Inferno XV. 95-96: Fortune’s Wheel and the Villainy of Time*

Inferno XV. 95-96 ("giri Fortuna la sua rota/come le piace, e ’l villan la sua marra")¹ is not one of the great cruxes of Dante’s Commedia, but the complete meaning of the phrase has not been fully understood by the commentators. If it has failed to generate its own critical literature, unlike Dante’s “piè fermo” (Inf. I. 30) and Guido’s “disdegno” (Inf. X. 63), it is only because the context renders its general significance more or less clear:

Ciò che narrate di mio corso scrivo,
e serbolo a chiosar con altro testo
a donna che saprà, s’a lei arrivo.
Tanto vogl’io che vi sia manifesto,
pur che mia coscienza non mi garra,
ch’a la Fortuna, come vuol, son presto.

Buti’s interpretation of the last two lines is typical of that offered by the majority of the old commentators: “Faccia la fortuna e facciano gli uomini, come piace loro, ch’io sono per sostenere.”² As we can see, Buti’s gloss is little more than a paraphrase of the two verses, yet it is this literal interpretation that virtually all of the modern commentators have preferred and perpetuated. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the commentary that has accumulated around these verses is its uniformity. Here are a few examples:

Let fate and men pursue their thoughtless course: this sounds like a proverbial phrase. (Grandgent)³

Let luck turn her wheel, and the labourer turn the soil — Dante shall remain unmoved by one as by the other. (Sayers)⁴

Faccia pure la fortuna, facciano il piacer loro gli uomini sconosciuti e malvagi. (Parodi)⁵

Dante è indifferente al rotare della Fortuna come sarebbe al lavoro di un contadino. (Momigliano)⁶

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Nonetheless, the same commentators readily admit that they do not completely comprehend the meaning of the phrase “e’l villan la sua marra.” They believe it to be part of a proverb whose significance is now lost. Momigliano, for example notes: “‘e’l villan la sua marra’ sembra un compimento proverbiale e popolescamente sdegnoso della frase ‘giri Fortuna la sua rota/come le piace’.” Chances are, given the rhythm and tone of the two verses, that at one time they did indeed constitute a proverbial saying. The problem then becomes, what is the proverb’s exact meaning and what is its origin?

Sapegno and Singleton, who have produced two of the most authoritative recent commentaries on the Commedia, are content to rephrase the traditional interpretation, synthesized by Momigliano above. Sapegno comments on the verses thus:

La frase “e’l villan la sua marra” ha tutta l’aria di un proverbio, già legato forse nell’uso popolare all’altra immagine, pur essa proverbiale, della Fortuna che gira la sua ruota; e Dante se ne serve per conferire un rilievo più energico, con una sfumatura di violenza plebea, al suo “superbo fastidio di tutte quelle piccole cose che gli attraverseranno il cammino.”

Singleton writes:

The peasant (villano) idly whirling his mattock is juxtaposed, in a defiant, challenging tone, to Fortune turning her wheel. The phrase, “e’l villan [giri] la sua marra” seems to echo some unknown proverb.6

Even Pézard, who has devoted a considerable amount of time to the mysteries of Inferno XV, is at a loss before the phrase’s original “proverbial” meaning. He too backs down and repeats the litany: “Et le vilain sa marre: allusion probable à des exemples proverbiaux du temps, illustrant l’idée qu’un homme comme Dante n’attend ni honneurs ni argent.” However, Pézard is the only modern commentator I know of who has attempted to identify Dante’s villan and give a more comprehensive interpretation of the troublesome phrase.11

Pézard detects in Inferno XV. 96 an echo of a passage in the Convivio:

Veramente io vidi lo luogo, ne le coste d’un monte che si chiama Falterona, in Toscana, dove lo più vile villano di tutta la contrada, zappando, più d’uno staio di santalene d’argento finissimo vi trovò, che forse più di dumilia anni l’aveano aspettato. (IV. xi. 8)

Then, through elaborate and subtle argumentation, he links “il villano del Falterona” to “il villan d’Aguglion,” to whom Caccia-
guida refers scornfully in Paradiso XVI. 56. Thus the villan of Inferno XV. 96 is, according to Pézard, an oblique allusion to Baldo di Guglielmo da Aguglione, who in 1311 was responsible for drawing up a document reconfirming the banishment from Florence of several political exiles, Dante among them. Pézard implies that Dante, unlike Baldo, whom Dante accuses of fraud elsewhere in the poem (Purg. XII. 105), is not concerned with riches and deceptive public honours (“ni honneurs ni argent”) but rather with the more lofty ideals of justice and integrity. Unlike the villainous Baldo d’Aguglione, Dante has a clear conscience (“mia conoscìenza non mi garra,” Inf. XV. 92) and thus he is ready to face the blows Fortune has in store for him. Pézard’s interpretation of the villano verse is ingenious but somewhat belaboured.

A much more sensible proposal concerning the identity of Dante’s villan in Inferno XV. 96 was put forward by some of the poem’s early commentators, Boccaccio included. They suggested that the villan is a reference to the Fiesolani, whom Brunetto had earlier identified as Dante’s enemies and had described as rustic and unsophisticated:

Ma quello ingrato popolo maligno
che discese di Fiesole ab antico,
e tiene ancor del monte e del macigno,
ti si farà, per tuo ben far, nimico. (Inf. XV. 61-64)

Boccaccio elaborates on this reasonable hypothesis in the following manner:

Queste parole dice per quello che ser Brunetto gli ha detto de’ Fiesolani, che contro a lui deono adoperare, li quali qui discrive in persona di villani, cioè d’uomini non cittadini, ma di villa; e in quanto dice “la sua marra”, intende che essi Fiesolani, come piace loro, il lor malvagio essercizio adoperino, come il villano adopera la marra.

Strangely enough, this perceptive and imaginative interpretation of the verse, based on an internal analysis of the structure of the episode and its pattern of imagery, has not found favour with modern commentators.

In any case, neither Boccaccio’s interpretation nor Pézard’s more intricate reading of the phrase elucidates its literal meaning. In order to understand its full significance we must fall back on the iconographical tradition depicting time. Moreover, the verse’s meaning must be considered in relation to the preceding verse evoking Fortune. To this extent those commentators who noted
that the two verses were somehow linked were on the right track. But they didn’t know how the two were connected, beyond that together they probably formed a popular proverbial saying. The connection, as I have already suggested, is that the images of Fortune turning her wheel and the peasant tilling the soil are both iconographical representations of time: time as kairos and time as chronos.

Let us start with the first phrase: “giri Fortuna la sua rota/ come le piace.” By itself, the phrase presents no problems. In it Dante evokes the traditional image of Fortuna personified as a woman turning a wheel. This picture of Fortune is in complete conformity with Virgil’s discussion of the concept in Inferno VII. 67-96. Indeed, Virgil’s obscure words (“Bene ascolta chi la nota,” Inf. XV. 99) at the end of Dante’s lengthy response to Brunetto’s prophetic pronouncement may be a veiled reference to his earlier discourse on Fortune. In Inferno VII, Virgil instructs Dante to listen carefully to what he has to say about the goddess Fortuna whose true nature man — enveloped as he is in ignorance — generally misunderstands: “Or vo’ che tu mia sentenza ne’mbocche” (Inf. VII. 72). He then proceeds to explain to Dante that Fortune is God’s minister on earth (“general ministra e duce”) and that it is pointless to resist her motion:

Vostro saver non ha contrasto a lei: 
questa provede, giudica, e persegue 
suo regno come il loro li altri déi. (Inf. VII. 85-87)

Dante’s statements in Inferno XV about the ways of Fortune all indicate that he has grasped fully the meaning — sentenza — of Virgil’s discourse on Fortune in Inferno VII. Hence, Virgil’s praise: “Bene ascolta chi la nota.” With these words, Virgil compliments his pupil for having learned the lesson well. Dante has taken note of, i.e. transcribed in the “book of his memory,” Virgil’s words in Inferno VII and he now uses them to interpret Brunetto’s prophecy. Thus, Virgil’s laconic phrase probably refers to his speech on Fortune in Inferno VII and not, as is often claimed to his maxim on Fortune in the Aeneid. Be that as it may, what concerns us here primarily is that in Inferno XV the medieval personification of Fortune is closely connected with the representation of the figure of time as kairos.

In Greek kairos means time, understood as “the brief, decisive moment which marks a turning-point in the life of human beings or in the development of the universe.” Kairos is thus the critical moment, the moment charged with significance when past, present, and future meet. According to Panofsky, in Greek art
this concept was represented by the figure of Opportunity, who was equipped with wings at both the shoulders and the heels, and who carried a pair of scales balanced on the edge of a straight razor, or later, on one or two wheels. His bald head sported a single lock of hair, the forelock by which one seizes opportunity. In the eleventh century, this allegorical notion of Kairos or Opportunity began to fuse with that of Fortune. As both Patch and Panofsky suggest, the fact that the Latin word for Kairos, Occasio, was feminine in gender, like the noun Fortuna, probably encouraged the assimilation of the two concepts. No matter how it came about, what matters to us here is that the figures of Fortune and Opportunity did fuse, or rather, that the concept of Fortune came to be identified with time as Kairos. Therefore it is Fortune that marks the critical moment, the turning-point in the personal history of men and the collective history of mankind.

Let us now turn our attention to the second phrase, “e'l villan la sua marra,” which completes the expression. The villan, as we shall soon discover, is also connected with representations of time, time understood not as Kairos but as Chronos, i.e. chronological, sequential time. The Greek word Chronos sounds very much like the name of the god, Kronos, known to the Romans as Saturn. Because of his association with agriculture and rural life in general, he was often depicted carrying a sickle. With the passage of time, the fact that Chronos and Kronos were virtual homonyms was used to justify the identification of the concepts they represented, which indeed shared some characteristics. Plutarch, for example, asserts that Kronos means Time just as Hera means Air and Hephaistos means Fire.

Because of this fusion, the Kronos-Saturn figure was, in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, depicted with some new features (like the snake or dragon with its tail in its mouth) intended to emphasize its connection with time. Moreover, the original features of his appearance were reinterpreted to support this idea. Thus Saturn’s sickle, appropriate originally because of his role as patron of agriculture, now was viewed as a symbol of the continuous flux of time. The myth that Saturn devoured his own children was allegorized, because of the Chronos-Kronos link, to mean that time devours what he creates.

The iconographical development of the image of Time, our modern “Father Time,” is thus virtually fused with the iconography of the Kronos-Saturn figure. But over the years the figure of time has lost some of his majesty. A dignified if somewhat morose figure, he was depicted in classical art with a sickle in his hand and a veil covering his face. By the high Middle Ages Saturn,
like Jupiter, Venus, Mercury and Mars, had been identified with a planet, and new characteristics were added to his appearance to reflect his role as planetary ruler.

In the Middle Ages, Saturn was held to be a sinister if not downright malignant force. Gloom and melancholy pervaded those unfortunate enough to be born under his influence. Panofsky characterizes Saturn's effect on men thus:

Those subject to his power could be mighty and wealthy, but not kindly and generous; they could be wise, but not happy. Generally Saturn, coldest, driest, and slowest of planets, was associated with old age, abject poverty and death.20

In the Middle Ages responsibility for natural disasters, such as famines and floods, was laid at his door. Those associated with him occupied the lowest levels of society — the cripples, beggars, criminals, grave diggers and poorest of peasants. In short, it was believed, and very strongly in popular culture, that from Saturn's influence could come no good.

Astrological imagery thus emphasized the negative aspects of Saturn's character. He was depicted mostly as a sick and gloomy old man, often in the garb of a peasant. In place of his original sickle he now carried a spade or mattock. Even this was later replaced by a staff or crutch as Saturn's role as patron of agriculture was subsumed by images suggesting the decrepitude of old age. But this final transformation of the Kronos-Saturn figure occurred after Dante's death. During his lifetime the image of Father Time, i.e., the iconography of Kronos-Saturn, had developed to the stage where he appeared as a peasant turning the soil with a hoe. On these grounds, I suggest that Dante's villan in Inferno XV is a figure of Kronos-Saturn, i.e., of Time. If this is the case, and I am certain that it is, the exact meaning of Inferno XV. 95-96 would be "let Fortune turn her wheel as she pleases and let time continue its relentless course." As further proof of my argument, let me add that Fortune and Time were often explicitly named together.27 Dante himself, as far as I can tell, does not couple the two ideas in one syntactical unit.28 However, referring in Paradiso XVII to his exile, he speaks alternately of the blows of Fortune and the blows of Time, which would indicate that in his mind the two concepts were linked:

dette mi fuor di mia vita futura
parole gravi, avvegna ch'io mi senta
ben tetragono ai colpi di ventura. (Par. XVII. 22-24)
Ben veggio, padre mio, sì come sprona
lo tempo verso me, per colpo darmi
tal, ch'è più grave a chi più s'abbandona. (Par. XVII. 106-108)

But, as I have already stated, Fortune and Time were often paired. Ariosto, for example, at one point in the *Orlando Furioso*, written some two hundred years after the *Commedia*, says: "per colpa di tempo e di Fortuna" (O.F. XXXIV. lxxiii). Ariosto's verse may or may not echo the two passages from *Paradiso* XVII cited above as well as the phrase from the *Convivio* (I. iv. 10): "colpo di fortuna." Regardless, it belongs to the same order of ideas as Dante's colourful expression: "giri Fortuna la sua rota/come le piace, e 'l villan la sua marra." What is missing from Ariosto is the mythographical context in which Dante's expression is embedded. Ariosto's verse also lacks the popular flavour and the defiant tone which animates Dante's line and gives it a proverbial ring. (Given the phrase's vigour, I would be inclined to agree with those who think Dante's expression was probably based on a proverbial saying.)

It is impossible to determine whether Dante was fully aware of the mythographical origins of the popular expression he elevated to poetry by placing it in a perfectly appropriate aesthetic context. However, I would argue that he certainly did know that the image of the peasant turning the soil with a spade stood for time, and that Fortune and Time belong to the same order of phenomena. If this is the case, the expression is not only a poignant and touching response to Brunetto's prophecy of his imminent exile, but also a precise one in terms of Dante's awareness of what exile means. By responding to Brunetto's menacing words in this way, Dante is saying, in effect, that he is ready to accept what Fortune and Time will bring. Specifically, he recognizes that exile will mark a turning-point in his life, a *Kairos*. Further, he is ready to face the hard times in store for him. In particular, Dante is ready to accept the consequences of exile which the "villainous" Saturn has prepared for him. Dante can accept with equanimity the blows of Fortune and Time because he knows that it is his destiny to transcend the realm of *Kairos* and *Chronos*. Thus he can say to Brunetto:

Ciò che narrate di mio corso scrivo,
e serbolo a chiosar con altro testo
a donna che saprà... ( Inf. XV. 88-90)

His is a journey from time to eternity (Par. XXXI. 37-39), and it is from this perspective that Cacciaguida, and not Beatrice, glosses Dante's book. However, it is Beatrice who makes Dante's transit
possible, for he enjoys her protection. Dante is her friend, and not the friend of Fortune (Inf. II. 61). But before Dante is redeemed, as Cacciaguida explains, he must suffer much because of Fortune's antagonism and the "villainy" of Saturn (Par. XVII. 46ff).

In conclusion, Dante's villan in Inferno XV. 96 is a figure of Time in the guise of the decrepit Saturn represented as a peasant turning the soil with a hoe. Time is "villainous" not only because it takes the form of a peasant, but also because it is "wretched." Its passing leads inexorably to suffering and death. Indeed, in Dante the noun "villano" is often qualified by "vile." To be a "villano" implies necessarily that one is "volgare," "non nobile." In the Convivio, Dante defines "nobilitate" in contrast to "viltate." In the Commedia, accepting with equanimity the blows of Fortune and Time, he demonstrates himself to be "nobile e non villano." Thus, he can say to Brunetto: "Let Fortune turn her wheel as she pleases and let time (il villano) continue its relentless course."

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NOTES

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1 All quotations from the Commedia are from La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata, a cura di Giorgio Petrocchi (Milano, 1966-1967); all quotations from Dante's minor works are from the Società Dantesca edition of Le Opere di Dante (Firenze, 1960).

2 Commento di Francesco da Buti sopra la Divina Commedia di Dante Allighieri, pubblicato per cura di Crescentino Giannini (Pisa, 1858), Vol. I, p. 416. To be sure, Buti goes on to offer an interesting if somewhat arbitrary allegorical interpretation of the two verses, in which "Fortuna" and "il villano" stand for Providence and free will respectively, i.e., the two forces which govern human existence: "Faccia la Fortuna e facciano li uomini, come piace loro, ch'io sono per sostenere. E questo dice notevolmente, per mostrare che li effetti della Fortuna vengono per due cagioni: l'una è da' corpi celesti e da quella sostanza, che Dio à posto a dispensare questi beni mondani, l'altra è da libero arbitrio dell' uomini: e però à nominato la Fortuna, dicendo, com'appar di sopra, per la prima cagione; e poi lo villano, per la seconda." (pp. 416-417). However, most modern commentators who cite Buti (and he definitely seems to be the most quoted early commentator on the subject) stop at his brief paraphrase of the two verses. See, e.g., Scartazzini and Sapegno. Few (e.g., Pagliaro and Fallani) record Buti's complete gloss. Perhaps this is due to the fact that whatever attention has been directed to these two verses by modern critics has been aimed at clarifying their "literal" meaning, universally perceived as being problematic, rather than speculating on any "other" possible meaning they may have. For a brief, very brief — and hence incomplete — survey of the commentary tradition on the two verses, see
6 La Divina Commedia: Inferno, con i commenti di T. Casini/S.A. Barbi e A. Momigliano; a cura di Francesco Mazzoni (Firenze, 1972), p. 296.
7 Momigliano, op. cit., p. 296. On this point there seems to be universal agreement. In addition to Momigliano, see Tommaseo, Andreoli, Grabher, Sapegno, Pagliaro, Pézard, Grandgent, Singleton, etc. From this point of view, perhaps Cesari's gloss is the most colourful: "Però girl... sua marra: come dicesse; Tanto mi scuoterà qualunque colpo della fortuna, quanto un colpo de marra che il villan dia contro la terra. O piuttosto, e forse meglio con un modo proverbiale; Faccia pur la fortuna il diavolo, peggio che ella sa: io mi piglierò il mondo com'e' verrà." See Bellezze della Commedia di Dante Alighieri. Dialoghi d'Antonio Cesari, Vol. I, Inferno (Verona, 1824), p. 309.
12 Pagliaro, op. cit., pp. 176-177, who seems to be unaware of Pézard's interpretation, also uses "il villano del Falterona" passage in the Convivio to gloss Inferno XV. 95-96, but he is content to simply juxtapose the two texts: "Si tratta di una immagine assunta quasi a metafora, secondo un modo, che è proprio del linguaggio dantesco: il contagio senza merito, anzi il peccato della contrada, che trova a caso, zappando, un tesoro, diventa un termine di confronto e quasi il simbolo della fortuna imimperita; come dire: 'La fortuna distribuisce pure a caso i suoi doni e ne godano gli imperiteroli, com'è il caso del contagino che trova tesori, manovrando senza intenzione la sua marra'" (p. 177). Bosco and Reggio liked Pagliaro's interpretation and have appropriated it in their recent commentary on the Commedia. See La Divina Commedia: Inferno, a cura di Umberto Bosco e Giovanni Reggio (Firenze, 1980), p. 229.
13 Cf. Fallani, who, through the mediation of Tommaseo, hints at a possible metaphorical connection between the villan of Inferno XV.96 and "il villan d’Aguglion" of Paradiso XV.56, but he makes nothing of it. See La Divina Commedia: Inferno, a cura di Giovanni Fallani (Firenze, 1965), pp. 175-76.
14 In addition to Boccaccio, see, e.g., L’Ottimo and L’Anonimo Fiorentino.
16 Few seem to be aware of it. See, however, Ernesto Trucchi’s paraphrase - interpretation of Inferno XV.91-96 in Esposizione della Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri: Inferno (Milano, 1943), p. 261: "Io non curo che l’approvazione della coscienza, e son pronto, per conservare questa, ad ogni mutamento di Fortuna: m’è ben nota questa caparra del dovere degli uomini di fronte alla fortuna: faccia dunque Fortuna il piacer suo, e i villani discendenti da Fiesole il loro: quella volgendo la sua rota come a lei spetta, questi menando colpi di marra. Così Dante si riacconta a Brunetto nell’uso dei proverbì popolari, e contrappone il
proprio disprezzo a quello degli uomini, senza offender la Fortuna che Virgilio gli ha insegnato a rispettare."


18 Cf. Sapegno, op. cit.: "Espressione oscura e variamente interpretata." Indeed, the verse has gained the status of a minor crux in Dante criticism. Pagliaro, op. cit., pp. 177-184, surveys rapidly the three most common interpretations of the verse, but there are others (e.g. Landino's) which he does not list. Pagliaro himself proposes a reading of the text different from that of the vulgata. See Petrocchi, La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata: Inferno, pp. 253-254. Pagliaro reads the verse as "Bene ascolta chi l'ha nota," and paraphrases it thus: "ascolta bene, intende bene le tue parole nei riguardi della Fortuna, solo chi la conosce per quello che veramente è (chi l'ha nota)" (p. 182).

19 Cf. Porena's gloss to Inferno XV. 95-96: "E' un modo concettoso di dire. Girando la sua ruota (cioè distribuendo volubilmente mali e beni), la Fortuna adopera il suo strumento, fa il suo mestiere, come il villano che adopera la sua marra. E' come dire che la Fortuna non merita biasimo; ed è una dimostrazione che Dante ha ben inteso la lezione sulla Fortuna che Virgilio gli ha impartito nel cerchio degli avari (VII. 73-96)." See La Divina Commedia, commentata da Manfredi Porena (Bologna, 1963), Vol. I, Inferno, p. 145.

20 Sapegno, op. cit., cites Boccaccio who uses the verb "notare" in a similar way in Decameron VII.1.3. But Dante himself uses the verb in this sense elsewhere in the Commedia (e.g. Purg. XXIV. 53 and XXXII. 52). Moreover, the image of the book, which is one of Dante's favourites, plays an important role in Inferno XV. The fact that Dante has taken note of Virgil's teaching on Fortuna permits him to understand, at least in part, Brunetto's words. However, the substance of Brunetto's text remains to be glossed: "Ciò che narrate di mio corso scrivo, e serbolo a chiosar con altro testo a donna che saprà, s'a lei arrivo." (Inf. XV. 88-90). In the end, it is Cacciaquida, and not Beatrice, who does the glossing (Par. XVII).


The Pilgrimage of Life (New Haven, 1962); and, John Leyerle, “The Rose-Wheel Design and Dante’s Paradiso,” University of Toronto Quarterly, 46 (1977), 280-308.

24 Patch, op. cit., pp. 115-117; Panofsky, op. cit., p. 72.

25 Cf. Panofsky, op. cit., p. 73.

26 Panofsky, op. cit., pp. 76-77. Not all representations of Saturn were negative. In another, parallel tradition Saturn retained his dignity and regal majesty. Primarily through Virgil (Aen. VIII. 319ff. and the Fourth Eclogue) and Ovid (Met. I. 89-112), he was associated with the Saturnia regna, the mythic golden age when virtue and justice prevailed. Dante himself in the Commenda presents this image of Saturn: “il caro duce sotto cui giacque ogni malizia morta” (Par. XXI. 26-27; cf. Inf. XIV. 95-96 and Purg. XXII. 70-72). On Dante’s representation of Saturn in the Commedia, see Giorgio Padoan, “Saturno,” Enc. Dant., V, p. 41. Moreover, in the sphere of Saturn (Par. XXI-XXII), Dante places the contemplatives — St. Peter Damian and St. Benedict. However, Saturn is the only sphere in Dante’s Paradiso where Beatrice does not smile and the blessed do not sing. Saturn’s children may “be wise but not happy.”


29 Beatrice says: “l’amico mio, e non de la ventura.”

30 In Vita Nuova VIII. 5 “villana” qualifies “Morte.”


32 “E però è falissimo che ‘nobile’ vegna da ‘conoscere’, ma viene da ‘non vile’; onde ‘nobile’ è quasi ‘non vile’” (Conv. IV. xvi. 6).

33 Cf. Convivio IV. viii. 5: “me nobile e non villano deggio mostrare.”