

“Why, this is hell” :

Metonymy of Hell, or the Underworld, in Epic, Drama and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*

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1

In the European epic tradition from Homer's *Odyssey* to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the hero's visit to and return from the underworld or hell makes at least one of the crucial episodes in the narration of the same hero's mythic journey.¹ Since printed texts of classical works were widely available either in their original languages or in various translations in Renaissance Europe, English poets like Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare would have been more or less familiar with this tradition. But reception of this topic by these late-sixteenth-century poets took somewhat different forms from those of their classical and medieval predecessors since they were strongly aware of the metonymic nature of their contemporary, colloquial discourse concerning the idea of hell or the underworld.

This essay is going to examine how two English Renaissance poets, Marlowe and Shakespeare, responded to and dealt with both the classical epic tradition regarding the representation of the underworld or hell and their contemporary colloquial uses of metonymy related to the same ideas.

2

There are many heroes in English Renaissance drama who make long and adventurous travels in distant countries. The heroes of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *Othello*, for example, might well have visited the underworld, but neither of them actually do.² Faustus, who sells his soul to Lucifer in order to obtain magical power, mentions his desire to visit and return from hell:

O, might I see hell and return again, how happy were I then! (*Faustus*, A-Text, 2.3.167-68)³

Marlowe's Faustus is characterized as a potential classical, epic hero in the mould of Odysseus, Aeneas, or the narrator-and-hero Dante of *Inferno*, who dare to go down to the underworld or hell in order to find some hidden truth. In spite of Faustus having such heroic desire, however, what Mephistopheles actually introduces him to are simply this-worldly places and objects. And instead of guiding the hero himself to hell, the latter merely shows him spectacles or illusions of

the underworld that are theatrically presented here on the earth.

Although dramatic poets of the English Renaissance like Marlowe and Shakespeare seem to have had a certain interest in representing hell or the underworld, they dealt with this classical topic in quite different ways. Marlowe's dramaturgy was a sort of parodic adaptation of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Inferno*. Faustus expresses his desire to visit "splendent Rome" while swearing in a Virgilian way:⁴

Now, by the kingdoms of infernal rule,
Of Styx, Acheron, and the fiery lake
Of ever-burning Phlegethon, I swear
That I do long to see the monuments
And situation of bright splendent Rome. (3.1.44-48)

On the other hand, Mephistopheles' offer to Faustus reminds us of Dantesque situations:

Nay, Faustus, stay. I know you'd fain see the Pope
And take some part of holy Peter's feast,
Where thou shalt see a troupe of bald-pate friars
Whose *summum bonum* is in belly cheer. (3.1.50-53)

Dante's *Inferno* is renowned for its vivid description of the topography of hell, but it is also famous for its satiric portrayals of corrupt popes who are being eternally punished there. Marlowe's hero is guided by Mephistopheles to witness the pope's and Catholic friars' voracious feast in Rome instead of observing them being punished in hell.⁵

Although there is an apparent difference between Dante's poetic narrative which places its hero in the underworld and Marlowe's theatrical representation of his hero's experience in the world above it, they are functionally equivalent because in both cases hell is imagined poetically through the mirror of what is going on in the real world.

The spectacle of the Seven Deadly Sins, which is presented by Lucifer as an illusion on the earth, is also a Marlovian counterpart of Dante's description of sinners being punished in hell and of the sins that they committed while they were in this world:

Lucifer. Do so, and we will highly gratify thee.

Faustus, we are come from hell to show thee some pastime. Sit down, and thou shalt see
all the Seven Deadly Sins appear in their proper shapes.

Faustus. That sight will be as pleasing as paradise was to Adam the first day of his creation. (2.3.99ff.)

In Marlowe's dramaturgy, hell is something that the audience is supposed to imagine from the words, actions and worldly spectacles presented on the stage. The underworld or hell is, in a sense, metonymic of what can happen or be imaginable on the earth. Such worldliness is more or less common in the representations of the underworld or hell in the epic tradition that starts with Homer. The underworld is something we imagine from our experience. In the tradition, both the hero who goes down there and the dead who inhabit it tend to be extremely concerned about what is going on or is going to happen on the earth above.

In *Inferno*, XIX, for example, the narrator-hero Dante and his master Virgil come to the bottom of a ditch where sinners who committed simony are being punished. Each sinner has been placed upside down in a hole, from above which their protruding feet are being burned. One of the sinners that they find there is the late Pope Nicholas III. First he mistakes Dante for another sinner, Pope Boniface VIII, who is destined to come and take his place in that hole. In reply to Dante's question he confesses what he did in his lifetime.

"O wretched soul, whoever you are that, planted like a stake, have your upper part down under!" I began, "speak if you can."

I was standing there like the friar who confesses the perfidious assassin who, after he is fixed, recalls him in order to delay his death; and he cried, "Are you already standing there, are you already standing there, Bonifazio? By several years the writ has lied to me. Are you so quickly sated with those gains for which you did not fear to take by guile the beautiful Lady, and then to do her outrage?"

I became like those who stand as if bemocked, not comprehending what is answered them and unable to reply. Then Virgil said, "Tell him quickly, 'I am not he, I am not he whom you think!'"] and I answered as I was bidden; whereat the spirit writhed hard both his feet; then, sighing, and with tearful voice, he said to me, "Then what is it you ask of me? If to know who I am concerns you so much that you have for that come down the bank, know that I was vested with the great mantle; and I was truly a son of the she-bear, so eager to advance the cubs that up there I pursed my gains, and here I purse myself. Beneath my head are the others that preceded me in simony, mashed down and flattened through the fissures of the rock. I shall be thrust down there in my turn when he comes for whom I mistook you when I put my sudden question.

But longer already is the time that I have cooked my feet and stood inverted thus than he shall stay planted with glowing feet, for after him shall come a lawless shepherd from the west, of uglier deeds, one fit to cover both him and me. A new Jason he will be, like him we read of in Maccabees, but even as to that one his king was pliant, so to this one shall be he who governs France."

(*Inferno*, XIX.46-87)⁶

While the landscape of hell is vividly described in Dante's poetic language, the topic of the conversation between the poet and the pope who is being punished mostly concerns what takes place in the real world. Dante's representation of hell is strongly associated with political issues contemporary to him.

Close association between this world and the underworld is also found in the case of Homer's *Odyssey*, Book 11. Seeking Tiresias' prophesy concerning his return journey home, Odysseus goes down to the underworld, and there he sees many ghosts including his own mother's. After he finishes conversation with the prophet, Odysseus finally talks with his deceased mother:

'Oh my son—what brings you down to the world
of death and darkness? You are still alive!
It's hard for the living to catch a glimpse of this . . .
Great rivers flow between us, terrible waters,
the Ocean first of all—no one could ever ford
that stream on foot, only aboard some sturdy craft.
Have you just come from Troy, wandering long years
with your men and ship? Not yet returned to Ithaca?
You've still not seen your wife inside your halls?'

'Mother,

I replied, 'I had to venture down to the House of Death,
to consult the shade of Tiresias, seer of Thebes.
Never yet have I neared Achaea, never once
set foot on native ground,
always wandering—endless hardship from that day
I first set sail with King Agamemnon bound for Troy,
the stallion-land, to fight the Trojans there.
But tell me about yourself and spare me nothing.
What form of death overcame you, what laid you low,
some long slow illness? Or did Artemis showering arrows
come with her painless shafts and bring you down?
Tell me of father, tell of the son I left behind:
do my royal rights still lie in their safekeeping?
Or does some stranger hold the throne by now
because men think that I'll come home no more?
Please, tell me about my wife, her turn of mind,
her thoughts . . . still standing fast beside our son,
still guarding our great estates, secure as ever now?
Or has she wed some other countryman at last,
the finest prince among them?'

(*The Odyssey*, XI.177-205)⁷

In the underworld scene of the *Odyssey* too, the hero's and the ghosts' concerns are about the world of the living. The image of the underworld here is created on the basis of familial sentiment, but it can also be regarded as political since Odysseus's family issue concerns the kingship of Ithaca.

4

As we have seen so far, representation of hell or the underworld has a lot to do with this-worldly issues, and Marlowe's parodic rendering of the traditional image of hell is also created upon this understanding. In discussing Renaissance poets' responses to this issue, I would like to draw attention to their sophisticated use of tropes – especially to those of metonymy and metaphor. It is often said that a clear distinction between metonymy and metaphor is very difficult to achieve.⁸ At least the boundary between the two seems quite vague. What follows are examples of recent definitions of these two tropes.

METONYMY (Gr., "change of name"; Lat. *denominatio*). A trope in which one expression is substituted for another on the basis of some material, causal, or conceptual relation. Quintilian lists the kinds traditionally distinguished: container for thing contained ("I'll have a glass"); agent for act, product, or object possessed ("reading Wordsworth"); cause for effect; time or place for their characteristics or products ("a bloody decade," "I'll have Burgundy"); associated object for its possessor or user ("the crown" for the king). Other kinds, previously considered synecdoche, are now often included in metonymy: parts of the body for states of consciousness associated with them (head and heart for thought and feeling), material for object made of it (ivories for piano keys), and attributes or abstract features for concrete entities. Because metonymy involves some literal or referential connection between tenor and vehicle, it is often contrasted with metaphor, in which no such relationship exists. (Greene and Cushman)⁹

METAPHOR (Gr., "transference") [.....] Despite their differences, the "interaction" view (Richards, Black), "controversion theory" (Beardsley), and "fusion" view (espoused by New Critics) all hold that metaphor creates meanings not readily accessible through literal language. Rather than simply substituting one word for another or comparing two things, metaphor invokes a transaction between words and things, after which the words, things, and thoughts are not quite the same. Metaphor, from these perspectives, is not a decorative figure but a transformed literalism, meaning precisely what it says. [.....] Synecdoche, as a species-genus or part-whole relation, can be imputed to any comparison whatever (everything being "like" everything else in some generic respect, or part of it, if the level of abstraction is high enough). Metonymy can be empirically observed association (cause-effect), an entailment (attribute for subject), or a contingent relation (object for possessor).

(Ibid.)

Colloquial use of hell is in many cases metonymic since it is simply associable with “suffering.” When Faustus asks Mephistopheles how it comes to pass that he is out of hell if he is really damned, the latter replies:

Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.

Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God

And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,

Am not tormented with ten thousand hells

In being deprived of everlasting bliss?

(*Faustus*, 1.3.79-82)

Although this is evidently an allusion to St. John Chrysostom's Homily on the Gospel of St. Mathew,¹⁰ Mephistopheles' lines sound extremely ironic here. Perhaps the poet Marlowe was aware of inevitable ambiguity implied in the popular use of the metonymy of hell, and was cracking a joke about it. Metonymy is in fact a sort of deception or misjudgment.

5

It is in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* that the most thorough examinations of the ambiguity and the deceptiveness in the conventional usage of the metonymy of hell are to be found. Uses of the term and the image of hell concentrate towards the end of the sonnet sequence, the part also known as the Black Lady sonnets.

What potions have I drunk of siren tears

Distilled from limbeckes foul as hell within,

Applying fears to hopes and hopes to fears,

Still losing when I saw myself to win!

What wretched errors hath my heart committed,

Whilst it hath thought itself so blessed never!

How have mine eyes out of their spheres been fitted

In the distraction of this madding fever!

O, benefit of ill! Now I find true

That better is by evil still made better;

And ruined love, when it is built anew,

Grows fairer than at first, more strong, far greater.

So I return rebuked to my content,

And gain by ills thrice more than I have spent.

(Sonnet 119)¹¹

“Why, this is hell”

As is evident in the phrase that relates “limbecks” with “hell,” which are both metonymies for the female genitalia, Sonnet 119 begins and develops in an apparently sexual and misogynic tone, but at the same time there seems to be certain deeper irony behind the uses of such expressions. The structure of the narrative of this sonnet is noteworthy. It begins with a mythical image of the Sirens (Gk. Σειρήνουν) in the first line, reminding the reader of Odysseus’ navigation in his prolonged return journey home from Troy, and then describes his own errors, failures and madness. At the beginning of the third quatrain, the sonnet suddenly changes its tone, and refers to “benefit of ill” and “return... to my content.” Thus the whole narrative of this sonnet structurally resembles the story of Odysseus or that of Aeneas. In other words, it looks like the smallest example of an *epyllion*, or a short, erotic narrative poem. We may compare this with Marlowe’s Faustus, who says to Lucifer:

O, might I see hell and return again, how happy were I then! (Faustus, 2.3.168)

The popular metonymy of “hell” for *pudendum* is metamorphosed in this sonnet into a sort of epic underworld, or a temporary destination of the poet’s creative and investigative drive.

Although the term “hell” does not appear in Sonnet 146, the images used there are interesting when we consider the relationship between the poet’s imagination and conventional tropes for hell or imagination.

Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth,
[] these rebel powers that thee array,
Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,
Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?
Why so large cost, having so short a lease,
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?
Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,
Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body’s end?
Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant’s loss,
And let that pine to aggravate thy store;
Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;
Within be fed, without be rich no more:
So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
And Death once dead there’s no more dying then.

(Sonnet 146)

The poet is personifying his own soul and addressing it himself, so in other words this is a self-referential, metapoetic sonnet. What seems problematic to me is the phrase “the centre of my sinful earth” of the first line. The word “earth” is usually taken to mean human flesh in the biblical sense. Such reading is no doubt correct, but it seems that the phrase has another implication. If

we remember, for example, Dante's poetic description of the topography of hell, which is supposed to be located in the centre of the earth, "the centre of my sinful earth" of this sonnet somehow resembles it. If "my ... earth" can be a trope for both "my body" and "my planet earth," the phrase will imply that the poet's soul is suffering in hell. This gives us a chance to reexamine the validity of the conventional, popular metonymy of "hell" for *pudendum*. What should be really associated with "hell" is not the female genitalia but the poet's own desire and suffering.

In Sonnet 147, the term "hell" appears in the last line.

My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease,
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
Th'uncertain sickly appetite to please.
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
At random from the truth, vainly expressed:

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

(Sonnet 147)

The phrase "black as hell" is a widely used cliché, but its association with the poet's unfaithful lover or her *pudenda* is cleverly deconstructed in this sonnet. What is really to blame in this context may be the poet's "thoughts" and his "discourse" that are mad and straying far "from the truth."

6

To conclude our present survey of Marlovian and Shakespearean images of hell and the underworld, let us have a look at Sonnet 129, which is notorious for its explicitly "misogynic" sexual imageries:

Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and, till action, lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,

“Why, this is hell”

Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme,
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe,
Before, a joy proposed, behind, a dream.

All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

(Sonnet 129)

In spite of its overtly sexual images, Sonnet 129 is, in a sense, one of the most serious poems in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. If we read carefully, terms that stand for madness in this sonnet almost all concern the poet’s own psychology or unreasonable desire. So the argument of this sonnet is, in fact, simply self-referential. The only problem will be found in the metonymic implication of the term “hell.”

As we have already seen in other Shakespearean sonnets, hell is a metonymy for this world or the poet’s own body in which his tormented soul is located, or simply the poet’s profound suffering itself. The phrase “Th’expense of spirit” of the first line is also worth reconsidering. Since association between “spirit” and “semen” is easy to make, the phrase tends to be interpreted either sexually or religiously. But another association is possible. Spirit can mean poetic inspiration or the source of creative imagination. Finally, “madness” is also associated with poetic imagination as well as with sexual desire in Shakespeare’s world, as we see in Theseus’ famous speech in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 5.1.7-17)¹²

As Mephistopheles significantly suggests to the aspiring Faustus in Marlowe’s tragedy, hell is a metonymy for every suffering in this world. Shakespeare took up and analyzed the same metonymy, and developed it to discuss the poet’s suffering self, and also to discuss poetic art itself.

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- 1 E.g. Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 11, Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6, and Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*.
- 2 William Shakespeare, *Othello*, 1.3.126-144. Othello testifies that he told Desdemona's father the story of his life which was made of many strange adventures, but he does not refer to the underworld.

- 3 All the quotations of Marlowe’s text in this article are taken from Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus, A- and B- Texts (1604, 1616)*, ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993).
- 4 Marlowe’s obvious allusion to Virgil:

Di, quibus imperium est animarum, umbraeque silentes
et Chaos et Phlegethon, loca nocte tacentia late,
sit mihi fas audita loqui ; sit numine vestro
pandere res alta terra et caligne mersas.

“You gods, who hold the domain of spirits! You voiceless shades! You, Chaos, and you, Phlegethon, you broad, hushed tracts of night! Suffer me to tell what I have heard; suffer me of your grace to unfold secrets buried in the depths and darkness of the earth!” (*The Aeneid*, 6.264-67). Publius Vergilius Maro, *Virgil I: Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid 1-6*, tr. by H. R. Fairclough (London: Heineman, 1986).
- 5 Regarding Dante’s readership in the sixteenth-century England, see Jackson Campbell Boswell, *Dante’s Fame in England: References in Printed British Books 1477-1640* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999). “After John Foxe’s enormously influential *Ecclesiastical History Contayning the Actes and Monumentes* was published (1570), Dante’s role as a proto-Protestant was sealed. Translators of popular Italian writers [……] might cite Dante’s contributions to poetry and eloquence of expression, but Englishmen would, by and large, view him as a polemist”(Introduction, p. xv).
- 6 The text is from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*, tr. with commentary by Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980). All the underlines in this article are mine.
- 7 The text is from Homer, *The Odyssey*, tr. by Robert Fagles with introduction and notes by Bernard Knox (London: Penguin Books, 2006).
- 8 See Raphael Lyne, *Shakespeare, Rhetoric and Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.28-33.
- 9 From Roland Greene and Stephen Cushman, eds., *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, Third edition (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2016) Kindle.
- 10 Bevington, 1.3.79-82n.
- 11 All the texts of the sonnets quoted in this article are from William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and a Lover’s Complaint*, ed. by John Kerrigan (London: Penguin Books, 1999).
- 12 The text is from William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
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