

Inferno Canto 20

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[Christianity Index](#) [Divine Comedy Index](#) [Previous: Inferno Canto 19](#) [Next: Inferno Canto 21](#)

Canto XX

Argument

The Poet relates the punishment of such as presumed, while living, to predict future events. It is to have their faces reversed and set the contrary way on their limbs, so that, being deprived of the power to see before them, they are constrained ever to walk backward. Among these Virgil points out to him Amphiaraus, Tiresias, Aruns, and Manto (from the mention of whom he takes occasion to speak of the origin of Mantua), together with several others, who had practised the arts of divination and astrology.

And now the verse proceeds to torments new,
Fit argument of this the twentieth strain
Of the first song, whose awful theme records
The spirits whelm'd in woe. Earnest I look'd
Into the depth, that open'd to my view,
Moisten'd with tears of anguish, and beheld
A tribe, that came along the hollow vale,
In silence weeping: such their step as walk
Quires, chanting solemn litanies, on earth.

As on them more direct mine eye descends,
Each wonderously seem'd to be reversed
At the neck - bone, so that the countenance
Was from the reins averted; and because
None might before him look, they were compell'd
To advance with backward gait. Thus one perhaps
Hath been by force of palsy clean transposed,
But I ne'er saw it nor believe it so.

Now, reader! think within thyself, so God
Fruit of thy reading give thee! how I long
Could keep my visage dry, when I beheld
Near me our form distorted in such guise,
That on the hinder parts fallen from the face
The tears down - streaming roll'd. Against a rock
I leant and wept, so that my guide exclaim'd:
"What, and art thou, too, witless as the rest?
Here pity most doth show herself alive,
When she is dead. What guilt exceedeth his,
Who with Heaven's judgment in his passion strives?
Raise up thy head, raise up, and see the man

Before whose eyes[1] earth gaped in Thebes, when all
Cried out 'Amphiaraus, whither rushest?
Why leavest thou the war?' He not the less
Fell ruining far as to Minos down,
Whose grapple none eludes. Lo! how he makes
The breast his shoulders; and who once too far
Before him wish'd to see, now backward looks,
And treads reverse his path. Tiresias note,
Who semblance changed, when woman he became
Of male, through every limb transform'd; and then
Once more behoved him with his rod to strike
The two entwining serpents, ere the plumes,
That mark'd the better sex, might shoot again.

[1: Amphiaraus, one of the seven kings who besieged Thebes. He is said to have been swallowed up by an opening of the earth.]

"Aruns,[2] with rere his belly facing, comes.
On Luni's mountains 'midst the marbles white,
Where delves Carrara's hind, who wons beneath,
A cavern was his dwelling, whence the stars
And main - sea whide in boundless view he held.

[2: Said to have dwelt in the mountains of Luni (whence that territory is still called Lunigiana), above Carrara, celebrated for its marble.]

"The next, whose loosen'd tresses overspread
Her bosom, which thou seest not (for each hair
On that side grows) was Manto, she who search'd
Through many regions, and at length her seat
Fix'd in my native land: whence a short space
My words detain thy audience. When her sire
From life departed, and in servitude
The city dedicate to Bacchus mourn'd,
Long time she went a wanderer through the world.
Aloft in Italy's delightful land
A lake there lies, at foot of that proud Alp
That o'er the Tyrol locks Germania in,
Its name Benacus, from whose ample breast
A thousand springs, methinks, and more, between
Camonica and Garda, issuing forth,
Water the Apennine. There is a spot[3]

[3: "There is a spot." Prato di Fame, where the dioceses of Trento, Verona, and Brescia meet.]

At midway of that lake, where he who bears
Of Trento's flock the pastoral staff, with him
Of Brescia, and the Veronese, might each

Passing that way his benediction give.
A garrison of goodly site and strong
Peschiera[4] stands, to awe with front opposed
The Bergamese and Brescian, whence the shore
More slope each way descends. There, whatsoever
Benacus' bosom holds not, tumbling o'er
Down falls, and winds a river flood beneath
Through the green pastures. Soon as in his course
The stream makes head, Benacus then no more
They call the name, but Mincius, till at last
Reaching Governo, into Po he falls.
Not far his course hath run, when a wide flat
It finds, which overstretching as a marsh
It covers, pestilent in summer oft.
Hence journeying, the savage maiden saw
Midst of the fen a territory waste
And naked of inhabitants. To shun
All human converse, here she with her slaves,
Plying her arts, remain'd, and liv'd, and left
Her body tenantless. Thenceforth the tribes,
Who round were scatter'd, gathering to that place,
Assembled; for its strength was great, enclosed
On all parts by the fen. On those dead bones
They rear'd themselves a city, for her sake
Calling it Mantua, who first chose the spot,
Nor ask'd another omen for the name;
Wherein more numerous the people dwelt,
Ere Casalodi's madness[5] by deceit
Was wronged of Pinamonte. If thou hear
Henceforth another origin assign'd
Of that my country, I forewarn thee now,
That falsehood none beguile thee of the truth."

[4: "Peschiera." A garrison situated to the south of the lake, where it empties and forms the Mincius.]

[5: Alberto da Casalodi, in possession of Mantua, was persuaded by Pinamonte Buonacossi to ingratiate himself with the people by banishing to their own castles the nobles, who were obnoxious to them. Pinamonte then put himself at the head of the populace, drove out Casalodi and his adherents, and obtained the sovereignty for himself.]

I answer'd, "Teacher, I conclude thy words
So certain, that all else shall be to me
As embers lacking life. But now of these,
Who here proceed, instruct me, if thou see
Any that merit more especial note.
For thereon is my mind alone intent."

He straight replied: "That spirit, from whose cheek
The beard sweeps o'er his shoulders brown, what time
Graecia was emptied of her males, that scarce
The cradles were supplied, the seer was he
In Aulis, who with Calchas gave the sign
When first to cut the cable. Him they named
Eurypilus: so sings my tragic strain,
In which majestic measure well thou know'st,
Who know'st it all. That other, round the loins
So slender of his shape, was Michael Scot,[6]
Practised in every slight of magic wile.

[6: "It is not long since there was in this city (Florence) a great
master in necromancy, called Michele Scotto, because he was from Scotland."
Boccaccio, Decameron G. viii. N. 9.]

"Guido Bonatti[7] see: Asdente mark,[8]
Who now were willing he had tended still
The thread and cordwain, and too late repents.

[7: An astrologer of Forli, on whose skill Guido da Montefeltro, lord
of that place, so relied, that he is reported never to have gone into battle,
except in the hour recommended to him by Bonatti. Landino and Vellutello speak
of his book on astrology. Macchiavelli mentions him in the History of
Florence, 1. i. p. 24. ed. 1550. "He flourished about 1230 and 1260. Though a
learned astronomer he was seduced by astrology, through which he was greatly
in favor with many princes."]

[8: A shoemaker at Parma, who deserted his business to practice the
arts of divination.]

"See next the wretches, who the needle left,
The shuttle and the spindle, and became
Diviners: baneful witcheries they wrought
With images and herbs. But onward now:
For now doth Cain with fork of thorns[9] confine
On either hemisphere, touching the wave
Beneath the towers of Scville. Yesternight
The moon was round. Thou mayst remember well:
For she good service did thee in the gloom
Of the deep wood." This said, both onward moved.

[9: By Cain and the thorns ("The Man in the Moon") the Poet denotes
that luminary. The same superstition is alluded to in the Paradise, Canto ii.
52.]