

A close reading and literary interpretation of canto vii



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“ Pape Satán, pape Satán aleppe!”[1] These baffling, untranslatable words screeched by Plutus in the Fourth Circle of Dante’s *Inferno* have been the subject of extensive linguistic exegesis for many years but, unfortunately, the attention given by scholars to Plutus’ role in the *Inferno* is often limited to this one-line invocation. While Plutus, the demon of avarice and greed (Notes VII 8), is one of the most short-lived and seemingly inconsequential characters of Dante’s poem, he serves a vital role in the structural and subliminal unity of this canto, the Circles of the Incontinent (Circles 2-5), the *Inferno*, and the *Divine Comedy* as a whole. While Virgil conflicts directly and explicitly with Plutus early in Canto VII, he introduces two more indirect and implicit conflicts with Plutus: one in an empyrean realm and another in a sublunary realm. The empyrean conflict is between Pluto, who is conflated with Plutus, and Michael, whom Virgil references in his threat to Plutus early in Canto VII. The counterpart sublunary conflict is between Fortune and those sinners who committed the avaricious and prodigal sins embodied by the demon Plutus. Once the empyrean and sublunary conflicts are explicated, the rest of Dante’s stylistic and literary choices in Canto VII can be illuminated in light of the overarching pair of conflicts.

While Plutus is defeated early in Canto VII through the direct verbal threats of Virgil in Hell, he is also indirectly defeated in an empyrean and sublunary domain in Heaven and Earth, respectively, revealing God’s absolute victory over evil in Heaven, Earth, and Hell. Dante conflates Plutus with Pluto early in Canto VII in order to allude to the biblical and empyrean conflict between Michael and Lucifer. In Italian, Dante writes ‘ Pluto,’ who is the ruler of the underworld in classical Greek mythology (Notes VI 115). ‘ Pluto’ is a

substitute name for Dis, whom Dante and Virgil encounter at the end of the *Inferno* in Canto XXXIV, and Dis is synonymous with Lucifer or Satan (Notes XXXIV 20). In reference to Plutus and Pluto, Allen Mandelbaum writes that, “Dante probably made no clear distinction between the two” (Notes VI 115). The relationship between Plutus and Dis, or Lucifer, is confirmed through Virgil’s threat to Plutus in Canto VII. This threat is similar to the defense that Virgil employed to ward off the verbal challenges of Charon (III 94-96) and Minos (V 21-24), but for the first time, Dante’s threat is not limited to an affirmation of their divinely willed journey; In Canto VII, Virgil also includes an allusion to the Archangel Michael. Virgil warns Plutus, “His [Dante’s] is no random journey to the deep: / it has been willed on high, where Michael took / revenge upon the arrogant rebellion” (VII 10-12). The reference to Michael is a biblical allusion to the Book of Revelation: “And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels [going forth] to war with the dragon; and the dragon warred and his angels; And they prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven.”[2] Michael is consistently referenced in the Bible as the archangel who combats and defeats Lucifer prior to the Last Judgment when Christ will return to the Earth (Daniel 12: 1). Therefore, because Plutus is conflated with Lucifer (Pluto) in Canto VII, Virgil’s threat not only literally defeats Plutus (VII 13-15), but also parallels Michael’s defeat of Lucifer in heaven. Note that the conflict between Lucifer and Michael occurs in Heaven, according to the Book of Revelation, and so this conflict is empyrean. By conflating Plutus with Pluto, Dante proposes his first of two implicit and indirect conflicts with Plutus: that which is between Michael and Pluto.

This ethereal conflict is followed shortly thereafter by its sublunary counterpart: the conflict between Fortune and the sinners of the Fourth Circle, who committed the avaricious and prodigal sins epitomized by Plutus. Note that Plutus is the "...demon of avarice" (VII Notes 8) in ancient Greek mythology, and thus he serves as a physical embodiment of the qualities for which the sinners of the Fourth Circle are punished. Midway through Canto VII, Virgil explains to Dante that Fortune is a representative employed by God to partition and shift worldly goods between various nations and clans (VII 78-80), in the same way that God "...gave the nations their inheritance and divided the human race" (Deuteronomy 32: 8). The avaricious and prodigal sinners were those who through "ill giving and ill keeping..." (VII 58) disrupted the well-balanced, earthly partitioning by God's minister, Fortune, who acts on God's behalf. For this sin, they are eternally damned to roll huge weights with their chests in opposite directions around the circle until they meet and clash at mid-point. Then, they turn around and traverse the circle until they crash again (VII 27-29). The incomplete, semi-circular motion of the avaricious and prodigal sinners in the Fourth Circle contrasts with the complete, circular motion of the Wheel of Fortune (Notes VII 96). Thus, the sinners' movements can be likened to an inoperative sphere of Fortune.

As Fortune is the commissioned minister of God, sinners who disobey the natural partitioning of Fortune through the exercising of avaricious and prodigal qualities are punished for disobeying the will of God. As opposed to the conflict between Michael and Pluto, which occurs in Heaven, the conflict between Fortune and the Avaricious and Prodigal sinners of the Fourth Circle

occurs on Earth. With the empyrean conflict and its counterpart sublunary conflict established, the rest of Dante's Canto VII can be analyzed in light of its contribution to this allegory, starting first with Plutus' liminal position between the Third and Fourth Circle in the Inferno. While Plutus clearly exemplifies avarice and prodigality, he remains physically and spatially detached from avaricious and prodigal sinners of the Fourth Circle. This is evidenced by Dante's and Virgil's sight of Plutus in Canto VI, as they reach the "...point that marks the downward slope" (VI 114) to the Fourth Circle. Dante clarifies that it is only after Virgil verbally defeated Plutus that they "...made [their] way down to the fourth ditch" (VII 16). Therefore, it is clear to readers that Plutus occupies a liminal space somewhere between the Third and Fourth Circle.

Plutus is in indirect conflict with both Michael and Fortune in Canto VII and so Dante places him on the boundary of the Fourth Circle, where he oversees and is responsible for the sinners, yet does not exercise direct control over them. Perhaps this is because he does not force his avaricious and prodigal qualities upon the sinners, but they instead choose these qualities due to the perversion of their free wills toward sin. Additionally, given that Plutus is in direct conflict with Virgil in Hell, indirect conflict with Fortune on Earth, and indirect conflict with Michael in Heaven, his position in the universe is nebulous. Thus, it is logical that Dante place Plutus in a non-defined position on the border of the ring where avaricious and prodigal sinners are punished. Plutus' liminal position between the Third and Fourth Circle is the physical representation of his indirect responsibility for the Fourth Circle sinners and also of his imprecise position in the universe.

Dante portrays the sins of avarice and prodigality as uniquely reprehensible crimes in order to communicate to readers that the disruption of Fortune's divinely ordered partitioning is a direct offense to God. Dante communicates this through a uniquely animalistic characterization and an unusually severe punishment for Fourth Circle sinners. The Fourth Circle of Canto VII is one of the only circles in the Inferno where no sinners are identified by name (VII 53-54) and in a poem where individual storytelling is paramount, this is a most degrading punishment. It is seemingly incongruous that sinners in the Fourth Circle should lose their identities as a form of punishment while the worst sinners of the Ninth Circle, Fourth Ring- Judas, Brutus, and Cassius- maintain theirs (XXXIV 62-67). While this may be the case because these Fourth Circle sinners are "...popes and cardinals" (VII 47), according to Virgil, and thus sinned while in a position of ecclesiastical authority, it is still odd that the avaricious and prodigal sinners would receive certain punishments that more sinful members of lower circles avoid. Thus, it is evident that Dante especially wishes to condemn the avaricious and prodigal sins of the Fourth Circle sinners.

Additionally, while the avaricious and prodigal sinners roll the huge weights in an incomplete, semicircular motion, Dante notes that, "...their howls were loud" (VII 26). While this wolf-like howling likens the sinners to Plutus, who Virgil labels a "...cursed wolf" (VII 8), it also relates them to the "...she-wolf..." (I 49) of Canto I. This she-wolf represents avarice or cupidity (Notes I 31-60), which is the sin for which the Fourth Circle sinners are punished in Canto VII. In Canto I, Dante's sight of the she-wolf forces him to abandon hope (I 52) and, thus, it is evident that the avaricious and prodigal sins of the

Fourth Circle are some of the most abhorrent and terrifying sins in the eyes of Dante.

The structure of the cantos surrounding Canto VII also reinforces this notion, as Dante dedicates more lines in Canto VI and VII to detailing the descent between the Third and Fourth Circle (VI 112 to VII 18) than in any previous cantos of the *Inferno*. Then, Dante dedicates the latter portion of Canto VII to detailing the descent between the Fourth and Fifth Circle (VII 97 to VII 130). Dante wishes to force the reader's attention to the descent in order to highlight the heinous nature of the lower sins and also to draw attention to the human tendency to only notice our participation in more detestable sins (Circles 4 and 5), while being less conscious of the minor sins we commit (Circles 1 to 3). It appears that Dante wishes to label the Fourth Circle as the most abominable Circle of the *Inferno* thus far through this structural feature, the relation of avaricious and prodigal sinners to the she-wolf of Canto I, and the cruel lack of identity for sinners. Dante goes to great lengths prior to and throughout Canto VII to demarcate and distinguish this canto from others in the *Inferno*.

The first striking feature of Canto VII is Plutus' untranslatable invocation to Satan in line 1: "Pape Satán, pape Satán aleppe!" (VII 1). Regardless of what possible interpretations it may have, this uncanny line certainly marks Plutus as a character worthy of attention by readers. Dante wishes to draw additional attention to the transient and ostensibly powerless character of Plutus because his indirect role in the empyrean and sublunary conflicts of Canto VII are representative of the grand notion of God's victory over evil in Heaven, Earth, and Hell. Virgil's allusion to Michael indirectly defeats Plutus <https://assignbuster.com/a-close-reading-and-literary-interpretation-of-canto-vii/>

through Plutus' conflation with Pluto, and represents God's absolute victory over evil in Heaven. Fortune's indirect victory over Plutus, through God's punishment of the Fourth Circle sinners who defied Fortune with the avaricious and prodigal sins embodied by Plutus, represents God's victory over evil on Earth. Finally, and most obviously, Virgil's verbal defeat of Plutus is the direct and explicit victory over Plutus in the Inferno, and represents God's victory over evil in Hell. Dante places Plutus in a liminal position on the boundary of the Third and Fourth Circle due to his nebulous position in the universe, as he opposes God from all three realms.

Although, this is not at all inconsistent with the Bible, as the Book of Revelation says, "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the Devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him" (Rev. 12: 9). In the context of Dante's Canto VII and the sins of the Fourth Circle sinners, this may be interpreted as Pluto being forced out of Heaven by Michael and then occupying the Earth with his demon Plutus, who indirectly leads humans to disobey Fortune through avaricious and prodigal sins. Dante considers these sins to be some of the most detestable sins and, thus, they serve as the epitome of evil. Later, "...the Devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur (Hell)" (Rev. 20: 10). It is in this domain, in Hell, where Virgil verbally defeats Plutus. Therefore, in Canto VII of the Inferno, Dante composes the story of the conflict between God and evil in all levels of the universe, from Heaven, to Earth, to Hell. Through Virgil's effortless victory over Plutus in Canto VII, Dante draws readers' attention to God's past victories over evil in Heaven and Earth, and then defeats him once more in Hell. Thus, Canto VII

can be viewed as a sort of addendum to the Bible, communicating Dante's expectation of God's absolute and eternal triumph over evil in all domains.

[1] Alighieri, Dante, and Allen Mandelbaum. *Inferno*. Toronto: Bantam Classics, 1982. Print. VII 1 [2] Coogan, Michael David, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. Print. Revelation 12: 7-8