

# From the dark wood to the asphalt jungle: adaptation and appropriation in *Detective Dante*

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## Abstract

*Detective Dante* (2005-2007) is a comic book miniseries written by Lorenzo Bartoli and Roberto Recchioni. The eponymous hero, Henry Dante, is a violent policeman who, haunted by the ghost of his wife, moves from New York to the fictional 'Paradise City'. The series, composed by 24 issues divided in three cycles (Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso), is noticeably influenced by the *Divine Comedy* both in its general outline and in some single episodes; nevertheless, it ultimately tells an original story. Through a close reading of the first issue as well as more general considerations about the series in its entirety, this paper investigates the intertextual relations between *Detective Dante* and the *Divine Comedy*. In the context of Dantean comics, this series exhibits a number of unusual traits: its references are thematical and structural, rather than graphic; it contaminates elements from the *Commedia* with a modern and noir setting, generating unique combinations; perhaps most importantly, it refutes the subservience to the literary source typical of many comics adaptations.

## Keywords

Adaptation; comics; Roberto Recchioni; Lorenzo Bartoli; Dante Alighieri

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Among the many adaptations of the *Divine Comedy* into comics, the miniseries *Detective Dante* seems to have escaped the attention of scholars – so much so, in fact, that not only there are no specific studies on this work, but it is not even named in otherwise commendable surveys of Dantean comics (for instance Winter 2018: 62-64; it appears, however, in a list of “Divini comics” posted by Lorenzo Barberis [2016] on his non-academic but insightful blog). This omission may partly be due to the relative obscurity of *Detective Dante* (especially in comparison to masterpieces like *L’inferno di Topolino* or Nagai’s *Dante Shynkioku*); perhaps an even more decisive factor, however, resides in the utterly peculiar relation that this work establishes with the Dantean source, which arguably makes it hard to even consider it as a veritable ‘adaptation’. Attempting to define this intertextual relation is precisely the goal of this paper.

The series was created by Lorenzo Bartoli and Roberto Recchioni in 2005; at the time, this duo was at the peak of its success with *John Doe* (2002-2012), another ‘bonellide’<sup>1</sup> series which has attained cult status over the years. *John Doe* was a quintessentially postmodern comic: a

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<sup>1</sup> Comic books imitating the format made popular by iconic Bonelli series such as *Tex* and *Dylan Dog* (paperback, black and white, 16x21 cm, around 100 pages).

cocktail of disparate influences and references, where the morally ambiguous protagonist could work with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and find himself battling Moby Dick, Santa Claus or his own authors – and even Detective Dante himself, in two cross-over episodes: *Detective Dante* #11 “Arriva John Doe” (2006) and *John Doe* #59 “Con tutta la forza che posso” (2008).

As declared by Bartoli and Recchioni, *Detective Dante* was conceived as a conscious attempt to create something completely different from *John Doe*: a more linear story, which would come to a definitive end in just 24 issues (a promise partly broken by the aforementioned cross-over episode in *John Doe* #59) and, most importantly, limited to one genre (however loosely defined): the hard-boiled detective fiction. The authors address the issue of the relation between these two comics in an interview released on the website *Comicus.it* in occasion of *Detective Dante*'s launch:

Su *Dante* abbiamo più che altro cercato di esplorare le varie forme del romanzo hard-boiled, del poliziesco, del thriller, dell'azione e via dicendo... spesso contaminando l'una con l'altra ma cercando di evitare tutto l'aspetto referenziale di *JD* o un certo tipo di strizzatine d'occhio ai lettori. (Recchioni in Dal Grande 2005)<sup>2</sup>

This professed return to simplicity is contradicted by the seemingly incongruous insertion of a Dantean subtext into the essentially 'noir' setting, which makes *Detective Dante* a distinctly postmodern work, no less than *John Doe*; not only for the contamination of sources in itself, but above all for the deconstructing effect it has on both its main components, the 'crime fiction' canon and the *Commedia*. In fact, the

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<sup>2</sup> [“With *Dante*, we essentially tried to explore the various forms of the hard-boiled, crime, thriller, action genre and so on... often by contaminating one with the other, but trying to avoid the referential component of *John Doe* or a certain kind of winks and nudges to the reader” (my translation)]

authors' attitude towards these texts can be perfectly summarized in Umberto Eco's seminal definition:

The postmodern response to the modern consists [...] of recognizing that the past – since it may not be destroyed, for its destruction results in silence – must be revisited ironically, in a way which is not innocent. (Eco in Rosso 1983: 2)<sup>3</sup>

The reference to the *Divine Comedy* is made apparent not only by the name of the eponymous hero, detective Henry Dante, but also by the division of the 24 episodes composing the miniseries in three cycles called respectively "Inferno", "Purgatorio" and "Paradiso".

In the aforementioned interview, Bartoli and Recchioni explained how they envisioned this intertextual relation:

*Recchioni:* Ci saranno dei contatti e dei parallelismi con la *Commedia di Alighieri* molto forti e per tutta la durata della miniserie. Nei primi albi saranno più sottolineati mentre in quelli successivi andranno a sfumare (rimanendo comunque presenti). Di numero in numero decidiamo quanta distanza prendere dai canti e quanto rimanere fedeli allo sviluppo originale della *Divina Commedia*, se agire attraverso un forte simbolismo oppure evocare solamente taluni personaggi e certe tematiche. Scoprire questa chiave potrà essere divertente per il lettore più attento e curioso ma non strettamente necessario per fruire la storia.

*Bartoli:* Abbiamo seguito la struttura dei canti, metaforizzando i ruoli e gli incontri che costellano la *Divina Commedia*. Ogni tanto, però, siamo usciti dal seminato, per evitare ripetizioni di tematiche che l'Alighieri aveva a cuore ma che mal si sarebbero adattate ad una trasposizione fumettistica. Niente cultura alta, comunque...

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<sup>3</sup> Later incorporated in the famous *Postille a Il Nome della Rosa* (1984).

non siamo capaci né vogliamo metterci dietro una cattedra. (Dal Grande 2005)<sup>4</sup>.

This attention to the “structure” and “metaphorization” of the *Divine Comedy* is in itself an anomaly in the context of the comics adaptations of Dante’s poem: one of the main reasons for the abundance of Dantean transpositions in a visual medium such as comics is the famed ‘iconicity’ of the episodes and characters so vividly represented in the *Commedia*, and especially the *Inferno*. More often than not, a decisive role is played by the mediation of Gustave Doré’s illustrations, which Alfonso Amendola and Mario Tirino have described as a veritable “filter” connecting Dante’s poem to visual media (2016: 30); Doré’s influence is evident, for instance, in Gō Nagai’s *Dante Shinkyoku* (Ciannella – Martí 2018: 140).

In Bartoli and Recchioni, on the contrary, the reference to the *Divine Comedy*’s visual imaginary (as represented both in Dante’s text and in the iconographic tradition) is virtually non-existent: the parallelisms established between poem and comics concern exclusively the themes and the narrative in general (single episodes and characters, as well as the overall structure of the story), while all of the comic book’s graphic

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<sup>4</sup> [“Recchioni: Throughout the miniseries’ run there will be strong ties and parallelisms with Alighieri’s *Commedia*. In the earlier issues they will be more stressed, while later on they will start to fade out (but they will still be there). For each issue, we decide how much to deviate from the cantos and how true we want to stay to the original unravelling of the *Divine Comedy*, whether to operate through a strong symbolism or to only evoke certain characters or themes. Looking for this key may be fun for the more careful reader, but it won’t be necessary to enjoy the story.

Bartoli: We followed the cantos’ structure, metaphorizing the roles and encounters punctuating the *Divine Comedy*. However, every once in a while, we went off the grid, to avoid reiterating topics which Alighieri held dear but wouldn’t translate well in a comics transposition. No high-brow culture, anyway... we are not up to it, nor are we interested in giving lectures.” (my translation)]

components are built around some declination of the crime fiction hyper-genre.

The foundation is of course laid by the classic hard-boiled novels, on which Bartoli and Recchioni boasted an encyclopaedic knowledge<sup>5</sup>. However, while these influences constitute the backbone of *Detective Dante* in terms of motifs and, above all, tone, the aesthetic layout of the series has more recent references, starting with the character design, which is evidently inspired by movie stars. This approach is fairly common in the comics industry (especially, but not exclusively, in Bonelli comics), as taking a celebrity as reference simplifies the communication between writers and artists (Del Grande 2005). However, the choice of a specific actor as the model for the character is in itself significant, as it helps orienting, even subconsciously, the expectations the reader. One particularly clear example is *Sorrow* by Cicogna and Freghierì (1976-1985), perhaps the most conventional 'noir' in the history of Italian comics, whose protagonist is a carbon copy of Humphrey Bogart.

In this respect, *Detective Dante* sends completely different signals. The heroine, Meridiana Cortez, has the face of Eva Mendes, an actress who had recently gained notoriety appearing in action films such as *Training Day* (2001) and *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003). Originally Henry Dante was to be based on Bruce Willis, although this idea was abandoned in the final design, which was elaborated by Recchioni and the artist, Elisabetta Barletta (*DD* #9: 2). Nevertheless, 'casting' two action movie stars as the main characters is certainly indicative of the direction in which Bartoli and Recchioni were stirring their series: away from the classic noir and towards the action thriller. In fact, in the cover of the issue #15 "Nero alla fine del buio", set in the world of cinema, the

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<sup>5</sup> In the comic book's accompanying notes, the authors explicitly cite many of the fathers of the genre, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Elmore Leonard, Donald E. Westlake (*DD* #9: 2), but also less illustrious names, such as the Italian Alan D. Altieri, who is especially relevant to the series for his emphasis on violence and action scenes (*DD* #2: 99).



Figure 1. Cover of *Detective Dante*#1 "Paradise City". Art by Leomacs (Massimiliano Leonardo), graphic project by Paolo Campana.

protagonist is portrayed with trench and fedora, in the signature Philip Marlowe attire, clearly meant to be parodistic.

Henry Dante's final design does not correspond to any celebrity in particular; he vaguely resembles a normalized and conventionally attractive version of Marv, the herculean, monstrous anti-hero of Frank Miller's *Sin City*. A more direct reference might be the eponymous protagonist of *Angel*, a spin-off of *Buffy the Vampire slayer*, which aired from 1999 to 2004 in the USA and from 2003 to 2007 in Italy (making it contemporary to the comic book)<sup>6</sup>. Despite its supernatural and gothic elements, *Angel* is essentially a detective series, with strong ties to noir cinema (Abbott 2005: 1-13) and set in the glamorous California, just like *Detective Dante*; the gritty and dark look of this tv show has clearly been an influence on Bartoli and Recchioni's comic, most evident in the covers of the first eight issues of *Detective Dante* (that is, the "Inferno").

These covers are also noteworthy for their design (fig. 1), which imitates the ones of the classic pulp magazines (see Lesser 2005),

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<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Wyatt Phillips of Texas Tech University for pointing out this connection.

especially in the use of “screamers” (the flashy writings those periodicals often put on their covers to enthusiastically advertise their content). This is an effort to differentiate *Detective Dante* from the Bonelli and ‘bonellide’ market, while at the same time signalling its belonging to the hard-boiled vein.

It is harder to make general statements about the art of the comics themselves, since *Detective Dante* employed a dozen different pencillers/inkers, with very different styles: the first issues tend to feature clear strokes and realistic depictions<sup>7</sup>; as the series progresses, however, there is an increasing presence of stylized, raw, sometimes almost caricatural art<sup>8</sup>. One commonality linking such diverse styles is, unsurprisingly, a massive use of chiaroscuros, which is a key feature not only of noir comics but of the noir genre *tout court* (this trait was derived from the German Expressionist cinema, one of noir’s main influences<sup>9</sup>. In time, this recognizable look has become a standard of crime-noir comics<sup>10</sup>). It should be noted that adventure Italian comics, traditionally in black and white, are particularly apt to this kind of design,<sup>11</sup> and as a

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<sup>7</sup> Such as those by Elisabetta Barletta (*DD* #1), Cristiano Cucina (*DD* #2), Alessio Fortunato (*DD* #4).

<sup>8</sup> With artists such as Werther Dell’Edera (*DD* #3,10,12,17), Giorgio Pontrelli, (*DD* #6,14,19) and Giacomo Bevilacqua, who makes his debut on *Detective Dante* #22. Bevilacqua would later ascend to fame thanks to his comedic webcomic *A panda piace*; interestingly, he has later switched to a more realistic style and now works frequently for Bonelli, with comics such as *Lavennder* (2017) or *Attica* (2019-2020).

<sup>9</sup> An early attempt to replicate this kind of visual effects on paper are the wordless novels by Lynd Ward, illustrated using the technique of wood engraving. I thank Prof. Alberto Zambenedetti of the University of Toronto for his input on this topic.

<sup>10</sup> Across such landmarks as Chester Gould’s *Dick Tracy*, Will Eisner’s *The Spirit* (Lyons 2013: 461-462), Carlos Sampayo and José Muñoz’s *Alack Sinner*; this last work is probably the most direct influence on *Detective Dante*, as they both share a similar expressive intent in the use of strokes and contrast.

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted for this insightful observation to Prof. Luca Somigli, of the University of Toronto.



matter of fact, Italian comics boast a remarkable tradition of so-called “fumetti neri” (Castaldi 2010: 13-22)<sup>12</sup>.

In extreme synthesis, these are the coordinates in which *Detective Dante* positions itself: a constellation of diverse influences which relate rather loosely to the broad category of ‘noir’ and that nonetheless come together to form a distinct and yet cohesive canvas.

On this foundation, in itself rather stratified, Bartoli and Recchioni weave their web of Dantean references. This peculiar kind of intertextuality is perhaps best illustrated through a close reading of the very first issue of *Detective Dante*, “Paradise City!” (corresponding approximately to the *Commedia*’s first five cantos), where these allusions are most numerous and transparent.

The comic book opens with a first and somewhat obvious (inescapable?) Dantean reference: the *Divine Comedy*’s incipit (*Inf.* 1, 1-3), quoted in caption over the establishing panels depicting a rain-drenched crime scene in New York (fig. 2). The quotation of Dante’s verses as a commentary of the action is the most direct example of intertextuality employed in the series, and it will be reused (although not constantly) throughout the “Inferno” cycle.

In this case, however, the graphic construction of the page seems to be of particular significance: the tercet is divided in three captions, each superimposed to one of the three panels composing the page. This disposition might be fortuitous: Bonelli (and ‘bonellide’) comics’ grid typically divides the page in three two-panel strips, and panels establishing the setting, which are the most intuitive choice to start a

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<sup>12</sup> The slew of “fumetti neri” in the 60s-70s was kickstarted by Angela and Luciana Giussani’s *Diabolik* (1962) and its numerous epigones, among which *Kriminal* and *Satanik*, both drawn by Roberto Raviola alias Magnus, one of the greatest artists not only as regards noir but also Italian comics on the whole (Castaldi 2010: 13-22); Magnus would go on to create the character of “The Unknow”, *Lo Sconosciuto* (1975), which may well be considered Italy’s most mature noir hero.

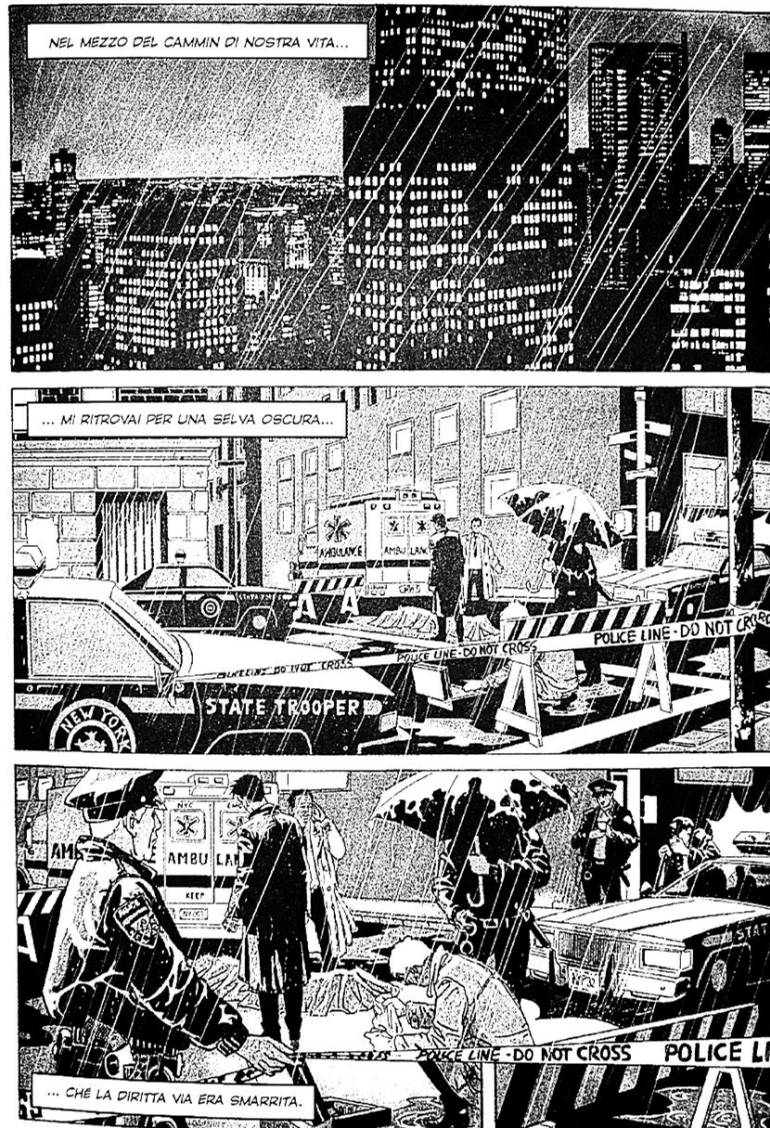


Figure 2. The 'dark wood'. *Detective Dante* #1: 5. Drawings by Elisabetta Barletta.

story, tend to take an entire strip. Nevertheless, the disposition of the panels mirroring the verses in caption may also be read as an artifice to translate the metrical structure of Dante's 'terza rima' into the visual grammar of comics, subtly accustoming the reader to the distinctive rhythm of the *Divine Comedy* from the very first page.

The quote from the *Commedia* anticipates the theme of this first sequence: detective Henry Dante's entrance into the "selva oscura". In the original poem, Dante's fall from grace happens after Beatrice's death. In the noir setting of *Detective Dante*, this death translates, of course, to a

murder: when Henry arrives at the crime scene and uncovers the body of the victim, he finds his wife, Maria (*DD* #1: 6-7). From a narratological point of view, both women function as the motor of the story: in the *Commedia*, Beatrice is the one who sends Dante to his journey through the netherworld; in *Detective Dante*, Henry is motivated by the guilt caused by not having been able to protect Maria and the desire to find her killer. Furthermore, 'Maria' is named after the Holy Virgin, who is at the very origin of Beatrice's work of salvation (*Inf.* 2, 94-96).

Feeling lost after the death of Maria, Dante moves to Paradise City, California (a fictional metropolis shaped after Los Angeles). This change of place can be read in two ways: on one hand, it reflects Dante (Alighieri)'s bewilderment when he embarks on his metaphysical journey; on the other, it is a conventional starting point for the noir novels from the 30s, whose protagonists often had just moved into the city<sup>13</sup>. The sense of disorientation is a trait in common between the *Commedia*'s pilgrim, who can only rely on Virgil's and Beatrice's guide to make sense of the Netherworld's wonders, and the noir hero, who typically find himself involved in an obscure and intricate plot, on which he has little control. These influences are combined in the character of Henry Dante, who, despite his toughness, is repeatedly fooled and constantly misinterprets reality<sup>14</sup>.

Fresh off the plane, Henry Dante stops at a diner where he comes across three robbers, evidently alluding to the three ferocious beasts from the first canto of the *Inferno*. However, contrary to his literary

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<sup>13</sup> This topos reflects the context in which the genre arose, reproducing the experience of the drifters in the years of the Great Depression (once more, I have to thank Prof. Zambenedetti for this clarification).

<sup>14</sup> He is also blindsided and passes out time and time again (once already in this first issue). This situation, too, is a cliché in noir novels, related to the detective's inability to stay on top of the situation; but again, it may also be linked with Dante's fainting in a number of occasions throughout of the *Commedia* (so often, in fact, that Cesare Lombroso diagnosed Dante Alighieri with epilepsy and Giuseppe Plazzi, more recently, narcolepsy [Plazzi 2013]).

counterpart, detective Dante is not shaken by the frightful encounter, as he nonchalantly guns the crooks down (*DD* #1: 12-18). This deviation from the *Divine Comedy*'s hypotext, meant to showcase Henry Dante's personality and skills, does not affect the progression of the story: the confrontation still results in Dante meeting his guide. In the comic book, the role of Virgil is filled by detective Meridiana Cortez, a policewoman born and raised in Paradise City's Hispanic district, who hastened to the scene after receiving reports of gunfire. She will be assigned to Dante as a partner and eventually become his lover, only to die in action at the end of the "Purgatorio" cycle (*DD* #16). Despite being a completely different character from the Mantuan poet in almost every conceivable way (gender, personality, relationship to Dante...), Meridiana fulfils the same function: she is experienced, rational and familiar with the area, therefore can chaperon Dante in his journey through Inferno and Purgatory (but, like Virgil, she will disappear before the Paradise).

After introducing him to the Chief of Police, Meridiana takes Dante for a tour of the city. As they drive across Downtown, once again a series of captions reminds us of the Dantean subtext, quoting the tercets inscribed on the gate of Hell (*Inf.* 3, 1-9; *DD* #1: 26). Dante and Meridiana receive the report of a homicide in the Hispanic district; as they enter the area, Meridiana instructs Henry with words that essentially paraphrase the "Lasciate ogni speranza" quoted only a few pages earlier:

Oltre questo punto, inizia il territorio della gang dei Maldecido, il loro quartier generale. Una sola via d'entrata... nessuna via d'uscita, se loro non vogliono. Molti casi d'omicidio portano qui... in un vicolo cieco. (*DD* #1: 31)<sup>15</sup>

The name of the gang, "Maldecido" (Spanish for 'damned'), is one more hint to the symbolic significance of passing this threshold; but should all these quite transparent clues escape a careless reader, a

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<sup>15</sup> ["Beyond this point, the territory of the 'Maldecido' gang begins: their headquarter. Only one way in... no way out, if they don't want you to go out. Many homicide cases lead here... to a dead end." (my translation)]



Figure 3. 'Charon'. *Detective Dante* #1: 32. Drawings by Elisabetta Barletta.

caption narrating Dante's interior monologue blatantly announces that we are, indeed, in Hell: "Benvenuto all'inferno, detective Dante..." (DD #1: 33).

Before Dante and Meridiana can reach the Maldecido's headquarter, however, their path is blocked by a gangster standing guard: a stand-in for Charon, who has traded his boat for a sports car (fig. 3). Nonetheless, Bartoli and Recchioni are not interested in transposing Charon's role as Hell's ferryman, but merely his function as regards the protagonists' journey: an obstacle to overcome. Like Virgil, Meridiana's right to enter the district is acknowledged by 'Charon', but she has to persuade him to let Dante pass, too. In addition to the narrative reprise from the third canto, the identification with the Dantean "Caron dimonio" is confirmed by a textual reference: the word "Dimonio" tattooed on the gangster's chest.

Having passed 'Charon', Dante and his guide meet El, superintendent of the building where the murder has happened, who is sitting peacefully in his chair with a newspaper and a cigar. Meridiana introduces him to Dante as "una persona molto importante, qui [...]. Lui sa sempre tutto. Specie sugli affari della sua gente. [...] Non è un

capobanda... ma la sua opinione è rispettata da tutti" (DD #1: 36)<sup>16</sup>. Contrary to Charon, there is no explicit reference to Alighieri's text, but Meridiana's description seems to relate El to the infernal judge Minos, who knows all damned souls' sins ("conoscitor de le peccata", *Inf.* 5, 9). In the *Divine Comedy*, Minos indicates which of Hell's circles is assigned to each sinner by wrapping his snake-like tail around his body; El, more prosaically, tells Dante and Meridiana the numbers of the floor and apartment where they will find their crime scene.

There, they find their culprit: the boss of the Maldecido, Miguel Trejo, who killed his woman and his brother after catching them red-handed in his bed. Both the crime of passion and the incestuous adultery between in-laws reference the tragic end of the lustful Paolo and Francesca (*Inf.* 5).

This is the last clear Dantean revisitation present in the issue: after that, the arrest of Miguel Trejo escalates in an all-out war with the Maldecido, with Dante and Meridiana sieged in a mini-market – a situation which does not seem to have a precedent in the *Divine Comedy*<sup>17</sup>.

Nevertheless, the climax of the episode is noteworthy for the appearance of Maria's ghost, whom Dante sees in moments of doubt or peril. The parallelism between the *Divine Comedy*'s Beatrice and *Detective Dante*'s Maria is perhaps the single most interesting aspect of Bartoli and Recchioni's adaptation. As already mentioned, the death of Beatrice and Maria can be considered the 'inciting incident' of the respective stories. Like Beatrice, Maria continues to watch over Dante even in death: she appears to him as a ghost, warning him of dangers and granting him a

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<sup>16</sup> ["A very important person, out here. He always knows everything, especially about his people's business. He is not a boss... but everyone respects his opinion." (my translation)]

<sup>17</sup> As the authors note in the comic book's closing remarks (DD #1: 99), this part of the episode does not pertain to the hard-boiled genre either, but is instead inspired by the "siege" topos as portrayed in movies such as Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo* (1959) and John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976).



Figure 4. Maria. *Detective Dante* #1: 89. Drawings by Elisabetta Barletta.

seemingly supernatural protection in shootouts. Henry repeatedly refers to her as “my guardian angel” (for instance in *DD* #1: 83, 89); later on, it is Maria herself to allude to her heavenly role: “Sono il tuo pezzo di cielo...” (*DD* #8: 98)<sup>18</sup>. And yet, Maria is far from an angelic presence: she is resentful, possessive and hostile, constantly accusing Henry of having forgotten her and left her unavenged. The visions of Maria haunt him and incite him in his increasingly violent impulses: in the last issue of the “Inferno” cycle (*DD* #8), Dante finally finds a serial killer who targets cops’ wives and, spurred by Maria’s ghost, shoots him in cold blood. In the same episode, it is revealed that, in actuality, Henry Dante had never been married: “Maria” was just an anonymous victim, with whom the detective became obsessed (perhaps an allusion to the fact that Bice Portinari, traditionally recognized as the ‘real’ Beatrice, had, in fact, no relation to Dante Alighieri). Despite Dante avenging her, and, at

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<sup>18</sup> [“I am your piece of sky...” (my translation)]

the same time, accepting she has never been real (“Chiunque tu sia... ti ho vendicata...” *DD* #8: 98)<sup>19</sup>, Maria stays with him throughout the “Purgatorio”; she will finally disappear after the death of Meridiana Cortez, only to be replaced in the “Paradiso” section by Meridiana’s ghost.

The insertion of this paranormal presence contaminates the otherwise extremely grounded noir setting of *Detective Dante* with a gothic element. Maria’s alterity is underlined by her graphic representation: Elisabetta Barletta colours her using grey tones, while the rest of the comic is in black and white. Greys are also used to represent flashbacks (*DD* #1: 5-7) and oneiric scenes (*DD* #1: 45-46), which anyway all revolve around Maria, either directly or indirectly. The artists working on the following issues do not use greys, but instead they draw her without shadows, in contrast with the common chiaroscuros (which, as mentioned before, are a distinctive feature of noir comics). Either way, Maria is graphically marked as an ‘alien’, otherworldly character (both thematically and as regards genres.)

However, if Beatrice, as Aldo Vallone summarizes, is the epitome of the Medieval ideal of the woman as “iter ad Deum” (1996: 542), then Maria represents an ‘iter ad Diabolum’: ultimately, she is a haunting presence who, while she seems to protect Henry Dante from physical harm, mentally vexes him and encourages his worst tendencies, eventually leading him to perdition and to madness. Her role of diabolical temptress, as opposed to Beatrice, is emphasized by her conspicuous but unsettling sexualization (see fig. 4). The remarks about her angelic or heavenly nature, as well as the reference to Beatrice, are thus to be understood as ironic.

The examples of references to the *Divine Comedy* we have found in the first issue of *Detective Dante* (which are, on the whole, indicative of the entire series) can roughly be categorized into three main typologies. The simplest form of Dantean reference is the textual quotation of Dante’s verses, through the use of caption. In his seminal comic book-essay *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud dedicates a whole chapter

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<sup>19</sup> [“Whoever you are... I avenged you...” (my translation)]



("Show and tell") to the hybridisation of pictures and words typical of the comics medium. After proposing a categorization of the possible relations between verbal and pictorial text, he concludes:

Perhaps the most common type of word/picture combination is the *interdependent*, where words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone. [...] Interdependent combinations aren't always an equal balance though [...]. Generally speaking, the more is said with words, the more the pictures can be freed to go exploring and vice versa. [...] When pictures carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free words to explore a wider area. (McCloud 1994: 155-157)

In *Detective Dante*, the sequences quoting verses from the *Commedia* are invariably picture-specific: the story is entirely told in panels with no dialogue, while the captions add a commentary which is not necessary to understand the scenes; in fact, in some instances the reader may not even catch on to the thematic connection between the quotation and the action depicted, interpreting the word/picture combination as not "interdependent" but rather "parallel" ("words and pictures seem to follow very different courses – without intersecting", McCloud 1994: 154). Thus, when the Dantean quotes are tendentially "parallel" to the pictures, they activate additional meanings; otherwise, they nonetheless elevate the story, conferring the scenes a lyrical or epic tone. This use is symptomatic of the entire series' approach to intertextuality: the story is enriched by the ulterior layer provided by the Dantean source, and yet does not depend from it.

The second typology of Dantean intertextuality in the series is the presence of elements which explicitly recall objects from the *Divine Comedy*, but do not seem to expand on the connection in any meaningful way. In "Paradise city!", for instance, the tattoo reading "Dimonio" is little more than a throwaway reference (contrary to the gangster sentry himself, who in a way constitutes a statement about the Dantean character of Charon). Other examples from later issues include a serial killer nicknamed "il Minotauro" (*DD* #4), like the mythological creature

guarding Hell's seventh circle (*Inf.* 12), or a rave club called "Malebolgia" (*DD* #5). References of this sort are the least significant from a thematical and narrative perspective, but they add an element of complicity with the readers, who are invited to participate in the game of discovering the Dantean 'Easter eggs' disseminated throughout the series.

On the other hand, the most complex references in *Detective Dante* are the stand-ins for characters and episodes from the *Divine Comedy*, of which we have encountered numerous examples in just one issue, including the aforementioned gangster/Charon; perhaps the most meaningful of such transpositions is in the issue #2 "Uomini di fango" ["Men of mud"] (obviously referencing Hell's third circle, *Inf.* 6), where the gluttonous Ciacco becomes the drug addict Chuck.

This strategy can be assimilated to what Ursula Winter describes as the broader process of "updating" Dante, for instance through the insertion of contemporary elements such as modern technology; a tendency not uncommon even in more traditional comics adaptations of the *Divine Comedy* (Winter 2018: 69-71). Nevertheless, one would be hard-pressed to find another comic book where this updating is so extensive; the complete change of the setting, in fact, would perhaps more fittingly be likened to analogous attempts which are rather common in theatre, opera and cinema (for instance, the numerous modernized cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's plays).

Besides, the process of adaptation of the *Divine Comedy* into *Detective Dante* is further complicated by another, even more drastic transfer: not only from a Medieval netherworld to 21<sup>st</sup> century California, but from allegorical poem to hard-boiled crime fiction. Again, this kind of operation is not unheard of in cinema: one famous example is Sergio Leone's *For a Fistful of Dollars* being recognized as an unauthorized remake of Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*. In that case, however, the adaptation concerned two fairly similar genres, 'chanbara' and western, while *Detective Dante* attempts a way more arduous transplant.

Nevertheless, Bartoli and Recchioni are not alone in having thought of contaminating the *Divine Comedy* with the noir: in 2011, Seymour

Chwast publishes *Dante's Divine Comedy*, in which Dante is portrayed as a trench-wearing, pipe-smoking hard-boiled detective à la Philip Marlowe, while Virgil resembles a stocky bodyguard in Poirot-like moustache and bowler hat (De Rooy 2017: 104); some of the episodes are also updated in the same vein<sup>20</sup>, although the comic book remains for the most part faithful to the Medieval imagery of the original. The depiction of Dante as a Humphrey Bogart caricature, not exempt of some comical intent, is deemed “incomprehensible” by Winter (2018: 73). However, especially if we consider that the *Inferno* is the cantica that left the most striking impression on popular imagery and particularly on comics artists (Frezza – Pintor Iranzo 2018: 7), the ominous and gory tones of the Dantean cantos do not appear, in fact, incongruous with the aesthetic conventions of the hard-boiled and noir genres. As Karl Fugelso notes:

Film noir, the *Comedy*, and graphic novels, [...] all three are sophisticated yet accessible. Dante weaves a complex political program and profound spiritual insights into a gossipy tale peppered with bawdy references and couched in the vernacular of his main victim—Florence. Film noir dwells on deep moral ambiguities in lurid tales of sex, drugs, and (proto-) rock and roll, not to mention violence. And graphic novels wrap the pictorial immediacy of comic books around overtly high-brow themes and extremely intricate plots.<sup>21</sup> (Fugelso 2011)

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<sup>20</sup> For instance, “The feud between White and Black Guelphs in medieval Florence (*Inf.* 6) is represented as a gun battle between mobsters, judge Nino Visconti (*Purg.* 8) lies in his coffin with a period submachine gun and the Roman emperor Justinian is represented as a cabaret dancer (*Par.* 6)” (De Rooy 2017: 104-105).

<sup>21</sup> While the point of this last observation may still be essentially valid, it is perhaps questionable to structure this argument around a differentiation between so-called graphic novels and the broader category of comics, since the majority of scholars and comics artists seem to agree that the label of ‘graphic

Furthermore, De Rooy points out the existence of a “broader postmodern trend that associates Dante with crime fiction, both in print and on screen” (De Rooy 2017: 104), citing David Fincher’s *Seven* (1995) and Ridley Scott’s *Hannibal* (2001) as especially noteworthy examples in cinema; and one could add Brian De Palma’s *Obsession* (1976) and Lars von Trier’s *The House That Jack Built* (2018), among many others. Nonetheless, while the pervasiveness of this association is undeniable, there is a visible distinction between these films and comics like Chwast’s: crime cinema tends to reprise specific concepts or images from Dante and isolate them in the frame of a present-day story<sup>22</sup>; Chwast, on the other hand, crafts a veritable adaptation (however extravagant) of the whole *Divine Comedy*, contaminating it with a noir imagery.

Bartoli and Recchioni are arguably somewhere between the two: *Detective Dante* is certainly a detective story containing recognizable Dantean passages, but it can also be read as retelling of the *Divine Comedy* on the whole. At the same time, the relation between the two souls of *Detective Dante* juxtaposed in its title is not entirely linear: the reference to the *Divine Comedy* can conflict with Henry Dante’s actual story, raising new questions and generating new meaning.

An essential component in *Detective Dante*’s use of its literary hypotext is irony – an approach especially noticeable in the character of

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novel’ is not supported by any inherent distinguishing feature (if one discounts perceived cultural prestige and marketability).

<sup>22</sup> *Obsession* cleverly uses the “screen lady” from the *Vita nuova* in a plot reminiscent of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. In *Seven*, a serial killer murders his victims according to their capital sin, referencing Dante’s law of retaliation (‘contrappasso’). In *The House That Jack Built*, another serial killer recounts his crimes to a man named ‘Verge’ who eventually accompanies into Hell (with a visual reprise, rather than Doré, of Delacroix’s *Barque de Dante*). In *Hannibal*, we find the titular cannibal is also a well-read Dante scholar, who recites lines from both the *Comedy* and the *Vita nuova*; while this last work is perhaps the most multifaceted as regards Dantean intertextuality (according to Peter Merseau, “*Hannibal* is, believe it or not, a film as much about Dante as serial murder”; 2001), the references do not concern the movie in its entirety.

Maria/Beatrice, as previously mentioned. Perhaps the single best example of this intertextual strategy is at the end of the “Inferno” cycle, where a caption reading “E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle” (*Inf.* 34, 139), the verse celebrating Dante’s emancipation from the oppressive darkness of Hell, is superimposed on a panel depicting the walls topped by barbed-wire of the mental institution in which Henry Dante has just been committed (*DD* #8: 98).

The ironic reference to the *Divine Comedy*, however, is not limited to specific passages; rather, it encompasses the series as a whole. To appreciate the extent of this operation, we need to briefly summarize the events following the “Inferno”.

Having spent seven years in a psychiatric institution, Dante is released and reconnects with Meridiana, who has left the police and started a private investigation agency; he becomes her partner and her lover, although Maria’s ghost keeps haunting him and accusing him of having betrayed her. Throughout the “Purgatorio”, Dante finds himself working for disreputable clients and killing for profit, but he keeps behaving in a relatively moral manner. The cantica ends with Meridiana being killed and Dante abandoning the city.

In the “Paradiso” cycle, Dante, after seven years in Mexico, returns once again to Paradise City, which in the meantime has been half-destroyed by an earthquake and has fallen prey to criminals and corrupted militaries; he is no more a detective, but some sort of mad vigilante<sup>23</sup> whose mission is “to kill the city”, which he sees as responsible for Meridiana’s death. He is haunted by Meridiana’s ghost, who however, contrary to the destructive Maria, acts as the voice of reason (eventually ignored by Dante). In the final issue of the series, Dante ends up killing an innocent girl to steal a nuclear device from a terrorist organisation. At this point, Maria appears once again, instigating Dante to commit suicide. Meridiana, on the other hand, urges him to save the innocent

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<sup>23</sup> In this last cantica, Dante shifts further away from his noir characterization, coming to resemble, even in his appearance, Marvel’s The Punisher.

population of Paradise City by taking the nuke away into the desert; Dante's intention, however, is to denotate the bomb himself, accomplishing his mission to destroy the city once and for all. The story ends with Dante pointing a gun at his head with one hand, while in the other he holds the nuclear bomb's detonator. The last page is completely black except for a caption informing us that he is pulling "the trigger", without specifying which one (*DD* #24: 98). The phrasing is ambiguous in that we do not know whether Dante has chosen to shoot himself or to detonate the bomb; in both cases, however, he ends with a self-destructive act.<sup>24</sup>

Although the *Divine Comedy* can be read in many ways, no one would argue in good faith that the journey of a pilgrim who ascends from the torments of Hell to the contemplation of God could in any way translate to a delusional detective turning to violence and eventually killing himself (and possibly a whole city). And yet, neither is *Detective Dante* a reversal of the *Divine Comedy*. Henry Dante's trajectory, in fact, is not opposed to the pilgrim Dante's: he is not blissful in the "Inferno" and desperate in the "Paradiso". Instead, over the course of the three canticles he does emancipate himself from the guilt and doubts which burdened him at the beginning of his journey; only this liberation is not achieved through repentance and enlightenment but rather by embracing his destructive inclinations. While the morality of his actions gets more and more questionable (and less and less put into question), Henry Dante becomes more empowered and, seemingly, also happier: he merrily slays his enemies, he is often depicted laughing, and in his last moments he admits that he has become "the worst monster of all", but he does so with a smile; in his own way, he achieves peace and we might perhaps add, in Aristotelian terms, even entelechy.

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<sup>24</sup> This ending is retconned in the aforementioned cross-over episode in *John Doe* #59, where it is revealed that Dante did detonate the bomb, but, thanks to a supernatural phenomenon involving John Doe, he has survived the explosion. Nevertheless, since these events occur outside of the *Detective Dante* series, they are not relevant for the purposes of this study.

In a loose sense, the progression of the three canticles is respected, although in an unexpected and horrific way. In respect to the *Divine Comedy*, *Detective Dante* is not a parody, but it is not exactly a subversion, either (at least, not completely); it would perhaps be best described as a profane rewriting.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, it seems that *Detective Dante* can ultimately be considered as an adaptation of the *Divine Comedy*, however unorthodox, at least according to Lisa Hutcheon's definition of "adaptation as a formal entity": "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work" (2006: 7). Moreover, Hutcheon's theory of adaptation proposes "a continuum of fluid relationships between prior works and later—and lateral—revisitations of them [...]. A continuum model [...] positions adaptations specifically as (re-) interpretations and (re-) creations" (2006: 171).

It goes without saying that Bartoli and Recchioni position themselves on the end of the spectrum which grants them the highest degree of independence. Their adaptation is certainly eccentric and rebellious, but as noted once again by Hutcheon, "the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying" (2006: 7). *Detective Dante* displaces and renegotiates the *Divine Comedy*, taking full advantage of the subversive potential of adaptations:

Indeterminacy and de-hierarchization, then, are key features of this postmodern enterprise. As palimpsests, the originals may peek through, but they cannot control the freeplay of meaning of this bricolage or bring totalization of unity to multiplicitous texts. Thus,

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<sup>25</sup> In other words, irreverent, but also irreligious. As a matter of fact, what separates *Detective Dante* from the *Divine Comedy* the most, in terms of the overall narrative, is perhaps the complete absence of God, which is not substituted by any stand-in. Therefore, while Dante Alighieri's journey is directed by a higher power, Henry Dante ultimately acts unguided and according only to his unstable temperament.

they open up a play of indeterminate meaning or, as Derrida would have it, the freeplay of textuality. (Slethaug 2014: 28-29)

On the other hand, qualifying *Detective Dante* as an adaptation does by no means imply that Bartoli and Recchioni's primary intention in creating the series was to adapt Dante's text. Other than the aforementioned interview, the reference to the *Divine Comedy* is simply not part of the discourse around the series: from the perspective of the reception, readers seem to deem the Dantean reference negligible, since it is not even mentioned once in the fan-mail section included in every issue. Likewise, the authors' and publisher's marketing strategy completely overlooks this component, emphasizing the 'noir' and, more broadly, crime fiction features of the series<sup>26</sup>.

Indeed, as previously mentioned, Bartoli and Recchioni are interested in telling their own story. The Dantean subtext is not at the core of the project, and it has value only as long as it enhances their original narrative: rather than an adaptation, it is an appropriation. It is for this reason that the authors include rather peripheral figures from the *Inferno*, like the Harpies and the Erinyes (*DD* #3), while leaving out memorable characters such as Farinata or Ulysses, who would perhaps translate less successfully to *Detective Dante's* setting; and it is for this reason that the Dantean references are in large part abandoned in the second half of the series.

The various quotations from the *Divine Comedy*, thus, always have purpose and are never mere homages to Dante Alighieri. Daniele Barbieri, writing about Tiziano Sclavi, the creator of *Dylan Dog* (another famously postmodern comic book), declared: "[Sclavi] non cita,

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<sup>26</sup> Such a marketing strategy, as a matter of fact, was not without foundation: as James Lyons remarks, around those same years some of the leading comics' publishing houses in the US (including Vertigo, Dark Horse and Marvel) were embarking in initiatives aimed at seizing the profitable 'crime-noir comics' market (2013: 458-459).



adopera" (1998: 89)<sup>27</sup>; the same could be said about Bartoli and Recchioni<sup>28</sup>.

Such an approach goes against the traditional subservience of comics adaptations towards their literary sources: William B. Jones, speaking of the American series *Classics Illustrated*, describes this attitude with the expression "handmaid's function" (2007: 215). Although media and adaptation theorists have long confuted the value of "binary oppositions" such as "literature versus cinema, high culture versus mass culture, original versus copy" (Naramore 2000: 2), to this day, "whether it be in the form of a videogame or a musical, an adaptation is likely to be greeted as minor and subsidiary and certainly never as good as the 'original'" (Hutcheon 2006: xii); and all the more so for comics, a medium against which the stigma is so strong that in Italy even the word "fumetto" seems to arouse suspicion and embarrassment (Plazzi 2009: 331). This "handmaid" mentality, thus, is still very much present, if not in the academia, certainly among the general public and even among the artists themselves: I.N.J. Culbard, a comics artist, defines his work in adaptation as "servicing a story" (Edginton – Culbard – Means-Shannon 2013: 41 ); likewise, the website of Kleiner Flug, a fairly successful Italian comics press specializing in non-fiction and adaptations from literary works, explains that the publisher "[si] propone, con le sue collane, di far conoscere città, vita e opere di personaggi illustri attraverso il linguaggio del fumetto", and looks for "giovani talenti emergenti capaci, con le loro abilità, di raccontare la storia e il genio dei grandissimi personaggi del passato" (Kleiner Flug; emphasis mine).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> ["Sclavi does not *quote* [other works], he uses them" (my translation)]

<sup>28</sup> It is not coincidental that Roberto Recchioni would go on to be chosen by Sclavi as the current curator of *Dylan Dog*.

<sup>29</sup> ["(Kleiner Flug's) collections aim to divulge towns, works and lives of illustrious figures, through the comics medium; (we look for) young talents whose skill may do justice to the story and the genius of the impressive characters from the past." (my translation)].



Figure 5. Henry Dante reading the Divine Comedy. *Detective Dante* #18: 14. Drawings by Stefano Landini.

This complex of inferiority, of course, is all the more pervasive for such a foundational masterpiece as Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Still, Italian comics have come a long way since the Disney parody *L'Inferno di Topolino* (1949-50), usually considered to be the first comics adaptation of the *Comedy*: a work which is imbued with such a reverence, in spite of its light-heartedness. This sense of guilt emerges in its metatextual ending: at the bottom of Hell, instead of Lucifer, the protagonists find the two creators of the comic book, tied to a stake, "e innanzi a lor sta ritto l'Alighieri / che li punzecchia con la penna in resta / in punizion dei lor peccati veri!" (Martina – Bioletto, 1971: 38)<sup>30</sup>; Topolino has to intercede for them, respectfully asking the Poet to forgive two humble cartoonists.

In this respect, Bartoli and Recchioni could not be more different from Marina and Bioletto: one can only imagine that were Dante Alighieri to appear in their series, these authors would have rather had

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This self-description sounds oddly humble, especially considering that it comes from a well-established publisher, boasting a rich and commendable catalogue. And yet, despite emphatically praising the possibilities of comics as a medium, Kleiner Flug claims little more than an educational role: the spotlight is clearly on the adapted text rather than on the comic book per se.

<sup>30</sup> ["And Alighieri stands in front of them / pricking them with the pen he wields / as a punishment for their proven sins!" (my translation)]

him shot up than made amends to him. As a matter of fact, in *Detective Dante*, too, the characters overtly reference the *Divine Comedy* in several occasions, poised between intertextuality and metatextuality: in the second issue already, Chuck, being introduced to Henry Dante, remarks: “Dante? Un nome adatto, visto che questo è l’Inferno” (DD #2: 23)<sup>31</sup>. The most extensive metatextual commentary is DD #18, “Il girone dei bugiardi”. In this episode, the protagonist infiltrates a prison; his cellmate, Bobby, has studied Dante Alighieri’s works and owns a copy of the *Divine Comedy*. After reading of his alter ego (fig. 5), Henry Dante can declare: “Io ormai sono fuori dal *Purgatorio*...” (DD #18: 42); he further reassures his cellmate: “Adesso sei in Paradiso” (DD #18: 46)<sup>32</sup>. The most telling part of the episode, however, is Bobby’s story. He tells Dante he was married with a woman he met in college, who was called Pia and bore an uncanny resemblance with the *Purgatorio*’s Pia de’ Tolomei<sup>33</sup> (*Purg.* 5). Although Bobby claims to have been unjustly sentenced for her murder, during their escape Henry eventually discovers that he did in fact kill her out of jealousy, just like Alighieri’s Pia, and throws him out of a helicopter. Thus, the only character in the series who is an enthusiastic reader of Dante, and furthermore one who tried to relive an episode from the *Divine Comedy*, is a liar and a murderer who gets unceremoniously defenestrated: a poignant metatextual summary of *Detective Dante*’s stance as regards its relation with Dante’s poem.

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<sup>31</sup> [“Dante? A fitting name, since this is Hell.” (my translation)]

<sup>32</sup> [“I am not in Purgatory anymore”; “You are now in Paradise” (my translation)]

<sup>33</sup> Taken literally, this statement has no meaning, since in the *Purgatorio* there is no description of Pia’s physical appearance whatsoever. Bobby refers, of course, to Doré’s illustration (reproduced in the comic book, DD #18: 41), which is thus effectively conflated with Dante’s text, confirming the aforementioned importance of Doré’s work in the visual reception of Dante. This is also the only clear graphical reference to the *Divine Comedy* found in the series.

Even in the 2000s, Bartoli and Recchioni's decision to put the *Divine Comedy* at the service of their pulp comic book, instead of the other way around, was certainly bold, albeit not outlandish; only in this regard, it might be likened to the action videogame *Dante's Inferno* (2010), which reimagines Dante as a hulking crusader, armed with a massive scythe, fighting his way through Hell to rescue Beatrice. Just like *Detective Dante*, the creators of this videogame of course did not originally intend to comment on the *Divine Comedy*, but they found it suited their concept<sup>34</sup>; and yet, preposterous as it may seem to some, even this reinterpretation (once again heavily influenced by Doré's illustrations) does generate new meaning as regards Dante's text (Canova 2019).

*Detective Dante*, while similar in spirit, is nonetheless a considerably more complex exercise in intertextuality. Many aspects of this revisitation, considered separately, are not unheard-of: repurposing the *Divine Comedy* (like *Dante's Inferno*); reinterpreting it in a noir scenery (like Chwast's *Dante's Divine Comedy*); framing it in a separate story (like so many contemporary crime movies). Nevertheless, what distinguishes *Detective Dante* from these works – and countless other pop oeuvres which reference the *Divine Comedy*, more or less extensively<sup>35</sup> – is that Bartoli and Recchioni managed to condense these diverse approaches in one comic book. And, with typically postmodern tongue-in-cheek-ness, they revealed this intertextual game right from the title, which (nested

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<sup>34</sup> The executive producer, Jonathan Knight, stated in an interview: "Originally I wanted to make a video game set in Hell, I thought it would be a great location, so I started doing some research into various afterworld mythologies. I'd known about The Divine Comedy from college, so I picked up a copy and read it. It seemed like a perfect video game waiting to happen: there are nine levels, bosses on each level, and there's a hero obsessed with a girl. I thought it would be challenging to adapt a piece of literature into an action game, so I built a team and we tackled the challenge" (Knight in Iannella 2016: 29).

<sup>35</sup> See the thousands of entries listed on the web archive *Dante Today. Citings & Sightings of Dante's Works in Contemporary Literature* (2006-).

Alessio Aletta, *From the dark wood to the asphalt jungle*

in an equally whimsical 'pulp' cover) underlines the antinomy/affinity between the "Detective" repertoire and the "Dante" echoes.

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