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“PUNISHED IN THE SHAPE HE SINNED”: SIN AS SELF-PUNISHING IN DANTE AND
MILTON

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the question of punishment as seen in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Milton's conception of punishment was heavily influenced by Dante's medieval epic, *The Divine Comedy*. The connection between the two works, while recognizable, can often be quite puzzling. Further research demonstrates how Milton expertly incorporates Dante's *Comedia* into his own while also substantiating that influence within Milton's epic.

To Laura Knoppers, for all the hours of guidance
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In the opening invocation to his epic, *Paradise Lost*,¹ John Milton asserts the aim of the poem to “justify the ways of God to men” (*PL* I.26). The “ways” to which Milton is referring are God’s punishments of mankind and of Satan as a result of their disobedience for which each will lose his paradise. The importance that Milton places on understanding these punishments then begs the reader to ask the question: how is it that Milton has come to understand God’s punishments? It is necessary to then look to Milton’s sources for understanding punishment; they are so important because little exists in the Genesis account of the event. In order to understand Milton’s version of the punishment, it is essential for one to be familiar with the first canticle of Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy*, the *Inferno*,² because of the profound influence that this medieval epic had on Milton’s writing.

Literary scholars have recognized for some time the influence that the Florentine poet had on the imagery of *Paradise Lost*. In many cases, the correlation is unmistakable. As early as 1898, Oscar Kuhns documented several instances of allusion in *Paradise Lost* to Dante’s earlier epic. One of these examples can be seen in the punishment of Satan. He notes that “In the change of the fallen angels to snakes in Book X, of course, Milton found the first suggestion in Ovid, but the language used seems to point to some influence on the part of Dante also” (Kuhns 9).³ By incorporating this type of punishment for Satan into his epic, Milton is, by extension, also adopting the reasoning of that punishment into his own interpretation of Genesis.

¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). All further references will use this edition.

² Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). All further references will use this edition.

³ Dante, parodying Ovid, boasts in his text that the transformations his souls undergo are something beyond what Ovid could have conceived. Dante makes references to *Metamorphosis* IX where Ovid tells the story of Byblis and Caunus: “So Byblis, Phoebus’ grandchild, was consumed by her own tears and changed into a fountain” (Ovid 219-21). He also references the story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus in the transformation of the thieves: “Their bodies were united and from being two persons they became one... so when their limbs met in the clinging embrace the nymph and the boy were no longer two, but a single form, possessed of a dual nature, which could not be called male or female, but seemed to be at once both and neither” (Ovid 103-104).

Yet the oddity of this scene makes it stand out amidst the other parts of Milton's poem. The style of punishment is very Dantesque because it so vividly details the physical transformation of Satan into the form of a serpent just as the thieves are transformed in Dante's Hell: "A monstrous serpent on his belly prone, / Reluctant, but in vain, a greater power / Now ruled him, punished in the shape he sinned" (*PL* X.514-16). Satan is punished as Dante's thieves for his deceit in the Fall of mankind which initially seems strange because of the dynamically different versions of Hell that each one creates. Dante's *Inferno* is heavily entrenched in a medieval world of physical punishment while Milton's Hell becomes a mobile state of mental torments.

Scholars have discussed the reasoning behind Milton's decision to punish Satan as he does. Irene Samuel points out that "Only Dante could have suggested to Milton the idea of having the scene represent the penalty exactly by divine justice—the criminal must go on being and doing involuntarily what he formerly was and did by choice" (112). In defining this connection between the two works, Samuel is referring to Dante's conception of *contrapasso* which would explain the actual mode of Satan's punishment, but not its appropriateness within *Paradise Lost*.

Milton adopts Dante's ideal of punishment into his own epic when he incorporates Dante's construction of punishment. Throughout the entire *Comedy*, Dante links each soul's position directly to his actions in life. Milton continues this tradition in *Paradise Lost*, most obviously in the scene of Satan's punishment which Samuel justifies in her essay, *The Valley of Serpents: Inferno XXIV-XXV and Paradise Lost X*: "Clearly Satan had chosen to descend into the serpent, had created a sham-serpent to deceive the mother of mankind, had feigned to have eaten of a sham-tree with magic fruit, the taste of which, he knew, would turn to dust and ashes in

Eve's mouth. Now he must be the serpent he then chose to be" (449). Yet, as we shall see, the punishment is fitting; it is not an anomalous Dantean moment but a scene for which Milton has carefully preparing his readers throughout the epic.

Given that the punishments that Satan suffers in *Paradise Lost* are both physical and mental, they might seem to differ from Dante's medieval interpretation of an eternal corporal suffering for one's sins, yet in her essay, *The Valley of Serpents*, Samuel writes that Milton's reference to Dante's serpents "may illuminate how fully Milton grasped Dante's meaning and how skillfully he himself infused comparable meaning into his comparable scene" (449). There is much more to Dante's scheme of *contrapasso* than mere physical torture. The specific reason for the differing punishments that Dante assigns to each sinner is based not on action, but on intention. Milton's scheme of punishment contains a seemingly much more mental component than does Dante's which is demonstrated in Satan's continual suffering even after leaving Hell.⁴ What becomes more evident after further consideration is that the two are much more similar than they first appear—Dante's Hell is not solely physical just as Milton's is not an entirely mental one, but each is a really a combination of the two—which make the connection between the two all the more appropriate.

⁴ "myself am Hell; / And in the lowest deep a lower deep / Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide, / To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n" (Milton IV.75-78).

Dante's Understanding of Punishment in the *Inferno*

Dante creates in his *Inferno* a complex hierarchy of graphic physical punishments that plague the afterlives of his sinners. His rendition of Hell works well within the medieval conception of physical punishment. The punishments in the *Inferno* also reveal the true nature of each sinner during his life. The punishments inflicted upon them are a physical manifestation of their crimes. By suiting each punishment to fit the individual sin of the sinner, Dante has created a clear system of punishment known as *contrapasso*. According to this system, the offense of each sinner directly correlates to the torments he experiences in Hell.

Dante demonstrates this structure repeatedly to his reader in each level of Hell. As Dante the pilgrim enters the third circle of the *Inferno*, he encounters Cerberus,⁵ the guardian of the gluttonous. Those punished in this part of Hell were incapable of controlling their appetites; Dante's choice to guard this level with a three-headed dog personifies the vice of these souls. Dante the pilgrim is only able to get past Cerberus when Virgil fills the dog's mouths with "food": "When Cerberus the great worm perceived us, he opened his mouths and showed his fangs; he was aquiver in every limb. And my leader, reaching out his open hands, took up earth, and with full fists threw it into the ravenous gullets" (*Inferno* 61).

The *contrapasso* that this group of sinners experiences is to lie in an "eternal, accursed, cold and heavy rain: its measure and its quality are never new" (*Inferno* 59). The constant, icy rain is meant to represent the insatiable indulgences of these souls. Just as the gluttons consumed everything in sight, so Cerberus gobbled the dirt that Virgil threw at him. His inability to control his appetite led him to devour soil. Likewise, when these souls overindulged in food or drink, it

⁵ In Greek mythology, Cerberus is the three-headed dog that guards the gates of Hades to prevent any souls from escaping once they have entered.

lost all taste to them. Food is good and necessary to the body, just as rain is necessary to the earth. When each is received in overabundance, it can no longer serve the positive purpose for which it was intended, but becomes a torment to whoever must endure it.

As Dante continues his travel through the Inferno, the punishments that he witnesses become increasingly more severe and more physically painful, but are always correlated to the offense. Dante sees in the first *bolgia* of the eighth circle those guilty of seduction and panderage. These souls are driven along in a line by demons. Here Dante introduces the reader to his former tutor, Brunetto Latino. Brunetto explains to Dante that “whoever of this flock stops even for an instant must then lie a hundred years without brushing off the fire when it strikes him” (*Inferno* 155). Men guilty of panderage would have been responsible for pushing others to fulfill their commands. These souls must never cease their march as the demons drive this train of souls from behind. Dante is showing the reader continually how, through *contrapasso*, the intention of the sin defines the punishment that is inflicted upon each sinner.

When Dante descends further into the eighth circle, where souls are punished for acts of fraud, he enters the realm of the simonists. For deceiving followers of the church, Dante condemns many important and powerful men to this area of Hell, including Pope Nicholas III. Dante sees the Pope and others flipped upside down in holes that resemble baptismal fonts which are filled with water, “from the mouth of each projected the feet of a sinner and his legs as far as the calf, and the rest was within. They all had both their soles on fire, because of which their joints were twitching so hard that they would have snapped ropes and withes” (*Inferno* 195). The horrific amount of pain that these souls must endure harkens well to a medieval style of graphic, physical punishment. These sinners were responsible for falsely purifying people of their sins which is, symbolically, the function of baptism—it is a washing away of past offenses.

Therefore, these souls are “drowned” by the symbol which represents the sin for which they are now condemned. Once again, Dante is continually reinforcing to his readers that the type of punishment meted out is determined by the sin itself. Dante shows how punishment is determined to fit the crime that it punishes.

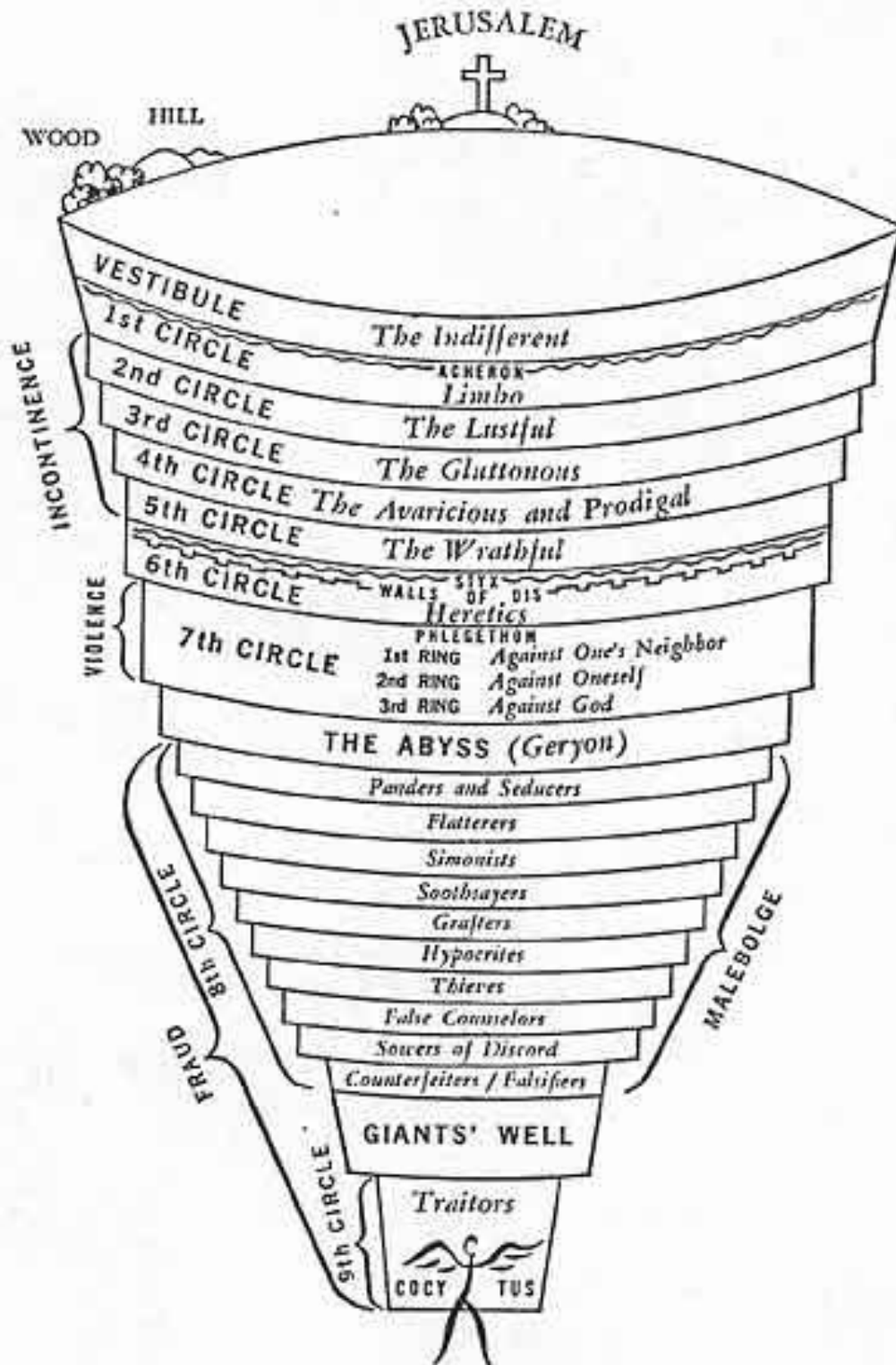
In the ninth bolgia of the eighth circle are those who created schisms, or divisions, during their lives. Because these sinners created divisions among people, their *contrapasso* is to have literal, physical divisions cut into their eternal bodies. Their punishment is one that they can never escape. The principal intention of these sinners in life was to create division, their eternity is perpetuated by physical division in themselves: “A devil is here behind that fashions us thus cruelly, putting again to the edge of the sword each of this throng when we have circles the doleful road; for the wounds are closed up before any of us pass again before him” (*Inferno* 295). The repetition of this punishment makes it truly terrible—their wounds are continually healing and reopening as the sinners travel around this realm of Hell.

It is later in this circle that Dante uses and defines his term *contrapasso* for the first time. As he and Virgil near the exit of the ninth *bolgia*, they meet Bertran de Born,⁶ a French poet, who Dante uses to explain his entire reasoning behind the punishments in the *Inferno*. De Born admits to Dante that, “to the young king gave the evil counsels. I made the father and the son rebel against each other” (*Inferno* 301). Like the other sinners in this circle, his body manifests physically the offense: “Because I parted persons thus united, I carry my brain parted from its source, alas! which is in this trunk. Thus is the retribution observed in me” (*Inferno* 303). In the Italian this line reads: “*Così s’osserva in me lo contrapasso*” which is translated to reflect

⁶ Bertran de Born lived in mid- to late-twelfth century France. He authored many poems including “Si tuit li dol” about the death of Prince Henry, the young prince who revolted against his father, King Henry II of England. There seems to be little documented evidence to Dante’s condemnation of de Born. It is because of the advice that he gives to the young Prince Henry that Dante punishes him with the sowers of discord (*Inferno* Vol. 2.521).

Dante's idea of one's punishment appropriate to one's violation (*Inferno* 302). Because a father is the head of his son, in a figurative sense, by giving unsound advice to the son, de Born separated the two from each other. His punishment is a literal representation of his figurative intention—his own head has been separated from his body.

Because sin punishes itself in the form that it was committed, it is only logical that each of the sinners that Dante encounters would be punished by exactly the means that they are. In each of the preceding examples, Dante shows his reader how different offenses justly receive different punishments. Once the reader understands Dante's concept of *contrapasso*, then the punishments in the *Inferno* make sense. And we would expect that all of those in the upper regions of Hell have committed sin of less consequence than those found in its lower regions.



Hell

Yet the structure of Dante's Hell is more elaborate and complex. What he shows to his reader is much more complicated than a hierarchy of souls with ever increasingly severe punishments. The judgments that Dante makes of the souls he shows in the Inferno demonstrate more than the differences among each sin; they are also a means of creating distinction among sinners. Further study of this complicated structure reveals the reasoning for Dante's organization of Hell in this manner: intention. The intention of the sinner is essential to determining where he will spend his afterlife. As it is the intention of each sinner that determines his placement within the structure of the Inferno, Dante has arranged each circle in a descending order so that the more severe offenses are deeper within the structure and, therefore, the farthest away from God. This construction reinforces the gravity of the sinner's intention as manifest by the sin itself. The intentions are so much more important than the sin because the physical punishments outwardly demonstrate the principal motive of each soul.

There are many in the Inferno who have committed similar crimes, but have been placed on different levels in Hell or even in Purgatory. This seems to contradict the idea of *contrapasso* on which Dante has based his entire system. Because sin is punished in a manner relating to the sin, it seems unjust for sinners who are guilty of similar crimes to be punished differently or not at all. Those who commit acts that could feasibly be punished on more than one level of Hell differ in motivation. It is these types of sins that make it even more puzzling to the reader how Dante determined where certain souls should be placed. Yet while the sins may seem similar, the motivations of the sinners often differ dramatically, thus relegating them to the various circles and *malebolge* of Hell. For example, the wrathful and the violent, in many ways, commit quite analogous sins. The reason that some are placed in the fifth circle while others are in the seventh is because of their intentions. The wrathful are those who are unable to control their anger. Dante

the pilgrim meets one of these souls as he and Virgil cross the River Styx in which the wrathful are punished. Dante's curiosity and eagerness to find souls he may know frames his meeting with Filippo Argenti.⁷ Dante recognizes this soul as a Florentine known for his anger, who responds to Dante: "In weeping and in sorrow do you remain, accursed spirit, for I know you, even if you are filthy" (*Inferno* 81). Characteristic of this circle, Filippo responds with irrational emotion; he is unable to control his anger. His punishment in the *Inferno* is a continued representation of his actions in life which were unrestrained moments of volatile anger: "Indignant soul, blessed is she who bore you! He was an arrogant one in the world. No goodness whatever adorns his memory; so is his shade furious here" (*Inferno* 81). The *contrapasso* of Filippo is based on his irrational outbursts of anger which makes clear both the placement and punishment of his soul.

Those who are condemned to the circle of wrath are put there because they are unable to control the anger that they feel inside them, but those who commit acts of violence worthy of the seventh circle have committed carefully planned violent actions for which they are eternally punished. Those in this circle are separated according to the object of their violence—against neighbor, against self, or against God—and their punishments vary accordingly to suit each offense. What they share in common is the premeditation behind their acts. As Dante journeys through the seventh circle, he first sees Azzolino,⁸ a tyrant who terrorized countless subjects during his reign, in the first ring of the seventh circle. His punishment is to boil in a river of blood from which he can never seek relief: "Around the ditch [the demons] go by the thousands, piercing with arrow whatever spirit lifts itself out of the blood more than its guilt has allotted to

⁷ According to Singleton, Argenti was a wealthy knight known to shoe his horses' hooves with silver. He was therefore nicknamed argenti which means silver in Italian (*Inferno* Vol. II.125).

⁸ "he did away with large numbers of the citizens of Padua, and he put out the eyes of even the best and most noble in great numbers, depriving them of their possessions and sending them begging through the world. He caused many others to die by various tortures and torments and at one time had eleven thousand Paduans burned ... and under the pretext of a rough and wicked justice, he did much evil" (*Inferno* Vol. II.199).

it” (*Inferno* 123). In the second ring, Dante speaks with Piere delle Vigne who says, “My mind, in scornful temper, thinking by dying to escape from scorn, made me unjust my just self” (*Inferno* 133). His act of violence, suicide, is certainly one that could not have been committed without forethought. For this, delle Vigne has been transformed into a tree that, when Dante breaks off a branch, bleeds. And finally, in the third ring, Dante encounters the souls who were violent against God. Capaneus—“one of the seven kings who besieged Thebes, and held, and seems to hold, God in disdain and praise him little”—was a man who, even in the moment of his death, did not cry out to God, but instead to Vulcan⁹ to save him (*Inferno* 145). For this he lies prone on burning sand with flakes of fire raining down on him. While both the wrathful and those in the circle of violence are guilty of harmful actions, the intention behind these actions is drastically different. Filippo’s attempt to flip Dante’s boat was an irrational reaction that manifests itself as an angry reflex to Dante’s calling him filthy. This is very unlike Azzolino, who tortured and killed thousands of his own people under the pretext of justice. The intention of these sinners is different even though the outcome of their sins can be seen as very similar—in both cases others are harmed as a result of one man’s actions.

The importance of intention becomes explicitly clear to Dante in the *bolgia* of the fraudulent counselors which is where Dante exemplifies the difference between the intentions and the actions of each sinner; he does this through the life of Guido da Montefeltro. Guido was an excellent military strategist, but as he neared the end of his life, he repented of his sins and joined a monastery: “When I saw myself come to that part of my life when every man should lower the sails and coil up the ropes, that which before had pleased me grieved me then, and with repentance and confession I turned friar, and –woe is me!—it would have availed” (*Inferno* 289). Guido had changed the intention of his life from one of military conquest to one dedicated to the

⁹ Vulcan was the god of fire and the patron of metalwork and crafts in Roman mythology

church. He later turned his life away from dedication to God. After Guido's initial repentance, Pope Boniface solicited his advice on the battlefield—advice which broke the vows Guido took upon entering the monastery. In giving advice to the Pope, Guido revoked his act of repentance despite his intention to later repent of this sin: “Then, when I died, Francis came for me; but one of the black Cherubim said to him, ‘Do not take him, wrong me not! He must come down among my minions because he gave fraudulent counsel since which till now I have been at his hair; for he who repents not cannot be absolved, nor is it possible to repent of a thing and to will it at the same time, for the contradiction does not allow it’” (*Inferno* 291). For this act, Guido, like the rest of the fraudulent councilors, was condemned to this region of Hell where his body was consumed by a flame, and his ability to speak, the mode by which his sin was perpetrated, was taken from him.

Dante continues his focus on the intention through *Purgatorio*.¹⁰ The critical difference between the souls who are damned and those that will one day reach Paradise is repentance. This singular act, for Dante, demonstrates a shift in the intention of the sinner. In Anti-purgatory,¹¹ Dante meets a soul called Manfred who exemplifies to Dante, and his readers, the particular importance that is placed on the act of repentance: “After I had my body pierced by two mortal stabs I gave myself weeping to Him who pardons willingly; horrible were my sins, but the Infinite Goodness has such wide arms that It receives all who turn to It” (*Purgatorio* 31). Manfred admits that he is guilty of terrible sins against God, but he has been given this opportunity in Purgatory based solely on his repentance done moments before his death. It is clear that this sinner is responsible for many of the transgressions for which others are punished

¹⁰ Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). All further references will use this edition.

¹¹ Anti-purgatory is the area right outside of Purgatory that is reserved for the late-repentant souls. Dependent on the soul, each spends a pre-determined amount of time here before he is allowed to enter Purgatory proper and begin atoning for his sins.

in Hell; it is also clear then that the only difference between Manfred and the damned souls is the act of repentance.

Dante meets a second soul, Buonconte da Montefeltro, in Anti-purgatory who also embodies the importance of repentance in the destiny of the soul. He is the son of Guido da Montefeltro who is one of the souls Dante met in the circle of the fraudulent counselors. Like his father, Buonconte is guilty of sins worthy of the Inferno. At the moment of his death, he also is visited by two angels, but unlike his father, Buonconte is not taken to Hell because he was remorseful of his actions in the moments before he died: “The Angel of God took me, and he from Hell cried, ‘O you from Heaven, why do you rob me? You carry off with you the eternal part of him for one little tear which takes him from me’” (*Purgatorio* 51). Aside from that final moment of regret, Buonconte had lived a life more terrible than that of his father, but he was not barred from Purgatory because of these crimes. Nor would his father be denied admittance had he shown the same attitude of remorse.

Dante has created in the *Inferno* an organization of punishment that is much more complex and meaningful than it may first appear. He associates the suffering each soul directly to the offense for which that soul was damned. Then, he incorporates into each punishment, the intention of each soul; it is this that places these souls in the Inferno rather than elsewhere in the afterworld. Inherent in Dante’s unique system of *contrapasso* is the motive of the sinner to commit the sin which then justifies his eternal physical state. Only through repentance then is a man able to escape from the eternal tortures that Dante has prescribed for him in Hell.

Milton's Scheme of Punishment in *Paradise Lost*

Milton creates a version of punishment that is seemingly quite different from the one that we see in Dante's *Inferno*. *Paradise Lost* begins after Satan has revolted against God and has been damned to Hell. At this point, he is already experiencing a portion of God's punishment, one that appears quite different from what Dante illustrates. This is due, in part, to the very distinct versions of Hell that Milton and Dante create. While the Hell of Dante's *Inferno* is a carefully organized hierarchy, the Hell of *Paradise Lost* has only just been created. There are not yet any human souls to inhabit this place because mankind has not yet been created or disobeyed God's commandments. In Milton's Hell, there are no circles or punishments described. Instead, Milton introduces his reader to Hell just after the Fall; it holds only Satan and the fallen angels who are still reeling from the War in Heaven: "To mortal men, he with his horrid crew / Lay vanquished, rolling in a fiery gulf" (*PL* I.51-2). While Milton does expand punishment to include mental sufferings, his Hell is initially quite physical. In Book I of *Paradise Lost*, the reader is shown Satan and the fallen angels suffering in a very physical Hell of pain, fire, and sadness:

No light, but rather darkness visible
Served only to discover sights of woe,
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
That comes at all; but torture without end
Still urges, and a fiery deluge, fed
With ever burning sulphur unconsumed

(*PL* I.63-9)

Satan seems to think, however, that his fall—and Hell—are purely physical, and that by his will, his mind will be able to overcome them. For "the mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of hell a hell of heaven" (*PL* I.254-5). What he fails to understand is that Hell is more than just a place of physical pain. Satan thinks that, because of the dissatisfaction he felt in

Heaven, he can create Hell to be his new sanctuary simply by willing it to be so. Satan sees himself ruling this new realm with power and authority just as God rules in Heaven.

The punishments, however, that Milton's God inflicts on Satan can be experienced both inside and outside of Hell because of the nature of the punishments themselves. Not only is he damned to eternal torment, but he is also damned to acknowledge his inferiority. What compounds Satan's punishment in Hell is also his defeat by God, as Beelzebub comments:

But what if he our conqueror (whom I now
Of force believe almighty, since no less
Than such could have o'erpowered such a force as ours)
Have left was this our spirit and strength entire
Strongly to suffer and support our pains,
That we may suffice his vengeful ire,
Or do him mightier service as his thralls
By right of war, whate'er his business be
Here in the heart of hell to work in fire,
Of do his errands in the gloomy deep;
What can it then avail though yet we feel
Strength undiminished, or eternal being
To undergo eternal punishment?

(*PL* I.143-55)

God does not take away from Satan his pride or ambition to be great when he damns him to Hell; these, combined with physical suffering, comprise his punishment in Book 1. It is Satan's pride that keeps driving him into acts of self-destruction. In Hell, Satan has been forced to recognize God's omnipotence over himself. For Satan, motivated by his desire to usurp God's position in Heaven, to be forced into a position of conscious subjugation for all eternity makes the physical torments he experiences in Hell much more terrible. It is these aspects of Satan's punishment that make it impossible for him to leave his punishments behind him in Hell.

Satan's inability to curb his own ambition continues to drive him toward his own destruction. He is, effectively, creating his own punishment because of his failure to change his direction:

Deep scars of thunder had intrenched and care
Sat on his faded cheek, but under brows
Of dauntless courage, and considerate pride
Waiting revenge: cruel his eye, but cast
Signs of remorse and passion to behold
The fellows of his crime, the followers rather
(Far other once beheld in bliss) condemned
Forever now to have their lot in pain

(*PL* I.601-8)

In this passage, the reader glimpses a moment of remorse in the character of Satan. He seems to be on the verge on repentance; he acknowledges how his actions are responsible for the destruction of the other angels and of mankind and seems regretful of the decision he has made—but the pride which pushes him on toward his objective of revenge will not allow him to waver. The ambition that Satan exemplifies has become an impediment to his redemption rather than a tool to make him great.

Milton continues to illustrate for his readers the role that the mind plays in one's punishment as Satan and the other fallen angels discuss their course of action after their fall. His sin was caused by his perception that God treated them unjustly in Heaven—that God did not allow Satan to have the full reign of power that Satan felt he should have—so he resolves to seek revenge against God for this injustice by deceiving mankind, whom God:

Intended to create, and therein plant
A generation, whom his choice regard
Should favour equal to the sons of heaven:
Thither, if but to pry, shall be perhaps
Our first eruption, thither or elsewhere:
For this infernal pit shall never hold
Celestial spirits in bondage, nor the abyss
Long under darkness cover. But these thoughts

Full counsel must mature: peace is despaired,
For who can think of submission?

(PL I.652-61)

Satan is persuading the others in Hell that his plan of revenge is worth pursuing. He urges the fallen angels to not accept their punishment in Hell, but to fight back. Satan calls on the other fallen angels to evade God's omnipotence by retaliating in another way—through the destruction of mankind. Satan's desire to defeat God's power has made him incapable of seeing any other solution to his present state. His pride will not allow him to submit to God's will or to repent from the actions he has taken thus far.

Near the opening of Book IV, after Satan argues the necessity of deceiving mankind, he breaks out of Hell and finds himself on top of a mountain in the sunlight:

to thee I call,
But with no friendly voice, and add thy name
O sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams
That bring to my remembrance from what state
I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere;
Till pride and worse ambition threw me down

(PL IV. 35-40)

Satan is again showing for the reader the type of mental punishment that Milton has created in *Paradise Lost*. Before the War in Heaven, Satan was the most powerful and beautiful of all the angels, but rather than thanking God for his great blessing, Lucifer,¹² now Satan, wanted more than what he had been given.¹³ After his fall, Satan found himself incapable of being in the presence of light because it was another reminder of what he once was. Therefore,

¹² In Latin, Lucifer is the name of Venus or the Morning Star which is why he is so often associated with light.

¹³ Satan is described in the Bible as: "How you have fallen from heaven, / O morning star, son of dawn! / You have been cast down to the earth, / you who once laid low the nations! / You said in your heart, / 'I will ascend to heaven; / I will raise my throne / above the stars of God; / I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, / on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. / I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; / I will make myself like the Most High.' / But you are brought down to the grave, / to the depths of the pit" (Isaiah 14:12-15).

when Satan sees light, it makes him feel not better but worse because the light represents the position in Heaven that he had forsaken in favor of his ambition.

Now that he is out of Hell, Satan's punishment has created a Hell within his mind. Satan made the mistake of thinking that Hell is only a place that could be overcome mentally: "To reign is worth ambition though in hell: / Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven" (*PL* 1.262-3). But when Satan feels the light of the sun, he is reminded of the glory in Heaven. Even though Satan has escaped from the physical Hell, his mind and memories continue to torment him, turning light itself into a version of Hell by reminding him of what he had lost. He acknowledges that it is his pride that has led him to this point, but he is still unable to stop himself from continuing his revenge, even as he remembers "from what state/ I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere; / Till pride and worse ambition threw me down / Warring in heaven against heaven's matchless king" (*PL* IV.38-41). Though Satan is not in Hell proper throughout most of Milton's epic, his punishments continue to torment him. In showing a system of punishment such as this, Milton is strongly emphasizing the power of the individual mind in each one's after life. In the preceding lines, Satan's punishment is to be in the presence of the light. This punishment is directly related to who he was previously within the grace of God. He was once God's light, his Morning Star, but now, as punishment, he is tormented by the rays of the sun. In a very Dantean way, the position that Satan held while in Heaven has now become the vehicle for his eternal punishment.

After effectively acknowledging his defeat, Satan continues into the Garden in search of mankind because he cannot stop himself from warring against God. He considers repentance, but knows it would fail:

But say I could repent and could obtain
By act of grace my former state; how soon

Would height recall high thoughts, how soon unsay
What feigned submission swore

(*PL IV.92-5*)

Even if God were to grant him grace, Satan knows that he would make the same choice again.

His ambition has become his punishment. After this realization, Satan finds Adam and Eve enjoying the Garden and their communion with God. For Satan, driven to take man's happiness,

Adam and Eve are:

Sight hateful, sight tormenting! thus these two
Emparadised in one another's arms
The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill
Of bliss on bliss, while I to hell am thrust,
Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,
Among our other torments not the least

(*PL IV.505-10*)

The sight of Adam and Eve experiencing happiness in the Garden is unbearable for Satan to witness. It makes him even more miserable than he had been to know that others still felt the blessings of God when these blessings had been denied to him. Upon seeing Adam and Eve experiencing earthly paradise, Satan is once again reminded of what he lost because of his rebellion in Heaven, but the bit of remorse that he feels in this moment is not enough to dissuade him from continuing in his sin.

Once Satan has entered Eden, seen Adam and Eve, and, again, fortified his resolve to seek revenge, he is compelled by his ambition to continue his plan of deception. He then embodies the serpent in order to trick Eve into disobeying God's commandment, lamenting:

that who erst contended
With gods to sit the highest, and am now constrained
Into a beast, and mixed with bestial slime,
This essence to incarnate and imbrute,
That to the height of deity aspired;
But what will not ambition and revenge
Descend to?

(*PL IX.163-9*)

To take on the form of a serpent would be a humiliating action for Satan who had once been one of the most blessed angels in all of Heaven. At that moment, he had sunk so far in his pursuit of omnipotence that he now had taken on the identity of one of earth's most lowly creatures when he had been to be one of the most lofty.

For Milton, then, to punish Satan by the manner in which he does—to transform him into the form of a serpent—is a profound demonstration of Dante's conception of *contrapasso*. Satan possesses the body of a serpent in order to steal happiness and paradise from mankind. Satan's pride and ambition are the motivation behind his act of deception. He intentionally commits this sin, knowing the consequence would be a continued and eternal estrangement from his former place in Heaven. Satan—"punished in the shape he sinned"—demonstrates perfectly how sin is directly correlated to the punishment received. Just as each of the sinners in the Inferno was punished by a means which represented his sin in a physical sense, so also is Satan punished in a manner related to his sin.

The Issue of Repentance in Paradise Lost

Despite how differently it appears that Dante and Milton depict the role of punishment in the afterlife of the sinner, the two are actually quite similar. Dante's punishments in the *Inferno* are more than just physical tortures conceived to frighten the readers of late-medieval Italy into submission to the Church. Nor does Milton create a version of punishment that is wholly separated from the physical torments seen in the *Inferno*. Dante's epic is strongly characterized by the thoughts, pre-meditations and intentions of each sinner; likewise, Milton incorporates physical suffering along with mental punishments throughout his epic. Milton utilizes Dante's scheme of *contrapasso* as the means by which the characters of *Paradise Lost* are punished. The importance of the sinner's intention in *contrapasso* is then demonstrated in the sinner's final punishment. This scheme of punishment then justifies the difference in the punishments suffered by Satan and by Adam and Eve. Initially, it seems unfair that Adam and Eve would be given the opportunity to repent of their sins while Satan is not. Each one consciously and calculatedly disobeyed God. They differ, however, quite drastically in their intentions. It is this difference that explains, and justifies, the dramatic difference in their punishments.

Satan chose to take on the form of a serpent so that he could trick Eve into eating the fruit; therefore, the Dantean punishment that Milton later inflicts on Satan is an incorporation of his intention and the means affected by Satan to achieve his ends:

A monstrous serpent on his belly prone,
Reluctant, but in vain, a greater power
Now ruled him, punished in the shape he sinned
According to his doom

(*PL* X.514-17)

Satan's punishment is fitting because of the motivation behind his sin—like a thief, he wanted to take from man something that did not belong to him (man's happiness). The manner that he employed to achieve his goal was then incorporated into his punishment as a physical manifestation of his intention. While Milton's use of Dante may seem unusual, it quite accurately speaks to the character and motivation of Satan's sin.

Once Satan had made the decision to rebel against God, his fate was then finalized. At that moment, Satan was no longer able to repent because of his pride and ambition. These vices caused him to tempt himself into rebellion against God and the deception of mankind. Satan's purpose in the Garden was to achieve his revenge against God by causing the eternal damnation of others to find mankind and "Seduce them to our party, that God / May prove their foe, and with repenting hand / Abolish his own works" (*PL* II. 368-71). Satan's intention to knowingly take from Adam and Eve their place in Paradise was a very different sin than Eve's disobedience by eating the fruit. The disparity in the objective behind the actions of each sinner clarifies the difference in the severity, and appropriateness, of the punishments received by Satan and by Adam and Eve.

Eve's sin is based on her feelings of vanity, and her dissatisfaction with the gender hierarchy between her and Adam. Satan, knowing Eve's weakness, purposefully uses that to tempt her to eat the fruit:

Fairest resemblance of thy maker fair,
Thee all things living on, all things thine
By gift, and thy celestial beauty adore
With ravishment beheld, there best beheld
Where universally admired; but here
In this enclosure wild, these beasts among,
Beholders rude, and shallow to discern
Half what in thee is fair, one man except,
Who sees thee? (and what is one?) who shouldst be seen
A goddess among gods, adored and served

By angels numberless, thy daily train.

(*PL IX.538-48*)

Satan flatters Eve in order to persuade her to disobey God's commandment. Satan easily uses her weakness to his advantage because he so readily understands the feeling—he also felt dissatisfied with his place in the hierarchy. He very craftily uses Eve's weakness to his advantage so that God's new creations would be destroyed.

Eve has been warned that to eat the fruit is to die.¹⁴ But in the moment when Satan is tempting her, Eve chooses to rely on her own knowledge and reasoning rather than obeying what she had been commanded to do by God:

what forbids he but to know,
Forbids us good, forbids us to be wise?

...

What fear I then, rather what know to fear
Under this ignorance of good and evil,
Of God or death, of law or penalty?

(*PL IX.758-9 / 773-5*)

Deceived by the serpent, Eve believes her understanding is greater than God's; she then is able to justify eating the fruit. The serpent tells her that to eat the fruit will make her more like God in knowledge and reason—attributes which Eve already desired. Eve knows that the sin requires punishment by death, but she chooses to disobey God's commandment in favor of becoming more god-like herself. This thought process is very reminiscent of Satan's rebellion in Heaven. But unlike Satan, Eve is tricked into committing her sin while Satan caused his own sin through self-temptation.

¹⁴ “By the tree whose operation bring / Knowledge of good and ill, which I have set / The pledge of thy obedience and thy faith, / Amid the garden by the tree of life, / Remember what I warn thee, shun to taste, / And shun the bitter consequence: for know, / The day thou eat'st thereof, my sole command / Transgressed, inevitably thou shalt die” (*PL VIII.323-30*).

Adam's sin is the result of a different intention than Eve's is which then explains the appropriateness of his different punishment. Adam, like Eve, is given the opportunity to repent because he was tempted to commit his sin by another:

Some cursed fraud
Of enemy hath beguiled thee, yet unknown,
And me with thee hath ruined, for with thee
Certain my resolution is to die;
How can I live without thee

(*PL IX.904-8*)

Adam sinned because he knew that Eve's sin had separated the two of them. By eating the fruit, Adam did not desire to make himself greater or more like a god, but Adam choose Eve as more important than following the commandment God gave him. Adam knew that eating the fruit would make him die, but he reasoned that death with Eve was more desirable than life without her: "Against his better knowledge, not deceived, / But fondly overcome with female charm" (*PL IX.998-9*).

Aside from the physical punishments that Adam and Eve must endure, they too experience a mental, self-inflicted aspect of punishment like Satan does. Even before they have been judged by God for their disobedience, Adam and Eve feel ashamed: "I heard thee in the garden, and of they voice / Afraid, being naked, hid myself" (*PL X.116-17*). They punish themselves for their actions before God does. Their punishment includes the physical difficulties they will now experience, the earthly death they will now endure, but also the knowledge that they have sinned.

Adam and Eve, unlike Satan, were given the opportunity to repent of their sins even though their sins were different. Satan's purpose was much graver than that of Adam or Eve. Like those who Dante places deeper in the Inferno, Satan's deception required premeditation and

fraud to accomplish. Satan also betrayed God and his new creation when he seduced Eve into eating the fruit. Satan took on the form of one of God's creatures, a serpent, and employed deceit and flattery to persuade Eve to ignore what God had specifically told her not to do. She did not seek to intentionally bring harm to others; instead, she was tempted by the image of making herself like God. The critical difference between Satan's, Adam's and Eve's sin is that Satan was the initiator of his own sin while Adam and Eve were tempted to commit theirs. The difference in motivation explains how the eternal fate of each one varies so drastically.

For both Dante and Milton, the sinner is only granted admittance into Heaven through repentance. In *Anti-purgatory*, Manfred explains to Dante that it is only through repentance that any soul is permitted to enter Purgatory: "After I had my body lacerated by these two mortal stabs, I gave myself weeping to Him, who willingly doth pardon. Horrible my iniquities had been; but Infinite Goodness hath such ample arms that it receives whatever turns to it" (*Purgatorio* 31). According to Dante, after repentance, each soul must ascend through a series of purgations in order to purify his eternal soul. In Purgatory, the souls work out their purification by completing penances that are counter to the sins they committed in life. This is much different than the souls that the pilgrim Dante and his guide, Virgil, met as they travel through the *Inferno*. While the intentions and the sins became the means of punishment for those in the *Inferno*, in Purgatory, the souls carry out the opposite of their former vices as a means of purifying themselves. This process alone makes it possible for each one to purify his soul and then to enter into Paradise.

Milton also requires the repentance of Adam and Eve in order that they achieve Paradise, but the plan that God lays out does not include purgation in the way that Dante shows it—primarily because the Protestant belief system excludes the existence of Purgatory. Adam and

Eve seemingly work out their penance through their punishments on Earth. According to Protestantism, once a man dies, if he had truly repented, he will proceed directly to Heaven for all eternity. God explains salvation for mankind as:

The law of God exact he shall fulfill
Both by obedience and by love, though love
Alone fulfil the law; thy punishment
He shall endure by coming in the flesh
To a reproachful life and cursèd death,
Proclaiming life to all who shall believe
In his redemption, and that his obedience
Imputed becomes theirs by faith, his merits
To save them, not their own, though legal works

(PL XII.402-410)

According to this plan, it is through the sacrifice of Christ alone that anyone will be permitted to enter Heaven. As God promised to Adam and Eve in the Garden, the punishment of sin is death which therefore makes Christ's death necessary so that each sinner may be redeemed. The turmoil that Adam and Eve, and subsequently mankind, experience on Earth is the result of the Fall and their exclusion from the earthly Paradise, the Garden of Eden. Once a man repents and dies a physical death, his soul will be taken directly to Heaven, according to Milton's understanding. The death of Christ is enough, according to Protestant interpretation, to atone for the payment of death that God requires for sin while the Catholic belief system requires each soul to purify itself in a more physical way before it is able to enter Heaven.

Conclusion

Milton's incorporation of Dante's text into his own epic, as we have seen, has been quite recognizable, but the justification of that use may not have been quite as obvious. The scene of Satan's punishment is one that has particularly puzzled scholars and readers because of the connection that Milton creates between Satan and the thieves of Dante's *Inferno*. Milton also expertly employs Dante's use of *contrapasso* throughout the epic. Only by understanding the importance that the sinner's intentions play in the punishment is it possible to understand the punishment itself. The idea of intention as the rationale for God's justice is one that Milton would have known due to his study of Dante. The intention of the sinner is so crucial because it alone reveals why the sin was committed which Dante demonstrates throughout every level of the *Inferno*. Milton does the same in *Paradise Lost*, as he said, "to justify the ways of God to men." It is a system of punishment based on intention that then provides an explanation, according to Milton, for the Fall. Milton clearly had a very deep understanding of Dante's text. This allowed him to incorporate such a seemingly physical system of punishment while still showing how well it fit with his design of an individualized, mental form of punishment. Despite the differences between the Catholic and Protestant understandings of the afterlife, Milton is able to effectively use Dante's interpretation of punishment to show his readers the perfection that exists within divine justice.

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