
From the Writer

Strangely enough, I wanted to write this paper not to express a bold new idea, but because I wanted to take a middle-of-the-road approach. All of the writers whom I had studied seemed to take rather extreme stances on the subject of *contrapasso*, whereas I saw an Occam's-razor-style approach as much more suitable. This mindset, however, also ended up complicating the process. Because my thesis was not so radical that my whole paper needed to constantly argue the point, I needed to find another way to make my conclusion seem viable.

In the end, I decided to follow this format: in the first paragraph, I would introduce two extreme interpretations of *contrapasso* in addition to my own. Then, through the course of the essay, I would explain why both of these extreme interpretations were inherently flawed. Finally, I would re-introduce my own point as the logical middle ground. Despite being a somewhat simple plan, my essay went through an unexpected number of major revisions, and the number of paragraphs that were written and struck off were almost as many as those that made it through to the final version.

However, even with all of these revisions, I would still be willing to go back and add a final pass of polish. Nearly eight months after writing it, some phrases now seem forced or over-used. This is especially clear to me in my concluding paragraph, which was written from scratch several times. The one lesson that I did take away from this essay is how helpful the space of even a few weeks is when revising old writing. I had started this paper somewhat early, and the ability to put it off for a week and come back with fresh eyes was essential to getting it to the level that it is now.

— Joseph Kameen

DARKNESS VISIBLE: DANTE'S CLARIFICATION OF HELL

Contrapasso is one of the few rules in Dante's *Inferno*. It is the one "law of nature" that applies to hell, stating that for every sinner's crime there must be an equal and fitting punishment. These punishments, however, are rarely simple or obvious and are usually metaphorically rather than literally related to their respective sins. In fact, Dante scholar Lino Pertile notes, "the ways in which [*contrapasso*] works in the narrative are as many as the sins, if not as many as the sinners, to which it is applied" (70–73). As is to be expected with such a complicated concept, many interpretations of this interplay between sin and punishment have been proposed. Some of the most interesting of these focus on the relationship between Dante's unique form of justice and the traditional, biblical sense of justice. For example, Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez in their notes on *Inferno* argue that Dante's portrayal of divine retribution is clearly derived from "the biblical law of retaliation," better known as "an eye for an eye" (448). These scholars firmly believe that Dante wanted only to properly apply the pre-established standard of justice to his interpretation of hell. Another camp, however, contends that Dante is attempting to redefine completely the popular image of hell. Matthew Pearl, in his article "Dante and the Death Penalty," argues that, "*contrapasso* differs drastically from the biblical principle of 'an eye for an eye,' with which it's sometimes confused. In Dante's poem, punishments must arise from the crime itself, not from the damage it has caused" (paragraph 7). Pearl argues that Dante is breaking away from the popular notion that the severity of a sin is determined by the damage done to society, suggesting instead that a sin is more or less severe because it is more or less offensive to God, not

to man (or rather, that each punishment derives from the offensiveness of the sin itself, rather than the suffering of its victims). There are, of course, problems with both of these approaches. In a work so grounded in biblical history, it seems strange to assume that Dante would completely reject it in favor of his own invention. At the same time, the *contrapasso* is surely much more complex than a simple exchange of blows between man and God, as Durling and Martinez claim. Instead, I propose a middle ground between these two claims: that Dante primarily intended to *explain* biblical justice through his *contrapasso*, but in order to do so more effectively, expanded upon tradition, and thus inevitably added some of his own invention.

At first glance, it *is* Durling and Martinez's summarization that appears correct. Dante, proud as he may be, seems too religious to stray very far from the biblical laws of retaliation. After all, Hell does seem to serve as little more than the "long arm of the law" acting out God's will. All sinners go to be judged before Minos, who, in lieu of God (who will finalize all punishments on the Judgment Day), damns each soul to its respective punishment. From that point on, a veritable army of demons and monsters (that at least appear to be "employed" by God) carry out or add to the punishment due to each person. In correspondence with this idea is the fact that each sin is "rounded up," so to speak, to the nearest biblical sin; for example, Filippus Argenti, though his sins include greed and pride, is lumped in with the rest of the wrathful souls. This is seen again in Canto 28, where schismatics of state, religion, and family all seem to be bound to the same punishment. At least from the Pilgrim's perspective, everything in hell seems to add up to a perfect tit-for-tat system, matching with the classical Christian views of crime and punishment. Indeed, the gates of hell themselves proclaim "Divine power made me;" it is only logical that hell should be portrayed as the perfect execution of God's justice (Dante 3.5).

And yet, complications arise as one reads a little deeper. The gate may proclaim its maker, but it also proclaims its inhabitants, and these souls are not, as might be expected from Durling and Martinez's standpoint, referred to in the traditional biblical sense, as the chaff separated from the wheat or as the goats separated from the sheep. They are referred to as "The Lost People" (Dante 3.3). This immediately brings us back to the image of Dante, wandering off the straight path and slowly veering towards the

valley. Dante is not being pushed into the pits for his past mistakes; in fact, the top of the “delightful mountain” still calls to him (Dante 1.77). In this light, we see that Hell is not simply a repository where God flings the unwanted souls, as a strict theologian of the time may have suggested, but rather it is only the end of all the wrong paths that man can take. It is in small nuances like this that we can see Dante’s true purpose: his main goal is to make hell real to the common man. At the same time, he is artistically bound by the source material, and since he cannot change the Bible, he is forced to add to it.

Matthew Pearl’s statements also seem correct at first glance. We can see that Hell acts as the place where all evil souls naturally go. In this light, Minos ceases to be a judge and becomes more of a directory, an information booth showing souls to their proper resting places. The demons also shift and no longer seem to punish the souls out of anger or bloodlust, but simply because that is the right and natural thing to do given the circumstances. More importantly, this interpretation points out the fact that all sinners in a circle are *not* given the same punishment. Each sinner suffers a different severity based on his or her unique sins: sullen sinners in the fifth circle can be placed deeper in the muck, heretics in the fifth may be roasted in hotter sepulchers, and those in the ninth *bolgia* are lacerated in varying degrees. Dante indicates that some punishments are greater than others based on who committed the sins, as when Virgil calls out, “O Capaneus, since your pride is not extinguished, you are punished more” (Dante 14.62–64). That is, strong or weak or proud souls all have different levels of punishment in Hell because they all led different lives and therefore find themselves at different ends.

Pearl’s points also have their own shortcomings. For example, Pearl bases his argument on the notion that a sin naturally leads to its own punishment on the assumption that hell’s torments are analogous to the soul’s respective sins. This, however, is an oversimplification. Sometimes the *contrapasso* is based on analogy (as with Pearl’s example of the heretics in the sixth *bolgia*), but it is just as often the antithesis of a sin (as with Curio in the ninth *bolgia*). Sometimes, sins of each type are even in the same Canto (compare Mohammed and Curio’s punishments). More often than not, however, the punishment is much more complex than either of these, as can be seen in the punishment for gluttons in the third Circle. This pun-

ishment could be interpreted as a storm meant to overwhelm those who craved stimulus in life, or as a storm obscuring those who hungered for fame, or the storm could be seen as an oppressive force holding the fat to the ground, or even as a fecal metaphor. Pearl's argument's weakness is that he confines the interpretation to one of these, when it is more than likely all at once, depending on the sinner and the reader. In trying to prove that Dante wanted to rewrite religion to his own liking, Pearl is choosing only those parts of *Inferno* that match his hypothesis, ignoring the rest (and, ironically, rewriting the *Inferno* to *his* own liking).

Perhaps the best example of Dante's true purpose can be seen in his treatment of non-biblical mythology. Dante's Hell includes a myriad of classical heroes and beasts, ranging from Ulysses to Geryon, who exist alongside biblical and historical figures. While these mythological figures are taken from many sources and fill many roles, Dante treats them all similarly; in each case, Dante generally sticks to the canonical facts but also expands upon them. For example, the Pilgrim shows respect for Ulysses's heroism in life, but these acts are not the focus of his speech. Rather Dante fills us in on the rest of the story, showing us what happened after Ulysses's fatal last voyage. By showing us Ulysses's final fate, his journey takes on a new light, making the character much clearer to us. Dante makes a point of not contradicting what has already been written about these characters, but he does seem to find their stories incomplete and unclear, so he finishes them for us. Dante does not reinvent or change the classic stories but only augments them as is necessary.

Similarly, Dante is not trying to consciously re-write the biblical definition of justice, as Pearl implies; nor is he simply going along with the status quo for the sake of political correctness. Rather than attempting to redefine hell, Dante is trying to explain hell, to take an abstract concept and make it tactile, and to make it known to the common man. That is why Dante wrote in the vernacular. Although most people of the time probably knew the Bible fairly well, study of the Bible was still a luxury afforded to the few who could afford the time. In addition, the current practices (such as speaking mass entirely in Latin) further distanced the common citizen from a deep understanding of the Bible. Therefore, Dante explains hell in the vernacular, attempting to expound upon the traditional notions, but inevitably adding his own flare to his creation. Toward this

purpose, Dante has crafted a series of *contrapassos* so complex that they will slightly change based on the reader, who will interpret the punishment as it is clearest to him or her. In this sense, Dante does not want to redefine justice, but only to make his religion tangible to the average person, to be to the reader as Virgil is to the Pilgrim: a “sun that heals every clouded sight” (Dante 11.91).

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