**Dante: *The Contrapasso***

Questions to consider while reading:

1. According to what law is the punishment assigned to the damned?
2. How does this law work in Hell? Does is change in Purgatory?
3. Did Dante invent the contrapasso?
4. What do the damned fulfill in Hell?

The *Contrapasso*

“Christian justice operates throughout Dante’s afterlife ensuring that nothing in it is gratuitous or arbitrary. Assigning every soul to its appropriate place is the rigorous law of *contrapasso*, a retributive principle whereby everyone must suffer in the afterlife according to the sin he or she has committed on earth. This suffering is retributive and eternal in Hell, whilst in Purgatory it is remedial and temporary. In Paradise, too, the situation of the blessed is closely related to their earthly behavior: by appearing in different spheres, they are shown to receive the quality and measure of reward appropriate to each of them. Thus, God’s justice is done, and is seen to be done, in all three realms of the afterlife.

The *contrapasso* is not Dante’s invention. What distinguishes its appearance in the Commedia is that it functions not merely as a form of divine revenge but rather as the fulfillment of a destiny freely chosen by each soul during his or her life. Thus, in Dante’s afterlife, far from being canceled, diminished or even altered, the historical identity of each soul is revealed in its very essence and so is intensified. Each individual is fixed in the other world as he or she really was, beneath all appearances, in this. In Hell the damned are forever petrified in the sins they committed in life. In Purgatory the penitent continue and fulfill the process of repentance they began on earth. In paradise the blessed enjoy the measure of happiness appropriate to the merits and capacity which characterized them while living. Thus, in Dante’s hands, the *contrapasso* works simultaneously as an instrument of justice and a powerful narrative device.”

Adopted from:

Pertile, Lino. “Dante.” *Cambridge History of Italian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. 63-64.