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“Why do you break me?” Talking to a human tree in Dante’s *Inferno*

Janis Vanacker

Universiteit Gent

Vakgroep Romaanse talen, Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte

Blandijnberg 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium

e-mail: Janis.Vanacker@UGent.be

tel.: 00 32 9 264 40 62

abstract

The author of this essay focuses on Canto 13 of the *Inferno* which describes the encounter between Dante and Pier delle Vigne, the suicide who has been changed into a tree. To this day critics do not agree on the classical source which has been a model for this episode. Several Ovidian tales (the tales of Daphne, the Heliads, Dryope and Erysichthon which occur in the *Metamorphoses*) and one passage in the *Aeneid* (the Polidorus episode narrated in book 3) have been considered a source of inspiration. The question can be resolved by a more profound and more systematic examination of both Canto 13 and its possible sources. Some of the most important issues studied are: the relationship between the changing character and the character that does not change; the conduct of the person transformed into a tree and the meaning of metamorphosis in the story. The author concludes that, although there are many structural resemblances between Canto 13 and the Polydorus episode, Dante clearly took a few essential elements from Ovidian myths.

keywords

Inferno, the wood of the suicides, metamorphosis, Virgil (*Aeneid* III), Ovid (*Metamorphoses*)

Introduction

This essay examines Canto 13 of the *Inferno* which narrates the encounter between Dante-pilgrim, his guide Virgil, and Pier delle Vigne, the damned soul who has been transformed into a thorn-bush. As many scholars have already pointed out, this episode is clearly inspired by classical authors: whereas the metamorphosis of a human body recalls Ovidian transformations, other details in the encounter can be related to the *Aeneid*. Despite the obvious intertextual links with Ovid and Virgil, one can notice a lack of precision and consensus in the identification of the tales rewritten by Dante. Therefore we want to find out whether or not there is a particular tale or myth which had a decisive influence on the depiction of Dante’s *selva dei suicidi*.

Entering the second ring of the seventh circle

Before we concentrate on the Latin sources behind the thorn-bush episode, it may be useful to consider the passage itself. At the beginning of Canto 13 Dante and Virgil enter the second ring of the seventh circle after having crossed Phlegethon, the river of blood, with the help of the centaur Nessus. The first aspect that catches our attention is the landscape which contrasts sharply with the location depicted in Canto 12: compared to the first ring where the setting

was dominated by boiling blood (cf. *Inf.* 12, 101; “la proda del bollor vermiglio”¹), this place is totally different since all references to bloody fluids (*Inf.* 12, “sangue”, “riviera”, “Tamisi”, “bulicame”) have disappeared. The new landscape is described as an uncivilized and darkish wood whose venomous vegetation causes death instead of engendering new life (Ubal dini 2005, pp. 134-135):

(...) un bosco
che da neun sentiero era segnato.
Non fronda verde, ma di color fosco;
non rami schietti, ma nodosi e ‘nvolti;
non pomi v’eran, ma stecchi con tòsco.
non han sí aspri sterpi né sí folti
quelle fiere selvagge che ‘n odio hanno
tra Cecina e Corneto i luoghi cólti. (*Inf.* 13, 2-9)

(...) a forest
not marked by any path.
No green leaves, but those of dusky hue--
not a straight branch, but knotted and contorted --
no fruit of any kind, but poisonous thorns.
No rougher, denser thickets make a refuge
for the wild beasts that hate tilled lands
between the Cècina and Corneto.

Note that, by using the anaphoras “non/ ma” in lines 4-6, the author suggests two landscapes at the same time: he calls to mind a classical *locus amoenus* (“fronda verde”; “rami schietti”; “pomi”) and its perfect reversal (“perfetto rovesciamento”, Ubal dini, 2005, p. 134). The contrast between the two scenes could not be more evident: the juxtaposition emphasizes the rough and gruesome character of the forest that Dante and his guide are about to enter.

This wood is the place where the hideous Harpies live: these hybrid creatures have the body of a bird of prey and the face of a woman. The howling of these strange monsters is the first of the bizarre sounds that Dante can hear in this *locus horridus*². At this point Virgil expresses a warning that prepares both his companion and the reader to a confrontation with the unusual: “(...) sí vederai/ cose che torrien fede al mio sermone” (*Inf.* 13, 20-21.)³. All of a sudden the pilgrim perceives plaintive cries coming from all sides, but he is unable to see the human beings expressing these lamentations. Encouraged by his guide, Dante picks a branch from one of the thorn-bushes (“un gran pruno”, *Inf.* 13, 32). The bloodstained trunk – the allusion to the blood reminds of canto 12 – reacts immediately and shouts: “Perché mi schiante?” (*Inf.* 13, 33)⁴. This human behavior is repeated in the next verses when the stem repeats his question (*Inf.* 13, 35: “ricominciò a dir: “Perché mi scerpi?”)⁵. Dante, who is frightened by this unexpected reaction, drops the twig and remains silent, whereas Virgil

¹ “the vermilion boil”, see also *Inf.* 12, 47-48: “la riviera del sangue in la qual bolle/ qual che per vïolenza in altrui nocchia” (“the river of blood that scalds/ those who by violence do injury to others”); *Inf.* 12, 117: “quel bulicame” (“that boiling stream”).

² *Inf.* 13, 13-15: “Ali hanno late, e colli e visi umani,/ piè con artigli, e pennuto ‘l gran ventre;/ fanno lamenti in su li alberi strani”. (“They have broad wings, human necks and faces,/ taloned feet, and feathers on their bulging bellies./ Their wailing fills the eerie trees”).

³ “you will see such things/ as are not easily believed from speech alone”.

⁴ “why do you break me?”

⁵ *Inf.* 13, 35: “ricominciò a dir: “Perché mi scerpi?” (“it cried again: ‘Why do you tear me?’)”).

explains to the tree why he made his companion injure his branches⁶. The pagan poet invites the shrub to reveal his identity, so that his companion can make up for his act of violence by restoring the reputation of the person that seems to be inside the plant (*Inf.* 13, 52-54). The speaking thorn-bush appears to be the soul of Pier delle Vigne, chancellor and minister of Frederick II, who killed himself after having been accused of treachery. In the following verses the suicide tells about his death, his entrance in Hell and the way he was transformed into a thorn-bush. All of a sudden the conversation between Virgil, Dante and Pier is interrupted by a new sound: they hear the barking of the black hounds (“nere cagne”, *Inf.* 13, 125) that chase the wastrels, the sinners who, during their lives, have intentionally thrown away their possessions⁷. Canto 13 ends with the account of an anonymous Florentine suicide who asks the two visitors to gather the leaves of “his tree” which have been torn during the chase.

The conversation with Pier delle Vigne, as mentioned in the introduction, is without doubt a reminiscence of classical texts. What strikes us, when examining critical contributions on this issue, is the lack of agreement in the identification of - what Genette would have called - these hypotexts⁸. Let us consider some recent articles on the matter. According to Peterson, the Pier delle Vigne episode recalls “two Ovidian episodes of human metamorphosis into a tree: that of Daphne changed into a laurel and that of Phaeton’s daughters turned into poplar trees” (Peterson 2007, p. 206). He adds: “The text is marked in this way, such that one can only think of Ovid”. Racci’s opinion is similar to that of Peterson: although she does not mention Ovid’s Daphne myth, she stresses the connection between canto 13 and the story of Phaeton (Racci 1994, p. 217-218). Guthmüller agrees with Peterson and Racci in recognizing the decisive impact of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, but he indicates another tale, that of Dryope, (*Met.* IX), as the main source of inspiration for Dante’s *selva dei suicidi* (Guthmüller 2000, p. 22). In his text Guthmüller also refers to the story of the Heliads (*Met.* IV) and that of Erysichthon (*Met.* VIII). Heuzé, on the other hand, considers the intertextual link between Canto 13 and the *Metamorphoses* as rather superficial (Heuzé 2009, p. 40). For him the most important source is the episode in the *Aeneid* (III, 22-48) where Aeneas damages the grave of Polydorus, son of Priam, who had been murdered by Polymnestor, king of Thracia. Confalonieri, author of an essay dedicated to the theme of the “uomo-pianta” in Italian literature, also connects Canto 13 to the third book of the *Aeneid*. He links one particular passage – where the suicide talks about his changed body (*Inf.* 13, 73-75) – to the Ovidian account of Dryope⁹.

Unfortunately none of these critics care to verify the correctness of their statements by simply consulting the classical sources. For this reason we shall now take a closer look at these texts. We do not merely want to verify which classical text(s) Dante chose to rewrite, we also intend to find out what exactly caused confusion among scholars.

Daphne or the Heliades, Dryope or Polydorus?

⁶ *Inf.* 13, 50-51: “ma la cosa incredibile mi fece/ indurlo ad ovra ch’a me stesso pesa”. (“But your plight, being incredible, made me/ goad him to this deed that weighs on me”).

⁷ As for the episode of the “scialacquatori” (and its relationship to the myth of Actaeon), cf. Vanacker 2009, pp. 107-113.

⁸ Cf. Genette 1982

⁹ Confalonieri 2008, p. 452: “Piero giura di fatto sul proprio corpo, naturalmente cogliendolo nella sua dimensione vegetale; qualcosa di simile accade nelle *Metamorfosi* di Ovidio, nell’episodio di Driope (...). È un passaggio in cui l’influenza di Ovidio sull’elaborazione dantesca del motivo dell’uomo-pianta (...) sembra avvertirsi distintamente”.

The first tale is the well-known myth of Apollo and Daphne narrated in the first book of the *Metamorphoses* (*Met.* 1, 452-567). Daphne was a beautiful chaste nymph who devoted herself to the goddess Diana and who refused to answer the love of Phoebus. She asked her father Peneus for help while being pursued by the god and only just before he could seize her, the nymph was transformed into a laurel¹⁰. When the metamorphosis was complete, Apollo unsuccessfully tried to kiss the trunk of the tree:

Hanc quoque Phoebus amat positaque in stipite dextra
sentit adhuc trepidare novo sub cortice pectus
complexusque suis ramos ut membra lacertis
oscula dat ligno; refugit tamen oscula lignum. (*Met.* 1, 553-556)

But even now in this new form Apollo loved her; and placing his hand upon the trunk, he felt the heart still fluttering beneath the bark. He embraced the branches as if human limbs, and pressed his lips upon the wood. But even the wood shrank from his kisses.

As he was unable to love the nymph, the god decided to make the laurel ‘his’ tree (“Since thou canst not be my bride, thou shalt at least be my tree. My hair, my lyre, my quiver shall always be entwined with thee, O laurel”¹¹). In describing the reaction of the plant, the narrator suggests an almost human conduct: “The laurel waved her new-made branches, and seemed to move her head-like top in full consent”¹². In the *Metamorphoses* this tale is the first of four stories (Io, *Met.* 1, 568-624; Syrinx, *Met.* 1, 689-712; Callisto, *Met.* 2, 401-530) where the love of a god for a reluctant young girl is presented as a hunt¹³. Considering the importance of the *selva* in Canto 13 we should add that the pursuit of these virgins takes place in a wood. The Ovidian wood seems a peaceful and idyllic place, but in reality it harbours dangerous, violent forces¹⁴. In the case of Daphne it is the transformation into a tree which helps to escape from Apollo’s sexual aggression. Metamorphosis, in her case, means salvation: it is a way to avoid the choice between life and death. By becoming a laurel, in other words, Daphne only puts an end to her life as a human being. For this reason her transformation is not represented as a negative experience. Rather, by turning the laurel into an eternal “symbol of military and artistic triumph”¹⁵, Apollo seems to consider metamorphosis as a reward.

Let us pass on to the Heliads, Phaeton’s sisters – and not his daughters as Peterson wrongly believes – who have very often been seen as a model for Dante’s suicides. In the second book of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes their grief at the death of their brother who had been killed by Jupiter’s lightning bolt while driving Phoebus’ chariot. The girls’ sadness was endless and after they had spent four months mourning near Phaeton’s grave, each one of

¹⁰ *Met.* 1, 548-556: “vix prece finita torpor gravis occupat artus,/ mollia cinguntur tenui praecordia libro,/ in frondem crines, in ramos brachia crescunt,/ pes modo tam velox pigris radicibus haeret,/ ora cacumen habet: remanet nitor unus in illa”. (Scarce had she thus prayed when a down-dragging numbness seized her limbs, and her soft sides were begirt with thin bark. Her hair was changed to leaves, her arms to branches. Her feet, but now so swift, grew fast in sluggish roots, and her head was now but a tree’s top. Her gleaming beauty alone remained).

¹¹ *Met.* 1, 557-559: “(...) at, quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse,/ arbor eris certe” dixit “mea! semper habebunt/ te coma, te ciharae, te nostrae, laure, pharetrae”.

¹² *Met.* 1, 566-567: “(...) factis modo laurea ramis/ adnuat utque caput visa est agitasse cacumen”.

¹³ On this subject see Vanacker 2009, pp. 46-51; Fabre-Serris 1995, pp. 276-289; Heath 1992, pp. 53-99.

¹⁴ Cf. Segal 1969; Newlands 2004, 137: “These landscapes are beautiful but also dangerous. They inevitably fail to protect the innocent the innocent outsiders who come to them seeking shelter and comfort. They always have a deceptive elements, making them collusive with the violence that takes place there and with their gods. Their victims, (...), find their trust in the protection of the landscape misplaced as they are pursued, raped, or transformed by gods”.

¹⁵ Brown 2005, p. 45.

them was transformed into a poplar tree¹⁶. In the final stage of metamorphosis – which corresponds to a hybrid condition between plant and human being – the sisters were still capable of speaking. They called upon their mother who desperately tried to put a stop to the transformation. Despite her efforts Clymene seriously wounded her daughters instead of saving them. The girls, turned into talking trees, begged their mother to stop because their changing bodies could still feel pain:

(...) truncis avellere corpora temptat
et teneros manibus ramos abrumpit, at inde
sanguineae manant tamquam de vulnere guttae.
“parce, precor, mater,” quaecumque est saucia, clamat,
“parce, precor: nostrum laceratur in arbore corpus
iamque vale” – cortex in verba novissima venit. (*Met.* 2, 358-363)

she tries to tear away the bark from their bodies and breaks off slender twigs with her hands. But as she does this bloody drops trickle forth as from a wound. And each one, as she is wounded, cries out: “Oh, spare me, mother; spare, I beg you. ‘Tis my body that you are tearing in the tree. And now farewell” – the bark closed.

In this episode metamorphosis is clearly the consequence of emotional sufferance. The reader does not have the impression that becoming a tree is a way to survive, as in the case of Daphne. Rather he has the feeling that the girls, as human beings, gradually disappear because of excessive grief. In this story the loss of the human body is a way to express some kind of alienation caused by the loss of a loved one.

Compared to the previous episode, one can also establish a difference in the relationship between the character that does not change (Phoebus/ Clymene) and the character that undergoes transmutation (Daphne/ the Heliads). The first myth is a story of impossible love – a god falls in love with a reluctant nymph – whereas the second episode is about a mother trying to rescue her daughters. In the first tale metamorphosis is wanted by the transforming person: Daphne explicitly asks her father to change her human body so as to save her from being raped. The character that does not change, Apollo, is the cause of the transformation of the other person. In the second episode, the transformation into a tree is not asked by the sisters. The character that does not change, their mother, is also not the reason why they experience metamorphosis. Clymene, in contrast, is the person who tries to stop this irreversible process.

The next tale which critics consider a source of inspiration for canto 13 can be found in book 9 of the *Metamorphoses* where Iole narrates the story of her half-sister, Dryope (*Met.* 9, 324-393). One day this Oechalian girl took her infant son Amphissos on her arm and went out to gather some garlands for the nymphs. She was standing near a lake when she saw a blooming lotus tree. She picked some of its blossoms in order to give them to her son as toys. Iole, who was with her sister, saw how the flowers began to bleed:

¹⁶ *Met.* 2, 346-355: “(...) e quis Phaethusa, sororum/ maxima, cum vellet terra procumbere, questa est/ deriguisset pedes; ad quam conata venire/ candida Lampetie subita radice retenta est;/ tertia, cum crinem manibus laniare pararet,/ avellit frondes; haec stipite crura teneri,/ illa dolet fieri longos sua brachia ramos,/ dumque ea mirantur, conplectitur inguina cortex/ perque gradus uterum pectusque umerosque manusque/ ambit, et exstabant tantum ora vocantia matrem”. (“Then one day the eldest, Phaëthus, when she would throw herself upon the grave, complained that her feet had grown cold and stark; and when the fair Lampetia tried to come to her, she was held fast as by sudden roots. A third, making to tear her hair, found her hands plucking at foliage. One complained that her ankles were encased in wood, another that her arms were changing to long branches. And while they look on those things in amazement bark closes round their loins, and, by degrees, their waists, breasts, shoulders, hands; and all that was free were their lips calling upon their mother”).

carpserat hinc Dryope, quos oblectamina nato
porrigeret, flores, et idem factura videbar –
namque aderam – vidi guttas e flore cruentas
decidere et tremulo ramos horrore moveri. (*Met.* 9, 942-345)

To please her little son the mother plucked some these blossoms, and I was in the act to do the same (for I was with her), when I saw drops of blood falling from the flowers and the branches shivering with horror.

Dryope had wounded Lotis, a nymph who was hiding in the tree after having been pursued by Priapus. Though she had not been aware of injuring a transformed nymph, Dryope was punished at once and changed into a lotus tree¹⁷. Her fate reminds of the Heliads episode for two reasons. The first parallel is the fact that her loved ones desperately tried to rescue her (*Met.* 9, 359-366). For a moment Dryope “had only her face remaining, while all the rest was tree”¹⁸. Similar to the Phaeton’s sisters, she had one last chance to speak. The girl did not beg her relatives to stop wounding her new body. Instead she stresses her innocence (“I have not merited this dreadful thing”¹⁹) and asks her family to let her child play beside her tree:

(...) nostraque sub arbore saepe
lac facitote bibat, nostraque sub arbore ludat.
cumque loqui poterit, matrem facitote salutet,
et tristis dicat “latet hoc in stipite mater.”
stagna tamen timeat, nec carpat ab arbore flores,
et frutices omnes corpus putet esse dearum.
care vale coniunx, et tu, germana, paterque!” (*Met.* 9, 376-382)

Beneath my tree let him often come and take his milk; beneath my tree let him play. And when he learns to talk, have him greet his mother and sadly say: “Here in this tree-trunk is my mother hid.” Still let him fear the pool, pluck no blossoms from the trees, and think all flowers are goddesses in disguise! Farewell, dear husband, and you, sister, and my father!

A laurel, poplar trees and a lotus tree... The next tree which, according to Ovid, is also the new body of a human being is an oak. In book 8 one can read the tale of Erysichthon (*Met.* 8, 738-878) who insulted Ceres by destroying a sacred wood. Inside this wood there was a “mighty oak with strength matured by centuries of growth, itself a grove”²⁰. Erysichthon commanded his servants to cut it down, but when he noticed their hesitation – they all knew the oak was sacred to Ceres – he took an axe and felled the tree himself. At this point the bleeding tree began to speak and declared that the man would be punished for his blasphemous act.

¹⁷ *Met.* 9, 349-355: “(...) quae cum perterrita retro/ ire et adoratis vellet discedere nymphis,/ haeserunt radice pedes. convellere pugnat,/ nec quicquam, nisi summa movet. subcrescit ab imo,/ totaque paulatim lentus premit inguina cortex./ ut vidit, conata manu laniare capillos,/ fronde manum implevit: frondes caput omne tenebant”. (“And when she started back in terror and, with prayers to the nymphs, strove to leave the place, her feet clung, root-like, to the ground; she struggled to tear herself away, but nothing moved except the upper part of her body; the slow-creeping bark climbed upward from her feet and covered all her loins. When she saw this, she strove to tear her hair with her hands, but only filled her hands with leaves; for leaves now covered all her head”).

¹⁸ *Met.* 9, 367: “nil nisi iam faciem, quod non foret arbor, habebat”.

¹⁹ *Met.* 9, 372: “non meruisse nefas”.

²⁰ *Met.* 8, 743-744: “(...) ingens annoso robore quercus,/ una nemus (...)”.

(...) et obliquos dum telum librat in ictus,
 contremuit gemitumque dedit Deoia quercus,
 et pariter frondes, pariter pallescere glandes
 coepere ac longi pallorem ducere rami.
 cuius ut in trunco fecit manus in pia vulnus,
 haud aliter fluxit discusso cortice sanguis,
 quam solet, ante aras ingens ubi victima taurus
 concidit, abrupta cruor e cervice profundi.

(...)

repetitaque robora caedit,
 redditus et medio sonus est de robore talis:
 ‘nympha sub hoc ego sum Cereri gratissima ligno,
 quae tibi factorum poenas instare tuorum
 vaticinor moriens, nostril solacia leti’. (*Met.* 8, 757-773)

and while he poised his axe for the slanting stroke, the oak of Deo trembled and gave forth a groan ; at the same time its leaves and its acorns grew pale, its long branches took on a pallid hue. But when that impious stroke cut into the trunk, blood came streaming forth from the severed bark, even as when a huge sacrificial bull has fallen at the altar, and from his smitten neck the blood pours forth. (...) Then, as he struck the oak blow after blow, from within the tree a voice was heard: “I, a nymph most dear to Ceres, dwell within this wood, and I prophesy with my dying breath, and find my death’s solace in it, that punishment is at hand for what you do”.

The severe punishment announced by the oak reflected Erysichthon’s extreme act of aggression. The insulted goddess, Ceres, asked Famine for help and affected the man with an insatiable hunger. His constant craving for food and water made him sell his daughter and consume his worldly possessions. At the end Erysichthon even “began to tear his own flesh with his greedy teeth and, by consuming his own body, fed himself”²¹.

There is an interesting connection between this case and the previous story: Erysichthon, like Iole’s half-sister, is punished for wounding a nymph hiding in a tree. Unlike Dryope, though, he intentionally chopped down the sacred oak. In this story, the person who is punished and transformed into a tree is guilty.

For the last episode, we must look at the beginning of the third book of the *Aeneid* where Aeneas describes how an unusual event convinced him not to found a city in Trace. After he and his family went ashore in this part of Greece, the hero decided to offer a sacrifice to the gods. On the top of a small hill he saw cornel bushes and myrtles: as he plucked some branches of a tree, he saw black blood coming out of it (“For from the first tree which is torn from the ground with broken roots trickle drops of black blood and stain the earth with gore”²²). Although this strange phenomenon scared him, Aeneas repeated his act when, suddenly, he heard a voice coming out of the earth:

tertia sed postquam maiore hastilia nisu
 adgreditor genibusque adversae obluctor harenae
 (eloquar, an sileam?), gemitus lacrimabilis imo
 auditor tumulto, et vox reddita fertur ad auris:
 ‘quid miserum, Aenea, laceras? iam parce sepulto,

²¹ *Met.* 8, 877-878: “ipse suos artus lacero divellere morsu/ coepit et infelix minuendo corpus alebat”.

²² *Aen.* 3, 27-29: “nam quae prima solo ruptis radicibus arbor/ vellitur, huic atro liquuntur sanguine guttae/ et terram tabo maculant. (...)”.

parce pias scelerare manus. non me tibi Troia
externum tulit, aut cruor hic de stipite manat.
heu! fuge crudelis terras, fuge litus avarum.
nam Polydorus ego. hic confixum ferrea textit
telorum seges et iaculis increvit acutis'. (*Aen.* 3, 37-46)

But when with greater effort I assail the third shafts, and with my knees wrestle against the resisting sands - should I speak or be silent? – a piteous groan is heard from the depth of the mound, and an answering voice comes to my ears. “Woe is me! why, Aeneas, do you tear me? Spare me in the tomb at last; spare the pollution of your pure hands! I, born of Troy, am no stranger to you; not from a lifeless stock oozes this blood. Ah! Flee the cruel land, flee the greedy shore! For I am Polydorus. Here an iron harvest of spears covered my pierced body and grew up into sharp javelins”.

The voice appeared to be that of Polydorus, the son of Priam's, who had been murdered by Polymnestor. The king of Trace, who was supposed to raise Polydorus, killed him in an attempt to steal the treasure of Troy. Several elements in this episode recall Dante's encounter with Pier delle Vigne. Every reader will already have noticed that Polydorus' exclamation (“Quid miserum, Aenea, laceras?”, *Aen.* III, v. 41) is almost identical to the words shouted by Pier. In the next section we will find out if there are more of these parallels by confronting Canto 13 with the *Aeneid* and the Ovidian myths discussed above.

“We once were men and now are turned to thorns”

The first reason why the connection between Dante's *selva dei suicidi* and the third book of the *Aeneid* may seem quite obvious is the fact that, in Canto 13, Virgil refers to his own text when he explains to Pier why he let Dante injure his tree:

“S' elli avesse potuto creder prima”,
rispuose ‘l savio mio, “anima lesa,
ciò c’ha veduto pur con la mia rima,
non averebbe in te la man distesa;
ma la cosa incredibile mi fece
indurlo ad ovra ch’a me stesso pesa
(...)”. (*Inf.* 13, 46-51)

“Could he have believed it otherwise,
O wounded soul,” my sage spoke up,
“what he had seen only in my verses,
he would not have raised his hand against you.
But your plight, being incredible, made me
goad him to this deed that weighs on me (...)”.

If we want to find a parallel between Aeneas' adventure in Trace and Dante's encounter with the human thorn-bushes, we must first examine the relationship between the character who wounds a tree and the person who is wounded. Similar to Virgil's hero Dante explores an unfamiliar region where, as a visitor, he has a conversation with a person he has only just injured. This relationship cannot be found in the Ovidian myths: considering the stories of

Daphne, the Heliads, Dryope or Erysichthon, one immediately understands that none of these tales are about travellers meeting somebody in a new land.

Wherein lays the difference between Dante-pilgrim and Aeneas? Both characters hurt a tree which loses dark blood (cf. *Inf.* 13, 34: “sangue bruno”; *Aen.* III, 28: “atro [...] sanguine”), but the latter, in fact, wounds vegetation growing on top of a grave. Dante, similar to Dryope or Erysichthon, injures a person that has become a tree. If we want to be precise, we have to mention that Aeneas plucks twigs from several trees standing on the hill²³, whereas Dante plucks a branch from only one tree²⁴. In this sense the pilgrim’s act reminds more of Dryope or Erysichthon, who both damage one plant. An attentive reader will also have noticed that Aeneas hears a voice coming out of the grave²⁵, whereas Dante hears a voice coming out the thorn-bush²⁶. So the idea of a person being locked up inside a tree must have been taken from the *Metamorphoses*. This equivalence becomes clear when we compare the following three citations. The first passage is one of the questions Virgil addresses to Pier.

Perciò ricominciò: “se l’om ti faccia
liberamente ciò che ‘l tuo dir priega,
spirito incarcerato, ancor ti piaccia
di dirne come *l’anima si lega*
in questi nocchi (...)”²⁷. (*Inf.* 13, 85-89)

Thus he began again: “So that this man may,
with ready will, do as your words entreat,
may it please you, *imprisoned spirit*,
to tell us further how *the souls are bound*
inside such gnarled wood (...)”.

The next two citations have been taken from Ovid’s account of Dryope (*Met.* 9) and Erysichthon (*Met.* 8):

scilicet, ut referent tardi nunc denique agrestes,
Lotis *in hanc* nympe, fugiens obscena Priapi,
contulerat versos, servato nomine, vultus. (*Met.* 9, 346-348)

For, so you must know, as the slow rustics still relate, Lotis, a nymph, while fleeing from Priapus’ vile pursuit, *had taken refuge in this shape*, changed as to features but keeping still her name.

²³ Cf. *Aen.* III, 27-40: “nam quae prima solo ruptis radicibus arbor/ vellitur, huic atro liquuntur sanguine guttae/ et terram tabo maculant (...). rursus et alterius lentum convellere vimen/ insequor et causas penitus temptare latentis (...) tertia sed postquam maiore hastilia nisu/ adgredior genibusque adversae obluctor harenae/ (...) gemitus lacrimabilis imo/ auditur tumulo (...)”. (“For from the first tree which is torn from the ground with broken roots trickle drops of black blood and stain the earth with gore. (...) Once more, from a second also I go on to pluck a tough shoot and probe deep the hidden cause (...). But when with greater effort I assail the third shafts, and with my knees wrestle against the resisting sands (...) a piteous groan is heard from the depth of the mound (...)”)

²⁴ ²⁴ Cf. *Inf.* 13, 32: “e colsi un ramicel da un gran pruno”. (“and plucked a twig from a tall thorn-bush”)

²⁵ Cf. *Aen.* III, 39-40: “(...) gemitus lacrimabilis imo/ auditur tumulo (...)”. (“a piteous groan is heard from the depth of the mound”).

²⁶ Cf. *Inf.* 13, 33: “e ‘l tronco suo gridò (...)”. (“and its stem cried out”).

²⁷ emphasis mine.

Nympha sub hoc ego sum Cereri gratissima ligno (*Met.* 8, v. 771)
I, a nymph most dear to Ceres, *dwelt within this wood.*

Wounding a tree is without doubt an essential element in Dante's text. We have seen in the previous section that, apart from the *Aeneid*, the stories of the Heliads, Dryope and Erysichthon also develop the motif of the bleeding plant. This is not so in Ovid's Daphne myth and this is one of the main reasons why the link with the wood of the suicides indicated by Peterson does not seem very convincing.

Other parallels between Canto 13 and the *Aeneid* can be drawn when one examines the reaction of the person who damages a tree (Aeneas/ Dante) and the behaviour of the person who is wounded (Polydorus/ Pier). Dante's reaction to the tree's exclamation is very similar to that of Aeneas: both men are very frightened by what they hear and they do not immediately understand what is happening:

(...) ond'io lasciai la cima
cadere, e stetti come l'uom che teme (*Inf.* 13, 43-44)

(...) and I let drop
the twig and stood like one afraid.

(...) mihi frigidus horror
membra quatit, gelidusque coit formidine sanguis. (*Aen.* 3, 29-30)

A cold shudder shakes my limbs, and my chilled blood freezes with terror.

Obvious parallels can also be found in the reactions of Polydorus and Pier delle Vigne. In addition to the almost identical answer shouted at the person responsible for their injuries (cf. *Aen.* 3, 41: "quid miserum, Aenea, laceras? (...)"; *Inf.* 13, v. 33 "e 'l tronco suo gridò: Perché mi schiante?"; v. 35: "ricominciò a dir: "Perché mi scerpi?"), one can notice that being wounded by a stranger is an opportunity to reveal their identities and to convey what has happened to them during their lives. We already know from the previous section that Polydorus had been murdered by Polymnestor²⁸. In *Inferno* 13 it is Virgil who interrogates the thorn-bush because Dante does not feel capable of asking questions. The pagan poet first asks the tree to reveal his identity and to tell his companion why his soul ended up in this horrendous place. Then he asks Pier to explain how the suicides had found their place in the wood and how they had been metamorphosed into trees. In this passage the visitor (Dante) – and the reader – receives a lot of information about the life and death of the character that did not even seem human at the beginning of the text. In this way Canto 13 is very similar to the Polydorus episode in the *Aeneid*. One aspect, however, reminds more of an Ovidian myth. In his answer to the first question, Pier delle Vigne swears on his new body:

Per le nove radici d'esto legno
vi giuro che già mai non ruppi fede
al mio signor, che fu d'onor sí degno. (*Inf.* 13, 73-75)

"By this tree's new-sprung roots I give my oath:
not once did I break faith

²⁸ *Aen.* 3, 49-57.

with my true lord, a man so worthy of honor.
(...)”

As Confalonieri has correctly suggested, “qualcosa di simile accade nelle *Metamorfosi* di Ovidio, nell’episodio di Driope (...)”. Like Pier, the girl attests her innocence by taking an oath in which she refers to “her tree”:

(...) si mentior, arida perdam
quas habeo frondes, et caesa securibus urar. (*Met.* 3, 373-374)

If I say not the truth, parched with the drought may I lose my foliage and may I be cut down by the axe and burned.

It is likely that Ovid’s Dryope myth was not only a source of inspiration for the words spoken by Pier delle Vigne. The anonymous suicide Dante and his guide meet at the end of Canto 13 does not swear on his body, but the way he calls attention to his thorn-bush clearly evokes the oaths taken by Pier and Dryope.

Ed elli a noi: “O anime che giunte
siete a veder lo strazio disonesto
c’ha le mie fronde sí da me disgiunte,
raccoglietele al piè del tresto cesto.
(...)” (*Inf.* 13, 139-142)

And he to us: “O souls who have arrived
to see the shameless carnage
that has torn from me my leaves,
gather them here at the foot of this wretched bush”.

The connection between Dryope and Pier delle Vigne helps to understand why critics do not agree about which classical source has been a model for Canto 13. We can explain what may have caused confusion by referring to the character’s life stories and the role of responsibility in these stories. In a place like Hell the question of being guilty or innocent is an important issue. Seen from this perspective, the story of Pier delle Vigne is a strange case because he can be considered innocent and guilty at the same time. On the one hand, Pier declares that he had not committed treachery (cf. *Inf.* 13, 73-75) when he was alive. Though the reader does not know whether Pier says the truth or not, he realizes that the chancellor, who was blinded and sent to prison, must have suffered a lot. It is this element, the severe punishment of a person who might be innocent, which recalls the story of Dryope²⁹.

On the other hand, Pier cannot deny that, by committing suicide, he deliberately broke the laws of God. Although he hoped “to escape from scorn” (“fuggir disdegno”, *Inf.* 13, 71) he must have been aware that, by killing himself, he committed a Christian sin. His act was intentional and this element links his case to that of Erysichthon, the man who deliberately damaged a sacred wood. Both Pier and Erysichthon destroyed something (the human body created by God, the oak sacred to Ceres) that was believed to be sacred by the society to which they belonged. Therefore, both men can be held responsible for the events that caused their death. Their conduct was self-destructive and it is interesting to see that this is mirrored

²⁹ Cf. Segal 1969, p. 38 : “The story of Dryope is perhaps the most arbitrary of the “innocent” metamorphoses. One can hardly expect Dryope to be held responsible for not knowing which flowers are only flowers and which conceal metamorphosized Nymphs”.

in the way they have been punished. Erysichthon faded away because his never-ending desire for food made him eat his own body:

vis tamen illa mali postquam consumpserat omnem
materiam dederatque gravi nova paluba morbo,
ipse suos artus lacero divellere morsu
coepit et infelix minuendo corpus alebat. (*Met.* 8, 875-878)

At last, when the strength of the plague had consumed all these provisions, and but added to his fatal malady, the wretched man began to tear his own flesh with his greedy teeth and, by consuming his own body, fed himself.

As for Pier delle Vigne, God transformed his soul into a thorn-bush and, by doing so, he made the chancellor's human body disappear.

Quando si parte l'anima feroce
dal corpo ond'ella stessa s'è disvelta,
Minòs la manda a la settima foce.
Cade in la selva, e non l'è parte scelta;
ma là dove fortuna la balestra,
quivi germoglia come gran di spelta. (*Inf.* 13, 94-99)

When the ferocious soul deserts the body
after it has wrenched up its own roots,
Minos condemns it to the seventh gulch.
It falls into the forest, in a spot not chosen,
but flung by fortune, helter-skelter, it fastens like a seed.

We can conclude by saying that Dante did not rewrite just one classical text when he described the encounter with Pier delle Vigne. He took many structural features (the dialogue, the global story line) and details (dark blood) from the Polydorus episode in the third book of the *Aeneid*, but for some important elements in the depiction of the wood of the suicides (the human tree, the issue of responsibility) he found his inspiration in Ovidian myths.

We hope to have shown that the relationship between the *Divine Comedy* and its classical sources is a far more complex issue than one would think at first sight. In fact, by simply mentioning passages in the *Aeneid* or the *Metamorphoses*, one denies the fascinating subtlety that distinguishes Dante's rewriting of classical texts.

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