

Dante's Virgil: The Tragedy of a More-than-Father



A semi-staging of scenes from Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, performed in Italian with titles, text, images and music.

Directed by Patrick Boyde

**St John's College
(two performances)**

Wednesday 16 & Thursday 17 November

7.30 – 8.45pm



In partnership with La Dante in Cambridge,
European Cultural Centre
www.ladante-in-cambridge.org



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St John's College
The Italian Section of MML

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Ludovico Nolfi, Director of *Ars in fieri*.

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Mark Harrison, for vital help with PowerPoint;

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Karen Clare, for managing the Eventbrite booking site.

The incidental music

is taken from the Four Ballades op. 10 by Johannes Brahms

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READERS

Virgilio	Ludovico Nolfi
Dante protagonista	Davide Martino
Narratore 1 (<i>Prologo e Epilogo</i>)	Patrick Boyde
Narratore 2 (<i>Inferno</i>)	Francesco Contò
Narratore 3 (<i>Purgatorio</i>)	Joned Sarwar
Beatrice	Mariangela Marulli
Lucia	Silvia Giannini
Catone	Michael Horton
Sordello	Francesco Marzella
Stazio	John Bruce-Jones
San Bernardo	Davide Fernandes Dos Santos
Caronte	Kacper Rybiński
Other parts	<i>Members of the cast</i>

MUSIC

Piano	John Bryden
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SYNCHRONISATION

Surtitles	Elena Violaris
	Reuben Thomas

POSTERITY

Video and DVD	James and Liz Willetts
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Virgil Stayed in Hell

Almost as soon as he meets Dante, Virgil lets him know that he was a ‘rebel’ to God’s law (*Inf.* I, 125) and shortly afterwards (*Inf.* II, 52) that he is in Limbo. When he and Dante visit Limbo, Virgil confirms that he belongs among the souls there (*Inf.* IV, 39) and explains that he and the others are guilty of no vice other than that, if like him they lived before Christ, they did not worship God duly. Virgil’s failing is made clearer later on (*Purg.* VII, 7-8; 34-36): he lacked faith and so the other theological virtues of hope and charity, although he possessed all the other, non-theological virtues. Limbo is the limbo of Hell. According to Christian doctrine in the Middle Ages and today, condemnation to Hell is eternal. Dante seems, then, very clearly to portray Virgil as irrevocably condemned to Hell, despite his virtuous life.

Some scholars have suggested that the discussion of the salvation of (ostensible) pagans in Cantos XIX and XX of the *Paradiso* suggests otherwise, and that Dante might have wished to leave open a chink of hope for the salvation of his favourite poet and revered master. But do these two Cantos really point in this direction?

In *Paradiso* XIX, 70-78 Dante the character raises the example of someone in his present (so in Christian times) born ‘on the bank of the Indus’ where Christ and his teachings are unknown. He lives a good life, according to human reason, and dies unbaptized and without faith. Would it not be unjust, Dante asks, for God to condemn him? The beatified souls in the shape of an eagle reply by telling Dante that he is arrogant to make such a judgement. It is as if he is judging something a thousand miles away when he can only see a hand’s breadth. In bringing up this example of someone living in his own times but invincibly ignorant of Christ, Dante was taking up a theme found in philosophers and theologians from Abelard to Aquinas and later. But their regular answer was that, before such a person died, God would ensure, either by sending a messenger or by internal inspiration, that such a person had the faith necessary for salvation. The eagle’s response to Dante does not rule out salvation for the Indian, but it ostentatiously avoids promising it. The theory of special inspiration is markedly absent.

The two examples of unlikely souls in heaven, Trajan and Ripheus, in *Paradiso* XX might seem more promising in providing hints of a happy ending for Virgil, but they turn out not to be. The theologically illiterate eighth-century monk who wrote the earliest hagiography of Pope Gregory recounted a miracle in which the pagan Emperor Trajan was rescued from Hell by the saint’s prayers for him. The theologians who came after him found various ways of explaining away the various doctrinal problems created by this story. Dante adopted (ll. 100-117) the one that became popular in the thirteenth century, taking it most probably from Jacob of Voragine’s *Golden Legend*. According to this version, Gregory’s intervention did not bring about the direct salvation of Trajan, but merely permitted his soul to return to his body, where in a short period of second life Trajan turned to God with faith and love and so merited salvation. Dante’s telling of this version places the emphasis on Gregory’s agency, rather than Trajan’s virtue. In short, Dante seems to go out of his way to stress that the case of Trajan is a strange exception, a miracle brought about by a saint, rather than a model for how virtuous pagans might be saved.

Ripheus, by contrast, is chosen because of his outstanding justice among the Trojans – almost all that is said about him in the brief reference to him in the *Aeneid*. And his salvation is Dante’s own invention. But Dante makes it very clear that his justice alone was not enough to save him. Rather (ll. 118-129), Ripheus’s love of righteousness, itself through God’s grace, led God, by further grace, to open his eyes to Christ’s future coming, so that he

died not a pagan but a Christian. He is an embodiment of Augustine's idea in the *City of God* that before the coming of Christ some members of every people were among the elect and inwardly inspired by God so that they grasped the truths of Christianity necessary for salvation. Of course, Dante could have conjectured that Virgil was among these Christians before Christ, but in that case he would have placed him in heaven.

We are not told why one just pagan, Ripheus, is saved in this way, while so many others, Virgil included, are damned. Indeed, Dante the author stresses that there is no explanation we could grasp. He goes on immediately after the account of Ripheus to comment: 'O predestination, how distant is your root from the vision of those who do not see the First Cause in its wholeness.' Nor would he be surprised that, for today's readers who do not share his Christian view (among whom are almost all readers now, including Christian ones), it is not just that God's individual decisions are inexplicable, but that in general his damnation of virtuous pagans, such as Virgil, seems unjust and so unfitting for God. As Dante writes in the *Monarchia* (II.7.4–5):

There are some judgements of God which, although human reason cannot reach them by its own powers, it can however be raised to them with the help of faith in what is said to us in Holy Scripture—for instance, to this: that no one, if he has never heard anything of Christ, in however many moral and intellectual virtues, according to disposition and to activity, he is perfect, can be saved without faith.

John Marenbon

Walking with Virgil

By virtue of its happy ending, generically a comedy, Dante's *Commedia* is also an epic of exile and homecoming, as too is Virgil's *Aeneid*. Virgil's Underworld book, *Aeneid* 6, stands on its own as a journey within a journey, a journey through the other world that is at once intensely private, and public and universal. Through a series of encounters with the shades of some of his nearest and dearest, lost in the course of his journey from Troy to a new home in Italy, Aeneas travels to a fleeting reunion with his dead father, Anchises, who reveals to him a pageant of the glorious future of Roman history, up to the time of Aeneas's distant descendant, the first emperor Augustus.

For the modern reader, Virgil's this-worldly goal is in strong contrast to the transcendental goal reached by the pilgrim Dante at the end of *Paradiso*. That contrast would not have been so marked for readers of Virgil in Dante's day, familiar with late antique and medieval allegorizations of Aeneas's journey through the Underworld as a journey to profound philosophical and theological truths, and even to the Christian God. Even without that way of reading, *Aeneid* 6 offered Dante the elements for the large-scale structure of the *Commedia*. The Elysian Fields of the blessed spirits, where Aeneas meets his father, correspond to *Paradiso*. Before reaching that goal, Aeneas passes the entrance to Tartarus, the deepest region of the Underworld and place of punishment for the most wicked sinners, the pagan equivalent of *Inferno*. There is even Virgilian authority for *Purgatorio*, in Anchises's account to his son of the elemental purifications undergone by souls in the cycles of a very unChristian doctrine of reincarnation.

For most of his journey through the Underworld Aeneas is guided by a woman, the forbidding and uncanny Sibyl, who hands over at the end to the man dearest to him, his father, for the revelation of future Roman history. Dante, likewise, has two guides for the greater part of his journey: through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, the man Virgil, a literary 'father' for whom Dante has the deepest personal affection, and, through most of *Paradiso*, the woman Beatrice, like the Sibyl a source of revelation, unlike the Sibyl the object of Dante's most intense love.

Reunion and final separation is the recurrent rhythm of Aeneas's experience in the Underworld. He meets the shade of the woman he loved, and was forced to abandon, Dido. She will not speak to him, and turns away. He is reunited, for a short time, with his father, who speaks to him at length, but he is frustrated in his threefold attempt physically to embrace the substanceless shade. Allusive density and emotional intensity are screwed to their highest point in the Virgilian intertextualities of *Purgatorio* 30, in which Dante is reunited with Beatrice, but loses his beloved Virgil. Textual traces of Virgilian loss and tragedy are converted into joyous advent and lasting presence, but the pain of final separation from Virgil is registered in the unredeemed echo of the dying Orpheus' threefold invocation of the name of Eurydice, lost for the second time and forever.

Philip Hardie

Details of Botticelli's drawings for *Inferno* XVII (c. 1490),
hand-coloured by Eileen Burke (1990)

Inferno XVII 79-84



Inferno XVII 91-96



Dante's Virgil as a 'More than Mother'

Dante pictures his relationship to Virgil as that of son to father but also at times of child to mother and finally of friend to friend. The *Commedia* traces a journey through an ever-changing landscape where many different virtues are called into play. Some are heroic virtues, as displayed by Aeneas escaping from the ruins of Troy. But delicacy, tact and maternal sympathy are also called for. And from this eventually flows friendship as between equals.

This friendship extends beyond the frame of the narrative. There is a literary bond of influence and example of which Dante, as he writes, is constantly aware. Virgil writes in Latin; Dante develops an Italian vernacular. But this difference only sharpens the sense of a working relationship. As early as *Inferno* Canto Two Dante beginning his descent into the underworld produces a beautifully elegiac account of growing darkness. This is built with great sensitivity on passages in Virgil's *Aeneid* that speak of night drawing in. The difference – or irony – is that Virgil is describing the onset of natural night whereas Dante is envisaging the entry into Hell. Or consider the treatment of the great judge of the underworld, Minos, who first appears like other figures in Hell in the underworld of *Aeneid* Book VI. Virgil depicts him as fearsome, even dignified. So too he seems to be in Dante's poem – until one discovers that Dante has endowed Minos with a ridiculously twirling animal-tail.

When eventually Dante and Virgil climb out of Hell into Purgatory, they enter a realm that has no equivalent in the underworld of the *Aeneid*. Yet against all expectation Dante extends Virgil's authority. Even here he remains Dante's guide. But the kind of guidance he offers changes markedly. He is now shown to be exploratory, even tentative, in negotiating unknown territory. He remains capable of philosophical discourse; and at the mid-point of the journey he engages in sustained technical discussion. Yet the topic verges on the theological, transcending the sphere of Virgil's classical thinking. This topic is love as the motive force in all creation.

Nonetheless, the bond between Dante and Virgil as literary authors remains indissoluble. And the vision that binds them is a vision of how the natural world may become a perfect world. This is the subject of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue: But when Dante at the summit of Purgatory enters the Earthly Paradise, his indebtedness to Virgil is made explicit. The Christian Earthly Paradise Dante insists was foreshadowed in the writings of ancient poets. Virgil smiles (as he rarely does) at this acknowledgement.

But this all prepares for an intensely tragic moment. Virgil enters Earthly Paradise but is silent, hardly comprehending its beauty. Then Beatrice appears. Dante turns to Virgil to speak of his overwhelming love. But Virgil has disappeared never to re-appear. Overcome by grief even in the midst of his joy at Beatrice's appearance, Dante, dissolving into tears bewails the loss of a father – whom he addresses now in his desolation as 'mother'.

Robin Kirkpatrick

Dante's Virgil: an Overview

SCENE	TITLE	CANTO
Inferno		
Prelude	The Meeting	I–II
Prologue	Beatrice and Lucia	II
1	Limbo	IV
2	The Noble Castle	IV
3	The Walls of Lower Hell	VIII–IX
4	The Centaurs	XII
5	Geryon	XVI
6	Threats	XXI
7	Pursuit and Flight	XXIII
8	Lucifer, Descent and Climb	XXXIV
Purgatorio		
Intermezzo	Dawn on the Shore	I
9	Cato, Challenge and Rebuke	I
10	Cato, Reproof	II–III
11	The Absent Shadow	III
12	Sordello	VI–VII
13	Lucia	IX
14	Statius	XXI
15	The Wall of Fire	XXVII
16	Emancipation	XXVII
Epilogue	Lament	XXX
Paradiso		
Postlude	Beatrice and Bernard	XXXI

Professor Boyde's Semi-stagings

This performance of *Dante's Virgil* is the latest in a series of semi-staged productions which have kept me busy since my retirement in 2002.

The plays are all abridgements of rarely performed verse-dramas, or dramatisations of episodes in classical epics or of books in the Bible. All have been enhanced by live music and illuminated by appropriate images. The meaning has always been made crystal-clear by specially-composed surtitles, or by the projection of the original text, or – as tonight – by both!

In every case the focus has been on the language of a major text which is to be enjoyed on its own terms and for its own sake, just like a symphony. Every directorial choice is intended to heighten the impact of the Word, to rouse it from its hibernation on the page, to bring it from potency to act. There are two underlying obsessions; first, my conviction – shared with Dante – that the essence of poetry lies in its verbal music (*armonia, dolcezza*), which is why it does not survive translation: and, second, that a good reading depends on deep understanding and conveys a loving interpretation – which it does more effectively than any written commentary.

Patrick Boyde

Table of the principal works semi-staged since 2002

2002	<i>Pulchérie</i>	Corneille
2005	<i>Nausicaa</i>	Homer
2007	<i>Penelope</i>	Homer
2008	<i>Antikleia and Calypso</i>	Homer / Ovid
2009	<i>Circe / Gilgamesh & Enkidu</i>	Homer / Epic of Gilgamesh
2010	<i>Oedipus at Colonus</i>	Sophocles
2010	<i>Sailing the Wine-dark Sea</i>	Anthology, Homer to Cavafy
2011	<i>Borderers, The</i>	Wordsworth
2011	<i>Prometheus</i>	Aeschylus / Shelley
2012	<i>Ajax (Lorarius)</i>	Sophocles
2012	<i>Conquering Hero, The</i>	Psalm 24 (Septuagint)
2012	<i>Kinsmen, Four</i>	Homer / Shakespeare
2013	<i>Achilles: The End of his Wrath</i>	Homer
2014	<i>Aeneas</i>	Homer / Virgil
2014	<i>Job: Trial by Ordeal</i>	Book of Job (Septuagint)
2015	<i>Persephone & Demeter</i>	Homeric Hymn / Ovid
2016	<i>Mark, The Gospel of</i>	New Testament
2016	<i>Paradise Regained</i>	Milton
2017	<i>Apocalypse</i>	New Testament
2017	<i>Manfred</i>	Byron
2018	<i>Samson</i>	Book of Judges (Septuagint) / Milton
2019	<i>Horace</i>	Corneille
2019	<i>Hermann und Dorothea</i>	Goethe
2019	<i>Maud</i>	Tennyson
2020	<i>Pan Tadeusz</i>	Mickiewicz
2021	<i>Hung from a Golden Galaxy</i>	Tennyson, Shakespeare, Byron, Browning
2022	<i>Comus</i>	Milton
2022	<i>Dante's Virgil</i>	Dante

Who's Who

PATRICK BOYDE (John's) is Emeritus Professor of Italian. Since 2002 he has been directing dramas in Greek, Latin, English, French, German and Polish.

JOHN BRUCE-JONES (Jesus) was born in Florence. He read Italian and French and undertook postgraduate research on Dante's *Convivio* under Professor Boyde. A solid grounding in thirteenth-century science prepared him for a long career in management consultancy.

JOHN BRYDEN is a well known concert pianist, accompanist and teacher who has always had a special love for the music of Brahms.

FRANCESCO CONTÒ (Trinity) is a postdoctoral Research Associate at DAMTP, University of Cambridge. He was born and grew up in Bisceglie, on the shore of the Adriatic Sea. His research is focused on fluid mechanics.

DAVIDE FERNANDES DOS SANTOS is from Rome.

SILVIA GIANNINI is from Puglia.

PHILIP HARDIE (Trinity) is Emeritus Professor of Classics and author of a major study on the fortunes of Virgil through the centuries and across Western Europe.

MICHAEL HORTON (John's) studied Italian and French in the 1970s and went on to become a teacher, and after studying Theology at Oxford, an Anglican Priest.

GILLIAN JONDORF (Girton) is a former Senior Lecturer in Renaissance French, and has been composing surtitles for semi-staged productions in Greek, Latin and French every year since 2004.

ROBIN KIRKPATRICK (Robinson) is Emeritus Professor of Italian and the translator/editor of the *Divine Comedy* for Penguin Classics.

JOHN MARENBO (Trinity) is a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge who works and writes on philosophy in the Long Middle Ages.

DAVIDE MARTINO is finishing a PhD in History at St John's, where he also took his History BA and MPhil. He grew up in Milan and Brussels, and worked as a primary school teacher in Northamptonshire before starting his PhD.

MARIANGELA MARULLI is from Puglia.

FRANCESCO MARZELLA was born in Puglia and brought up in L'Aquila. He is a Research Associate at the Dept. of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, working on Latin Arthurian Literature.

LUDOVICO NOLFI is an actor, director and drama trainer from Rome. He is founder and director of the theatre companies 'Progetto Attore' in Rome and 'Ars in Fieri' in Cambridge.

KACPER RYBIŃSKI (John's), from Łódź, Poland, is in his second year reading English. He has already performed Shakespeare and Milton here, his ambitions lying firmly with theatre.

JONED SARWAR (Homerton) is from Mantua but born to Pakistani and Italian parents in Germany. He holds an MEng in Information Engineering from Cambridge and is a co-founder and director of Alchera Technologies.

REUBEN THOMAS first worked with the Director as an undergrad in 1994, and more recently has taken the parts of the eponymous heroes in *Samson* and *Comus*. Principally a freelance baritone and software developer, Reuben is currently completing an archive of the productions listed on page 10 for future use and study.

ELENA VIOLARIS completed her BA, MPhil and PhD in English at St John's. She is currently supervising undergraduates at Cambridge University and is an Associate Lecturer at Anglia Ruskin University.