

CANTO XIII

When they have crossed the river, the Poets find themselves in a dense, tenebrous wood of gnarled, poisonous brambles, where the Harpies nest, avian creatures with broad wings, taloned feet, feathered maws, but female faces. Dante hears woeful moanings but describes no one in pain. Perhaps thinking that he suspects the presence of sufferers hidden in the thicket, Virgil invites his charge to snap off a twig from a shrub (1–30). As he does so, the broken limb spurts blood and bitterly reproaches him for his cruelty. The startled Dante drops the sprig, standing there unnerved, while Virgil explains to the injured plant that the Pilgrim could not have believed so unlikely a thing without putting it to the test himself (31–51). To salve the wound, Virgil says that if the implanted spirit will identify himself, the Poet will renew his fame in the world. The shade, unable to resist such coaxing, then reveals himself as Pier della Vigna, a minister of Frederick II and one who enjoyed the Ruler's confidence until the envious unjustly turned the Emperor against him. Rather than bear public disgrace, he took his life, unwavering in loyalty to his sovereign (52–78). Although prompted, Dante, overcome by pity, is unable to ask the engrafted spirit anything. When Virgil therefore inquires how the suicidal spirit is transplanted into a bush and whether it can ever be uprooted, Pier replies that, at its death, Minos casts the shade into the seventh circle, where it lands at random, takes root, sprouts, and puts forth leaves. Feeding upon its foliage, the Harpies both inflict pain and grant an airing for pain, since the ensheaved souls can hiss forth speech only through a bloody opening. At the general resurrection on the Last Day, they too shall seek their forfeited bodies, drag them back, and hang them on their branches for all eternity (79–108). Suddenly two scattergoods, Lano da Siena and Jacopo da Santo Andrea, come tearing through the underbrush, mangled and naked. Gasping, the latter collapses upon a brier, where a pack of hounds in hot pursuit tears him asunder and carries off his members (109–129). When questioned, the splintered plant left behind speaks superstitiously of Florence but discloses itself only as one who hanged himself from a gallows (130–151).

¹ But Nessus had not reached the other shore
When we set out to journey
through a wood^[211]
That was not marked by any path before.

⁴ No verdant leafage, but a dark-leafed hood;
No boughs were smooth, but all
were gnarls and knots; No fruits were there,
where poisoned briars stood.

⁷ The savage beasts that hate the cultured plots
From Cécina to far Corneto
rest^[212]
In no more rough and densely wooded spots.

10 And there the ugly Harpies make their nest, Who chased the Trojans from
the Strophades,
With dismal tales of future ills to breast. [\[213\]](#)

13 Broad wings but human neck and face have these, With taloned feet and
feathered maws, and they
Make such laments upon the strangest trees.

16 “Before you enter farther on this way, Take note that in the second ring
you’ll dwell,”
My goodly Master had begun to say,

19 “Until you see the horrid sand. Look well [\[214\]](#)
On that account, and shortly you will spy
What you would not believe, were I to tell.”

22 On every side I heard a wailing cry, But yet no one who made it was
perceived,
So that I halted, much amazed. And I

25 Believe that he believed that I believed Among the trunks so many voices
came
From people hiding from us there, ensheaved.

28 The Master therefore said: “If you should maim Some little branch from any
plant you may,
The thoughts you have will all be rendered lame.”

31 I stretched my hand a bit then towards a spray And plucked a branchlet from
a thorn grown tall, [\[215\]](#)
Whose trunk cried out: “Why break my branch away?”

34 And when it darkened with a bloody pall, Again it said: “Why are you
tearing me?
Have you no pity in your soul at all?

37 Though we were men, now each is made a tree.
Your hand would show a greater pity though

your hand would show a greater pity, though,
If nothing else than serpent souls were we.”

40 As verdant brands on one end burn aglow While, from the other, drippings
will appear
With hissing sounds from wind escaping, so

43 Out of the broken twig there issued here Both words and blood. I held the tip
no more,
And thus I stood there like a man in fear.

46 “Had he been able to believe before, O wounded soul,” my Sage replied,
“what he
Had never seen but in my verses’ store,[\[216\]](#)

49 He’d not have stretched his hand against a tree.
Unlikely things have made me recommend
A deed to him that burdens even me.

52 But tell him who you were that he may mend The harm and make your glory
fresh anew
Up in the world, where he may still ascend.”

55 The trunk: “If lured by words of such sweet hue, Then I can not be still; but
if I please
To speak at length, may it not burden you.

58 For I am he who carried both the keys Of Frederick’s heart, and so I turned
the two,
Thus locking and unlocking with such ease

61 That from his secrets I took all but few.[\[217\]](#)
I kept faith with that noble duty’s ties
So that I lost my sleep and pulses too.

64 The whore who’s never turned her harlot eyes Away from Caesar’s dwelling
but who goes
As common death and courtly vice would rise[\[218\]](#)

67 To flame their minds against me, and all those, Aflame, inflamed that
Emperor august,
Till joyful honors turned to dismal woes.

70 My spirit, in disdainful humor thrust, Which thought to flee disdain through
death, made me Unjust against myself, though I was just.

73 I swear by these new roots beneath this tree, I never broke faith with my lord
—oh no!— For so deserving of esteem was he.

76 If to the world yet one of you should go, Please carry comfort to my
memory,
Which still lies prostrate there from Envy's blow.”

79 The Poet waited, then he told me: “See, He's fallen silent; lose no time, but
speak,
And ask him what you please, if more there be.”

82 “But you must further ask,” I had to seek, “Of that which you believe may
yet appease
My heart—I can't, for pity makes it weak.”

85 “So may this man,” he thus renewed his pleas, “Do freely what your spoken
prayer implied,
Imprisoned spirit; and if you should please,

88 Inform us further how the soul is tied Within these knots; and if you can, tell
too
If from such members some are ever pried.”

91 And at that point the trunk quite strongly blew, Then changed that wind to
play the voice's role:
“But briefly will response be made to you:

94 When from its flesh there parts a savage soul That tears its roots from where
they first had lain, Then Minos sends it to the seventh hole.

97 It falls on woods, with no select terrain; But wheresoever Fortune wills to
throw
That soul, it sprouts there like a wheaten grain.

100 Such grow as saplings, then wild plants, and so Upon their leaves the
Harpies feed, whose bite
Both gives them woe and windows unto woe.

103 Like others, we shall seek our spoils despite Our being nevermore with
them arrayed— What one casts off is not one's own by right.

106 We'll drag our bodies here, where they'll be laid To hang throughout this
mournful wood's extent,
Each on the thorn-tree of its harmful shade."

109 And on the trunk we both were still intent, Believing it had wanted to say
more,
When some loud noise surprised us, and it went

112 With us as when a man perceives the boar And chase as they are coming
towards his post:
He hears the branches swish and beasts that roar.

115 And now two spirits from the left-hand coast, All torn and naked, fleeing
hard, came by
Through broken brambles of the wood's great host.

118 "Come death, come quickly!" was the first one's cry.
The other thought himself too much delayed
And yelled, "Your legs, O Lano, weren't so spry

121 When you were jousting once at Toppo's raid!"[\[219\]](#)
And maybe since his breath began to lack,
One heap of him and of a bush was made.

124 The forest there was full of dogs, all black, Which came behind with swift
and eager vim,
Like hounds that had escaped from chains too slack.

127 Where he had crouched, they set their teeth in him, Thus tearing him
asunder, shred by shred,
And then they carried off each wretched limb.

130 My Escort took my hand, and I was led On over to the bush that wept for
naught,
Lamenting through its fractures as they bled.

133 “Jacop’ da Sant’ Andrea,” so it sought, “What good is it to make a screen of
me?
Am I to blame for your bad life in aught?”

136 My Master said, once stopped beside that tree: “O you, who blow through
many wounds to mourn
With blood in woeful speech, who might you be?”

139 And he replied: “O spirits, who are borne To see this shameful havoc from
nearby,
Through which so many of my leaves are torn,

142 Please bring them to this sad shrub’s base to lie.
My city changed its former patron’s reign
For that of John the Baptist—that is why[220]

145 His warring art will always cause it pain.
And if the Arno’s pass no longer bore
Some vestiges of Mars that still remain,

148 The citizens who built that town once more, On ashes left from where Attila
rode,
Would find in vain all that they labored for.

151 I made a gallows of my own abode.”[221]