

# Inferno Canto 18

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[Christianity Index](#) [Divine Comedy Index](#) [Previous: Inferno Canto 17](#) [Next: Inferno Canto 19](#)

## Canto XVIII

### Argument

The Poet describes the situation and form of the eighth circle, divided into ten gulfs, which contain as many different descriptions of fraudulent sinners; but in the present Canto he treats only of two sorts: the first is of those who, either for their own pleasure, or for that of another, have seduced any woman from her duty; and these are scourged of demons in the first gulf: the other sort is of flatterers, who in the second gulf are condemned to remain immersed in filth.

There is a place within the depths of Hell  
Call'd Malebolge, all of rock dark - stain'd  
With hue ferruginous, e'en as the steep  
That round it circling winds. Right in the midst  
Of that abominable region yawns  
A spacious gulf profound, whereof the frame  
Due time shall tell. The circle, that remains,  
Throughout its round, between the gulf and base  
Of the high craggy banks, successive forms  
Ten bastions, in its hollow bottom raised.

As where, to guard the walls, full many a foss  
Begirds some stately castle, sure defence  
Affording to the space within; so here  
Were model'd these: and as like fortresses,  
E'en from their threshold to the brink without,  
Are flank'd with bridges; from the rock's low base  
Thus flinty paths advanced, that 'cross the moles  
And dykes struck onward far as to the gulf,  
That in one bound collected cuts them off.  
Such was the place, wherein we found ourselves  
From Geryon's back dislodged. The bard to left  
Held on his way, and I behind him moved.

On our right hand new misery I saw,  
New pains, new executioner of wrath,  
That swarming peopled that first chasm. Below  
Were naked sinners. Hitherward they came,  
Meeting our faces, from the middle point;  
With us beyond, but with a larger stride.  
E'en thus the Romans,[1] when the year returns

Of Jubilee, with better speed to rid  
The thronging multitudes, their means devise  
For such as pass the bridge; that on one side  
All front toward the castle, and approach  
Saint Peter's fane, on the other toward the mount.

[1: In the year 1300, Pope Boniface VIII, to remedy the inconvenience occasioned by the press over the bridge of St. Angelo during the time of the Jubilee, caused it to be divided lengthwise by a partition. G. Villani, who was present, describes the order that was preserved, lib. viii. c. xxxvi. It was at this time, and on this occasion, that he first conceived the design of "compiling his book."]

Each diverse way, along the grisly rock,  
Horn'd demons I beheld, with lashes huge,  
That on their back unmercifully smote.  
Ah! how they made them bound at the first stripe!  
None for the second waited, nor the third.

Meantime, as on I pass'd, one met my sight,  
Whom soon as view'd, "Of him," cried I, "not yet  
Mine eye hath had his fill." I therefore stay'd  
My feet to scan him, and the teacher kind  
Paused with me, and consented I should walk  
Backward a space; and the tormented spirit,  
Who thought to hide him, bent his visage down.  
But it avail'd him naught; for I exclaim'd:  
"Thou who dost cast thine eye upon the ground,  
Unless thy features do belie thee much,  
Venedico[2] art thou. But what brings thee  
Into this bitter seasoning?" He replied:  
"Unwillingly I answer to thy words.  
But thy clear speech, that to my mind recalls  
The world I once inhabited, constrains me.  
Know then 't was I who led fair Ghisola  
To do the Marquis' will, however fame  
The shameful tale have bruited. Nor alone  
Bologna hither sendeth me to mourn.  
Rather with us the place is so o'er throng'd,  
That not so many tongues this day are taught,  
Betwixt the Reno and Savena's stream,  
To answer Sipa[3] in their country's phrase.  
And if of that securer proof thou need,  
Remember but our craving thirst for gold."

[2: Venedico Caccianimico, a Bolognese, who prevailed on his sister Ghisola to prostitute herself to Obizzo da Este. (See Canto xii.)]

[3: "To answer Sipa." He denotes Bologna by its situation between the

rivers Savena to the east and Reno to the west, and by a peculiarity of dialect, the use of the affirmative "sipa" instead either of "si" or of "sia."]

Him speaking thus, a demon with his throng  
Struck and exclaim'd, "Away, corrupter! here  
Women are none for sale." Forthwith I join'd  
My escort, and few paces thence we came  
To where a rock forth issued from the bank.  
That easily ascended, to the right  
Upon its splinter turning, we depart  
From those eternal barriers. When arrived  
Where, underneath, the gaping arch lets pass  
The scourged souls: "Pause here," the teacher said,  
"And let these others miserable now  
Strike on thy ken; faces not yet beheld,  
For that together they with us have walk'd."

From the old bridge we eyed the pack, who came  
From the other side toward us, like the rest,  
Excoriate from the lash. My gentle guide,  
By me unquestion'd, thus his speech resumed:  
"Behold that lofty shade, who this way tends,  
And seems too woe - begone to drop a tear.  
How yet the regal aspect he retains!  
Jason is he, whose skill and prowess won  
The ram from Colchis. To the Lemnian isle  
His passage thither led him, when those bold  
And pitiless women had slain all their males.  
There he with tokens and fair witching words  
Hypsipyle[4] beguiled, a virgin young,  
Who first had all the rest herself beguiled.  
Impregnated, he left her there forlorn.  
Such is the guilt condemns him to this pain.  
Here too Medea's injuries are avenged.  
All bear him company, who like deceit  
To his have practised. And thus much to know

[4: She deceived the other women, by concealing her father Thoas, when they slew their males.]

Of the first vale suffice thee, and of those  
Whom its keen torments urge." Now had we come  
Where, crossing the next pier, the straiten'd path  
Bestrides its shoulders to another arch.

Hence, in the second chasm we heard the ghosts,  
Who gibber in low melancholy sounds,  
With wide - stretch'd nostrils snort, and on themselves

Smite with their palms. Upon the banks a scurf,  
From the foul steam condensed, encrusting hung,  
That held sharp combat with the sight and smell.

So hollow is the depth, that from no part,  
Save on the summit of the rocky span,  
Could I distinguish aught. Thus far we came;  
And thence I saw, within the foss below,  
A crowd immersed in ordure, that appear'd  
Druff of the human body. There beneath  
Searching with eye inquisitive, I mark'd  
One with his head so grimed, 't were hard to deem  
If he were clerk or layman. Loud he cried:  
"Why greedily thus bendest more on me,  
Than on these other filthy ones, thy ken?"

"Because, if true my memory," I replied,  
"I heretofore have seen thee with dry locks;  
And thou Alessio[5] art, of Lucca sprung.  
Therefore than all the rest I scan thee more."

[5: Of the old Interminei family.]

Then beating on his brain, these words he spake:  
"Me thus low down my flatteries have sunk,  
Wherewith I ne'er enough could glut my tongue."

My leader thus: "A little further stretch  
Thy face, that thou the visage well mayst note  
Of that besotted, sluttish courtesan,  
Who there doth rend her with defiled nails,  
Now crouching down, now risen on her feet.  
Thais[6] is this, the harlot, whose false lip  
Answer'd her doting paramour that ask'd,  
'Thankest me much!' - 'Say rather, wondrously,'  
And, seeing this, here satiate be our view."

[6: "Thais." In the Eunuchus of Terence, Thraso asks if Thais was obliged to him for his present; and Gnatho replies, that she had expressed her obligation in the most forcible terms.]