

Paradiso, Cantos I–XII

Paradise contains nine concentric circles (spheres), ending with the Empyrean, the realm of God. Dante is careful to point out that all the blessed souls, though located in their specific spheres, still live in bliss with God in the Empyrean. While the structures of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* were based around different classifications of sin, the structure of the *Paradiso* is based on the four cardinal virtues (Fortitude, Justice, Temperance, and Prudence) and the three theological virtues (Faith, Hope, and Love)

Cantos 1-4, The Moon (The Inconstant: those who failed to maintain their religious vows and showed themselves deficient in fortitude)

“transhumanize” (1.70-71)

Dante invents a word to describe ascending to Paradise, saying “*Transumanar significar per verba non si poria* (To transhumanize (i.e. go beyond being human) cannot be expressed in words)”

moon spots (2.49-148)

In seeking to explain the dark spots on the moon, Dante abandons tradition for a pseudo-scientific explanation: he attributes them to the presence of “denser” and “rarer” portions of the lunar body. Beatrice’s refutation of this view points to the limits of reason and the need for a different, spiritual knowledge in Paradise.

Piccarda Donati (3.34-123)

Sister of Forese Donati (see *Purgatorio* 24), Piccarda was a member of the “Poor Clares,” a mendicant order founded by St. Clare of Assisi (1194–1253). Her brother, Corso, forced her to leave the convent and marry his henchman for political reasons.

Constance (3.109-120)

Empress Constance (1152–1198) of the Holy Roman Empire, mother of Frederick II. Like Piccarda, she was forced to leave the convent to enter into a political marriage. Piccarda insists that though Costanza was forced to leave the convent, she remained true to her vows—and thus to her name (“Constance”)—in her heart (3.117).

Cantos 5-7, Mercury (The Ambitious: those who did good out of a desire for fame and were therefore deficient in the virtue of justice)

Justinian (5.115-7.9)

The first emperor to codify Roman law in the early 6th c., Justinian achieved much, but in the name of ambition and worldly fame. This combination of positive activity but selfish motive is characteristic of all spirits in Mercury.

Romeo (6.127-142)

Justinian tells us the story of Romeo di Villanova (not Shakespeare’s Romeo!), a political advisor to the Count of Provence. When vicious rumors circulated about him, he took his

few possessions and left to live as a beggar (compare to Pietro della Vigna's story in *Inf.* 13).

The Incarnation (7.19-120)

In linking the Incarnation to original sin, medieval theologians usually invoked the "ransom" theory of redemption (payment for the release of humankind), a version of the church's penitential system. Dante, on the other hand, presents the Incarnation as a paradoxical union not only of natures (human and divine) but of choices as well. Beatrice claims that satisfaction for original sin could occur in one of two ways: either God does it or humankind does it, with no other option (*Par.* 7.91-93), but Dante (through Beatrice) rejects this "either/or" scenario. Through the "magnificent process" (*Par.* 7.113) in which God chooses to become human while remaining divine, both God and humankind participate fully in redemption (*Par.* 7.103-20).

Dante and Medieval Anti-Semitism

While developing this incarnational theology, Dante regrettably promulgates one of the most heinous ideas of Christian thought: the charge of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus, an accusation used for centuries to justify anti-Semitic beliefs and actions. Insofar as Christ was fully human, Beatrice argues, humankind's transgression against God was justly punished with the crucifixion; insofar as Christ was fully divine the crucifixion was unjust and was therefore rightly punished with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE (*Par.* 7.34-45).

Cantos 8-9, Venus (The Lovers: those who, being passionately in love, were deficient in temperance)

Charles Martel of Anjou (8.31-9.6)

Son of King Charles II of Naples (late 13th c.), Charles met Dante once, only briefly, in 1294. Here he points out that a properly functioning society requires people of many different kinds.

Cunizza (9.13-66)

Cunizza da Romano had a series of affairs, including with a troubadour poet and a knight, and married several times. The point is, as one of the early commentators puts it, Cunizza knew love during each stage of her life. And this, she makes clear to Dante, is nothing to regret now that she enjoys the blessedness of heaven (9.34-36).

Folco (9.67-142)

A Provençal poet who later became a Cistercian monk and Bishop of Toulouse. Folco was driven by intense desire as a poet, but enjoys an afterlife of joy and loving admiration free of regret and recrimination.

Rahab (9.112-126)

Dante assigns a prominent place to Rahab: a biblical prostitute from the city of Jericho who aided Joshua by sheltering two of his scouts (for which she and her family were spared when Joshua's army destroyed the city) (Jos. 2 and 6.17-25)

Earth's shadow (9.118-20)

Although all the blessed actually reside in the Empyrean before God and are perfectly content (*Par.* 4.28-39), Dante's use of the earth's shadow to separate the first three spheres from the rest of Paradise may suggest that the spirits appearing in the Moon, Mercury, and Venus are somehow inferior to their celestial counterparts in the upper heavens. Despite their admirable qualities and accomplishments, the shadowed spirits are grouped according to specific moral defects: unfulfilled vows (Moon), achievements for the sake of glory (Mercury), irrepressible ardor (Venus).

Cantos 10-12, The Sun (The Wise: those embodying the virtue of prudence)

Thomas Aquinas and his circle (10-11)

The spokesman for the first circle of twelve wise spirits in the solar sphere is Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who was canonized in 1323 and given the title *Doctor Angelicus* (“Angelic Doctor”) by Pope Pius V in 1567. Consistent with the themes of harmony and reconciliation in the cantos of the Sun, Thomas, a Dominican brother, is assigned the task of eulogizing the founder of the Franciscan order, Francis of Assisi (canto 11).

Bonaventure and his circle (12)

Bonaventure (c. 1217–1274), who joined the Franciscans in 1243 and became the order's minister-general in 1257, wrote a biography of Francis and a mystical account of an ascent to God (*Journey of the Mind to God*) that may have influenced, in a general way, Dante's conception of the *Comedy*. Bonaventure, born Giovanni Fidanza near Orvieto (in central Italy), was canonized in 1482 and later given the title “Seraphic Doctor” by Pope Sixtus V in 1587. As Aquinas (a Dominican) did for Francis, Bonaventure (a Franciscan) here praises Dominic.

So...

Consider Dante's challenge in trying to reconcile theological doctrine (all the blessed are perfectly happy, paradise is a realm of peace and harmony) with his poetic need to tell a dramatic story with such elements as difference, variation, growth, and conflict (see *Par.* 3.64-90). How can a poem about heaven be theologically sound without being dull?

How does Dante's treatment of love and sexuality in the sphere of Venus square (or not) with his presentation of these themes in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*? What similarities and differences do you see between figures here (Charles Martel, Cunizza, Folco, Rahab) and their counterparts in hell and purgatory?