

Adam McCune

Dr. Sharon Coolidge

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“Outstretched Wings”

Angelic versus Demonic Anatomy in Dante’s *Inferno* 21-22 and *Paradiso* 31

Dante emphasizes the grotesque qualities of the demons of Hell with many references to their bodies, which are described in bestial terms. In contrast, he emphasizes the beauty of angels in the *Paradiso* by giving very few details about their actual forms, and comparing them primarily to sterile, inanimate things.

The initial bodily descriptions are extremely parallel and stand in stark contrast. A demon is described as:

a devil, black!

His face, his look, how frightening it was!

With outstretched wings he skimmed along the rock. (*Inferno* XXI, lines 30-32)

The angels, on the other hand, are described as follows:

Their faces showed the glow of living flame,

their wings of gold, and all the rest of them

whiter than any snow that falls to earth. (*Paradiso* XXXI, lines 13-15)

The three body parts listed are skin, face, and wings. The demon’s wings are presumably like those of Satan, “not feathered wings but rather like the ones \ a bat would have” (*Inferno* XXXIV, lines 49-50). Thus, a demon’s skin is black, while an angel’s is “whiter than any snow,” a demon’s face is frightening, while an angel’s face glows like “living flame,” and a demon’s

wings are bat-like, whereas an angel's wings are "gold." Thus far, the demons (and Satan) are described either without comparison, or with comparison to an animal (a bat), whereas the angels are compared to pure, inanimate things: "flame," "gold," and snow."

In contrast to such non-living substances, the demons are described in decidedly biological—and usually bestial—terms. While we never get more of the angels' bodies than skin, face, and wings, the *Inferno* mentions twelve more body parts for the demons: "high-hung and pointed shoulders" (XXI, line 34), "claws" (XXI.36; XXII.40,137,140), "teeth" (XXI.131,138), "farting tongue" (XXI.138), "bugle of an ass-hole" (XXI.139), "tusks" (XXII.55), "mouth" (XXII.56), "arms" (XXII.59), "wild eyes" (XXII.95), "snout" (XXII.106), "head" (XXII.107), and "chest" (XXII.129). Note that many of the body parts selected by Dante emphasize that which is grotesque in bodies, whether in their specific qualities—shoulders that are "high-hung and pointed," a tongue used for a "farting" noise, eyes which are "wild"—or by their inherently bestial or scatological nature: "ass-hole" being of the latter category, and "claws," "tusks," and "snout" of the former. The connection to beasts, in fact, is highlighted by metaphor and simile. The demons, singly or corporately, are compared to a "hound" (XXI.44), "dogs" (XXI.68), "a boar" (XXII.56), "evil cats" (XXII.58), a "filthy bird of prey" (XXII.96), "a falcon" (XXII.130), and a "full-fledged hawk" (XXII.139).

Compared to these vividly embodied demons, the angels, while beautiful, are rather streamlined and vague. They are compared to animals once—but the "bees" in *Paradiso* XXXI.7 are not mammals like hounds, dogs, boars, or cats, but are tiny and exoskeleton-clad, and thus are unlikely to remind humans of their own bodies. Moreover, the bees are selected as a metaphor because they "swarm" "in a single motion" (7), rather like sparks swirling up from a fire. Sparks are more familiar territory for the angels, since, earlier in the *Paradiso*, the angels

have no visible bodies at all, but are “showers of light... sparks” (XXVIII.89-90), or, in one case, a “sweet lyre” (XXIII.101). Somehow, they sing in this disembodied form (XXIII.103-108; XXVIII.94). Even once they appear in humanlike forms, their bodies are scarcely mentioned at all. Aside from the three lines quoted above, the aforementioned wings are mentioned only twice, without further description: the angels have their “wings outstretched” (XXXI.130), and Gabriel has his “wings spread wide” (XXXII.96). Gabriel is also said to “burn like fire” (105) and to glow like “the morning star in fresh sunlight” (108). The descriptions of angels, while beautiful, avoid specific anatomy and favor bodiless energies such as light and fire.

If angels are barely embodied, while demons have specific anatomy, it would seem that the latter acquired a more embodied, anatomical nature by their fall into sin. It would appear, therefore, that though Dante intellectually affirms the value of the body by his frequent references to bodily resurrection, that in spirit he holds the body suspect, like so many of his classical forbears.

Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante. *The Portable Dante*. Ed. Mark Musa. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.