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Jason Ader
Parkland College

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THE POLITICAL PERSECUTION OF A POET

A Detail of Dante's Exile



By

Jason Ader

John Poling

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Durante degli Alighieri, known throughout the world as simply Dante, was a fourteenth century Italian poet, philosopher, literary theorist, and politician. He is best known for his epic *Commedia*, which was later dubbed *The Divine Comedy*. *Commedia* is generally considered the greatest Italian literary work and a masterpiece of world literature.¹ Due to the turbulent political atmosphere of his time and place, Dante spent over a third of his life living in exile. This paper will explore the details of Dante's exile and the influence that it had upon his work.

Dante was born in Florence around 1265 to an aristocratic family of moderate wealth and status. Dante's father was a notary, and Dante was the only child of his father's first marriage. Dante's mother died when he was about thirteen years old. His father then remarried and his second wife bore another son and two daughters before he too died when Dante was about eighteen.²

It is thought that at around six years of age Dante entered school. Education was rapidly increasing in importance in Florence in those days.³ Giovanni Boccaccio, Dante's first biographer, describes Dante's education:

I say that from the beginning of his boyhood, when he had learned the first elements of his letters, he did not give himself up, after the fashion of the young nobles of today, to boyish frivolity and sloth, lounging in his mother's lap. He gave up his entire boyhood, in his own city, to the continued study of the liberal arts, in which he became admirably expert. And as his mind and intelligence increased with years, he did not devote himself to lucrative studies as most people now do, but, with a praiseworthy desire for eternal fame, and, despising transitory riches, he gave himself up completely to his wish to gain full knowledge of the fictions of the poets and of the critical analysis of them...And seeing that the works of the poets are not vain and simple fables or marvels, as the foolish multitude thinks, but that within them are concealed the sweet fruits of historical and philosophical truth (for which reason the intent of the poets cannot be wholly understood without a knowledge of history and moral and natural philosophy), he made a sensible division of his time, and strove to learn history by himself and philosophy under various masters, and not without long study and toil.⁴

¹ Chubb, *His World*, xv-xvi.

² Paget Toynbee, *Dante Alighieri: His Life and Works* (London: Methuen & Co., 1910), 38-39.

³ Thomas Caldecot Chubb, *Dante and His World* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1966), 58.

⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Life of Dante* (London: Hesperus Press, 2002), 12.

Dante's early years cannot be discussed without mention of his obsession, his first love Beatrice Portinari. He first met Beatrice at a neighborhood gathering when they were both around nine years old.⁵ It seems that Dante admired Beatrice from afar and that the culmination of their relationship occurred in passing on a street nine years later when they were both eighteen.

On this occasion she turned her eyes upon Dante, and saluted him. After this greeting, which, he says, seemed to reveal to him the utmost limits of happiness, Dante retired to the solitude of his own chamber and sat himself down to think of Beatrice. And as he sat thinking he fell asleep, and had a marvelous vision, whereon he composed a sonnet beginning "To every captive soul, and gentle heart," which is his earliest known composition.⁶

According to biographers Dante was only to encounter Beatrice twice more and both of those incidents resulted in Dante being rebuked. Beatrice married sometime before her twenty-third year and died when she was twenty-five. Although their interaction had been minimal, Dante's love of Beatrice would influence him for his whole life.⁷

Dante's youth also included education of another sort, warfare. As a member of his city's knightly class he participated in its military ventures against opponents in Tuscany. Before his twenty-fifth year he had already seen battle at least twice, once at Campaldino, near Arezzo, and once at Caprona, near Pisa. The Florentines were victorious in both of these battles. Dante later described the conflict at Campaldino, the first of the two, as one "in which I found myself, no longer a youth, at war, where I experienced great fear and eventually very great exultation, as a result of the varying fortunes of that battle."⁸ Also present at Campaldino were two figures who, during the following decade, would become bitter rivals as leaders of opposing factions in

⁵ Toynbee, *Life and Works*, 43.

⁶ *Ibid*, 45.

⁷ Chubb, *Life and Works*, 252-253

⁸ Nick Havely, *Dante* (Malden, Ma: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 14.

the internal conflict that would rack Florence and lead to Dante's exile. These two were Corso Donati and Vieri de' Cerchi⁹

Fierce rivalries between political factions were nothing new in Florence. From the beginning of the thirteenth century northern Italy had been divided into two great political parties, the Guelfs, who followed the Pope, and the Ghibellines, who followed the Emperor. In Florence the conflict between the parties continued with varying fortune to either side for fifty-two years, from 1215 to 1267, after which the Guelf party gained and remained in control. During those fifty-two years much violence ensued, whichever party that was the victor exiling the losers and their property being destroyed or confiscated. Dante's family were Guelfs.¹⁰

Before we can examine how Dante became entangled in Florence's political scene we must first return briefly to Beatrice. After her death in 1290 Dante was overwhelmed with grief. There followed a distressing period when Dante's friends and family thought that he would soon follow her to the grave. Nothing that they did consoled him. Eventually he turned instead to his books and immersed himself in his studies with renewed vigor, likely studying with the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella. In his later work *Convivio*, Dante himself described this time:

I remained so overwhelmed with grief that no comfort availed me. Howbeit, after some time, my mind, which was striving to regain its health, resolved (since neither mine own nor others' consolation was of any avail) to have recourse to the plan which a certain other disconsolate one had adopted for his consolation. And I set myself to read that book of Boëthius, whose contents are known but to few, wherewith, when a prisoner and in exile, he had consoled himself. And hearing also that Cicero too had written a book, in which, treating of friendship, he had spoken of the consolation of Laelius, that most excellent man, on the death of his friend Scipio, I set myself to read that. And although at first it was hard for me to understand the meaning of them, yet at length I succeeded so far as such knowledge of Latin as I possessed, and somewhat of understanding on my part, enabled me to do. And as it befalls that a man who is in search of silver sometimes, not without divine ordinance, finds gold beyond his expectations, so

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰ Toynbee, *Life and Works*, 1-15.

I, who sought for consolation, found not only healing for my grief, but instruction in the terms used by authors in science and other books.¹¹

This research in particular and technique in general would prove helpful again when Dante found himself exiled. He had written many sonnets praising Beatrice during her life, but during this period after her death he finally composed his first book length work *Vita Nuova*.¹²

There is some dissent among his biographers about whether or not Dante himself was already married at this time, but if he was not he must have wed during this period.¹³ He had been betrothed since 1277 to a young lady from his neighborhood, Gemma Donati—sister of Corso Donati whom he had fought alongside at Campaldino.¹⁴ Dante and Gemma eventually had a family of four children, all of whom were born before 1302. Boccaccio ties Dante's family life into his emergence on the political scene:

It is in the nature of temporal matters that one thing often leads to another. His family cares drew Dante to cares of state, in which the vain honours which are joined to public office so entangled him that, without noticing where he had started from or knowing where he was going, he gave himself up almost entirely, with loosened rein, to the government of the state. Fortune was, in this, so favourable to him that no embassy was heard or answered, no law passed or repealed, no peace made, no war begun, and in short, no discussion of any weight undertaken, unless he first gave his opinion with regard to it. In him seemed to rest the public faith and every hope; in him, in short, all things, both human and divine.¹⁵

There were other factors in play as well, however. Prior to 1295 Dante, as a nobleman, would not have been eligible to take part in the politics of Florence. The city's representatives were selected exclusively from the members of the seven greater guilds—the Calimala, the Guild of the Judges and Notaries, the Wool Guild, the Silk Guild, the Bankers Guild, the Skinners and Furriers Guild, and the Physicians and Apothecaries Guild. This was understandably a small portion of the city's population but also the portion with the most wealth. Under certain

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

¹² Havelly, *Dante*, xxiii.

¹³ Chubb, *His World*, 193-194.

¹⁴ Havelly, *Dante*, xxii.

¹⁵ Boccaccio, *Life of*, 23.

circumstances a nobleman could join a guild but could never be one of its *capitundini*—the consuls of the greater guilds—nor its rector. Furthermore, a nobleman could never become a prior of the city. These laws had been enacted to protect the city and its population from abuse and control by the nobles but by this time the greater guilds had become an elite of their own. The nobles, or *grandi*, soon began to ally themselves with the lesser guildsman and the commoners, or *popolano*, to exert pressure upon the magistrates to reform the laws.¹⁶ A new law was passed in July 1295 which allowed “that any citizen of Florence, *who was not a knight*, who is found inscribed in the books or on the roll of any guild of the city of Florence might now serve in the priorate, become gonfalonier, be a member of any of the many Florentine councils, or in fact take any part whatsoever in Florentine government.”¹⁷ Very soon thereafter Dante joined a guild—the Guild of the Physicians and Apothecaries. He was listed on their roll as *Dante d’Aldighieri degli Aldighieri, poeta fiorentina*. It may seem surprising to find a poet listed on the guild of doctors and druggists, but in Dante’s time medicine and philosophy were considered associated disciplines and Dante was already recognized locally as a philosopher.¹⁸ Documents that are preserved from this time support Boccaccio’s above assessment of the weight of Dante’s influence. Proposals that he made or spoke in favor of tended to pass with a great majority.¹⁹ In 1300 Dante was elected as one of the six priors. The term was for two months and was highest office in the commonwealth.

“From this priorate,” says Leonardi Bruni, “Sprang Dante’s exile from Florence, and all of the adverse fortunes of his life as he himself writes in one of his letters, the words of which are as follows: ‘All my woes and all of my misfortunes had their origin and commencement with my unlucky election to the priorate; of which priorate, although I was not worthy in respect of worldly wisdom, yet in respect of

¹⁶ Chubb, *His World*, 265-282.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 282. Italics in original.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 290-291

loyalty and of years I was not unworthy of it; inasmuch as ten years had passed since the battle of Campaldino, where the Ghibelline party was almost entirely broken and brought to an end, on which occasion I was present."²⁰

At the time of Dante's election to the priorate Florence was in a precarious state of upheaval due to the recent introduction of renewed family dynastic fighting from Pistoja. These two factions were the Blacks and the Whites, which divided the Guelf party in Florence into two camps and were the impetus of frequent brawls and bloodshed in the streets. In Pistoja the Blacks and the Whites had formed around a family feud. Two branches of the Cancellieri family had developed a split, apparently over a rather trifling quarrel which had started with a child throwing a snowball. Even trifles, however, can have great repercussions and soon most of the citizens were aligned with one side or the other. In an effort to avoid a civil war in their backyard, the Florentines intervened. They arrested the leader of each faction and imprisoned them.

Unfortunately, rather than quell the feud this action instead spread the faction fighting into Florence. In Florence there were also two rival families—the Donati, an aristocratic family of long standing in Florence that had fallen into a state of reduced wealth and prestige, and the Cerchi, an up-and-coming family from the merchant class. The Cerchi had bought a palace that was adjacent to the Donati holdings. The noble Donatis became upset with the upstart Cerchis and their continued display of opulence. When the Black/White dichotomy reached Florence the Donati, headed by the abovementioned Corso, took up the side of the Black, and the Cerchi, headed by the also abovementioned Vieri de' Cerchi, took the side of the Whites. Florence, which had been battled over for so many years by the Guelfs and Ghibellines, and the

²⁰ Toynbee, *Life and Works*, 74.

Guelf party itself, were split down the middle with every citizen aligned with one side or the other. Dante, whose wife was a Donati, nevertheless became affiliated with the Whites.²¹

And by the said two parties all the city of Florence and her territory was divided and infected. For which cause the Guelf party, fearing lest these divisions should turn to the advantage of the Ghibellines, sent to Pope Boniface to ask him to heal them. Wherefore the Pope sent for M. Vieri de' Cerchi, and when he was come into his presence, besought him to make peace with M. Corso Donati and his party, and to submit their differences to him, promising to advance him and his friends to a great position, and offering him any spiritual favours he might ask. M. Vieri, although in other matters he was a prudent knight, in this matter showed little wisdom, but was obstinate and touchy, and would do nothing of what the Pope asked, saying that he had no quarrel with any man; and so he returned to Florence, and left the Pope very wrathful against him and his party.²²

Pope Boniface was not a man to be argued with, and this insubordination by Cerchi played no small role in the fall of the Whites and Dante's exile.²³

In addition to Boniface, another historical figure must be introduced. At this same time Charles of Valois, brother of Philip the Fair, was in search of a realm to rule. He had made successive and unsuccessful attempts to become king of Aragon, king of Sicily, emperor of Constantinople, and Roman emperor. He was frequently crowned but never won a realm, a fact which has led him to be known both as the Chapel King and Charles Lackaland. In contrast with Cerchi, Charles was more than happy to do the Pope's bidding in exchange for help in advancement to a great position.²⁴ As the favored party of the Pope, the Blacks looked upon Charles as a potential ally. The whites on the other hand, were bitterly opposed both to Boniface and to Charles Lackaland.²⁵

Back in Florence the violence continued. On May Day in the year 1300 a fight broke out which resulted in many wounded; a Cerchi with a decapitated nose among them. By evening

²¹ Toynbee, *Life and Works*, 75-81.

²² *Ibid*, 80.

²³ Chubb, *His World*, 316-319

²⁴ *Ibid*, 326-327.

²⁵ Toynbee, *Life and Works*, 82.

the whole city was under alarm and had taken up arms. Recall that this event took place during the two month term of Dante's Priorate. As the violence escalated, the Priors decided that something must be done. By way of solution the Priors banished the leaders of both parties.²⁶

For a time things were relatively quiet, while both parties plotted and tried to consolidate power. In October of 1301:

[I]n order to protest against the Papal policy, which aimed at the virtual subjection of Florence, and if possible to avert the coming of Charles of Valois, the Whites sent an embassy to Rome, of which Dante was a member. But while Dante was still absent at Rome, the Pope's "peacemaker" Charles arrived in Florence, which he entered on All Saint's Day (1 November, 1301), his entrance having been unopposed, on the faith of his promise to hold the balance between the two parties, and to maintain peace. No sooner, however, had he obtained command of the city, than he treacherously espoused the cause of the Blacks, armed his followers, and threw the whole of Florence into confusion. In the midst of the panic Corso Donati, one of the exiled leaders of the Blacks, made his way into the city, broke open the prisons and released the prisoners, who, together with his own adherents, attacked and pillaged the houses of the Whites during five days, Charles of Valois meanwhile, in spite of his promises, making no attempts to interfere.²⁷

The Blacks, having gained the upper hand, began to strengthen themselves by getting rid of their opponents. On January 27, 1302, a sentence was pronounced against Dante and four other Whites who had been summoned before the Podestá, Cante de' Gabrielli of Gubbio, and had failed to appear. The charge they faced was barratry, in other words, "of fraud and corrupt practices in office, including the extortion of money and the making of illicit gains. They were further charged with having conspired against the Pope, against the admission into the city of his representative, Charles of Valois, and against the peace of the city of Florence and of the Guelf party."²⁸ The penalty was a fine of five thousand florins and restitution of the sums illegally gained. Payment was to be made within three days of the pronouncement of the sentence, in default of which all of their goods were to be forfeited and destroyed. In addition to the fine they were sentenced to banishment from Tuscany for two years and would never

²⁶ Toynbee, *Life and Works*, 81.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

again be able to hold office in Florence. None of the five paid their fine and in March 1302 a second, more severe sentence was passed. The five Whites previously sentenced, as well as an additional ten of their party members, were condemned to be burned alive if they were ever caught in Tuscany. Dante never again set foot in Florence.²⁹

In *Paradiso* Dante described his exile in the form of a prophecy from a dead relative. "Thou shalt leave every thing beloved most dearly; and this is the shaft which the bow of exile first lets fly. Thou shalt prove how salt the taste is of another's bread, and how hard a path it is to go up and down another's stairs."³⁰ In *Convivio* he described the misery of his wanderings in greater detail:

Alas would it had pleased the Dispenser of the Universe that I should never have had to make excuses for myself; that neither others had sinned against me, nor I had suffered this punishment unjustly, the punishment I say of exile and of poverty! Since it was the pleasure of the citizens of the fairest and most renowned daughter of Rome, Florence, to cast me out from her most sweet bosom (wherein I was born and brought up to the climax of my life, and wherein I long with all my heart, with their good leave, to repose my wearied spirit, and to end the days allotted to me), wandering as a stranger through almost every region to which our language reaches, I have gone about as a beggar, showing against my will the wound of fortune, which is often wont to be imputed unjustly to the fault of him who is stricken. Verily I have been as a ship without sails and without rudder, driven to various harbours and shores by the parching wind which blows from pinching poverty. And I have appeared vile in the eyes of many, who, perhaps from some report of me, had imagined me in a different guise.³¹

Little is known for certain about the exact course and destinations of Dante's wanderings.³² Like most celebrities from antiquity, the few sparse facts are undermined by a much greater body of myth and conjecture. It is thought that he traveled to Forlì, Bologna, Sarzana, Poppi, Verona, Arezzo, Lucca, and Val di Magra, in short, to nearly "every region to which our language

²⁹ Toynbee, *Life and Works*, 84-88.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

³² *Ibid.*, 89-91.

reaches” before eventually settling in Ravenna, where he died in 1321.³³ One certainty that we do have is that his exile was thereafter present in all of his writings.

In addition to the two examples cited above, references to characters and circumstances of his exile dot Dante’s work. In Sarzana, a coastal city on the western edge of Italy, Dante was a guest of Franceschino Malaspina. In *Purgatorio*, Dante meets Franceschino’s first cousin Currado who foretells of Dante’s visit to the Malaspinas, “the honoured race which ceases not to be adorned with the glory of the purse and of the sword.”³⁴ In Lucca Dante met the poet Bonagiunta, who he also later meets in Purgatory.³⁵ Pope Boniface is attacked repeatedly throughout the *Commedia*. In *Inferno* Pope Nicholas III, himself a simoniac, greets the newly arrived Boniface: “Art thou so soon come here / Into this fiery place, Pope Boniface? By some years, then, the writing lied to me. So soon then art thou sated by the hunger / For which thou didst not fear to seize by guile / Our fair lady the Church and outrage her?”³⁶ To travel to Forlì, Dante had to cross the Muraglione, a treacherous pass in the Apennines. In *Purgatorio*, “We climbed up through a cleft between the rocks / Which seemed that it did bend this way and that / Like to a wave which draws back and then surges.”³⁷ In his work *De Vulgari Eloquentia* he discusses Romagna, where he spent many years of his exile:

Let us now cross the leaf-clad shoulders of the Apennines and hunt inquiringly, as is our custom, through the left side of Italy, beginning from the east. Entering the Romagna, then, we observe that we have found in Italy two different types of dialects with certain opposite characteristics in which they respectively agree. One of these, on account of the softness of its words and its pronunciation, seems so feminine that it causes a man when he is speaking to be thought a woman. The other is so bristling and

³³ Havely, *Dante*, xxiv-xxvi.

³⁴ Toynbee, *Life and Works*, 91-92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁶ Chubb, *His World*, 302-302.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 418.

shaggy in its accents that, owing to its rough harshness, it not only distorts a woman's speech, but makes one doubt whether she is not a man.³⁸

He speaks of Forlì in *Inferno*, "The city which withstood so long a siege / And piled the Frenchmen into bloody heaps / Under the Green Claws once more finds itself." Messer Marchese of Forlì appears as well. "I saw Messer Marchese, who once had leisure / To drink at Forlì with far less thirst / Yet even then was never satisfied."³⁹

It would be possible to fill a work of this size up completely with autobiographical details that later found their way into Dante's work, so it is no wonder that his exile was so important. That is one facet that all Dante scholars tend to agree upon. It may be possible to progress a step further yet. Considering the time and involvement that Dante was dedicating to politics before his exile, it may not be too far-fetched to consider that perhaps most of Dante's work may have never come into being without the condition of his exile. He had only produced one book length piece up until that time, and that during the later stages of his mourning over Beatrice. It has been noted by more than a few people that pain and suffering can fuel the fires of creativity. Even if Dante had not been exiled and still went on to compose larger works it is doubtful that they would have contained the passion and detail that the exile's life imbued his works with. Therefore, to be thankful of the genius of his works is also to be thankful for the noble sufferings of the man.

³⁸ Chubb, *His World*, 422-423.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 468-470.

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