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STATIUS, LUCAN, AND DANTE'S GIANTS
VIRGIL'S LOSS OF AUTHORITY IN *INFERNO* 31

In Dante's *Commedia*, the classical poet Virgil guides the pilgrim through the lower world of the *Inferno* and helps him ascend Mount Purgatory, but part way up the mountain, Virgil's epic successor Statius escorts them, and, later, Beatrice continues to lead the wayfarer in the *Paradiso*. At the beginning of the *Inferno*, Virgil's authority goes unquestioned. "Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore" ("You are my master and my author," *Inf.* 1.85), says the pilgrim, and Virgil is "l'altissimo poeta" ("the great poet," *Inf.* 4.80).¹ In the *Purgatorio*, however, Virgil confesses the limits of reason. "Quanto ragion qui vede, / dir ti poss'io," he tells the pilgrim; "da indi in là t'aspetta / pur a Beatrice, ch'è opra di fede" ("As far as reason sees here I can tell you; beyond that wait only for Beatrice, for it is a matter of faith," *Purg.* 18.46-48). Throughout the *Commedia*, Virgil, as the pagan exemplar of reason uninformed by faith, loses his authority. To illustrate Virgil's fallibility, Dante juxtaposes him against other classical poets, most notably his epic successors Statius and Lucan. While the reduction of Virgil's authority is ongoing, it is particularly interesting in *Inferno* 31, where the pilgrim and his guide prepare to enter the nethermost reaches of Hell.

Dante was well acquainted with classical literature, and the *Commedia* is an encyclopaedic culmination of his learning.² To be sure, the poem is particularly indebted to Virgil's *Aeneid*.³ As Peter S. Hawkins observes, Dante's borrowings from Virgil's epic, especially in the *Inferno*, "are so abundant that it is impossible to escape the fact that the *Commedia* is constructed out of its narratives, personae, metaphors, and imperial dream."⁴ However, Dante also admired the works of Statius and Lucan, and he refers to both poets throughout the *Convivio*. In that text he calls Lucan "quello grande poeta Lucano" ("that great poet Lucan," 4.28.13), and he praises Statius as "lo dolce poeta" ("the sweet poet," 4.25.6). The influence of Lucan and Statius on the *Commedia* is pervasive. Edward Moore calculates that Dante quotes or refers to Virgil some 200 times throughout his writings, to Lucan around 50, and to Statius between 30 and 40.⁵ Dante was thoroughly familiar with the *Thebaid*, and Statius' city of Thebes is funda-

mental to his city of Dis.⁶ On the other hand, Dante's use of Lucan, though clear, has received only modest attention.⁷ Lucan is among the virtuous pagans in Limbo. Virgil says to the pilgrim:

Mira colui con quella spada in mano,
che vien dinanzi ai tre sì come sire:
quelli è Omero poeta sovrano;
l'altro è Orazio satiro che vene;
Ovidio è 'l terzo, e l'ultimo Lucano.

[Note him there with sword in hand who comes before the other three as their lord. He is Homer, sovereign poet; next is Horace, satirist; Ovid comes third, and Lucan last.] (*Inf.* 4.86-90)

Dante introduces Lucan and signals that the *Pharsalia* should be compared and contrasted with the *Commedia*. On the one hand, Virgil's statement describes the chronological order of Lucan in relation to the other poets. On the other, it is an ambiguous comment on Lucan's poetic merit. Homer might be the first and best of the poets, and Lucan might fall far behind him. Or Lucan might be "l'ultimo Lucano" because he builds on and transcends the works of his predecessors much as Dante does, and Dante's poetic persona is in their midst.⁸ When Dante writes that the transformations experienced by the thieves Cianfa and Agnello (*Inf.* 25.49-96) exceed Lucan's descriptions of the deaths of Sabellus and Nasidius (*Phars.* 9.763-97), he indicates that his poem goes beyond the *Pharsalia*. "Taccia Lucano omai" ("Let Lucan now be silent," *Inf.* 25.94), he adds, a remark which underscores the superiority of the *Commedia*.

Virgil stands in contrast to Statius and Lucan, but in different ways. In a move that has attracted considerable scholarly attention, Dante casts Statius as a pagan who secretly converted to Christianity (*Purg.* 22.88-91).⁹ Because he is enlightened by Christian truth, Dante's Statius surpasses the poetically superior Virgil.¹⁰ Statius, however, credits Virgil for both his poetic achievement and his salvation: "Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano" ("Through you I was a poet, through you a Christian," *Purg.* 22.73). Statius is what Virgil might have been, had Virgil been a Christian. Because Statius is a Christianized Virgil, he is able to guide Dante's pilgrim through Purgatory, a place where classical myth becomes increasingly eclipsed by Christian doctrine. While Statius is an evolution and extension of Virgil, Lucan is more a competitor. Like Statius, he comes after Virgil chronologically. While Virgil tells of the founding of Rome, Lucan's civil war epic is an anti-*Aeneid* about Rome's dissolution. Dante does not make Lucan a Christian. However, because he writes after Virgil and, like Dante, innovates the epic genre, Lucan poses a challenge to Virgil's authority.

The journey from Hell to Paradise is one in which Christianity displaces paganism and the vague foreshadowings of classical myth yield to the clarity of Christian truth. Because Virgil was a pagan, and because in death he is still not fully enlightened, he is not a completely reliable guide for the pilgrim. While Dante makes this point most forcefully when Statius and Beatrice guide the wayfarer, he also points to Virgil's fallibility as a guide in Hell, a realm that is fundamentally Christian in spite of its classical elements. When Virgil and the pilgrim cross Styx and approach the wall of the city of Dis, a mob of fallen angels prevents them from entering (*Inf.* 8.82-93). Virgil tells the pilgrim that the demons may not deny them access, since God has willed otherwise (*Inf.* 8.103-105). The Latin poet speaks to the demons privately but unpersuasively, and they shut the gates of Dis in his face (*Inf.* 8.112-17). Virgil announces that an angel must open the gates for them (*Inf.* 8.128-30), and the Latin poet's usual eloquence changes to nervous babbling:

“Pur a noi converrà vincer la punga,”
cominciò el, “se non . . . Tal ne s’offerse.
Oh quanto tarda a me ch’altri qui giunga!”

[“Yet we must win this fight,” he began, “or else . . . such did she offer herself to us! Oh, how long to me it seems till someone come!”] (*Inf.* 9.7-9)

When the angelic messenger arrives, “Venne a la porta e con una verghetta / l’aperse, che non v’ebbe alcun ritegno” (“He came to the gate, and with a little wand he opened it, and there was no resistance,” *Inf.* 9.89-90). Unlike the pagan Virgil, the angel effortlessly gains access to Dis. Virgil explains that the demons have previously tried to deny access to Hell:

Questa lor tracotanza non è nova;
ché già l’usaro a men segreta porta,
la qual senza serrame ancor si trova.

[This insolence of theirs is nothing new, for they showed it once at a less secret gate, which still stands without a bolt.] (*Inf.* 8.124-26)

As commentators have noted, Dante is alluding to Christ's harrowing of Hell. Virgil elsewhere reveals that he witnessed Christ's descent (*Inf.* 4.52-63, 12.34-45), and as Hawkins has discussed at length, Dante uses the motif of the harrowing of Hell to contrast Virgil and Christ.¹¹

In describing Virgil's inability to enter Dis without divine assistance, Dante points to the limited power of the classical author. Virgil's incapacity is matched by his limited knowledge, perception, and comprehension. As he stares into Dis, he is unable to see and has trouble finding his way:

Attento si fermò com' uom ch'ascolta;
ché l'occhio nol potea menare a lunga
per l'aere nero e per la nebbia folta.

[He stopped attentive, like a man that listens, for his eye could not lead him far through the dark air and the dense fog.] (*Inf.* 9.4-6)

His inability to perceive his surroundings is noteworthy, since Dante's description of the area surrounding Dis strongly evokes the *Aeneid*. The walls seem to be made of iron (*Inf.* 8.78), there is a high tower (*Inf.* 9.35-36), and the three Furies appear (*Inf.* 9.37-51). In the *Aeneid*, Virgil similarly writes:

Respicit Aeneas subito et sub rupe sinistra
moenia lata videt, triplici circumdata muro,
quae rapidus flammis ambit torrentibus amnis,
Tartareus Phlegethon, torquetque sonantia saxa.
porta adversa, ingens, solidoque adamante columnae,
vis ut nulla virum, non ipsi excindere bello
caelicolae valeant; stat ferrea turris ad auras,
Tisiphoneque sedens, palla succincta cruenta,
vestibulum exsomnis servat noctesque diesque.

[Suddenly Aeneas looks back, and under a cliff on the left sees a broad castle, girt with triple wall and encircled with a rushing flood of torrent flames—Tartarean Phlegethon, that rolls along thundering rocks. In front stands the huge gate, and pillars of solid adamant, that no might of man, nay, not even the sons of heaven, may uproot in war; there stands the iron tower, soaring high, and Tisiphone, sitting girt with bloody pall, keeps sleepless watch o'er the portal night and day.] (*Aen.* 6.548-56)

Aeneas, however, never actually looks upon the torments of the damned. Instead, the Sibyl describes their punishments and explains to Aeneas:

dux inclute Teucrum,
nulli fas casto sceleratum insistere limen;
sed me cum lucis Hecate praefecit Avernis,
ipsa deum poenas docuit perque omnia duxit.

[Famed chieftain of the Teucrians, no pure soul may tread the accursed threshold; but when Hecate set me over the groves of Avernus, she taught me the gods' penalties and guided me through all.] (*Aen.* 6.562-65)

The passage is significant, for Aeneas does not venture into Tartarus and Virgil does not offer a detailed account of that place in his epic. For Dante, Virgil lacks first-hand knowledge of Tartarus and is thus confused when he approaches Dis.

Rather than admit to being lost, Virgil seeks to reassure Dante's distraught pilgrim. He tells him that he thoroughly knows the way through Hell, since he has made the journey before:

Ver è ch'altra fiata qua giù fui,
 congiurato da quella Eritón cruda
 che richiamava l'ombre a' corpi sui.
 Di poco era di me la carne nuda,
 ch'ella mi fece intrar dentr' a quel muro,
 per trarne un spirto del cerchio di Giuda.
 Quell' è 'l più basso loco e 'l più oscuro,
 e 'l più lontan dal ciel che tutto gira:
 ben so 'l cammin; però ti fa sicuro.

[It is true that once before I was down here, conjured by that cruel Erichtho who was wont to call back shades into their bodies. My flesh had been but short while divested of me, when she made me enter within that wall to draw forth a spirit from the circle of Judas. That is the lowest place, and the darkest, and farthest from the heaven that encircles all. Well do I know the way, so reassure yourself.] (*Inf.* 9.22-30)

Dante creates an intertextual contest between Virgil's *Aeneid* and Lucan's *Pharsalia*, for Virgil anachronistically alludes to Erichtho, the necromantic witch of Lucan's epic. But Lucan does not tell the story of Erichtho summoning Virgil from the dead. In his note on the passage, Singleton remarks that the tale may have been suggested to Dante by various medieval legends depicting Virgil as a necromancer.¹² Dante's modern commentators, however, generally agree that he invented the legend.¹³ The erroneous nature of the allusion suggests that Virgil is fabricating the tale, and that he really has not witnessed the depths of Hell before.

Lucan, however, has made that voyage, and so his text struggles against the *Aeneid* as part of the background of Dante's Hell. In the *Pharsalia*, Erichtho prepares to practice necromancy for Pompey's son and his companions. She says to them:

Si vero Stygiosque lacus ripamque sonantem
 Ignibus ostendam, si me praebente videri
 Eumenides possint villosaque colla colubris
 Cerberus excutiens et vincti terga gigantes
 Quis timor, ignavi, metuentes cernere manes?

[Even if I were to display the pools of Styx and the bank that crackles with fire—if my consent should bring before your eyes the Furies, and Cerberus shaking his mane of snakes, and the chained bodies of the Giants, why dread, ye cowards, to behold the dead who fear me?] (*Phars.* 6.662-66)

Erictho describes some of the features of the underworld, including its Stygian waters and fiery shores, horrid monsters, and shackled Giants. While she does not discuss the lower world in detail, she nonetheless displays her familiarity with it. By stressing to Pompey's son that such wonders can be made visible to them through her consent, rather than through chance, she makes clear that she has power over the infernal region. She calls Pompeius Sextus and his companions cowards for being afraid of the dead, and she indicates that the dead are afraid of her. Thus she stresses the scope of her authority. She emerges as a figure far more menacing than the Virgilian Sibyl of Cumae.¹⁴ While the Sibyl will help Aeneas descend to the underworld to consult with the dead, Erictho will bring the dead out of the classical Hell and into the land of the living.

While Lucan creatively engages and opposes *Aeneid* 6 in his account of Erictho's necromancy, Statius also imitates Virgil's narrative. But unlike Lucan, Statius does not react against Virgil's text. In the *Thebaid*, the seer Manto tells her father Tiresias:

panditur Elysium chaos, et telluris opertae
dissilit umbra capax, silvaeque et nigra patescunt
flumina, liventes Acheron eiecat harenas.
fumidus atra vadis Phlegethon incendia volvit,
et Styx discretis interflua manibus obstat.
ipsum pallentem solio circumque ministras
funestorum operum Eumenidas Stygiaeque severos
Lunonis thalamos et torva cubilia cerno.

[The Elysian void is flung open, the spacious shadows of the hidden region are rent, the groves and black rivers lie clear to view, and Acheron belches forth noisome mud. Smoky Phlegethon rolls down his streams of murky flame, and Styx interfluent sets a barrier to the sundered ghosts. Himself I behold, all pale upon his throne, with Furies ministering to his fell deeds about him, and the remorseless chambers and gloomy couch of Stygian Juno.] (*Theb.* 4.520-27)

Manto's vision lacks the horror of Erictho's description of the underworld, chiefly because Manto is not evil. She recounts the rivers of the classical Hell in greater detail than Lucan's Erictho, and like her counterpart from the *Pharsalia*, she mentions the Furies. But her vision is more sad than frightening, and her audience is her father, not Pompey's fearful son. In fact, the lower world is so commonplace that Tiresias asks Manto not to tell him about the punishments of Tityos, Ixion, and the other famous mythological sinners, since their sufferings are so well known (*Theb.* 4.536-40). He then adds:

ipse etiam, melior cum sanguis, opertas
 inspexi sedes, Hecate ducente, priusquam
 obruit ora deus totamque in pectora lucem
 detulit.

[I myself in the years of stronger manhood beheld the hidden realms with Hecate as my guide, before heaven whelmed my vision, and drew all my light within my mind.] (*Theb.* 4.540-43)

For Tiresias, the wonders of the underworld are nothing new. He knew them fully when he was a young man, and while his daughter describes the lower world to him now, the queen of the netherworld taught him the mysteries of that region before.

The infernal descents of the *Aeneid*, the *Pharsalia*, and the *Thebaid* form the background of the descent to Hell in the *Commedia*. In *Inferno* 31, Virgil and Dante's pilgrim prepare to descend to Judecca, the lowest part of Hell. Their descent corresponds with their earlier journey to the walls of Dis, and Dante again stresses the ignorance and confusion of the travellers.¹⁵ Like Virgil, who is blinded by the dark air and dense fog at the entrance to Dis, the pilgrim's vision is confounded. He initially mistakes the giants of Hell for towers, because he cannot see them clearly and is unable to differentiate them (*Inf.* 31.21-45).¹⁶ And like Virgil, who babbles at the gates of Dis, much to the pilgrim's dismay (*Inf.* 9.7-15), Nimrod speaks in an unintelligible language (*Inf.* 31.67-81). While Dante describes Nimrod at length, his description primarily elucidates the giant's size. He says that Nimrod's face seems as large as the pinecone of St. Peter's; that three Frieslanders would have trouble reaching his hair; and that thirty great spans of him are visible below the place where a man buckles his cloak (*Inf.* 31.58-66). Each comparison emphasizes Nimrod's enormity, but Dante does not clearly say how large Nimrod is.¹⁷

After their meeting with Nimrod, Virgil and Dante's pilgrim encounter the giants Ephialtes and Antaeus, and Virgil tells his companion that Briareus resembles Ephialtes, though Briareus is further on and more ferocious in appearance (*Inf.* 31.103-105). Virgil additionally mentions Tityus and Typhon, thus suggesting that they are also among the giants in Hell (*Inf.* 31.124). The giants are buried from the waist down (*Inf.* 31.31-33, 44-45). Dante's Ephialtes is bound in chains (*Inf.* 31.85-90), and Virgil explains that Briareus is similarly fettered (*Inf.* 31.103-105).

The pilgrim tells Virgil that he wants to see "smisurato Briareo" ("immense Briareus," *Inf.* 31.98). As Dante's commentators have often remarked, his language recalls Statius' description of "immensus Briareus" ("Briareus vast in bulk," *Theb.* 2.596). A less frequently noted point is that Dante uses "le ritorte" to signify Ephialtes' chains (*Inf.* 31.111), a term that

evokes a passage from Statius' description of the underworld:

quid tibi monstra Erebi, Scyllas et inane furentes
Centauros solidoque intorta adamante Gigantum
vincula et angustam centeni Aegaeonis umbram?

[Why should I tell thee of Hell's monsters, of Scyllas and the empty rage of Centaurs, and the Giants' twisted chains of solid adamant, and the diminished shade of hundredfold Aegaeon?] (*Theb.* 4.533-35)¹⁸

These words are spoken by the seer Manto to Tiresias. In engaging this passage from the *Thebaid*, Dante creates an intertextual relationship between Statius' epic and the *Inferno*. The Italian poet hints that Statius glimpsed the truth of the giants' twisted shackles in the *Thebaid*, and the lines from the *Thebaid* work with the Christian wayfarer's Statian mention of "smisurato Briareo" (*Inf.* 31.98) to suggest the authority of Statius' non-Virgilian classical text.

The reference to "smisurato Briareo" (*Inf.* 31.98) and its evocation of Statius' "immensus Briareus" (*Theb.* 2.596) invites a comparison between the giant of *Inferno* 31 and the fierce monster of the *Thebaid*. In the corresponding passage from Statius' poem, the warrior Tydeus fights like Briareus at the battle of Phlegra:

non aliter—Geticae si fas est credere Phlegrae—
armatum immensus Briareus stetit aethera contra,
hinc Phoebi pharetras, hinc torvae Pallados anguis,
inde Pelethroniam praefixa cuspide pinum
Martis, at hinc lasso mutata Pyracmone tempens
fulmina, cum toto nequiquam obsessus Olympo
tot queritur cessare manus.

[Not otherwise—if Getic Phlegra be worthy credence—stood Briareus vast in bulk against embattled heaven, condemning on this hand Phoebus' quiver, on that the serpents of stern Pallas, here Mars' Pelethronian pinewood shaft, with point of iron, and yonder the thunderbolts oft changed for new by weary Pyracmon, and yet complaining, though combatted in vain by all Olympus, that so many hands were idle.] (*Theb.* 2.595-601)

Statius' Briareus is rebellious, proud, and apparently on the verge of victory, for in this passage the Latin poet does not allude to the giant's defeat. However, the beginning of the simile raises questions about the narrative that follows, since Statius says that the account is reliable "Geticae si fas est credere Phlegrae" ("if Getic Phlegra be worthy credence," *Theb.* 2.595). And as Statius and his readers would have known, Briareus was eventually defeated by Zeus and the Olympian gods.

Like Statius, Dante also questions the truth behind the mythic battle of Phlegra. Dante's pilgrim says to Virgil:

S'esser puote, io vorrei
che de lo smisurato Briareo
esperienza avesser li occhi mei.

[If it were possible, I should wish my eyes might have experience of the immense Briareus.] (*Inf.* 31.97-99)

The pilgrim begins by questioning the possibility of such an encounter. While the passage superficially means that Dante's wayfarer wants to see the monster, the poet's language suggests something stronger. The pilgrim wants to experience the monster, albeit through his own eyes, and his request shows that he wants to gain greater understanding of the classical myth. Virgil replies:

Tu vedrai Anteo
presso di qui che parla ed è disciolto,
che ne porrà nel fondo d'ogne reo.
Quel che tu vuo' veder, più là è molto
ed è legato e fatto come questo,
salvo che più feroce par nel volto.

[Hard by here you shall see Antaeus, who speaks and is unfettered, and he will put us down into the bottom of all guilt. He whom you wish to see is much farther on, and he is bound and fashioned like this one, except that he seems more ferocious in his look.] (*Inf.* 31.100-105)

Virgil explains that the hundred-handed monster of classical myth is really anthropomorphic. Dante's pilgrim, and the reader, must rely on Virgil's words, since the pilgrim and his guide do not actually look upon Briareus. So too, Virgil engages in a confused redirection of the pilgrim's attention. Rather than answer Dante's query about Briareus, Virgil initially mentions Antaeus. But then he contrasts Antaeus and Briareus, since he says that Antaeus is able to speak and is unchained, while Briareus is chained like Ephialtes. He further complicates his answer by saying that Briareus is not quite like Ephialtes. Instead, Briareus, according to Dante's Virgil, seems more ferocious. The pilgrim does not pursue the matter further, but Virgil's comment could fuel his eagerness to see the more ferocious Briareus, rather than diminish his interest.

While the wayfarer does not actually encounter Briareus in Hell, he later sees the giant sculpted on a paving stone in Purgatory:

Vedëa Briareo fitto dal telo
celestial giacer, da l'altra parte,
grave a la terra per lo mortal gelo.
Vedea Timbreo, vedea Pallade e Marte,
armati ancora, intorno al padre loro,

mirar le membra d'i Giganti sparte.

[I saw Briareus, on the other side, pierced by the celestial bolt, lying heavy on the ground in mortal chill. I saw Thymbraeus, I saw Pallas and Mars, still armed, around their father, gazing on the scattered limbs of the giants.] (*Purg.* 12.28-33)

Dante's pilgrim learns the true fate of Briareus, as the paving stone shows the conclusion of the myth alluded to by Statius. As in the *Inferno*, Dante does not clearly reveal the physical nature of the giant. Though Briareus is shown pierced by a thunderbolt, Dante does not say how many heads and arms the giant had. He teasingly mentions the scattered limbs of the giants, but he gives no hint how many limbs there are. Indeed, the literal truth of the carving is questionable, since Thymbraeus, Pallas, and Mars stand around Jove. These are the gods of pagan polytheism and cannot be part of a literal rendering of Christian truth. Because the death of Briareus is depicted in terms of classical myth, even if Dante were to specify that the giants carved on the stone had a hundred arms, such a representation would be only a figurative representation of Christian teaching.

In *Thebaid* 4.533-35, Statius similarly reveals the outcome of the battle at Phlegra. Briareus, or Aegaeon, is a diminished shade in the underworld, and Statius links the monster with the other giants, who are bound in twisted chains of solid adamant. Thus when Dante evokes *Thebaid* 4.553-35 through his reference to Ephialtes being bound ("le ritorte," *Inf.* 31.111), he additionally associates Ephialtes with Briareus, since Statius refers to both the giants and Briareus in his corresponding passage from the *Thebaid*. In doing so, Dante reinforces Virgil's claim that Briareus is bound and fashioned like Ephialtes. When Dante describes Ephialtes, he provides little detail about the giant and instead discusses how Ephialtes is shackled (*Inf.* 31.85-96). He then says that Briareus resembles Ephialtes (*Inf.* 31.97-105).

Antaeus is closely related to Dante's Briareus. When the pilgrim asks to see Briareus, Virgil mentions Antaeus, whom he says is unfettered (*Inf.* 31.97-102). Virgil then returns to the matter of Briareus, whom he says is bound like Ephialtes (*Inf.* 31.103-105). Thus Dante contrasts Briareus and Antaeus. He then gives his extended account of Antaeus (*Inf.* 112-45). Dante links Antaeus with the battle of Phlegra. Virgil says to the giant:

O tu che ne la fortunata valle
 che fece Scipion di gloria reda,
 quand' Anibàl co' suoi diede le spalle,
 recasti già mille leon per preda,
 e che, se fossi stato a l'alta guerra
 de' tuoi fratelli, ancor par che si creda
 ch'avrebber vinto i figli de la terra:

mettine giù, e non ten vegna schifo,
dove Cocito la freddura serra.

Non ci fare ire a Tizio né a Tifo.

[O you that, in the fateful valley which made Scipio heir of glory, when Hannibal with his followers turned his back, did once take for prey a thousand lions, and through whom, had you been at the high war of your brothers, it seems that some still believe the sons of earth would have conquered, set us down below—and disdain not to do so—where the cold locks up Cocytus. Do not make us go to Tityus nor to Typhon.] (*Inf.* 31.115-24)

In noting that Antaeus was absent at Phlegra and in revealing that the giants lost that battle, Dante links Antaeus with Briareus, who was at Phlegra and whose battered corpse is depicted on the pavement stone of Purgatory.

As Dante's commentators have long noted, the myth of Antaeus alluded to in *Inferno* 31 comes from Lucan's *Pharsalia*.¹⁹ So too, in the *Convivio* Dante cites Lucan as one of his sources for the myth of the fight between Antaeus and Hercules (3.3.7), a myth which Virgil conveniently ignores in the *Commedia*. Lucan writes:

Nondum post genitos Tellus effeta gigantas
Terribilem Libycis partum concepit in antris.
Nec tam iusta fuit terrarum gloria Typhon
Aut Tityos Briareusque ferox; caeloque pepercit,
Quod non Phlegraeis Antaeum sustulit arvis.

[Even after the birth of the Giants Earth was not past bearing, and she conceived a fearsome offspring in the caves of Libya. She had more cause to boast of him than of Typhon or Tityos and fierce Briareus; and she dealt mercifully with the gods when she did not raise up Antaeus on the field of Phlegra.] (*Phars.* 4.593-97)

When Virgil tells Antaeus not to make him and the pilgrim seek Tityus or Typhon (*Inf.* 31.124), Dante recalls Lucan's remark that Earth had more reason to boast of Antaeus than of Typhon or Tityos. While Dante's engagement with Lucan's epic is clear, Virgil's possible allusion to the *Pharsalia* is less certain. In saying that some still believe that had Antaeus been present at Phlegra the giants would have overcome the gods (*Inf.* 31.120-21), Virgil might be alluding to Lucan as one of those believers, or he might just be recounting a more general idea. Moreover, Lucan does not actually say that the giants would have won the war with Antaeus' help; he says only that Antaeus would have made the battle more challenging. Unless Dante is again being intentionally anachronistic, Virgil would not know that he is echoing Lucan's text. And if Virgil is not intentionally alluding to Lucan, then Lucan's *Pharsalia* is part of the hidden truth of

Hell. Dante once again has Virgil engage in an intertextual struggle with Lucan, in which Virgil unknowingly affirms the truth presented in Lucan's poem.

Antaeus is linked with Briareus in the *Pharsalia*, and their relationship reinforces Dante's association of Briareus with Antaeus in the *Inferno*. Lucan refers to "Briareusque ferox" (*Phars.* 4.596). Virgil likewise tells Dante's pilgrim that compared to Ephialtes, Briareus is "più feroce par nel volto" (*Inf.* 31.105). Because Dante mentions Antaeus shortly before his reference to Briareus' ferocious appearance, he recalls Lucan, who says that Antaeus was more worthy of Earth's boasting than fierce Briareus was. So too, Virgil writes that Aeneas slays a soldier named Antaeus (*Aen.* 10.561). Virgil's reference to Antaeus in the *Aeneid* is almost immediately followed by his comparison of Aeneas to Aegaeon (Briareus) (*Aen.* 10.565-70), and thus Antaeus is further linked with Briareus. Virgil's Aeneas, who resembles Briareus in his martial rage, seems more ferocious than Antaeus, since he defeats the human soldier of that name. Thus Dante cleverly has the *Aeneid* contradict the *Pharsalia*, while the *Commedia* bears out the truth of Lucan's text.

In telling the pilgrim that Briareus is anthropomorphic, Virgil admits that his account of the hundred-handed monster in *Aeneid* 10.565-70 is a fable. But Virgil's account of Aeneas fighting like Briareus in *Aeneid* 10 is the model for Statius' account of Tydeus fighting like Briareus in *Thebaid* 2, and this is the passage that Dante invokes when the pilgrim speaks of "smisurato Briareo" (*Inf.* 31.98). Virgil's reply to the pilgrim's request to see Briareus is an attempt to crush the pilgrim's curiosity. However, since Dante never tells us what Briareus really looks like, Virgil may or may not be telling the truth when he says that Briareus is human in form. Perhaps Briareus really does have a hundred hands, since some of Dante's creatures really are grotesque: Minos has a tail (*Inf.* 5.11), Cerberus has three heads (*Inf.* 6.13-33), the Centaurs really are part man and part horse (*Inf.* 12.52-96), and Geryon has the face of a just man and the trunk of a snake (*Inf.* 17.1-27). In dismissing the pilgrim's request to see Briareus, Virgil also dismisses Statius, whose language the pilgrim echoes.

In the *Inferno*, Virgil creates a text for Dante's pilgrim. That text draws upon and engages the *Aeneid*, the *Thebaid*, and the *Pharsalia*. In telling the pilgrim that Briareus is bound and fashioned like Ephialtes, Virgil composes a new text which corrects his account of the hundred-handed monster of *Aeneid* 10. In responding impatiently to the pilgrim's request to see the Statian "smisurato Briareo" / "immensus Briareus" who, like Ephialtes, is presumably fettered by the Statian "le ritorte" / "intorta vincula," Virgil

similarly confronts the epic of his allegedly Christian poetic successor and summarily dismisses it. In alluding to Erichtho and saying to Antaeus that some believed that the giants would have defeated the gods at Phlegra had Antaeus been present there, Virgil expands upon Lucan's later epic and subtly criticizes it. But because Dante makes clear that Virgil is neither omniscient nor infallible, Virgil's responses to the *Aeneid*, *Thebaid*, and *Pharsalia* are unreliable. Dante has Virgil engage in an intertextual contest with Statius and Lucan to undermine Virgil's authority. Because Dante presents Statius as a Christian, he suggests that at times the *Thebaid* may convey truth more accurately than the *Aeneid*. Thus whenever Virgil contradicts the mythic vision of Statius, he leaves himself open to doubt. Virgil's relation to the pagan poet Lucan, however, is more complex. Though Lucan may rank behind Virgil as a poet, as Dante's reference to "l'ultimo Lucano" implies (*Inf.* 4.90), Virgil's fellow denizen of Limbo is sometimes more reliable than the author of the *Aeneid*. By comparing the poet of the *Aeneid* to the poet of the anti-*Aeneid*, Dante underscores Virgil's fallibility. Like the pilgrim, we cannot see clearly into the recesses of Hell, even with Virgil as our guide. While Dante calls into question the classical foreshadowings of Christian teaching, he also cautions against the uncritical acceptance of mortal corrections of the ancient texts. In doing so, he underscores the limits of human attempts to understand divine truth.

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NOTES

¹Dante's *Commedia* is cited parenthetically from Singleton's edition.

²See Barański, *Dante e i segni*, for an overview of Dante's intellectual development.

³Scholarship on Dante's use of Virgil is extensive. Some recent studies include Consoli, *Significato del Virgilio dantesco*; Guardini, "La figura di Virgilio nella *Commedia*"; Hollander, *Il Virgilio dantesco* and "Le opere di Virgilio"; Shapiro, "Virgilian Representation in Dante."

⁴Hawkins, "For the Record," 75. On the other hand, Burrow remarks that Dante shows little interest in imitating Virgil's narrative structure and compact style ("Virgils, from Dante to Milton," 82).

⁵Moore, *Studies in Dante*, 4. For a brief discussion of Dante and the classical canon, see Picone, "Dante and the Classics."

⁶Lewis, "Dante's Statius"; Martinez, "Dante, Statius and the Earthly City"; Stephany, "Statius."

⁷Schnapp, "Lucanian Estimations." For more on Dante's use of Lucan, see Paratore, *Dante e Lucano*.

⁸De Angelis, V. ". . . E l'ultimo Lucano."

⁹For discussions of Dante's presentation of Statius as a Christian, see Pzard, "Rencontres de Dante et de Stace"; Brugnoli, "Statius Christianus" and "Stazio in Dante"; Franke, "Resurrected Tradition and Revealed Truth: Dante's Statius"; Renucci, *Dante, Disciple et Juge du Monde Grco-Latin*, 334; Scrivano, "Stazio personaggio, poeta e cristiano."

¹⁰For a summary of Statius' standing in relation to Virgil, see Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, 256-269.

¹¹Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, 99-124.

¹²For Virgil's medieval reputation, see Comparetti, *Virgil in the Middle Ages*.

¹³See the notes in the editions by Gialalone, Musa, Durling and Martinez, and Hollander. Hollander, *Studies in Dante*, 178-180, suggests that if there is a justification for the tale, it should be sought in Lucan. See also Brownlee, "Dante and the Classical Poets," 110.

¹⁴See Masters, *Poetry and Civil War*, 179-215, for an overview of Lucan's Erictho and Virgil's Sibyl. As Masters notes, Lucan both draws on the *Aeneid* and opposes it.

¹⁵Virgil's fallibility is especially evident in *Inferno* 20. Kleiner remarks: "Virgil presents five seers in *Inferno* 20 derived from four different Latin epics, and in every case he either mistakes the tone of the text he is citing or contradicts some basic fact" (*Mismapping the Underworld*, 64). Hollander argues that Dante deliberately misrepresents the classical text ("Dante's Misreadings," 77-93).

¹⁶For the importance of the tower as a governing motif in *Inferno* 31, see Kleinhnz, "Dante's Towering Giants."

¹⁷Kleiner analyzes the measurements Dante provides and demonstrates their confusing and contradictory nature ("Dante's Towering Giants," 45-47). Chiari argues that the dimensions are meant to be poetic rather than mathematically precise (*Il canto XXXI dell'Inferno*, 17).

¹⁸Dronke says: "I do not know if it has been remarked that his term for the giants' chains, *le ritorte* (XXXI 111) is likewise Statian (*Theb.* IV 534f: *intorta . . . vincula*)" (*Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions*, 134 n. 18). Moore does not cite this parallel in his *Studies in Dante, First Series*. Pietro Alighieri, Guido da Pisa, Bernardino Daniello da Lucca, Grandgent, Scartazzini, Singleton, Sapegno, Gialalone, Durling and Martinez, Hollander, and Musa do not note this parallel in their commentaries. Daniello, Singleton, Sapegno, and Musa observe that "ritorte" appears again in *Inferno* 19.27, where Dante describes the punishment of Pope Nicholas III.

¹⁹Dante's son Pietro Alighieri, for example, discusses Lucan's Antaeus at length in his fourteenth-century commentary on the *Commedia* ("super XXXI capitolo *Inferni*," 261).

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