

## **The Story of Paolo & Francesca Explained**

Paolo & Francesca were historical contemporaries of Dante. Francesca's father, Guido da Polenta, lord of Ravenna had waged a long war with Malatesta, lord of Rimini. Finally peace was made through intermediaries, and to make it more firm, they decided to cement it with a marriage. Guido would give his beautiful young daughter Francesca in marriage to Gianciotto, eldest son of Malatesta. Though Gianciotto was very capable and expected to become ruler when his father died, he was ugly and deformed. Guido's friends informed him that if Francesca sees Gianciotto before the marriage, she would never go through with it. So they sent Gianciotto's younger brother Paolo to Ravenna with a full mandate to marry Francesca in Gianciotto's name. Paolo was a handsome, pleasing, very courteous man, and Francesca fell in love the moment she saw him. The deceptive marriage contract was made, and Francesca went to Rimini. She was not aware of the deception until the morning after the wedding day, when she saw Gianciotto getting up from beside her. When she realized she had been fooled, she became furious. In any case, the feelings of Paolo and Francesca for each other were still very much alive when Gianciotto went off to a nearby town on business. With almost no fear of suspicion, they became intimate. Gianciotto's servant found them out, and told his master all he knew. Gianciotto returned secretly to Rimini and went to Francesca's room. Since it was bolted from within, he shouted to her and pushed against the door. Paolo and Francesca recognized his voice, and Paolo pointed to a trapdoor that led to a room below. He told Francesca to go open the door as he planned his escape. As he jumped through, a fold of his jacket got caught on a piece of iron attached to the wood. Francesca had already opened the door for Gianciotto, thinking she would be able to make excuses, now that Paolo was gone. When Gianciotto entered and noticed Paolo caught by his jacket. He ran, rapier in hand, to kill him. Seeing this, Francesca quickly ran between them, to try to prevent it. But

Gianciotto's rapier was already on its way down. Before reaching Paolo, the blade passed through Francesca's bosom. Gianciotto, completely beside himself because of this accident— for he loved the woman more than himself— withdrew the blade, struck Paolo again, and killed him. Leaving them both dead, he left, and returned to his duties. The next morning, amidst much weeping, the two lovers were buried in the same tomb.

— Charles Singleton,  
*Commentary: Dante's Inferno*(1977)