“a man cannot, as long as he carries flesh, but have some light sins”; 35. 1982). For this reason, admission of guilt is an essential first step on the path of Christianity: “Et qua spes est? Ante omnia confessio: ne quisquam se justum putet, et ante oculos Dei qui videt quod est, erigat cervicem homo qui non erat et est” (“And what hope is there? Before all, confession: so that no one should think himself just, or a man that did not exist and now does, before the eyes of God who sees what he is, should lift his nose in the air”; PL 35. 1982). Virgil’s claim, therefore, that the souls in Limbo have not sinned is without foundation and without merit from the perspective of someone who accepts the reasoning and presuppositions of 1 John. It is a prideful denial of the very foundation of Christian belief. Virgil operates with the assumption that human nature is without inherent flaw, but 1 John begins with the premise that human beings are incapable of perfect virtue alone and that, therefore, admission of guilt, grateful charity, and humble compassion are the highest goods to which humans can aspire.

As with the theme of sinlessness, the images of light and darkness in 1 John contrast markedly with Virgil’s claims about the light surrounding the “nobile castello” in Inferno IV. In explaining why the virtuous pagans are granted the privilege of illumination within the darkness of hell, Virgil associates light with earthly honor and fame: “L’onrata nominanza / che di lor suona sù ne la tua vita, / grazïa acquista in ciel che sì li avanzâ” (“The honored reputation that of them sounds above in your life gained grace in heaven that thus advances them”; Inferno 4. 76-78). In contrast, 1 John
condemns earthly honor and fame as “the pride of life, which is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2: 15). The Christian brother is to “[l]ove not the world, nor the things which are in the world. If any man love the world, the charity of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2: 15). In addition, 1 John associates light exclusively with God and truth: “God is light, and in him there is no darkness. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth” (1 John 1: 5b-6). Light is, even more importantly, associated with love of others: “He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is no scandal in him” (1 John 2: 9-10).

Significantly, this love of one’s brother is at least as crucial to salvation as faith in Jesus Christ. The author of 1 John states categorically that “this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ,” but the writer immediately continues, “and love one another, as he hath given commandment unto us” (1 John 3: 23). Love is the cornerstone of salvation, because “charity is of God. And every one that loveth, is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God: for God is charity” (1 John 4: 7-8). Love is also a critical indicator of spiritual life and health: “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not, abideth in death” (1 John 3: 14). This kind of love is likely the salvation of Dante’s Ripheus, a pagan character originally from Virgil’s own Aeneid who appears among the blissful souls of Paradiso XX and who “tutto suo amor là giù pose a drittura: / per che, di grazia in grazia, Dio li aperse / l’occhio a la nostra redenzion futura” (“directed all his love there below to righteousness: through which, grace upon grace, God opened his eyes to our future redemption”; Paradiso 20. 121-123).
Such a love seems to be absent from the “nobile castello” of Dante’s virtuous pagans. According to Dante, “la bella scola / di quel segnor de l’altissimo canto / che sovra li altri com’ aquila vola” (“the beautiful school of that lord of the most illustrious song, who over the others flies like an eagle”) welcomes the Pilgrim, after a brief deliberation, into “la loro schiera / …tra cotanto senno” (“their group… among so much wisdom”; *Inferno* 4: 94-102), but the virtuous pagans live in a “nobile castello” that excludes from its circle of light “le turbe… d’infanti e di femmine e di viri” that reside eternally in the shadows of Limbo (“the crowds… of babies and women and men”; *Inferno* 4. 29-30). This act of callous exclusion hardly seems to reflect the spirit of grateful charity advocated in 1 John or elsewhere in Scripture. Indeed, according to the Gospel of Matthew, “A city seated on a mountain cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but upon a candlestick, that it may shine to all that are in the house. So let your light shine before men” (Matthew 5: 14-16). The virtuous pagans of the “nobile castello” do not “shine to all that are in the house” but rather are, like a candle under a bushel basket, hidden within a castle that is “sette volte cerchiato d’alte mura” (“surrounded seven times by high walls”; *Inferno* 4. 107).

But these same virtuous pagans see themselves as wholly without fault – blithely unaware of their own lack of charity. With a surprising lack of self-understanding or self-criticism, Virgil says, “ei non peccaro” (“they have not sinned”; *Inferno* 4. 34). The poet of the *Divine Comedy* may have found in Virgil’s own epic the seed and inspiration for this portrayal of Virgil and the virtuous pagans, deluded in their own alleged purity and virtue. In *Aeneid* VI, Virgil’s Aeneas is discouraged by the Sibyl from confronting sin beyond the walls of Tartarus, because “nulli fas casto sceleratum insistere limen” (6.
But for Dante, as for the author of 1 John, sin is an ever-present fact of human nature, and classical claims to purity or to perfect virtue merely show that pagans who make such claims are clueless about themselves and their own human weakness. Because of the inherent sinfulness of human nature, Dante the pilgrim must set foot on the “sceleratum… limen” and confront his own vices candidly in order to gain the salvation that the virtuous pagans will never achieve. As Virgil leads the Christian pilgrim to the mouth of hell, he tells Dante, “A te convien tenere altro viagio / …se vu’ campar d’esto loco selvaggio” (“To you to take another way is best . . . if you wish to leave this savage place”; Inferno 1. 91-93).

In portraying Virgil as self-deceived about his own purity, moreover, Dante is likely reflecting more generally on Virgil’s own vision of the heroic in the Aeneid. Throughout the Aeneid, Aeneas is a passive figure who acts only when prompted by the gods or by his father’s spirit. In this way, Virgil avoids assigning Aeneas responsibility for events and refuses any mark of guilt that others might impute to him. With Dido, for example, the last words that Aeneas speaks deny his own role in his actions: “Italian non sponte sequor” (4. 361; “I set sail for Italy – / all against my will”; 4. 451-452). As Virgil writes, “pius Aeneas, quamquam lenire dolent em / solando cupit et dictis avertere curas, / multa gemens magnoque animum labefactus amore, / iussa tamen divum exsequitur classemque revisit” (4. 393-396; “Aeneas / is driven by duty now. Strongly as he longs / to ease and allay her sorrow, speak to her, / turn away her anguish with reassurance, still, / moaning deeply, heart shattered by his great love, / in spite of all he obeys the gods’ commands / and back he goes to his ships”; 4. 494-500). This submission to duty marks Aeneas as heroic and pure, something that Virgil emphasizes
when Aeneas later visits the underworld and is denied entrance to Tartarus by the Sibyl. Virgil’s portrayal of the heroic insistently stresses submission, sacrifice, decorum, purity, and passivity – not admission of guilt or responsibility.

In sharp contrast to Virgil, the poet Statius creates heroes who take responsibility for their actions, their lives, and their sins, and this fact may be part of the reason that Dante places Statius, unlike Virgil, among the saved in purgatory, positing a fictional conversion to Christianity for Statius.⁷ In Book I of the *Thebaid*, for example, Statius re-tells the legend of Coroebus, a figure who rises against a monster sent by Apollo to plague his city and eat its children:

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haud tulit armorum praestans animique Coroebus
seque ultro lectis iuvenum, qui robore primi
famam posthabita faciles extendere vita,
obtulit. illa novos ibat populate penates
portarum in bivio; lateri duo corpora parvum
dependent, et iam unca manus vitalibus haeret
ferratique ungues tenero sub corde tepescunt:
obvius huic.
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A hero – armed, courageous – named Coroebus could stand no more, so he recruited men of prowess who sought fame, not length of life.

Out of a gate where two roads parted came
the monster, fresh from recent devastation,
the body of a baby on each hip.
Her hooked hands held their organs in her grip,
and iron nails grew warm in tender hearts.
The soldier blocked her path.

(1. 605-612)\(^8\)

When Apollo demands retribution for the death of his monster at Coroebus’s hands,
“fortunate animi longumque in saecula digne / promeriture diem! non tu pia degener
arma / occulis aut certae trepidas occurrere morti. / comminus ora ferens Cirrhæi in
limine templi / constitit et sacras ita vocibus asperat iras” (1. 638-642; “Coroebus openly
declared himself – / may his soul prosper through long centuries! / He merits life; he did
not hide his deeds / or tremble at the thought that death was near! At Cirrha, at the
temple gates, his anger / was sacred, and his words were fierce, roughhewn”). Whereas
Aeneas does not cross the “sceleratum… limen” of Tartarus, Coroebus stands, alone and
unafraid, “in limine templi” and is rewarded for his willingness to accept responsibility
for his actions: “Sors aequa merentes / respicit. ardentem tenuit reverentia caedis /
Letoiden, tristemque viro summissus honorem / largitur vitae” (1. 661-664; “Only the
brave find Fortune provident – / Latona’s ardent son was reverent. / Apollo gently
granted his reward: / he yielded and he spared his life”). Coroebus becomes a type and
icon of justice in Statius’s text, and many other honorable characters in the \textit{Thebaid}
behave similarly – among them, Maeon, Hypsipyle, Antigone, Argia, Menoeceus, and
Theseus.\(^9\) Characters in the \textit{Thebaid} who, unlike Coroebus, fail to take responsibility for
their actions, most especially Eteocles, are condemned in the poem for their lack of accountability (e.g., 2. 458-466).

More importantly, all the characters in Statius’s poem are flawed and – to a greater or lesser extent – impure. In this respect, the seer Amphiaraurus is typical and interesting. Amphiaraurus foresees the coming catastrophe at Thebes, “sed atra / sede tegi, et superum clausus negat acta fateri” (3. 571-572; “but sought seclusion. He would not reveal / the prophecies of heaven to the people”). In essence, he fails to behave with responsibility, lacking the moral courage to disclose the knowledge that he has divined. Later, betrayed by his treacherous wife, Amphiaraurus is forced to join the ill-fated Argive army and, to his credit, meets death with courage: “non arma manu, non frena remisit: / sicut erat, rectos defert in Tartara currus, / respexitque cadens caelum” (7. 819-821; “He did not drop his weapons or his reins, / but just so, steered his chariot to hell: / a last glimpse of the heavens, then he fell”). Once in the netherworld, however, Amphiaraurus denies any heroic motive for his arrival, distancing himself from courageous figures such as Hercules and Orpheus: “nec ad Herculeos (unde haec mihi pectora?) raptus, / nec venerem illicitam (crede his insignibus) ausi / intramus Lethen” (8. 95-97; “I am not Hercules, who sought his prey; / I do not set my heart on such affairs, / and by these marks I wear, you may believe / I do not seek illicit love in Lethe”). More importantly perhaps for Dante, he denies all culpability for his fate: “crimine non ullo subeo nova fata, nec alma / sic merui de luce rapi; scit iudicis urna / Dictaei verumque potest deprendere Minos” (8. 101-103; “no crime has made me suffer my new fate; / no lack of merit lost me nurturing daylight. / The urn of the Dictaean judge knows this; / Minos is able to assess the truth”). Amphiaraus’s sudden invasion of the netherworld initially
angers Pluto, who vengefully curses the remaining Argives with horrors – fratricide, cannibalism, pollution, and blasphemy (8. 70-77), but in the end, the god of the dead decides that Amphaiaraus is not a significant threat and, in determining the prophet’s personal fate, condescendingly “ire supra satis est” (8. 126; “contents himself . . . and passes by”). Amphaiaraus is, for Statius, an ambivalent character – a central protagonist, brave at times but uninspiring overall, harmless and unheroic, a nonentity, condemned finally to ignominious oblivion. Having failed to warn his comrades of their doom and having unintentionally prompted Pluto’s curse, he is the cause of nightmarish deaths for his friends. In essence, he is human – exceptional and flawed at one and the same time.10

Statius’s portrayal of moral courage and flawed human nature likely explains his salvation in the Commedia.11 Dante’s portrayal of Statius, when Dante and Virgil meet him in purgatory, focuses, as in Inferno IV, on images of light and darkness, inviting us to compare the light that brings about Statius’s salvation with the light of the “nobile castello” of the virtuous pagans.12 Dante’s Statius, in explaining how Virgil’s poetry drew him to Christianity, likens Virgil to “quei che va di notte, / che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova, / ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte” (“the one who goes by night, who carries the light behind and does not help himself but after himself makes other people wise”; Purgatorio 22. 67-69). The “lume” of Virgil’s poetry here resembles the “city seated on a mountain” or the candle on a candlestick from Matthew’s Gospel, because, unlike the light of the “nobile castello,” it cannot be hidden and “shine[s] to all that are in the house” (Matthew 5: 14-16). It illuminates others, unlike the light of the “nobile castello,” which excludes others and illuminates only the select few. Significantly, Virgil, unlike the Christian brothers of 1 John, does not walk in its light – i.e., does not have fellowship
with God: “If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth” (1 John 1: 6).

But Dante reminds us that Virgil’s lack of fellowship with God is not merely a function of his want of faith or baptism. When, upon meeting the author of the *Thebaid*, Virgil describes his love for Statius, he describes it in terms of reciprocation: “Amore, / acceso di virtù, sempre altro accese, / pur che la fiamma sua paresse fore” (“Love, lit by virtue, always lights another, when its flame appears outwardly”; *Purgatorio* 22. 10-12). This reciprocated love is reminiscent of the distorted courtly love that condemns Francesca to the circle of the lustful (*Inferno* 5. 103-105). According to 1 John, love ought not to be a matter of reciprocation among mortals – returning love for love and hate for hate – but rather of liberal, unstinting gratitude for God’s ultimate act of love, proffered to all: “My dearest, if God hath so loved us; we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4: 11). Even at the top of the mountain of purgatory, Virgil’s love is stingy and self-serving rather than grateful and altruistic, hardly the kind of Christian charity that would “[l]ove your enemies: do good to them that hate you: and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you” (Matthew 5: 44). With the right kind of love, Virgil might have moved into the light (“He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is no scandal in him”; 1 John 2: 10) and might, like Ripheus, have come to know God (“every one that loveth, is born of God, and knoweth God”; 1 John 4: 7).

More importantly, Dante reminds us through the words of the figure Statius why Virgil cannot love as he should – what, more than anything, stands in his way and blocks him from Christian salvation. Dante’s Statius describes in detail how he came to be in purgatory: “se non fosse ch’io drizzai mia cura, / . . . voltando sentirei le giostre grame
“nel inferno” (“if it were not that I straightened my care . . . I would feel myself rolling
the bitter jousts [in hell]”; *Purgatorio* 22. 37-42). Statius owes his salvation not to his
baptism but to the fact that “m’accorsi che troppo aprir l’ali / potean le mani a spendere, e
pente’mi / così de quel come de li altri mali” (“I realized that the hands could open their
wings too much in spending, and so I repented that one as well as my other evils”;
*Purgatorio* 22. 44-45). Statius has recognized, acknowledged, and repented of his sins,
and he confesses them openly – unabashedly – to Dante and Virgil. As Augustine writes
in his commentary on 1 John, “Et quæ spes est? Ant e omnia confessio . . . deinde
dilectio: quia de charitate quid dictum est? *Charitas cooperit multitudinem peccatorum*
(“And what hope is there? Before all, confession . . . and afterward love: because what
is written of charity? *Charity covers a multitude of sins*”; 35. 1982). Christian charity,
which Virgil fails to exhibit in his self-serving love for Statius, compensates for sin, but
the first step to salvation – *ante omnia* – is confession.

The Christianity that separates Dante from Virgil may, then, consist primarily of
the difference in their attitudes toward confession – that is, toward responsibility, guilt,
and human failing. When Dante condemns his beloved literary mentor to Limbo, he
may well do so because Virgil the poet, in contrast to Statius, defines heroism in terms of
purity rather than in terms of responsibility and remorse. Dante’s character Virgil
certainly refuses to acknowledge any sin in *Inferno* IV, and in light of 1 John, that refusal
brands him as one who has no truth in him (1: 8). Seeing Dante’s Virgil in the context of
1 John and the *Thebaid* highlights Virgil’s failings from the perspective of Christian
psychology and moral philosophy. Baptism does not save Statius, nor does lack of
baptism condemn Virgil. In the end, Dante’s Virgil is the master of his own fate, and his

**NOTES**

1 Citations of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* will be made internally by *cantica*, canto, and line number(s). All translations from Dante’s Italian are my own. Dante’s choice to place the virtuous pagans in the “nobile castello” of Limbo is certainly intentionally provocative. As Amilcare Iannucci has pointed out, it violates medieval theological orthodoxy on Limbo (“Dante’s,” 65-69). Indeed, two of Dante’s primary unorthodoxies in his depiction of Limbo specifically complicate interpretation of the virtuous pagans: “Dante’s Limbo is not an antechamber to Hell, or an abode separated from it, but is Hell’s First Circle,” and “[it] is populated not only with the souls of children but also with the souls of virtuous adult pagans whom [Dante] depicts as absolutely blameless” (Iannucci, “Dante’s,” 68, 69). Dante’s unorthodoxy in portraying adults in Limbo demands explanation, but the seeming contradiction of placing Limbo within Hell and yet depicting the virtuous pagans as blameless muddies the waters for any explanation that we might offer. As will become clear, I disagree with Iannucci’s own conclusion – that Dante condemns the virtuous pagans purely for not being baptized and that they “have been predestined, through no fault of their own (‘they did not sin’), to an eternal life of hopeless longing simply because they lived at the wrong time or in the wrong place to experience the revelation of God!” (“Dante’s,” 73).
There is reason to think that such a view of human nature might have had some currency among Dante and his readers. As A. N. Williams notes, “By the mid-thirteenth century, the acts of the Council of Orange had been rediscovered, and with them came a renewed theological insistence on the priority of divine grace: fallen human nature requires both the healing grace infused at baptism and the sanctifying grace given throughout a Christian’s life, if anyone is to do good, much less acquire the good habits which are called virtues” (202). While Williams sees an overall emphasis in Dante on human freedom rather than on divine grace, Williams concludes that “Dante tries to hold together human freedom with divine redemption and grace . . . [and] throws up his hands in the attempt to reconcile these divergent theological data” (213).

Translations from Augustine’s Latin are my own, and citations are made internally by volume and column number.

David Scott Wilson-Okamura has argued persuasively that we should not act “as if the meaning of Virgil’s text were transparent as well as transcendent” (104). If we approach Virgil’s text in that way, “instead of comparing Dante with Virgil, we compare Dante with whatever interpretation of Virgil happens to be current with our colleagues in Classics” (Wilson-Okamura 105). According to Wilson-Okamura, we should always ask, “‘What did Dante think Virgil meant?’ How, to be blunt, did he construe Virgil’s intention?’” (104). Margherita Frankel, among others, has attempted to elucidate “the way Dante read and understood the Aeneid,” concluding that Dante may have viewed the Aeneid as a pre-figuration of “both the Old and the New Testaments, of which however Virgil himself – unwitting prophet of Christianity – was unaware” (20). My analysis of
Inferno IV does not negate Frankel’s thesis with respect to other allusions to Virgil in the Divine Comedy, but I would maintain that, in Inferno IV, the Aeneid serves Dante less as a literary type fulfilled in Christian imagery than as a source of philosophical and literary error to be corrected by the Christian poet. Wilson-Okamura himself provides plausible evidence that Dante might indeed have viewed the first half of the Aeneid – at the very least – as lacking in this respect. According to Wilson-Okamura, typical medieval wisdom taught that Book VI of the Aeneid should be “read allegorically, as the attainment of wisdom,” but in the Convivio, “[l]ike John [of Salisbury] and Bernardus [Silvestris], Dante reads the poem as an allegory of the ages of man, and again, like John and Bernardus, he goes no further than Book 6. For Dante, however, the underworld journey is not a representation of the wisdom that comes to a man in his old age, but rather the fortitude appropriate to youth, which is the second age of man in Dante’s schema (Conv. xxiv)” (107). In other words, in contrast to the typical allegorical reading of the Aeneid, Dante did not see Aeneas’s experiences in the underworld (including his avoidance of Tartarus, which is a critical episode in my reading) as the culmination of human wisdom – but rather as a manifestation of the courage, enthusiasm, and naïveté of youth, which surely must be tempered by the wisdom gained “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita” (Inferno 1.1).

Citations of the Latin text of Virgil’s Aeneid are taken from Fairclough and will be made internally by book and line number(s). English translations of Virgil’s Latin are taken from Fagles and cited by Fagles’s book and line number(s), which differ significantly from the Latin text.
Looking at Pier della Vigna in the context of the Polydorus episode in the *Aeneid*, Douglas Biow comes to much the same conclusion: for Aeneas, “[t]he realm of the impure is simply a barrier through which he cannot pass,” but for Dante, “one must pass through the impure in order to arrive at knowledge of the self and of the higher truths that move the universe and govern the laws of hell” (48).

Here I disagree with Kevin Brownlee, who posits that “Virgil is damned, but his text is salvific; Statius is saved, but his text seems not to have Christian salvific value” (148). A. Teresa Hankey certainly sees signs of Christian salvific value in Statius’s text, especially in “Statius’s portrait of the Devil and all his works, his treatment of the ‘gods above’ and his depiction of a pagan world in pressing need of divine succour” (50). Paul Maurice Clogan even goes so far as to argue that “there is ample evidence . . . in a careful reading of the *Thebaid* and his other works, that Statius may have been a secret Christian” (87; cf. Kallendorf and Kallendorf 72), but in marked contrast to Hankey, Clogan views the world of Statius’s poem in an optimistic light: “evil does not control the universe and the redemption of sinners. The *Thebaid* is a narrative not of evil but of triumphant good” (79). William Franke suggests that “Statius’ leading the Greeks, by his pen, to the river, stated in conjunction with the disclosure that he himself had crossed the river of salvation through baptism, takes on the connotation of a possible Christian allegorical meaning buried in his own ostensibly pagan and historical poem” (12-13), but Franke does not explore Statius’s poem in order to tease out that potential allegory, focusing instead entirely on Dante’s fictional portrayal of Statius in the *Purgatorio* to illuminate Dante’s understanding of historicity, divine providence, and poetry. Winthrop
Wetherbee, like Franke, suggests the potential for an allegorical reading of the *Thebaid* and, unlike Franke, explores that potential (183-185). The potential needs further exploration, however; neither Franke nor Wetherbee, for example, links the figure of Opheltes to Christ, a symbolic connection that seems fairly easy to posit (the innocent, whose sacrificial death – involving a serpent – leads to divine apotheosis?) – whether or not a true connection intended by Statius.

8 Citations of Statius’s *Thebaid* will be made internally by book and line number(s). English translations are taken from Ross.

9 As Dominik observes, “Coroebus journeys to Delphi, acknowledges his guilt, and heroically offers himself as a sacrifice to the vindictive Apollo to save his city from unjust divine retribution (1.641-61). His heroic response to the oracular revelation anticipates the apotropaic *Opfertod* of Menoeceus (10.756ff.), who meets certain death when he plunges into the enemy ranks in order to save Thebes, a suicidal act directly motivated by Virtus (‘Virtue’, 661-71, 678-81, esp. 672-77). In one sense, Coroebus’ willingness to offer himself to Apollo can be viewed as an attempt to atone for the crime of Apollo. In another sense, his devotion can be seen as an attempt to free the Argive community of responsibility for its collective guilt through its association with him” (*Mythic* 67). Clogan also notes the “pietas” of Maeon and Menoeceus (80-81) but views Amphiaraus, whom he sees as “guiltless” (85), much more positively than I do. Winthrop Wetherbee similarly cites the “virtuous action” of Menoeceus, Maeon, Coroebus, Amphiaraus, and Hypsipyle (173-179, 186-187). Of Menoeceus, Wetherbee writes, “Here epic tradition is not so much confounded as transcended. The Virtus who
inspires Menoeceus’ act [of self-sacrifice] and receives his lifeless body (10.780-81) belongs to a new order of values, and bears no relation to the uncontrollable \textit{virtus}, the sheer martial force, of Capaneus or Tydeus” (166).

10 Significantly, Dante rewrites the death of Amphiaraus in a way that goes even further than Statius in condemning the prophet. Among the soothsayers in \textit{Inferno} XX, Virgil directs Dante to look “a cui / s’aperse a li occhi d’i Teban la terra; / per ch’ei gridavan tutti: ‘Dove rui, / Anfïarao? perché lasci la guerra?’” (“at the one for whom the earth was opened to the eyes of the Thebans; so that they all shouted: ‘Where are you rushing, Amphíaraus? Why do you abandon the war?’”; \textit{Inferno} 20. 31-34). Dante essentially portrays Amphiaraus as a coward and deserter who flees the battlefield, much as Statius initially portrays him (when he flees his responsibility to tell the Argives their fate), and Amphiaraus’s \textit{contrapasso} in the \textit{Inferno}, while it suits his sin of soothsaying, could as easily fit the act of desertion: “Mira c’ha fatto petto de le spalle; / perché volse veder troppo davante, / di retro guarda e fa retroso calle” (“Look at the one who has made a chest of his back; because he turned to see too much ahead, backward he looks and makes a backward path”; \textit{Inferno} 20. 37-39). Cowardice on the battlefield and soothsaying are both fundamental denials of accountability – whether the accountability of a soldier to his peers and superiors or of individuals for their own futures.

Amphiaraus’s cowardice – as a soldier and a diviner – also has gender implications (Migiel 138-139). As one who displays such cowardice, Amphiaraus cannot maintain his innocence or deny his lack of moral courage and responsibility in Dante’s afterlife. In Statius’s underworld, when Amphiaraus calls upon Minos to substantiate his lack of fault
(“verumque potest dependere Minos”), no one appears to care or bothers to approach the great judge of the dead for verification. In contrast, in Dante, Amphiaraus rushes headlong “fino a Minòs che ciascheduno afferra” (“right up to Minos who grabs each one”; *Inferno* 20. 36). Dante’s mention of Minos here seems to me a direct allusion (and corrective) to Statius’s portrayal of Amphiaraus in the underworld, recalling Amphiaraus’s own reference to Minos. In general, Statius’s influence on Dante has been underestimated, although this situation is beginning to be corrected, as George Butler notes (5). A fuller exploration of Dante’s allusions to Statius is sorely needed but is beyond the scope of the present essay. I suspect that, just as Dante’s relationship to Virgil is complex and multifaceted, his relationship to Statius, while generally positive, is neither simple nor without tensions.

11 As Wetherbee points out, viewing Statius’s role in the *Commedia* as a function of Statius’s own poetry “is something new” (160). As an example of how “casual” Dante scholars can be about Statius, Wetherbee cites “the senior Dantista who once assured me that Lucan would have done just as well as Statius, that Dante had more or less flipped a coin between them” (160). Wetherbee, however, views Statius’s poetry rather differently from me: “The dominant theme of the *Thebaid* is conflict. At its center is of course the deadly rivalry of the sons of Oedipus, over which the world of the poem is divided, but at a broader level conflict of one sort or another defines the human condition as Statius presents it. . . . [T]he disasters of the *Thebaid*, and even human culpability itself, seem to be imposed by higher forces” (162-163). According to Wetherbee, Statius has created “a world where all are in some sense victims, doomed by a fate they can recognize but not
avoid” (162). Similarly, William Dominik emphasizes “the causative and destructive rôle of the gods in the forward movement of the narrative . . . [in which] divine intervention precipitates human death and suffering” (Speech 27). In response, I would argue that the characters nonetheless make choices in the face of their fates and divine intervention, either taking responsibility for those choices or refusing to take responsibility. Wetherbee himself, in discussing the figure of Capaneus, suggests how the characters’ responsibility for their own choices, even when those choices will end in death, is the source of their heroism: “Statius provides ample grounds for Capaneus’ scorning of the gods, and hints at a grudging admiration for his refusal to obey the restraints of traditional cult, but recognizes that his courage will inevitably prove self-destructive” (167). Capaneus’s heroism, like that of Coroebus, lies precisely in his courageous refusal to duck responsibility for his choices, even in the face of the avenging gods and death. Similarly, Dominik praises the courage of Maeon in choosing suicide over submission to Eteocles: “The use of libertas shows that Statius views Maeon’s display of public defiance against the monarch as a blow against despotism and usurpation. The concept of libertas further suggests that the poet views Maeon’s death as a release from the persecution of a tyrant . . . The valorous deeds of Maeon reveal him as a hero whose qualities resemble those of the ideal Stoic figure” (Speech 159).

Lloyd Howard has drawn attention to many references to light and blindness in Purgatorio XXI-XXIII (60-69). His reading of the Statius cantos has inspired my own reading here. Many other scholars have closely examined Dante’s story of Statius’s conversion. Grlic, for example, sees in Statius’s account of his conversion a
reformulation of Augustine’s three-step process of conversion in the *Confessions* (especially 78-81). Amilcare Iannucci proposes that “the encounter with Statius completes the Limbo episode” and emphasizes Virgil’s failings (“The Mountainquake,” 49). In contrast, Richard Lansing sees in the episode Dante’s provision of “a fitting occasion for expressing his own deep gratitude to Vergil as guide, voice of reason and, most especially, supreme poet . . . prior to his necessary departure” (S92). Most scholars see Statius in the episode as a surrogate for Dante or as a stepping stone between the pagan, classical poet Virgil and the Christian, vernacular poet Dante (e.g., Barolini 256-269; Martinez).

13 In a discussion of the Francesca episode, Carolynn Lund-Mead similarly concludes that “Dante’s gender inversion in *Inferno* 5 indicates that as a pilgrim he is not following in the footsteps of Virgil’s Aeneas. In his response to Francesca, Dante does not act upon his own formerly philosophical reading of the tale of Dido and Aeneas (in the *Convivio*) as a moral-psychological allegory about the opposition of appetite to reason. His allusion to this tale by means of gender inversion indicates a failure on his part to live up to an ideal of rational self-control, no doubt, but more importantly, it highlights the need for a poetic revision of the very concept of the virtuous hero – and heroine. The old heroic ideal enshrined in classical epic must be subverted by Christian paradox. Instead of imitating steadfast Aeneas, Dante seems to be emulating an Old Testament hero such as Samson, a man of strength whom the Devil in *Les aventures ou la queste del Saint Graal* remembers to have been deceived by a woman. In the New Testament, Samson is included in a roll call of biblical heroes who ‘recovered strength
from weakness’ [convaluerunt de infirmitate] (Heb. 11:32, 34). . . . Just as Augustine had to weep over Dido before he turned to God and as Dante himself has to fall before Francesca’s words in order that he may rise again, so Dante cannot spare his readers the experience of Christian paradox” (141-142).

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