

DANTE & "THE GOLDEN DOG"

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DISCUSSING *The Golden Dog* in undefined terms will not work; one needs a working definition of "romance." Frye provides one in *The Secular Scripture* when he notes that "the two chief elements of romance [are] love and adventure": otherwise expressed, "sexuality and violence are central to romance."¹ Frye also states that "The central element of romance is a love story, and the exciting adventures are normally a foreplay leading up to a sexual union." While *The Golden Dog* is romantic in the sense that it is "a tale of love and adventure," the adventures recounted are certainly not a "foreplay leading up to a sexual union"; if the six main characters form relationships that make three couples, the three relationships paid most attention to over the course of the novel are terminated by treachery, death, or both. These relationships end, in degrees of agony that range from the exquisite to the soul-wracking, before the novel closes; the adventures described are a prelude to dissolution.

But there is an even more essential way in which *The Golden Dog* eludes the label "romance." Frye notes

the curious polarized characterization of romance, its tendency to split into heroes and villains. Romance avoids the ambiguities of ordinary life, where everything is a mixture of good and bad, and where it is difficult to take sides or believe that people are consistent patterns of virtue or vice.

Kirby is careful to create characters that are neither exclusively good nor bad. Apart from characterization, ambiguity is present in the form of undermining wit; jabs at underlying assumptions give the first hint that the world of *The Golden Dog* is not a world in which "the curious polarized characterization of romance," and the type of moral vision which this implies, may be found. For example, when bickering between the rival factions of the Grand Company and the Golden Dog threatens to disrupt the proceedings of a meeting intended to clarify New France's military strategy, the Governor of the colony intercedes with the "Dr. Strangelove" line "This is a Council of War, and not a place for recriminations."² Another such instance concerns Pierre Philibert and Amélie de Repentigny. As Amélie, who has retreated to an Ursuline convent, quickly slides into the final stage of her romantic decline,

A feeling of pity and sympathy for these two affianced and unfortunate lovers stole into the hearts of the coldest nuns, while the novices and the romantic convent girls were absolutely wild over the melancholy fate of Pierre and Amélie.

Kirby, apart from undermining the seriousness of Amélie's romantic decline, here associates the romantic sensibility with the young "convent girls," rather than the elder novices or the nuns. The point is this: romantic as *The Golden Dog* is, in the sense that it is a tale of love and adventure, there are all sorts of clues that point to a moral vision more complex than the polarity of romance might admit. The sources of *The Golden Dog* help to confirm the presence of and explain the nature of this moral vision. Kirby explains

To beguile a leisure hour, it so happened I had purchased a volume styled "Maple Leaves — a budget of historical, legendary and sporting lover, by J. M. Le Moine." I was so captivated by the dramatic interest infused into two out of several sketches it contained, *Chateau Bigot* and the Golden Dog [*sic*], that I vowed to a friend, I would make them the groundwork of a Canadian novel. Thus originated my *Chien d'Or* romance.³

Looking at the sketches Kirby refers to enables one to distinguish what in *The Golden Dog* is purely attributable to Kirby and what is derived from the accounts he thought of as his kernel. One of the sketches referred to was reprinted in 1873, under the title "Le Chien D'Or: The History of an Old House."⁴ While much of the sketch deals with general historical detail, the events that were to appear in Kirby's novel are rather briefly recounted:

As appears by the corner stone recently found at the *Chien d'Or*, it was Nicholas Jacquin Philibert who caused this house to be erected, the 20th August, 1735.

. . . the 21st January, 1748, Nicholas Jacquin dit Philibert quarrelled with Pierre Legardeur, Sieur de Repentigny, respecting a military order billeting him on Philibert. From words came blows, and de Repentigny wounded his adversary mortally.

In those fighting days of adventures and duels . . . the blood of a fellow creature was easily atoned for, especially if the transgressor bore a noble name and stood well at Court.

De Repentigny received the year following a pardon from King Louis XV, and returned from Acadia, whither he had retired. Philibert before dying had forgiven his murderer.⁵

What Le Moine relates is a tale of violence: this is made obvious in the sorts of questions the story raises for him:

If, on one hand, Philibert is a victim which moves us to pity; on the other, it seems incomprehensible that de Repentigny should have drawn his sword about such an insignificant quarrel. Was it merely an ordinary instance of soldierlike brutality? Was it a deed of personal revenge, or else, was de Repentigny merely the instrument, the sycophant of a mightier man? Whatever we choose to suppose, that drop of blood, lights up with sinister glare, the gloom of years which overshadows the old structure. So much for romance.⁶

This emphasis, to the exclusion of virtually all else, on blood and vengeance is alien to the world of *The Golden Dog*. The transition from the account to the

novel involves much more than the simple diffusion of this single focus. What appears to be at least as germane to Kirby's novel as the actual story of the Golden Dog is a French romance Le Moine mentions, written by Auguste Soulard and based on the same story. Pierre Philibert, one of the major characters in *The Golden Dog*, first appears in Soulard's romance. Presumably Kirby borrowed not only the idea of giving Nicholas Philibert a son called Pierre from Soulard, but as well the ideas of having the East Indies as the locale of de Repentigny's death, and the news of his death to be communicated by letter.

What looking at Le Moine's account reveals is that Kirby made an enormous addition to the tale of the Golden Dog — female characters. Kirby's novel has six main characters, three of whom are female. In neither the English account nor the French romance Kirby used as sources do any women appear, with the single exception of a woman (Madame Philibert) who plays a minor role in Soulard's romance; and certainly neither source presents a woman, as Kirby does, who quotes Dante in times of crisis. The addition of significant female characters obviously raises the question of the thematic function of their presence, and the question is complicated by the fact that all three have qualitatively different relationships with the three main male characters in *The Golden Dog*.

HOWEVER *The Golden Dog* HAS NOT BEEN READ in light of Le Moine's account. Sorfleet reads the conclusion to *The Golden Dog* as a recognition of the tragic "mutability of life,"⁷ while Northey considers the ending to be a *coup*, possibly a *coup de grâce*:

And, seemingly to ensure that the reader suffers a concluding stroke of terror, Kirby draws attention to life's incomprehensibility, stating that 'there is neither human nor poetic justice' in it.⁸

In *The Golden Dog* there is "neither human nor poetic justice" for the simple reason that there is, finally, divine justice. Sorfleet and Northey fail to consider Kirby's novel in relation to its sources: between this omission and the failure to acknowledge the structural and thematic use of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in *The Golden Dog*, a key to the moral vision that informs the novel is missed.

Explicit reference to *The Divine Comedy* gives the first indication of the importance of Dante's poem in *The Golden Dog*. In what is arguably the central passage of the novel, thematically and certainly geometrically, there is explicit reference made to *The Divine Comedy*, and lest the point be missed, Dante's words appear both in English translation and Italian:

Amélie clung to Philibert. She thought of Francesca da Rimini clinging to Paolo amidst the tempest of wind and the moving darkness, and uttered tremblingly the

words, "Oh, Pierre! what an omen. Shall it be said of us as of them, '*Amor condusse noi ad una morte*?' " ("Love has conducted us into death.")

Other explicit references to Dante are made in the chapter that climaxes with the passage quoted above: the "touching tale of Paolo and Francesca da Rimini" is read, and it is remarked "how truly the *Commedia*, which is justly called Divine, unlocks the secret chambers of the human soul." Elsewhere in *The Golden Dog* a character finds herself in

A world of guilty thoughts and unresisted temptations, a chaotic world where black, unscalable rocks, like a circle of the *Inferno* hemmed her in on every side, while devils whispered in her ears the words which gave shape and substance to her secret wishes. . . .

Apart from explicit references to Dante, there are a number of implicit references to *The Comedy* in *The Golden Dog*. Some of these are simply isolated allusions, while others form significant patterns.

Isolated allusions are frequent and varied. Kirby applies Dante's vision of Hell, at least in the physiographic sense, to the faction that rivals the Golden Dog: "The rings of corruption in the Grand Company descended, narrower and more black and precipitous, down to the bottom where Bigot sat the Demiurgos of all." Dante refers to Minos, "the judge of Hell," as "that connoisseur of all transgression" (*Inf.* v. 9): Kirby describes Intendant Bigot as "a connoisseur in female temper; he liked to see the storm of jealous rage . . . followed by the rain of angry tears." And Cerberus, the mythical three-headed dog, is found both in *The Golden Dog* and the Third Circle of Dante's Hell.

But apart from these occasional allusions, there are patterns of imagery, at least strongly reminiscent of *The Comedy*, that thread through the novel. That imagery drawn from *The Comedy* and references to the poem are profuse in *The Golden Dog* might be attributable to a desire, on Kirby's part, to evoke Dante for the sake of heightening mood at given junctures; but the fact that the patterns of images Kirby uses are images that figure significantly in *The Comedy* leads one to suspect that Dante is more than a matter of casual allusion.

In *The Comedy* Dante is guided through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven; in *The Golden Dog* more than one character refers to a similar series of ports of call. Another pattern of imagery in *The Golden Dog* involves the stars; there is, for example, speculation about "the demon star Algol." But perhaps the most revealing instance of this pattern is the title of chapter 21, "*Sic itur ad astra*," for in a sense Dante's journey is a following of the path to the stars, as the final lines of *Il Paradiso* indicate: "My will and desire were turned by love, / The love that moves the sun and the other stars." Finally the crowning image of *The Comedy* is the celestial rose, and not only is *The Golden Dog* filled with rose imagery, but there is repeated suggestion that there is some sort of association, as with Dante, to be made with the rose. In *The Comedy* heaven, purgatory, and hell are literally

found beneath the celestial rose; in *The Golden Dog* it is stated "we are all companions under the rose." But the direct and oblique allusions to *The Comedy* that fill *The Golden Dog* only hint at the assimilation of Dante's cosmic vision into Kirby's novel.

Of Kirby's six main characters, three are male and three are female; the six are, for most of the novel, grouped as three couples, or would-be couples. Textual analysis suggests that for each pair there is involved at least one Beatrice and/or what might be called an anti-Beatrice figure. (If a Beatrice figure leads a lover to redemption, perhaps it does not do too much violence to Dante's vision to claim that an "anti-Beatrice" figure is one who leads a lover to damnation.) In *The Golden Dog*, the respective histories of the relationships of the three couples form three subplots. As in *King Lear*, where there is more than one exploration of the relationship between the parental and filial generations, a certain degree of serial repetition is involved. In *The Golden Dog*, as in *Lear*, serial repetition enables the exploration of variations upon a common theme. In *The Golden Dog* this theme is corrupted or perverted love, and the concept involved is one discussed in *The Comedy*.

THE IDEA OF CORRUPTED OR MISDIRECTED LOVE as the anti-thesis to rightful or proper love is presented by Dante as a vital recognition: it is not until he has ascended to a sphere but one from Empyrean that he declares that he has been "dredged . . . from the sea of wrongful love" (*Para.* xxvi. 62). Virgil, in the course of guiding Dante through purgatory, adjures

Bethink thee then how love must be the seed
In you, not only of each virtuous action,
But also of each punishable deed. (*Purg.* xvii. 103-5)

It is in response to Dante's request — "please, / Define me love, to which thou dost reduce / All virtuous actions and their contraries" (*Purg.* xviii. 13-15) — that Virgil gives his Second Discourse on Love; Virgil proceeds to explain

how wholly those are blind
To truth, who think all love is laudable
Just in itself, no matter of what kind. (*Purg.* xviii. 34-36)

Dante's Virgil adds that one ought to be "strict to purge right loves from reprobate" (*Purg.* xviii. 66). As Sayers summarizes Virgil's argument, "Man has a natural impulse to love that which pleases him. This impulse, which is the root of all virtue, can be perverted, weakened or misdirected to become the root of all sin" (II, p. 66).

This is precisely why a crucial line from Dante's account of the story of Paolo and Francesca da Rimini appears in the central passage of *The Golden Dog*; the

concept of sin as corrupted love is the heart of the matter. In *The Golden Dog* those who inhabit the sublunary or sub-celestial rose world, by virtue of their very distance from the celestial rose, are bound to corrupt love to some degree, which is, as Kirby expresses it, why “we are all companions under the rose.” All six major characters of *The Golden Dog* therefore duly engage in the terrestrial, “under the rose” activity of perverting or corrupting love.

If the relationship between Intendant Bigot and Caroline de St. Castin is clearly a case of improper love, and that between Le Gardeur de Repentigny and Angélique des Meloises overtly one of perverted love, the relationship between Pierre Philibert and Amélie de Repentigny is less obviously one of corrupt love. The Pierre and Amélie that the reader meets are impossibly virtuous. Pierre is introduced to the reader through Amélie’s memory of him as the alert and agile boy who saved her brother’s life. Apparently Pierre has only improved with age: “Those who caught sight of him saw a man worth seeing — tall, deep-chested, and erect. His Norman features without being perfect were handsome and manly.” Amélie, who is “in the bloom of youth, and of surpassing loveliness,” is as loyal as she is lovely: let it suffice to say that she has been nicknamed “Ste. Amélie.”

Initially Pierre and Amélie appear to be the ideal pair. Pierre “mingled as the fairy prince in the day dreams and bright imaginings of the young poetic girl,” and he has “a thousand pictures of her hung up in his mind and secretly worshipped.” While Pierre and Amélie appear to be a perfect match, a series of notes are struck that belie this appearance. There is, for example, the suggestion that they both indulge in narcissism:

“what you do is ever wisest and best in my eyes, except one thing, which I confess now that you are my own, I cannot account for —”

“I had hoped, Pierre, there was no exception to your admiration, you are taking off my angel’s wings already, and leaving me a mere woman!” replied she merrily.

Presumably there are more than physiographic reasons for having Amélie, as the pair walk and have the above talk, see Pierre “reflected” in a “still pool.” But narcissism is associated with Pierre as much as it is with Amélie, as is made clear when Pierre gazes at

the portrait of Amélie painted by himself during his last visit to Tilly. The young artist, full of enthusiasm, had put his whole soul into the work until he was himself startled at the vivid likeness which almost unconsciously flowed from his pencil. He had caught the divine upward expression of her eyes, as she turned her head to listen to him, and left upon the canvas the very smile he had seen upon her lips. Those dark eyes of hers had haunted his memory forever after. To his imagination that picture had become almost a living thing. It was as *a voice of his own that returned to his ear as the voice of Amélie*. In the painting of that portrait Pierre had the first revelation of a consciousness of his deep love, which became in the end the master passion of his life. [emphasis mine]

Interestingly enough, possibly the most apt gloss upon this passage one can find is a statement made in a commentary upon Dante's *Il Purgatorio*: "If you exalt the objects of your love until your picture is a false one; if you idealize them; if you project upon them your own ideal self; then you are loving not a real person but a dream'" (Sayers, II, p. 221).

However where Kirby makes most clear that Pierre and Amélie do not have an ideal relationship is in the chapter that describes their engagement. At first the auspicious is implied, for the setting is idyllic and the season summer. But the voice that affects the lovers issues from hell:

Philibert let fall upon his knee the book which he had been reading. His voice faltered, he could not continue without emotion the touching tale of Paolo and Francesca da Rimini. Amélie's eyes were suffused with tears of pity, for her heart had beat time to the music of Dante's immortal verse as it dropped in measured cadence from the lips of Philibert.

The "touching tale of Paolo and Francesca da Rimini" is found in *L'Inferno* — not *Il Paradiso*. When one looks at Dante's account beside Kirby's description of the reading of that account, a very odd similarity of situation becomes apparent. In Canto V of *L'Inferno*, in the course of telling her tale to Dante, Francesca da Rimini describes the scenario of the beginning of her affair with Paolo:

One day we read for pastime how in thrall
 Lord Lancelot lay to love, who loved the Queen;
 We were alone — we thought no harm at all.

As we read on, our eyes met now and then,
 And to our cheeks the changing colour started,
 But just one moment overcame us — when

We read of the smile, desired of lips long-thwarted,
 Such smile, by such a lover kissed away,
 He that may never more from me be parted

Trembling all over, kissed my mouth. I say
 The book was Galleot, Galleot the complying
 Ribald who wrote; we read no more that day.

(*Inf.* v. 127-138)

According to Francesca, she and Paolo first acknowledge their love upon reading "the romance of *Lancelot du Lac*," a tale of illicit love; according to Kirby, Pierre and Amélie first acknowledge their love upon reading Dante's account of Paolo and Francesca da Rimini, another tale of illicit love. Kirby hits upon not an obscure episode but this celebrated tale of adultery which has been called "the most famous episode in the whole *Comedy*." The point is driven further by Amélie's consequent "tears of pity," for Dante is chastised for precisely such behaviour in the course of his journey through hell:

Truly I wept, leaned on the pinnacles
 Of the hard rock; until my guide said, "Why!
 And art thou too like all the other fools?"

Here pity, or here piety, must die
 If the other lives; who's wickeder than one
 That's agonized by God's high equity? (*Inf.* xx. 25-30)

When Dante weeps for pity in hell, he is told that he must choose between pity and piety; when Amélie listens to Dante's account of his journey through hell, she weeps "tears of pity." The implication is that Pierre and Amélie are far from being ideal lovers. This impression is strengthened by the nature of Amélie's response to the storm that begins after her acceptance of Pierre's proposal:

The rising wind almost overpowered with its roaring the thunder that pealed momentarily nearer and nearer. The rain came down in broad, heavy splashes, followed by a fierce, pitiless hail, as if Heaven's anger were pursuing them.

Amélie clung to Philibert. She thought of Francesca da Rimini clinging to Paolo amidst the tempest of wind and the moving darkness, and uttered tremblingly the words, "Oh, Pierre! what an omen. Shall it be said of us as of them, '*Amor condusse noi ad una morte?*'" ("Love has conducted us into death.")

Kirby's translation of Dante's line is not quite accurate: variant modern translations have it "Love to a single death brought him and me" (*Inf.* i. 106) and "Love led us to one death." By phrasing his translation "Love has conducted us into death," Kirby shifts nuances: the phrase "conducted us into" is suggestive not of the sort of love that leads to Beatrice and heaven, but rather the type that paves the way to Francesca and hell. And, as it is the virtuous Amélie who quotes Dante's line, the type of love in question bears some scrutiny. Pierre and Amélie are portrayed as being as good as mortals possibly can be; yet the answer to the crucial question Amélie poses ("Shall it be said of us as of them [Paolo and Francesca] '*Amor condusse noi ad una morte?*'") is, in the context of *The Golden Dog*, yes. After the engagement, Amélie's brother is duped into murdering Pierre's father; as a result, Amélie retreats to an Ursuline convent and has a romantic decline, following which the desolated Pierre eventually finds the death he seeks in battle. In a sense, Amélie literally dies of shame; the element of narcissism is not to be forgotten, and Amélie's brother has murdered her future father-in-law.

Pierre is described as after his death meeting Amélie "joyfully in that land where love is real": in *The Comedy*, it is in heaven that Dante conceives of the "love whereto / Each thing becomes that which it really is" (*Para.* xx. 77-8). Even for a Pierre and an Amélie, uncorrupted love can only be realized in the spheres crowned by — not upon the earth beneath — the celestial rose.

So it is that each of the three relationships explored in depth in *The Golden Dog* is described in terms of idolatry. Pierre worships "the idol of his heart, Amélie de Repentigny," and the heart of Le Gardeur de Repentigny is "wedded to the

idol of his fancy.” Finally Caroline de St. Castin sins in loving Bigot “better than she loved God” — Bigot is the god of her idolatry.

Dante provides the concept of sin as corrupted love, and Kirby uses this notion in order to present a vision in which the world is a sinful place. The primary way in which Kirby demonstrates this vision is the serial repetition of relationships which are associated with corrupted or perverted love. But if the ideas of sin as corrupted love and the unavailability of sin on earth are central to the moral vision found in *The Golden Dog*, these ideas ought to inform other aspects of the novel. Possibly the ripple-effect of these central notions is most clearly seen in the depiction of the relation between Old and New France.

In New France it is said that “matters of love . . . are matters of state in France!” because

the Marquise de Pompadour governed the King and the kingdom. But Louis XV was capricious and unfaithful in his fancies; he had changed his mistresses and his policy with them many times, and might change once more, to the ruin of Bigot and all the dependents of La Pompadour.

Unless one is of Bigot’s party, when it is asked in New France “‘Has France come to be governed by courtesans like imperial Rome?’” the succinct reply is “‘Yes!’” As one officer, when informed that the defence budget of New France has been frozen, exclaims,

“They may as well sell New France at once to the enemy, if we are not to defend Quebec! The treasury wants [ie. lacks] money for the war in Europe forsooth! No doubt it wants money for the war, when so much is lavished upon the pimps, panders and harlots of the Court!”

Thus sin, or corrupt love, is seen as not only the condition of earthly relationships but as well the bane of earthly government. As Dame Rochelle, the wise old woman of the novel remarks, people ought to place “trust in Heaven, not on earth, where all is transitory and uncertain.” It is well to remember Dame Rochelle’s words when one reads the conclusion of the novel, where it is said “Our tale is now done. . . . There is in it neither poetic nor human justice”: what there is, in terms of the moral vision presented in the novel, is divine justice.

Certainly *The Golden Dog* has romantic aspects, but scrutiny of the novel suggests that at most it is romantic in framework. The inherent polarization of romance is finally foreign to *The Golden Dog* for the simple reason that Kirby explores not a world of definite distinctions but a morally complex universe. It might be argued that Kirby’s answer to complex moral questions is finally quite straightforward if not simple, but this is another matter. Whatever the degree of simplicity to the answer or answers that Kirby does provide, there is ample evidence that he presents moral problems as complex issues. What Kirby’s vision finally distils to is a celebration of the sacred accompanied by an underlying contempt for the profane. For the manner in which this view is conveyed, Kirby is

considerably indebted to Dante's *Comedy*. As for the view in itself: perhaps concerning celestial roses there ought to be dispute. Kirby, after all, leaves one earth-bound with the reminder that "we are all companions under the rose"; it is Dante that intrigues one to discover the way to ascend from the dark wood of his first canto to the "love that moves the sun and the other stars." To be Kirby's Beatrice is to corrupt even love; to be Dante's Beatrice is to love even the corrupt.

NOTES

- ¹ Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), p. 26.
- ² William Kirby, *The Golden Dog (Le Chien d'Or): A Romance of Old Quebec* (1877; rpt. Toronto: The Musson Book Company, 1925), p. 125.
- ³ William Kirby, "A Biographical Sketch of the Author of 'Maple Leaves,'" in J. M. LeMoine, *Maple Leaves* (Quebec: J. M. Demers and Frère, 1894), p. 7.
- ⁴ J. M. LeMoine, "'Le Chien D'Or': The History of an Old House," in *Maple Leaves: Canadian History — Literature — Sport*, New Series (1863; rpt. Quebec: Augustin Côté and Company, 1873), p. 89. The unavailability of the second sketch that Kirby refers to, *Château Bigot*, presents a problem. In its absence a lot must remain matter for speculation.
- ⁵ Le Moine, pp. 92-94.
- ⁶ Le Moine, p. 94.
- ⁷ John Robert Sorfleet, "Fiction and the Fall of New France: William Kirby vs. Gilbert Parker," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 2, No. 3 (Summer 1973), p. 145.
- ⁸ Margot Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 29.
- ⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, trans., *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine*, 1 (1949; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 97.

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