

# Inferno Canto 14

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## Canto XIV

### Argument

They arrive at the beginning of the third of those compartments into which this seventh circle is divided. It is a plain of dry and hot sand, where three kinds of violence are punished; namely, against God, against Nature, and against Art; and those who have thus sinned, are tormented by flakes of fire, which are eternally showering down upon them. Among the violent against God is found Capaneus, whose blasphemies they hear. Next, turning to the left along the forest of self - slayers, and having journeyed a little onward, they meet with a streamlet of blood that issues from the forest and traverses the sandy plain. Here Virgil speaks to our Poet of a huge ancient statue that stands within Mount Ida in Crete, from a fissure in which statue there is a dripping of tears, from which the said streamlet, together with the three other infernal rivers, are formed.

Soon as the charity of native land  
Wrought in my bosom, I the scatter'd leaves  
Collected, and to him restored, who now  
Was hoarse with utterance. To the limit thence  
We came, which from the third the second round  
Divides, and where of justice is display'd  
Contrivance horrible. Things then first seen  
Clearlier to manifest, I tell how next  
A plain we reach'd, that from its sterile bed  
Each plant repell'd. The mournful wood waves round  
Its garland on all sides, as round the wood  
Spreads the sad foss. There, on the very edge,  
Our steps we stay'd. It was an area wide  
Of arid sand and thick, resembling most  
The soil that erst by Cato's foot was trod.

Vengeance of heaven! Oh! how shouldst thou be fear'd  
By all, who read what here mine eyes beheld.

Of naked spirits many a flock I saw,  
All weeping piteously, to different laws  
Subjected; for on the earth some lay supine,  
Some crouching close were seated, others paced  
Incessantly around; the latter tribe  
More numerous, those fewer who beneath  
The torment lay, but louder in their grief.

O'er all the sand fell slowly wafting down  
Dilated flakes of fire, as flakes of snow  
On Alpine summit, when the wind is hush'd.  
As, in the torrid Indian clime, the son  
Of Ammon saw, upon his warrior band  
Descending, solid flames, that to the ground  
Came down; whence he bethought him with his troop  
To trample on the soil; for easier thus  
The vapor was extinguish'd, while alone:  
So fell the eternal fiery flood, wherewith  
The marle glow'd underneath, as under stove  
The viands, doubly to augment the pain.  
Unceasing was the play of wretched hands,  
Now this, now that way glancing, to shake off  
The heat, still falling fresh. I thus began:  
"Instructor! thou who all things overcomest,  
Except the hardy demons that rush'd forth  
To stop our entrance at the gate, say who  
Is yon huge spirit, that, as seems, heeds not  
The burning, but lies writhen in proud scorn,  
As by the sultry tempest immatured?"

Straight he himself, who was aware I ask'd  
My guide of him, exclaim'd: "Such as I was  
When living, dead such now I am. If Jove  
Weary his workman out, from whom in ire  
He snatch'd the lightnings, that at my last day  
Transfix'd me; if the rest he weary out,  
At their black smithy laboring by turns,  
In Mongibello, while he cries aloud,  
'Help, help, good Mulciber!' as erst he cried  
In the Phlegraean warfare; and the bolts  
Launch he, full aim'd at me, with all his might;  
He never should enjoy a sweet revenge."

Then thus my guide, in accent higher raised  
Than I before had heard him: "Capaneus!  
Thou art more punish'd, in that this thy pride  
Lives yet unquench'd: no torment, save thy rage,  
Were to thy fury pain proportion'd full."

Next turning round to me, with milder lip  
He spake: "This of the seven kings was one,  
Who girt the Theban walls with siege, and held,  
As still he seems to hold, God in disdain,  
And sets His high omnipotence at naught.  
But, as I told him, his despiteful mood  
Is ornament well suits the breast that wears it.

Follow me now; and look thou set not yet  
Thy foot in the hot sand, but to the wood  
Keep ever close." Silently on we pass'd  
To where there gushes from the forest's bound  
A little brook, whose crimson'd wave yet lifts  
My hair with horror. As the rill, that runs  
From Bulicame,[1] to be portion'd out  
Among the sinful women, so ran this  
Down through the sand; its bottom and each bank  
Stone - built, and either margin at its side,  
Whereon I straight perceived our passage lay.

[1: A warm medicinal spring near Viterbo; the waters of which, as Landino and Vellutelli affirm, passed by a place of ill - fame. Venturi conjectures that Dante would imply that it was the scene of licentious merriment among those who frequented its baths.]

"Of all that I have shown thee, since that gate  
We enter'd first, whose threshold is to none  
Denied, naught else so worthy of regard,  
As is this river, has thine eye discern'd,  
O'er which the flaming volley all is quench'd."

So spake my guide; and I him thence besought,  
That having given me appetite to know,  
The food he too would give, that hunger craved.

"In midst of ocean," forthwith he began,  
"A desolate country lies, which Crete is named;  
Under whose monarch, in old times, the world  
Lived pure and chaste. A mountain rises there,  
Call'd Ida, joyous once with leaves and streams,  
Deserted now like a forbidden thing.  
It was the spot which Rhea, Saturn's spouse,  
Chose for the secret cradle of her son;  
And better to conceal him, drown'd in shouts  
His infant cries. Within the mount, upright  
An ancient form there stands, and huge, that turns  
His shoulders toward Damiata; and at Rome,  
As in his mirror, looks. Of finest gold  
His head is shaped, pure silver are the breast  
And arms, thence to the middle is of brass,  
And downward all beneath well - temper'd steel,  
Save the right foot of potter's clay, on which  
Than on the other more erect he stands.  
Each part, except the gold, is rent throughout;  
And from the fissure tears distil, which join'd  
Penetrate to that cave. They in their course,  
Thus far precipitated down the rock,

Form Acheron, and Styx, and Phlegethon;  
Then by this straiten'd channel passing hence  
Beneath e'en to the lowest depth of all,  
Form there Cocytus, of whose lake (thyself  
Shalt see it) I here give thee no account."

Then I to him: "If from our world this sluice  
Be thus derived; wherefore to us but now  
Appears it at this edge?" He straight replied:  
"The place, thou know'st, is round: and though great part  
Thou have already past, still to the left  
Descending to the nethermost, not yet  
Hast thou the circuit made of the whole orb.  
Wherefore, if aught of new to us appear,  
It needs not bring up wonder in thy looks."

Then I again inquired: "Where flow the streams  
Of Phlegethon and Lethe? for of one  
Thou tell'st not; and the other, of that shower,  
Thou say'st, is form'd." He answer thus return'd:  
"Doubtless thy questions all well pleased I hear.  
Yet the red seething wave<sup>[2]</sup> might have resolved  
One thou proposest. Lethe thou shalt see,  
But not within this hollow, in the place  
Whither,<sup>[3]</sup> to lave themselves, the spirits go,  
Whose blame hath been by penitence removed."  
He added: "Time is now we quit the wood.  
Look thou my steps pursue: the margins give  
Safe passage, unimpeded by the flames;  
For over them all vapor is extinct."

[2: Phlegethon.]

[3: The other side of Purgatory]