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Highway to Hell: How *La Mappa dell'Inferno* Brought Dante to a New Audience

"Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate:" Abandon all hope, ye who enter here. This poignant phrase is but one small sample of the vivid imagination that comprises *Inferno,* the first of three poems by Dante Alighieri collectively titled *La Divina Commedia.* Written during Dante's exile from Florence in 1308, it became a literary sensation (Quinones). The readership was hugely expanded by the invention of the printing press in 1439, when books became affordable and readily available to the new middle class (*Assassin's*). Shortly afterwards, in 1445, Sandro Botticelli is born in Florence (Lightbown). His talent rapidly earned him a widespread following, including the formidable Medici family, famous patrons of the arts ("Medici"). Despite their pressing commissions, Botticelli took the time to rerelease a commentary edition of *Inferno,* complete with his own illustrations (Lightbown). One of these, the Map of Inferno, or *Mappa dell'Inferno,* brings incredible detail to the viewer. Considering rhetoric, Botticelli's map brought the meaning of Dante's *Inferno* to a new audience.

Botticelli did not invent the subject matter of his parchment, instead he rendered the prose of Dante into a more visceral manifestation. The first area, the Vestibule (Cary 13), is depicted in the upper left corner as a small open space filled with souls awaiting departure on Charon's ferry (Botticelli). Indeed, in a tiny alcove on the extreme left are two small figures: Dante and his guide Vergil. The verdant forest described in the first canto spans the top of the page, interpretable as the last glimpse of the green earth we see before our descent. Spanning

the cliffs beneath these woods is the River Acheron, a blue line containing three instances of Charon's ferry: left, off-center, and right, where Dante and Vergil begin the descent into Hell proper, down the first set of stairs.

They enter the first ring, Limbo, the realm of virtuous pagans and the unbaptized. On the right side of this ring is a castle with seven towers, representing the seven virtues. The center and left are filled with lost souls, roaming endlessly, submerging us in their pathos, looking for a way to heaven. Though they did not sin, they did not accept "the true God" and so cannot ascent to Paradise. A serpentine figure sits atop the stairs to the second ring. This is Minos, judge of the damned, wrapping his serpentine tail around himself once for every ring of Hell the sinner descends to.

In the second ring, Botticelli depicts figures hovering a uniform height off the ground, as if blown about in a sharp wind. These are the waifs damned for their carnal Lust, sentenced to be tormented in endless winds as they let themselves be blown about by their desire. Another incarnation of Dante and Vergil stand in conversation with a figure lying at the center. Botticelli is likely depicting their consultation with the adulterous Francesca Da Rimini, née Da Polenta, the only major character interaction in the canto (Cary 27). Da Rimini and her brother-in-law Paolo were killed by her husband Gianciotto Malatesta when he discovered them committing adultery, making her a prime example of the vices of desire ("Francesca").

The change between the second ring and the third is drastic. Now, instead of figures alone, we have a scattering of bodies in what appears to be an almost snowglobe-like storm of white dots. Left of the center is an indeterminate animal, likely Cerberus, as this is the ring of Gluttony, where sinners are assaulted by a downpour of endless slush. Botticelli has rendered this rather simplistically. Whereas the description of the circle is particularly vivid in the

poem, the ring in the *Mappa* is rather more blatant than allegorical. Botticelli was trying to be obvious, making sure that a purchaser of any social background could understand the concept.

The next ring is in the same vein as the previous three, with whitened figures against the barren stony background. What is unique to this ring are the souls dragging large bags filled with gold coinage. These are the avaricious and miserly, sentenced to haul the material wealth they so greedily hoarded in life for eternity. Plutus, the Greek god of wealth, stands atop the stairs from the third ring, watching over his domain of Greed (Cary 33).

The ring beneath Greed is noticeably disparate. A blue strip spans the funnel just above the center, lined with the grey blocks of towers representing the City of Dis. Outside these city walls, the damned suffer for sins of the flesh, which are less serious. Inside the walls of Dis, souls are punished for malicious choices they have made, rather than yielding to temptation (Cary 45). Just outside these walls is the circle of Anger, the most serious sin of the flesh, where the wrathful thrash hopelessly in the swampy murk of the river Styx. Phlegyas' ferry is visible beneath the path on the left side, there to guide Dante and his guide across the turbulent waters and into deeper Hell.

Passing through the walls of Dis, the next ring is rather hard to distinguish; at a glance, it appears to be a morass of vague geometric shapes in dark brown. On closer inspection, the indeterminate geometry coalesces into coffins, scattered haphazardly about the circle. This is the ring of Heresy, where Epicureans and practitioners of other blasphemous religions are punished in flaming tombs. Dante and Virgil stand on the left, in conversation with a pair of figures protruding from their sepulchers. These are likely the Florentine nobles Farinata degli Uberti and the euphonious Cavalcante Cavalcanti, both known by Dante prior to his exile (Cary 47).

The next ring is Violence, through which runs the reddish line of the Phlegethon, the river of blood, in which those who exhibited violence suffer for eternity. Bluish centaurs dance atop these sinners, as if they wish to trample the souls deeper into the boiling blood. Beneath this is a darkish line, which may or may not be the Forest of the Suicides, or those who committed violence against the self. Much clearer, however, is the burning desert, represented as a lighter plain covered in small orange triangles of flame, wherein reside the sodomites, usurers, and blasphemers: those who commit violence against God. As many forms of sodomy and certainly usury are commonplace today, this ring is somewhat dated in its imagery.

Below the desert is a large, steep cliff, with one slim line of red representing the waterfall made by the Phlegethon as it plummets into deepest Hell. Geryon is barely distinguishable near the top of this waterfall, manifesting as a serpentine form transporting the two poets from Violence into Fraud. This ring is a series of small terraces, each with a profligate scattering of figures engaged in various forms of punishment. These are the ten *Malebolge* (literal translation "bad ditches" or "evil pockets"), where the fraudulent languish. Each *bolge* is spanned by a bridge, making a distinct diagonal line across the ring, which our Poets will cross over. Line after line of sinners stand underneath these bridges: panderers and seducers, flatterers, simonists, false prophets, corrupt politicians, hypocrites, thieves, evil counselors, sowers of discord, and falsifiers. In each *bolge*, the actual punishments are so minute as to be nearly indistinguishable; an unfortunate side effect of the funnel-map layout.

The circle of Treachery is the final ring, in which a few ice-blue figures hover poised like icicles above the final descent. These are the Giants, among them Antæus, who transports the poets down to the base of the page (Cary 143). There Satan himself resides, seeming almost cut-off, in the icy blue expanse of Lake Cocytus. This is inscribed with oddly precise

lines, as if Botticelli were practicing rudimentary geometry. Barely distinguishable between these lines are the souls frozen in the ice of their own betrayal.

Botticelli applied easy-to-understand visuals and a simplistic layout to make the meanings of *Inferno* obvious to those with less than flawless mental acuity. The Florentine middle class was moderately educated, financially stable, and conventionally artistic, though they lacked the *vieil argent* and inherent social grace of the aristocracy (Gand). Botticelli wanted to make the meaning of each ring immediately apparent to any reader, and clearly inform them "if you {insert sin}, you will end up here." The simple scattering of snowflakes for Gluttony, the red line with dotted heads for Violence, the circle of icy blue for Treachery, each can be clearly matched with a ring from the poem. This makes the complex, metaphysical concepts of *Inferno* easily understandable for a middle-class Florentine.

This brilliant methodology created a map that is now an archetype for future maps to come. Botticelli's piece so effectively conveys the meaning of the poem that the 'funnel' design has been copied and recopied throughout the centuries, not just for *Inferno,* but for dozens of other maps as well. The original parchment pictured is now buried deep within the Vatican Archives, which is decidedly ironic. Despite this, almost any copy of *Inferno* that can be found today will have a map in the funnel style; reusing Botticelli's brilliant layout because of its immediate clarity to viewers of all intelligences.

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