

Manto into Mantua: Vergil, Statius, and Dante

Dante's use of Manto in the *Inferno* is a *locus classicus* of authorial correction in Dante's interpretation of Vergil, a passage that nods to its literary predecessors by stressing how wrong they are (Hollander 1991, 1983). The seeress who appears in Canto 20 of the *Inferno* is adopted from the works of Vergil and Statius, a conflation of Vergil's nymph (*Aen.* 10.198-203) and Statius' seeress (*Thebaid* 4.443-645), who retains her status as a prophetess and influence on the founding of Mantua. Despite Dante's obvious reverence for these authors, however, his character Virgilio emphatically rewrites the story by excising this woman from Mantua's community: she inhabited the site alone, Virgilio claims, shunned by the locals on account of her selfish and sinister magic. The city, then, was established after her death by the community that rejected her. Virgilio and Dante pilgrim see Manto tormented in the pits of Hell, having gained neither rewards nor honors from her deeds in Mantua. This Manto is a far cry from either Vergil's nymph, who is integral to the city as the ancestress of the Mantuan rulers, or Statius' seeress, who works with the help of her father Tiresias on behalf of the community of Thebes. Moreover, Dante poet self-consciously calls attention to his corrections to the history of Manto by making Virgilio request leave from Dante pilgrim to discourse at such length on his revision of the story, and by making Dante pilgrim officiously affirm its veracity when the account draws to a close.

The reason for this pejorative transformation of Manto lies in the nymph's significance in the *Aeneid* and in Vergil's posthumous reputation. After his death and throughout the middle ages, Vergil was associated with fortune telling, such as the *sortes Vergilianae*, and other occult knowledge. The importance of the supernatural seeress Manto in the founding of Vergil's home of Mantua, as established in the *Aeneid*, enhances Vergil's reputation as a *vates* and builds his credibility in mystic areas such as Aeneas' descent to the underworld (Haskins 1927). These

same mystic and infernal associations, unfortunately, work at cross-purposes to Dante poet's Christian story of personal salvation, inasmuch as Dante poet (which was unusual in his time, Barolini 1998) condemned fortune-telling practices as sinful, and could not in good conscience be led out of Hell by someone whose connections to fortune-telling were so well-known and questionable. Dante poet thus must exert himself by means of authorial correction to sever Vergil's connections to Manto and thereby save Vergil from the torment that Manto and other fortune-tellers suffer in the fourth bolgia.

After suffering this transformation, Dante's Manto bears less resemblance to any literary predecessors of the same name and more to another supernatural female from the *Aeneid*: Circe (*Aen.* 7.5-24 and passim). The way that Dante poet's Manto and Vergil's Circe are conceptualized through their geography, combined with the protagonists' assiduous avoidance of these women, makes Manto not the helpful and community-minded seeress from the *Thebaid*, nor the footnoted nymph from the *Aeneid*. Rather, she is a threat looming in the distance, who, unless she is carefully avoided according to the precepts of Virgilio (as Circe must be avoided by Aeneas according to the precepts of Helenus, and, in a larger sense, as the Vergilian/Statian Manto is avoided by Dante poet), could interrupt Dante pilgrim's advancement and destroy his entire endeavor.

Bibliography

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