

# Dante's portrayal of the excommunicated within medieval ideas about excommunication.

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines Dante's portrayal of the excommunicated in Canto III of *Purgatorio*, contextualising it within medieval ideas about excommunication. Dante's depiction reflects a complex interplay of traditional theological teachings, evolving canon law, and his own critique of Church authority. Medieval excommunication, often seen as both a spiritual and social severance, is mirrored in Dante's portrayal of the excommunicates as a wandering, ostracised group, denied entry into Purgatory proper and forced into extended penance. Influenced by canonical developments that emphasised excommunication as a remedial rather than purely punitive measure, Dante diverges by offering excommunicated souls eventual salvation through repentance, bypassing the Church's role as an intermediary. The character of Manfred, in particular, challenges papal authority by finding direct reconciliation with God, thereby critiquing the Church's political use of excommunication. Yet, Dante paradoxically reinforces Church judgement by branding Manfred with a symbolic wound, likening him to the schismatics in *Inferno*. This paper explores how Dante's portrayal simultaneously aligns with and critiques medieval views, revealing his nuanced position on the limits of ecclesiastical authority over the afterlife.

A distinctive feature of Dante's purgatorial landscape is his depiction of the excommunicated in the third circle, portrayed as a timid, sheep-like group of ostracised individuals. Dante's portrayal of the excommunicated draws partial influence from canonical developments concerning excommunication's soteriological and punitive aspects. This influence is evident in Dante's placement of the excommunicates in Purgatory and their perceived contagious state. However, Dante's portrayal diverges from medieval ideas about excommunication, particularly in its treatment of salvation through God and the character of Manfred. Both Dante's soteriological framework and Manfred's narrative serve to challenge papal jurisdiction over the afterlife, with the salvation framework excluding the Church as an intercessor to man and God and Manfred serving as a conduit for Dante's critique of the Church and papacy. Despite Dante's use of Manfred as a vehicle for criticism, the author also symbolically brands the king with a wound on his chest. This aligns Manfred with the schismatics in *Inferno*, thereby reinforcing the Church's judgment against him. Lastly, contrasting the flock of excommunicates with Manfred highlights the complexities of situating Dante's portrayal within medieval conceptions of excommunication. Contextualising Dante's portrayal within medieval ideas about excommunication is challenging because the author does not consistently maintain a singular source of influence. Dante deviates from the adoption of medieval ideas when it concerns controversial topics such as Church jurisdiction over the afterlife and the

arbitrary use of excommunication. While Dante adopts a general Christian medieval ideology in his portrayal of the excommunicated, he does not accept the unchecked notion that the Church could determine the fate of souls through motivation by politics or personal ambition.

Dante's placement of the excommunicates within Purgatory reflects medieval Christian beliefs regarding the treatment of those who have been severed from the Church. Drawing from Thomas Aquinas' definition of excommunication as the separation of an individual from the spiritual community, Dante chooses to exile his excommunicated figures from the realm of Purgatory proper.<sup>1</sup> This reflects medieval Christian notions that the excommunicate, having been cut off from the Church, must undergo a period of purification or penance before being readmitted to the community. Dante's portrayal thus symbolises both the consequences of spiritual transgressions and the prospect of redemption through repentance and reconciliation.

While Dante's depiction aligns with canonist teachings about excommunication, it notably lacks elements from popular tradition, where beliefs often intertwined with superstition. For instance, Giovanni Villani, a contemporary of Dante, cautioned against offending those in positions of ecclesiastical authority, saying that "one must be careful not to offend anyone who is in the place of Christ's lieutenant, neither the Holy Church." Giovanni cites prophetic warnings as a consequence of such actions, for instance, the Bishop of Ansiona's prophesy that the ruling monarchy of France would lose their power after the arrest and death of Pope Boniface.<sup>2</sup> A parallel can be found between popular stories of excommunication leading to death or bad luck and Dante's portrayal of Manfred. The historical figure of Manfred died in a crusade against him after incurring multiple excommunications and ignoring the warnings of the Church. Therefore, while the condition of Dante's excommunicates can be attributed to canonist ideas about excommunication, Manfred is a character with whom the laity would be familiar.

Dante's choice to uphold the excommunication sentence of individuals in Canto III stems from significant shifts in medieval canon law during the thirteenth century, which redefined the purpose of excommunication from punishment to a form of spiritual healing. This

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Bezinger Bros. edition, 1947), II-II: q.11, a.3.

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Villani, Matteo Villani, and Filippo Villani, *Croniche di Giovanni, Matteo e Filippo Villani*, vol.1, (Trieste: Sezione letterario-artistica del Lloyd Austriaco, 1857), 320. "E però è da guardare d'offendere chi è in luogotenente di Cristo, nè a Santa Chiesa."

transformation was formalised during the Council of Lyon in 1245, convened by Pope Innocent IV, where the medicinal aspect of excommunication was explicitly recognised. Article 19 of the Council's *Constitutiones* reads, "Since excommunication is curative, not mortal... let the judge take care to show... that he pursues what is correcting and healing."<sup>3</sup> Despite this evolving understanding, some contemporaries continued to hold onto older interpretations, such as those of St. Jerome, a fourth-century Christian priest and theologian. St. Jerome likened an excommunicated individual to pus within a wound, suggesting that their removal was necessary for the health of the spiritual community.<sup>4</sup> In Dante's portrayal, we encounter a synthesis of both traditional and progressive medieval views on excommunication. By exiling the excommunicated individuals, Dante allows them the opportunity to repent for their sins and ultimately find redemption. Simultaneously, this act protects Purgatory's sanctity from these sinners' potentially harmful influence. Thus, Dante's depiction encapsulates the tension between the punitive and remedial aspects of excommunication, reflecting the complexities of medieval theological thought on the matter.

In the medieval mindset, excommunication was perceived akin to a contagious ailment. A fourteenth-century Archbishop wrote that excommunicates were to keep away from the faithful and ought also to avoid other excommunicates.<sup>5</sup> Dante's representation of the excommunicated is deeply influenced by these prevailing notions of contagion, manifesting in two significant ways. Firstly, Dante consigns the excommunicates to Ante-Purgatory, effectively segregating them from the community of penitents within Purgatory proper. Moreover, within Ante-Purgatory, Dante accentuates the divide further by subjecting the excommunicated to a prolonged period of isolation, lasting thirty times the duration of their contumacy. In contrast, the rest must remain there for a period equivalent to the length of their life.<sup>6</sup>

While the punishment for interacting with excommunicates in the latter half of the thirteenth century entailed exclusion from essential sacraments like the Eucharist, Dante's portrayal introduces a paradox. On one hand, he adheres to canonist teachings about the contagious nature of excommunication by isolating the excommunicated. However, Dante also imbues a

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<sup>3</sup> Josepho Alberigo and others, eds., *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decretal*, 3rd edn. (Bologna: Instituto per le scienze religiose, 1973), 291. "Cum medicinalis sit excommunicatio non mortalis, caute provideat iudex ecclesiasticus, ut in ea ferenda ostendat se prosequi quod corrigentis est et medentisi."

<sup>4</sup> Saint Jerome, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*. Trans. Marie Liguori Ewald. Vol. 1. The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation. Vols. 48 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1964) 369, 309.

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Vidola, *Excommunication in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 47n20.

<sup>6</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy II: Purgatory*, trans. Dorothy Sayers (Baltimore: Penguin, 1959), 63-64.

sense of *communitas* among them (*Pur.* III, 79:93), contradicting established Church doctrines.<sup>7</sup> This contradiction highlights the limitations of the Church's excommunication policy when applied to groups of individuals. As criticised by Tanner, the arbitrary use of excommunication sentences by the late Middle Ages for political reasons caused whole populations to be excommunicated, “such as the Venetians in 1202, and the Bolognese in 1231, and the Flemings, Scots, and Florentines in the fourteenth century.”<sup>8</sup> Dante's portrayal thus not only reflects medieval attitudes towards excommunication but also prompts contemplation on the broader implications of ecclesiastical authority and societal dynamics within the context of spiritual punishment.

Dante's portrayal of the excommunicated reflects medieval fears of spiritual contagion and explores their state's theological implications. The soteriology that governs the salvation of Dante's excommunicates is partly based on medieval ideas about the afterlife and excommunication. In the thirteenth century, salvation became available to excommunicates. Article 19 of the Council of Lyon was instrumental in causing a change in consciousness about the future of excommunicates. Aquinas reaffirmed the availability of grace to excommunicates in the late thirteenth century, claiming that “excommunication regards grace, not directly but consequently, in so far as it deprives a man of the Church's prayers, by which he is disposed for grace or preserved therein.”<sup>9</sup> Since excommunication only regards grace “consequently” by depriving excommunicates from partaking in sacraments, salvation is still achievable through different means.

Dante illustrates this through characters like Manfred, who finds repentance and reconciliation with God directly (*Pur.* III, 119), bypassing the traditional channels of the Church. However, while the figures have been saved from hell by contrition, the keys held by the guardian angel of Purgatory-Proper do not remit the *culpa* of sin.<sup>10</sup> Excommunicates were expected to atone for their sins and seek forgiveness directly from the individual who issued the excommunication. Once freed from the sentence, an individual was readmitted to society and the Church. However, since Dante's excommunicates repented directly to God, their sentence

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Lansing, 'Purgatorio III', *Lectura Dantis* 12, Supplement (1993), 47

<sup>8</sup> Norman Tanner and Sethina Watson, "Least of the Laity: the Minimum Requirements for a Medieval Christian", *Journal of Medieval History*, 32 (2006), 420.

<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, IIIae: q.22, a.2.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Armour, *The Door of Purgatory A Study of Multiple Symbolism in Dante's Purgatorio* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 81.

must be fulfilled before progressing within Purgatory. In Dante's narrative, the Church's authority extends into the afterlife. Yet, he also emphasises the individual's direct relationship with God as a means of salvation to challenge papal control over the afterlife.

Dante's portrayal of the excommunicated reveals a paradoxical relationship with medieval ideas about excommunication. Through the character of Manfred, Dante grants the Church a degree of influence over a person's afterlife while simultaneously criticising the institution for its arbitrary imposition of excommunication sentences. Manfred was first excommunicated by Alexander IV in 1258 and again by Urban IV, who proclaimed a crusade against him. Singleton argues that the excommunication sentences were politically motivated, as Manfred was aligned with the Ghibellines.<sup>11</sup> Despite potential political motivations behind Manfred's excommunications, medieval canonist doctrine mandated repentance even for unjustly excommunicated individuals. The author of the supplement to Aquinas' *Summa* advised that if an unfairly excommunicated person "were to condemn the sentence, he would '*ipso facto*' sin mortally."<sup>12</sup> This was confirmed by Giordano of Rivalto in 1303 when he preached to the Florentines that if the excommunication "should be unjust, then the person thus excommunicated is not thereby excommunicated by God and does not lose heaven. But he must obey the excommunication."<sup>13</sup> In the thirteenth, defiance of an excommunication sentence could lead to the Anathema, a ritual delivering the unrepentant to Satan. Manfred's repeated excommunications suggest non-compliance with the papacy's demands and failure to fulfil his punishment, theoretically warranting the use of the Anathema. However, Manfred finds himself in Purgatory because he repented to God at the moment of his death (Pur. III, 119-120), contradicting canonist teachings about the consequences of ignoring excommunication and the wishes of the popes. Dante's choice to portray Manfred among the late repentant souls directly challenges canonist doctrine, illustrating the complexity of spiritual redemption in the Middle Ages.

Dante's decision to save Manfred while retaining his excommunication serves as a dual critique of the Church's political manipulation and its limits in influencing the afterlife. Balfour argues

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Singleton, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio Commentary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 57-58.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, IIIae: q.21, a.4.

<sup>13</sup> Giordano da Rivalto, *Prediche inedite del B. Giordano da Rivalto, recitate in Firenze dal 1302 al 1305*, ed. Enrico Narducci (Bologna: Presso Gaetano Romagnoli, 1867), 47. "sia isco municato non è però iscomunicato a Dio e non perde pe rò paradiso ma dee costui ubbidire la scomunicazione".

that Dante's portrayal can be deciphered as a criticism towards the Church's use of crusades against Christians for political reasons.<sup>14</sup> By sparing Manfred, Dante protests the papacy's arbitrary wielding of a tool with significant soteriological implications. While Carroll holds that Dante uses Manfred to show the limits of the Church's influence over the afterlife.<sup>15</sup> While Dante does not challenge Manfred's excommunication, his feigned repentance effectively bypasses the Church as an intermediary between the laity and God. Both historians provide insightful interpretations, as Dante's depiction of Manfred is a nuanced critique of the Church's authority and boundaries. While Dante acknowledges the Church's temporal power, he also challenges its role as the sole determinant of spiritual salvation for those who disregard their excommunication. Instead, Dante emphasises the individual's direct relationship with God, suggesting a more personal and immediate avenue for redemption.

During Dante's time, the pope's authority over the afterlife was not firmly established, and debates on this matter only gained prominence in the late fourteenth century. Cardinal Simon's argument, popular in the fourteenth century, posited that since Purgatory is situated in the centre of the Earth and the pope's jurisdiction extends to this world only, he could exert certain powers over it.<sup>16</sup> Dante does not adhere to this view in his portrayal of Manfred. While the sentence of excommunication carries into the afterlife if not absolved during one's lifetime, Dante asserts that the Church lacks the authority to dictate an individual's fate. For Dante, the Church's attempts to assert jurisdiction over matters of salvation represented a departure from the intentions of St. Paul. Throughout the *Commedia*, Dante critiques the Church's abuse of power. In *Paraiso*, St. Peter laments that his successors have used the keys entrusted to him to wage war against the baptised (*Par.* XXVII, 46-51). When used by the protector of Purgatory proper, the keys reflect God's justice (*Pur.* IX, 117-132), but when used by the Church, they are often employed in actions that contradict the fundamental principles of mercy and redemption. This is evident by the admonition issued by Dante to John XXII for his decrees of exclusion that also do not resemble God's justice (*Par.* XVIII, 128-129). Dante's portrayal can then be contextualised as a refutation of canonist views on excommunication and its implications in the afterlife. Popes erroneously claimed, like Celestine V's, to "have the power..., to lock and

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<sup>14</sup> Mark Balfour, "Orribil furon li peccati miei": Manfred's wounds in 'Purgatorio', III," *Italian Studies*, 48 (1993), 16.

<sup>15</sup> John Carroll, *Prisoners of hope : an exposition of Dante's Purgatorio* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906), 48.

<sup>16</sup> Antonius de Rosellis, 'De Indulgentiis' in *Tractatus universi iuris*, vol. 14, (Venice: Franciscus Zilettus, 1584) 147v.

unlock heaven, because the keys are two (*Inf.* XXVII, 103-104)". However, Manfred's salvation serves to clearly delineate the jurisdiction of the Church and criticise it for abusing its exclusion powers for political means.

On the other hand, in medieval times, excommunicated individuals were often perceived as a schismatic class, challenging established Christian doctrines and potentially spreading dissenting beliefs to others. This portrayal aligns with Dante's depiction of Manfred, whose wound serves as a visual representation of his status as an excommunicate and his defiance against church authority. In the *Commedia*, the only other group of individuals depicted with wounds are the schismatics in *Inferno*. Fraccero suggests that Dante's encounter with Bertrand de Born's decapitated body signifies a schism within the political order.<sup>17</sup> Bertrand is castigated "Because I severed persons thus conjoined, severed, alas, I carry my own brain (*Inf.* XXVIII, 139-140)." Schismatics, who cause division within the community, are punished through physical laceration and disfigurement. One narrative surrounding Manfred's excommunication implicated his dealings with the Saracens. By portraying Manfred with a wound at the centre of his body, Dante symbolically acknowledges, if not explicitly confirms, the judgments of the popes. However, this symbolism primarily serves to reflect Dante's acquiescence with the temporal authority of the Church rather than endorsing or denying Manfred's specific actions.

In contrast to Manfred, Dante portrays the rest of the excommunicates in a manner that completely aligns with medieval concepts of excommunication, illustrating the theological and social ramifications of being severed from the Christian community. Like sheep, they move in unison without clear sense of direction (*Pur.* III, 79-83). While Lansing suggests that Dante's comparison alludes to their lack of will, benign ignorance, or submission, this interpretation seems inadequate.<sup>18</sup> The excommunicated, having already submitted through repentance albeit belatedly, would not be characterised by ignorance or insufficient will, which would hardly aid them in reaching Purgatory proper. Alternatively, Carroll's interpretation better contextualises Dante's treatment of the excommunicated: as the excommunicates have been cast off the church, they are like sheep without a shepherd.<sup>19</sup> The state that Dante's excommunicates are in emulates their state in life. During the medieval age, excommunication entailed a separation of

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<sup>17</sup> John Freccero, *Dante and the Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 199.

<sup>18</sup> Lansing, *Purgatorio III*, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Carroll, *Prisoners*, 43.

an individual from the Church, thereby depriving the person of the guidance and sacraments available to all members to attain grace.<sup>20</sup> The excommunicates are condemned to wander for thirty times the duration of their earthly sentence, devoid of divine guidance, as a means of learning discipline. This depiction underscores the severe consequences of excommunication and emphasises the need for repentance and reconciliation with the Church's teachings.

In conclusion, Dante's portrayal of the excommunicated reflects a complex interplay of influences, drawing from both canonical edicts and the author's personal perspectives. The placement of the excommunicated outside Purgatory-Proper aligns with medieval notions of their ostracism from the spiritual community. While the excommunicates ultimately find salvation, they experience a form of double exile in the afterlife, reminiscent of medieval attitudes towards their treatment. However, Dante's depiction introduces nuances that diverge from traditional views. Dante's personal views of the Church's abuse of power for political and personal means interfere with the author's abidance to medieval views about excommunication. Dante deviates from contemporary teachings by reformulating the doctrine of salvation that governs the admission of excommunicated souls into purgatory by removing the Church as an intercessor. Additionally, Dante uses Manfred to criticise the idea of papal jurisdiction over the afterlife. For Dante, the Church's power was only effective on Earth, but it was binding— as seen through the excommunicates' retention of their sentence. Despite inconsistencies in Dante's adherence to medieval views, this paper has elucidated the areas of contention and compliance in his portrayal of the excommunicated, highlighting the complexity of his stance on this theological and social issue.

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Helmholz, "Jurisdiction and Discipline," in *The Routledge History of Medieval Christianity 1050-1500* (London: Routledge, 2015), 289.



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