

Essay One

“Hell & Hades: Dante’s Appropriation of the Classical ”

Russell J Lowke, November 16th, 2001. (Undergraduate)

One of the greatest strengths of Roman civilization was the adaptation and modification of existing technologies and culture(s) to create something uniquely Roman. The epic poem of the founding of Rome, *The Aeneid*, is a classic example. In this saga, Virgil closely follows the tradition of epic Greek poetry championed by Homer. Virgil not only borrows from classical Greek tradition, but also incorporates Roman forms of thought (which are themselves derivatives of the Greek). Thirteen hundred years later, when Dante composed the *Inferno*, he appropriated Virgil's works in much the same way. In many respects, the end result is similar; both works are reliant on the legacy of the previous, Dante on Virgil, Virgil on Homer, both owing patrimony to the Greek. In the *Inferno*, Dante produces a solidified map of Christian Hell, a Hell whose geography and population shows a remarkable resemblance to the Greek and Roman Underworlds.

Christian Scriptures, although threatening damnation and stressing fear of God, rarely refer to Hell. In the ninety books of the Christian canon, there are only four instances where Hell is actually mentioned: "...fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell"¹, "...better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell, to the unquenchable fire."², "...cast them into hell and committed them to chains..."³, and "...so that your children may not see hell."⁴ Hell is described only as an "unquenchable fire;" moreover, this description is lacking in the best ancient authorities.⁵ None of these instances describe the geography of Hell at all. Satan, the lord of Hell, is sparsely mentioned, and is alternately referred to as the Devil, Lucifer⁶ or Beelzebub⁷. In fact, the name "Satan" is an English transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning simply

¹ Matthew.10.28

² Mark.9.43

³ 2nd Peter.2.4

⁴ 2nd Esdras.2.29

⁵ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible 3rd*, Ed. Michael D.Coogan, (New York: Oxford, 2001): 75 N.T.

⁶ Lucifer (Latin: Light bringer) drawn from a Canaanite myth of the gods Helel, the morning star (planet Venus at dawn), and Shahar, dawn, who fall from heaven as the result of rebellion. see *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*: 999 H.B.

⁷ Beelzebub derives from Beelzebul, originally a title of the Canaanite deity Baal. see *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*: 22 N.T.

"adversary."⁸ The roles the Devil plays include, creature of God, partner of God, and rival of God. Medieval church writers debated at length the problems caused by belief in the existence of a spiritual being such as Satan, in a universe created by an all-loving God.

The popularity of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* to late-medieval Christians may be partially due to the lack of any description of Hell within the Bible, and the ambiguity around the lord of Hell. Dante describes a very specific place that is Hell, a place inaccessible to the living, yet perceived as quite real. Dante gives Christians a vivid Hell indeed — a Hell which exploits the Classical Land of the Dead to generate authenticity and authority. Dante's river Acheron, with its "mournful shore,"⁹ flows directly from Greek mythology. The real Acheron river in Epirus, Greece, was believed to lead to Hades because it flowed through dark gorges and went underground in several places. Several other rivers in Greece are also called Acheron, which traditionally means "River of Woe."¹⁰ Another river from the Greek Underworld which Dante adopts is the Styx (meaning "hateful"). In the epics of Homer the gods swore by the water of the Styx as their most binding oath.¹¹ Dante describes the river as such: "This dreary stream, once it has reached these malignant, ashen slopes, drains out into the swamp called Styx."¹²

Dante has all the rivers in Hell originating from the tears of a huge old man ("gran veglio"), with a head of gold, breast of silver, waist of brass, legs of iron and a foot of clay. This man is modeled from a statue dreamt by Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel.2.31-35. Dante has him standing inside Mt. Ida, Crete, and gazing "on Rome as his mirror."¹³ Crete was considered by the Greeks to be the origin of much of their mythology and hence appropriate to Dante as source of Hell's rivers. Describing Rome as his mirror is ideal, as Rome was both the spiritual and physical center of the Catholic Church and capital of the old Roman Empire, most of which lay in ruins.

⁸ "Satan" Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

⁹ Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander, (New York: Random House, 2000): III.71.

¹⁰ "Acheron" Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

¹¹ "Styx" Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

¹² Dante: VII.106.

¹³ Dante: XIV.112-120.

The geography of the Greco-Roman Underworld could not be transplanted into the Christian Underworld of Dante without also taking its gate keepers, namely Cerberus the three-headed, dragon-tailed hell hound¹⁴ and Charon, the son of Erebus and Nyx (Night). It was the duty of Charon to ferry the souls of the deceased over the Styx and Acheron rivers.¹⁵ In their descriptions both Virgil and Dante hold true to Greek tradition. Virgil speaks of Cerberus, "...[the resounding of] barking from the three throats of the huge monster Cerberus... snakes writhing on his neck... he opened his three jaws, each of them rabid with hunger..."¹⁶ Dante describes similarly the horror of Cerberus, adding human characteristics, namely, a beard, a belly and beady eyes, "Cerberus, fierce and monstrous beast, barks from three gullets... His eyes are red, his beard a greasy black, his belly swollen. With his taloned hands he claws... no part of him he held in check."¹⁷ As for Charon, both Virgil and Dante depict a demonic, burning eyed ferryman, gray with age and yet vigorous. Virgil refers to him as, "...the terrible Charon in his filthy rags. On his chin there grows a thick gray beard, never trimmed. His glaring eyes are lit with fire and a foul cloak hangs from a knot at his shoulder..."¹⁸ While Dante refers to him as, "...an old man, his hair white with rage... Charon the demon, with eyes of glowing coals, beckons to them, herds them all aboard, striking anyone who slackens with his oar."¹⁹

The number of characters Dante appropriates from various literary cultures is enormous, ranging from the "sovereign poet"²⁰ Homer, to the Muslim Saladin. They are all set to the the same landscape traversed in the *Odyssey* of Homer (Book XII) and the *Aeneid* of Virgil (Book VI), but ruled by a Christian Satan, who punishes the betrayers of Julius Caesar and Jesus Christ

¹⁴ "hell hound" Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

¹⁵ "Charon" Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

¹⁶ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. David West, (London: Penguin, 1990): bk.6 lines 417-418.

¹⁷ Dante: VI.13.

¹⁸ Virgil: bk.6 line 300

¹⁹ Dante: III.111.

²⁰ Dante: IV.88.

equally. The three greatest sinners are Judas Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius. These three hang in the mouth of Satan at the end of the *Inferno*. Two of the three betrayed Roman emperor Julius Caesar, the other the betrayed Jesus. This fact is surprising because it seems to place Rome over Christ.

Christianity as a whole has a long and colorful history of adopting and absorbing pagan beliefs into its own mythology, Dante overtly continues this tradition. The English name Easter is thought to derive from the spring goddess Eostre,²¹ while the celebration day of Christmas coincides with pagan agricultural, Yule time and solar observances, rather than being specific to any Christian agenda.²² Christian theology took pre-existing literary traditions and reinterpreted them in a Christian light using broad and liberal allegory. This was done to successfully convert other cultures into an ever expanding Christendom. Medieval authors such as Servius, Fulgentius, and Silvestris heavily redefined the Roman poet Virgil. Likewise, the tasks of the Greek hero Hercules were manipulated.

Two works included in the Christian Canon, *The Song of Songs* and *The Book of Jonah*, are heavily dependent on allegorical interpretation. *The Song of Songs* was widely considered to be an account of Christ's love of the church or spiritual union of the soul with God.²³ Similarly, the great fish that saves Jonah in *The Book of Jonah* has been interpreted either as "an obedient agent of God's purpose,"²⁴ or, conversely, the embodiment of evil. Haimo of Auxerre, in his *Commentary on the Book of Jonah*, interprets the great fish as representing Hell and Jonah as representing Christ,²⁵ the expulsion of Jonah from the fish being symbolic of the resurrection.

Christian cultivation of symbolic interpretation readily embraced the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, in which *The Inferno* is part. Similarly, Dante deliberately constructed a four-fold, historical, anagogic (mystical), tropological (moral) and allegorical interpretation.²⁶ The character of Virgil is

²¹ "Easter" Encyclopædia Britannica Online

²² "Christmas" Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

²³ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible 3rd*, Ed. Michael D.Coogan, (New York: Oxford, 2001): 959 H.B.

²⁴ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible 3rd*, Ed. Michael D.Coogan, (New York: Oxford, 2001): 1322 H.B.

²⁵ Haimo of Auxerre, *Commentary on the book of Jonah*, trans. Deborah Everhart (Michigan, 1993). 8.

²⁶ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible 3rd*, Ed. Michael D.Coogan, (New York: Oxford, 2001): 486 Essays.

transformed from being a Roman into being “human reason unenlightened by faith,”²⁷ while character of Dante is a sort of every man. The *Inferno* upholds Christian tradition, maintaining that characters such as Virgil may not enter the Kingdom of God unbaptized. In this way, inherited Classical elements are Christianized, and the crucial topics, such as baptism, emphasized.

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* was so successful, and was held in such esteem, that in his *Epistle to Cangrande*, he boldly suggested that his writing used the same keys as the Bible.²⁸ His works liberally borrow from Classical myth and history and exploit Greek and Roman tradition for popular appeal. Dante absorbs the efforts of Virgil, who himself becomes a main character in Dante’s poem. As Virgil borrowed from the histories and myths before him, so too does Dante transform the Hellenic underworld into a Catholic one.

²⁷ Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander, (New York: Random House, 2000): intro xxii.

²⁸ Ibid.

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