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Kristina Olson

George Mason University, kolson4@gmu.edu

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## Empty Flags and Fallen 'Angeli': Dante and the Imagery of the Capitol Riot

### Cover Page Footnote

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## REPORT

### ***EMPTY FLAGS AND FALLEN 'ANGELI': DANTE AND THE IMAGERY OF THE CAPITOL RIOT***

KRISTINA M. OLSON, George Mason University

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After the mob attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, which disrupted the certification of the 2020 presidential election, several photographs of the insurrectionists have begun to emerge. Jacob Chansley, known as Jake Angeli, was one of the many insurrectionists photographed on the Senate dais after the chamber had been evacuated of all elected officials, who were escorted into safety. Angeli wore a horned, double raccoon-tail helmet, painted his face the colors of the US flag, and carried a spear with the American flag. While the appearance of the Confederate flag born into its halls by the same mob is undoubtedly more disturbing, Angeli's eccentric ensemble evokes the language of violence and treason from Dante's *Inferno*. From the horns of the Minotaur, guardian of the violent in the Seventh Circle, to the tripartite-facial colors of Lucifer, the emperor of the despondent kingdom whose three mouths eternally masticate traitors to country, homeland and God, Angeli's insurrectionist garb should be considered for its unintended symbolism with Dante's poetic imagination. As I explain in this contribute, though insurrectionists and neofascists have often coopted medieval iconography, and Dante's own name has recently become appropriated by Italian nationalist rhetoric in disturbing ways, a closer look at his *Inferno*, evoked by these and other symbols of this mob, show these domestic terrorists to be participants in sins of political violence and treason, as many other fallen "angeli."

Keywords: Insurrectionists, Capitol Siege, Violence, Cowardice

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It has been demonstrated by BIPoC and white scholars that alt-right, white nationalist, and white supremacist groups have [purposefully co-opted late-ancient and medieval symbols](#) for their forceful displays of racism and toxic masculinity at riots and protests. Disturbed by [their misappropriation of mythic symbols, scholars began studying](#) this phenomenon after the August 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Participants carried flags and wore clothing that bore the Deus Vult cross associated

with the First Crusade (1096), the ancient Germanic Valknut, and Mjölner, Thor's Hammer, together with Nazi and neo-Nazi signs and the Confederate flag. In March 2019, Brenton Tarrant killed 49 worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, with a rifle that was embellished with images from two medieval battles—[battles which Tarrant read, albeit erroneously in one case, as belonging to a crusader-narrative.](#)

Though these examples misappropriate Norse, Germanic and Crusader history, politicians and leaders of the alt-right in other countries have similarly reclaimed their medieval past as a part of their revisionist narratives. Fascists of the early 20th century [dis-torted Dante Alighieri, 14th century poet of the \*Divine Comedy\*, into Italy's idyll of patriotic glory. Far-right politicians of today have followed in these footsteps](#), as when Matteo Salvini [cited the brutalized appearance of the Prophet Muhammed in \*Inferno 28\*](#) as part of his anti-immigration speech in Florence in 2016.



Fig. 1. [Storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 \(Photo from Wikimedia Commons\)](#)

Years later, Dante's name was written as one of the hundred names of their ideological forefathers on the walls of the CasaPound, [a headquarters for neofascist activity in Italy.](#) Dante has begun to be appropriated in subtle ways by the alt-right, as Dante scholar David Bowe has recently observed in [Breitbart's announcement of the Uffizi exhibit of Dante's drawings](#), which emphasizes in both the

subtitle and the first paragraph the number of drawings in the exhibit as “88”—[a hate symbol meant to signify “Heil Hitler.”](#)

[Medieval iconography was again apparent in the disturbing images of white supremacist and nationalists](#), many who wore shirts with the Deus Vult cross when attacking the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. As I suggest here, Dante was present in these images as well. But it was not the idealized, neo-fascist distortion of the 14th century Italian poet in view. Instead, it was the textual Dante, what one might call the “real” Dante, who was legible in the photographic documentation of the event.

This Dante is the fourteenth-century poet who lived during times of intense political unrest and division, and whose poem condemns various vices and sins, including cowardice, violence, tyranny, and treachery. This is the Dante whose ethical vision inspired another rhetoric, such as the abolitionist discourse of American politicians in the nineteenth century. One must look very carefully to see this Dante, but he is there, almost as an accidental commentary on the injustices being carried out. I will discuss two ways in which we can read this Dante and how we can reclaim medieval culture at this horrific event.

The first image is of an individual whose story was featured [in several Italian newspapers](#), perhaps due to his chosen last name: Jacob Chansley, known as Jake Angeli, a native of Phoenix, Arizona who has become the iconographic leader of this mob. Shirtless and baring several large [tattoos depicting Mjölner and Yggdrasill \(the Norse tree, which includes a valknut\)](#), Angeli wore a bison-horned, double raccoon-tail helmet, painted his face the colors of the US flag, and carried a spear with the American flag attached, as seen below. Angeli has a [record of attendance](#) at Trump rallies and QAnon demonstrations dating back to November 2019, [often depicted with the sign “Q Sent Me,”](#) which has led to his monicker as [“QAnon Shaman.”](#) He was one of the many insurrectionists photographed on the Senate dais after the chamber had been evacuated of all elected officials, who were escorted into safety.

While the inspiration for his ensemble might be Native American or nineteenth-century white western or even Viking dress,<sup>1</sup> Angeli's appearance evokes the language of violence and

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Anderson, Professor of Native American Literature at George Mason University, writes, “It is unclear if the insurrectionist is specifically or intentionally styling himself in ways he perceives to be Indigenous. There are ‘western’ elements to his dress, as in some odd mix of cowboy and (possibly) Native elements, but not in line with the Apaches of his home state, Arizona. It could also be that such specificity doesn’t matter, and that he’s playing Indian in a generic sort of way, and just throwing together a costume that, he thinks, looks ‘Indian.’” From an email correspondence

treason from Dante's *Inferno*. In canto eleven, Dante the pilgrim arrives in the first ring of the Seventh Circle, which punishes those souls who were violent against their neighbors. Here, tyrants, murderers, and bandits—those who are violent to others or their property—are immersed in the Phlegethon, a boiling river of blood, to various degrees: the worse the sin, the further immersed the soul in the river.



Fig. 2. “[Jacob Chansley, aka Jake Angeli, inside the Capitol on January 6, 2021](#)” (Photo Credit: [Alek Gakos, Orlando Weekly](#))

The Minotaur—part-man, part-bull—is the first among the monsters encountered in this area, and, in keeping with the bestial rage exhibited here, he is infuriated by the appearance of Dante and his guide, Virgil. The damned souls, including Alexander the Great and Attila the Hun, are guarded by centaurs, men from the waist up, and horses from the waist down, brandishing arrows for hunting. Dante includes these hybrid creatures to signify the bestial nature of violence. Violent acts—be it plundering and looting, killing or executing—exhibit the bestial nature antithetical to reason, the facility that distinguishes humans from animals to the medieval mind. From the horns of the Minotaur, to his bare torso and brown-colored legs, Angeli evokes these bestial guardians of the Circle of Violence.

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dated 1/19/2021. Also see Philip Joseph Deloria’s study *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

The irony of such resonance, of course, is that the insurrectionists who sieged the Capitol claimed to do so in the name of freedom, and against tyranny itself: “Don’t Tread on Me,” as their Gadsden flags read. Instead, they figured like so many centaurs, the mythic creatures known for their violence, as they notoriously kill, plunder, and violate the human gatherings that they invade. Angeli’s facial painting—the three colors of the American flag—likewise recalls the tripartite colors of Lucifer’s three faces: red, yellow and black. His three mouths eternally masticate traitors to country, homeland, and God. Lucifer, the supreme fallen *angel*, is described by Dante as the emperor of the despondent kingdom: the most treacherous of souls, frozen into the lake of Hell, Cocytus, which is fed by his own tears.

If Angeli’s insurrectionist garb bears this unintended symbolism with Dante’s poetic imagination, a more elaborate, intricate Dante was hidden in another image: that of the portrait of Charles Sumner behind an insurrectionist with the Confederate flag. Charles Sumner employed Dante’s idea of cowardice to denounce slavery on the very floor of the Senate. Dante places the cowards—the pusillanimous, the lukewarm—in the vestibule of hell, outside of Hell proper. As a punishment for their inaction in life, they are forced to chase an empty banner, goaded on by stinging insects. As [Dennis Looney has noted](#), Charles Sumner and his brother, George Sumner, were both avid readers of Dante. In a July 4, 1859 speech, George Sumner compared compromisers in the North with the “indifferent angels” from *Inferno* 3. George’s brother, Charles—the Massachusetts senator, one of the founders of the Radical Republican Party, and a frequent traveler to Italy—had earlier demonstrated his deep knowledge of Dante, extensively referring to *Inferno* 3 in his denunciations of slavery. In his May 1855 speech, “The Antislavery Enterprise: Its Necessity, Practicability, and Dignity with Glances at the Special Duties of the North,” Charles Sumner [exhorts his fellow Americans to take a stand, quoting \*Inferno\* 3.37–39 in full](#):

Better strive in this cause, even unsuccessfully, than never strive at all. The penalty of indifference is akin to the penalty of opposition,—as is well pictured by the great Italian poet, when, among the saddest on the banks of Acheron, rending the air with outcries of torment, shrieks of anger, and smiting of hands, he finds the troop of dreary souls who had been ciphers in the great conflicts of life:

‘Mingled with whom, of their disgrace the proof,  
Are the vile angels, who did not rebel,

Nor kept their faith to God, but stood aloof.'

Charles Sumner would again refer specifically to *Inferno* 3, likening those who do not stand against someone to the one who “made the great refusal” (*Inf.* 3.60) in his 1856 speech to the Senate, “The Crime against Kansas: The Apologies for the Crime; and the True Remedy.” Here, Sumner unleashes the hortatory power of this canto, using Dante’s punishment of cowardice as a warning to the living to take a stand. It was after delivering this speech, on May 22, 1856, that a brazen act of violence was committed on the Senate floor [when Preston Brooks caned and permanently disabled Charles Sumner](#).

This photograph from January 6, 2021 [below] is thus an allegory begging to be read for its disturbing contrasts: a Confederate-flag yielding insurrectionist stands in front of a politician who spoke against slavery and was beaten for it. But it is an image of the Dantean punishment of cowardice, where a man carries a flag—the flag of a non-entity, the Confederacy, that is followed by too many—in front of a man who knew that text well. Dante’s poetic vision unfolds here before our eyes and those of Sumner.



Fig. 3. [“Insurrectionist holds Confederate flag in front of portrait of Charles Sumner”](#) (Photo Credit: Erin Schaff, *The New York Times*)

As a part of the ultimate punishment of the pusillanimous, Dante does not name any of the cowardly souls he witnesses: “non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa” (“Let us not talk about them,



but look and pass,” *Inf.* 3.51). The pilgrim only understands that this large group of souls sinned in cowardice because he recognizes one of them, one who “made the great refusal.” For Dante, cowardice is a political sin, a refusal to act in times in crisis when the circumstances require it. For this reason, his conception of cowardice has punctuated political speeches from [Teddy Roosevelt](#) and [President John F. Kennedy](#)—who interpreted Dante’s condemnation of cowardice in the saying, “The worst places in hell are reserved for those who do not act in times of moral crisis”—and sermons from 19th-century American pastors like H.M. Vines, up to the Reverend Martin Luther King.

It is clear that these domestic terrorists were participants in acts of violence and treason. Yet if we were to attempt a parallel between the cowardly population of Dante’s hell and the mob that invaded the Capitol on January 6, 2021, we would do better to look the one who incited their violent and treacherous act in the first place: the true coward, former President Trump, who urged them to rebel and then disowned any association with their actions.