

The concept of contrapasso and its representation



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Inferno narrates Dante's journey through Hell which is guided by the Roman poet Virgil. During their travels through each of the nine circles of Hell, Dante and Virgil witness contrapasso, or the law which ensures that each sinner is punished with a sentence that suits their offense's severity according to Medieval expectations. Some punishments that Virgil and Dante observe logically fit the corresponding crimes. Other punishments, however, are more symbolic and obscure. Although the nature of the sins may be related, each punishment is tailored to torture each sinner in a manner that reflects how the sins affected others, therefore allowing the punishments to vary greatly. Throughout their journey, Dante and Virgil observe and converse with the sinners to explore the relationship between sin itself and its corresponding contrapasso.

When Dante and Virgil arrive in the third circle of Hell, it is raining, as this is the always the weather that accompanies the punishment of the gluttons. Dante describes the rain as " eternal, cursed, cold, and heavy rain; its rule and quality never change" (6. 7-9). The rainwater is filthy and large hailstones and snow also fall from the sky. The " earth stinks that receives them" (6. 11-12). In these few short lines, Dante is able to convey the disgusting atmosphere of this circle to emphasize the idea of the misery of Hell. A monstrous dog-like beast with three heads named Cerberus guards the gluttons, who howl like dogs along with the creature. When Cerberus spots Virgil and Dante, he opened his mouth and showed his fangs. Virgil " opened his hands, took up earth, and with both fists full threw it into those ravenous pipes" (6. 25-27). The beast devours the mud and then grows quiet, symbolizing that he himself is a glutton. Contrapasso and retribution

are clearly evident as the sinners are tormented by this beast who reflects their earthly behaviors. The vile slush symbolizes the personal degradation of someone who overindulges in food, drink, or other worldly pleasures. The inability to see others lying nearby represents the gluttons' selfishness and coldness. These souls that overindulged in food, drink, and other kinds of addiction are eternally tortured for doing so, and their punishment directly reflects and satirizes these specific earthly faults.

Virgil and Dante enter the sixth bolgia of the eighth circle of Hell which punishes those who committed Fraud. They witness the hypocrites who are "painted people who were walking with very slow steps, weeping and, by their expressions, weary and defeated" (23. 58-60). The hypocrites are wearing hooded robes that resemble those of the monks. However, these robes are "dazzlingly gilded, but within they are all of lead, so heavy that the ones Frederick put on people might have been of straw" (23. 64-66). It is noted that Dante's interpretation of hypocrisy comes from Ugucione of Pisa's *Magnae derivationes* which attributes the etymology of "hypocrisy" to "hypo," meaning below, and "crisis," meaning gold (64-65nn). Analogous to the gilded cloaks, in their lives, the sinners appeared to be good externally. Yet in reality, they contained evil within. The hypocrites listlessly walk along wearing the heavy, gilded lead cloaks, representing the factiousness behind the appearance of their actions. This falsity weighs them down and makes spiritual progress impossible for them. The hypocrites' contrapasso is appropriate for the sin itself as the sinners are now tortured and weighed down by a physical representation of their manipulation of others during life.

In this bolgia, Virgil and Dante meet Catalano and Loderingo who are Jolly Friars from Bologna. The Jolly Friars were a religious order that quickly achieved a reputation for corruption and self-interest (103n). Before Dante can begin a conversation with Friars, he spots a man who is crucified to the ground with three stakes. Catalano tells Dante ““ That one staked there at whom you are looking counseled the Pharisees that it was expedient to put one man to death for the people. He is stretched naked out across the road, as you see, so that whoever passes, he must feel his weight first” (23. 115-119). This man is Caiaphas who was the high priest of the Sanhedrin. He urged the crucifixion of Jesus in order to silence Jesus’ criticisms of the Sanhedrin’s hypocrisy, who covered their self-interest with a pretense of public concern (115-123nn). Caiaphas is forced to feel the weight of the hypocrisy of others as the other hypocrites literally walk over him. This is also an allegory that parallels Christ on the cross who bore the weight of all men’s sins (118-120nn). Though they are in the same bolgia, the sinners’ punishments clearly vary greatly. The location which the sinners are sent to represents the type of crime committed, as both the cloaked hypocrites and Caiaphas and his followers all committed fraud, yet the actual punishment depends on the specific circumstances and severity of that crime. Caiaphas suffers the eternal punishment that is equivalent to the suffering he caused when he was alive, demonstrating a contrapasso that Caiaphas is entirely worthy of.

Virgil and Dante continue to the seventh bolgia of the eighth circle, which punishes thieves. The atmosphere of each bolgia is becoming increasingly more disturbing, as serpents and terrifying beasts roam among the sinners.

Virgil and Dante watch Vanni Fucci and Cacus the centaur be tortured by these creatures. But the true horror of this circle appears when a sinner calls out Cianfa's name. Cianfa, a serpent with six feet attacks the man who called him and " wrapped around his waist, with its forefeet it seized his arms; then it pierced both his cheeks with his fangs" and continued to wrap around Agnel like a tree (25. 52-54). The part of this punishment that reflects the sin of thievery is when their two heads melt together and their limbs grow and twist together. The thieves' punishment is revealed gradually. As the thieves once stole other's people's possessions, the sinners are now subject to theft. And since they are in Hell, their identities are their most valued possessions. Agnel's identity is diminished by his transformation with Cianfa. Dante and Virgil watch another gruesome transformation that ultimately leaves the man a snake while the creature becomes a man. The newly created man can now speak, saying "' I want Buoso to run, as I have, on all sixes along his path'" (25. 140-141). He takes delight in Agnel's suffering. The contrapassos that the sinners in this bolgia suffer is essentially identical to their earthly wrongdoing. These gruesome punishments allow the sinners to be victims of thievery, losing their identities and mortal forms, which are all they have left.

Throughout their journey through Hell, it becomes clear that each sinner's contrapasso has the same effect on them as their sins had on others when they were alive. These punishments vary greatly, yet they are all appropriate to the sin itself. And, there is multi-dimensional symbolism present in each sin's contrapasso. The significance of the different punishments signifies that each circle of Hell and bolgia houses sinners of a specific crime, yet each sinner's contrapasso exquisitely fits the circumstances and severity of the

wrongdoing. The sinners in each of these three examples is tortured to a state that is physically unbearable, exhibiting that each punishment is excruciating and tailored to deliver the retribution that the sinners are worthy of.