Christopher Moltisanti reports that Hell is The Emerald Piper, an Irish bar where it is St. Patrick Day, every day, forever. The bar is supervised by a bouncer—a big, Irish goon wearing old-fashioned clothes—and is always open for business; the Irishmen win every roll of the dice in the crap games they play against the Italians and two Roman soldiers; and Moltisanti’s gangster father is murdered painfully every midnight, in the same fashion as he was slain on earth. Moltisanti, member of the mythical Soprano crime family, gleaned his vision of Hell from a one-minute near-death experience, when he suffered cardiac arrest after being shot by an enterprising hoodlum. For Moltisanti, being at the mercy of Irish American gangsters in the context of an eternal St. Patrick Day celebration tailors Hell specifically for Italian Americans. Indeed, I shudder as I type.

**Dante’s Mission**

Fortunately, Dante Alighieri has a more expansive vision of Hell. Dante the author had been exiled from Florence by the time he composed the *Commedia* and, like all of us, he had been exiled from heaven because of the transgressions of Adam and Eve. The prime character in the *Commedia*, Dante the pilgrim, portrays this dual exile as he journeys toward earthly and spiritual reconciliation. As the pilgrim travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, he interprets those regions and interprets himself. The process is an exercise in self-transformation. The pilgrim will move from the pure
facticity of Hell – where character is forever fixed and frozen, and fresh possibilities are lacking – to increasing self-awareness, freedom, and self-creation. His self-transformation flows from his recognitions and struggles as he confronts the shades in the afterlife and his personal demons.

As the pilgrim meets condemned souls in Hell, he, along with the readers, finds many of them sympathetic. They are not merely one-dimensional personifications of pure evil. Some are seemingly seductive, classy, and attractive (such as Francesca in Canto 5); some are deeply patriotic and magnanimous (such as Farinata in Canto 10); some suffered grievously and excessively on earth (such as Pier in Canto 13); some are stunningly intellectual and accomplished (such as Brunetto in Canto 15); some manifest admirable parental compassion (such as Ugolino in Canto 33); and a few are noble, swashbuckling adventurers (such as Ulysses in Canto 26). But the pilgrim’s moral development requires stern repudiation of the damned: they have received their proper sentences. The infallible Judge has meted out pure procedural and substantive justice. Each soul has received what it morally deserved. Compassion is now misplaced. Steely, uncompromising justice replaces the allure of pleasing appearances, personal charms, and special skills and crafts. Human behavior is complex and nuanced; sin may be encased in a seductive package. However, the pilgrim and we must come to despise sin regardless of its occasional pleasing façade. The afterlife is no place for sissies.

In this chapter I summarize Dante’s *Inferno*, while highlighting the moral assumptions that ground his depictions of sinners in Hell. Crucial among these is the law of contrapasso: the punishment inflicted upon sinners must mirror the nature of their transgressions; the relationship between the particular suffering and the specific sin must be clear. In that sense, penitents bring about their own destiny. They receive what they willed through their choices and actions.

The Journey Begins

As the *Inferno* commences, the pilgrim awakens in a dark, dense forest. Terrified and lost, he roams until he faces a sunlit hill. Finding consolation in its beauty, he begins to climb the hill until three ferocious beasts block his path: a lonza (leopard), a leone (lion), and a lupa (she-wolf), who represent the three major types of sin – fraud, violence, and unrestrained desire, respectively. The fearful pilgrim retreats, but soon meets the shade of Virgil,
to whom the pilgrim pleads for aid. Virgil bears good and bad news. The bad news is that Virgil cannot overcome the terrifying beasts, who will remain until the time a veltro (greyhound) drives them back into hell. (The greyhound may symbolize an individual redeemer, or the moment of a spiritual kingdom on earth where wisdom, love, and virtue – attributes of the Trinity – will unseat sin.) The good news is that Virgil can help the pilgrim by leading him by another path. Also, Virgil promises to guide him through Hell and Purgatory, after which a more suitable spirit will help the pilgrim reach Paradise.

Virgil may represent the best of human reason, art, and poetry: the pinnacle of human intelligence uninspired by knowledge of God. As the historical Virgil was the poetic and political guide of Dante the author, so, too, the character Virgil will lead Dante the pilgrim through the most terrifying regions of the afterlife. The three beasts cannot be defeated by a person standing alone. Virgil will guide the pilgrim geographically, but, more importantly, he will help the pilgrim recognize, rise above, and renounce his sins. Virgil (70–19 BC) cannot guide Dante the pilgrim to Paradise because he lived and died prior to the birth of Christ. Lacking knowledge of Christian salvation, he resides in Limbo. Symbolizing only human reason, Virgil lacks the connection to grace or theology required to lead the pilgrim to Paradise.

The pilgrim, however, is fearful. To reassure him, Virgil evokes the string of events that conferred upon him the role of guide: the Virgin Mary herself exercised her bountiful compassion and asked Santa Lucia, the personification of grace, to aid the pilgrim. The saint contacted the blessed Beatrice (“Bice”) Portinari, Dante’s idealized earthly love, who went to Limbo and asked Virgil to assume the task until the time when Beatrice would guide the pilgrim to Paradise. This explanation reassures and emboldens the pilgrim. The journey begins. The pilgrim requires an education about sin as prelude to his ascent to the vision of the Divine.

Vestibule (Ante-Hell): The Indecisive Neutrals

The pilgrim recoils as he reads the words inscribed about the gate: Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate (“abandon every hope, you who enter”). Lacking all hope and possibility, the shades in Hell cannot perceive themselves except as fully actualized. Metaphorically, the denizens of Hell earned entrance by antecedently abandoning hope: they perceived themselves as
fully determined. In existential terms, they ran from their freedom and stripped themselves of possibilities. They thereby exude bad faith and are inauthentic. They have nothing left to abandon when they swing through the gate.

Virgil softens the pilgrim’s fear by pointing out that the words apply to him – consigned forever to Limbo, as he is – but not to Dante the pilgrim.

Qui si convien lasciare ogne sospetto; ogne viltà convien che qui sia morta [“Here one must leave behind all hesitation; here every cowardice must meet its death”]. (I III, 14–15)

Here the pilgrim observes two sets of unfulfilled souls: the first race endlessly just inside the gate, meaninglessly pursuing a banner while they are beset by flies and wasps; the second set are newly arrived souls and await their escort to their appropriate permanent place in the multi-layered Inferno. They died unrepentant and without reverence, and will meet their proper fate shortly.

Dante the author conjures the vestibule of Hell for those without passion, decisiveness, or conviction. They refused to take a stand between virtue and vice during their earthly lives, so they are now compelled to race forever without purpose. They are rejected equally by Hell proper and by Heaven. The cliché “getting nowhere fast” applies. (My mother would call them “pasta asciutta” – dried-up macaroni.) They now have no hope of transcending their meaningless activity. Shunning vigorous commitment and lacking deep passion while on earth, the neutrals are now stung repeatedly by insects. Having refused, in existentialist terms, to create a robust self on earth, they brought about their disgraceful eternity.

Questo misero modo tegnon l’anime triste di coloro che visser senza infamia e senza lodo [“This miserable way is taken by the melancholy souls of those who lived without disgrace and without praise”]. (I III, 34–36)

As with all punishments in Hell, the sentences of those condemned reflect their earthly lives, or, in this case, their refusal to commit to crafting a substantive life. The contrapasso (law of counter-suffering) demands that the unrepentant and irreverent serve penance in proportion to, and according to, the nature of their sins. The lash of the contrapasso is only the fulfillment of the destiny chosen by each soul during his or her earthly life. The afterlife continues, deepens, and solidifies the life led by souls while they were on
earth. The sufferings of the damned are their sins, portrayed in horrifying images. At death, the sinful soul becomes “the emblematic form of its inward life.”

The vast horde of indecisive neutrals remains nameless, as a just response to their nondescript lives. The neutrals sought personal safety over commitment to principle. Allusions are made to angels who refused to take sides when Lucifer rebelled against God; and, possibly, to Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands rather than pass judgment on Jesus. Naked in their despair, the indecisive neutrals run futilely after a banner which may symbolize a leader, or a firm conviction, or a connection to enduring value.

Dante the author invented the vestibule of Hell for cowardly pasta asciutta pieces – people who merited neither praise nor blame. Cravenly fleeing from an authentic existence and remaining agnostic about value, they deserve the disgraceful vacuousness of their eternity.

**Upper Hell: Sins of Unrestrained Desire (the Wolf)**

*LIMBO, CIRCLE 1  Virtuous pagans, innocent babies*

Those who died without being baptized and those who were virtuous but expired prior to the life of Christ occupy Limbo. They committed no serious unrepented sin, but they grieve without torment, as they now yearn hopelessly for God.

*Che senza speme vivemo in desio* [“Still desiring, we live without hope”]. (I IV, 42)

Dante the author underscores that baptism and faith in Christ are (almost) necessary conditions for salvation. But Dante the pilgrim will confront some exceptions later in his journey. For example, the church teaches the doctrine of the harrowing of Hell, when Christ descended into Hell after His death and redeemed Old Testament figures – such as Adam, Noah, Moses, David, and Solomon – who embodied *implicit* faith. Although these figures died prior to the birth of Christ, they embraced God’s earliest manifestations and thereby attained implicit faith. Moreover, at times, special bestowals of grace liberate those who would otherwise reside in limbo.

Dante the author names over three dozen historical and mythological figures among the countless in limbo: the great pagan poets Homer, Horace,
Lucan, and Ovid (and, of course, Virgil); the mythical poet and musician Orpheus; renown philosophers such as Anaxagoras, Aristotle, Averroes, Avicenna, Cicero, Diogenes, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Plato, Seneca, Socrates, Thales, and Zeno; famous military heroes such as Aeneas, Lucius Brutus, Julius Caesar, Hector, King Latinus, and Saladin; pioneers in mathematics and science such as Democritus, Dioscorides, Euclid, Galen, Hippocrates, and Ptolemy; and praiseworthy women such as Camilla, Cornelia, Electra, Julia, Lavinia, Lucretia, Marcia, and Penthesilea.

Virgil, who is otherwise firm in feeling no compassion for justifiably punished souls, expresses pity for those in limbo (including himself, we might suspect). His concern is well placed. Through no fault of their own, in most cases with no access to the life and teachings of Christ, and leading otherwise worthy lives as judged by secular morality and in the historical perspective of Dante the author, these virtuous pagans are consigned to an eternity of unrequited longing. Should luck play so critical a role in one’s destiny?

Circle 2  The lustful

The horror of Hell most graphically begins in the second circle. All human beings who die unrepentant and in a state of serious sin must confess their transgressions. There Minos, the mythological half-human, half-beastly creature, twists his tail a discernible number of times, to indicate to which of the eight circles of proper Hell sinners are to be relegated. Horrifying and snarling, Minos instructs the pilgrim to enter Hell carefully and be wary of trusting its denizens.

Sins of incontinence or unrestrained desire are natural for human beings and offend God less than sins of malice. The second circle of Hell, the first circle of Hell proper, punishes the lustful. These miscreants shriek, lament, and curse as they are blown about by an “infernal storm, eternal in its rage.” The core of their sin, and the other transgressions punished in upper Hell, is desire unconstrained by reason and will. Virgil points out to the pilgrim the shades of historical and mythological figures such as Achilles, Cleopatra, Dido, Helen of Troy, Paris, and Tristan. However, the centerpiece of this circle is a couple bound tightly together and being hurled about violently. Francesca da Rimini and her brother-in-law Paolo Malatesta were adulterous lovers in life and were slain by Francesca’s husband and Paolo’s brother, Gianciotta.

Francesca weaves a seductive tale. She alleges that she was beguiled by her reading of a medieval French romance novel focused on the courtly story of the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere. Spurred by the intoxications
Inferno 25

of the novel, Paolo’s initial kiss sealed her fate. Overcome by emotions not of her choosing, and captured by love itself, Francesca appeals to the pilgrim’s pity and, perhaps, his empathy. Was not her amorous affair excusable, or a mere peccadillo? Was she not overwhelmed by forces too powerful to resist?

The pilgrim confronts a recurrent theme: sinners lack self-knowledge, deny responsibility, and fervently seek to blame other people or adverse circumstances for their plight. They obtusely see themselves as having been determined by external causes and forces. In existential terms, they are pure facticity. They deny their freedom, flee from responsibility, and clothe themselves in flimsy excuses. They exude bad faith as they cower in their “givenness,” and they deny their capability of reimagining their characters and of remaking their contexts. The sinners in Hell view themselves as compelled by external causes and forces and project that meaning on their environment. They are in conflict with their own desire for freedom. For example, Francesca misinterprets the moral of the romance novel: its intent is to warn against, not to glorify, adulterous relationships. Francesca wrongly understands the romance novel as validating the power of love to overwhelm the banal restrictions oppressing married couples: even moral judgment must retreat before the majesty of noble hearts struck by uncontrollable passion. In acting as they do, Francesca and Paolo choose lust for each other over devotion to God, transience over permanence, and unguided desire over reason, while insisting that they did not choose at all.

Yet the pilgrim is moved deeply by Francesca’s eloquence and by Paolo’s sobbing. How could such an eloquent, compassionate, gracious woman such as Francesca be so heartlessly consigned to eternal damnation? The pilgrim’s compassion is wildly misplaced. He has not learned how disingenuous the lustful are, nor how rational and just the punishment meted out in the afterlife is. The pilgrim has naïvely allowed Francesca to slide him through the grease. In fact Francesca distorts the meaning of the romance novel, cravenly casts off responsibility for her actions, and mistakes lust for love. She has chosen to be unfree, while dully believing that she had no choice. Glistening with inauthenticity, Francesca is now condemned together with Paolo, forever to be conjoined, as an eternal reminder of their mutual shame in privileging transient pleasure over moral duty. Worse, she now shamelessly exemplifies how seductive rhetoric can facilitate the triumph of desire over reason. Her situation in Hell mirrors the circumstance she found so pleasurable in life. Although insisting she was compelled by “love” while on earth, she, while living and now in Hell, cravenly flees from responsibility for crafting her destiny.
However, the *contrapasso* will not be denied. Francesca’s desperate rationalizations of her actions only highlight her manipulative, self-indulgent, deceptive character. While on earth, she used her aristocratic charms to advance her station by currying favor with power; she continues her charade in the afterlife. She neither understood nor repented over her transgressions then or now. The overall lesson: love, unrestrained by reason, corrupts the good. Succumbing to uninformed passion is the road to all spiritual ruin. Francesca sexually seduced Paolo on earth, and now she tries to seduce the pilgrim rhetorically in the afterlife. Both efforts exalt desire over reason.

In all the circles of Hell, existence without hope is the most fundamental and eradicable punishment. In existential terms, to view oneself as completely determined by external causes and forces is Hell. Never-ending punishments without redemptive quality imply that retributive justice can never be satisfied: no amount of suffering can atone for the impoverishment of a soul that dies unrepentant and thoroughly corrupted. As an inescapable mode of being, Hell seems disproportionate. Moreover, many of the characters in Hell are not thoroughly reprehensible. For example, Francesca has charms, even virtues, which are overwhelmed by her fatal flaw of lust. She manifests a complexity of character that prevents fair evaluators from reducing her to merely a lustful reprobate. Dante the pilgrim’s compassion toward her may well be naïve and misplaced, but does it completely miss the mark? Does the pilgrim intuit what we must all confront: is an everlasting punishment for a finite, earthly sin, committed by a human being who is not thoroughly reprehensible, justified? Is the law of *contrapasso* truly definitive of divine justice, or is it too often excessive and disproportionate to the offense? Are good and evil not so much separate substances but intertwined, interrelated opposites that flow from the same underlying impulses? Is Hell merely the ripening of sins themselves – the consequences requested by reprobates as evidenced by their choices on earth? Or should we simply read the *Inferno* allegorically and conclude that Dante’s descriptions of punishments only reveal the nature of sin and not literal sentences meted out? Does the character of Francesca represent less a condemned individual and more the incarnation of unrepented lust?

**Circle 3   The gluttonous**

The third circle of Hell encloses the gluttonous, who enlarged themselves in solitude while living. In a colorless, dark setting, they lie flat, gyrating and contorting to ease their pain. The ground is damp and fetid; dirty precipitation
cascades down upon the sinners; and Cerberus, a three-headed canine with an unctuous beard and protruding stomach, howls while periodically attacking the residents of this circle. The overall impression is of a bloated, junkyard dog reigning over a sanitation dump.

The pilgrim meets a fellow Florentine, Ciaccio (“hog”), who narrates the troubles of their native city. The shades in Hell are aware of the past, and even of the future – Ciaccio offers prophecies of Florence’s fate – but they are shrouded from the present. The glutton is a metaphor for the excesses of contemporary Florence. Ciaccio begs the pilgrim to tell others about him when the pilgrim returns to the world of the living. Ciaccio suggests that a robust, living legacy in the world is still a concern for those eternally damned in the afterlife. Lacking hope for transformation in the afterlife, the damned cling to the extension of memories of themselves on earth. Perhaps a thin continuation of their biographical lives is all that is left.

Superbia, invidia e avarizia sono le tre faville c’hanno i cuori accesi [“Three sparks that set on fire every heart are pride, envy, and avarice”]. (I VI, 74–75)

Virgil informs the pilgrim that at the Last Judgment Ciaccio the shade, like all others, will be reunited with his body. Being more complete, Ciaccio will experience more intense sensations and thus more striking pain – an appropriate fate for those of unconstrained appetite while on earth.

Circle 4  The avaricious and the prodigal: Hoarders and wasters

The fourth circle of Hell snares those who misused wealth, either through avarice or through miserliness. Plutus, the mythological god of wealth, presides over those who were unable to apply the principle of moderation to material goods. Again, desire was unmollified by reason and will. The hoarders now push heavy rocks with their chests around a semicircle, where they soon clash with the wasters, who push in the opposite direction. When they meet, the first group shouts, “Why hoard?” while the second group yells, “Why squander?” Then each group reverses direction and prepares for the inevitable collision on the other side. Together the two groups constitute a community of pointless recrimination.

Although the individuals in the two groups, having been identified solely by their approach to material goods in life, are largely indistinguishable, the pilgrim notices numerous historical clergymen among the
wasters. As always, Dante the author is unsparing in his criticism of the worldly ambitions of clerics.

**Circle 5  The wrathful and the slothful**

Amid a muddy marsh, the pilgrim observes naked, dirty shades pummeling each other with fists and feet, battering heads, and tearing at each other with teeth. The wrathful orphan all dignity and sputter with pettiness. Beneath them, producing surface bubbles in the slime, lie the sullen slothful. Here Dante the author understood that Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas differentiated between three degrees of wrath: the enraged; the sullen, who seethe but repress their feelings; and the vindictive, who pick their spots. Those beneath the slime in the fifth circle are a combination of sloth and sullenness.

The pilgrim begins to understand the vileness of sin and the rationality of the *contrapasso* as he spots the mean-spirited Florentine Filippo Argenti floundering and trashing in the muck of the wrathful. Filippo Argenti dramatically overreacts to Virgil and the pilgrim. He exemplifies the core of wrath: unlike righteous anger, wrath is irrational in that it is gravely disproportionate to the events that occasioned it. Righteous anger accords with reason in that it is appropriate to the circumstances and its intensity is determined by its causative offense. When the pilgrim becomes angry with Argenti, he is acting reasonably to Argenti’s unreasonable initial salvo.

Whereas earlier the pilgrim had expressed deep sympathy for Francesca and even for Ciacco, he is unmoved by Argenti. The pilgrim derides Argenti and a group of the wrathful assault their colleague. Virgil approves, hugging and kissing the pilgrim for his moral advance. Virgil interprets the pilgrim’s hardness as evidence that he is righteously angry at the sin of wrath that Argenti exemplifies. Yet the pilgrim must still transcend his own sinful nature. Righteous anger – which is always distinguished from sinful wrath by Aristotle and Aquinas – must be subject to reason and will.

**River Styx, Walls of the City of Dis**

**Circle 6  The heretics**

Dante the author locates negative heretics on the edge of upper hell. He places overt or paradigmatic heretics – those who were definitional heretics and the pre-Christian thinkers who denied personal immortality
or other Christian doctrines derivable by reason alone – on the rim of lower hell. Dante the author believes heresy flows from intellectual hubris, which rejects the Christian depiction of reality. The doomed heretics lament fiercely as their immortal souls are encased eternally within flaming tombs.

Unlike the other sinners in hell, the heretics are guilty of neither unrestrained desire nor malice. The same can be said of those who occupy Limbo and of the indecisive neutrals in the vestibule. In a category created by Dante the author, the indecisive neutrals are punished for their cowardice or indifference in failing to take a stand. Those who reside in Limbo also bore false beliefs, but their culpability is mitigated (should it be totally excused?) because their errors stemmed not from intellectual hubris but from (unavoidable?) ignorance. Heretics, whose transgressions flow from false beliefs generated by intellectual hubris, reside between the sins of unrestrained desire and those of malice. Heresy, like partisan politics, divides that which should be united.

Included among this heretical crowd are Epicurus and his followers. Believing that fear of death and of the gods obstructed mankind from attaining the good life, Epicurus taught that divine providence is a myth and no personal immortality awaits human beings upon death. Gods exist, but they are indifferent to human reality. Being composed entirely of atoms, the soul perishes along with the body.

Dante the pilgrim recognizes a famous Ghibelline leader, Farinata degli Uberti. Farinata does not recognize the pilgrim but smugly asks him to identify his ancestors. In life, Farinata was selfish, arrogant, and easily given to intellectual hubris. The pilgrim answers and Farinata recognizes some Guelfs he helped to rout in the famous battle of Montaperti in 1260. The pilgrim wryly responds that the Guelfs made a comeback, but Farinata cannot do the same. Farinata exudes several unpleasant dispositions and beliefs: he is an Epicurean (and thus he denied the immortality of the soul, at least while he was on earth), and he is arrogant and cruel. But he also loves his native city as deeply and sincerely as the pilgrim does. Unfortunately Farinata’s soul was too meager to admit God. Farinata glistens with patriotism and political passion; but he rejects higher, supernatural matters. The earthly city is his only concern and reality.

The pilgrim also meets Farinata’s tombmate, Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti, the father of his friend, the poet Guido Cavalcanti (who married Farinata’s daughter). The old man assumes that Dante’s poetic talent won him this journey through the afterlife and wonders why his son did not accompany
the pilgrim. The pilgrim suggests that the son lacked proper respect for Virgil, whom he does not name. Cavalcante wonders if his son is still alive and falls back into his tomb. Cavalcante, like Farinata, bears several flaws, but his love of his son is genuine.

Farinata, ignoring the passionate exchange between the pilgrim and Cavalcante, predicts that the pilgrim will learn how difficult comebacks really are after he is exiled from Florence. He continues by asking the pilgrim why the Guelfs have been so merciless to the Ghibellines. The pilgrim reminds Farinata of the brutality at the battle of Montaperti, where over four thousand Guelfs were slain in one day. (Note: After their victory at Montaperti, the Ghibellines proposed the total destruction of Florence. Farinata resisted the overture.) Preparing to leave, the pilgrim asks Farinata who else is with him in Hell. Farinata mentions only Emperor Frederick II and Cardinal Ottaviano degli Ubaldini, both of whom allegedly denied personal immortality. The pilgrim asks Farinata to inform Cavalcante that his son is still alive.

Later on the pilgrim and Virgil, struggling amid rancid odor, pass the tomb of Pope Anastasius II, a late fifth-century prelate whom medieval tradition accused of denying the divinity of Christ by permitting a heretic to receive communion. (The tradition confused the pope with a Byzantine emperor of the same name.)

**Lower Hell: Sins of Malice Leading to Violence (the Lion)**

**Circle 7 The violent**

**Ring 1 Violence against neighbors: Tyrants and murderers** Unlike sins of incontinence or weakness of will, where desire overwhelms reason, sins of malice include a will to do harm. Those who harmed others violently are boiled eternally in a river of blood. The Minotaur, half-man, half-bull, a symbol of blind rage and irrational might, guards the entry to this circle. Thousands of centaurs shoot arrows at any shades that try to rise above their designated level in the boiling river. The more harm sinners cause in life – to other people and their possessions – the deeper they are submerged into the blood. Tyrants such as Alexander the Great, Dionysius of Syracuse, Attila the Hun, Ezzelino III da Romano, King Pyrrhus of Epirus, and Sextus, son of Pompey the Great, are immersed up to their eyebrows. Less avid murderers are immersed to their throats or chests or feet.
RING 2  Violence against self and one’s possessions: Suicides and squanderers

Those who harmed themselves violently are consigned to a feral, dour forest: no green leaves, fruit, or smooth branches are in place. Repellent harpies – birds with women’s faces – nest in the woods. The pilgrim meets Pier della Vigne, a thirteenth-century statesmen who was accused of scheming with the pope to slay his master, Frederick II of Sicily. Pier was imprisoned, blinded, and led disgracefully from town to town on a donkey. He soon thereafter killed himself by bouncing his head against a prison wall. Unsurprisingly, Pier blames the envy of others at Frederick’s court for his downfall. The pilgrim is rendered silent from pity as Pier claims innocence, requests a re-evaluation of his deeds, and a rehabilitation of his early fame. The pilgrim and Pier recognize that Pier is being punished only for his suicide, not on account of the false allegation that initiated his demise. Pier believed in the dominion of the emperor, but lacked faith in the divine.

Virgil questions Pier about the nature of the punishment meted out in this ring. Pier informs Virgil that the appropriate souls are hurled down into the forest, where they take root and sprout. The harpies feed on their leaves, and this act pains the shades. Only after a branch is torn may a shade utter a sound. At the Last Judgment the sinners will not be able to inhabit their bodies, which will hang isolated on the tree branches: those who rejected their bodies in life will not be reunited with them in the afterlife.

Neither suicides not squanderers appreciate the value of material reality. The suicides renege on their corporeal life and destroy their own material substance. The squanderers undervalue material goods and waste them dramatically. The contrapasso declares that the bodies of squanderers be repeatedly torn asunder, as the wasted substances are now themselves; while the suicides, who, while on earth, perceived themselves as substances that they could destroy, are now transformed into complete materiality: trees.

Suddenly, two naked sinners rush across the area: Lano of Siena and Giacomo da Sant’ Andrea. Shouting wildly at each other, they are chased and assailed by ferocious black dogs. These are the profligates or squanderers, who mistreated earthly goods by not valuing them appropriately. Lano and Giacomo squandered their wealth and property in life. Devastated by his foolishness, Lano sought combat in war in order to die. Instead of escaping by foot when the opportunity arose, he fought and was killed. The squanderers in the seventh circle of Dante the author are distinguished from those in the fourth circle by the fact that they were violent in their passion for wasting or in their methods. For example, Giacomo allegedly set several houses on fire for the sheer joy of destruction.
Soon thereafter the pilgrim and Virgil learn that the bleeding bush, which had been attacked by the savage dogs in their pursuit of Lano and Giacomo, is an anonymous Florentine who had killed himself in his home. As a representative of his city, the anonymous suicide underscores Dante the author’s conviction that his native city was killing itself through excess.

**Ring 3  Violence against God: Blasphemers, sodomites, and usurers** Those who blasphemed violently or sodomized or greedily lent money are relegated to a scorching desert through which a stream of boiling blood flows. Weeping shades lie in groups in different positions, as bloated flames cascade down. The blasphemers are fewest in number and lie inactively, facing the heaven they defamed; the usurers sit crouched over, like the money grubbers they were in life; and the sodomites are greatest in number and wander aimlessly and continually. The contrapasso treats sodomites similarly to the way the lustful in the second circle of Hell are treated: both groups, whether of their own accord or through the agency of wind, cast about futilely, seemingly in search of what they cannot ever find. Blasphemers sin directly against God; sodomites transgress against God’s creation, nature; while usurers violate art.

The representative of the blasphemers is Capaneus, one of the seven kings who assaulted Thebes. When scaling the walls of Thebes, Capaneus cursed Jove, who killed him by casting down a thunderbolt. The pilgrim asks Virgil about the source of the river. Virgil instructs the pilgrim that the tears of the Old Man of Crete are the source of all the waterways in Hell.

The pilgrim then meets the spirit of a former mentor, Brunetto Latini, who has been condemned to the seventh circle and third ring of Hell on account of his homosexuality.

In modern law, sodomy is a term describing oral or anal sex between members of the same or of opposite sex; or homosexuality in general; or sex between a human being and an animal. (Less frequently, the term describes nonconsensual, violent sexual acts committed against persons.) Such sexual activity has often been considered “unnatural” in that its intent and result cannot include procreation. The biblical origin of this perspective resides in the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for the alleged sexual wickedness of their inhabitants (Genesis 19: 1–13). Although the biblical passages are far from clear – some scholars interpret the sin of the inhabitants of Sodom to have been cruelty and lack of hospitality to strangers – the dominant Christian view concluded that God destroyed Sodom as punishment for widespread sexual immorality and unnatural desire (Jude 1:7).
In the *Inferno*, Dante the author focuses on consensual homosexual acts between men. Thoroughly influenced by the Christian view that homoerotic sexual activity arouses God’s anger, Dante and the majority of his contemporaries would have regarded homosexuality as unnatural and sinful.

The pilgrim and Brunello wander together because Brunetto fears that, if he stops wandering, he will be sentenced to 100 years of more intense punishment. Brunetto predicts that the pilgrim will perform glorious deeds that will earn him numerous enemies among the Florentines. In life, Brunetto was a major positive influence on Dante the author. Yet here the author consigns Brunetto to eternal damnation. Brunetto’s fatal flaw of sodomy overwhems his numerous positive dispositions, which benefited many of his students and colleagues. Sodomy regards what is intended by God to be fruitful in a fashion that ensures its barrenness.

The pilgrim wonders about the identity of the three spirits accompanying Brunetto: Priscianus Caesarienis, a sixth-century Latin grammarian; Francesco d’Accorso, a thirteenth-century Florentine lawyer; and Andrea De’ Mozzi, a thirteenth-century bishop of Florence, whom Pope Boniface VIII transferred to another diocese when the bishop’s sexual preferences become known. (Apparently the Catholic church’s proclivity for transferring sexually wayward priests from one diocese to another has a long history.) Suddenly, Brunetto runs off to catch up with his companions.

A trio of spirits, running in a circle to avoid the additional punishment meted out for stopping, implores the pilgrim to recognize them. They are prominent Guelfs of the generation immediately prior to the time of Dante the author: Jacopo Rusticucci, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, and Guido Guerra. The pilgrim expresses his admiration for their deeds and fame and his distress at seeing them among the damned. Jacopo asks whether Florentines still exuded bravery and dignity. The pilgrim laments that pride and excess mar contemporary Florentines, especially those entering the city from rural homelands. The three sinners ask the pilgrim to speak of them to those who remain on earth.

A terrifying monster appears: Geryon, who has the face of an earnest man and a poisoned tail. Geryon symbolizes fraud – an honest countenance masking venomous intent. While Virgil negotiates with Geryon, who will facilitate descent into the eighth circle of hell, the pilgrim sees usurers sitting hunched over on the desert sand. The usurers are unrecognizable, because their obsession with material accumulation overwhelmed their individuating characteristics on earth. However, the moneybags that hang
around their necks are adorned by crests that identify them as members of the Gianfigliazzi, Ubriachi, and Scrovegni families.

**Lower Hell: Sins of Malice Leading to Fraud (the Leopard)**

**Circle 8 Simple or ordinary frauds: Fraud without treachery**

*The ten bolgie: 1 Panderers and seducers*  The pilgrim recognizes two lines of naked sinners walking in opposite directions; they are chased and whipped by horned demons. The line walking toward the pilgrim is composed of panderers who acted in life as go-betweens in liaisons and in illicit sex. The line walking in the same direction as the pilgrim is composed of seducers who, in life, deceptively lured victims into sexual encounters.

The pilgrim spots a shade which is trying to hide its face. Venedico Caccianemico, leader of the Guelfs in Bologna in the late thirteenth century, identifies himself and his transgression: he had sold his sister to a marquis. Venedico adds that this bolgia includes numerous panderers from Bologna.

As Virgil and the pilgrim cross an old bridge, they spot Jason, leader of the Argonauts, who has met the destiny he deserved for seducing Hypsipyle, abandoning her, and leaving her pregnant and desperate.

*2 Flatterers*  The pilgrim then hears lamentations from souls mired in human excrement. He stares at Alessio Interminei, a prominent White Guelf in Lucca, and wryly adds that he had once seen him with dry hair. Virgil asks the pilgrim to observe a filthy, unkempt woman scratching herself with dirty fingernails: the mythical harlot Thaïs, well known for her larger-than-life personality. Flatterers are fraudulent purveyors and perverters of language and speech.

*3 Simonists*  Stuck upside down into holes, with feet aflame and twitching like candlewicks, are the simonists – those who profited from selling sacred items such as indulgences and church offices. Dante the author places several popes in this bolgia, including the office holder at the time he composed the *Commedia*. Pope Nicholas III is the shade whose legs are twitching most noticeably. Nicholas informs the pilgrim that Pope Boniface VIII and Pope Clement V will descend to the same hole at death.
and will stuff Nicholas even further down. Despite a disingenuous gesture of tardy repentance, Nicholas always advanced the interests of self and family over the interests of the wider religious community. With Virgil’s approving embrace, the pilgrim delivers a stern lecture against simony and its practitioners. No misplaced sympathy here. The pilgrim’s understanding of the contrapasso is deepening. The intensity of the pilgrim’s moral outrage is here most striking. Entrusted by God to be the shepherd of His spiritual community, Nicholas (and, by extension, Boniface and Clement) fraudulently abused his position for money. Such fraud severs the church from its spiritual mission and desecrates communal trust.

4 Sorcerers: Diviners, astrologers, and magicians Because they spoke too promiscuously and peered into the future too indiscriminately while alive, the sorcerers no longer speak and are turned toward the past. Their heads are twisted grotesquely toward their rears; they walk backwards slowly and weep; the tears creep down their buttocks. Figures such as Amphiaraus, Tiresias, Aruns, Manto, Euryplus, Michael Scott, Guido Bonatti, and Asdente are identified. Surprisingly, the pilgrim cries when he first sees the contorted bodies of the sorcerers. Virgil sternly reprimands him and points out that piety is alive only when pity has expired. The pilgrim's pity is surprising not only because of his apparent moral advance in the previous bolgia, but also because Dante the author had criticized astrology so harshly at a time when its conclusions were widely accepted.

5 Swindlers Stuck in boiling tar in retribution for the stickiness of their fingers while alive, the swindlers are menaced by nasty winged-demons, the Malebranche, who claw at any grifter trying to escape from the tar pitch. Dante the author is most concerned with political corruption, which triggered his historical humiliation and exile. The swindlers in this bolgia are the secular counterparts of the simonists in the third bolgia. Virgil warns the pilgrim to hide behind a stone as a rush of demons appears. Virgil confidently confronts and straightens out the fearsome demon, Malacoda. He points out that he would never have gotten this far in the journey but for divine aid. Bowing to the necessity of a greater power, Malacoda orders his minions to ease off Virgil and the pilgrim. Amid the pilgrim’s suspicions, which are allayed by Virgil, Malacoda provides an escort.

As they continue, a sinner pops out of the tar pitch, seeking respite from his punishment. One of the demons escorting the pilgrim stabs the
presumptuous miscreant. As the demon readies a more severe response, Virgil asks the sinner to identify himself: he is a Spaniard, Ciampolo of Navarre, who betrayed a king. Virgil asks if any Italians are in the pitch. Ciampolo mentions one whom he had just left and two Sardinians, Fra Gomita and Michele Zanche.

A grifter to the end, Ciampolo promises the demons that he will go below and entice some of his fellow swindlers to rise about the pitch, for the sadistic amusement of the demons. Instead, Ciampolo escapes back into the pitch, being followed by two of the hapless demons whose confederates must now rescue them. All in a day’s work in the fifth bolgia, where sinners and their custodians parry and harass to the maximum possible extent.

6 Hypocrites The demons were tricked by Ciampolo and blame Virgil and the pilgrim. They race after the pair with outstretched wings. Virgil grabs the pilgrim and they safely slide down the bank leading to the sixth bolgia. The demons lack the power to leave the fifth bolgia. A crowd of sinners appears; they creep slowly along, in single file, while seeming overwhelmed as they weep. Unlike most sinners in Hell, who remain naked, these perpetrators are dressed in flashy golden cloaks lined with heavy lead. The hoods of their cloaks are pulled low. These are the hypocrites.

Two monks, Catalano de’ Malavolti and Logeringo degli Andalò, identify themselves: they belonged, in life, to an order of monks. This order was ostensibly formed in order to support peace among political sects and feuding families and to defend the powerless and disenfranchised. In practice, they were better known for pursuing pleasure than for demonstrating religious excellence. At the request of the Florentines, Catalano and Logerino had traveled from Bologna to Florence. They were jointly elected to the office of mayor (podestà). Instead of facilitating peace, they nurtured a divisiveness that climaxed with the expulsion of the Ghibellines from Florence. The pilgrim begins to reply when he spots a sinner on the ground, crucified to three stakes. The miscreant is none other than Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest who persuaded his colleagues and Pontius Pilate to condemn Christ. All the other hypocrites in this bolgia walk slowly over his body – which, unlike their weighted-down bodies, remains naked.

Virgil and the pilgrim realize that they had been deceived in the fifth bolgia. Malacoda and his minions lied when they claimed that, although the main bridge over the sixth bolgia was broken, another bridge further down the path was operable. Moreover, Ciampolo lied to them too, luring
them into believing that he was going to call up the Italians beneath the tar pitch to speak with them. Of course, Ciampolo had also lied to the Malebranche in order to escape from them. Virgil and the pilgrim are deceived by this mendacity. Their gullibility is often interpreted as symbolic of the inadequacy of human reason to pierce through the glitter and seduction of well-crafted trickery. But why would Virgil and the pilgrim trust those who are eternally condemned as swindlers and the demons who are their wards? I find it impossible to believe that Virgil exemplifies the highest attainment of human reason in this matter. Instead, he demonstrates that he is stained with sciocchezza (“foolishness”).

7 Thieves Virgil and the pilgrim continue the perilous trek through the rings of Hell. The pilgrim struggles as he ascends. Virgil urges him on with a traditional Roman appeal for pursuing enduring glory.

“Omai convien che tu così ti speltre,” disse ’l maestro; “ché, seggendo in piuma, in fama non si vien, né sotto coltre; senza la qual chi sua vita consuma, cotal vestigio in terra di sé lascia, qual funmo in aere e in acqua la schiuma.” [“Now you must case aside your laziness,” my master said, “for he who rests on a featherbed or under covers cannot come to fame; and he who spends his life without fame leaves no more vestige of himself on earth than smoke bequeaths to air or foam to water”]. (I XXIV, 46–51)

In the seventh bolgia the pilgrim sees a frightening collection of exotic serpents. The condemned thieves relegated to this bolgia run among them naked, with their hands tied behind their backs, and utterly horrified; the thieves are powerless to prevent the serpents from forcing their heads and tails through the stomachs of the sinners.

An especially gruesome event follows: a serpent jumps on one of the condemned thieves, striking him at the base of his neck. The shade ignites, burns, and dissolves to ashes. Almost immediately, the ashes assume the thief’s previous form. The reconstructed shade is stonato (“stunned,” “made dumb”) and confused. Virgil asks his name. He is Vanni Fucci, the Beast from Pistoia. Fucci is an odd inhabitant of the seventh bolgia. It turns out that Fucci – by reputation a man of violent rage and not a purloiner of goods – had stolen the treasure of the sacristy in a church at Pistoia, and an innocent person had been blamed. Fucci adds that the pilgrim, a White Guelf, should temper his satisfaction at the deserved punishment of Fucci, a Black Guelf. He predicts joyfully, with the unwavering certitude of many
of those condemned in Hell, that the civil war in Pistoia will soon spill over to Florence, with disastrous consequences for the pilgrim’s political party.

Vanni Fucci, continuing to live down to his reputation, makes the obscene gesture of the fig: closing the hand to form a fist, with the thumb inserted between the first and second fingers. (This maneuver, still popular in Italy, recalls sexual intercourse and is roughly comparably to giving someone the finger.) Fucci directs the obscenity to God. A serpent immediately wraps itself around Fucci’s neck, while another serpent ties back his arms. Fucci speeds away as a centaur bearing snakes and a fire-breathing dragon pursue him. Clearly, Fucci’s expression of rage was poor strategy.

Three shades, the Florentines Agnello, Buoso, and Puccio “the Cripple” Sciancato, ask Virgil and the pilgrim to identify themselves. Prior to the response, Agnello is beset upon by a fourth Florentine, Cianfa, while Buoso is attacked by yet another, Francesco de’ Cavalcanti (“Guercio”). Both attackers assume the form of serpents. By means of their attack, they regain the human form that their victims relinquish. The law of contrapasso decrees that in life no object was safe from these thieves; in the afterlife, not even the human form of these shades is secure: not having distinguished, while they were on earth, between what was rightfully theirs and what rightfully belonged to others, in the afterlife they cannot claim possession even of their own shapes and personalities.

The scene deepens and widens in a fashion Federico Fellini would approve: the six-legged serpent Cianfa leaps on Agnello, and the two begin to merge. They temporarily form changing colors and semblances never before seen. The hideous hybrid skulks away. Soon thereafter Cavalcanti, as a small fiery serpent, leaps toward Buoso while Puccio escapes. Cavalcanti pierces the stomach of Buoso and falls at his feet. With smoke foaming from its mouth, the serpent joins the wound of Buoso. Each form begins to change into the other. The smoke ends and a newly formed beast, the former Buoso, flees, hissing, while Cavalcanti, now in human form, chases it.

8 Deceivers: Fraudulent counselors The pilgrim ruminates about the travails of his native city. Florence, represented so robustly in the ring of thieves, has experienced a downward spiral, not soon to end. Virgil and the pilgrim travel over the ridge of the eighth bolgia. The ring is sparking with flames, each of which conceals the tormented soul of a sinner. An approaching flame contains Ulysses (Odysseus) and Diomedes, condemned for their deceptions and fraudulent counseling during the Trojan War. Together in sin while living, the two are joined eternally in punishment.
Ulysses chronicles his quest for new adventures after leaving the seductive Circe, who enchanted Ulysses for more than a year and turned his men into swine. Along the way, Ulysses dishonored his commitments to his family and traveled past the limits allowed to pagans. Ulysses neglected his familial and civic duties and deceived comrades, in a foolish quest fueled by arrogance, vanity, and abused reason. He represents the relentless adventurer who pursues heroism for its own sake, detached from salutary moral convictions and values. Ulysses deeply appreciates his own rhetorical skills as he spins the tale of his final journey. Dante the author invents much of this tale.

After the Ulysses–Diomedes flame leaves, another flame, recognizing Virgil’s Lombardy accent, approaches and asks about his native Romagna. The pilgrim informs the flame that Romagna, although known for its internal strife, was relatively peaceful at the time. Upon being questioned, the flame identifies himself as Guido da Montefeltro, a renowned Ghibelline captain. Unlike several earlier sinners, Guido does not want his story retold to the living. Identifying his transgressions with those of the fox and not with those of the lion, he speaks only because he believes that the pilgrim will not return to earth. A militarist who became a monk in order to atone for his sins, Guido was duped by Pope Boniface VIII. Always one to seize opportunity, the vicar promised in advance to absolve Guido, at that point a Franciscan monk, and then convinced him to render counsel on how to deceive the pope’s enemies, the Colonna family, who were hunkered down in the seemingly unassailable town of Palestrina. Swallowing the bait, Guido advised the pope to give assurances, then to renege them once the Colonnas accepted. The pope agreed. He offered the Colonnas a complete pardon if they would abandon their fortress. Once the Colonnas left Palestrina, he had the town razed and salted. The Colonnas lost everything. Trusting in what turned out to be the pope’s fraudulent absolution, Guido never repented his sins. Moreover, Guido’s original motivation in becoming a monk – to repent his past sins – was annulled by his giving sinful counsel to the pope. When Guido died, St. Francis came to claim his soul. But a black cherubim interrupted the enterprise, citing the principle that we never earn absolution from sin while intending future sin; we cannot intend sinful action and repent over it, simultaneously. Also, Guido’s actions as a monk call into question the sincerity of his repentance over his sins as a militarist: his initial repentance was itself fraudulent. Thus Guido is encased in an eternal flame.

Both Ulysses and Guido embody prodigious talents, twisted toward fraudulent ends: uncommon intelligence unrestrained by moral virtue spells self-destruction and social disaster. Clever adventurers, prepared to
employ any means necessary to secure their ends, are dangerous to themselves and the community. The encasement of Ulysses in flames testifies to his brilliance; but the law of contrapasso militates for the eternal suffering of this type of self-absorbed adventurer.

9 Sowers of discord and scandal  The ninth bolgia is constituted by mutilated, bloody shades continually ripped open, healed, then reopened by a demon’s sword. A sinner split from the chin past the navel identifies himself as Mahomet (Muhammad). His son-in-law Ali stands in front of him, split from chin to brow and sobbing. Dante the author views Mahomet and his first disciple, Ali, as architects of the great schism between Christians and Moslems. Mahomet asks the pilgrim to identify himself. Virgil answers. More than one hundred shades stop and gape at the pilgrim. Mahomet raises a foot to move on, gives the pilgrim a message to relay to a living schismatic friar, Fra Dolcino, and sets his foot down.

Another shade, Pier da Medicina, gives the pilgrim a warning about two prominent men of Fano: a tyrant plans treachery against them. Pier was an originator of strife between the Polenta and Malatesta families in Medicina (east of Bologna). Pier then points to the tongueless head of Gaius Scribonius Curio, who urged Caesar to cross the Rubicon and ignite the Roman civil war. Another shade who lacks hands, Mosca de Lamberti, explains that he sparked the first clash between Guelfs and Ghibellines by agitating for an Easter Sunday attack of the family of a man who had broken off a marriage engagement with one of Mosca’s relatives. The pilgrim points out that the intrigue ended in the death of Mosca’s relatives. That reminder sends the sorrowful, bleeding shade away.

The pilgrim is then stunned as he spots a shade carrying his own head as if it were a lantern. As the shade approaches, he holds out his severed head to the pilgrim and identifies himself as Bertran de Born, a Cistercian monk and celebrated troubadour in life. Bertran had advised Prince Henry to rebel against his father, King Henry II. The insurrection was unsuccessful, as the prince was slain and Bertran imprisoned. Dante the author has Bertran severed from his head in Hell in order to underscore the imperatives of the contrapasso: the character is now separated from the brain that concocted his schemes.

10 Falsifiers and counterfeiters  In the tenth bolgia the pilgrim encounters the shade of Geri del Bello degli Alighieri, a first cousin of Dante’s father. An established agitator, Geri had been killed in a blood feud with the Sacchetti
family, but his death had not yet been avenged. In the day of Dante the author, the law permitted, even encouraged, private vendettas, and honor often required explicit retaliations. (In fact, 30 years after Geri’s death, he was avenged by some nephews – an event that celebrated the adage that “revenge is a dish best served cold.”)

An unbearable stench permeates the tenth bolgia. Shades lie in various piles and in grotesque positions, unable to rise. They are afflicted with loathsome diseases. The pilgrim spots two leprosy-pocked sinners leaning against one another, scratching themselves avidly. Virgil asks if there are any Italians among them. One of the shades, Griffolino da Arezzo, says that they are both Italian. Griffolino hailed from Arezzo, but he was burned at the stake in Siena. He had jokingly told the bishop’s son that he could teach him to fly, so that the boy might enter the Siena homes of desirable women through the window. The boy was cafone (obtuse and coarse) enough to pay Griffolino for lessons. After discovering the fraud, he reported his misfortune to the bishop, who acted decisively. But the sinner was relegated to the eighth circle, ten bolgia of Hell for the fraud of alchemy – acting as a magician. In an aside, the pilgrim asks Virgil if any people – even the notoriously vain French – are as self-enthralled as the Sienese.

The other sinner is the fraudulent alchemist Capocchio, a Florentine also burned at the stake in Siena. He was a fellow student of the pilgrim’s and gives his opinion on the Sienese. He exempts some of them from harsh evaluations, but only tongue-in-cheek: members of the Brigata Spendericcia (Spendrift Club) were wealthy young men seeking attention. They rented palaces, threw lavish banquets, and ended up squandering their wealth.

Two pale, naked, deranged sinners, both condemned for impersonation, enter the scene. Gianni Schicchi bites Capocchio’s neck and drags him away with his stomach bouncing over the ground. In life, at the urging of a dead man’s son, Gianni impersonated the deceased in order to alter the will, making it more favorable toward the relatives of the dead man. Ever enterprising, Gianni bequeathed the best items to himself.

The other sinner, Myrrha of Cyprus, used impersonation to commit incest with her father. (She was turned into a myrrh tree, from which was begot Adonis.) The contrapasso decrees that impersonators are rendered insane – a corruption of the mind, which is an appropriate disease flowing from their own corrupt values. In that vein, the alchemists are afflicted with leprosy, a corruption of the body.

The pilgrim espies a swollen shade, who appears as a lute with legs. He calls himself Master Adam, who was burned alive for allegedly counterfeiting
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gold florins at the urging of the Guidi family in Romena. Though desperately thirsty, he would trade water for the sight of the Guidi family members being rightfully punished. In fact, placing no premium on forgiveness, he would be willing to move only an inch every century in exchange for seeing them in pain. The pilgrim asks about two nearby feverish women. Adam identifies them as Potiphar, the seductive wife from the biblical story, who falsely accused Joseph of bold sexual advances; and Sinon the Greek, the deceitful woman who tricked the Trojans into taking the wooden horse inside their city gates.

Upset by the thinness of her description, Sinon whacks Adam in his stomach. Adam retaliates by thrusting his arm in Sinon’s face. The two trade insults. The pilgrim enjoys the scene, until Virgil scolds him for his base desire to hear such trash talk. Virgil’s sternness renders the pilgrim embarrassed and speechless. Virgil immediately forgives the pilgrim.

The counterfeiters suffer from dropsy and the deceivers are condemned to be plagued by a fever that produces a repellent odor. The contrapasso demands that these sinners, diseased and corrupt, while living, through the values they exemplified, eternally symbolize what they brought about in life.

Circle 9 Complex frauds: Fraud with treachery against special bonds

1 Caina: Traitors to kin The pilgrim and Virgil make their way through the thick air separating the eighth from ninth circles of Hell. Several mythological giants, who rebelled against their gods, are spotted on the way to the depths of Hell: Nimrod, Ephialtes, and Briareus are all eternally chained. As such rebellion centers on the sin of envy and pride, Dante the author flags these transgressions as the most grievous of all. Unlike sins of simple fraud, the transgressions of complex fraud include treachery, usually murder.

At Virgil’s request, the unchained giant Antaeus lifts the two wanderers in his hand and places them lower, on a lake of ice – the Cocytus. The frozen lake consists of four concentric rings. Treacherous traitors to family bonds are relegated to the furthest ring, Caina, named after Cain, who murdered his brother Abel. They are punished by being buried in ice up to their necks. The pilgrim sees two shades near his feet standing chest to chest. Tears cascade down their cheeks and lock the two together. A third shade, whose ears have fallen off from the low temperature, says that the two others are brothers: Napoleone and Alessandro, sons of Count Alberto of Mangona.
The two quarreled incessantly and ultimately killed each other in a dispute over their inheritance. The speaker identifies himself as Camicion de Pazzi, who in life murdered a relative. The pilgrim also meets the mythological Mordred, evil nephew of King Arthur, who planned to kill his uncle and to seize the kingdom; Focaccia, a White Guelf who murdered his cousin; and Sassoll Mascheroni, a member of the Toschi family who got rid of his nephew to gain his inheritance.

2 Antenora: Traitors to party and country The second ring of the ninth circle of Hell, Antenora, is named after a Trojan warrior who betrayed his city to the Greeks. This division of the Cocytus punishes those who treacherously betrayed their city, country, or political party.

As he moves inward toward Antenora, the pilgrim accidentally kicks one of the faces sticking out of the ice. Angry, the pilgrim pulls at the shade’s hair to force him to reveal his name. The shade dummies up. But another shade identifies him as Bocca degli Abati, a Ghibelline who pretended to side with the Guelfs at the infamous battle of Montaperti. Bocca allegedly cut off the hand of the Guelf standard bearer. The loss of the Guelf standard led to a state of panic that facilitated a major victory by the Sienese Ghibellines.

Enraged that he has been kicked and that his identity had been revealed, Bocca names other sinners in Antenora, including Buoso da Duera, chief of the Ghibellines in Cremona, who was assigned to stop Charles of Anjou, but instead accepted a bribe that allowed the French to pass freely into Naples; Tesauro dei Beccheria, an abbot and papal legate who was killed for betraying the Guelfs of Florence; Gianni de Soldanier, a prominent Ghibelline who switched parties; Ganelon, a knight who betrayed Roland to the Saracens; and Tibbald, a Ghibelline who opened Bologna to the Guelfs in order to take revenge on a Ghibelline family. As he journeys further, the pilgrim see two heads frozen in one hole, the mouth of one shade nibbling on the head of the other. Their situation recalls another one, from Greek mythology: Tydeus killed Menalippus in combat, but Menalippus severely wounded Tydeus, who demanded the head of Menalippus and ate his brains in a rage.

The hungry, enraged shade is Count Ugolino della Gherardesca, who now feasts on the head of Archbishop Ruggieri. The count, although belonging to a Ghibelline family, had conspired with his son-in-law to advance Guelf power in Pisa. He was exiled for subversive activity but still became prominent in the Guelf government. A few years later he schemed with the Archbishop to rid Pisa of the Visconti family. The archbishop betrayed the
plot and, with the help of the Ghibellines, assumed control of the city. At that point the archbishop imprisoned the count. The prelate locked the count and his innocent four children in the Tower of Pisa and kept them there for six months; then he starved them to death in eight days. (Historically, the count was incarcerated with two sons and two grandsons.) The count paints a gruesome picture of the family’s final days. He hints that he ate his children in a fight against starvation. The dynamic duo now occupy the boundary between Antenora and Tolomea: Ugolino is condemned for betraying his country – his appropriate placement would be in Antenora – while Ruggieri is punished for betraying his confederate – and should be relegated to Tolomea. Because they are joined, they reside on the boundary of the two rings. Ugolino munches on the head of his jailor, Ruggieri, for eternity. Ugolino betrayed Nino Visconti, his grandson and political rival, and Ruggieri betrayed Ugolino after conspiring with him. Ugolino exemplifies rabid selfish desire for material goods – mainly political power and wealth. As the pilgrim curses the ruthless Pisans, who killed the four innocent scions of Ugolino, Ugolino returns to gnawing on the Archbishop’s cranium.

3 Tolomea: Traitors to guests and hosts The pilgrim and Virgil mosey down to the third ring of ice, where traitors to guests are punished. Tolomea is named after the biblical captain of Jericho, Ptolemy, who murdered the Jewish high priest Simon and two of his sons after luring them to a dinner he hosted. Sinners in this ring are frozen in ice, with their faces tossed back, so that their tears freeze and seal their eyes. One of the condemned pleads with the pilgrim to remove frozen tears from his eyes. Dante asks his name and suggests that, if the shade complies, then the pilgrim will grant his request or go to the bottom of Hell if he does not. The beggar says he is Friar Alberigo, one of the Jovial Friars better known for pursuing hedonism than for pursuing religious devotion. Why was he condemned? Well, a relative had slapped his face during a dispute. The friar hired assassins and plotted his revenge: he invited the relative and his son to a reconciliation banquet; when the friar called for the fruit, the knife-wielding assassins murdered the two guests. Beware of prelates requesting kumquats!

The shade explains that souls in this ring of Hell often lose possession of their souls before death. Such miscreants arrive at Tolomea prior to the death of their bodies, which are inhabited by devils while they themselves are still alive on earth. Such was the case with the friar and with Branca d’Oria, whose soul is frozen just behind him, although his demon-infested
body still acts in the world. Branca is a Genoan who treacherously murdered his father-in-law, Michele Zanche – a swindler now condemned to the fifth bolgia of circle eight in Hell.

The pilgrim refuses to wipe the frozen eyes from the friar’s eyes. Technically, he did not break his word – he is headed for the bottom ring in Hell. But the pilgrim is firmly convinced that the friar does not deserve common courtesy. Moreover, the pilgrim curses Branca’s fellow Genoans. Having earlier wished that the Pisans would drown and now hoping that the Genoans would be driven from the planet, and showing no pity for the friar, the pilgrim judges that traitors should themselves be betrayed. The pilgrim’s previous compassionate leanings have been replaced by a chilling, enthusiastic embrace of the law of contrapasso.

4 Judecca: Traitors to lords and benefactors  Unsurprisingly, the innermost ring of the Cocytus contains Satan, the Knight of Darkness, Master of Spiritual Disaster, Most Fallen of Angels, the Sultan of Sin. Judecca punishes sinners who betrayed their rightful lords and benefactors, whether religious or secular. The treacherous souls now lie buried beneath the ice. Accordingly, they cannot speak, move, or connive. The pilgrim walks behind Virgil to shield himself from frigid gales blasting from what appears to be a giant windmill covered with mist. Virgil warns the pilgrim that they must conjure special courage. The giant windmill is in fact Satan. Having rejected God due to his pride and obsession with attention, Lucifer, now at the physical center of the universe, bears the entire weight of a sin-infested world. Fixed in ice from the chest down, the evil one has three faces: one red, one black, one yellowish–white. This distorted analogue to the Holy Trinity replaces the divine qualities of all-lovingness, all-power, and all-knowingness with hatred, impotence, and insanity. Under each of Satan’s heads flap two huge wings – a parody of his once angelic form. The flapping wings generate the frigid gales that maintain the frozen lake of Cocytus. The more furiously Satan flaps his wings, in a futile effort to escape, the more securely he is locked into place. His six eyes weep in frustration; tears and bloody drool repulsively decorate his three chins.

In each of his mouths, Lucifer, the ultimate traitor, munches on one of the three worst sinners of all time (at least up to the time of Dante the author). Unsurprisingly, Satan’s red, middle mouth chews on Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve original apostles – the one who betrayed Jesus in exchange for 30 pieces of silver. His head is entirely within Satan’s mouth, while his legs
protrude out, kicking in anguish. Judas has the ignominious honor of occupying the lowest ring of Hell named after him.

But who are the other two worst sinners? None other than the major perpetrators of the assassination carried out on the Ides of March: Brutus and Cassius. Having betrayed what was, for Dante the author, the divinely willed beginning of the Roman Empire, they now dangle from Satan’s other two mouths: Brutus, the moral conscience of the conspiracy, hangs from Satan’s black face; Cassius, the instigator and organizer of the assassination, is suspended from Satan’s yellowish–white face. Unlike with Judas, only their torsos are gnawed by Satan’s mouths; their heads dangle outside, as both hall of shame sinners struggle eternally in silent desperation.

Dante the author ties a bow around his recurrent theme: the worst earthly transgressions are monumental betrayals of rightful divine and worldly authority. The Church and the Roman Empire remain for the author the symbols of that authority. Accordingly, the law of contrapasso exudes no mercy for history’s three greatest evil-doers.

**Dante’s Existential Lessons in Hell**

The *Inferno* expresses several themes that anticipate the arrival of existential philosophy. In Hell, Dante the pilgrim learns six lessons. First, human beings define themselves through their choices and decisions: our choices and actions shape our characters. The sinners in Hell crafted their destinies in unhealthy ways. Second, soul-making is our most important project. Although we too easily fail to reflect on our efforts and results, our grandest project is that of ongoing self-creation. The sinners in Hell failed this purpose miserably and their characters are now fixed. Third, living authentically is required for human flourishing. We must recognize our freedom, understand our personal context, and take responsibility for our actions. The sinners in Hell deny their freedom and cast off blame. Fourth, vice is its own punishment. Regardless of the perceptions of others, thoughts and actions arising from incontinence and malice mold our characters in unwholesome ways. The sinners in Hell now reap what they have sown – their punishments reveal what they made of themselves on earth. Fifth, self-deception nurtures vice. Facile rationalizations and self-serving excuses promote only our moral depravity. Having fixed their characters while on earth, the sinners in Hell continue their self-defeating strategies in the afterlife. Sixth, commitment and conviction are required
for crafting the soul. Allowing ourselves to be shaped by received wisdom and dominant ideas is an indolent recipe for personal dissolution. The sinners in Hell fell too easily into the allure of conformity and external validation by following noxious conventions.

The pilgrim is introduced to these lessons in Hell, but his spiritual education and personal transformation have only begun. To refine and supplement the lessons of Hell, the pilgrim must continue his journey and climb to Purgatory.

**Notes and References**

**General note** Throughout this work I include parenthetical references to Dante’s *Commedia*. These references are of the form:

P XXX 34–57 (= *Purgatorio*, Canto 30, Lines 34–57)
I IV, 52–63 (= *Inferno*, Canto 4, Lines 52–63)
Par. XX, 125 (= *Paradiso*, Canto 20, Line 125).

I also include a few parenthetical references to passages in the Bible and to Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which should be self-explanatory.

1. From “Where to Eternity,” the 22nd episode of the HBO original series *The Sopranos*, and the 9th episode of the show’s second season.