

Satire as Homage: R. Sikoryak's Tribute to the *Divine Comedy* via Bazooka Joe¹

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Accessible, yet sophisticated. Simple, yet complex. Shallow, yet deep. These polarities have long been associated with the *Divine Comedy*, but they may be even more applicable to "Inferno Joe," R. Sikoryak's 1989 parody of Dante's first cantica.² In these ten adaptations of Bazooka bubble-gum comics, as well as in four modified copies of its wrapper, Sikoryak superficially skewers a literary classic while profoundly emulating its spirit and tone.

In a column on the left side of this one-page satire, he depicts four almost exact copies of the red, white, and blue background for a contemporaneous Bazooka wrapper but changes the original text. Though the content and format of the latter have taken many different forms since the gum was first sold in 1947, by the 1970s and 80s the top of the wrapper's front usually features the name of the manufacturer, Topps, in capital white horizontal letters against a red isosceles triangle that is thickest on the left.³ Just beneath that appears a diagonal white bar that rises to the right and includes the word "Bazooka" in alternating red and blue letters. And immediately below that is a blue isosceles triangle that tapers towards the left, is slightly larger than the red triangle, and includes the horizontal words "bubble gum" in capital white letters. On the back of the wrapper, the top half has the word "Bazooka" in alternating red and blue letters rising on a white band that cuts diagonally across a blue rectangle, while the lower half comprises a red rectangle interrupted at left by horizontal white letters giving the manufacturer, in the middle by a thin black vertical line, and at right by capital white letters horizontally proclaiming this gum to be "young America's favorite." And between the back and front of the wrapper, its four edges feature a white background that contrasts on one long side with a black text announcing the gum's ingredients in all capitals ("gum base, sugar, dextrose, corn syrup, softeners, natural & artificial flavors & artificial colors") and, on the other long side, with a black text in all capitals giving the name of the manufacturer, its address, and the notation, "made & printed in U.S.A."

These long edges are similar to one of the long white edges for Sikoryak's four vertically aligned, unfolded, and unseparated wrappers, but his two consecutive lines proclaim in horizontal black capitals, "Gum base, sugars, corn syrup, flavor & cantos./ Dante Chewing Gum, Inc., Brooklyn, It.," his other long edge features the word

¹ I would like to thank Kevin J. Harty for bringing this comic to my attention.

² R. Sikoryak, "Inferno Joe," *Raw* 2.1 (1989): 58, reprinted in his *Masterpiece Comics* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 6, and easily found on-line at such sites as corvusfugit.com at <https://corvusfugit.com/2019/02/28/1989-inferno-joe/>, last accessed 29 October 2021. R(ober) Sikoryak is on the staff of his alma mater, the Parsons School of Design in New York City, and specializes in comic adaptations of literature classics.

³ For a brief and accessible entry point to the history of Bazooka bubble gum and its packaging, start with the entry for it in Wikipedia, at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bazooka_\(chewing_gum\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bazooka_(chewing_gum)), last accessed 29 October 2021. For a widely available image of this version of the wrapper, see <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jasonliebigstuff/4289098281/>, last accessed 29 October 2021.

"Inferno" in alternating red and black letters, and the text on what seems to be the front and back of his wrappers are quite different from those of the original. At the top of his front is the horizontal word "Dante's" in capital white letters against a red isosceles triangle that, as on the original wrappers, wanes towards the right. Below that triangle is the diagonal word "Inferno" in alternating red and black letters against a diagonal white band that, like the word within it, rises to the right. And below that band is the horizontal phrase "bubble gum" in capital white letters against a black isosceles triangle that, as with its counterpart on the actual wrappers, waxes to the right. At the back top of his wrappers appear the words "young poets' favorite" in capital white horizontal letters against a red rectangle. And beneath that and a thin white horizontal band is the word "Inferno" in alternating red and black letters on a thick diagonal white band that rises to the right against a rectangular black background.

These textual deviations provide a foretaste of some of the many ways in which Sikoryak's inserts also depart from his Bazooka prototypes. As with the actual inserts, which were included with the gum from 1953 to 2013,⁴ each of Sikoryak's ten versions, which are divided into two columns of five open inserts each, features three or four panels of color comics above and to the left of an illustrated black-and-white product-offering and over a prediction or warning that runs in black print along the bottom of the insert's white edge. But while the overall format, fonts, and illustration style of his inserts closely echo those of the originals, the content of his texts and images have been adapted to the *Inferno*. Rather than announce that the cartoon features "Bazooka Joe and His Gang," Sikoryak's headings name Inferno Joe and the role or sin of the figure(s) he and his pals are encountering in the relevant episode from Dante's text, as in the titles "Inferno Joe and his Guide" for the first several cantos, and "Inferno Joe and the Traitors" for the last several. Moreover, each heading introduces illustrations that replace their original counterparts' juvenile and otherwise pointless jests, such as "Last night I dreamed I was eating a giant marshmallow! So, when I woke up this morning...my pillow was gone!,"⁵ with a joke or pun that doubles as, or at least contributes to, an extraordinarily brief synopsis of the relevant episode from the *Commedia*, as when Inferno Joe declares in the first frame of the first comic strip, "Help! I'm lost in this dark wood!," which is followed in the next frame by the Bazooka character Mort appearing as Virgil and saying, "Don't worry, Joe! I'll lead you to safety!," to which Joe replies, "Great! Where are we going?," just before he palms his face as his new guide replies in the third and final frame, "To Hell!" And perhaps lest the audience miss the implications of such narratives for the characters, or for themselves, the randomness of the predictions and warnings at the bottom of the original inserts, such as "A plane ride to a strange place is in store for you"⁶ and "What you think can't happen can,"⁷ is replaced at the bottom of Sikoryak's inserts by such pointed messages as that for the first few cantos

4 On the origins of the comic insert, see note 3, above. On Topps' elimination of the insert and on other simultaneous alterations in the packaging of Bazooka gum, see Andrew Adam Newman, "Change Comes to Playground Funny Pictures," *New York Times*, 29 November 2012, at <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/30/business/media/bazooka-gum-overhauls-brand-and-loses-comic-strips.html>>, last accessed 29 October 2021.

5 For this particular gag, see <<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/26740191514225613/>>, last accessed 29 October 2021.

6 For this particular prediction, see the first in-text illustration for "Seth on the End of Bazooka Joe Comics," *Bado's Blog*, 5 December 2012, at <<http://bado-badosblog.blogspot.com/2012/12/seth-on-end-of-bazooka-joe-comics.html>>, last accessed 29 October 2021.

(and cribbed from the famous inscription over Dante's gate of hell), "Abandon hope, you who enter there," and that for the last few cantos, "Take the stairs and rise above evil." In fact, even Sikoryak's product offerings depart from the miscellaneous nature of the original inserts by advertising items that, rather than offering to exchange, say, a "real" camera for 250 Bazooka wrappers or 50 cents and ten wrappers,⁸ underscore a motive and/or motif that is central to the relevant episode, such as an ice scraper for the frigid trek through the last several cantos, or, in the case of the first few cantos, a "Divine Love Pendant[:] Goldplated heart imprinted with Beatrice's initial. Comes with graceful chain. Send 150 comics to: Inferno/ P.O. Box 1300/ Brooklyn, IT. Print clearly. Not valid where prohibited." That is, even while precisely duplicating the visual format of the original inserts, Sikoryak radically departs from their typical content by replacing it with synchronized references to the *Inferno*.

Which is not to say that he comes anywhere close to fully capturing Dante's narrative. Indeed, his choice of visual prototype would hardly allow that and suggests doing so was never his goal. Yet within the constraints he places upon himself by following the Bazooka format, he summarizes Dante's plot and themes with extraordinary accuracy and thoroughness, not to mention efficiency. Sequentially arranged from left to right and top to bottom on the page, the headings roll through all the major figures encountered by Dante's protagonist, beginning with Virgil and including the (other) "heathens," "lustful," "gluttons," "misers & squanderers," "wrathful," "heretics," "violent," "deceivers," and "traitors." And beneath those titles, in the cartoons, are short, simple, ostensibly humorous synopses of the Pilgrim's encounters with not only Virgil but also the other pagans, sinners, and/or their guardians, as when Mort says to Joe in the first of three frames about the heathens, "The first circle of Hell holds the virtuous pagans!" and adds in the second frame, "Their only sin was not believing in the Mighty One!," which prompts Joe to respond in that frame, "Jeez!," just before Mort says in the final frame, "Yes, He's the One!" The key action, theme, and relevance of each meeting is thus presented in an easily accessible, overtly engaging, and extraordinarily efficient manner to an audience that, as suggested by the format of the inserts, could range widely in age, education, experience, and knowledge, particularly of the *Inferno*.

But faithfulness to Dante's plot and themes is not the only way in which Sikoryak directly invokes the *Commedia*, for he also echoes its spirit and tone. Indeed, his efforts to make this cultural cornerstone more accessible and engaging, not to mention concise, could be seen as an extension of Dante's approach to the most serious and ambitious subjects of his day, particularly religion, politics, and the relationship between the two. In much the same manner that the *Commedia* is couched in catchy vernacular rhymes that were apparently even sung by fourteenth-century peasants,⁹

7 For this particular warning, see the first in-text illustration for an undated entry on *me.me*, at <<https://me.me/i/bazooka-joe-o-and-his-gang-tm-i-can-go-22355889>>, last accessed 29 October 2021.

8 For this particular offer, see the wrapper mentioned above in note 7 or the insert illustrated in another notice of the elimination of Bazooka's comic inserts, Anthony Bond's "Bubble Finally Bursts for Bazooka Joe: Gum Manufacturers Drop Iconic Comic Strip after 60 Years," *Daily Mail. Com*, 1 December 2012, at <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2241630/Bazooka-Bubblegum-Manufacturers-drop-iconic-comic-strip-60-years.html>>, last accessed 29 October 2021.

9 For one fourteenth-century account of nearly contemporaneous peasants singing *Commedia* verses while they worked, see *Le novelle di Francho Sacchetti*, ed. Ottavio Gigli, 2 vols. (Florence: Successori Le Monnier, 1909), 1:276-77. For a widely accessible introduction to the expansive

Sikoryak's inserts copy the simple forms, bold outlines, pure hues, basic words, and short sentences of their Bazooka counterparts. In something of a parallel to the way Dante supplements the engaging nature of his melodious presentation with bold opinions and scandalous gossip,¹⁰ so Sikoryak fills his comics with corny puns and slapstick expressions that blatantly seek to entertain a wide range of viewers. And the extraordinary compression with which Sikoryak summarizes the *Inferno's* plot and themes recalls Dante's famous economy in detailing and opining on vast swaths of history, theology, and myriad other subjects in a mere 100 cantos of approximately 160 short lines each.

Yet, it is the parodic implications of these parallels that, ironically, may most closely and deeply invoke the *Commedia*. In refracting Dante's literary classic through an exceptionally shallow and ephemeral form of pop culture, Sikoryak echoes the many ways in which his fourteenth-century predecessor challenged convention and authority by departing from his own forerunners.¹¹ Though Dante as author sometimes has his narrator and/or protagonist respectfully acknowledge their literary roots as well as his own, he differs from all his known predecessors not only by taking a sometimes playful, often gossipy, and always vernacular approach to such serious subjects as the afterlife but also in the degree to which his content (otherwise) departs from Catholic orthodoxy and Church politics, as when he assigns Pope Boniface VIII to hell at a narrative time when the pontiff was not even dead.¹² Indeed,

literature on the significance of Dante composing his text in the vernacular, rather than Latin, see Albert Russell Ascoli's approach to this topic via a discussion of two other major works by Dante, in "The Unfinished Author: Dante's Rhetoric of Authority in *Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*," chap. 4 in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 45-66.

10 For an introduction to the frequency and boldness of opinion expressed by Dante in the *Commedia*, begin with Ascoli, as cited above in note 9. For perhaps the most thorough chronicling of gossip in Dante's text, begin with Vanessa DiMaggio's 2019 doctoral dissertation for the University of Pennsylvania, "Uncovering the Sources: Historical Characters in Dante's *Divine Comedy*." Note that these instances of gossip would seem to be rather hypocritical given the *Commedia's* multiple condemnations of it, as at *Inferno* 18:57, when the sinner Vendico condemns those who circulate the "filthy tale" about him and his sister: "come che suoni la sconcia novella", from *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgate*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (1966-68; 2nd edn Florence: Casa editrice Le lettere, 1994).

11 While few areas of research on the *Commedia* lack an extensive bibliography, the number of sources on the innovativeness of Dante's text is particularly rich. For a balanced entry point to and overview of this topic, see *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, particularly the second chapter, Teodolinda Barolini's "Dante and the Lyric Past" (14-33), and the seventh chapter, Kevin Brownlee's "Dante and the Classical Poets" (100-19).

12 For the reference to Boniface in hell, see *Inferno* 19.49-63, where Pope Nicholas III, who, like all of Dante's sinners, can see the future, mistakenly assumes that the protagonist is Boniface. For more on the occasions and ways in which the *Commedia* acknowledges its author's, narrator's, and/or protagonist's literary roots, start with Barolini and Brownlee, as cited above in note 11. For an introduction to the ways in which Dante's text could be seen as somewhat playful, begin with Enrico Sannia's foundational study, *Il comico, l'umorismo e la satira nella "Divina Commedia"*, 2 vols. (Milan: Heopli, 1909). For the *Commedia's* (somewhat hypocritical) gossipy nature, see DiMaggio, as cited above in note 10. For its use of the vernacular, see Ascoli, as cited above in note 9. And, for a quick but helpful introduction to Dante's treatment of the Church and politics, as well as a brief summary of the contexts that allowed him and his work to survive being so critical about such ostensibly sensitive subjects, begin with John A. Scott's sections "Dante's Orthodoxy" (332-34) and "Dante's Political Vision in the *Comedy*" (334-36) in "Dante and His Contemporary World," chap. 11 of *Understanding Dante* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004). For a slightly more dated but longer and still-relevant introduction to Dante's treatment of Church doctrine and personnel, see Christopher Ryan's "The Theology of Dante," chap. 9 in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, 136-52.

he sometimes challenges the papacy so fundamentally and/or completely that more than one Church official publicly condemned the *Commedia* during and not long after Dante's lifetime, as in 1329 when the Dominican Guido Vernani da Rimini compares authors such as Dante (and, implicitly, the *Commedia*) to vessels that tempt with a beautiful exterior while containing poison within,¹³ and the papal legate in Bologna, Bertrando del Poggetto, ordered the *Commedia* to be publicly burned for its "heretical content."¹⁴ Moreover, even when Dante is denying that he visited the afterlife in the same way as supposedly did St. Paul and Aeneas, he does not gainsay the possibility that he actually visited it in some manner.¹⁵ And, of course, his very denial not only raises the possibility that he did indeed travel to the afterlife in the same way as did those iconic figures but also suggests that his more informal tone than Paul's or Virgil's has an element of anti-authoritarianism to it.¹⁶ In other words, he lays the groundwork for later commentators such as Sikoryak to emulate him even as they satirize him.

"Inferno Joe" is thus a surprisingly profound meditation upon a literary cornerstone that it may initially seem to spoof in a shallow, puerile, and perhaps even ignorant manner. Closely echoing the form of a famously juvenile and transient form of American pop culture, even as his content thoroughly penetrates to the heart of Dante's plot and themes, Sikoryak captures much of the *Commedia*'s spirit. Through satire itself, by thereby emulating and honoring Dante's text, he affirms not only its ongoing relevance but also that of the Middle Ages, medievalism, and medievalism studies.

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13 For the full quote, see *Il più antico oppositore politico di Dante: Guido Vernani da Rimini. Testo critico del "De reprobatione monarchiae"*, ed. Nevio Matteini (Padua: CEDAM, 1958), 93: "Inter alia vero talia sua vasa quidam fuit multa fantastice poetizans et sophista verbosus, verbis exterioribus in eloquentia multis gratus, qui suis poetici fantasmatis et figmentis, iuxta verbum philosophie Boetium consolantis, scenicas meretriculas adducendo, non solum egros animos, sed etiam studiosos dulcibus sirenarum cantibus conducit fraudulenter ad interitum salutifere veritatis."

14 My translation from S. A. Chimenz's account in "Dante," in *Letteratura italiana*, 2 vols. (Milan: C. Marzorati, 1956), 1:76.

15 For Dante's denial that he is (even like) Aeneas and Paul, see *Inferno* 2.32: "Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono". On his elusiveness regarding whether and how he might have actually visited the afterlife, as well as how fourteenth-century commentators, particularly Guido da Pisa, treated that possibility, see Karl Fugelso, "Illuminating Thresholds: Depicting Dante 'pien de sonno' in Musée Condé MS 597," *Word & Image* 29:4 (October 2013): 443-55.

16 For more on this passage, particularly the ways in which it, in fact, links Dante to Paul and Aeneas, see esp. paras. 11-23 in Barolini's "*Inferno* 2: Beatrix Loquax and Consolation," which provides an excellent introduction to these issues in general and can be found in the *Commento Baroliniano* for the Digital Dante website (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2018), at <<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-2/>>, last accessed 29 October 2021. For more on the anti-authoritarianism of the tone here and elsewhere in the *Commedia*, see the sources cited above, in note 11, especially Brownlee.

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