

What is Contrapasso?

A single word sums up the system of justice in Dante's *Inferno*: 'contrapasso.' That term, which Anthony Cassell defined as "the justice of retaliatory punishment", occurs only once in the *Divina Commedia*, spoken in the gruesome ditch of the disseminators of discord by Bertran de Born's severed head: "Così s'osserva in me lo *contrapasso*".² Seven centuries of commentary have richly illuminated this passage, providing historical context for Bertran's life and art as a troubadour, background on the royal father and son he is said to have set against each other, speculations on the allegorical anatomy of trunk and head, and plural glosses on the word 'contrapasso.' Since Niccolò Tommaseo (1837), "contrapasso" is understood not only to describe Bertran's eternal fate, but to define the principle governing punishment of sinners in all *Inferno*. Yet if its reach is so wide, why does Dante so long delay naming a concept fundamental to his microcosm?

From "Contrapasso: The Long Wait to Inferno 28" by Victoria Kirkham, MLN
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Contrapasso is one of the few rules in Dante's *Inferno*. It is the one "law of nature" that applies to hell, stating that for every sinner's crime there must be an equal and fitting punishment. These punishments, however, are rarely simple or obvious and are usually metaphorically rather than literally related to their respective sins. In fact, Dante scholar Lino Pertile notes, "the ways in which [*contrapasso*] works in the narrative are as many as the sins, if not as many as the sinners, to which it is applied" (70-73). As is to be expected with such a complicated concept, many interpretations of this interplay between sin and punishment have been proposed. Some of the most interesting of these focus on the relationship between Dante's unique form of justice and the traditional, biblical sense of justice. For example, Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez in their notes on *Inferno* argue that Dante's portrayal of divine retribution is clearly derived from "the biblical law of retaliation," better known as "an eye for an eye" (448). These scholars firmly believe that Dante wanted only to properly apply the pre-established standard of justice to his interpretation of hell. Another camp, however, contends that Dante is attempting to redefine completely the popular image of hell. Matthew Pearl, in his article "Dante and the Death Penalty," argues that, "*contrapasso* differs drastically from the biblical principle of 'an eye for an eye,' with which it's sometimes confused. In Dante's poem, punishments must arise from the crime itself, not from the damage it has caused" (paragraph 7). Pearl argues that Dante is breaking away from the popular notion that the severity of a sin is determined by the damage done to society, suggesting instead that a sin is more or less severe because it is more or less offensive to God, not to man (or rather, that each punishment derives from the offensiveness of the sin itself, rather than the suffering of its victims). There are, of course, problems with both of these approaches. In a work so grounded in biblical history, it seems strange to assume that Dante would completely reject it in favor of his own invention. At the same time, the *contrapasso* is surely much more complex than a simple exchange of blows between man and God, as Durling and Martinez claim. Instead, I propose a middle ground between these two claims: that Dante primarily intended to explain biblical justice through his *contrapasso*, but in order to do so more effectively, expanded upon tradition, and thus inevitably added some of his own invention.

From "Darkness Visible: Dante's Clarification of Hell" by Joseph Kameen
<http://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-2/kameen/>