

Virgil and Dante: Protective Father and Admiring Son

During the mayhem of a harrowing battle, Dante exclaims, “My leader seized me quickly, like a mother who is / awakened by the noise and sees the flames burning / close by” (Inf.23.37-39). In this passage, Dante emphasizes two crucial literary elements: first, Virgil’s parental instincts move him to protect Dante; second, Dante allows Virgil to exert his superiority and carry him to safety. As Virgil and Dante progress through the dark depths of Hell and despair, they encounter a sea of sinners guilty of horrendous crimes. While the sinners’ pleading cries can pose a distraction, *Inferno* provides an enlightening account of Dante and Virgil’s development into an everlasting relationship. In particular, Cantos 1 and 23 possess striking similarities that illuminate the close familial bond between Virgil and Dante, how Dante’s speech portrays Virgil as an authoritative figure, and Virgil’s protective actions toward Dante when faced with danger. Their relationship emphasizes the importance of relying on a trustworthy figure and forming a strengthening bond when undergoing a treacherous, life-threatening journey.

In Canto 1, Dante immediately establishes Virgil as the leader in their close-knit, not yet paternal, relationship. He admiringly states, “You are my master and my author, you alone are / he from whom I have taken the pleasing style that / has won me honor” (1.85-87). Dante asserts Virgil’s authority through repetition of the word “my”. By repeating the word “my,” Dante declares his loyalty to Virgil and embraces his authority. Thus, Dante makes himself subservient to Virgil as he explains how Virgil is best suited to bring him on this difficult and strenuous journey. Dante displays his utmost confidence in Virgil by alluding to the fact that their

relationship is a “perfect match” and their partnership allows Dante to rely on Virgil as his sole guide through Hell. Further, line 87 is end-stopped to allow the reader to fully grasp Dante’s god-like view of Virgil and his finality and emphasis on Virgil serving as his guide. Even though they delve deep into Hell and Dante becomes fearful at times, he does not question Virgil’s competence. Instead, he reaffirms Virgil as his guide and author which allows Virgil to metaphorically “write” what Dante is doing as he directs their journey. Thus, Virgil becomes Dante’s author in more ways than just as a favorite writer of The Aeneid; Virgil authors Dante’s experience. Their allegiance to each other is crucial as they encounter several sinners guilty of treacherous and unsettling crimes.

Despite Virgil’s steadfast attempt to keep to their path, Dante struggles to maintain focus and pauses several times to reflect on the sinners’ cries and pleadings for mercy. He begs for Virgil’s help and says, “See the beast for which I have turned back: help / me against her, famous sage” (1.88-89). The beast makes Dante’s “veins / and pulses tremble” (1.89-90) which illuminates the wretchedness of Hell and intensifies Dante’s reaction to the beast, providing a basis for his similar emotions that persist throughout *Inferno*. His purely physical, not intellectual, response is bestial in and of itself. Despite Dante’s emotional response to the sinners, Virgil consistently pushes Dante to keep moving as part of his authorial role. After Virgil sees Dante weeping, he interjects and says, “You must hold to another path / if you wish to escape from this / savage place; / for this beast at which you cry out lets no one / pass by her way” (1.91-95). Dante’s use of the word “beast” (1.88) and Virgil’s use of the word “savage” (1.93) convey the grotesque nature of their surroundings. The fiery darkness, eeriness, and pain experienced in Hell from Dante and Virgil’s perspective emphasizes the importance of their

developing relationship. Dante and Virgil portray how negative, surrounding forces can bond two people through their shared experience and survival.

While Canto 1 provides the foundation of Dante and Virgil's relationship, Canto 23 activates the development of their parental relationship. Dante states, "He had not finished giving this advice, when I / saw them coming, with outstretched wings, not far / away, intent on seizing us" (23.34-36). This image evokes a feeling of doom, uncertainty, and danger. Unlike angels of God who symbolize divinity and eternity in Heaven, these wings are filled with violence in the depths of Hell. The act of "seizing" someone is forceful and an assertion of authority. Dante continues and states, "My leader seized me quickly, like a mother who is / awakened by the noise and sees the flames burning / close by, / who takes up her son and flees, caring more for / him than for herself, not stopping even to put on her / shift" (23.37-42). While the same phrase is not explicitly repeated, "seized me quickly" (23.37) and "takes up her son and flees" (23.40) convey the same message, a mother's undying love for her child. Virgil does what the devils appear ready to do. However, Virgil counters with the same action but for the better purpose. When faced with an extremely dangerous situation, his paternal instincts kick into full force and he does not consider the danger to himself. Rather, Virgil's sole focus is bringing Dante to safety. Further, the simile that compares Virgil to a mother and Dante to a son emphasizes the manifestation of their parent-child relationship. The words "seized" (23.37), "flames burning" (23.38), and "flees" (23.40) contribute to the graphic imagery of Hell and provide visual indicators of its intensity. There are also no punctuation marks, except commas, present in these lines which emphasize the rapidity, vigor, and forcefulness of the situation. This quote from Canto 23 highlights the significant element of Virgil's instinctive reaction in providing Dante protection in the face of a near-death situation.

Cantos 1 and 23 complement each other: while Canto 1 allows Dante to reflect on Virgil's guiding force in his life, Canto 23 intensifies this reflection by depicting how Virgil swoops in to save Dante. While Virgil provides a response to Dante's reflection in Canto 1, the passage is primarily from Dante's point of view. This shows the fluidity in their relationship as they are able to communicate well due to Virgil's authoritative figure and Dante's ability to listen and follow Virgil's lead. Canto 1 provides the foundation of Dante and Virgil's relationship while Canto 23 further explores and builds upon their care, protection, and paternal/filial bond. Dante's *Inferno* illustrates how one must have a trustworthy figure to rely on during life's journey and how the ultimate figure is God.

Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. Edited and translated by Robert M. Durling, Oxford UP, 1996.