

CANTO 5
Unlawful Carnal Knowledge

(As DANTE and VIRGIL descend out of the first circle, they see MINOS
snarling.)

DANTE

Who is that horned beast with fierce demeanor?

VIRGIL

He is Minos, who once ruled in Crete, he
Examines each lost soul at the entrance;
Judges, then dispatches with coiling tail. 5
Observe that when the spirit evil-born
Appears before him, it confesses all,
And this discriminator of transgressions
Knows the suitable depth for it in Hell;
Thus, he girds himself with his twitching tail,
One coil for each ring it must be thrust down. 10
Always the damned crowd up in front of him;
Passing to judgment, each one confesses;
They speak, they hear, and then are downward hurled.

MINOS

O thou, who've reached this pit of suffering,
Careful how thou enter and whom you trust; 15
Let not the wide, easy gate deceive thee!

VIRGIL

Why dost thou protest? Do not misjudge him.
Do not attempt to block his fated path:
Our passage has been willed by one above,
Trust that which is willed; so question no more. 20

(MINOS lets DANTE and VIRGIL pass beyond)

DANTE

What dolesome notes of anguish do I hear?
Mighty lamentation strikes upon me.

VIRGIL

The infernal hurricane that never rests,
Its rage eternal, sweeps up the damned souls
Whirling them round, and lashing, it tortures them. 25
When they are slammed against the ruined slope,
They shriek with cries of anguish and lament,

Then curse the power of almighty God.
It sends them whirling here, there, up and down
No hope doth comfort them for evermore,
Not of repose, release, or lesser pain. 30

DANTE

Master, who are these unfortunate souls
Whom the black wind thrashes from side to side?

VIRGIL

The first of these whose story thou shouldst know,
Was empress over lands of many tongues. 35

Her tastes and habit of lust was so great
That she legalized all debauchery

To remove the shame and scandal she'd caused.
She is Semiramis of whom we read,
She that succeeded Ninus, and was his spouse; 40

She held the land which now the Sultan rules.

The next, Dido, who killed herself for love,
And broke faith with the ashes of Sichaeus;

Then the voluptuous Cleopatra.
There is Helen for whose sake ten ruthless 45

Seasons revolved; and see great Achilles,
Whose heart and heel were slain by bated love.

Next Paris, and there, Tristan; and thousands
Of Shades torn from the mortal life by love.

DANTE

O Poet, I would speak to those two there 50
Who seem to be so light upon the winds.

VIRGIL

Behold thou when they shalt draw near to us,
Then entreat them by their love; they will come.

DANTE

O ye weary souls! By Love, hear my voice!
Come speak to us, if no one forbids it. 55

FRANCESCA

O living creature, gracious and benign,
Who braves the dark, dingy air to greet us,
Poor souls, who have stained the world with our blood;
Were the King of the Universe our friend,
We would beseech him to grant thee peace, 60
Since thou hast pitied our atrocious plight.

Whatever pleases thee to hear or speak,
Will please us too, to hear and speak with thee
As long as the wind will remain silent. 65
The town where I was born lies near that shore
Where the river Po and attendant streams
Descend unto their final resting place.
Love, that can quickly clench the gentle heart
Seized this man with passion for my sweet body
Which was torn from me, that still offends me! 70
Sent me hither unshriven to my doom.
Love, that exempts no one loved from loving,
Seized me strongly with pleasure of this man,
Thus we are one in hell, as we were above.
Love has conducted us unto one death; 75
Caina awaits he who quenched our lives!

VIRGIL
What thinkest?

DANTE

Alas! Poorest of creatures,
How many pleasant thoughts, how much desire,
Brought these lovers to this pitiful pass?

(DANTE turns back to them)

Francesca, the endless torments you suffer 80
Melt my eyes with painful tears of pity.
But tell me: at the time of your sweet sighs,
How, and by what signs, did Love seduce you
To recognize your dubious desires?

FRANCESCA

There is no greater pain or sorrow than 85
To recall past bliss in our present grief;
Your guide and teacher knows the truth of this.
Yet if you yearn so much to understand
The earliest root of our love, I'll tell
My tale to you in words of flowing tears. 90
One day, to pass the time away, we read
Of Lancelot – how love had overcome him.
Alone we were and without suspicion.
Time and again our eyes drew together
While we read that book; our faces blushed and paled 95
As one lone soft passage overcame us.
For when we read how her much desired lips

Were being kissed by such a famous lover,
This one, who never shall be parted from me,
All trembling Kissed me upon the mouth.
That book, and he who wrote it, was a pander.
That day no farther did we read therein.

100

(Her Lover weeps. DANTE faints.)