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“Per acque nitide e tranquille.”

***The Free Will and Subjective Agency of Women in Dante
and Medieval Italian Literature.***

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of Marguerite Waller

Editors' Introduction

On the occasion of the 700th anniversary of Dante's death, this special volume is dedicated to the medieval literary representations of the free will and subjective agency of women in homage to the centrality of female actors in Dante Alighieri's poetic universe. The volume draws its title, "Per acque nitide e tranquille" ["Through Still and Limpid Water"], from the simile that Dante uses to describe his initial glimpse of the first souls he meets in Paradise upon entering the sphere of the Moon. Together, these lunar souls set the stage for Beatrice's long foreshadowed elucidation on the nature of free will and subjective agency:

Quali per vetri trasparenti e tersi,
o ver per acque nitide e tranquille,
.....
vid'io più facce a parlar pronte ...

As through clear, transparent glass
or through still and limpid water,
.....
I saw many faces eager to speak ...
(*Par.* 3.10-16)

The pilgrim turns around to find the people whose reflections he imagines he is seeing, only to discover, as Beatrice puts it, that his still juvenile intellect has misdirected his steps toward a meaningless void, and away from the reality before him (*Par.* 3.19-29).

Among the faces eager to speak are souls who failed in their vows, yet, being blessed, do not stray in their step. Piccarda Donati immediately frames her story in terms of just will and Divine will, even as she recounts her failure to maintain her sacred vow by submitting to the threat of violence. With one of her male siblings present in *Purgatorio* 24-25, and another ostensibly destined for hell (*Purg.* 24.82-84), Piccarda's subject identity in the *Commedia* is conspicuously framed in terms of her social role as sister to Forese Donati and to Corso Donati. The subject identity of her companion, the empress Costanza, is also explicitly framed in terms of her social role relative to two men in the *Commedia*: here as the mother of the eminent emperor Federico II (present in *Inf.* 10.119 and prominently featured in *Inf.* 13.58-69), and earlier, as grandmother to Manfredi

(*Purg.* 3.112-113). The two women share histories of having been forced into political marriages in violation of their sacred oaths of avowed chastity. Yet, despite their seemingly ancillary identities, Piccarda and Costanza provide the catalyzing premise for Beatrice's dissertation on the *Commedia's* core concern: the complex nature of free will and its role in shaping the fate of the soul.

Free will, pithily defined by Dante's Virgilio as the noble power to guide and constrain the soul's natural inclination and desires (*Purg.* 18.73), holds a place of central concern in the *Commedia*. The foundation for gauging an individual's responsibility for their actions and choices, freedom of the will accounts for the joy and acclaim for doing good, or misery and censure for doing ill. In this context, therefore, recognizing free will also implies acknowledging the agency of a subject capable of moral and ethical self-determination.

The passage chosen for the title of this collection of essays therefore synthesizes the subtle multiplicity of the themes that the volume's contributing authors explore. Primarily, the passage points to the perceptual errancy of the pilgrim who does not initially grasp the reality and legitimacy of female subjects who are prepared and eager to speak and act through their own agency. Here Dante mobilizes the semiology of the Narcissus myth and complex (*Par.* 3.17-20) to underscore the inherent fallacy of the male observer's solipsistic myopia in the presence of voluntarily edifying women. Additionally, by centering water imagery in the sphere of the Moon, this passage serves to evoke the symbolic correlation of lunar and tidal cycles with the natural periodicity of female sexual maturity, the physiological onset of which traditionally initiates women on a path of evolving social identities that prescribe the compass of their civic agency—be it as daughters and sisters, as wives, as widows, as mothers, or eventually as grandmothers.

The essays in this collection draw attention to how the medieval texts they explore articulate models of representation that frame the scope of women's agency based on established social roles, as well as how these texts interrogate or transgress prevailing tropes to advance critical conceptions of the free will and agency of the female subject. The contributors approach the topic from a variety of perspectives with probing queries: How do medieval writers—both male and female—characterize female psychology and the societal roles available to women? What are the criteria for accountability applied to the female subject in these texts? To what extent is the acclaim or censure of the subject's choices and actions transparently

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justifiable by these criteria? How do the literary characterizations of these conventions represent, commend, or even critique the female subject's compliance or contravention? How do medieval writers dramatize potential challenges to established boundaries of gender conventions? The questions that this volume poses pay attention to both creative and critical approaches to treating women's practical and discursive agency in poetry and narrative. In doing so, the volume also interrogates how the field historically dominated by male critics and scholars has shaped the lens through which these literary depictions are received. Throughout the collection, contributors explore how the functions women serve in their social, political, and religious roles correlate to both the literary representations—and corresponding critical reception—of the scope of women's civic engagement and intellectual authority.

Given Dante's assorted representations of the willful agency of women in the *Commedia* in its exploration of the expression of what drives, guides, or hinders even those who make reason subject to desire or capitulate to duress, the central point of departure for this collection is therefore to examine some of the ways Dante and his near contemporaries represent free will and the ethical, intellectual, and poetic authorities of women. The essays in this collection draw inspiration from such authors as Dante, Boccaccio, and Christine de Pizan to focus on stories of unrecognized resilience, transgressive behaviors, and ultimately free will and subjective agency.

Background Scholarship

In the last few years, several critics have approached the issue of women's agency in medieval Italian literature in ways that were not tried before. Marco Grimaldi (*La poesia che cambia*) has recently taken a radical stance against the whole discipline of gender studies and his chapter "Dante e le donne. Contro gli studi di genere" does not render justice to the rich scholarship in and new perspectives on medieval literature that Gender Studies has produced. To Grimaldi's credit, his warning against the risks of presentism and of idealizing Dante's attitude towards women is a call to avoid anachronisms and to apply philology, historicism, and cultural categories sensibly in literary scholarship. However, Grimaldi's immoderate skepticism ("gli 'studi di genere' non riescono a dire nulla di davvero nuovo e di decisivo sulla letteratura medievale e su Dante in particolare"; 60) leaves little room for debate and constructive discourse. One of the earliest Italian scholars to say something new and decisive about

medieval women was Chiara Frugoni. The great medieval historian, who passed away on April 9, 2022, began researching the depictions of women in medieval art as early as 1990, showing how women were regularly portrayed as meek, obedient, and silent—diminutive attributes that emphasized the dominating role of their husbands. In one of her last publications, *Donne medievali*, Frugoni analyzes some famous medieval women—Redegonda, Matilde di Canossa, Pope Joan, Christine de Pizan, and Margherita Datini—whose lives or works are taken as exemplary perspectives on gender dynamics in medieval society. Taking a cue from such historiographic scholarship, we can frame gender discourse in literature within the panorama of predominantly male early writers, prominent exceptions being Christine de Pizan, who wrote in French, and the Compiuta Donzella, whose identity and even gender are debated.

The recent surge in scholarship of critical reflections on how women are represented and allowed or denied agency in literature has taken different shapes and directions, and not necessarily always within the methodological or ideological precincts of a feminist approach. For example, Marguerite Waller—whose untimely death prevented her from contributing to this volume which we dedicate to her—employed a deconstructionist approach (“Sexualities and Knowledges”) to question current ideas of sex and sexuality in Dante’s poem and dismantle other typical binary notions (e.g. corporeal/incorporeal, singular/plural, and male/female linguistic gender) as they have been applied to the *Commedia*.

It is indeed possible to view Dante’s conceptualization of women in the *Commedia* as a unifying framework to be analyzed within the context of redemptive poetics: “in an era characterized by patrilineal authority, the *Comedy* endorses women’s role as active agents in the salvific process” (Diana Glenn, *Dante’s Reforming Mission*, xiii). Elsewhere, Glenn engages with powerful female figures of Dante’s masterwork, showing Francesca’s active upending of traditional gender roles and social norms in medieval Italy: the Riminese noblewoman recounts her adultery focusing on her own bodily desires and voicing her own story, as her lover, Paolo, remains silent (“Francesca da Rimini”).

Dante’s philogynous theology is the object of Raffaele Pinto’s attention: the indictment of men’s repression of women’s sexuality and physical liberty paradoxically becomes, in the *Commedia*, the foundation of women’s personal and literary freedom (Pinto 12). In fact, Pinto includes Petrarch and Boccaccio as important contributors

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to the creation of a western category of women readers, dedicatees, and potential authors of literary works: “le tre italianissime e fiorentine corone [hanno] aperto l’immaginario occidentale alle donne, intese come pubblico privilegiato della letteratura, poesia o romanzo, e quindi, potenzialmente, come autrici loro stesse di scrittura letteraria” (Pinto 10).

While Victoria Kirkham’s 2012 survey of historical women in the *Commedia* examines the numerological significance attached to specific figures and to the conception of the “female” and its role within the Great Chain of Being, Marco Santagata’s posthumously published *Le donne di Dante* is a monumental study of all the female figures, historical and fictional, who surrounded the life of the poet. Chapter 8 of Santagata’s volume is dedicated to the “Nobildonne di cui si parlava a Firenze,” and it includes: Francesca da Rimini, Pia (dei Tolomei or Pia dei Malavolti, as recent scholarship indicates), Cunizza da Romano, and Sapia Senese. Santagata shows Dante’s favorable portrayals of such women as Pia del Malavolti in *Purg.* V: “[a]lla base della decisione di Dante di assumere Pia come personaggio c’è proprio l’oscurità che ne avvolgeva la fine: la fa parlare per fare luce, denunciando la responsabilità del marito” (158). However, Santagata also casts Francesca da Rimini as a “cattiva lettrice” and “donna leggera” for projecting her own fantasies on the texts she has read—the Arthurian romance *Lancelot* and Andreas Cappellanus’ *De amore*—and misunderstands them (152-153). Thus, Santagata states, Dante does not in *Inferno* 5 revile the *Lancelot* (which the poet had praised in *De vulgari eloquentia* I.x.2 as “Arturi regis ambages pulcerrime”), but rather indicts Francesca’s poor approach to the text. If Santagata engages only tangentially with gender studies, *Le donne di Dante* offers an invaluable analysis of historical sources and data, scrutinized with the sharpest literary acuity and the most rigorous scholarship.

Although the Gender Studies approach to Petrarch’s work has been less abundant,¹ it has been very fruitful on Boccaccio’s side. A balanced assessment by Teodolinda Barolini (“The Marquis of Saluzzo”) strives to restore the final tale of the *Decameron* to its rightful owner: the Marquis Gualtieri of Saluzzo. As Boccaccio notes in the rubric of the tale, the story is about him rather than his wife Griselda, who has become the de facto protagonist in subsequent iterations and criticism. According to Barolini, the artificial agency that has been placed upon Griselda’s shoulders is a construction of later readers and may have originated in Petrarch’s reinvention of the

tale as an exemplar of the perfect wife. The Griselda story has continued to inspire writers for centuries, as Janet Smarr shows. Smarr's "Women Rewrite Griselda" examines the rewriting by five female authors, ranging from Christine de Pizan in her 1405 *Livre de la cité des dames* to later reworkings such as that by Louise-Geneviève Gillot de Saintonge, and all the way to the twentieth century, with Agnes Miegel, Caryl Churchill, and Julia Voznesenskaya, showing the long-lasting attractiveness of Boccaccio's core story of the exploited wife. The ethical discourse on gender of the *Decameron* has often been contrasted with the Certaldese's works presenting a strong vision of women: in "Boccaccio and Women," Marilyn Migiel questions whether the *Corbaccio* is a work of extreme misogyny, or a work of exquisite sarcasm against misogynists, while also pointing at the inconsistent positions of the narrator of the *De mulieribus claris*. Migiel continues her reflections in *The Ethical Dimension of the Decameron*, inviting readers to reconsider the gendered approach. The scholar shows the hermeneutical risks of envisioning a purely feminist or purely misogynist Boccaccio in any of his works through our contemporary presentist categories and instead encourages us to renounce the search for a consistent ideology about women in Boccaccio's oeuvre.

Kristina Olson ("The Language of Women") studies the complex dynamics of the gendered vernacular narrative in Dante's *Commedia* and Boccaccio's *Esposizioni sulla Commedia* and *Decameron*. Launching from the feminized image of the "mother tongue," Olson shows how Boccaccio locates his prose works within a new vernacular canon of literature, one that includes Dante and the *stilnovisti* and can hold its own in the newly forming humanist literary canon. Boccaccio was writing at a time when the vernacular as a literary language was in its initial stages and he noted in his *Esposizioni* that Dante's *Commedia* enjoyed limited success, particularly in comparison to Petrarch's Latin works, because it was "hidden in a cloud of female language" that was unintelligible to a broader Latin-reading audience. Such reflections on the gendering of the burgeoning language debate in the fourteenth century invests the vernacular with "maternal" attributes that offered nurturing succor and comfort to Dante in exile. However, they also reveal the perceived threat of "feminizing" its (male) audience. For example, Boccaccio's *Esposizioni* were a failed use of the vernacular because they "vernacularized" (and thus "feminized") an already vernacular text (Dante's *Commedia*). The *Decameron*, on the other hand, succeeded because it took up the baton where Dante had left off

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and moved in a new vernacular literary direction. Still, Boccaccio imagines that detractors will lament his use of the “gossipy” language of the contemporary woman instead of the illustrious language inspired by the classical muses. In the end, Olson argues, women might be the source, and perhaps even the judges, of the written vernacular, but it is still men who are wielding the language and acting as interlocutors and interpreters for their purported female readership.

Boccaccio’s “minor” works have also received continuous critical attention, as exemplified in Elsa Filosa’s *Tre studi sul De mulieribus claris* (2012). Filosa’s monograph focuses on Boccaccio’s treatise on famous women as the first collection of female biographies in the history of Western literature. Filosa shows how this revolutionary work of fiction established new ways of writing women by breaking certain representational idealizations and portraying women with more complex and realistic psychological profiles. Filosa’s article in the present volume continues in the same spirit, viewing Boccaccio’s female characters in *De mulieribus* as marking a cultural shift away from a stereotypical depiction of women, and paving the way to a more nuanced and introspective representation of female literary figures.

A recent book that perhaps best frames the gendered textual relationship of writers and readers in Dante’s time is Elena Lombardi’s *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante*. Lombardi shows how in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, female readers went beyond educational and devotional texts, as a result of a general increase in lay literacy and new, more open ideas about the practice of reading. In Dante’s early poems, both men and women play a role; in parallel, the new mixed-gender audience for lyric poetry multiplied possible responses to the texts. While the female addressee of love poems is often considered a mere screen for its male audience, Lombardi views the addressee as a powerful figure with agency, a potential critic of the poet since female readers may also offer criticism of the poems. Several important female readers of the Middle Ages, including Heloise, Alysoun of Bath in the *Canterbury Tales*, and of course, Francesca da Rimini and Boccaccio’s Griselda, find their way into Lombardi’s analysis of the female audience for many late medieval works, a fruitful vantage point from which the author can state that “Boccaccio, in particular in his early work, constructs his relation to his readership as one of lover to beloved, thus realizing in full the suggestions of his lyric predecessors and of Dante” (190).

A notable example of the vibrant currency of contemporary interest in the representation of women in Medieval literature is the project directed by Laura Ingallinella at Wellesley College to create publicly available Wikipedia entries on the women in Dante's *Commedia*. Realized in collaboration with Wiki Education—a non-profit initiative that supports higher-education professionals and students to become Wikipedia editors—the project mobilized undergraduate students of the *Commedia* from Wellesley College working with English translations of the poem to rewrite existing entries or to compose new entries for key characters and themes in the poem, with an explicit focus on the medieval women represented or mentioned by Dante. Ingallinella's team produced over sixteen new or significantly improved entries that drew millions of viewers during the project's period of development and following. In the second year, the program was extended to other topics and characters from the poem based on critical inquiries about the *Commedia* generated by students. Details of the project, including its design, workflow, and goals are available in the forthcoming publication: Laura Ingallinella, "Foul Tales, Public History: Bringing Dante's *Commedia* to Wikipedia," *Bibliotheca Dantesca*, special issue "Dante and the Digital Humanities," eds. Elizabeth Coggeshall and Akash Kumar (vol. 5, 2022).

To conclude this survey, a volume of proceedings is forthcoming, edited by Simona Lorenzini e Deborah Pellegrino (*Women's Agency*), that collects interventions presented on April 23, 2021, at a conference organized by Yale University and Kent State University. All these important works testify to the liveliness and relevance of research in Gender Studies for medieval Italian literature, to which the present collection contributes.

Essay Summaries

This volume includes nine essays that engage the topic from a variety of perspectives. Taking into account literary representations that frame the scope of women's agency that reflect established social roles, the contributing scholars explore critical conceptions of the free will and agency of the female subject in the works of Dante Alighieri and near contemporaries, including Giovanni Boccaccio and Christine de Pizan. Further consideration is given to elements of the representation of women further afield during this period of the fourteenth century. The seasoned and emerging scholars of Medieval Italian Literature whose essays appear in this collection developed

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their contributions during the Dantean year 2021, each reexamining established paradigms of reception and proposing new perspectives.

The opening essay, “Beatrice *ammiraglio*: Master and Commander of Poetic Authority in Dante’s *Commedia*” by Catherine Adoyo revisits how the poet’s representation of Beatrice consistently subverts gendering tropes throughout his body of work and invests the figure of Beatrice with unimpeachable authority rooted in the rhetorical poetic legacy of the Ancient Mediterranean tradition. The study demonstrates how Dante mines the currency of the nautical metaphor as poetic enterprise to clarify the significance of the simile equating Beatrice to an admiral upon her arrival in Terrestrial Paradise. Adoyo observes that while commentary and criticism have traditionally framed Beatrice’s presentation as jarringly masculine and recoiled at its disregard for conventions of the *descriptio mulieris*, especially as object of desire pleasing to the male gaze, that same tradition has failed to discern the intertextual saturation of the poet’s chosen term “ammiraglio” with a poetic convention of the ancient Mediterranean literary tradition. With a singular rhetorical flourish, the term illuminates the compass of Beatrice’s dominion as the arbiter of meaning in Dante’s unprecedented poetics of revelation.

In “The Eloquent Witness: Women’s Testimony and Hermeneutical Insurrection in Dante’s *Commedia*,” Laura Ingallinella reads the *Commedia* through the lens of hermeneutic injustice to illuminate Dante’s poetic challenge to the epistemic exclusion of women’s agency through the voices of Francesca, Pia, Sapia, Piccarda, and Cunizza. Ingallinella is able to show how Dante represents women as knowledgeable witnesses to their own experience of human bonds and divine justice by emphasizing their testimonial authority and juridical power. In doing so, Dante subverts the rhetorical toolkit of courteousness, reticence, and modesty that are traditionally assigned to female eloquence. Dante’s *Commedia* thereby carves a rhetorical space that encompasses several instantiations of gendered hermeneutical defiance.

Sara Diaz interrogates the form and function of female sexual agency within the *Commedia* in “Francesca da Rimini and Beatrice d’Este: Female Desire, Consent, and Coercion in Dante’s *Commedia*.” Focusing on the civic function of marriage as the only morally sanctioned locus for female sexuality, Diaz juxtaposes the sexually transgressive lovers in *Inferno* 5 represented by Francesca da Rimini and the civically exemplary societies represented by the chaste wives of Cacciaguida’s Florence. Underscoring the

misanthropic implications of Francesca's erotic infraction, Diaz argues that Dante's portrayal of Cacciaguida's happy matrons as paragons of wifely virtue aligns their healthy sexual practices with the moral, familial, and civic well-being of his ancestor's bygone utopia in ways that shed light on the anti-social implications of Francesca's erotic subjectivity.

"The Widow's Predicament: Imperatives of Fidelity and Prayer in the *Commedia*" by Christina Lopez examines the salvific potentialities of women in the *Commedia*, and especially widows. On this score, Lopez draws attention to the contrast between the shade of Dido, a widow expressly identified as she who "ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo" (*Inf.* 5.62), and the still-living widows of Nino Visconti (*Purg.* 8) and Forese Donati (*Purg.* 23). Lopez further highlights the significant role of both widows by underscoring the distinction that the poet makes: for while Nino Visconti fears that his remarried wife has forgotten about him completely and does little to advance his progress in Purgatory, Forese credits his wife's constant prayer for his speedy passage through the realm's rehabilitating terraces. Lopez makes the case that the social imperative on widows to seek out new partners does not accommodate the potential to remain spiritually and sexually loyal to their deceased husbands. Lopez thereby contrasts the social norms surrounding widowhood with Dante's treatment of widows, illustrating a crucial component of how the poet represents women in the *Commedia*.

Tonia Bernardi Triggiano's "Dream, Distortion, and Double Take: Dante's Poetics of Redirection" explores how female agents who guide the pilgrim's passage ensure the imperative of redirection in the *Commedia* through overt instruction by correcting the pilgrim's visual and imaginative misperceptions through nocturnal dreams, optical distortion, and gestural double-takes. Starting with Maria, Lucia, and Beatrice—the triad of *donne benedette* who set the pilgrim's journey in motion—Triggiano draws attention to the various roles of women who serve to correct the pilgrim's progress. Examples include how Lucia facilitates the pilgrim's physical relocation, while the *femmina balba*, in her capacity as both subject and object of distortion in the pilgrim's double vision of self-discovery, dramatizes the struggle of deliberation admonished by the *donna santa*. Additional examples include Leah (and Rachel by implication) as marker of re-equilibrated will, as well as Beatrice and Piccarda who collaborate to correct the pilgrim's mistaken perception at the threshold of *Paradiso*.

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In her essay “‘Facce a parlar pronte’: Imagining Gendered Textual Communities in Dante’s *Vita Nova* and Occitan Songbook *H*,” Katherine Travers proposes reading gender as another axis along which the Occitan tradition dialogues with the *Vita Nova*, particularly through the figure of the speaking woman. Placing Dante’s representations of women as readers, recipients, and speakers, in a broader cultural context, Travers compares Dante’s representations of speaking women to those found in an Occitan songbook, known as manuscript *H* (Vatican Latin 3207). This manuscript, made around Padua in the late *Duecento*, was destined for an Italian, *borghese* readership and contains the single largest extant collection of *trobairitz* (women troubadours)—that is, representations of women who speak. Travers posits that in describing the pilgrim’s perception of the souls encountered in the Sphere of the Moon as immaterial reflections (“specchiati sembianti”; *Par.* 3.20), seen through glass or through water (“per acque nitide”; *Par.* 3.11), Dante provides an analog for our own mediated and partial perception of women readers and poets represented in Italian culture of the late *Duecento*.

Alessandro Vettori’s “Dante, Lady Poverty, and the Donation of Constantine” offers a historical reappraisal of Dante’s critique of the corrupting consequences of the Donation of Constantine in conjunction with the poet’s figurative personification of Francesco d’Assisi’s repudiation of material wealth. Taking into account Dante’s unequivocal condemnation of usury as a cause of moral decay, Vettori underscores the importance of Bernard Clairvaux’s participation as a representative of the austere Cistercians in the *Commedia*’s criticism of the culture of money in certain religious orders. Vettori also discusses how the evocation of Lady Poverty as Francesco’s bride in the poem’s praise of the Saint in *Paradiso* 11 bears strong similarities with the representation of Poverty in the *Sacrum commercium Sancti Francisci cum Domina Paupertate*, a possible source of inspiration in Dante’s portrait of Francesco and his relationship to poverty.

With “*De mulieribus claris*: a New and Humanistic Portrait of Women,” Elsa Filosa presents the first of two essays in this collection that focus on Boccaccio’s representations of women. Filosa elaborates how Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*, the first collection of female biographies in the history of Western literature, constitutes a revolutionary work of fiction and a cultural artifact that established new ways of representing women in writing. Filosa further discusses how, compared to the practice of cataloguing brief women’s biographies during the Middle Ages, Boccaccio is the first

European author to portray women realistically in his writings, eschewing idealized profiles or purely figurative representations. In this respect, *De mulieribus* marks a cultural shift away from a stereotypical depiction of women, paving the way for portraying women with greater complexity and nuance in literature.

Viviana Pezzullo’s “Reimagining Griselda: Christine de Pizan’s Rewriting of Boccaccio” is an illuminating comparative reading of a singular iconic character as envisioned by both a male and a female writer. Accepting Giovanna Angeli’s invitation to scholars to further examine Christine de Pizan’s reading of Boccaccio (“La Griselda di Christine de Pizan”, 2015), Pezzullo investigates the character of Griselda both in *La cité des dames* and the *Decameron*, discussing how Christine’s strategic changes to Boccaccio’s source material fosters the former’s agenda of advocating for female agency. While restoring Griselda’s authority, Christine also affirms her own authorship in a male world. Indeed, Christine strips Griselda of the halo of piety that characterized her in Boccaccio’s text and turns her into a symbol of resistance against the abuses men inflict on women. Pezzullo also uses the illuminated manuscript Pal. Lat. 1989 which contains a copy of the *Decameron* to reflect on how the Master of *La Cité des dames* visually represents Griselda’s body which is described differently by Christine and by Boccaccio.

Even as it reflects the continued interest among readers and scholars of Dante and of Medieval Literature to explore the representation of women in increasingly complex and subtle ways, this volume endeavors to cultivate nascent and innovative approaches to reading the representations of women’s agency in the early modern literature of Dante and his near contemporaries. As the readers of Dante continue to become ever more discerning and engagement with Medieval literature gets more sophisticated with respect to current affairs and contemporary issues, this volume ventures to provide a forum for new perspectives on the hermeneutics of representation concerning women in Medieval Literature.

The editors and contributing authors of this collection look forward to welcoming and engaging further critical interrogations of both historical and contemporary receptions of these representations.

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INTRODUCTION

NOTES

¹ On Petrarch and Gender Studies, in addition to Olson (see below) and Pinto, see the 1994 monograph by Laura L. Estrin and a chapter (“Women of Stone: Gender and Politics in the Petrarchan World”, pp. 17-67) in Aileen Feng’s 2017 *Writing Beloveds*. Conversely, Petrarchism and Renaissance poetry have received much attention in Gender Studies, also thanks to the first women writing in Italian language. In addition to the vast critical literature on Italian women writers, I would recommend Federico Sanguineti, *La storia letteraria in poche righe* for a short and incisive perspective.

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SECTION 1
LITERATURE

Beatrice ammiraglio: Master and Commander of Poetic Authority in Dante's *Commedia*.

*...e donna mi chiamò beata e bella,
tal che di comandare io la richiesi.*

.....
«O donna di virtù, ...

.....
*tanto m'aggrada il tuo comandamento,
che l'ubidir, se già fosse, m'è tardi;
più non t'è uo' ch'apirmi il tuo talento.»*
(*Inf.* 2.53-81)¹

Enter Beatrice

Few encounters in the *Commedia* rival the shocking and seemingly perplexing effect of Beatrice's initial appearance to Dante in the thirtieth canto of *Purgatorio*.² To the newly confident Florentine poet who has gone through hell, scaled impossible heights, and even plunged into flames so searing that he imagines molten glass a welcome relief—all just to reach her—Beatrice's words and mien both come as a withering rebuke of his intellectual and poetic shortcomings. With the very first and only utterance of his name in the poem, Beatrice makes it clear that her pronouncements and demeanor are unequivocally intended for the Florentine pilgrim:

«Dante, perché Virgilio³ se ne vada,
non pianger anco, non pianger ancora;
ché pianger ti conven per altra spada».
Quasi ammiraglio che in poppa e in prora
viene a veder la gente che ministra
per li altri legni, e a ben far l'incora;
in su la sponda del carro sinistra,
quando mi volsi al suon del nome mio,
che di necessità qui si registra,
vidi la donna che pria m'appario
velata sotto l'angelica festa,
drizzar li occhi ver' me di qua dal rio.

[“Dante, though Virgilio be gone,
do not weep, do not weep yet—
there is another sword to make you weep.”

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Just like an admiral who moves from stern to prow
to see the men that serve the other ships
and urge them on to better work,
so on the left side of the chariot—
as I turned when I heard her call my name,
which of necessity is here recorded—
I saw the lady, who had just appeared
veiled beneath the angels' celebration,
fix her eyes on me from across the stream.]
(*Purg.* 30.55-66)

The analogy of Beatrice's bearing to a vigilant admiral has occasioned some discomfort among critics and inspired innumerable meditations on what many consider a "peculiarly masculine image" (Scott 29-39).⁴ Building on interpretive themes articulated by André Pézard (19) and Robert Hollander (ch. 3 and 4), J.A. Scott, expressing deep and abiding discomfort, suggests an allegorical reading of the simile in which its "striking masculinity" may be accounted for by Beatrice's function as a *figura Christi* who "proves herself the true guide or *ammiraglio* across the sea of *cupiditas*" (37). Elaborating further, Scott surmises that

it is this analogy that provided an essential motive for Dante's use of this image, which comes near to ruining the description of Beatrice's preternatural beauty and the love he still felt for the woman he had known and cherished in Florence. (37)

Alongside Beatrice's Christological symbolism,⁵ Scott insists on seeing Beatrice in such decidedly mundane terms as "the woman" beloved of the poet. It appears that despite the Christological justification that Scott leans on to account for both the "masculine" language in the announcement of Beatrice's arrival and the *ammiraglio* analogy, the perceived gender incongruity proves too opaque a lens for the critic who remains "unhappy about the aesthetic impact of Dante's simile." Providing pithy expression of additional incongruities that have troubled commentators, Scott further summarizes the objections that have been raised by critics over the years as follows:

every other detail in Dante's description depicts Beatrice's hieratic immobility rather than an admiral pacing his quarterdeck, let alone rushing from bow to stern. And, in any

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case, where are “la gente che ministra / per li altri legni” and how may Beatrice be said to encourage them? There are too many niggling doubts left in our minds for us to accept this as the successful evocation of *the woman* whose appearance the poet had so triumphantly caught in vv.21-39. (39)

The foundation for Scott’s objection to the *ammiraglio* simile is, ironically, in fact the very fallacy for which Beatrice rebukes the pilgrim upon his arrival in the Terrestrial Paradise: namely, that of seeing her primarily as an object of erotic ideal and failing to understand and act upon her semiotic function as a mortal signifier of the Divine. The critic thus strays into a reader-subjective cul-de-sac with no objectively edifying consequent.

The fog of indignation conjured by the masculist polemics of Pézard, Hollander, and Scott—among others—throws an obfuscating shroud over the depth and lucidity of Dante’s distinct representation of authority in his *magnum opus*. For, as Barolini articulates,⁶ Beatrice—the most important character in the *Commedia* drawn from among Dante’s contemporaries—does not conform to the reductive parameters of the *descriptio mulieris* extant in the literature of the poet’s time. This essay offers a three-part forensic analysis of Dante’s representation of Beatrice as the authority of the *Commedia*’s poetics of revelation.

The first part of this analysis uses the lens of Judith Butler’s critique of the performative ontology of gendering to examine how Dante’s composition of the figure of Beatrice consistently subverts the standard tropes of the *descriptio mulieris*. Juxtaposing Dante’s meeting with Beatrice in the Terrestrial Paradise’s *divina foresta* (*Purg.* 28.2) with his first encounter with Virgilio on the outskirts of the *selva oscura* (*Inf.* 1.2) illuminates how the text contrapuntally prefigures and establishes the poem’s investment in Beatrice’s authority.

The second part of this analysis comprises a survey of the currency of nautical metaphors as signifiers of the poetic enterprise within the rhetorical legacy from which Dante draws both the material and skill of his craft. The survey, in turn, provides the poetic context for deciphering the figurative meaning of the term *ammiraglio* in order to respond to Scott’s query to Dante’s simile: “where are ‘la gente che ministra / per li altri legni’ and how may Beatrice be said to encourage them?”

The third part of this study brings focus back to the primary text of the *Commedia*, enumerating how Dante uses nautical metaphors that signify poetic composition to chart a clear course leading to the announcement of Beatrice's authoritative function as admiral, the master and commander of Dante's unprecedented poetics of revelation.

“The Woman” as Gendered Object

Between the *Vita Nova* and the *Commedia*, Dante not only goes to great lengths to develop Beatrice as a poetic figure, he is also breathtakingly bold in laying and declaring the poetic foundation of her authority in the *Commedia*. The most significant part of this process is the fact that the poet of the *Commedia* does all of this while also exploding established tropes of gender performativity, very much to the confusion and discomfort of “historically mostly male commentators” (Barolini), critics, and even casual readers.

Reading Dante's Beatrice through the lens of Judith Butler's discourse on gendering exposes the critical fissures in the commentary tradition which has, for nigh near seven centuries, willfully striven to nullify the way Dante neutralizes conventionally gendered portrayals of his muse and guide. Butler's intuition to scrutinize gender as an identity attribute that is conjured by the expectation of its affirmation through performative gestures is the key to contextualizing the discomfort and disappointment critics express about the way Dante confounds these expectations. Among the female-gender-affirming performative gestures codified in the *descriptio mulieris* trope are activities and occupations that include dancing, singing, chanting, sighing, marrying, bearing children, raising them. Butler summarizes how these conventional gendering indicators frame the female in terms of her function not only as an object of the male subject's erotic desire, but also pragmatically, in her role as bride and mother, as “the object of exchange that both consolidates and differentiates kinship relations” (38). Furthermore, the woman is a commodity, “the gift” that “opens a channel of exchange that not only serves the functional purpose of facilitating trade, but also performs the symbolic or ritualistic purpose of consolidating the internal bonds, the collective identity, of each clan differentiated through the [institution of marriage]” (Butler 39).

The souls of several historical women notably wronged and dishonored in service to this reductive concept of the woman as commodity are prominently featured in epistemically pivotal roles at

the threshold of each *cantica* along the pilgrim's itinerary in the *Commedia*. The first soul to recount the story of her unhappy fate in *Inferno* proper is Francesca, a sympathetically eloquent speaker whose surrender to carnal appetite over reason by way of Paolo's tremulous kiss transgresses the kinship bonds secured by her marriage to his brother (*Inf.* 5.107; *Inf.* 6.2). In *Purgatorio*, Pia declares that the manner of her death is known to him who claimed her hand in matrimony (*Purg.* 5.133-136). Meeting the pilgrim at the beginning of his journey through *Paradiso*, Piccarda is first introduced as the sister of the penitent Forese Donati (*Purg.* 24.10-15) and the doomed Corso Donati (*Purg.* 24.79-87) who forced his sister out of the convent against her will and into a politically expedient marriage (*Par.* 3.97-108). The burdens of consolidating kinship bonds and sustaining the Hohenstaufen clan's hereditary dominion accumulate on the shoulders of Piccarda's companion in the Sphere of the Moon, the Empress Costanza (*Par.* 3.109-120); born the daughter of Ruggero II, King of Sicily and Africa, Costanza, too, was taken from the convent against her will (*Par.* 3.113-117) and compelled to marry the Emperor Henry VI for whom she bore a son, the Emperor Frederick II (see *Inf.* 10.119; *Inf.* 13.58-69), who in turn made her the grandmother of yet another King of Sicily, Manfredi (*Purg.* 3.113).⁷

Scott's reproachful discomfort with Dante's choice to present "the woman" Beatrice as "quasi ammiraglio" finds fault with the poet's failure to frame her in the beguiling gendering conventions of the *descriptio mulieris* intended to service the pilgrim's erotic fantasy; indeed, the fact that Dante avoids presenting Beatrice in ways that reiterate and legitimize the dominion of the heterosexual matrix described by Butler (47 ff.) apparently compounds both the passage's poetic and rational deficiencies in Scott's estimation. Clearly absent in Beatrice's severe comportment in this simile is the traditional repertoire of performative gestures attributable to the feminine. In fact, unlike some of the other female figures in the *Commedia*, never in Dante's work does Beatrice engage in any such alluring gestures, nor occupy prescribed roles as object or commodity. With apparent disregard for the efforts and gender truisms of posterity's patriarchal glossators, Dante is meticulous not to saddle Beatrice with the symbolic identities that frame her purpose and function in service to the heterosexual matrix; never do the poet's works introduce Beatrice in terms that identify her as either the mother or the wife of any man in particular. Not even in relating the death of her father in the *Vita nova* does the poet circumscribe

Beatrice's identity as the decedent's daughter, preferring rather to discuss the significance of the paternal-filial bond in general ethical terms. Equally conspicuous, when describing Beatrice's aspect and comportment, is the poet's silence where the traditional repertoire of physical attributes ascribed to the feminine object of desire are concerned; In pronounced contrast to these conventions, never is the color of Beatrice's hair mentioned, nor the shape of her lips or brow, nor her height, nor heft in Dante's *œuvre* (Picone 15-16). Any illustrator attempting to render an image of Beatrice based on textual clues provided by Dante would be hard-pressed to even draw a silhouette of the lady.⁸

The effort the poet exerts to neutralize conventional gendered imagery when presenting Beatrice extends to the way he represents the power of her subjective agency and authority without the mediating intervention of the putatively masculine characterization Scott imagines. Dante's descriptions of the lady center primarily on her actions: her eagerly sought salutation in the *Vita nova* and her ineffable smile in *Paradiso* have a powerful influence on his composure at any given moment.⁹ In other words, whether in the *Vita nova* or the *Commedia*, eroticized physiological signifiers of sex or gender codified to service the demands of the heterosexual matrix and enforce the restrictions it imposes on women are irrelevant to the role that Beatrice occupies as the voice of authority in the *Commedia's* poetics of revelation.

In what is perhaps the most incisive palinode of Dante's self-censure, Beatrice herself rejects the objectifying gaze of the enamored pilgrim in powerfully declared first-person subjectivity as she proceeds to disabuse him of his puerile infatuation and teach him to recognize and acknowledge her edifying semiological function:

«guardaci ben! ben son, ben son Beatrice.»
 [“Behold! Indeed I am, indeed I am Beatrice.”]
 (*Purg.* 30.73)

The onomastic identifier that Dante first mentions in *Vita nova*—“la gloriosa donna de la mia mente, la quale fu chiamata da molti Beatrice” (*VN.* 1.1)—bespeaks her ontology as an autonomous subject, the willful agent whose sets the pilgrim's journey in motion by recruiting Virgilio at the behest of Dante's other celestial benefactors, Santa Lucia and Maria, the Mother of God, herself:

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«i' son Beatrice che ti faccio andare.»

[“I, who bids you go, am Beatrice.”]

(*Inf.* 2.70-2)

Gorni provides the most persuasive key to understanding Beatrice in the *Commedia* when he argues that she is primarily a textual figure whose very ontology is inherent in, and conveyed by, her name (19-44). In underscoring the lady's ontology as text, Picone, in turn, notes that Beatrice's corporeal aspect plays a negligible part in the vicissitudes of the *Vita nova*; even in the *Commedia*, the beauty of this “*donna beata e bella*” registers primarily as a function of the effect her bearing and radiance have on the awestruck pilgrim.

Furthermore, from a strictly linguistic perspective, the “masculine” references to Beatrice are perfectly coherent in purely grammatical terms with her role in the pilgrim's journey. Beatrice's appearance to the pilgrim in the Terrestrial Paradise is first in a role as *judex* and, as this study will demonstrate, the description of her bearing as *ammiraglio* is simply a practical and poetically efficient way of representing the breadth of her authority in Dante's new poetics. Subsequently, Beatrice's stewardship of the pilgrim through the Celestial Paradise is explicitly and consistently as his *doctor*. In all three cases, the term designating the role is linguistically masculine; the same candor with which Dante assigns a maternal role to Virgilio as the occasion merits (see *Inf.* 23.37-45 and *Purg.* 30.43-45)¹⁰ without feminizing him applies to characterizing the lady who comes to first judge him and then lead him into the realm of ultimate revelation without masculinizing her.

Anima fia a ciò più di me degna...

The contrapuntal elements in Virgilio's and Beatrice's respective roles as Dante's primary guides through his three-part itinerary are notable from the very first *canto* of *Inferno* when Virgilio informs the pilgrim that he will only lead his ward through two of the realms before entrusting him to another more worthy guide (*Inf.* 1.121-126). In an exploration of poetic authority in the *Commedia* like the one this study undertakes, a comparative juxtaposition of parallel features in the two guides proves illuminating. Unlike the figure of Virgilio, an anthropomorphic expression of the metonymic synthesis of the Florentine poet's Vergilian heritage, Beatrice exists in Dante's world as his own poetic invention. Beyond the particulars of her being

female, young, beautiful, wise, and authoritative, Dante goes even further than other poets and philosophers have done¹¹ with comparably fair muses in presenting her as a truly potent symbol of poetic authority. So comprehensive is Beatrice's command in the *Commedia* that she is not only the one who assigns Virgilio the task of leading Dante safely out of his predicament in the *selva oscura* and the *fiumana ove 'l mar non ha vanto*, she also wields the power to correct and clarify the pilgrim's inherited misapprehensions and internal conflicts about theological mysteries and philosophical questions as she guides him through *Paradiso*.

The body of scholarship that interrogates the various problematic aspects of Dante-pilgrim's and Dante-narrator's relationship with Virgilio generally focuses on the *Commedia*'s reservations about Virgilio's authority. This study proposes to supplement that work by juxtaposing the dynamics of the pilgrim's and the Roman poet's meeting at the beginning of *Inferno* with Dante's and Beatrice's initial encounter in Terrestrial Paradise. The complementary and contrapuntal nature of four specific elements in both encounters pithily contextualizes the deeper consequence of Beatrice's stewardship within the poem's program of authorization: (a) the affective atmosphere in the moment of encounter; (b) the ambiance of the setting; (c) the linguistic subject identity of the two guides; and lastly, (d) the nature of the query posed by both guides upon meeting Dante.

Chi per lungo silenzio pareo fioco...

(a) The meeting with Virgilio occurs in an atmosphere of deep, dispiriting silence and occupies a discreet 30 lines in *Inf.* 1.61-90. Virgilio, appearing before Dante at Beatrice's behest, is a barely discernible shade that is further obscured to near imperceptibility by the deep silence from which he emerges. The pilgrim he encounters has all but completely lost hope of ascending the luminous hill before him.

Mentre ch'i' rovinava in basso loco,
dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto
chi per lungo silenzio pareo fioco.

[While I was fleeing to a lower place,
before my eyes a figure appeared,
faint, in the wide silence.]

(*Inf.* 1.61-63)

(b) The setting of this meeting is a bleak “gran diserto.” The atmosphere of desperation and deep desolation reverberates in the pilgrim’s first words to the apparition echoing David’s supplication for mercy uttered repeatedly throughout the *Psalms*: “Misere mei.”¹²

Quando vidi costui nel gran diserto,
«Miserere di me», gridai a lui,
«qual che tu sii, od ombra od omo certo!».

[When I saw him in that vast desert,
“Have mercy on me, whatever you may be,”
I cried, “whether shade or living man!”]
(*Inf.* 1.64-66)

(c) The apparition’s initial response, “Non omo” [“Not human”], to the pilgrim’s query about his identity is grammatically distinctive for the conspicuous absence in it of the principal verb of being, “essere” [“to be”], that ordinarily indicates the linguistic subject in its moment of utterance. Instead of answering with a simple nominal predicate in the present tense, “Non *sono* uomo” [“I am not human”], the apparition relegates the subject-identifying verb of *being* to the preterite, “omo già *fui*” [“I once *was* human”], a perfect tense that makes the absence of the present tense “sono” [“I am”] all the more glaring in the initial locution that bears the linguistic weight of the speaker’s agency.

The significance of this verbo-temporal detail in Virgilio’s first utterance is especially transparent when read through the lens of Émile Benveniste’s analysis of Language and Subjectivity (“De la subjectivité” 262). According to Benveniste, the semiotic versatility of personal subject pronouns resides in their capacity, as otherwise empty signifiers, to extemporaneously designate the concrete referent in a linguistic instance of enunciation when the subject speaks the first-person pronoun, “I”, in the present tense.¹³ Subject identity and agency in language is therefore contingent upon and marked by the pronoun in time. So, although the figure of Virgilio *is* in fact present before the pilgrim, and he is speaking, he very deliberately does not immediately assert his subjective agency in that present moment of self-identification.

Virgilio’s apparition then proceeds to linguistically reiterate, always in the preterite, his defunct subjectivity as he enumerates his history as the son of a Lombard family from Mantova; specifies the

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historical era of his birth; identifies where he spent that life geographically; defines both the political and religious contexts in which he lived; and concludes with a note on his professional life as poet, providing identifying clues about his most iconic work, the *Aeneid*:

Rispuosemi: «Non omo, omo già fui,
e li parenti miei furon lombardi,
mantoani per patria ambedui.
Nacqui sub Iulio, ancor che fosse tardi,
e vissi a Roma sotto 'l buono Augusto
nel tempo de li déi falsi e bugiardi.
Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto
figliuol d'Anchise che venne di Troia,
poi che 'l superbo Ilión fu combusto.»

[He answered: “Not human, though once I was.
My parents were from Lombardy—
Mantua was their homeland.
I was born *sub Julio*, though late in his time,
and lived in Rome, under good Augustus
in an age of false and lying gods.
I was a poet and I sang
of that just son of Anchises who came from Troy
after proud Ilium was put to flame.”]
(*Inf.* 1.67-75)

(d) Having thus identified himself in the preterite, Virgilio now addresses Dante in the present tense, asking him to explain his reluctance to ascend the luminous source of all joy:

«Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?
perché non sali il diletto monte
ch'è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?».

[“But you, why are you turning back to misery?
Why do you not climb the peak of delight,
origin and cause of every joy?”]
(*Inf.* 1.76-78)

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This is the pair's initial encounter, and the Roman poet does not address the pilgrim by name, nor does he inquire about his identity. Rather, the topic of Virgilio's query is the pilgrim's circumstance and motivation, his questions posed to elicit information that verifies whether the lost soul before him is the one whom Beatrice sent him to aid—a friend “so hindered on his way upon the desert slope / that, in his terror, he has turned back” («ne la diserta piaggia è impedito / sì nel cammin, che volt'è per paura»; *Inf.* 2.62-63).

It is left to the pilgrim to name Virgilio in recognition, finally speaking the Mantuan poet into the present tense and establishing his agency in subjective correlation¹⁴ with his woebegone interlocutor. Furthermore, Dante affirms Virgilio's stature among poets, zealously avowing his own discipular devotion:

«Or, *sei* tu quel Virgilio, quella fonte
che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?

.....

Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore»

[“*Are* you indeed Virgil, the fountainhead
that pours forth so full a stream of speech?”

.....

You are my teacher and my author”]

(Inf. 1.79-85)

Sovra candido vel cinta d'uliva donna m'apparve...

Juxtaposing the four elements summarized above (affective atmosphere, ambiance, linguistic subject identity, and the guide's query to the pilgrim) in Dante's encounter with Beatrice reveals some illuminating counterpoints in the poem's program of authorization:

(a) Compared to the ominous apparition of Virgilio which materializes in the deep shade of silence, Beatrice's brilliantly attired figure emerges in jubilation and resplendent glory:

Io vidi già nel cominciar del giorno
la parte oriental tutta rosata,
e l'altro ciel di bel sereno addorno;
e la faccia del sol nascere ombrata,
sì che per temperanza di vapori
l'occhio la sostenea lunga fiata:

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così dentro una nuvola di fiori
che da le mani angeliche saliva
e ricadeva in giù dentro e di fori,
sovra candido vel cinta d'uliva
donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto
vestita di color di fiamma viva.

[At break of day, I have seen the sky,
its eastern parts all rosy
and the rest serene and clear
even as the sun's face rose obscured
so that through tempering mist
the eye could bear it longer,
thus, within that cloud of blossoms
rising from angelic hands and fluttering
back down into the chariot and around it,
olive-crowned above a veil of white
appeared to me a lady, beneath a green mantle,
dressed in the color of living flame.]

(Purg. 30.22-33)

The olive wreath crowning Beatrice is a telling adornment that foreshadows her severity toward the pilgrim. For unlike the laurel wreath which figuratively represents the art of poetry guided by Apollo, the olive wreath represents the aegis of Minerva,¹⁵ who, in Ovid's words, "mille dea est operum: certe dea carminis illa est" ["is goddess of a thousand works: certainly the goddess of song"] (*Fasti* 3.833). Known for her wisdom and skill in craft and strategy, Minerva is also fiercely exacting and does not tolerate either willful mediocrity or hubris in those endowed with the intellectual and artistic gifts she administers. Thus radiantly self-assured, Beatrice's arrival is directly preceded by mellifluous singing that fills the air of the Terrestrial Paradise followed by a solemnly reverend procession that metonymically personifies the Books of both the Old and the New Testament, complete with hermeneutic apparatus that include, among other personified allegories, Graces and Virtues rejoicing in dance. A thunderous trumpet call rings out as they stop, and a host of angels saturate the air with torrential cascades of flowers and jubilant songs of praise and welcome.

(b) In contrast to the desolation of the "gran deserto" in which the pilgrim cries out in despair just before meeting Virgilio's apparition,

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the Terrestrial Paradise where the pilgrim finally lays eyes on Beatrice is the quintessence of all earthly abundance, teeming with trees and flowers galore, crystalline streams, and beauty of such idyllic perfection that it seems the Platonic ideal that poets of Antiquity could only imagine:

«Quelli ch'anticamente poetaro
l'età de l'oro e suo stato felice,
forse in Parnaso esto loco sognaro.
Qui fu innocente l'umana radice;
qui primavera sempre e ogne frutto;
nettare è questo di che ciascun dice.»

[“Those who in ancient times called up in verse
the age of gold and sang its happy state
dreamed on Parnassus of perhaps this very place.
Here the root of humankind was innocent,
here it is always spring, with every fruit in season.
This is the nectar of which the ancients tell.”]
(*Purg.* 28.139-144)

(c) Further emphasizing the contrapuntal difference between Dante's encounter with his two guides, Beatrice's opening utterance is the first and only declaration of the pilgrim-narrator-poet's proper name in the entire *Commedia*: “Dante!” Unlike Virgilio who embarked on a mission to lend aid to a soul he had never met and whose identity he first had to verify with circumstantial inquiry, Beatrice's greeting leaves no doubt that she knows the pilgrim on whose behalf Maria invoked grace and for whose sake Lucia sought help. Then, on the heels of a peremptory interdiction that Dante suspend his tears over Virgilio's departure because he has much to answer for, Beatrice does not follow with the periphrastic kind of introduction that Virgilio offered the distressed pilgrim, but rather with an assertive self-identification in the present tense in which she also pronounces her own proper name:

«Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice!»
[“Behold! Indeed I am, indeed I am Beatrice!”]
(*Purg.* 30.74)

The English translation of this utterance loses a significant linguistic detail, namely that Beatrice simply foregoes the index of subjectivity, “io,” obviating that empty pronominal signifier, and emphasizing the nominal predicate declaring her subject agency as a uniquely distinct individual. Beatrice provides no other information about familial, geographic, or political affiliations to further establish her identity; unlike the mysterious apparition at the edge of the *selva oscura*, Dante already knows who she is, their meeting taking place following his prolonged, and then recently intensified, anticipation of finally seeing her again.

(d) Before she expounds on the reason for her rebuke, Beatrice makes yet another pronouncement that presents in direct counterpoint to Virgilio’s solicitous query where he had asked the pilgrim:

«perché non sali il diletto monte
ch’è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?»

[“Why do you not climb the peak of delight,
origin and cause of every joy?”]
(*Inf.* 1.77-78)

Beatrice, instead, demands of the now mortified Dante:

«Come degnasti d’accedere al monte?
non sapei tu che qui è l’uom felice?»

[“How did you dare approach the mountain?
Do you not know that here man lives in joy?”]
(*Purg.* 30.74-75)

Where in the meeting with the Roman poet it is Dante who names Virgilio, speaks him into the quickening present tense while lauding his eloquence and celebrates the edifying love and perusal of Vergil’s poetic volume that exalted his own poetic apprenticeship, Beatrice, upon her arrival, not only speaks the pilgrim’s proper name as well as her own name, she soon lays out the heuristic significance for his spiritual and intellectual edification that Dante ought to have discerned and cultivated from her presence in his life. Comparing these two defining moments of the pilgrim’s journey in this way renders the poem’s deep-rooted structural investment in Beatrice’s ultimate authority in the *Commedia* more transparent. Furthermore, it

invites a closer interrogation of the hermeneutic correlation between the blessed lady to whose “comandamento” the Roman poet eagerly submits spontaneously (*Inf.* 2.53-81) when called upon to rescue the floundering Florentine, and the figurative “ammiraglio” that Virgilio’s protégé discerns in the same lady at the conclusion of the mission she mandated.

Synthesis of Poetic Heritage

The stage is thus set at the bookends of the first two *cantiche* for the *Commedia* to affirm the epic genre aspirations persistently invoked at the beginning of each *cantica* and reiterated in *Paradiso*’s inaugural exhortation. Essential to the poetic legitimacy of this declaration is the figurative identity of flowing water with rhetorical eloquence, and seafaring with the poetic enterprise, both tropes richly documented in the poetic tributaries that flow into the *Commedia*’s currents from the classical Mediterranean poetic tradition. It is in this context that the rhetorically allusive significance and authority of Beatrice “*ammiraglio*” gains purchase, further subverting both the pilgrim and the reader’s expectation of an otherwise conventionally gendered object of erotic desire in the heterosexual matrix.

From the moment Virgilio crowns and miters the pilgrim upon awakening in the Terrestrial Paradise, to the instant Beatrice utters her first words to Dante, strains of ancient Roman idyll and overtones of vernacular amorous lyric intermingle to resound in the narrative. A series of intertextual references and quotations of Vergilian pastoral, bucolic, and epic poetry serve to recapitulate the metonymic ontology of the Latin poet’s name, providing Beatrice with a comprehensive handle, “Virgilio,” for the purely temporal, secular poetics of the ancient Roman tradition. In this initial encounter with the pilgrim during which the Roman guide vanishes, Beatrice’s peremptory warning that Dante must answer to an *altra spada* [“another sword”] invokes two significant metonymic figures who both appear in the poem emblematically wielding swords: Homer and the Apostle Paul. The former appears in Limbo at the head of elite poets of the pagan tradition:

...«Mira colui con quella spada in mano,
che vien dinanzi ai tre sì come sire:
quelli è Omero poeta sovrano.»

ADOYO

[“Take note of him who holds that sword in hand
and walks before the three as lord:
He is Homer, sovereign poet.”]

(*Inf.* 4.86-88)

Homer—“quel Greco /che le Muse lattar più ch’altri mai” (“that Greek that the Muses suckled more than any other”; *Purg.* 22.101-102)—is the iconic figurehead of the poetics of Hellenic and Roman Antiquity, the ocean of eloquence from which all other waters flow (Quintilianus *Institutio oratoria* 10.11.47),¹⁶ the “segnoire de l’altissimo canto” (“the Lord of the highest song”; *Inf.* 4.95) leading the Augustan poets of the *bella scola*. The Apostle Paul, the emblematic author to whom half the books of the New Testament are attributed, appears in the biblical procession preceding Beatrice’s arrival in Terrestrial Paradise. Walking beside Luke, the healer, Paul advances bearing “una spada lucida e aguta” [“a sword bright and sharp”] so striking that, even from across the river, it inspires fear in the pilgrim (*Purg.* 29.136-141). Beatrice’s locution “altra spada” evokes both metonymic figures in such a way that casts the secular, pagan poetics associated with the vanished Virgilio in direct contrast to the Christian poetics of revelation symbolized by the incisively Pauline “*gladium Spiritus quod est verbum Dei*” (“the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God; *Ephesians* 6:17). This homonymous juxtaposition also effectively synthesizes, in Beatrice’s first *terzina* of direct address, the *Commedia*’s ongoing debate concerning the temporal and the spiritual. The *Commedia* thus embarks on the final stage of its poetic evolution from the profane to the sacred that is outlined in symbolically dualistic terms throughout the pilgrim’s journey—viz., *Enea* and *Paolo*, crown and miter, Empire and Church, ethics and morals; the debate is here spelled out in the literary contrast between the symbolic apogee of pagan poetic art, Homer—*colui con quella spada in mano*—on the one hand, and the *verbum Dei*—*l’altra spada*—on the other.

Upon the arrival of Virgilio, Dante, and Stazio in Terrestrial Paradise after crossing the wall of fire, the narrator periphrastically identifies Virgilio as the singer of the “buccolici carmi” (“eclogues”; *Purg.* 22.57), thereby priming the atmosphere for saturation with Vergilian echoes as the trio prepares to settle in for the night (*Purg.* 27.70-87). Here the *Commedia* underscores the pilgrim’s unselfconscious reliance on his Latin predecessors by casting Virgilio and Stazio as shepherds, and the pilgrim as their ward, a picture

reminiscent of the seventh of Vergil's *Eclogues*.¹⁷ The attitude of all three poets is compared first to one of sure-footed goats grazing on a steep slope watched over by a shepherd leaning upon his staff for support. This analogy is compounded with that of herders who spend the night outdoors with their flock to ensure that no harm comes to the animals. Finally, the distinction between the pilgrim and the Latin poets is made: Dante is like a peaceful, insouciant kid in the tranquil daylight, they like watchful shepherds in the night ready to ward off danger to their flock as they each retire on steps on either side of him.

The suggestive power of Vergil's seventh *Eclogue*—where Corydon and Thyris vie for poetic glory, the one invoking the aid of the “Nymphs of Helicon,” and the other exhorting Arcadian shepherds to “crown [the] newborn poet”¹⁸—continues to resound in this scene on the steps of the Terrestrial Paradise. Anticipating Virgilio's crowning and mitering of Dante in the final verses of the canto, these echoes reverberate with the quiet confidence of an aspiring poet at the threshold of realizing his dream of finally seeing Beatrice.

Complementing this initial resonance of Vergilian pastoral are a pair of close allusions to the *Aeneid*.¹⁹ In the first of these Vergilian echoes, “*manibus date lilia plenis*” (*Aen.* 6.883), Anchises mourns the premature passing of Augustus Caesar's successor, Marcellus, at the end of the Roman epic's prophetic exposition about the future history of Rome. At the top of Mount Purgatory, however, “*Manibus oh date lilia plenis*” (*Purg.* 30.21) assumes a dual significance of a different tenor. Literally, as pronounced by the attending host of Angels and anthropomorphic Biblical metonymy, the phrase heralds the arrival of Beatrice who shortly thereafter emerges from a cloud of flowers. In meta-textual terms, it further mines the metonymic connotation of the Latin poet, foreshadowing Virgilio's own imminent ‘passing’ and the depth of loss that the pilgrim experiences upon his poetic progenitor's disappearance.

The second major Vergilian allusion, “*conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma*” (“I know the signs of the ancient flame”; *Purg.* 30.48), is a translated quotation of Dido's kindled passions for Aeneas, “*agnosco veteris vestigia flammae*,” (*Aen.* 4.23) and effectively implicates the pilgrim for *cupiditas* by laying bare his persistently erroneous erotic conception of Beatrice. Clearly, Dante ought to know better after Virgilio's extensive disquisitions on Love in the central *canti* of the *Purgatorio*, his own dreamed rebuke of the Siren immediately following that lesson, and Matelda's remarks correcting Dante's

erroneous eroticization of her own joyful demeanor (*Purg.* 28.76-81). The complex reverberations—in Dante’s grief over Virgilio’s departure (*Purg.* 30.49-51)—of Vergil’s Orphean lament in the final book of the *Georgics* (4.525-527) are resonant with the Vergilian tricolon where Aeneas’ futile attempt to embrace the shades of Creusa (*Aen.* 2.792-794) echoes a parallel encounter with the shade of Anchises (*Aen.* 6.700-702). This repeated Vergilian figure is in turn recalled in the pilgrim’s failed attempts to embrace the shade of his friend Casella on the shores of Purgatory (*Purg.* 2.79-81). Together, these intertextual allusions foreshadow not just a declaration of the shortcomings of Classical poetics, but also the repudiation of the limits of the pilgrim’s contemporary lyric tradition in Beatrice’s subsequent indictment.

Accordingly, the pastoral, bucolic, and epic strains preceding Beatrice’s arrival all intermingle with echoes of the amorous lyric tradition, an aesthetic the pilgrim has just been extolling in the company of the vernacular poets in the final Terrace of the mountain. Despite the exemplary humility with which Arnaut Daniel repudiates indulging the ethos of erotic vernacular poetry (*Purg.* 26.140-147), the pilgrim continues to interpret the pristine surroundings and encounters of the Terrestrial Paradise in subjectively erotic terms (*Purg.* 28.43-51), even after Matelda gently points out the approximative limitations of the poetics of the Ancients (*Purg.* 28.139-144).

The obtrusive weeds of the pilgrim’s secular erotic poetics are summarily deracinated when Beatrice finally appears in the Terrestrial Paradise and speaks directly to Dante. For although he started the *altro viaggio* knowing that Virgilio would leave upon delivering him to Beatrice (*Inf.* 1.121-123), the pilgrim’s distress at the Roman poet’s departure is acute. Dante knows that before setting out to do Beatrice’s bidding, Virgilio—enlisted to make his poetic craft and eloquence, his *parola ornata*, instrumental in Dante’s salvation from the dangers of “la fiumana ove ’l mar non ha vanto”—eagerly submitted to Beatrice’s command (*Inf.* 2.76-81). Once in the presence of the commander herself, the pilgrim’s experience saturated with Vergilian allusions, Virgilio simply vanishes, leaving his ward breathless with loss. For while both Dido’s sentiments in the *Aeneid* and Orpheus’ laments in the *Georgics* punctuate the intensity of the pilgrim’s bereavement, these passages also express the limits of Dante’s capacity under the aegis of Virgilio’s poetics to discern what Beatrice truly signifies. The pilgrim’s delivery to Beatrice, the

guide better suited to help him complete the divinely ordained pilgrimage, comes with a manifestly blunt assessment of his inadequacy to proceed equipped with only the Classical and vernacular poetics in which he takes so much pride.

The precedent established by the Hellenistic and Roman rhetorical legacy where poets self-consciously cast themselves as intrepid seafarers sets the *Commedia*'s course for this moment's revelation of Beatrice *ammiraglio*'s poetic authority. By this authority, in conjunction with her divinely inspired essence, she pronounces judgment on the deficiencies of the ancient Mediterranean tradition for the revelations awaiting the pilgrim. Cutting through a narrative deeply suffused with both Classical strains and echoes of the courtly love lyric, Beatrice's opening *terzina* pithily contrasts the greater authority of the poetics of the *verbum Dei* to the merely propedeutic function of the Classical tradition typified by the epic, of which Homer is the symbolic apogee. For neither the poetic heritage that Dante initially claims from his *maestro* and *autore*, nor Virgilio's investiture of his ward's sovereign mastery of his will and desire in temporal and spiritual matters (*Purg.* 27.127-142) avail him when he finally stands before the lady under the aegis of whom he embarked on the *altro viaggio*.

In announcing the jurisdiction of an "altra spada," Beatrice signals a change of guard—as it were—in the pilgrim's poetic *Bildung*. By directly counterposing the cause of the pilgrim's grief, i.e. the loss of Virgilio, with the "altra spada," the *terzina* implicitly challenges the poetic authority that Virgilio represents. And so just as Virgilio led the pilgrim who initially worried, "Io non Enëa, io non Paolo sono" (*Inf.* 2.32) through Aeneas's itinerary into the Underworld before accompanying him up Mount Purgatory, Beatrice now prepares to lead the pilgrim through Paul's rapturous itinerary into Heaven²⁰ with the authority of an admiral who encourages the seafarers under her command.

For a clearer picture of some of "the men that serve the other ships" (*Purg.* 30.59), we need only turn to E. R. Curtius for a catalog of the trope casting the challenges of the poetic craft as a seafaring enterprise and poets as sailors in the classical Mediterranean tradition. Curtius hereby helps expedite a survey of the figure's currency (128-130), particularly in the works of Dante's Augustan poets, equipping interested readers of the *Commedia* with a more finely calibrated compass to navigate the sea of poetic legacy that Beatrice *ammiraglio* oversees.

The Nautical Metaphor in Archaic Tradition

Scholars of archaic Greek poetry trace the trope identifying nautical metaphors with poetic enterprise at least as far back as the eighth and seventh century BCE, with two particularly pertinent examples in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Alcman's *Partheneion*. Looking back at the poetic tradition inherited by Vergil and his contemporaries, Rosen, following Nagy, persuasively demonstrates the currency of the metaphor of poetic endeavor as seafaring in the "Nautalia," a conspicuous digression (lines 618-94) found in Hesiod's *Work and Days*.²¹

Reading this *excursus* into sailing as "an Archaic poet making programmatic statements about his art in the manner of an Alexandrian poet" (Rosen 100),²² Rosen demonstrates how the passage's nautical metaphor paints Hesiod's own performance at the funeral games in Chalcis as a "minor venture into the realm of heroic poetry compared to the Homeric epos" (101). In Rosen's estimation, the key to the metaphorical significance of the *excursus* may be found in the poet's generally ironical attitude where he offers to give advice on an enterprise about which he confesses little practical knowledge. In effect, Hesiod figuratively translates poetic activity into sailing, equating the "grandiose, heroic poetry" to genuine seafaring, "a dangerous enterprise" not to be undertaken lightly (Rosen 104).²³

In his analysis, Rosen notes how Hesiod adopts the language of farming and commerce to counsel prudence in the face of poetic ambition: the poet who endeavors to sing the long, demanding epic poem risks failure in the same way that the farmer or merchant risks ruin by consigning all his wares to a long seafaring venture. This cautious attitude is discernible in the works of Augustan poets who often apply the metaphor of sailing in invocations and *recusatio* as illustrated in some of the examples in the survey below. Rosen further notes that the archaic poet's pronounced concern with "the nature of poetic inspiration, poetic authority, and poetic truth" revealed in his interpretation of the "Nautalia" also bespeaks "a degree of literary self-consciousness and gamesmanship that we normally reserve for Hellenistic poets" (112).²⁴

While documenting whether this specific passage from Hesiod's *Work and Days* circulated among Roman poets or was conveyed to their Medieval poetic successors extends beyond the scope of this essay, the text at least offers a precedent example of the nautical metaphor's currency in the classical Mediterranean poetic tradition that may well be worthy of further study.

Nautical Metaphors in the *Bella scola*

Of more immediate relevance to the poetic legacy Dante inherits from the Hellenic tradition through Vergil is Callimachus, an Alexandrian poet of the third century BCE who exerts considerable influence on the aesthetic sensibility of the poets of ancient Rome. Vergil's metonymic avatar, Virgilio, a figure whom the pilgrim welcomes with great reverence and intimacy in distinctly fluvial terms, is the most significant among the poets of the *bella scola*²⁵ who use nautical metaphors to signify the craft of poetry. With good reason, commentaries that gloss this fluvial metaphor pithily outline Vergil's merits as a revered patriarch of the Latin poetic tradition and reiterate how his works represent the celebrated river of eloquence.²⁶ The topos is well documented in Latin rhetoric and yields nuanced variations in the Hesiodic tradition as well. However, the sea that is Homer, and indeed the Hellenic tradition itself, is too far removed from Dante's direct experience and he can only pay homage to it as one does to an emblem, an abstracted ideal of poetic virtue. In recognizing and submitting to Beatrice's command (*Inf.* 2.76-81) and deferring to her epistemic authority throughout his journey with the pilgrim across Inferno and Purgatory, Virgilio—esteemed among exemplary poets (*Inf.* 4.80-93; *Purg.* 21.91-102)—lays a solid foundation for the narrator of the *Commedia* to acknowledge that the compass of this authority extends to other poets of great intellect and grand ambition.

Centuries after Homer, the Alexandrian poet Callimachus emerges with reactionary aversion to the epic in the period preceding the Augustan poets. Criticizing prolixity, symbolized by the roiling muddy waters of the Euphrates River, Callimachus warns against the vast scope and breadth of the epic, and instead champions a spare and modest compositional ethos of the humble lyric in the *Hymn to Apollo* (lines 105-112).²⁷ In his study of the passage, Richard Thomas articulates the intertextual resonance of this fluvial imagery with Vergil's programmatic allusions to his own aesthetic and thematic evolution from an unequivocally Alexandrian poetic youth to a matured champion of the epic (Thomas "From Recusatio").²⁸ Leaving behind the simple apian nectars and quiet brooks of slender muses, Vergil sets out into the open sea and thrives. In short, Vergil eschews the merely servile mimicry of Hellenic poetry and remakes the Greek epic in the Latin voice, much to the delight of his timider counterparts.²⁹ In this light, Dante's interest—the "lungo studio e 'l grande amore" (*Inf.* 1.83) that draws him to Vergil's text—appears

animated at its poetic core by a passion for aesthetic growth that mirrors the Roman poet's own evolution. In the context provided by Thomas's analysis, Dante's greeting, "sei tu, quel Virgilio, quella fonte, / che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume" (*Inf.* 1.79-80) responds to a deeper concern than commonplace poetic eloquence.

Vergil's engagement with fluvial metaphors as poetic enterprise extends to the nautical vein prefaced in the Hesiodic example above. With the exhortation in Book 2 of the *Georgics*, the poet assumes a modest demeanor in his direct appeal to Maecenas, assuring him that the work will not dither in needless rhetorical flourishes. Dante's reader will undoubtedly recognize the nautical imagery in the invocational strains launching the poet's endeavor into *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* in Vergil's invitation to his patron to pay close heed to the poem's progress:

Maecénas, you whose favor is my pride, / O you whose merit
plays the greatest part / In all the honor I have had, Maecénas,
/ Come, spread sail, make haste across the sea. / I could not
hope my song could tell it all, / All that there is to tell, not if I
had / A hundred tongues or mouths, a voice of iron. / Come,
coast along the shore, the land is near. / Nor will our journey
together be hindered by / Inordinate prefacing, fanciful songs,
circuitous / Wanderings here and there among the byways.
(*Georgics* 2.40-47).³⁰

Vergil once again alludes to his poetic labor in nautical terms as he prepares to take leave of his listener in *Georgics* 4.116-119.³¹ Nor is he alone in casting poetic endeavor in fluvial and nautical terms. Horace and Ovid, both poets of Dante's *bella scola* (*Inf.* 1.79-96), remark on the challenges of poetic craft in their works using nautical metaphors in varied contexts that range from the vicissitudes of political or military life to misadventures in love. In a decidedly more expansive context in the *Odes*, Horace uses the nautical metaphor to warn against immoderate temerity or diffidence and instead advises circumspection (*Odes* 2.10.1-7, 17-24).³² In a later ode, the significance of the rhetorical figure is much more transparent as the poet laments not launching forth into the ocean of epic ambition (*Odes* 4.15.1-4).³³

Ovid, for his part, appears to make the most varied and dramatic use of the nautical metaphor. In the *Fasti*, its significance as poetic effort is clearly spelled out in the dedicatory opening verses:

Germanicus Caesar, receive this work with tranquil countenance, and guide my timid vessel's course. Don't turn away from a modest honour; see, it is to you that this act of duty is vowed; give it your godlike blessing and support.

(*Fasti* 1.3-6)³⁴

The same figure also appears in the invocational plea to Bacchus (*Fasti* 3.788-789),³⁵ and is equally transparent in the self-referential exhortation to his poetry in *Fasti* 4.18.³⁶

Ovid maintains this clear correspondence between the nautical metaphor and the poetic endeavor in the *Ars amatoria* (1.772; 3.25-26; 3.747-748), always taking pains to cast himself as the agent of the enterprise in question. However, true to the central concerns of the *Tristia*, the nautical metaphors for both the psychic burden of exile and poetic labor overlap in an elaborate *recusatio* declaring a preference for more humble fare than heroic epos.

Undeservedly am I blamed. Poor is *the field I plough*; that was a theme mighty and fruitful. A *skiff* ought not to trust itself to the *sea* just because it ventures to disport itself in a little pool. Perhaps (but even this I doubt) I am well enough suited to lighter verse, capable of humble measures; but if thou shouldst bid me sing of the Giants conquered by Jove's lightning, the burden will weaken me in the attempt. Only a rich mind can tell the tale of Caesar's mighty deeds if the theme is not to surpass the work.

(*Tristia* 2.327-336)³⁷

The figure of modesty seen here resonates with Dante's own *recusatio* when faced with poetizing Beatrice's resplendence in *Paradiso* 23 as will be illustrated further below.

So saturating is Ovid's self-identification as a sailor in his poetic endeavor that, time and again, he revisits the figure when comparing himself to others: "I feared not, I admit, that where so many *barks* plied, one only would be wrecked while all the rest were safe" (*Tristia* 2.469-470).³⁸ The nautical imagery also serves to set Ovid apart:

Yet think not all my work trivial; oft have I set *grand sails upon my bark*. Six books of *Fasti* and as many more have I written, each containing its own month. (*Tristia* 2.548-552)³⁹

Also notable here is Ovid's integration of the bucolic notion of ploughing with the maritime, an image that occurs in Dante's appeal to the reader in *Paradiso* 2.10-15 which we will have occasion to read more closely below. The Roman poet takes great pains to articulate the travails of his sea voyage from home, lamenting the turbulent vicissitudes of his life in the exile into which Caesar has cast him for his myriad transgressions, poetic and otherwise (*Tristia* 1.2.13-20).⁴⁰

Ovid reprises the figure later, blurring the lines between the literal sea voyage and the exercise of his craft, avowing that he does not aspire to wealth or pleasure, but rather simply hopes to reach his designated port of bitter exile safely (*Tristia* 1.2.73-82).⁴¹ The imagery of ploughing the sea continues through the dramatic description of his bitter fate even as he laments his woeful state through poetry (*Tristia* 1.4.1-6).⁴²

Rounding out Ovid's assorted uses of the nautical metaphor in this survey is the heartbreaking epistolary composition to a faithless, fair-weather friend where the poet equates his happier days of poetic celebrity with smooth sailing, bemoaning his friend's changeful and opportunistic loyalties:

Complaint or silence? Shall I make a nameless charge, or should I wish all to know who you are? I will not employ your name lest my complaint bring you favour and through my verse you win renown. As long as *my bark rested firmly upon its keel among all who wished to sail* with me you were first. (*Ex Ponto* 4.3.1-10)⁴³

Turning now to Statius, the *Thebaid* closes with a cursory version of the nautical metaphor that seems to express the poet's genuine fatigue: "Scarce would new inspiration or Apollo's presence sustain the task, and *my little bark has voyaged far and deserves her haven*" (*Thebaid* 12.808-809).⁴⁴ Elsewhere, in the *Silvae*, the poet deploys the trope first in *recusatio* as he contemplates a greater poetic challenge after completing his Theban saga:

Now if perchance you would know what my Muse essays, the *Thebaid* has already *accomplished her Sidonian labours and furlled her sails in longed-for haven*. [...] Now a different band comes to entwine my vacant locks: [...] Impulse has long been drawing me that way, and fear draws me back. Will

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my shoulders hold fast under such a mass, or will my neck sink beneath the mighty load? Say, Marcellus, shall I bear it? Or is my ship, accustomed to sail lesser seas, not yet to be trusted in the perils of the Ionian? (*Silvae* 4.4.87-100)⁴⁵

The elegy that Statius dedicates to his recently deceased father is a moving expression of filial piety in which the nautical metaphor alluding to his epic endeavors is woven into a figure of modesty as he celebrates and honors his progenitor:

With you as my mentor my *Thebaid* pressed close against the work of ancient bards. You showed me how to spur my song how to set forth the deeds of heroes, the modes of warfare, the layout of places. Without you my course falters, uncertain my track, befogged the sails of the orphan craft. (*Silvae* 5.3.233-238)⁴⁶

In addition to illustrating the figurative currency of the nautical metaphors as poetic endeavor, the strains of this passage are especially resonant with Stazio's reverential homage to Virgilio in Dante's *Purgatorio*:

«Al mio ardor fuor seme le faville,
che mi scaldar, de la divina fiamma
onde sono allumati più di mille;
de l'Eneida dico, la qual mamma
fummi e fummi nutrice poetando:
sanz'essa non fermai peso di dramma.
E per esser vivuto di là quando
visse Virgilio, assentirei un sole
più che non deggio al mio uscir di bando.»

[“The sparks that kindled the fire in me
came from the holy flame
from which more than a thousand have been lit—
I mean the *Aeneid*. When I wrote poetry
it was my mamma and my nurse.
Without it, I would not have weighed a dram.
To have lived on earth when Virgil lived
I would have stayed a year's sun longer than I owed

before I came forth from my exile.”]

(*Purg.* 21.94-102)

In thus echoing and evoking the filial devotion that Statius voices in the *Silvae*, the *Commedia* links Stazio not only to Virgilio, but by extension also to the other elite of the *bella scola* who all share the mantle of “poeta” with honor in mutually exalting affinity (*Inf.* 4.79-102). Their centuries-old Mediterranean poetic tradition of self-identifying as intrepid sailors offers a ready response to Scott’s query, “where are “la gente che ministra / per li altri legni” and how may Beatrice be said to encourage them?” With the simple simile, “quasi ammiraglio,” the pilgrim’s first clear glimpse of Beatrice figuratively draws these self-declared sailors of Dante’s acquired poetic tradition into a fleet under the command of a single vigilant admiral. The response to the second part of Scott’s query regarding how Beatrice might be said to encourage this conceptual fleet of poets may be found flowing throughout the *Commedia*’s own series of nautical metaphors which invoke bygone traditions while also sailing new, uncharted waters.

Dante’s Admiral

Dante’s own progressively elaborate use of the nautical metaphor for the poetic enterprise—a trope made most explicit at the beginning of both *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*—creates a stable context in which to interpret the simile that casts the pilgrim’s impression of Beatrice as a vigilant and exigent commander spurring a crew of sailors to excellence. With that single word, *ammiraglio*, the poet synthesizes and deploys a trope that identifies poetic composition with seafaring, thus affirming the poetic foundation of Beatrice’s dominion⁴⁷ over this new poetic enterprise that is the *Commedia*.

The first, admittedly oblique allusion to seafaring in the *Commedia* occurs at the beginning of the poem in the shipwreck simile that characterizes the pilgrim’s sense of relief for escaping an unspecified danger:

E come quei che con lena affannata
uscito fuor del pelago a la riva
si volge a l’acqua perigliosa e guata,
così l’animo mio, ch’ancor fuggiva,
si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
che non lasciò già mai persona viva.

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[And as one who, with laboring breath,
has escaped from the deep to the shore
turns and looks back at the perilous waters,
so my mind, still in flight,
turned back to look once more upon the pass
no mortal being ever left alive.]

(*Inf.* 1.22-27)

In this inaugural *canto* where each reference to the sun (*Inf.* 1.16-8; 1.38; 1.60) evokes allusions to Apollo, and the guide who appears to rescue the distressed pilgrim is none other than the iconic author of the *Aeneid* who then promptly invokes Parnassus (1.77-78), the text is so deeply saturated with semantics of the art of poetry that this initial shipwreck reads like a metaphor for the pilgrim's catastrophic failure to master the craft and successfully embark on the ambitious venture of composing a work of epic proportions.

The weight of the nautical metaphor as a signifier for poetry is further buoyed in the current of water imagery that springs from the lost pilgrim's affirmation that Virgilio is "quella fonte che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume." The figurative identity of water with oratory eloquence in the *Commedia* extends beyond retrospective allusions to Latin rhetoric, reaching far enough into *Paradiso* to saturate the pilgrim when he is encouraged to speak his mind:

...mi volsi a Beatrice, ed essa pronte
sembianze femmi perch'io spandessi
l'acqua di fuor del mio interno fonte.

[I faced Beatrice, who quickly signaled,
with a glance, that I should now pour forth
the waters welling from the source within me.]

(*Par.* 24.55-57)

At the beginning of the poem, however, the nautical allusion to the figurative shipwreck that Lucia mentions to Beatrice in her appeal still points to the pilgrim's false start:

«non odi tu la pieta del suo pianto?
Non vedi tu la morte che 'l combatte
su la fiumana ove 'l mar non ha vanto?»

[“Do you not hear the anguish in his tears?
Do you not see the death besetting him
on the swollen river where the sea cannot prevail?”]
(*Inf.* 2.106-108)

In conjunction with Lucia’s appeal, this figurative shipwreck resonates with a distinctly meta-poetic subtext. Both the rhetorical identity of Homer with the ocean from whence other rivers of poetic eloquence flow,⁴⁸ and the rhetorical identity of rivers with other poets of antiquity whose works flow like tributaries into the unifying current of Dante’s *Commedia* together draw a clear correlation between the *selva oscura*—a signifier for the unwieldy raw material that Dante initially fails to master—and the *fiumana ove ‘l mar non ha vanto* that Lucia mentions in her appeal. At the beginning of the poem, the pilgrim is shipwrecked like so many of his classical predecessors had feared to do.⁴⁹ Furthermore, just as fluvial and nautical imagery serves to mark the stages of Vergil’s own poetic evolution, from the clear springs of pastoral poetry, to the turbulent Euphrates in the *Georgics*, and finally the open sea of the epic, so the *Commedia* itself represents an evolution from the tradition of great pagan poets to a Christian poetics of revelation. It is therefore fitting that a metaphor for poetic endeavor as widely understood and deeply established in the Ancient Mediterranean poetic legacy as this nautical trope holds significant currency in unveiling the authority figure designated by Dante to signal this evolution. By evoking this trope in the figure of Beatrice *ammiraglio*, the *Commedia* thereby suggests that the poetics of Antiquity symbolized by Homer, the *poeta sovrano* (*‘l mar*), is insufficient to prevail over the pilgrim’s own poetic struggle (*la fiumana*) to make sense of the hylomorphic poetic *materia prima* (*selva*). In urging Beatrice to attend to the pilgrim, Lucia observes this shortcoming in far more subtle terms than Beatrice will use in the Terrestrial Paradise when she distinguishes pagan and secular poetics from the *verbum Dei*.

Subsequent meta-poetically charged nautical imagery coincides with the simile that equates Geryon’s credulity-defying arrival from the abyss of the *Malebolge* in response to Virgilio’s summons to a free-swimming deep-water diver resurfacing after releasing a ship’s anchor at the bottom of the sea:

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Sempre a quel ver c'ha faccia di menzogna
de' l'uom chiuder le labbra fin ch'el puote,
però che senza colpa fa vergogna;
ma qui tacer nol posso; e *per le note*
di questa *comedia*, lettor, ti giuro,
s'elle non sien di lunga grazia vòte,
ch'i' vidi per quell'aere grosso e scuro
venir notando una figura in suso,
maravigliosa ad ogne cor sicuro,
sì come torna colui che va giuso
talora a solver l'àncora ch'aggrappa
o scoglio o altro che nel mare è chiuso,
che 'n sù si stende, e da pié si rattrappa.

[To a truth that bears the face of falsehood
a man should seal his lips if he is able,
for it might shame him, through no fault of his,
but here I can't be silent. And by the strains
of this Comedy—so may they soon succeed
in finding favor—I swear to you, reader,
that I saw come swimming up
through that dense and murky air a shape
to cause amazement in the stoutest heart,
a shape most like a man's who, having plunged
to loose the anchor caught fast in a reef
or something other hidden in the sea, now rises,
reaching upward and drawing in his feet.]

(*Inf.* 16.124-136)

Lest there be some lingering doubt about the meta-poetically topical significance of this nautical analogy, the narrator swears on the poetic enterprise in which he is currently engaged and which he, for the first time, identifies by the term “*comedia*” (*Inf.* 16.127-128).

When the narrator next refers to his endeavor in the same terms, it is in conjunction with yet another nautical simile describing the pitch in the *bolgia* of the barrators (*Inf.* 21. 7-18). Prefiguring this second instance in the preceding canto, the narrator strikes a poetically self-conscious note by spelling out the formal compositional components of “*versi*”, “*canto*” and “*canzon*” in *Inferno* 20.1-3. Curiously, although *Inferno* 20 is populated by diviners walking on their feet, their bodies

piteously contorted and their heads twisted to face backwards, the *canto* is nevertheless announced as that of the *sommersi*. However, the submerging pitch described by recalling Venetian shipyards does not appear until *canto* 21, which, in its turn, opens with the reticence of the “*comedia*” (*Inf.* 21.1-3) wrought of the aforementioned “*versi*”, “*canto*”, and “*canzon*”.

The famous nautical episode in Ulisse’s recollection of his final voyage (see *Inf.* 26.100-102; 136-138) occurs within the narrative frame of the Greek sailor’s account about his life and death and is thus not available as metaphor for the *Commedia* itself as will occur later in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*.⁵⁰ However, this coda to the Homeric epos dramatizing Ulisse’s immoderate, headlong rush to become “del mondo esperto” and culminating in his fatal shipwreck resonates with the Callimachean *recusatio* found not only in the Augustan poets, but also in their predecessor. When, later in *Paradiso*, San Tommaso extolls the virtues of cautious patience over imprudent temerity and hasty judgment, he illustrates his point with a nautical image that activates the poem’s internal memory of this anecdote while also pointing to the hazard of shipwreck that, in the literary context, gives poets pause:

e legno vidi già dritto e veloce
 correr lo mar per tutto suo cammino,
 perire al fine a l’intrar de la foce.

[and once I saw a ship, which had sailed straight
 and swift upon the sea through all its voyage,
 sinking at the end as it made its way to port.]

(*Par.* 13.136-138)

The nautical metaphor explicitly signifying the emerging success of the *Commedia*’s own poetic endeavor is finally spelled out at the very beginning of the *Purgatorio* - incidentally also a realm unknown to the great poets of the classical Mediterranean tradition.⁵¹

Per correr miglior acque alza le vele
 omai la navicella del mio ingegno,
 che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele;
 e canterò di quel secondo regno
 dove l’umano spirito si purga
 e di salire al ciel diventa degno.

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[To run its course through smoother water
the small bark of my wit now hoists its sail,
leaving that cruel sea behind.
Now I shall sing the second kingdom,
there where the soul of man is cleansed,
made worthy to ascend to Heaven.]

(*Purg.* 1.1-6)

In the latter half of their advance through the Terrace of Pride, an area particularly charged with Dante's self-consciousness about being renowned for artistic merit, Virgilio uses another nautical allusion encouraging Dante to press on. Here, as the pilgrim progresses at a purposely delayed pace in lockstep with Oderisi, listening closely to the penitent illuminator's exposition on exemplary figures of humility, the maritime metaphor is suggestively proximate and complementary to a bucolic simile also often associated with the labor of poetic composition:

Di pari, come buoi che vanno a giogo,
m'andava io con quell'anima carica,
fin che 'l sofferse il dolce pedagogo.
Ma quando disse: «Lascia lui e varca;
ché qui è buono con l'ali e coi remi,
quantunque può, ciascun pinger sua barca,»
dritto sì come andar vuolsi rife'mi...

[As oxen go beneath their yoke.
that overladen soul and I went side by side
as long as my dear escort granted.
But when he said: "Leave him and hurry on,
for it is fitting here, with all your strength,
to speed your ship with wings and oars,"
I straightened up, erect...]

(*Purg.* 12.1-7)

The contraposition of the bucolic image of slow, yoked oxen and nautical imagery of sailing progress that we see here is quite distinct from the juxtaposition of the two images that we will see in the *Paradiso*. Curiously, the subsequent nautical allusion related to the progress of the travelers in *Purgatorio* 24 only indicates their

fleet pace. Here the metaphor emphasizes the fact that on this occasion the travelers do not slow down as Dante and the penitent Forese converse:

Né 'l dir l'andar, né l'andar lui più lento
facea, ma ragionando andavam forte,
sì come nave pinta da buon vento.

[Walking did not slow our talk, nor did the talking
slow our motion, as conversing we moved swiftly,
like ships that are driven by favoring winds.]

(*Purg.* 24.1-3)

The next significant nautical allusion is the passage which catalyzed this study where Beatrice appears before Dante pilgrim with the bearings of a vigilant *ammiraglio* who oversees “la gente che ministra / per li altri legni, e a ben far l’incora.” Keeping in mind the consistency and stability of that meta-poetic equivalence of nautical rhetorical figures with the enterprise of crafting epic poetry in the classical Mediterranean tradition, the radical and essential meaning of Beatrice’s role as Master and Commander of all poetry in the universe of the *Commedia* is here explicitly illuminated. For just as Virgilio’s actions in the interest of his ward’s well-being merit characterization as father *and* mother, *maestro*, *duca*, *guida*, and at the moment of ultimate, unanticipated separation, a meta-poetic Eurydice to Dante’s Orpheus, so Beatrice’s comportment, starting from the beginning of the journey and persisting through *Paradiso*, is those of *judex*, *doctor*, *sole*, *madre*,⁵² and most significantly, the *ammiraglio* who exercises unimpeachable authority over the itinerary and trajectory of the resurgent “morta poesi” (*Purg.* 1.7) that, by the grace of Heaven, Dante ultimately crafts into his “poema sacro” (*Par.* 25.1).

The conventional reading of this image of Beatrice *ammiraglio* by glossators and critics without regard for its transparent allusion to, and artistic authority over the ancient Mediterranean practitioners of the art of poetry calls attention to hermeneutic limitations that hinder a clear view of just how consciously and radically innovative the poet of the *Commedia* is, even, and especially, by the standards of posterity. But readers are not alone in this condition: the contrite Florentine pilgrim is ruthlessly admonished by Beatrice precisely for this short-sighted narrow-

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mindedness which fails to see past her womanly form as a mere object in the heterosexual matrix to discern the inspiring heuristic power that her beauty and virtue represent.

«Quando di carne a spirto era salita
e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m'era,
fu' io a lui men cara e men gradita.»

[“When I had risen to spirit from my flesh,
as beauty and virtue heightened in me,
to him I was less dear and less than pleasing.”]
(*Purg.* 30.127-129)

For even as it declares Beatrice *ammiraglio's* authority over “la gente che ministra / per li altri legni”—the very same host of poets who in their works cast themselves as intrepid seafarers—the *Commedia* also remarks the empowering function of this authority which “a ben far l'incora” [“urges them on to better work”]. It is on this note, then, that the narrator of the *Commedia*, upon embarking on the third and most audacious leg of his poetic enterprise, is now able to more transparently claim his place among the figurative fleet of poetic seafarers.

In the *Paradiso*, the nautical trope that shipwrecked to signal the pilgrim's poetic ineptitude in *Inferno* and then hoisted sail and launched into happier waters of revitalized poetry in *Purgatorio*, now catches the winds inspired by Minerva and ventures forth into uncharted waters guided by Apollo. Beatrice, her office as *judex* under the aegis of Minerva successfully executed in the Terrestrial Paradise, now fully—and literally—assumes the mantle of *doctor*, leading the pilgrim into the heavens by example:

... Beatrice in sul sinistro fianco
vidi rivolta e riguardar nel sole:
aquila sì non li s'affisse unquanco.
E sì come secondo raggio suole
uscir del primo e risalire in suso,
pur come pelegrin che tornar vuole,
così de l'atto suo, per li occhi infuso
ne l'immagine mia, il mio si fece,
e fissi li occhi al sole oltre nostr'uso.

[...I saw that Beatrice had turned toward her left
and now was staring at the sun—
never had eagle so fixed his gaze on it.
And, as a second ray will issue from the first
and rise again up to its source,
even as a pilgrim longs to go back home,
so her gaze, pouring through my eyes
into my imagination, made itself my own, and I,
against our practice, set my eyes upon the sun.]
(*Par.* 1.46-54)

For the greater part of the first *canto* of *Paradiso*, Beatrice, true to her role as *doctor*, follows example with the first of her expository dissertations on the order of all things and Creation's relationship to the Creator (*Par.* 1.103 ff.).

The second *canto* of the celestial realm then affirms Beatrice's role as *ammiraglio* with the most extensively developed nautical metaphor for the new poetic enterprise that is the *Paradiso*. Articulated in three parts, the *cantica*'s first apostrophe to the reader in *Paradiso* 2 immediately extends the link of dependency that exists between Beatrice and the pilgrim to the reader as well. First, the casual listeners are cautioned to return to safety lest they soon find themselves adrift. Next, the serious seekers of wisdom are invited to follow closely. Finally, a coda alluding to Ovidian genesis related to ploughing completes the apostrophe before the narrator returns to describing the celestial ascent.

In the first part of this apostrophe, the modesty of the *piccioletta barca* serves to characterize those casual listeners not adequately equipped to venture forth into the open sea:

O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,
desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti
dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,
tornate a riveder li vostri liti:
non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,
perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.
L'acqua ch'io prendo già mai non si corse;
Minerva spira, e conducemi Appollo,
e nove Muse mi dimostran l'Orse.

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[O you, eager to hear more,
who have followed in your little bark
my ship that singing makes its way,
turn back if you would see your shores again.
Do not set forth upon the deep,
for, losing sight of me, you would be lost.
The seas I sail were never sailed before.
Minerva fills my sails, Apollo is my guide,
nine Muses point me toward the Bears.]
(*Par.* 2.1-9)

The nautical trope that opens *Paradiso* 2 exploits both the Hesiodic and Vergilian imagery cited above as Dante launches forth into the open waters of the unknown without reservation. In this case, however, the cautious notes that serve Hellenic and Augustan poets in *recusatio* are now directed to the reader. With a tone more cautionary than Vergil's conciliatory invitation to Maecenas (*Georgics* 2.40-47), the narrator of the *Commedia* warns casual readers (lines 1-3) to forgo the voyage and return to the safety of their domestic shore should they wish to avoid losing their bearings at sea in their *piccioletta barca* (lines 4-6). On this leg of the journey, the poet of the *Commedia* is inspired by Minerva, led by Apollo, and guided by the Muses as he boldly goes where none has gone before (lines 7-9). Occurring immediately after *Paradiso*'s opening *canto* in which Beatrice delivers an inaugural lesson on the order of all things, this passage reinforces the correlation between the goddess of wisdom and poetry whose olive wreath adorns Beatrice's crown and the analogy equating Beatrice to an admiral, thereby crystalizing a compound symbol for poetic composition and affirming the compass of Beatrice's authority in the *Commedia*.

The next time a little barque appears in the text, however, it serves to contextualize the narrator's failing capacity to describe the radiant splendor of Beatrice's sanctifying smile:

Se mo sonasser tutte quelle lingue
che Polimnia con le suore fero
del latte lor dolcissimo più pingue,
per aiutarmi, al millesmo del vero
non si verria, cantando il santo riso
e quanto il santo aspetto facea mero;
e così, figurando il paradiso,
convien saltar lo sacro poema,

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come chi trova suo cammin riciso.
Ma chi pensasse il ponderoso tema
e l'omero mortal che se ne carica,
nol biasmerebbe se sott'esso trema:
non è pareggio da picciola barca
quel che fendendo va l'ardita prora,
né da nocchier ch'a sé medesmo parca.

[If at this moment all the tongues
that Polyhymnia and her sisters nurtured
with their sweetest, richest milk
should sound to aid me now, their song could not attain
one thousandth of the truth in singing of that holy smile
and how it made her holy visage radiant.
And so, in representing Paradise,
the sacred poem must make its leap across,
as does a man who finds his path cut off.
But considering the heavy theme
and the mortal shoulder it weighs down,
no one would cast blame if it trembled with its load.
This is no easy voyage for a little bark,
this stretch of sea the daring prow now cleaves,
nor for a pilot who would spare himself.]

(*Par.* 23.55-69)

There in the Eighth Sphere of the Constellations, the poet of the *Commedia* plainly submits that the challenge he faces is not for the faint-hearted: not even the aid of all the great poets of Antiquity, he muses, would be sufficient to convey the smallest part of that experience (lines 55-60). With a *recusatio* reminiscent of both Statius's appeal to Marcellus in *Silvae* (4.4.97-98), and Ovid's diffidence in *Tristia* (2.327-336), Dante opts to simply skip ahead (lines 61-63), assuring the reader that upon considering both the gravity of the subject in question and the mortal shoulders that must bear that burden, none would find his trembling under such weight amiss. For the sea depths that this audacious prow cleaves are no place for the meager barque,⁵³ nor yet for the navigator who would commit less than all of himself. The intellectual challenge posed to the reader at the beginning of the final leg of the journey is now directed to the Dante subject *qua* narrator and poet as the *legno che cantando varca* forges ever onward, ploughing through the uncharted waters of *Paradiso*.

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The fusion of nautical and bucolic imagery that is introduced in the second part of the apostrophe in *Paradiso* 2 to signify poetry is reminiscent of those classical strains we observed in Hesiod and in the Augustan poets cited above, and especially Ovid:⁵⁴

Voialtri pochi che drizzaste il collo
per tempo al pan de li angeli, del quale
vivesi qui ma non sen vien satollo,
metter potete ben per l'alto sale
vostro navigio, servando mio solco
dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna equale.

[You other few who craned your necks in time
to reach for the bread of the angels, which
gives us life on earth, yet never leaves us satisfied,
you may indeed set out, your ship afloat
upon the salty deep, keeping to the furrow
I have made, before the sea goes smooth again.]
(*Par.* 2.10-15)

The dedicated seekers of true wisdom (*pan degli angeli*) who are still unsatisfied by earthly knowledge (lines 10-12) are invited to set out with the narrator. The readers who would follow the poet into the undiscovered country must keep close to the wake of his ship if they are to avoid getting lost in the vast unknown sea. Here the ship's wake is described as the ploughed furrow (*solco*) that quickly disappears when the water settles behind the poet's enterprising vessel. Extending the ploughing imagery further, the apostrophe ends by comparing the reader's anticipated wonderment with that of the Argonauts witnessing Jason yoke a pair of fire-breathing oxen to a plough (Ovid *Metamorphosis* 7.100-158).

Que' gloriosi che passaro al Colco
non s'ammiraron come voi farete,
quando Iasón vider fatto bifolco.

[Those famous men who made their way to Colchis,
when they saw Jason had become a plowman,
were not as stunned as you shall be.]
(*Par.* 2.16-18)

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The poet's choice of imagery is especially potent since it compounds a reference to ploughing with a recollection of that wondrous feat accomplished at the mythical dawn of civilization that is recounted by Ovid in the *Metamorphosis*. At the end of the *cantica* this allusion is complemented by another recollection of wonder inspired by humanity's mythical first sea voyage undertaken by the Argonauts. This time, the reference comes with the effect of historicizing the marvel of human enterprise:

Un punto solo m'è maggior letargo
che venticinque secoli a la 'mpresa,
che fé Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo.

[My memory of that moment is more lost
than five and twenty centuries make dim that enterprise
when, in wonder, Neptune at the Argo's shadow stared.]
(*Par.* 33.94-96)

With this last nautical reference, the *Commedia* ties the symbolic totality of human history to the art of poetry. Straining to describe that final vision, the poet claims that the breadth and depth of the cumulative details that he has forgotten of its particulars—details which constitute the material of his narrative—is equivalent in magnitude to what humanity has forgotten of their history since man first embarked on the open sea.⁵⁵ So grave a loss notwithstanding, the poet's ship sails smoothly *through* the final verses of the poem. In a notable departure from the conventions of leave taking, the poetic enterprise of the *Commedia* looks to yet another beginning, mirroring the unending nature of its Trinitarian structure, with the poem closing in the imperfect tense as Dante's will and desire enters consonance with the "amor che move 'l sole e l'altre stelle" (*Par.* 33.145).

The same Dante warning those listeners who are ill equipped to face the dangers of the uncharted, open seas upon which he embarks against following him in their "piccioletta barca," also embraces the same grand undertaking assumed by his ancient predecessors, hoisting the sails of his "legno che cantando varca" spurred on and guided by the *Commedia's* own declared poetic authority, Beatrice *ammiraglio*. The analogy thus designating Beatrice, the agent of Dante's journey of salvation and intellectual edification, is truly one of the most audacious personifications of poetic authority that dares readers to extend our imagination and intellect beyond the

constraints of received and anticipated assumptions of signification, especially with respect to normative gendered conceptions.

Seven centuries have passed since Dante's death and still, the concept of gender as prescribed roles defined to appease the strictures of the heterosexual matrix continues to block the reader's access to the intertextually complex depths of Beatrice's authority in the poetics of the *Commedia*. Beatrice is the commanding catalyst and benefactor of Dante's *poema sacro*, and he does not limit her representation and expression to the narrow boundaries of aesthetic and social systems which demand that she only exist as an object of the male gaze, devoid of either voice or agency. It is telling of the unchallenged persistence of the heterosexual matrix that scholars and commentators view and refer to Beatrice's authority as "masculine." Yet the unselfconscious consistency and intellectual vigor that characterize the lady—from the opening passages of the *Vita Nova* to the *Commedia*'s arrival in Empyrean—constitute the main features of the perfect, resplendent beauty that Dante extolls. That the poet offers no descriptions of Beatrice's physical body need not mean that he denies that she is female, nor does it mean that he endows her with "masculine" traits to establish her credibility. Rather, to the frustration of scholars who have "diligently scrutinized archives and medieval artworks in search of the evidence of Beatrice's 'true' features" (Camilletti 4), the poet effectively obviates cliché tropes of beauty that reduce female figures to physical objects of desire that flatter the authority and expectations of the male gaze. Instead, Dante simply focuses both his and the reader's attention on representing and dramatizing the essential nature of the beauty that moves, inspires, and directs him: radiant intellect and manifest dignity free of gendered and gendering constraints.

The historically vast poetic legacy of the nautical metaphor in which the poetically authoritative significance of the term *ammiraglio* is rooted lays the foundation for an unequivocal outcome: when Beatrice speaks, her utterance as *ammiraglio* collapses the multiplicity of Dante's poetic heritage into a syncretic unity not only in the moment of her appearance before the pilgrim in the Terrestrial Paradise, but throughout the poet's entire program of composition. By characterizing her demeanor as *ammiraglio*, the poet of the *Commedia* distills the idea of poetic enterprise into a single word that connotes both administrative and epistemic authority. The secondary significance of *ammiraglio* in metaphoric, allegorical, or anagogical terms consequently extends beyond the specific instance of the

utterance to a global context that encompasses the *Commedia* and integrates the concept of arduous yet intrepid spiritual and poetic endeavor. It is therefore by drawing upon a metaphor signifying the complex and daunting labor of poetic craft that Dante's *Commedia* invests the figure of Beatrice with paramount authority as the master and commander of poetic enterprise and the hermeneutic arbiter of Dante's new poetics of revelation.

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NOTES

¹ "... a lady called me, so blessed and so beauteous / that I implored her to command me. /... / "O lady of virtue ... / so much does your command please me / that my obedience, were it already given, would still be late. / You have but to make your desire known." (*Inf.* 2.53-81; my translation adapted from Hollander). This study uses the Petrocchi critical edition of the *Commedia* along with Hollander's English translation. All other editions and accompanying translations of primary texts used in this essay are listed in Works Cited. Unless otherwise noted, added emphasis on quoted texts highlighting relevant phrases in context is made by the author of this study.

² In her illuminating discussion of the peculiarity and unparalleled breadth of Beatrice's agency as an authoritative speaker, Barolini also remarks on the unfavorable responses that Beatrice in the *Commedia* elicits from readers in general and from "historically mostly male commentators" of the poem.

³ In order to maintain a clear distinction between the historical author Publius Vergilius Maro and the metonymic poetic avatar that appears as Dante's guide in the *Commedia*, I will refer to the historical figure as Vergil, and to the poetic character in the *Commedia* as Virgilio throughout this essay.

⁴ For studies that analyze this simile in terms of sex and gender see also Potter and Schnapp.

⁵ Charles Singleton is among the most persuasive scholars dedicated to reclaiming Beatrice's Christological symbolism. For further details, see especially "The Pattern at the Center"; *Journey to Beatrice*; and *An essay on the Vita nuova*.

⁶ See Barolini.

⁷ See Laura Ingallinella's essay in this volume discussing the testimonial authority these figures exhibit in the *Commedia*'s representation of their lived experiences, the circumstances of their deaths, and their ultimate fate.

⁸ Contextualizing the mid-19th-century paintings and drawings of Beatrice created by the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti that have become iconic images of Beatrice in contemporary popular imagination, Fabio Camilletti proposes that such works of imaginary representation exemplify an expression of the modern visual artist's interiority responding to the textually "externalized simulacrum of the poet's own interiority" (Camilletti 4-8).

⁹ See discussion on Beatrice's function in service to the poet in Barolini 367-368.

¹⁰ Stazio, too, recounts how the *Aeneid* fulfills the maternal role in the poetic biography he shares (*Purg.* 21.97-99).

¹¹ See Barolini's discussion.

¹² Although several glossators only refer to *Psalms* 50 and 118 as the textual source of the pilgrim's exclamation, "Miserere mei" occurs repeatedly in the *Psalms*, occurring some 18 times throughout David's prayers in the following passages: *Psalms* 4:2, 6:3, 9:14, 24:16, 25:11, 26:7, 30:10, 40:5, 40:11, 50:3, 55:2, 56:2, 85:3, 85:16, 118:29, 118:58, 118:132. The frequency of the phrase in the *Psalms*, coupled with its quotation in the gospels of Luke, Mark and Matthew specifically in relation to David, and finally the general popularity and utility of the *Psalms* makes it a ready identifier of the singer of the "cantor che per doglia / del fallo disse 'Miserere mei'" (*Par.* 32.111-12). Also of interest is Nicola Fosca's note on the verse: "Davide è anche l'umile salmista (*Purg.* X.65), il cantor de lo Spirito Santo (*Par.* XX.38): cfr. *Purg.* X, n. 49-54; a lui Dante, ottenuta l'investitura poetica divina, somiglierà. Si noti che S. Tommaso, nel discutere della grandezza dei profeti (ST II-II, q. 174, a. 4), afferma che "Mosé fu superiore nella conoscenza della divinità, mentre Davide conobbe ed espresse in modo più completo i misteri dell'Incarnazione di Cristo." Cited from the commentary to *Inferno* 1.65 in Fosca.

¹³ Since speech occurs in time, the illocutionary appropriation of the subject position is intrinsically temporal. Citing the *Dictionnaire général*'s definition of the present—« le temps où l'on est » ["the time in which one is"]—Benveniste equates it with « le temps où l'on parle » ["the time in which one is speaking"] ("De la subjectivité" 262). "C'est là le moment éternellement « présent », quoique ne se rapportant jamais aux mêmes événements d'une chronologie « objective », parce qu'il est déterminé pour chaque locuteur par chacune des instances de discours qui s'y rapporte. Le temps linguistique est sui-référentiel. En dernière analyse la temporalité humaine avec tout son appareil linguistique dévoile la subjectivité inhérente à l'exercice même du langage." ["This is the eternally 'present' moment, although it never relates to the same events of an 'objective' chronology because it is determined for each speaker by each of the instances of discourse related to it. Linguistic time is *self-referential*. In the final analysis, human temporality with all its linguistic apparatus reveals the subjectivity inherent in the very act of using language."] ("De la subjectivité" 262-263). In other words, the subject exists within the present in which he speaks along with the world he appropriates through language—a present that he constantly renews and perpetuates in speech. "Le locuteur situe comme « présent » tout ce qu'il implique tel en vertu de la forme linguistique qu'il emploie. Ce présent est réinventé chaque fois qu'un homme parle parce que c'est, à la lettre, un moment neuf, non encore vécu." ["The speaker situates as 'present' all that he implies as such by virtue of the linguistic form he employs. This present is reinvented each time a person speaks because it is, literally, a new moment, not yet lived."] ("Le langage et l'expérience humaine" 72-74).

¹⁴ "Au couple *je/tu* appartient en propre une corrélation spéciale, que nous appellerons, faute de mieux, *corrélation de subjectivité*. Ce qui différencie le « je » de « tu », c'est d'abord le fait d'être, dans le cas de « je », *intérieur* à l'énoncé et extérieur à « tu », mais extérieur d'une manière qui ne supprime pas la réalité humaine du dialogue." ["To the *I/you* pair belongs a special correlation, which we will call, for want of a better term, the *correlation of subjectivity*. What differentiates the "I" from "you" is, first of all, the fact of being, in the case of "I", *internal* to the statement and external to "you", but external in a way that does not take away the human reality of the dialogue."] (Benveniste "Structure des relations de personne" 232).

¹⁵ See commentary to *Purgatorio* 30.22-33 in Imola. See also Gorni 19-44.

¹⁶ “ita nos rite coepturi ab Homero videmur. hic enim, quem ad modum ex Oceano dicit ipse amnium fontium que cursus initium capere, omnibus eloquentiae partibus exemplum et ortum dedit. hunc nemo in magnis rebus sublimitate, in parvis proprietate superaverit. idem laetus ac pressus, iucundus et gravis, tum copia tum brevitate mirabilis, nec poetica modo, sed oratoria virtute eminentissimus” (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.47). [“... the proper place for us to begin is with Homer. Like his own Ocean, which he says is the source of every river and spring, Homer provides the model and the origin of every department of eloquence. No one surpassed his sublimity in great themes, or in propriety in small. He is at once luxuriant and concise, charming and grave, marvelous in his fullness and in his brevity, supreme not only in poetic but in oratorical excellence.”] (Russell)

¹⁷ See *Eclogue* 7.1-5; Ferry 53.

¹⁸ *Eclogue* 7.21-28; Ferry 55.

¹⁹ For alternative readings of this scene see commentary to *Purgatorio* 30.22-33 in Imola and in Pertile (“Chapter 3. Aspettando Beatrice”).

²⁰ “scio hominem in Christo ante annos quattuordecim sive in corpore nescio sive extra corpus nescio Deus scit raptum eiusmodi usque ad tertium caelum. et scio huiusmodi hominem sive in corpore sive extra corpus nescio Deus scit. quoniam raptus est in paradysum et audivit arcana verba quae non licet homini loqui. pro eiusmodi gloriabor pro me autem nihil gloriabor nisi in infirmitatibus meis.” *Epistula Pauli ad Corinthios* 2. 12.2-5. [“I know a man in Christ above fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I know not, or out of the body, I know not; God knoweth), such a one caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man (whether in the body, or out of the body, I know not: God knoweth), That he was caught up into paradise, and heard secret words, which it is not granted to man to utter. For such an one I will glory; but for myself I will glory nothing, but in my infirmities.” (Douay-Rheims, II *Corinthians* 12.2-5).

²¹ “But, Perses, do remember that each kind of work has its season / and, above all, navigation. / Praise a small ship, but load your cargo on a big one. / The bigger the cargo the greater the profit heaped on profit, / if the winds keep nasty gales in check. / Whenever you want to turn your foolish mind to trade / to escape your debts and the hunger that plagues you, / I will teach you the rules that govern the sea, / though I am no expert on navigation and ships, / since I never sailed the open seas on a boat, / except when I went to Euboea from Aulis, where once / the Achaeans weathered a grim storm and then with a great host / from holy Greece sailed over to Troy, land of fair women. / There I crossed over to Chalkis for the prizes / in honor of wise Amphidamas, the many prizes proclaimed in advance / by his magnanimous sons. And I claim that there / I was the victor in a song contest and won an eared tripod, / which I dedicated to the Helikonian Muses, / where they first taught me mastery of flowing song. / This is all I know about well-riveted ships, / but even so I can speak the mind of aegis-bearing Zeus, / for the Muses taught me to sing and never weary.” Hesiod, *Work and Days* (641-662; qtd. in Rosen). See also Tsagalis.

²² See also Tsagalis.

²³ Rosen further notes that “Hesiod’s injunctions toward the close of the Nautilia (687-94), when read metaphorically, make this point eloquently. The poet here advises the person contemplating sailing not to put one’s entire livelihood into the ship (μηδ’ ἐν νηυσὶν ἅπαντα βίον κοίλῃσι τίθεσθαι, 689), but to leave behind the greater amount (ἀλλὰ πλέω λείπειν, τὰ δὲ μείονα φορτίζεσθαι, 690). The sailor who ensures against a total material disaster at sea by staking only a moderate amount of βίος on one sea voyage is analogous to the poet who avoids the artistic dangers of

heroic poetry by composing in a less ambitious genre (where the poet's βίος is his poetic material)" (Rosen 105).

²⁴ Aside from Hesiod, Theognis, too, associates poetry with the metaphorical flight over the seas, also referring to himself metaphorically as a ship (Rosen 110). As quoted by Rosen: "ἔφθην αἰνήσας πρὶν σοῦ κατὰ πάντα δαῖναι / ἦθεα· νῦν δ' ἦδη νηῦς ἄθ' ἐκάς διέγω" (Theognis 969-70). In (Rosen 110 n.39), the critic remarks that in this case "Kyrnos travels like a bird, but the diction is that of seafaring (ἰχθυόεντα περῶν πόντον ἐπ' ἀτρύγετω)." Rosen further notes that "the most extended treatment of the metaphor is Propertius 3.3.13-24, which is all the more striking because the poem opens with an evocation of Hesiod as Propertius's poetic mentor (1-2). In 13-24 Propertius explicitly likens the contrast between his own ("Hesiodic") poetic agenda and the more elevated heroic epic to that between an enterprising sailor on the open sea and the skittish novice who always keeps the shore in view (cf. esp. 19-24, "ut tuus in scamno iactetur saepe libellus, . . / non est ingenii cumba gravanda tui. / alter remus aquas alter tibi radat harenas, / tutus eris: medio maxima turba mari est." This image is strongly reminiscent of Hesiod's contrast between the Achaeans' sea voyage to Troy and his own minor trip to Chalcis, a trip where each shore would always remain in view" (Rosen 112-113).

²⁵ For more examples of the nautical metaphor cited by Curtius (128-130) but not included among the *bella scola* see: Propertius 3.3.22-3; 3.9.3-4; 3.9.36. Manilius 3.26. Pindar: *Nem.* 3.26-7; *Ol.* 6.101; *Pyth.* 10.51-2. Apollonius: *Arg.* 4.1773-5. Valerius Flaccus: *Arg.* 1.1.1-4. Summarizing the *Thebaid*, Foley notes that "the *ratis* of Statius (*Theb.* 12.809), a "ship" of poetry, which recalls others such as those [cited above] is described by the poet as being deserving of a haven (portum, "harbor," *Theb.* 12.809; cf. *Sil.* 4.4.88-9), ostensibly from the apparently endless tale of epic grief, despair, and ruination it describes. While Statius' employment of the nautical metaphor to refer to the end of the *Thebaid's* journey is reminiscent of Pindar's use of the anchor to indicate the end of an ode (*Ol.* 6.101), it also recalls Ennius's self-conscious statement (possibly) at or towards the end of his *Annals'* original epilogue to the fifteenth book (*Ann. sed. inc. fr.* 69), where he likens a distinguished poeta finishing a demanding literary task to a champion racing steed in retirement (Dominik 1993: 44-5)" (Foley 517). I have reserved analysis of poetically self-conscious nautical metaphors in Homer or in Lucan for a separate study.

²⁶ For a summary, see commentary to *Inferno* 1.79-81 in Landino.

²⁷ "ὁ Φθόνος Ἀπόλλωνος ἐπ' οὐάτα λάθριος εἶπεν / «οὐκ ἄγαμαι τὸν ἀοιδὸν ὃς οὐδ' ὄσα πόντος αἰεῖδει.» / τὸν Φθόνον ἀπόλλων ποδί τ' ἤλασεν ᾧδὲ τ' ἔειπεν / «Ἀσσυρίου ποταμοῦ μέγας ῥόος, ἀλλὰ τὰ πολλὰ / λύματα γῆς καὶ πολλὸν ἐφ' ὕδατι συρφετὸν ἔλκει. / Διοῖ δ' οὐκ ἀπὸ παντὸς ὕδωρ φορέουσι Μέλισσαι, / ἀλλ' ἦτις καθαρὴ τε καὶ ἀχράαντος ἀνέρπει / πίδακος ἐξ ἱερῆς ὀλίγη λιβάς ἄκρον ἄωτον.» [Spake Envy privily in the ear of Apollo: "I admire not the poet who singeth not things for number as the sea." Apollo spurned Envy with his foot and spake thus: "Great is the stream of the Assyrian river, but much filth of earth and much refuse it carries on its waters. And not of every water do the Melissae carry to Deo, but of the trickling stream that springs from a holy fountain, pure and undefiled, the very crown of waters] (Callimachus, Hymn II.105-112).

²⁸ For more on the polemic over genre in the epilogue of the *Hymn to Apollo*, see Kohnken 413-416.

²⁹ Thomas describes how the Callimachean Propertius, wary of the open sea—"alter remus aquas alter tibi radat harenas, / tutus eris: medio maxima turba mari est" (Prop. 3.3.23-24)—nevertheless hails Vergil's success as an epic poet: "Cedite Romani

scriptores, cedite Grai: / Nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade” (Thomas, “A Trope by Any Other Name”).

³⁰ “tuque ades inceptumque una decurre laborem, / o decus, o famae merito pars maxima nostrae, / Maecenas, pelagoque volans da vela patenti. / non ego cuncta meis amplecti versibus opto, / non mihi si linguae centum sint oraque centum, / ferrea vox. ades et primi lege litoris oram; / in manibus terrae: non hic te carmine ficto / atque per ambages et longa exorsa tenebo” (*Georgics* 2.40-47). English translation in Ferry, *The Georgics of Virgil*. For examples of Hesiodic allusion, see *Geor.* 2.173-176. For detailed commentary see corresponding notes in Thomas, *Georgics*.

³¹ “Atque equidem, extremo ni iam sub fine laborum / vela traham et terries festinem advertere proram, / forsitan et, pinguis hortos quae cura colendi / ornaret, canerem, ...” (*Georgics* 4.116-119) [“And, to be sure, if it were not true that I / Have nearly come to the end of this my labor / And now am almost ready to turn my vessel / Eagerly toward home and furl my sails, / It might be that I’d sing to celebrate / The care it takes to cultivate the flowers / That make our gardens beautiful”] (Ferry, *The Georgics*).

³² “Rectius vives, Licini, neque altum / semper urgendo neque, dum procellas / cautus horrescis, nimium premendo / litus iniquum. / auream quisquis mediocritatem / diligit, tutus caret obsoleti / sordibus tecti, caret invidenda / sobrius aula. [...] non, si male nunc, et olim / sic erit: quondam cithara tacentem / suscitatur Musam neque semper arcum / tendit Apollo. / rebus angustis animosus atque / fortis adpare: sapienter idem / contrahes vento nimium secundo / turgida vela” (*Odes* 2.10.1-7, 17-24). [“You’ll do better, Licinius, not to spend your life / Venturing too far out on the dangerous waters, / Or else, for fear of storms, staying too close in / To the dangerous rocky shoreline. That man does best / Who chooses the middle way, so he doesn’t end up / Living under a roof that’s going to ruin / Or in some gorgeous mansion everyone envies. / [...] / Apollo isn’t always drawing his bow; / There are times when he takes up his lyre and plays, / And awakens the music sleeping upon the strings. / Be resolute when things are going against you, / But shorten sail when the fair wind blows too strong.”] (Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*).

³³ “Phoebus volentem proelia me loqui / victas et urbis increpuit lyra, / ne parva Tyrrenum per aequor / vela darem” (*Odes* 4.15.1-4) [“I wanted to sing a heroic song about / Caesar’s great victories in battle and / The conquering of cities, but Apollo / Struck a peremptory chord upon his lyre, / Forbidding me to do so, forbidding me / To launch my little boat on such an ocean”] (Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*).

³⁴ “excipe pacato, Caesar Germanice, voltu / hoc opus et timidae derige navis iter, / officioque, levem non aversatus honorem, / en tibi devoto numine dexter ades” (*Fasti* 1.3-6). English translation in Wiseman and Wiseman.

³⁵ “mite caput, pater, huc placataque cornua vertas, / et des ingenio vela secunda meo” (*Fasti* 3.788-789) [“Father, turn your mild head and peaceful horns this way, and give my talent favourable sails”] (Wiseman and Wiseman).

³⁶ “mota Cytheriaca leviter mea tempora myrto / contigit et ‘coeptum perfice’ dixit ‘opus’. / sensimus, et causae subito patuere dierum: / dum licet et spirant flamina, navis eat” (*Fasti* 4.18). [“Moved, [the goddess] lightly touched my brow with Cytherean myrtle, and said: ‘Complete the work you have begun.’ I felt it, and suddenly the reasons for the days became clear. While it’s allowed and the breezes are blowing, let the ship sail”] (Wheeler).

³⁷ “arguor immerito. tenuis mihi campus aratur: / illud erat magnae fertilitatis opus. / non ideo debet pelago se credere, siqua / audet in exiguo ludere cumba lacu. forsā—et hoc dubito—numeris levioribus aptus / sim satis, in parvos sufficiamque

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modos: / at si me iubeas domitos Iovis igne Gigantes / dicere, conantem debilitabit onus. / divitis ingenii est immania Caesaris acta / condere, materia ne superetur opus” (Ovid *Tristia* 2.327-336). English translation in Wheeler.

³⁸ “non timui, fateor, ne, *qua tot iere carinae, / naufraga* seruat omnibus *una foret*” (*Tristia* 2.469-470). English translation in Wheeler.

³⁹ “omne meum credas opus esse remissum, / saepe dedi nostrae grandia uela rati. / sex ego Fastorum scripsi totidemque libellos, / cumque suo finem mense uolumen habet” (*Tristia* 2.548-552). English translation in Wheeler.

⁴⁰ “uerba miser frustra non proficientia perdo. / ipsa graues spargunt ora loquentis aquae, / terribilisque Notus iactat mea dicta, precesque / ad quos mittuntur, non sinit ire deos. / ergo idem uenti, ne causa laedar in una, / uelaque nescio quo uotaque nostra ferunt. / me miserum, quanti montes uoluuntur aquarum!” (*Tristia* 1.2.13-20). [“But, wretch that I am, to no purpose am I wasting profitless words. / My very lips as I speak are sprayed by the heavy waves, / and dread Notus hurls away my words / nor suffers my prayers to reach the gods to whom they are directed. / So the same winds, that I be not punished in one way only, are driving /—I know not whither— both my sails and my prayers. / Wretched me! what vast mountains of water heave themselves aloft!”] (Wheeler).

⁴¹ “ut mare considat ventisque ferentibus utar, / ut mihi parcatis, non minus exul ero. / non ego diuitias auidus sine fine parandi / latum mutandis mercibus aequor aro, / nec peto, quas quondam petii studiosus, Athenas, / oppida non Asiae, non loca uisa prius; / non ut Alexandri claram delatus in urbem / delicias uideam, Nile iocose, tuas. / quod faciles opto uentos (quis credere possit?) Sarmatis est tellus, quam mea uela petunt” (*Tristia* 1.2.73-82). [“Even should the sea grow calm and favouring breezes bear me on /—even should ye spare me—I shall be not less an exile. / Not in greed of limitless wealth do I plough the sea to trade my wares / nor am I on my way to Athens as once I was while a student, / nor to the cities of Asia, nor the places I have seen / before, nor am I sailing to Alexander’s famous city / to see thy pleasures, merry Nile. / The reason of my prayers for favouring winds (who could believe it?) / Is the Sarmatian land, the object of my voyage”] (Wheeler).

⁴² “Tingitur oceano custos Erymanthidos ursae, / aequoreasque suo sidere turbat aquas. / nos tamen Ionium non nostra findimus aequor / sponte, sed audaces cogimur esse metu. / me miserum! quantis increscunt aequora uentis, / erutaque ex imis feruet harena fretis!” (*Tristia* 1.4.1-6). [“The guardian of the Erymanthian bear [Bootes] dips / in ocean and with his setting stars makes stormy the waters of the sea. / Yet I am cleaving the Ionian waves / not of my own will but forced to boldness through fear. / Wretched me! what mighty winds swell the waters, / casting up the seething sand from the lowest depths!”] (Wheeler).

⁴³ “Conquerar an taceam? Ponam sine nomine crimen / an notum qui sis omnibus esse uelim? / Nomine non utar, ne commendere querela, / quaeraturque tibi carmine fama meo. / Dum mea puppis erat ualida fundata carina, / qui mecum uelles currere primus eras.” *Ex Ponto* 4.3.1-10. English translation in Wheeler.

⁴⁴ “uix nouus ista furor ueniensque implesset Apollo, et mea iam longo meruit ratis aequore portum” (*Thebaid* 12.808-809). [“Scarce would new inspiration or Apollo’s presence sustain the task, and my little bark has voyaged far and deserves her haven”] (Mozley).

⁴⁵ “Nunc si forte meis quae sint exordia musis / scire petis, iam Sidonios emensa labors / Thebais optato collegit carbasa portu / Parnasique iugis silvaeque Heliconide festis / tura dedit flammis et virginis exta iuvencae / votiferaque meas suspendit ab arbore vittas. / nunc vacuos crines alio subit infula nexu: / Troia quidem magnusque

mihi temptatur Achilles, / sed vocat arcitenens alio pater armaque monstrat / Ausonii
maiora ducis. trahit impetus illo / iam pridem retrahitque timor. stabuntne sub illa /
mole umeri an magno vincetur pondere cervix? / dic, Marcelle, feram? fluctus an
sueta minores / nosse ratis nondum Ioniis credenda periclis?" (*Silvae* 4.4.87-100).
English translation in Bailey.

⁴⁶ "te nostra magistro / Thebais urgebat priscorum exordia vatum; / tu cantus
stimulare meos, tu pandere facta / heroum bellique modos positusque locorum /
monstrabas. labat incerto mihi limite cursus / te sine, et orbatae caligant vela carinae"
(*Silvae* 5.3.233-238). English translation in Bailey.

⁴⁷ For a reading of Beatrice's initial appearance to the pilgrim in biblical and
historical terms elaborating on the figure of the *mulier fortis*, see Pertile.

⁴⁸ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 10.1.47.

⁴⁹ See the survey of nautical metaphors above: used to represent the challenge of
composing epic poetry, they are often accompanied by *recusatio* expressing the
poet's diffidence about embarking on such a daunting task.

⁵⁰ Piero Boitani juxtaposes the imagery of Ulisse's episode with that of the Argo
found in *Par* 33.94-96.

⁵¹ See Le Goff.

⁵² See Barolini's observations about the peculiarity of Beatrice's characterization in
maternal terms (368).

⁵³ Incidentally, Padoan reads this *recusatio* as Dante's concession to Giovanni del
Virgilio's demands that Dante compose in the more exclusively erudite Latin rather
than in the vernacular: "...quello [...] parziale cedimento di fronte alle riserve di chi
voleva la vera arte dedicata ai pochi si registra anche all'inizio della terza cantica,
dove cogliendo pretesto dell'affermazione della maggior difficoltà della materia per
cui si tentano nuove altezze, Dante, dopo aver manifestato il desiderio
dell'incoronazione laurea (l'accostamento qui, è assai indicativo), dissuade da
seguirlo coloro che sono 'in piccioletta barca.'" Padoan is of a mind with Auerbach
and Gmelin who detect a paternalistic note in Dante's tone in this apostrophe. The
exclusivity of this attitude, according to Padoan, nearly undermines "quel
difficilissimo equilibrio che nel poema dantesco si stabilisce tra messaggio
escatologico ed ambizione letteraria" (25-27).

⁵⁴ Cf. especially "nos tamen Ionium non nostra *findimus* aequor" (*Tristia* 1.4.3); "non
ego [...] aequor aro" (*Tristia* 1.2.75-6); "arguor immerito. tenuis mihi campus aratur"
(*Tristia* 2.327).

⁵⁵ For a detailed critical reading of *Paradiso* 33.94-96 in conjunction with Ulisse's
doomed final enterprise, see Boitani's analytical exegesis. See also Bárberi Squarotti
for further discussion.

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The Eloquent Witness: Women's Testimony and Hermeneutical Insurrection in Dante's *Commedia*

Introduction

Dante and Virgil are walking through the ring of the *Malebolge* that houses panderers. Here, the pilgrim encounters a thirteenth-century man from Bologna, Venèdico Caccianemico.¹ Venèdico tries to hide his face, but he is recognized and forced to confess what sin condemns him to eternal damnation:

I' fu colui che la Ghisolabella
condussi a far la voglia del marchese,
come che suoni la sconcia novella.

[It was I who urged Ghisolabella
to do the will of that marquis,
no matter how the foul tale goes around.]
(*Inf.* 18.55-57)

Venèdico refers to a tale that was likely the subject of avid gossip in late thirteenth-century northern Italy, one that Dante records on parchment for everyone to read: Venèdico had forced his younger sister, Ghisolabella, into prostitution to a nobleman with whom he hoped to strike a political alliance. Ghisolabella's story exemplifies how women from Dante's recent past are often represented in the *Commedia*.² The poem is abundant with stories of gendered forms of abuse and coercion, which Dante reads as resulting from political corruption and systemic injustice.³ In this framework, Ghisolabella is the exception that proves the rule: she does not have a voice in *Inferno* 18—her name is recorded in her abuser's confession—but other women who were subjected to similar abuses speak for themselves.

Dante mines foul tales concerning instances of gendered violence and turns them into opportunities for women to produce discourse endowed with hermeneutical authority. The value of female testimony and identity power as juridical persons was the site of tense negotiations in Dante's time; women were systematically subjected to hermeneutical and testimonial injustice. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when a group that is considered subordinate in a given community is not allowed to participate equally in the generation of shared knowledge, meaning, and understanding. As a result, that group is afforded a lesser quotient of credibility in social processes of

testimony and knowledge exchange.⁴ In 1415, the *Statuta* of Florence explicitly stated that women could only testify by proxy (*per procuratorem*).⁵ These prescriptions do not entirely reflect courtroom practices; in fact, Dante's time saw a resurgence of trials initiated by women, especially for instances of sexual violence.⁶ However, these proceedings typically involved women from low social classes; the women in the *Commedia* belong to the elite of thirteenth-century Italy, a subgroup that continued to abide by stricter laws of conduct.

When a female witness could reach the stand, it was not a given that her testimony would be accepted as authoritative. In a legal treatise from fourteenth-century Italy titled *Processus Satane*, the Virgin claims the role of advocate for humanity. The devil immediately contests her presence in the courtroom with the argument that she falls short in the credibility economy because of her gender on two counts: first, she cannot speak for humankind because legal representation is a "job for men" (*virile officium*); second, she would be "suspect" (*suspectam*) as a defendant, being the judge's mother.⁷ The Virgin crafts a long response to confute the devil's insinuation. First, she justifies her role as an advocate by listing all the cases in which legal sources grant women the right to participate in court (for example, in cases where a woman is representing herself). As for the insinuation about her lack of credibility, the Virgin only argues against the devil on theological grounds.

Even the most exceptional woman in Christian history could not escape the epistemic challenges that women faced when they took the stand. In addition to powerlessness, silencing, and exclusion, women contemporary to Dante all faced the burden of having to demonstrate their authority in fragile economies of credibility (*fides*) and reputation (*fama*).⁸ The *Commedia* places women at the center of this debate and offers characters who produce authoritative testimonies—for and against themselves, for and against others. These characters—who, by virtue of their historicity, stand closer to the pilgrim's path of sin and conversion than Beatrice and her "infallible" speech (*Par.* 7.19)—are creative sites of gendered authority. With Cunizza, Francesca, Pia, Sapia, and Piccarda, Dante subverts the formalized tools of female eloquence by producing characters whose testimony exposes the relation between gendered abuse and hermeneutical inequality. Building upon readings of these characters through the lens of ethics, authority, and testimony,⁹ I argue that all the women who meet the pilgrim use language to present themselves as

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hermeneutical brokers in the poem's system of earthly and divine justice. Their ability to negotiate knowledge and situate themselves (and others) in judicial terms breaks gendered epistemic limitations, resulting in performances of what I call, following José Medina,¹⁰ hermeneutical insurrection: a disobedience to interpretive norms which sets up new paradigms of knowledge exchange.

Testimonial and Judicial Power

Critical inquiries into Francesca and her subjectivity often aim to demonstrate what she gets wrong rather than what she may get right, and analyses of the literary sources and courtly ideologies on which she builds her testimony typically highlight her epistemic failings. According to this interpretive trend, Francesca is in hell because she is a bad reader, who harnessed from love lyrics and French romance ways to justify and act on her lustful disposition.¹¹ However, Francesca's ability to displace responsibility is grounded on the hermeneutical authority that Dante affords her in the first place. Francesca possesses knowledge of herself and the afterlife that is not that common in the poem; she is one among the few characters of *Inferno* who are aware of the laws and structure of the three realms. Upon meeting the pilgrim, Francesca coaxes him into imagining an impossible situation: if she and Paolo were blessed souls in heaven, they would pray to God on the pilgrim's behalf for the compassion he expresses for their miserable state (*Inf.* 5.91-93). Rarely in the poem does a soul imagine itself in a realm that is not the one to which they are assigned by divine justice—the most notable exception being Virgil, whose situation serves Dante as an important point of interrogation regarding the legitimacy of divine justice. Modeled after Cavalcanti,¹² Francesca's impossible offer to pray on the pilgrim's behalf showcases her ability to use the love lyric tradition for something other than producing a distorted representation of love. Devout prayer, a much-needed currency for both the living and the souls in purgatory, is the most precious gift a blessed soul can offer. A foil to Beatrice, Francesca knows that she will never be able to handle this currency; however, her refined hermeneutical tools allow her to turn impossibilities into opportunities for an affective exchange.

Prompted by the pilgrim, Francesca then shares the story we have all come to know, framing her sin as a capitulation to the overpowering force of love. The critical tradition has notoriously seen Francesca as attempting to use her speech to divest herself of as much

responsibility for her situation as she can. Francesca explicitly blames love as the agent that drove her and Paolo to a violent death. However, she concludes her speech with a noteworthy addition: “Caina attende chi a vita ci spense” (Caina waits for him who took our life; *Inf.* 5.107), simultaneously revealing that she and Paolo were murdered by a family member—Francesca’s husband and Paolo’s brother, Gianciotto Malatesta—and that the murderer is therefore destined to end up in the first ring of the last circle of hell which confines all traitors to kin.

In articulating the fate that awaits her spouse, Francesca claims the role of witness and judge, which she would never have been afforded in the patriarchal society which caused her death. Dante imbues Francesca with judicial power: Francesca is so well versed in the retributive logic of divine justice that she can see into the future and into the deepest bowels of hell to predict the fate of her murderer. Gianciotto, “colui ch’a vita ci spense,” is not just guilty of murder; by killing Francesca and Paolo, he has robbed them of the freedom they had while still living to repent and reconcile with God.¹³ With precision, Francesca phrases her allegation so that the *vita* that Gianciotto extinguished can be interpreted as life on earth, eternal life in communion with God, or both. If there is a strongly retributive component in the claim made by Francesca, it is precisely in the economies of freedom that are afforded to the parties involved in this otherworldly litigation: Francesca has been robbed of her freedom to choose salvation; Francesca’s prediction implies that Gianciotto, while in possession of said freedom, will never repent.

Damnatory statements like Francesca’s occur seldom in the poem, and almost never with this level of specificity. The pilgrim—and readers with him—have to wait until the very end of *Inferno* to learn that Caina is one of the rings in Cocytus, the frozen lake housing traitors, and that each ring is devoted to a different subgroup of sinners.¹⁴ Most early commentators (Graziolo Bambaglioli, Guido da Pisa, l’Ottimo, and others) interpret Francesca’s words as a logical and almost obvious application of retributive justice: Gianciotto is sentenced to Caina (or, to follow the text found in many early codices of the poem, to stand alongside Cain himself)¹⁵ because he committed fratricide like Cain. And yet, it has been often debated whether one should interpret Francesca’s sentencing of Gianciotto as a prophecy, like so many others in the *Commedia*, or merely as a personal desire to which we should not afford any credibility within the economy of the poem.¹⁶ This evaluation robs Francesca and her prediction of the

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credibility that is normally given to other characters of the *Commedia* who announce events that are yet to take place. The entire poem, and especially the first *cantica*, is laced with prophecies of this kind. We do not doubt the logical validity of the prophecies pronounced by Ciaccio, Farinata, or Brunetto; we simply trust these characters' ability to see into the future, which is, in fact, explained by Farinata (*Inf.* 10.100-108). Why, then, should we not believe that Francesca is endowed with the same gifts or able to make logical predictions, using the interpretive tools at her disposal? Francesca's declaration of Gianciotto's eschatological destination reads as an early example of Dante's willingness to bend his theology of free will and justice to denounce cases of moral and political corruption. Indeed, Francesca's statement about Gianciotto resounds with the same authority as those made about Corso Donati's damnation by his brother, Forese (*Purg.* 24.82-87), and about Boniface VIII's imminent arrival in hell by Nicholas III (*Inf.* 19.52-57).

The uneasiness with Francesca's prediction reproduces the same gendered pressures that Dante is reacting to in crafting her voice—the unfamiliarity, foreignness, and untrustworthiness of the female subject and witness calling for justice. With Francesca, Dante offers not only the first example of an articulate subject's testimony in the realm of the damned but also a complementary idea—already presented with the appearance of Beatrice in *Inferno* 2—that female speech can inhabit authority in ways that upset readers' expectations.

Justice Turns Inward

As the *Commedia* progresses, victims of gendered violence turn to more subtle forms of negotiation to reconfigure Francesca's hermeneutical litigation. For these characters, like Pia in *Purgatorio* 5, the assertion of judicial power enhances the poetics of reticence, allusion, and circumlocution that are already present in Francesca's speech.

Pia is among the sinners who repented *in articulo mortis* and, in their encounter with the pilgrim, recount the violent circumstances of their deaths. Her male companions—the soldier Bonconte da Montefeltro and the politician Iacopo del Cassero—know well the language of gore and death. Dante affords them precise tools to describe their dying bodies, explain their last-minute conversion, and name those responsible for their death. With Pia, however, Dante is concerned not with the effectuality of testimony, but with a subterranean negotiation of knowledge and judicial power.

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Pia is one of the few characters in *Purgatorio* who does not ask for prayers, but for remembrance. When the pilgrim is approached by the eager group of souls in *Purgatorio* 5, he promises them that he will do whatever they wish of him if it is within his power (*Purg.* 5.59-63). Aware that prayers will get him through the mountain of Purgatory faster, Iacopo asks the pilgrim to negotiate with their native town, Fano, to bestow prayers on his behalf; more disillusioned with his family, Bonconte instead urges the pilgrim to tell the world about his final breath's dying appeal to the Virgin and his miraculous salvation (*Purg.* 5.67-72, 100-104). Pia makes a different request:

«Deh, quando tu sarai tornato al mondo
e riposato de la lunga via,»
seguitò 'l terzo spirito al secondo,
«ricorditi di me, che son la Pia;
Siena mi fé, disfecemi Maremma:
salsi colui che 'n nanellata pria
disposando m'avea con la sua gemma.»

[“Pray, once you have gone back into the world
and are rested from the long road,”
the third spirit followed on the second,
“please remember me. I am La Pia.
Siena made me, in Maremma I was undone.
He knows how, the one who, to marry me,
first gave the ring that held his stone.”]

(*Purg.* 5.130-136)

It is often observed that the three characters of *Purgatorio* 5 embody the three final moments of Christian life: the trauma of separation from Earth (Iacopo); the miraculous nature of repentance (Bonconte); and the openness to forgiveness (Pia).¹⁷ Critics often romanticize the demureness of Pia's prayer and her hope that the pilgrim be safe, well rested, and in the comfort of his earthly dwelling before he remembers her. While courteous, modest, and gentle, this request deliberately serves to disrupt normative boundaries of knowledge exchange and burdens of responsibility. Pia's prayer is modeled after a scene from the Passion recorded in the Gospel according to Luke: as Christ hangs on the cross suffering, the good thief asks Jesus to remember him in heaven and Christ reassures him that the doors of heaven will open for him.¹⁸ Pia, whose repentance

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similarly took place in a moment of suffering, asks the pilgrim not only to acknowledge her in the moment of their shared encounter, but also to know her through time: she urges him to engage in a continued act of memorial knowledge and to actualize her testimony in his quotidian life.

The domestic intimacy of Pia's request stands in marked contrast to the expansively public dimensions of Iacopo's and Bonconte's accounts. Unlike her companions, Pia is not endowed with hermeneutical tools that allow her to describe her dying body or her repentance as directly as Bonconte and Iacopo. Pia's rhetorical gestures systematically divert the pilgrim's attention from details that may flesh her out with unbecoming exactitude. The creation and destruction of her body are contained in a single line, which places two lands, Siena and Maremma, as the determining agents of her fate. The forces that unmade Pia—the lands which saw her life unfold and the patriarchal structures that govern them—constrict her capacity for testimony. However, they also build a platform for another claim to justice.

Like Francesca, Pia talks about her husband by means of a periphrasis that occupies an entire *terzina* strategically placed at the end of her speech. The reference draws readers' attention to two complementary forms of transaction: the legal and the epistemic. Pia describes her husband as the initiator of marriage negotiations by alluding to two components of the nuptial ritual: first, the *anellamento*—a domestic ceremony, typically held on a designated day at the bride's home, in which the groom gave a ring to his betrothed in the presence of a notary and her parents; and second, the *desponsatio*—a more general term for the ritual preceding the consummation of the marriage.¹⁹ Pia thus deploys legal language to represent marriage as a contract between two individuals. In doing so, she also presents herself as the wronged party in a transaction gone wrong, rather than simply as a commodity—the young bride adorned with a wedding ring—traded between families in the upper class of thirteenth-century Tuscany to seal bonds of marriage. Her periphrasis is also inscribed within an insinuation that carries long-lasting consequences: the man Pia has just described is the only person who knows the truth (“salsi”) about her undoing. In this context, knowledge equals responsibility. By framing the allusion to her husband in epistemic terms, Pia communicates that their holy bond of matrimony has now become an unholy bond of knowledge. A woman, now in purgatory, and her husband, still walking the same

Earth to which she wishes the pilgrim safe return, are forever bound by a transaction of violence and death.

Like Francesca, Pia has experienced divine justice. Unlike Francesca, however, Pia knows that a sinful life can still be turned around even by end-of-life acts of free will. As a result, Pia embodies judicial authority in a different way than Francesca: for although Pia's husband is virtually culpable for the same murder as Francesca's, he is not automatically condemned to Caina. By framing her husband's responsibility in epistemic terms, Pia allows for the possibility that awareness can lead to repentance and salvation. Pia and Francesca employ the same hermeneutical tools to demand justice by applying their understanding of divine justice to their assailants; but they reach different outcomes because their experience and understanding of divine justice is not the same. While Gianciotto's eventual damnation to Caina corresponds to Francesca's own eternal perdition, Pia's salvation is typically interpreted as a case study in purgatorial forgiveness which in turn may allow for the salvation of her murderer, should he choose to repent. If we accept this paradigm, we also must recognize that for Pia, forgiveness is rooted in the exercise of justice and epistemic liberation: by pointing out to her husband's responsibility in her murder, she also indicates the road to salvation that she was able to take at the end of her life.

Pia's attention to the legal and epistemic dimensions of the violence she suffered are typically interpreted as liminal because of her reticent and allusive language. Readings of *Purgatorio* 5 frame this liminality in gendered terms: in accusing her spouse, Pia exposes intimate secrets that are ordinarily confined to domestic spaces; the private nature of Pia's revelations controls her speech, which the poet renders opaque by necessity.²⁰ This rhetorical gesture of turning inward, however, does not exclude the possibility of hermeneutical insurrection. Pia invites the pilgrim to view her experience in transactional terms. The liminal—that is to say, the private—dimension of her statements is constantly questioned and negotiated. In asking the pilgrim for remembrance, Pia initiates an epistemic transaction from a private place (her conscience) to another (the pilgrim's). When she talks about her marriage, she inscribes her story into enclosed spaces—the domestic ceremony of *anellamento*; the conscience of her husband and murderer—while opening doors into them and turning them into the object of epistemic exchange.

Premodern conduct literature in Italy and elsewhere in Europe instructed the virtuous woman that private conversation was the only

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space in which she could exert her social power and articulate free speech.²¹ More specifically, women bound in marriage could only do so in their own homes with their husbands. By initiating her testimonial and hermeneutic transaction with the pilgrim, Pia breaks the confines of the epistemic status quo that confined knowledge of domestic violence to within the household walls; she thereby bends the boundaries of private epistemologies by placing a hermeneutical burden on the pilgrim and, therefore, on the reader of the *Commedia*. With her poetics of reticence, Pia entrusts readers with the responsibility of naming her foul tale and articulating it as sociopolitical commentary.

Hermeneutic Sisterhood

Drinking from the river Lethe casts oblivion over the souls' memory of past suffering, yet the pilgrim's journey through heaven reserves crucial rhetorical spaces for the discussion of gendered violence and the negotiation of women's identity power. In *Paradiso* 3, the pilgrim meets Piccarda Donati, who was coerced into marriage by her brother, Corso.²² Without expanding on the violence, Piccarda recounts her forceful removal from the convent of Monticelli in a brief tercet which condenses everything that she was given the opportunity to leave behind when she drank from the Lethe and the Eunoé. However, even in this beatific state, Piccarda's recollection of her past is still intimately related to the politics of knowing:

Uomini poi, a mal più ch'a bene usi,
fuor mi rapiron de la dolce chiostra:
Iddio si sa qual poi mia vita fusi.

[Then men more used to evil than to good
carried me off, away from the sweet cloister.
God knows what after that my life became.]

(*Par.* 6.106-108)

Stripped of the memory of her suffering outside of Monticelli, Piccarda declares that only God now really knows ("si sa") about her suffering. Like Pia, her tragedy constricts the possibility of testimony to a stage that negotiates the public and the private. Unlike Francesca, Piccarda does not take on the robes of the judge to announce the sentence facing her brother. Dante has conveniently entrusted Piccarda's other brother, Forese, with the responsibility of foretelling

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Corso's impending damnation. Having let her soul be soothed to the point of experiencing only peace, Piccarda has also let go of the claim to judicial power for herself. And yet, precisely because of this resignation from self-centered vindication, Piccarda latches onto the communal possibilities of hermeneutical insurrection in a way that Francesca and Pia do not manage to achieve.

Piccarda is the only case in the entire poem of a female character who recounts the story of another female character. In contrast with Dante's typical pattern of pairing contemporary personalities with ancient figures, the contemporary Piccarda is here paired with a figure from recent history:

E quest'altro splendor che ti si mostra
da la mia destra parte e che s'accende
di tutto il lume de la spera nostra
ciò ch'io dico di me, di sé intende;
sorella fu, e così le fu tolta
di capo l'ombra de le sacre bende.
Ma poi che pur al mondo fu rivolta
contra suo grado e contra buona usanza,
non fu dal vel del cor già mai disciolta.

[And this other splendor who appears to you
upon my right, who blazes up
with all the brightness of this sphere:
What I told of myself applies to her as well.
She was a sister and, like me, she had the shadow
of the holy veil torn from her head.
But, even after she was cast into the world
against her will and against all proper custom,
the veil was never loosened from her heart.]

(*Par.* 3.109-117)

Piccarda introduces Costanza—another woman who aspired to become a nun and was instead coerced into marriage for political motives—as her epistemological avatar. Despite having been born in different centuries and having lived in different sociopolitical contexts, Piccarda states that the two women share the same processes of knowing, understanding, and expressing their identity, state, and fate. By the end of *Paradiso* 3, Piccarda has not only explained the state of the souls in heaven and in her sphere in

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theological terms, but she has also taken the time to make a momentous statement about inconstant souls like Costanza and herself: within the gendered, private spaces of their souls, Costanza and other souls like her were always steadfast (*Par.* 3.117). While this belief situates her, Costanza, and similar souls in the Heaven of the Moon, Piccarda is never morally blamed or chastised for her epistemic failure; rather, Beatrice engages with her statement to comment and clarify it the same way she will later do with other theological conundrums faced by the pilgrim. Just as Francesca is tasked with presenting the pilgrim with the first testimony of what it means to be a damned soul, Piccarda presents the theology of beatitude and how it intersects divine justice with free will.

Piccarda and Beatrice thus don the mantle of theologians to elucidate the finer points on the question of absolute and relative free will across *Paradiso* 3 and 4. In canto 3, Piccarda draws upon the authority of Clare of Assisi (*Par.* 3.97-99); her entire hermeneutical system, from her models to her community, is inscribed within a female perspective. In contrast, when Beatrice picks up where Piccarda left off to respond to the pilgrim's queries, her demeanor and discourse invoke male paradigms and authorities—including Daniel, Plato, Moses, Samuel, John, the angels Gabriel and Michael—all for the male pilgrim's benefit. Clare of Assisi is traded for the martyr Saint Laurence (*Par.* 4.83), and Beatrice brings up only male case studies in her discussion of the successful resistance of the will to external forces. Piccarda's paradigmatically dissident theology is a foil—or, rather, a complement—to Beatrice's embodiment of divine authority which serves the pilgrim alone. With her radiant joy and willingness to engage critically with dogma—after saying that she is perfectly content with it—Piccarda communicates truths about herself and her fellow sisters and their states, to any ear willing to hear: while she is happy and recognizes the justice of her lesser state of beatitude, she also draws the reader's attention to systemic inequalities by which one's circumstances, rather than absolute will, are crucial in determining one's fate.

While Piccarda now participates in God's will and can align her own desires with that of the divine, her communion does not result in a form of totalizing epistemic leveling. In her speech, Piccarda shows that her blessed state is a continuous negotiation of two epistemic systems: one that is divine and provided to her by the union of her soul with God (which allows her to joyously recognize that her experience of beatitude is affected by her broken vow); the other that

is entirely human, personal, and tied to her positionality (which allows her to advocate for Costanza and challenge readers by stating that the vows of the “inconstant” souls were never truly broken). Piccarda is a site for epistemic negotiation between the human and the divine, a role that she shares with other blessed souls situated in the shadow of Earth, like Justinian, as well as with souls beyond, like those who make up the brow of the eagle of Justice.

Justice in the Heaven of Venus

In *Paradiso* 9, the pilgrim’s encounter with Cunizza finalizes the project of hermeneutical insurrection which Dante develops throughout the *Commedia*. Much like Ripheus and Trajan in *Paradiso* 20, Cunizza—together with the biblical prostitute, Rahab—is scandalous miracle that demonstrates the deep-running possibilities of salvation.²³ A notorious historical case from thirteenth-century Veneto, Cunizza stands alongside women who have been forced to accept a life they did not choose; her brother coerced her into several marriages to forge political alliances, not unlike the one that Corso hoped to gain by marrying Piccarda off to Rossellino della Tosa.²⁴ Known as a promiscuous woman, sister to a tyrant, and lover to troubadours and knights, and now glorified in the heaven of Venus, Cunizza is a crucial piece of the puzzle in Dante’s program of gendered authority. Along with Beatrice, Matelda and (as we shall see) Sapia, Cunizza is among the few female characters in the poem who do not need to negotiate their hermeneutical power. Triumphantly, she does not relinquish an inch of her authority as a producer of knowledge when referring to herself and her community:

ma lietamente a me medesma indulgo
la cagion di mia sorte, e non mi noia;
che parria forse forte al vostro vulgo.

[I gladly pardon in myself the reason for my lot,
nor does it grieve me—a fact that may
seem strange, perhaps, to those unschooled among you.]

(*Par.* 9.34-36)

Like Piccarda, Cunizza turns the act of testimony into an affirmative expression of joy. She uses the verb *indulgere*—that is, to pardon, a verb laced with both legal and theological implications—to describe her relationship with her amorous disposition: she is not

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happy despite it, but because of it. Her affirmation is delivered in a rhetorical gesture that has continuously puzzled commentators, several of whom have tried to reframe and inscribe her dissident triumph within a normative understanding of lust.²⁵ Like all the blessed souls of *Paradiso* who have climbed the mountain that perfected their disposition and drank of the rivers Lethe and Eunoé, Cunizza does not experience regret. As Folchetto states later in the same canto, the Heaven of Venus is a locus of laughter, rather than one of repentance (*Par.* 9.103-105). Cunizza's authority as a witness applies not only to herself, but extends to the discourse on divine justice and the injustice of tyranny. Employing the poetics of circumlocution to exert that authority, she revels, with radiant irony, in the conundrum that she presents to readers: for what exactly does she pardon herself? Nevertheless, she possesses a hermeneutical power that places her above those that classify her purely according to misogynistic parameters designed to refute her epistemic authority. Cunizza is, like Francesca, witness and judge—only this time, in perfect communion with God.

Economies of Credibility

Dante employs a number of rhetorical gestures—courteousness, circumlocution, and reticence—that were typically associated with virtuous female eloquence to undo the hermeneutical expectations that accompanied these forms of expressions and resituate women's voices as sites of authority. The *Commedia* denounces the moral corruption of factional politics by bringing to the fore the voices of women who suffered because of its inference in family and marriage. As a result, the poem methodically endows female speech with hermeneutical authority and a deft ability to negotiate identity power within juridical systems both earthly and divine.

This essay opened with an exception confirming the rule, Ghisolabella, and it shall conclude with another. On the second terrace of Mount Purgatory, Dante meets a group of souls purging the vice of envy. Their eyes are sewn shut with wire, and they must cling to one another to progress along the terrace, learning the necessity of communal repenting, loving, and forgiving. When the pilgrim courteously inquires about the origins of these souls, a female voice from the group warmly corrects him: his question is pointless because they are all citizens of the one true city; the question should instead be rephrased to cast earthly life as a transitory pilgrimage (*Purg.* 13.94-96).

The voice is that of Sapia, a woman who accentuates the epistemic paronomasia of her name when she jokes that she was not *savia* (“wise”; *Purg.* 13.109). Rather, her behavior was *folle* (“mad”; *Purg.* 13.113), blighted by that special brand of Ulyssean madness that is laced with hubris. Sapia is the fifth woman in the *Commedia* who shares her testimony with the pilgrim, but she diverges significantly from Francesca, Pia, Piccarda, and Cunizza in the way she models authority. Whatever the experiences of the historical Sapia Salvani may have been, Dante shows no interest in portraying her as a victim of gendered abuse. More importantly, Sapia does not engage with the courteousness and the poetics of reticence, allusion, and circumlocution that other female witnesses deploy to their advantage. For these reasons, Sapia has always eluded gendered romanticization and has often been the target of violently misogynistic readings.²⁶ Furthermore, Sapia has always stood apart from other souls in *Purgatorio* because, rather than focus solely on conversion, repentance, and purgation, she identifies not only her most dominant vice with punctilious accuracy, but also the sinful actions that she committed in expressing that vice.

Sapia knows why she is spending time purging on the terrace of envy: instead of finding joy in her own good fortune, she reveled in other people’s suffering. In line with Dante’s interpretation of *invidia* (together with pride and greed) as a sociopolitical disorder at the root of violence and decadence, Sapia portrays her vicious joy as an ethical and epistemic failure. However, she does not limit herself to describing the disposition she must purge. Without any prompting, she offers anecdotal evidence to support her self-incrimination by recounting how she not only prayed to God for the defeat of her kinsmen as troops were gathering for the battle of Colle Val d’Elsa, but how she even rejoiced in the outcome of the battle. Envy, interpreted as an epistemic failure, is an act of malevolent seeing (*invideo*) that produces a chain of evil, violence, and sin: as the Sienese ran from their enemies, Sapia lifted her face to God and let out a blasphemous cry, “Now I do not fear you anymore!” (“Omai più non ti temo”; *Purg.* 13.122). Had Sapia not repented later in her life, she would have shared the same fate as Capaneus and been forever damned among the blasphemous and the violent against God.²⁷ However, one late act of free will (*Purg.* 13.124) allowed her to reconcile with God and change her fate, turning from an agent of conflict into an advocate for *caritas* and peacemaking.

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Sapia's eloquence may not be easily classified as gendered, but her knowledge and experience of the world are. Much like Francesca, Pia, Piccarda, and Cunizza, Sapia's understanding of the world is shaped by the sociopolitical constraints of the society in which she lived, a society that thrived on conflict and betrayal. Her folly mirrors that of the Sienese, a *gente vana* ("vain people"; *Purg.* 13.151) hoping to rival the maritime power of Genoa and Pisa; her reveling in chaos rises from and exposes the corruption of factional and family conflicts. However, Sapia's blood-thirsty prayer and blasphemous joy do not occur in a battlefield, but in the gendered confines of a family residence. Her personal tragedy, one in which she plays the parts of victim and abuser, is domestic like those of Francesca, Pia, Piccarda, and Cunizza. Unlike these other women, Sapia is not a victim of gendered violence, but rather a gendered embodiment of violence itself. For this reason, she has been often compared to male infernal counterparts such as Capaneus, Farinata degli Uberti, and Vanni Fucci. However, Sapia's negotiation of justice and authority places her alongside the other female speakers of the *Commedia*. Like Pia, Sapia does not ask the pilgrim for prayers; she does not have an urgent need for them, because a devout member of her community, Pier Pettinaio, has already fulfilled that request out of his own selfless devotion, thereby allowing her to pass swiftly through ante-purgatory and the first terrace. What Sapia hopes for, and asks the pilgrim with deep urgency, is that her *fama* be restored within her community:

E cheggioti, per quel che tu più brami,
se mai calchi la terra di Toscana,
che a' miei propinqui tu ben mi rinfami.

[And I entreat you by what you most desire,
if ever you tread the soil of Tuscany,
to restore my name among my kinfolk.]

(*Purg.* 13.148-150)

Commentators have noted the apparent incongruity that results from this request occurring in the wake of *Purgatorio* 11 and 12, in which the pilgrim hears several explicit statements declaring the transitory—and therefore, meaningless—nature of earthly fame.²⁸ However, the apparent incongruity disappears once we remember that Sapia, despite her non-normative rhetorical gestures, is inscribed in the same economies of credibility and history of hermeneutical

injustice as the rest of the female characters in the *Commedia*. More specifically, Sapia uses the verb *rinfamare* (“to reinstate someone’s reputation”), which may have been coined by Dante and is not attested to anywhere else in medieval Italian. This verb is designed as a direct opposite of *infamare* and *diffamare*, both of which refer to making false, defamatory statements about someone.²⁹ *Diffamatio* signified more than casual rumors passing from ear to ear: it had a public dimension and a legal status.³⁰ At the beginning of this essay, I noted that *fama* was one of the most critical requirements to credit a witness, especially a woman, participating in courtroom proceedings. In testimonial processes, *fama* was instrumental in establishing truth: if a person had a good reputation, her testimony would be admissible in court. Sapia is therefore asking the pilgrim, her community, and the readers of the *Commedia* not only to reinstate her good name, but also to authenticate her testimony beyond the otherworldly confines of the poem.

Sapia, then, shares with Francesca, Pia, Piccarda, and Cunizza a subversive use of legal language to negotiate her hermeneutic authority across two systems of justice: the divine—that is, the system established in the poem, and the earthly—that is, the system that exists outside the diegetic boundaries of the *Commedia* where these women were considered objectified sensations in their respective communities. It is significant, therefore, that the poem sustains constant efforts to establish women’s authority with respect to their historicity. We discern from these efforts that for Dante, denouncing the ties between corruption and gendered abuse, restoring the reputation and authority of women from his recent past, and advocating for their commemoration is as important as inscribing them into the system of divine justice.

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NOTES

¹ In this essay, I will cite the poem from Petrocchi’s edition and refer to the translation in Alighieri and Hollander.

² The bibliography on female characters in the *Commedia* is vast: see Santagata; Glenn, “Dante’s Reforming Mission”; Ferrante; Kirkham; and Shapiro.

³ For an analysis of gendered violence in the poem, see Schildgen (55-98).

⁴ Fricker. Fricker’s formulation of epistemic, testimonial, and hermeneutic injustice has been influential across disciplines; for the purposes of this study, I will primarily

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rely on Medina, Tuana, and Dotson. Throughout the essay, I will also refer to notions developed by feminist epistemologist who have anticipated the concept of epistemic injustice, namely Code.

⁵ *Statuta populi et communis Florentiae*, III, ix, 118: “Quod nulla mulier debeat per se, sed per procuratorem agere in causa civili”; cited in Crisafi and Lombardi (79 n. 45).

⁶ For a discussion of women’s participation in trials in medieval Italy, see Lansing and Skinner.

⁷ This text is cited and discussed in Pasciuta, esp. 105-108.

⁸ For a nuanced discussion of gender-based testimonial injustice in central and northern Europe, see Seabourne, van Houts, and Brundage.

⁹ Crisafi and Lombardi; Barolini, “Notes Towards a Gendered History”; Glenn; Pierson; and the essay by Catherine Adoyo appearing in this volume.

¹⁰ Medina, “Varieties” 50.

¹¹ For alternative perspectives, see Lombardi; Barolini, “Dante and Francesca”; and Crisafi and Lombardi, esp. 74.

¹² Barolini, “Dante and Cavalcanti.”

¹³ As suggested by Malato (188-190).

¹⁴ For a summary of references to the ninth circle across *Inferno*, see Pastore Stocchi 32.

¹⁵ On this textual problem, see Russo.

¹⁶ For example, Perotti, Hollander, and others. Barolini (“Dante and Francesca” 23-24) provides further examples, especially from nineteenth-century scholarship, and expands in detail on the historical context that authorized Dante to envision the entire Malatesta family as a dynasty of traitors and cold-blooded murderers.

¹⁷ For example, Chiavacci Leonardi 80-81.

¹⁸ “Iesu, memento mei, cum veneris in renum tuum” (Luke 23.42): Glenn, “Ricorditi di me.”

¹⁹ Klapisch-Zuber, Casagrande. This evaluation is still acceptable even if we accept the theory that Pia refers to two parts of the ritual to mean that she was married twice; for a recent discussion, see Pagani.

²⁰ See for example Tellini 572: “come un segreto da lasciare nel privato riserbo delle mura domestiche.”

²¹ See Casagrande and Vecchio, esp. 150-155 and 425-440; Sanson.

²² On Piccarda, esp. in relation to ideas of violence and force, see Pierson and cited bibliography.

²³ On Cunizza, see Silverman, “The Life of Cunizza.”

²⁴ Silverman, “Marriage.”

²⁵ Silverman, “The Life of Cunizza” (259).

²⁶ A picturesque collection of such statements is presented by Glenn (*Dante’s Reforming Mission* 199-200).

²⁷ Chiavacci Leonardi (396).

²⁸ For example, see Volpi 357-360.

²⁹ Cf. the entries for the three verbs on the *Tesoro della lingua italiana delle origini*, <http://tlio.oivi.cnr.it/TLIO/> (accessed March 22, 2022).

³⁰ On *fama* in the context of late medieval and Renaissance Florence, see Kuehn.

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**Francesca da Rimini and Beatrice d'Este:
Female Desire, Consent, and Coercion in Dante's *Commedia***

*Indi, come orologio che ne chiami
ne l'ora che la sposa di Dio surge
a mattinar lo sposo perché l'ami,
cha l'una parte e l'altra tira e urge,
tin tin sonando con sì dolce nota,
che 'l ben disposto spirto d'amor turge;
così vid'ïo la gloriosa rota
muoversi e render voce a voce in tempra
e in dolcezza ch'esser non pò nota
se non colà dove gioir s'insempra.
(Par. 10.139-148)¹*

Introduction

The tenth canto of Dante's *Paradiso* closes with the highly erotic image of a sexually desirous woman. The poet draws a multi-tiered analogy between the chorus of wise men and a mechanical clock, comparing their undulating dance to oscillating gears that swell, push, and pull, and likening their song to the sweet tintinnabulation that awakens a celestial bride to her groom at dawn. Already remarkable for its reference to what then would have been cutting-edge technology, the temporal marker also stands out because of the ambiguous nature of the activity performed at daybreak - "mattinar."² As the *Commedia*'s first generation of commentators observed, the verb points to the canonical hours and the religious practice of singing matins at sunrise.³ Safely framing Dante's spousal analogy within a liturgical setting and informed by centuries of exegesis on the *Song of Songs*, early readers confidently identified Dante's "sposo" and "sposa di Dio" with Christ and his Holy Church.⁴ Later critics, though not discounting the ecclesiastical allegory reverberating throughout these lines, began to suspect that vernacular influences were also at play. In a reading that has since gained some currency, Dante's sensual *mattinata* also echoes a medieval lover's serenade beneath his beloved's window at daybreak.⁵ *Paradiso* 10's early morning song therefore points in two equally compelling directions, the sacred and the profane, using the language of courtship and consummation to describe an active soul awaking to receive her God. However,

while this passage ultimately speaks to the faithful's yearning for the Divine in a universal sense, it is the bride who engages in the act of "mattinar" traditionally performed by monastics and male lovers; it is the bride who rises to be loved by her groom. Within the limited confines of this simile, it is a woman who is endowed with sexual agency.

The bride's active role in this sensual scene is remarkable, particularly if compared to the other libidinous women in the *Commedia*. Issues relating to sex and power converge with the destructive lust of *Inferno's* Dido, Semiramis, and Cleopatra. Pasiphae serves as a negative exemplar of taboo, bestial desire for the penitent on *Purgatorio's* terrace of lust. As Rachel Jacoff concludes in her study of the legitimacy of women's erotic desire in the *Commedia*, these women are "icons not only of transgressive female desire, but of the nature of all female desire, and, ultimately, perhaps of desire itself" (Jacoff 195). The bride of *Paradiso* 10, on the other hand, seems insulated from the moralizing judgment passed upon many of the historical and mythological women of Dante's lower realms. She is the rhetorical point of comparison in a complex analogy, free from the weight of centuries of misogynist distrust heaped on the female body. Given the gulf between the two extremes – the threatening, sinful desire of *Inferno's* ancient queens, and the transcendental eroticism of *Paradiso's* heavenly bride – one wonders if there was a middle ground for Dante. Independent of the punitive classification of lust as a sin, how might Dante have understood the agency of flesh and blood women in matters relating to sex?⁶ Was there an arena in which his female contemporaries could assert their agency over their sexual bodies? And how did his culture's attitudes regarding women and their desires translate into his well-ordered cosmos? It is with these questions in mind that we turn to Francesca da Rimini and Beatrice d'Este – two women who walked the thin line between coercion and consent.

This article investigates Dante's attitudes towards female sexuality in the *Commedia*. It focuses on women not as passive objects of desire, or as emblems of desire itself, but rather as desiring subjects. Specifically, it explores the form and function of sexual agency among the dynastic wives who failed to live up to patriarchal ideals because of their unbridled desires. While modern definitions of sexual agency include a broad range of issues relating to partners, preferences, and gender identity, for the purpose of this study I locate female sexual agency within the consent to marry. Building on

feminist scholarship that measures Francesca da Rimini's agency against the realpolitik of her dynastic marriage, I examine Dante's scathing reference to the unnamed wife of Nino Visconti, Beatrice d'Este, in relation to her assumed historical passivity. As we shall see, Dante's problematic treatment of the Estensi widow illustrates the double-bind facing women caught between Christian doctrine that championed women's right of consent to sex and marriage, and patriarchal expectations for female chastity. As proof, I bring in commentaries by Boccaccio that underscore the importance of consent for authorizing or rejecting sexual unions. Ultimately, this paper argues that despite the medieval association between feminine corporality with carnal weakness, Dante's distaste for Beatrice d'Este's second nuptials with Galeazzo Visconti reveals the poet's underlying faith in women's power over their own bodies.

Francesca da Rimini's Adulterous Passivity

The past thirty years have seen a steady flow of Anglophone scholarship that boldly contends with desire and gender in Dante's works. In many such studies, critical re-evaluation and re-contextualization has revealed a far more nuanced, and at times positive view of human sexuality than previously imagined. Commenting on *Paradiso's* bridal vignette, for example, Patricia Zupan concludes that Dante strikes an equilibrium between the language of *eros* and *caritas* by employing the "humanized imagery of perpetual spousal desire as most dramatically indicative of paradisiacal existence" (95). Dante's love for Beatrice has also been re-examined by feminist scholars who question established readings of the poet's sublimated, heteronormative desire. In a series of essays that build off the work of Jeffrey Schnapp, Madison Sowell, and Marguerite Waller, to name but a few, Regina Psaki emphasizes the erotic relationship between Dante and his beloved, arguing against readings that sanitize or de-sexualize his mature attraction.⁷ Additional inroads have been made into our understanding of Dante's unique formulation of embodiment and sexualities, particularly as they relate to queer desire.⁸ But while research on gendered personhood and eroticism continue to reshape the field of Dante studies, the subject of women as desiring agents has been left largely, though not entirely, unexplored.

Teodolinda Barolini's watershed examination of Francesca da Rimini is an important exception in the critical literature that brings us closer to the subject at hand.⁹ The Pilgrim's encounter with the

carnal sinners is among the most memorable and critically contested of the *Commedia*. Indeed, even after nearly seven hundred years of interpretation, Francesca's account of her overpowering attraction to her brother-in-law Paolo still has the capacity to inspire both the sympathies and condemnation of her readers. Her syntactic passivity displacing all moral responsibility onto *Amor* has been read as either a sign of her feminine cunning or self-deception.¹⁰ Barolini's historicizing analysis adds an important corrective to these longstanding debates. According to Barolini, the Francesca of Dante's making accurately reflects the lack of personal agency available to dynastic wives in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy. Though Francesca is damned for passively giving into her unchecked desires, hers is a historical passivity shared by a class of women who, like her, were used as pawns in matrimonial alliances. Disempowered by the agnatic system into which she was born, married, and died, Francesca adopts a "pleasurable passivity for herself as the object of a man's attention" (Barolini 10). Furthermore, by framing Francesca's narrative in the "key of romance," Dante creates a place for Francesca to assert her "agency and her personhood against a dynastic patriarchy that assigned no value to her pleasure" (Barolini 8-10). Issues relating to female sexual and political agency were therefore at the forefront of Dante's mind when he immortalized Francesca da Rimini in the pages of his *Inferno*.

While Barolini ultimately can find a silver lining in the poet's attention to this dynastic wife's gendered history, it is important to keep in mind that Francesca's adulterous passivity transgresses against the one place reserved for female sexual agency in the Trecento – marriage. Naturally, today's attitudes towards women's sexual and reproductive rights differ dramatically from anything Dante and his contemporaries ever could have imagined. Though varying from culture to culture, modern definitions of sexual agency loosely center on our ever-changing understanding of consent: the individual power to choose or reject the who, what, when, how, and why of sexual activity.¹¹ In Dante's Florence, the subjects of sex and consent inevitably converged on the institution of matrimony. As Pierre Payer remarks, "almost every topic in medieval discussions of marriage has a sexual dimension to it, from the nature of the consent required for a valid marriage to the duties and obligation that arise from a valid marriage" (62). For the medieval Church, the mutual consent required of sacramental wedlock initiated its participants, both male and female, in carnal and affective unions that mirrored the

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divine mystery of Christ's relationship to the Church.¹² Details varied according to local customs and familial negotiations, but civic marriage also relied on the articulation of present consent to make the relationship binding.¹³ And while sexual consummation was not essential for a legally valid marriage, it was the freely given expression of consent that authorized sexual activity between spouses.¹⁴ The most conspicuous sign of women's agency over her body could therefore be found on the threshold to marriage. Though generally disenfranchised by a patriarchal system that afforded them little equity in the eyes of the law, women were at least ceremonially empowered to make the most binding decision governing their sexual futures.

Boccaccio's commentary on *Inferno* 5 grows out of this culture of authorizing female desire only within the sanctioning framework of matrimony. In a romantic reimagining of the episode that has at times overshadowed the original in the popular imagination, Boccaccio dramatizes Francesca's right to choose her sexual mate. It is a sympathetic rendering that falls into the category of what Barolini calls "male gallantry" – a critical impulse to protect Francesca's reputation from some of the more damning aspects of Dante's text (Barolini 11). Among the many embellishments found in the *Esposizioni* – details including Gianciotto's deformity, the marriage by proxy, the climactic double homicide, and lovers' burial in a shared grave – Boccaccio gives Francesca agency. It is in fact the fear of her agency that sets her father's cruel deception in motion. According to Boccaccio, Guido da Polenta had good cause to worry that Francesca would not consent to marry the less-appealing of the Malatesta heirs since she was known to have a mind of her own. As Guido's friend advises:

Guardate come voi fate, per ciò che, se voi non prendete modo ad alcuna parte, che in questo parentado egli ve ne potrà seguire scandolo. Voi dovete sapere chi è vostra figliuola, e quanto ell'è d'altiero animo; e se ella vede Gian Ciotto avanti che 'l matrimonio sia perfetto, né voi né altri potrà mai fare che ella il voglia per marito. (Boccaccio, *Esposizioni* 315)

[Be careful how you go about this because a scandal could arise if you don't consider all sides of the question. Surely, you must know what sort of daughter you have and how strong-willed she is. If she sees Gian Ciotto before the

marriage becomes official, neither you nor anyone else will be able to convince her to take him as her husband.] (Boccaccio, *Espositions* 279)

Francesca's personal desires threaten her father's efforts to shore up a peace between the Polenta and Malatesta dynasties. Guido's machinations – the bait-and-switch of one Malatesta brother for the other – are designed to circumvent Francesca's apparent right to reject the match. His ploy is successful, resulting in Francesca's decision to love the man she believes to be her betrothed—"in lui puose l'animo e l'amor suo"—and the consummation of her union to Gianciotto on their wedding night. Her ensuing affair with the man she mistakenly believes to have wed legally, physically, and affectively – Paolo – is thus mitigated in Boccaccio's narrative of misplaced consent.

Boccaccio's efforts to rescue Francesca from the notoriety given to her by Dante underscores the importance of locating female sexual agency within marriage. His gloss openly questions Dante's account of her impromptu transgression by proposing a counter-narrative of intergenerational conflict and erotic choice. His authorial intervention is two-fold: he most conspicuously rewrites Francesca's explanation of how she came to know those "dubbiosi disiri" (*Inf.* 5.120), calling Dante's tale of spontaneous desire and literary imitation of an Arthurian romance a likely fiction.¹⁵ But Boccaccio's version of the events leading up to Paolo and Francesca's death also does away with Francesca's apparent passivity, giving her an agency that contradicts her own displacement of any moral responsibility for her adulterous affair onto *Amor*. Instead of Love compelling Francesca with an irresistible desire for Paolo's beauty (*Inf.* 5.103-4), Boccaccio's Francesca willingly gives herself to him, body and soul. Francesca's expressed passivity, however, is an essential aspect of her placement among the *Inferno*'s carnal sinners. The character presents herself as a passive subject, a victim of Love's sway; the poet instead makes it rhetorically clear that the damned of *Inferno* 5 actively subject their God-given reason to their baser appetites – "che la ragion sommettono al talento" (*Inf.* 5.39). She is therefore doubly guilty – first of giving in to her desires, and then of refusing to take ownership of her actions. Additionally, Francesca's failure to exercise her own agency is an ironic reversal of the active consent required by both ecclesiastical and civic authorities for a licit sexual union. If marriage represented a "pattern of conduct by which individuals identify

themselves and determine their duties in society,” then Francesca’s passive stance is in conflict with the ideological and political structures ultimately served by marriage (Cartlidge 9).

Beatrice d’Este’s Inconstant Agency

Marital status was a defining aspect of medieval gender identity and the principal means of demarcating the rigid boundaries between licit and illicit sexual practices. This was especially true for the mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and widows of Dante’s Florence, whose sexuality was largely oriented towards or away from matrimony.¹⁶ The centrality of marriage in the life of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century women is attested to in the era’s homiletic literature, conduct manuals, and even popular lyrics. A small corpus of poems known as “women’s songs,” for example, gives voice to different aspects of real or imagined female desire: precocious maidens pine away for a husband; sexually experienced matrons take pleasure in verbal duels; mistreated *malmaritate* wish for a better mate.¹⁷ Though likely authored by men, they paint a picture of lives circumscribed by matrimony and by their culture’s perceived need to channel their women’s physical impulses into one socially sanctioned outlet. Meanwhile, countless religious, juridical, and literary sources bear witness to a belief in women’s inordinate carnal appetites.¹⁸ Medical texts diagnose women as fickle, libidinous, and less constrained by reason due to the innate inferiority of their flesh. Their bodies are presented as constitutionally weak and passive, hungry for union with the active male. In short, female sexual desire was a source of concern in Dante’s day, and was policed and regulated through the institution of matrimony.

Patriarchal distrust of the female body is especially pronounced in medieval attitudes towards widows. Presumed to crave the physical contact they enjoyed while still married, a widow’s sexual knowledge was a potential threat to a family’s heirs, honor, and patrimony.¹⁹ Confirmation of the general unease with which Trecento society tended to view the desires of a sexually indoctrinated woman, and of female sexuality in general, can be found in Dante’s brief reference to the widow of Nino Visconti, Beatrice d’Este. Her story, though alluded to only indirectly in *Purgatorio*, reflects some of the contradictory expectations placed on a dynastic wife disparagingly remembered for her sexual desires and feminine weakness.

Beatrice d’Este’s identity in the *Purgatorio* is framed in terms of her relationship to her two husbands, Nino Visconti and then

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Galeazzo Visconti, and to a young daughter caught in the crosshairs of their dynastic politics. It is the first of her two spouses, the penitent judge Nino, who attempts to dictate how we should judge her actions. His exchange with the Pilgrim in the Valley of the Princes quickly devolves into an invective against his widow's marital and maternal negligence:

«... quando sarai di là da le larghe onde,
dì a Giovanna mia che per me chiami
là dove a li 'nnocenti si risponde.
Non credo che la sua madre più m'ami,
poscia che trasmutò le bianche bende,
le quai convien che, misera!, ancor brami.
Per lei assai di lieve si comprende
quanto in femmina foco d'amor dura,
se l'occhio o 'l tatto spesso non l'accende.
Non le farà sì bella sepultura
la vipera che Melanesi accampa,
com' avria fatto il gallo di Gallura.»
Così dicea, segnato de la stampa,
nel suo aspetto, di quel dritto zelo
che misuratamente in core avvampa.

[“... when you are far from these wide waters,
ask my Giovanna to direct her prayers for me
to where the innocent are heard.
I think her mother has not loved me
since she stopped wearing her white wimple,
which, in her coming misery, she may long for.
There is an easy lesson in her conduct:
how short a time the fire of love endures in woman
if frequent sight and touch do not rekindle it.
The viper that leads the Milanese afield
will/ hardly ornament her tomb as handsomely
as the cock of Gallura would have done.”
He spoke these words, his face stamped
with a look of righteous indignation
that burns with proper measure in the heart.]

(*Purg.* 8.70-84)

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Nino has been forgotten by the one person sworn to preserve his good name in life. Her cold indifference to his passing, Nino laments, not only brings injury to his daughter and dishonor to his legacy, it also deprives him of his share of intercessory prayers. The name of the woman to whom this duty should have naturally befallen, still recognizable through her husbands' heraldic insignia, is bowdlerized by the bitter judge.

The historical details regarding Beatrice d'Este's movements from the home of one man to the next, though long rehearsed in the commentary tradition, are less known than Francesca's and therefore bear repeating. Beatrice was the daughter of Obizzo d'Este and the sister of Azzo VIII, two of the most powerful men of the Estensi dynasty. She was married to the Pisan judge Nino Visconti, a Guelf, who died in 1296 after five years of marriage and the birth of only one female heir, Giovanna. Back under the direct authority of her ruthless brother Azzo, in 1300 she was married off again to Galeazzo Visconti of Milan in order to secure a more advantageous political alliance. Beatrice was then forced to leave her daughter for her new marriage, only to see the Ghibellines strip young Giovanna of her father's patrimony. Two years later, Galeazzo was banished from Milan, and Beatrice endured exile with him until his death. Victim of her first husband's demise, her second husband's politics, and her brother's dynastic ambitions, Beatrice is nevertheless remembered for her maternal negligence and uxorial indifference.

Unlike Francesca da Rimini, Beatrice d'Este is not afforded a voice of her own in the *Commedia*. She is not given the chance to appeal to the reader's sympathies or present her side of the story. Her dubious history is related by her accuser – a bitter man who betrays his animus towards her and her gender. Her redemption would instead have to wait for the paratexts that have long since accompanied Dante's great poem. Indeed, some of the *Commedia's* earliest commentators took up her cause, pointing out her legal right to remarry, the need to give up her child, and her inability to resist her powerful brother.²⁰ Their sympathetic glosses are backed up by historians that tell us that remarriage of young, dowered widows during the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries was the norm, not the exception. In fact, the majority of young Florentine widows saw themselves paired up again after the death of their first spouse. With so much of a family's material wealth and political leverage at stake, young widows were “the target of a whole set of forces struggling fiercely for control of their bodies and their fortunes” (Klapisch-

Zuber 120). Facing overwhelming familial pressure and social constraints, women in reality had little choice in these unions. Nevertheless, as Deborah Parker points out, Dante disregards these established social practices and presents Beatrice as “the supreme architect of her own actions” (Parker 132). Dante assumes Beatrice’s agency in her marital vicissitudes, along with her culpability.

Looking back at the passage cited above, we see that Nino’s righteous anger comes to a head over his former wife’s loss of affections. What begins as a disillusionment over her faded love for him bleeds out onto his contempt for women as a class. With what we know about the high number of widows reentering the marriage market, a contemporary reader might be surprised to find a woman pressed to remarry four years after her first husband’s death and explicitly linked to only two men through licit matrimony maligned for her inconstancy. Nevertheless, according to Nino, Beatrice’s actions reveal the mutable nature of all female desire:

«Per lei assai di lieve si comprende
quanto in femmina foco d’amor dura,
se l’occhio o ‘l tatto spesso non l’accende.»

[“There is an easy lesson in her conduct:
how short a time the fire of love endures in woman
if frequent sight and touch do not rekindle it.”]

(*Purg.* 8.79-81)

Nino calls his widowed wife a “femmina” – a far coarser term for her gender than the respectable “donna.”²¹ The reference is highlighted by an alliterative chiasmus that pairs “femmina” with “foco,” leading to a characterization of female love as a fiery, fleeting passion. This gendered form of love is overtly physical, requiring constant visual and tactile stimulation. In Nino’s characterization, Beatrice has taken off her widow’s garb just to re-experience sensual pleasure. With no apparent consideration for the outside pressures that dictated her actions, Nino insinuates that Beatrice exercised her agency solely to satisfy her sexual desires.

It is worth noting that Dante expresses Beatrice’s gendered predisposition towards inconstancy using a phrasing borrowed from the *Aeneid* (“Varium et mutabile / semper femina”; 4.569-70). The Virgilian citation, an urging from Mercury for Aeneas to hasten his departure from Dido, through the centuries came to be a

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commonplace in anti-feminist discourse. For medieval readers, Dido was “essentially characterized by her sexuality – either by her ability to resist sexual temptation in the historical version or by her tendency to succumb to sexual desire” (Desmond 57-58). She bore the dual burden of a Virgilian past and centuries of patristic unease with her gender. And indeed, the Dido of Dante’s *Inferno* is identified as both a suicide for love and a lapsed widow: “colei che s’ancise amorosa / e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo” [she who broke faith with the ashes / of Sychaeus and slew herself for love. (*Inf.* 5.61-62). She serves as an emblem for all of the lustful (“la schiera ov’ è Dido” *Inf.* 5.85) - a group dominated by the presence of desiring women. When read in connection with Nino’s condemnation of Beatrice d’Este, it would seem that for Dante, the lapsed widow serves as a platform for comments about the mutability of female desire in general.

Dante’s Virgilian paraphrase betrays his misogynistic views on female corporality. It speaks to the double-bind facing marriageable widows who, forced to choose between their paternal family’s interests and the memory of their first husband, nevertheless could still find their honor tarnished by deep-seated prejudices against female sexuality. At the same time, Nino’s disappointment with Beatrice’s decision to remarry reveals the poet’s underlying belief in a woman’s agency over her sexual body. Beatrice is judged harshly in Dante’s Christian afterlife precisely because she exercises her free will. She is morally accountable, regardless of any extenuating circumstances.

Dante’s insistence on women’s power over their bodies is indirectly supported by one of his most attentive readers, Boccaccio. Though he did not live long enough to extend his commentary through to the *Purgatorio*, Boccaccio’s praise of Dido in *De mulieribus claris* is nonetheless illuminating on this point. Here, Boccaccio chooses to celebrate the version of Dido that was hailed by Church Fathers and medieval chroniclers for her exemplary chastity – the one who never turned her back on Sychaeus, and died rather than consent to a new marriage.²² In this impassioned defense of this ‘other’ Dido, Boccaccio systematically lays out a series of plausible justifications for remarrying only to dismiss each one:

What glory there is in inviolate chastity! O Dido, venerable and eternal model of unsullied widowhood! I wish that women who have lost their husbands would turn their eyes upon you and that Christian women in particular would

contemplate your strength. If they can, let them meditate on how you shed your chaste blood - especially for women for whom it is a trivial matter to drift into second, third and even more marriages [...] Our women show great acuity in excusing themselves, so I believe that someone will reply: “I *had* to marry again: I had been abandoned; my parents and my brothers were dead; suitors were urged in their flattery; I couldn’t resist; I’m made of flesh, not iron.” [...] A third woman will come and declare that she had to marry again because her parents ordered her, her relatives forced her, and her neighbors encouraged her. *As if we did not know that with a single denial she could have overcome everything had her own passion not spurred her on – nay, had not unbridled lust commanded her. This woman could not refuse marriage to live honorably, but Dido could die as to not live dishonorably.* (*Famous Women*, 43.175-9; emphasis added)

Clearly aware of the various forces that might compel his female contemporaries to marry again, Boccaccio nonetheless clings to the doctrine of wedlock as a sacramental union between two, and only two people. Parental pressure, financial distress, feminine weakness – none of these reasons warrant betraying the indissoluble vow made to one’s first spouse. All of their excuses mask a woman’s true reason for taking on a new mate – unbridled lust. Boccaccio paints women as being passively subject to their desires, and poorly equipped to resist the temptations of the flesh.²³ At the same time, he exhorts Christian women to exercise their agency over their bodies by refusing to remarry. Boccaccio’s commentary thus reveals an inherent contradiction in medieval approaches to female sexuality: though disempowered by a patriarchal system that bartered them off to the highest bidder and treated their flesh as suspect, women were nonetheless empowered to give or deny their consent. Herein lay their special agency over their sexuality.

Conclusion

Beatrice d’Este died in 1334. She outlived Dante by thirteen years, and was alive and well at the time of his fictional journey in 1300. Her tomb was inscribed with the Pisan *gallo* as well as the Milanese *vipera* in a display of conjugal fidelity to both of her husbands. Though denied a voice with which to defend herself in the *Commedia*, she was able to rewrite her story in death. It is tempting

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to imagine the lot Dante might have assigned to her in his afterlife had the timing lined up differently. As we have seen in the pages above, Dante presents Beatrice as an inconstant widow driven by her physical desires. It then follows that Dante might have damned her to spend the rest of eternity among carnal sinners. There she would join Dido who, like her, dishonored her first spouse by consenting to marry a second. She would also join Francesca da Rimini who, like her, belonged to a class of historically passive women used to cement dynastic ties between the houses of men. But Dante does not tell us that Beatrice d'Este was an adulteress. There is no indication that she attempted to free herself from patriarchal domination through erotic transgression. Whatever her motives were – whether she sought out a new husband to satisfy her physical needs as Nino would have it, or simply consented to her brother's wishes – her second marriage was part of established nuptial practice. Her new union to Galeazzo brought injury to Nino's masculine honor, but it was licit and binding, even in the eyes of the Church. Might then have Dante allowed for her redemption in death, somewhere between the lustful queens of the *Inferno* and the ardent lovers of the *Paradiso*? Would her inconstancy not have better suited her for the purgatorial terrace of lust, under the aegis of those unnamed husbands and wives who were chaste, “come virtute e matrimonio imponne” [“...wives and husbands who were chaste / even as virtue and matrimony urge”] (*Purg.* 25.135)? Might not this dynastic wife, by some act of grace, even have ascended to the heaven of Venus next to another noblewoman with a history of multiple marriages, Cunizza da Romano? Perhaps in death, Beatrice could have finally shaken off the burden of medieval misogyny and been judged not for the perceived deficiencies of her feminine flesh and desires, but for the merits of her personal choices.

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NOTES

¹ “Then, like a clock that calls us at the hour / when the bride of God gets up to sing / matins to her bridegroom, that he should love her still, / when a cog pulls one wheel and drives another, / chiming its ting-ting with notes so sweet / that the willing spirit swells with love, / thus I saw that glorious wheel in motion, / matching voice to voice in harmony / and with sweetness that cannot be known / except where joy becomes eternal.” All original citations from the *Commedia* come from Petrocchi's edition. English language translations are by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. Both the

original and translations can be accessed through *The Princeton Dante Project*, <https://dante.princeton.edu/pdp/>.

² On the modernity of Dante's reference to a mechanical clock, see Freccero; or Moevs.

³ The identification of Dante's "sposa di Dio" with the Church can be found in the Jacopo della Lana, *Ottimo commento*, Chiose ambrosiane, Benvenuto da Imola, and Francesco da Buti commentaries, to name just a few of the earliest.

⁴ For more on the allegorical interpretation of the *Song of Songs* and its relevancy to the *Paradiso*'s bridal metaphors, see Nasti; Holmes, "Sex and the City of God,"; and Pertile.

⁵ Patricia Zupan most fully explores this subject, linking Dante's *mattinata* to religious and erotic dawn songs, and in particular, to the Provençal *alba*.

⁶ The topic of lust, or *lussuria*, has not surprisingly received considerable attention across the centuries, resulting in a bibliography far too voluminous to cite here. For an introduction to the subject of lust as a carnal sin, I refer the reader to the bibliography provided by Santarelli.

⁷ Particularly useful is her review of Dante studies dealing with the body, sexuality, and gender identity in Psaki, "Love for Beatrice" (119).

⁸ Among several relevant essays contained in Gragnolati's edited collection on desire in Dante's works, Marguerite Waller's contribution provides a useful survey of the relevant critical literature on sexuality. Holmes explores negative female embodiment in her monograph, *Dante's Two Beloveds*. For studies on what we today might call homosexual desire and identity, see Boswell; Cestaro; Pequigney; Stone; and Stowell.

⁹ Other studies on desire and agency that draw from Barolini's work include Lombardi; and Pierson.

¹⁰ *Inf.* 5.38-39. As Lombardi summarizes in her monograph on desire in *Inferno* 5, critics generally fall into one of two camps: In one, Francesca is the "heroine of love, the powerful and unforgettable character, the woman with agency." In the other, she is either the "poor provincial woman mesmerized by literature, ventriloquized by lyric poetry and romance, and unable to interpret, yet alone protect herself, from the words she regurgitates without understanding them," or the "deceiver, the flatterer, the manipulator, obsessed with masking lust with love, and intent on dragging the traveler/reader into the grips of her sin, through the sympathy she elicits" (9).

¹¹ North American academics, for example, are no doubt familiar with the unfolding debates surrounding recent changes made by the U.S. Department of Education to Title IX regulations, and its emphasis on establishing affirmative consent.

¹² The theory of marital consent was consolidated in the twelfth-century thanks to the works of two great canonists, Gratian and Peter Lombard. For more on Gratian's *Decretum* (*Concordia dischordantium canonum*) and Peter Lombard's *Book of Sentences* (*Libri Quattuor Sententiarum*) as they relate to marital consent, see Brundage, "Implied Consent to Intercourse"; or Reid. For a comprehensive look at marriage and canon law, see Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*; and his *Sex, Law, and Marriage in the Middle Ages*.

¹³ Notable scholarship on nuptial rites in medieval and early modern Italy include Klapisch-Zuber; Dean; and Molho.

¹⁴ There was considerable debate among the canonists over the place for sexual consummation in sacramental wedlock, particularly as it might relate to the dissolution of an unconsummated union. For more on the subject, and on the practice of consensual intra-marital chastity, see Elliott.

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¹⁵ “Col quale come ella poi si giugnesse, mai non udi’ dire se non quello che l’autore ne scrive; il che possibile è che così fosse: ma io credo quello essere più tosto fizione formata sopra quello che era possibile ad essere avvenuto, ché io non credo che l’autore sapesse che così fosse.” Boccaccio, *Esposizioni* 316. On this point, see Barolini 15.

¹⁶ Due to space constraints, I am omitting any discussion of sexual agency as it relates to female celibacy, such as the vows taken by nuns or chaste widows.

¹⁷ An overview of these lyrics can be found in Kleinhenz.

¹⁸ In addition to the studies cited above that relate directly to Dante, important works on medieval sexual difference and female corporality include Cadden; Jacquart and Thomasset; and Mazo Karras.

¹⁹ See Klapisch-Zuber 117-131; Calvi; and Mazo Karras 81.

²⁰ Deborah Parker’s review of the commentary tradition on these lines demonstrates how Dante’s contemporaries were sensitive to the extenuating legal and dynastic circumstances surrounding Beatrice’s remarriage. As evidence she cites the *Ottimo Commento* and Benvenuto da Imola glosses, as well as Franco Sacchetti’s account in the *Trecentonovelle*.

²¹ The term “femmina” is used disparagingly several times in the *Commedia*, including *Purg.* 19, 7; *Purg.* 23, 95; and *Purg.* 29, 33.

²² For the many different versions of Dido, including the pre-Virgilian accounts and the patristic sources that focus on her chastity, see Desmond’s work.

²³ For recent work on Boccaccio’s literary engagement with Dante and the female body, see Kriesel.

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The Widow's Predicament: Imperatives of Fidelity and Prayer in the *Commedia*

In his letter to Furia, a recently widowed woman considering the prospect of remarriage, St. Jerome counsels her in no uncertain terms against remarriage, elaborating upon its many evils:

Young widows, of whom some ... wish to marry, generally make such excuses as these. 'My little patrimony is daily decreasing, the property which I have inherited is being squandered, a servant has spoken insultingly to me, a maid has neglected my orders. Who will appear for me before the authorities? Who will be responsible for the rents of my estates? Who will see to the education of my children, and to the bringing up of my slaves?' Thus, shameful to say, they put that forward as a reason for marrying again, which alone should deter them from doing so. For by marrying again a mother places over her sons not a guardian but a foe, not a father but a tyrant. Inflamed by her passions she forgets the fruit of her womb, and among the children who know nothing of their sad fate the lately weeping widow dresses herself once more as a bride. Why these excuses about your property ...? Confess the shameful truth. No woman marries to avoid cohabiting with a husband. At least, if passion is not your motive, it is mere madness to play the harlot just to increase wealth. You do but purchase a paltry and passing gain at the price of a grace which is precious and eternal! If you have children already, why do you want to marry? If you have none, why do you not fear a recurrence of your former sterility? Why do you put an uncertain gain before a certain loss of self-respect?¹

This church father's scathing rebuke of widows wishing to remarry provides a clear example of the stereotype of the lustful and avaricious widow, a misogynist trope that persisted in the Western imagination for centuries. While Jerome's letter naturally illustrates the Christian imperative of chastity, this excerpt grants insight not so much into the theological issues of remarriage, but rather into the social concerns surrounding a widow's fate. Furia ultimately followed Jerome's counsel, shunning remarriage in favor of caring for her elderly father and young children. Women in the centuries to follow would face her same dilemma, yet many would face a very different outcome.

Almost a millennium after Jerome's letter, Dante would evoke the major themes of the church father's message – the supposed lustfulness of widows, their materialistic desires, their urge to remarry – in his *Commedia*, granting them a crucial function within the overarching structure of his *oltremondo*. The widows of the *Commedia* do not occupy much textual space, yet the role they play is of great significance, as Dante links the actions of these living women to the fates of their deceased husbands; their behavior on earth directly impacts the experience of their spouses in the afterlife. By examining the function widows serve in Dante's afterlife, one inevitably encounters a striking discrepancy between the position he fashions for them and the realities within which they lived. The unflagging faithfulness Dante requires of widows is in direct contrast to the social pressures these women faced in order to survive after the death of their husbands, and in this paradox there exists a compelling narrative tension. Little work has been done to examine the role of widows in the *Commedia*; this essay fills this lacuna by providing a theological and historical context within which to place widows. In turn, this essay seeks to nuance readers' perceptions of this subset of women in the *Commedia*.

The most notable depictions of widows occur in *Purgatorio* 8 and *Purgatorio* 23, which I will briefly sketch here and return to in greater detail later. In *Purg.* 8, Dante encounters Nino Visconti, who inveighs against female inconstancy by presenting his widow, Beatrice d'Este, as the prime example of womanly lust and impulsivity. Later, in *Purg.* 23, Dante finds his dear friend Forese Donati, who has a completely different attitude about his widow, Nella, whom he credits for his speedy passage through the realm's rehabilitating terraces. These two cases provide a stark contrast and thus present the key concerns surrounding widowhood: if widows should remarry, and to what extent they were expected to dwell upon the memory of their dead husbands. In order to better understand the opposing examples that Dante depicts, one must consider not only the expectations placed upon widows but also the historical realities of their situation.

A widow in Dante's time had several concrete duties: to mourn her husband's death, to recall his memory, to continue to raise their children (if they had any), and – most importantly for Dante – to pray for her husband's soul. Mourning played an important social function, as it served both to commemorate the deceased person and to emphasize the loss felt not only by the family but also by the community. Grieving in particular sheds light on the functions of

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women in medieval Italian society, as women were assigned a unique role in funerary rituals of the period. In the twelfth century, public funerals verged on theatrical, and while both men and women grieved loudly and openly, it was the responsibility of women to “learn, enact, and transmit to others the standard techniques of mourning, which included physical gestures, loud laments, and often dramatic, self-inflicted injuries” (Strocchia 11). The dramatic displays of grief, which served as a sign of respect and loyalty to the deceased, were indeed enacted by both sexes, yet by the thirteenth century, one finds municipal legislation banning excessive performances of emotion among men.² While the mourning of men was subject to legal interventions designed to sublimate their grief into more socially acceptable practices, the grieving of women was shaped not by laws, but by strong cultural and social imperatives, which ultimately placed their bereavement rituals squarely within the public arena. Citing Franco Sacchetti, Sharon Strocchia notes:

The late Trecento novelist Franco Sacchetti, for example, anticipated that a new widow would have the following response to the death of her husband. To signify her loss, Sacchetti wrote, the widow “cuts her hair... dresses in black... and places her husband in the [public] room on a crude bed on the ground;” over his body she makes “laments and prayers” along with the other female kin and neighbors. This behavior was intended not only to demonstrate women’s personal loss but to legitimate the collective grief of family and community. (Strocchia 12)

A widow was thus charged with engaging in mourning that was simultaneously personal and collective, as her behavior served to symbolize the sentiments of the greater community. Widows would ultimately set the tone for an entire community of mourners seeking to grieve and commemorate the life of the deceased.

Even more important than the public displays of grief were the ongoing prayers for the soul of the departed. If a woman was given the public task of mourning her husband’s death, it is not surprising that she would also be expected to take on the private and internal role of prayerful intercessor. Prayer for the dead was a common practice among Christians even before the notion of Purgatory became culturally and religiously codified in the thirteenth century, but once Purgatory came to be formally recognized as a realm of the

afterlife, prayer for the dead took on an even greater importance. Indeed, prayer was built into its very structure, as Purgatory was, in essence, “an intermediary other world in which some of the dead were subjected to a trial that could be shortened by the prayers, by the spiritual aid, of the living” (Le Goff 4). As early as *Purg.* 6 Dante stages the issue of prayer’s efficacy when he has the pilgrim ask Vergil if, in direct contradiction to what he wrote in the *Aeneid*, it is possible for prayer to bend the decree of heaven:

io cominciai: «El par che tu mi nieghi,
o luce mia, espresso in alcun testo
che decreto del cielo orazion pieghi;
e questa gente prega pur di questo:
sarebbe dunque loro speme vana,
o non m’è ‘l detto tuo ben manifesto?»

[I began: “O my light, it seems to me
that in one passage you explicitly deny
that prayer can bend decrees of Heaven
and yet these people pray for that alone.
Will this their hope, then, be in vain,
or are your words not really clear to me?”]

(*Purg.* 6.28-33)³

The pilgrim’s question to Vergil demonstrates an issue that was both cultural and theological: to what degree could the interventions of the living impact the purgation of the souls of the deceased?

While the notion of Purgatory had begun to take shape in the fourth century, it was not truly solidified until the thirteenth century, when the Council of Lyons (1274) granted it official doctrinal status. This major development was a direct result of the rise of scholasticism, and one finds many of the thirteenth century’s most accomplished theologians engaging in spirited debates on the nature of Purgatory. Thomas Aquinas wrote extensively on Purgatory in various works, but most notably by elaborating upon Peter Lombard’s *Sententiae* in the *Scriptum* (a commentary dedicated entirely to the *Sententiae*), in the *Summa theologica*, and in the *Supplement*, a posthumous addendum – written most likely by Aquinas’s companion, Fra Rainaldo da Piperno — to complete his unfinished *Summa*. The *Supplement* addresses the impact of prayer on souls in Purgatory in great detail in questions 70 and 71, and the answers to

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these particular questions link almost seamlessly to Dante's question to Vergil on the efficacy of prayer.

Firstly, the *Supplement* states in no uncertain terms that prayer is useful to the souls of the departed, and this claim rests upon two key considerations; it begins with a citation of Maccabees:

[In] the words of 2 Macc. 12:46: "It is... a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from sins." But this would not be profitable unless it were a help to them. Therefore the suffrages of the living profit the dead.

(*Suppl.*71.2)

Then, in a poignant elaboration upon 1 Corinthians, it continues:

Charity, which is the bond uniting the members of the Church, extends not only to the living, but also to the dead who die in charity. For charity which is the life of the soul, even as the soul is the life of the body, has no end: "Charity never falleth away" (1 Cor. 13:8). Moreover, the dead live in the memory of the living: wherefore the intention of the living can be directed to them. Hence the suffrages of the living profit the dead in two ways even as they profit the living, both on account of the bond of charity and on account of the intention being directed to them. (*Suppl.*71.2)

Ultimately, the assertions of the *Supplement* – along with various others theological writings of the thirteenth century – confirmed that Purgatory existed, and that it was incumbent upon the living to aid the souls in Purgatory through prayer, alms, and mass.⁴ And while anyone could contribute to this salvatory effort,⁵ it was the obligation mainly of the relatives and spouse of the deceased.⁶ Therefore when Dante portrays Forese's speedy progress through Purgatory, he is not engaging simply in literary invention but is rather demonstrating his conformity to a distinct theological principle: prayer was a crucial tool for the advancement of souls through Purgatory.

This examination of the expectations placed upon widows has not yet touched upon the complex and pressing social realities they faced, remarriage chief among them. Technically speaking, there were no rules – neither in canon law nor in medieval society more generally – that explicitly forbade widows from remarrying,⁷ yet to conclude the discussion there would be to grossly oversimplify the situation of

widows in Dante's time. The ambiguous status of the widow is reflected in a wide array of sources from the period, both literary and historical, which oscillate between depicting the widow's liberated state, her insatiable sexual appetite, her financial and legal vulnerability, and her ability to achieve a level of spiritual grace rivaled only by virgins, to name only a few major stereotypes.⁸ Medieval representations of the widow could evoke a woman brimming with wantonness or piety, a woman of poverty or privilege, a woman enjoying total freedom or suffering complete subjugation. But what was the widow's situation, really?

Study of historical sources paints a dire picture. The social and financial pressures facing widows were significant, and while her relative socioeconomic status would certainly impact the degree of hardship a widow faced, it could never truly repair a system that ultimately made her liberation an impossibility. A woman of the lower classes faced almost certain destitution after the death of her husband,⁹ as both private and public sources of charitable aid provided only occasional and modest assistance at best.¹⁰ The challenges of women in the upper echelon of medieval Italian society – the kind of women Dante depicts through Nella Donati and Beatrice d'Este – were altogether different.

In the patrilineal society of Dante's time, widows posed a unique problem; unmarried women (with the exception of cloistered nuns) were monitored very closely, as they were considered incapable of resisting sexual temptation. It thus fell to their male relatives to protect and vouch for their virtue. Given these concerns, it was of crucial importance for families to have strategies in place to ensure that women would not be left to their own devices upon the death of their husbands. So what options were available to a medieval Florentine widow?

Theoretically, a widow had some choice in the matter. She could live in her husband's family, by her children's side; she could live independently without remarrying, but near her children; or, finally, she could remarry and leave the first family that had received her. But in practice a widow, if young, was barred from the second option and found herself subjected to contradictory pressures that prevented her from quietly choosing between the other two possibilities. (Klapisch-Zuber 120)

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Each of these options brought with them unique problems and considerations. The dowries of wealthier women made it possible for them – at least in theory – to live on their own.¹¹ A dowry would, by default, revert to the widow upon her husband's death, and she was legally entitled to use it to support herself and her children. Nonetheless, the widow who chose never to remarry and to live in her own household was relatively uncommon.¹²

A woman's dying husband could try to convince her to remain in his household and keep her dowry within the family. In other words, he would try to dissuade her from remarrying so that the financial resources of her dowry could combine with those of his estate, making it possible for her to live comfortably, support their heirs, and leave behind an inheritance for said heirs.¹³ If her prospects for remarriage were slim, this could indeed be an attractive option. Alternatively, if their heirs – who, let us not forget, were not necessarily her own children but may have been from her husband's previous marriage – did not wish for her to remain in her husband's household, she could always fall back on the *tornata*,¹⁴ the right to return to her family of birth.

Yet it was an indisputable fact that women were considered most valuable when they could be deployed to advance or solidify the interests of her family. A widow could thus serve as a boon to her family; in remarrying her, her family could forge an alliance with another clan and be spared from the financial burden of having their daughter under their roof once again. Young widows afforded their natal families a special opportunity:

Early widowhood revived the claims of the widow's family of birth on the goods brought as a dowry. As these were irrevocably attached, by law, to the physical person of the woman for the duration of her life, widowhood forced her own kin to use her as a pawn, forcing her to 'come out' of her husband's family. When she remarried, her family could join a new circle of affines. By the remarriage of a widow of their blood, Florentines affirmed that they had never totally relinquished control over the dowries that they had given their daughters or their sisters [...] When the widow returned to her family of birth and once again became part of its matrimonial strategies, the family took back cards it had already played, with every intention of making the most of a second deal of social prestige bought by the conclusion of a new alliance. (Klapisch-Zuber 123)¹⁵

The pressures placed upon a young widow by her birth family would ultimately make it difficult – if not impossible – for her to live up to the lofty standards of chastity extolled by church teachings. Remarriage, while not a perfect outcome,¹⁶ was indeed the most likely one for a young and eligible widow.

All of these historical considerations bring us back to the *Commedia*, to these two opposing examples of Nella Donati and Beatrice d'Este. The widow who pursues a new marriage is depicted negatively as one who “breaks faith” with her husband (as Dante says of Dido in *Inferno* 5). In *Purgatorio* 8, Nino Visconti bitterly laments how quickly his wife moved on after his death, effectively renouncing her widowly duties of mourning and prayer, which he now hopes will be assumed by his daughter, Giovanna:

«dì a Giovanna mia che per me chiami
là dove a li ‘nnocenti si risponde.
Non credo che la sua madre più m’ami,
poscia che trasmutò le bianche bende,
le quai convien che, misera!, ancor brami»

[“ask my Giovanna to direct her prayers for me
to where the innocent are heard.
I think her mother has not loved me
since she stopped wearing her white wimple,
which, in her coming misery, she may long for”]
(*Purg.* 8.71-75)

Furthermore, she is proof, he says, of the fleeting nature of women’s affections:

«Per lei assai di lieve si comprende
quanto in femmina foco d’amor dura
se l’occhio o ‘l tatto spesso non l’accende»

[“There is an easy lesson in her conduct:
how short a time the fire of love endures in woman
if frequent sight and touch do not rekindle it”]
(*Purg.* 8.76-78)

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She may be considered emblematic of the womanly lust that Jerome condemns in his letter. Linked to the accusations of her supposed wantonness are Nino Visconti's concerns for the purgatorial journey that lies ahead of him, and so he hopes that his daughter will pray for him, thereby taking on the salvific role that ought to be played by his wife.

The theme of women's immodesty appears again when Dante encounters Forese in *Purg.* 23. He credits Nella for his quick passage through Purgatory and praises her for her goodness:

«Tanto è a Dio più cara e più diletta
la vedovella mia, che molto amai,
quanto in bene operare è più soletta»

[“So much more precious and beloved of God
is my dear widow, whom I greatly loved,
the more she is alone in her good works”]
(*Purg.* 23.91-93)

Yet he also makes it a point to highlight just how different her attitude is from the multitudes of “brazen women of Florence” (line 101). Thus Nella – in stark contrast to Beatrice d’Este – embodies the ideal widow: through her “flooding tears,” her “devoted prayers,” and her “sighs” she has done the work necessary to support her husband in his purgation.

Not only does Dante's treatment of these widows contradict what we know of the actual possibilities available to widows, but it is also a source of intratextual conflict, as Dante makes reference to cultural and theological issues that demonstrate that he would have been aware of the flaws in his argument against remarriage.

One notable theological principle that serves to weaken his position on widows comes in *Purg.* 19, when Dante encounters Pope Adrian V. Upon realizing that he is addressing a pope, Dante sinks to his knees, but Adrian urges him to stand, saying:

«non errar: conservo sono
teco e con li altri ad una podestate.
Se mai quel santo evangelico suono
che dice ‘Neque nubent’ intendesti,
ben puoi veder perch’ io così ragiono»

LOPEZ

[“make no mistake. I am a fellow-servant
with you, and with the others, of a single Power.
If ever you did understand the holy passage
in the Gospel where it says ‘Neque nubent,’
you may well perceive just why I say this”]

(*Purg.* 19.134-138)

Adrian is here referring to the Gospel of Matthew, to a time when Jesus is asked a hypothetical question by the Sadducees: if a woman had had seven husbands during her lifetime, which one of them would be her husband in the afterlife? Jesus responds by saying that no one shall marry or be given in marriage at the time of the resurrection (in Latin: “neque nubent, neque nubentur”). This passage ultimately signifies the temporality of the vocations of marriage and holy orders; in other words, they are vows that expire at the end of one’s life on earth. Such a theological principle stands in direct opposition to the notion that a widow must behave as though she is still married to her deceased husband, as the vow of matrimony is indeed dissolved by death.

Leaving aside for a moment the theological contradiction I’ve just highlighted, Dante furthermore demonstrates within the *Commedia* that he is aware of the financial and societal factors that could leave widows little choice but to remarry. Dante uses the pilgrim’s encounter with Cacciaguida in *Paradiso* 15 to reminisce about the virtues of Florence before its corruption, and he makes a pointed reference to the current financial burdens of Florentine families:

«Non faceva, nascendo, ancor paura
la figlia al padre, ché ‘l tempo e la dote
non fuggien quinci e quindi la misura»

[“Nor did a new-born daughter make her father fear,
for marriage age and dowry were not yet extreme,
the one too low, the other one too high”]

(*Par.* 15.103-105)

Dante here acknowledges two important historical realities: the imperative to marry off daughters at an exceedingly young age (which made widowhood an inevitable predicament for a staggering number of women),¹⁷ and the monetary pressures placed upon families because of dowry inflation (which, as I have shown, made

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remarriage an attractive avenue for families otherwise burdened by a young, widowed daughter). These points – which one could go as far as to say contradict the standards he proposes for widows – illustrate that Dante was perfectly cognizant of the impediments to these ideals he extolled.¹⁸

The widows we encounter ultimately create tension in the *Commedia*, as they play a crucial yet complicated role in the afterlives of their husbands. They are meant to mourn and pray for their spouses, and they are meant also to remain unmarried. In light of the teachings of the church and the emphasis placed upon feminine chastity, Dante's depiction of these widows may initially seem uncontroversial, yet when one historicizes the realities of widows in Dante's time, the situation becomes quite muddy. Dante expects these women to disregard the social imperative to seek out new husbands and to instead remain chaste and faithful to their deceased husbands. What he suggests would have been exceptionally difficult for these women to achieve – after all, it was typically not up to them to decide for themselves what they would do upon their husbands' death. Dante's proposal is radical: for a widow to defy both the expectations of her family and the social and financial pressures of her community more generally in order to honor the memory of her late husband.

Ultimately the feminine lust and inconstancy that Jerome denounces – and that Nino Visconti and Forese Donati similarly lament – serve as the explanation for women's questionable desire to remarry. The allegation of lasciviousness, so prevalent in medieval perspectives on women, would smoothly obscure the real reasons women chose to remarry. Yet Dante's portrayal of widows, while very much at odds with the social realities of his time, still aligns with *Commedia's* central theme of the salvific potentialities of women. The prayers of Beatrice (a dead woman) save Dante (a living man). The dead thus advocate for the living in a striking inversion of the role Dante creates for widows in the *Commedia*; her intercessions are the very reason for which the pilgrim is permitted to make this journey through the afterlife and toward salvation. From the Virgin Mary on high down to the lowly widow on Earth, the *Commedia* illustrates time and again the redemptive powers of women.

NOTES

¹ “Solent adolescentulae viduae, quarum nonnullae abierunt retro post Satanam, cum luxuriatae fuerint in Christo nubentes dicere: Patrimoniolum meum quotidie perit: majorum haereditas dissipatur: servus contumeliose locutus est: imperium ancilla neglexit. Quis procedet ad publicum? quis respondebit pro agrorum tributis? Parvulos meos qui erudiet, et vernulas quis educabit? Et hanc proh nefas, causam opponunt matrimonii, quae vel sola debuit nuptias impedire. Superducit mater filiis, non nutritium, sed hostem; non parentem, sed tyrannum. Inflammata libidine, obliviscitur uteri sui: et inter parvulos suas miserias nescientes, lugens dudum, nova nupta componitur. Quid obtendis patrimonium? quid superbiam servulorum? Confitere turpitudinem. Nulla idcirco maritum ducit, ut cum marito non dormiat. Aut si certe libido non stimulat, quae tanta insania est, in morem scortorum prostituere castitatem, ut augeantur divitiae; et propter rem vilem atque perituram, pudicitia, quae et pretiosa et aeterna est, polluatur? Si habes liberos, nuptias quid requiris? si non habes, quare expertam non metuis sterilitatem; et rem incertam, certo praefers pudori?” (Jerome, “Letter 54” par. 15).

² The grieving of men and women was treated differently, as various statutes were created and implemented in order to suppress dramatic displays of mourning by men specifically; this is one of the many topics of historical inquiry in Lansing.

³ All subsequent citations of the *Commedia* in Italian come from the Petrocchi edition, while all English translations are taken from the Hollander edition.

⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3.71.9.

⁵ There are numerous examples of souls Dante encounters in Purgatory who, rather than seeking the aid of their living relatives, simply hope that someone – anyone – will pray for them. For instance, Belacqua laments his slow progress through Purgatory, wishing that someone could offer up prayers on his behalf: (“Prima convien che tanto il ciel m’aggiri / di fuor da essa, quanto fece in vita, / perch’io ‘ndugiai al fine i buon sospiri, / se orazione in prima non m’aita / che surga sù di cuor che in grazia viva” [“I must wait outside as long as in my lifetime / the heavens wheeled around me / while I put off my sighs of penance to the end, / unless I’m helped by prayers that rise / from a heart that lives in grace”]) (*Purg.* 4.130-134).

⁶ There are various examples of souls who hope their family will pray for them; notable instances include Manfredi beseeching his daughter, Constance to pray for him (*Purg.* 3.145) and Buonconte wishing his wife would pray for him (*Purg.* 5.89-90).

⁷ It must be noted that the Church generally recommended that widows decline remarriage but, if a widow ultimately chose to remarry, she would be required to wait at least one year before doing so; violating this waiting period could result in civil penalties. See Brundage.

⁸ Louise Mirrer’s book provides an extensive overview of the literary and historical depictions of widows in the Middle Ages; see: *Upon My Husband’s Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe* (ibid.).

⁹ Isabelle Chabot argues that the impoverishment of widows of various socioeconomic classes was due in large part to the dowry system, and she underlines in particular the inefficacy of the dowry in lower class families. While wealthier women with sizeable dowries could potentially use them to defray expenses after the death of their husbands, the dowries of poorer women were typically so modest that they would provide little help in the wake of a husband’s death. Their plight was singularly difficult: “These women were almost inevitably destined to misery

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following their husband's death [...] For those families dependent for their survival on the contribution of all members of the household capable of working, the loss of the father's wage could not be compensated for by the work of his widow. For young widows, remarriage must have appeared the most pressing solution to the misery into which they would otherwise have fallen. However, because remarriage opportunities for women lessened with age, this was an option open only to a minority of them" (302).

¹⁰ Chabot (304) also discusses the financial assistance available to destitute widows, reiterating that sources of public welfare were scant; whatever aid these widows did receive typically came from confraternities, hospitals, and neighborhood associations.

¹¹ While it was true that the dowry belonged to a widow upon her husband's death and could grant her a degree of financial stability, the situation was often much more complicated in practice, since the entire sum of the dowry may not have actually been available to the widow: "By law, the husband was designated master of the dowry and was required to apply it for the benefit of the married couple and their children, yet his ability to employ the dowry for this purpose was stymied by delayed and partial payments. As the size of dowries increased, it became increasingly more difficult for the bride's family to pay the full amount in a timely lump sum. The evidence from *ricordanze* reveals that while the bride's trousseau was usually conveyed to the husband on the day of the wedding, with an initial cash payment around the time of the consummation of the marriage, the major portion of the dowry (in cash or from Florence's *Monte delle doti*) was paid in installments, 'sometimes occurring many years after the wedding'" (Kirshner 9-10).

¹² The trope of the independent, wealthy widow is well known to any reader of Boccaccio, for instance, yet this was not at all commonplace. Citing data from the *catasto*, Klapisch-Zuber states: "...among wealthy Florentines the probability of a widow's living alone collapses: 2 percent of the 472 wealthiest households (which represent less than 5 percent of all Florentine households) were headed by a woman (an even lower percentage than in the country), and rich widows who lived really autonomously were the exception at the upper echelons of urban society" (Klapisch-Zuber 121).

¹³ Klapisch-Zuber 120-121.

¹⁴ Klapisch-Zuber 121.

¹⁵ Klapisch-Zuber 123.

¹⁶ One particularly knotty issue revolved around the fate of the widow's children. Once she remarried, the children from her previous marriage became something of a liability; children were considered part of their father's lineage, which meant that it was the responsibility of their paternal relatives to care for them. As a result, it was not uncommon for children to be abandoned by their mothers once they remarried (in which case their care would fall to their paternal family). Here it is useful to recall Jerome's letter, specifically his criticisms of widows for their superficial concerns about rents and properties, and their neglect of their children in their pursuit of new relationships. The church father's indictments indeed rang true in the Middle Ages, though not because of women's alleged lust or greed, but rather as a result of societal pressures that made it exceptionally difficult for widows to live the chaste existence Jerome extols. Klapisch-Zuber sheds light on this issue, as well as the resulting stereotype of the "cruel mother" that occurs frequently in literature of the period (Klapisch-Zuber 124-131).

¹⁷ The age gap between couples was significant: girls were anywhere from eight to fifteen years younger than their husbands (Klapisch-Zuber, p. 20). This difference in age made widowhood a virtual inevitability for many women, and records indicate that roughly 25 percent of Florence's population were widows (see again Klapisch-Zuber (120), citing the *catasto*).

¹⁸ Deborah Parker focuses exclusively on Dante's harsh treatment of Beatrice d'Este in her essay, "Ideology and Cultural Practice: The Case of Dante's Treatment of Beatrice d'Este." Parker uses the responses made in commentaries by Franco Sacchetti, Benvenuto da Imola, and Giovanni Serravalle as evidence that his depiction of Beatrice d'Este was unorthodox and out of sync with the ideologies of his contemporaries, all of whom "resist [his] formulations of women's nature and who predicate this resistance on current social practices" (Parker 143).

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Dream, Distortion, and Double Take: Dante's Poetics of Redirection

In writing the *Commedia*, Dante rewrites his life; he does this not by revising his personal history or changing the facts around its events, but in designing a purposeful pathway to the *segno lieto*, the unchanging happiness that is God, with a renewed understanding of the signposts. Dante fashions this reorientation of life's journey by writing a story whose protagonist-pilgrim is assisted by female figures who possess the mind and voice of unimpeded vision. In this way, Dante, pilgrim and poet, are redirected to the *sito decreto*, the place to which one can arrive only through deliberate and rational discernment.¹

The *Commedia* is built on the metaphor of a journey presented from the outset in a strenuous dialectic of lost and found, and it is precisely this tension that moves both pilgrim and poem forward. Inherent to the description of this journey are expressions of redirection that mark the moments in which Dante exercises his free will as integral to his personal itinerary of transformation. This drama is activated powerfully in the *Commedia* through female figures who work collaboratively to reestablish the pilgrim's passage; in some moments by overtly pointing out the right way, and at other times by rectifying visual, aural, and imaginative misperceptions experienced by Dante as they occurred both on earth and in his passage through the places of the afterlife. This essay examines how the poem's theme of redirection is signaled and activated by its poetics; nocturnal dreams, optical distortions, and gestural double-takes reveal a syncretic perspective in which the youthful errant Dante faces the mature thinker who then writes the poem as the vehicle by which he calls himself back to the right way.

The reader of the *Commedia* must then ask where, when, and how this folding of time and purpose occurs; where is the point of encounter between the poet's life and the journey that is recreated by the order of the poem? Much of this reckoning happens at the top of the mountain of Purgatory where the pilgrim is required to face his past through the lens of Beatrice's critical review. For this reason, *Purgatorio* 30 is a canto of marked conversion in Dante and its staging for spatial and temporal articulation begins when the pilgrim's company passes from male (Virgil and Statius) to female (Beatrice and Matelda). Transfer of leadership from Virgil to Beatrice is actuated by the pilgrim's double take: he first feels Beatrice's

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presence, looks for Virgil and does not find him, then turns to Beatrice's voice calling out to him from across the River Lethe:

«Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice.
Come degnasti d'accedere al monte?
non sapei tu che qui è l'uom felice?»

[“Look over here! I am, I truly am Beatrice.”
How did you dare approach the mountain?
Do you not know that here man lives in joy?”]
(*Purg.* 30.73-75)²

The sternness of Beatrice's command rides upon a lyricism reminiscent of the *Vita Nuova* as her imperative, “Guardaci ben,” orders the pilgrim's gaze onto her person then links the repeated “ben son” to her *essere* [being] as the fulcrum of Dante's passage to heaven.³ Two verses later, Beatrice signifies herself with the state of happiness by way of rhyme (*Beatrice / felice*) and resumes the story around her death that was left suspended in the *Vita Nuova*.⁴ In Chapter 39 of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante envisions Beatrice in glory (“una forte imaginazione in me”) and then reorders the progression of events that lead up to that moment (“Allora cominciai a pensare di lei; e ricordandomi di lei secondo l'ordine del tempo passato...”). The subsequent chapter in the *Vita Nuova* describes pilgrims passing through a Florence bereft of Beatrice, and *Purgatorio* 30 picks up this point of the narrative thread of the *Vita Nuova* by re-presenting Beatrice within the journey recounted by the *Commedia*.

Beatrice's masterful command of Dante's self-discovery results in full catharsis, the softening of the pilgrim's heart is like the snow of Italy's mountainous spine that with the mere breath of spring melts and seeps out into itself “poi, liquefatta, in sé stessa trapela;” (“but then, dissolving, melts into itself”; *Purg.* 30.88). The expanded reflexive construction of *trapelare* elongates the process of tearful contrition where the amalgamation of ice into water is like a gradual mixing of cold sin and warm sorrow. This display of Dante's renewed self-understanding opens the way for Beatrice's review of Dante's youthful past and subsequent reordering of events:

«Alcun tempo il sostenni col mio volto:
mostrando li occhi giovanetti a lui,
meco il menava in dritta parte vòlto.

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Sì tosto come in su la soglia fui
di mia seconda etade e mutai vita,
questi si tolse a me, e diessi altrui.
Quando di carne a spirto era salita,
e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m'era,
fu' io a lui men cara e men gradita;
e volse i passi suoi per via non vera,
imagini di ben seguendo false,
che nulla promession rendono intera.
Né l'impetrare ispirazion mi valse,
con le quali e in sogno e altrimenti
lo rivocai: sì poco a lui ne calse!»

[“For a time I let my countenance sustain him.
Guiding him with my youthful eyes,
I drew him with me in the right direction.
Once I had reached the threshold of my second age,
when I changed lives, he took himself from me
and gave himself to others.
When I had risen to spirit from my flesh,
as beauty and virtue in me became more rich,
to him I was less dear and less than pleasing.
He set his steps upon an untrue way,
pursuing those false images of good
that bring no promise to fulfillment—
useless the inspiration I sought and won for him,
as both with dreams and other means
I called him back, so little did he heed them.”]
(*Purg.* 30.121-135)

Let us examine Dante's use of ambiguity in Beatrice's speech where double meaning of the verbs *rivocare* (to call again / to call back) and *impetrare* (to implore / to turn to stone) assist the poet's threading of past into present. Time is compressed at the last verse (line 135) on *rivocai* as Beatrice renders the verb in the past absolute tense while simultaneously calling out to Dante from across the river. At the beginning of that tercet, Beatrice qualifies her calling out to him from heaven, those earlier implorations had no effect where *impetrare* suggests her failed attempt to bring Dante to a conversion. The verb *impetrare* appears over the arc of the poem to signify the two acts of supplication and petrification, and these can be seen as complementary whereby the efficacy of prayer

should result in new pliancy of a hardened will. The potential good outcome is conversion, negatively exemplified by Count Ugolino in *Inferno* 33 who, even in the misery of hearing his children beg for comfort, is incapable of showing the sympathy required to soften and relieve fault. Because Ugolino cannot cry, he turns to stone inside, “Io non piangëa, sì dentro impetraï” (*Inf.* 33.49), thus echoing his frozen immobility in Cocytus.⁵

Beatrice reconstructs her place in the youthful Dante’s life as physically participatory, her face and eyes acted as beacon and if Dante and Beatrice walked the same path together, *in dritta parte* toward the same right goal, it was only for a brief time, *alcun tempo*. Divergence occurred with Beatrice’s death whereby the disappearance of her physical self, the instrument by which she drew him along with her, causes Dante to lose sight of the objective. In her second life, Beatrice employed various strategies to call him back from the “other,” *altrui*.⁶ This particular moment of syncretic recollection again hinges on the verb *rivocai*, where verses 121-123 collapse the itinerary of the *Vita Nuova* into one tercet and the following tercet quickly (*sì tosto*) pivots Beatrice’s perspective from earthly to heavenly. The equivocal rhyme of *volto* at verse 121 (noun for face) and at 123 (past participle of *volgere*) levels Beatrice’s exterior aspect as the instrument that drew the youthful Dante on the true path, but at verse 130 recurrence of the verb *volgere*, “e volve i passi suoi per via non vera,” recycles the verb to describe divergence from the true way to a path made of empty promises and false good. *Purgatorio* 30 and much of 31 focus on Dante’s errant youthful life, Beatrice’s message recapitulates that life into the present moment of the poem by clarifying the difference between transient and eternal good thus resetting proper objective, “imagini di ben seguendo false, / che nulla promession rendono intera” (*Purg.* 30.31-32). In this way, the program of the poem retrieves multiple layers of the past and brings Dante of the *Vita Nuova* to meet Dante of the *Commedia* at the top of the mountain of Purgatory.⁷

Instrumental to the progression of the journey are signposts that mark the way for pilgrim and reader, and the poem’s variety of poetic and programmatic motifs signal direction and encourage reorientation. For example, at liminal spatial junctures pilgrim and guide pause to look forward and back; this taking stock and evaluating the journey occurs at the tenth canto of the three canticles. Similarly, at the thirtieth canto of each canticle, the Narcissus story paves a complementary byway to the main journey to show Dante’s evolving sense of self-estimation.⁸ By comparison, the figure of

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Ulysses is presented in the poem in a journey complicated by waywardness, its arabesque design imitates misdirected desire and absence of clear objective, and in the economy of the journey motif Dante evokes Ulysses in a similar arcane tracing of path and purpose, it is ultimately characterized as “il varco folle d’Ulisse” when seen from the vantage point of the starry sphere (*Par.* 27.79-84).

The vehicle of the poem also offers signs in punctuated frequency as in the occurrence of the verb and variants of *smarrire* - a reminder of how the story began and the evolving resolution to the danger that it records. In similar fashion, the *torcere / drizzare* motif marks moments where a straightening of what was twisted signals and motivates comprehension or resolution of a problem.⁹ Translated into simple spatial patterns, this motif tells us that the straight and direct way is the right way and when understood in the context of the journey, it is best to stay on the main road and keep the objective in clear view.¹⁰

The mountain of Purgatory restores and implements that spatial redirection and time passes in real terms of night and day to activate the souls’ renewed desire to unburden sin through exercise and thus satisfy a natural human desire heavenward. Climbing and unwinding the mountain traces an ascending spiral where sin is un-done as circling penitents are “straightened” and made right. The pilgrim says to Forese Donati (referring to Virgil’s guidance):

«Indi m’han tratto sù li suoi conforti,
salendo e rigirando la montagna
che drizza voi che ‘l mondo fece torti.»

[“With his support I have left all that behind,
climbing and circling the terraces of the mountain
that straightens those made crooked by the world.”]
(*Purg.* 23.124-126)

This occurrence of the *torcere / drizzare* motif defines the mountain as both subject and object in the process of the restoration of the will; in its usage as subject, it is the agent of redirection to heaven; in its usage as object, it is the thing the penitents must overtake. Instrumental to this process for the pilgrim is a series of three nocturnal dreams, let us look carefully at these by focusing on the middle dream and proceed by comparison of their female *dramatis personae*.

The purgatorial three-dream drama employs female figures that cooperate the pilgrim’s passage to Beatrice. In the first dream Lucia

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conveys the pilgrim from Ante-Purgatory to Purgatory proper; in the middle dream the *femmina-serena* and *donna santa* manifest the pilgrim's processing of Virgil's exposition on human love and appropriate measure of desire (delivered in the preceding canto), thus preparing the pilgrim's passage to upper Purgatory (sins of excess desire); in the third dream, Leah (and Rachel by implication) reflect the pilgrim's perfected will thus marking his readiness to enter the Earthly Paradise where Beatrice awaits. The dream series fuses multiple pages of time by creating a channel for both recollection of the past and exploration of potential outcomes; as such, these nocturnal imaginings might be less valued as presentations of the future and more of a staging of non-reality where free will is unrestricted to actualize redirection.¹¹ The pilgrim's middle dream stages a double vision of self-rediscovery as he struggles to couple the poem's central message on love and human desire with his own self-understanding.¹²

It is nightfall of Dante's second day on the mountain, he and Virgil leave the circle of the wrathful and as they pause to orient themselves, Virgil delivers his speech on the relationship of love and how one must pursue love for the right object and in right measure. They are now among the slothful and as the penitents depart, darkness gathers and the pilgrim's drowsiness intermingles the day's experiences, canto 18 concludes:

Poi quando fuor da noi tanto divise
quell' ombre, che veder più non potiersi,
novo pensiero dentro a me si mise,
del qual più altri nacquero e diversi;
e tanto d'uno in altro vaneggiar,
che li occhi per vaghezza ricopersi,
e 'l pensiero in sogno trasmutai.

[Then, when these shades were so far parted
from us we could no longer see them,
a new thought rose within me,
from which others, many and diverse, were born.
And I rambled so from one thought to another
that my eyes closed in drowsy wandering
and I transformed my musings into dream.]

(*Purg.* 18.139-145)

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In sleep, the process of transmutation begins and Canto 19 opens in formulaic dream terms: astronomical indicators show that time has moved into the hour just before dawn, warmth yields to cold in a vista of the dark eastern sky creating feelings of isolation, surrender, and pause.¹³ By contrast, the pilgrim's first dream is marked by movement, "la mente nostra, peregrina" (*Purg.* 9.16) and bird imagery simulate Lucia's work of conveyance, while the third dream is cast in warm pastoral terms of shelter and restful stasis, "io come capra, ed ei come pastori" (*Purg.* 27.86). The middle dream is nightmarish like the anxiety-ridden dreams of the *Vita Nuova* and in its punctuated allegorical sequencing recalls the dream narrated by Count Ugolino in *Inferno* 33. Time is stamped on space as the cautionary quality of this dream is prefaced by a reference to geomancers known for using patterns of constellations to foretell the future; for this reason, the configuration of this dream is crucial as we shall see what the pilgrim must do to recover from its disturbing effects, this is an exertion to which Count Ugolino could not bring himself.¹⁴

Particular to the middle dream is the pictorial qualification of the pilgrim's conscious to unconscious mental activity where the verb *trasmutare* animates the metamorphosing *femmina balba-dolce serena*. The rhythm of these tercets slows the reader into a dreamlike reality; dieresis of *diurno* and *oriente* and the suspension created by the adverbial phrase introduced by *quando* return the reader's attention to the cold night sky. The next series of four tercets continue in a language lacking the terminology the reader expects in preparation for the vision experience; it is only in the middle dream that the protagonist presents herself without the softening effect of *parere* to create personification and distance. Compare how Lucia enters in the first dream: "in sogno mi pareva veder sospesa / un'aguglia," ["in a dream I seemed to see an eagle"] (*Purg.* 9.19-20) and Leah in the third dream: "in sogno mi pareva / donna vedere andar per una landa / cogliendo fiori;" ["in a dream I seemed to see a lady, / young and lovely, passing through a meadow / as she gathered flowers"] (*Purg.* 27.97-99). The woman of the middle dream instead enters boldly:

mi venne in sogno una femmina balba,
ne li occhi guercia, e sopra i piè distorta,
con le man monche, e di color scialba.
Io la mirava; e come 'l sol conforta

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le fredde membra che la notte aggrava,
così lo sguardo mio le faceva scorta
la lingua, e poscia tutta la drizzava
in poco d'ora, e lo smarrito volto,
com' amor vuol, così le colorava.

[there came to me a woman, in a dream,
stammering, cross-eyed, splayfooted,
with crippled hands and sickly pale complexion.
I looked at her, and as the sun revives
cold limbs benumbed by night,
just so my gaze gave her a ready tongue
and then in very little time
straightened her crooked limbs
and tinged her sallow face as love desires.]

(*Purg.* 19.7-15)¹⁵

The *femmina-serena* is characterized by her transitory double nature: “Ne li occhi guercia, e sovra i piè distorta / ... / ... e poscia tutta la drizzava” (lines 8, 14) making this occurrence of the *torcere / drizzare* motif unique for two reasons. First, it employs the variant *distorta*; compared to a simple twisting or bending, distortion relates qualities of de-formation as in undoing what was once formed, this adjective reminds us that this figure has two identities, she is both *femmina balba* and *dolce serena*. Second, distortion also relates the quality of faulty perception as when the senses do not cooperate in receiving information; the *femmina-serena* is the object of distortion through the viewer's gaze that holds the power of transmutation. Further, distortion is recurring - in the *femmina*'s contorted true self and then in a false straightening by the viewer (Dante of the dream).

Dante's dreamed self is physically inert while his gaze re-forms her: her tongue is untied, all of her is straightened, color returns to her *smarrito volto*.

Poi ch'ell' avea 'l parlar così disciolto,
cominciava a cantar sì, che con pena
da lei avrei mio intento rivolto.
«Io son,» cantava, »io son dolce serena,
che ' marinari in mezzo mar dismago;
tanto son di piacere a sentir piena!
Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago

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al canto mio; e qual meco s'ausa,
rado sen parte; sì tutto l'appago!»

[And with her speech set free
she started singing in a way that would
have made it hard for me to turn aside.
“I am,” she sang, “I am the sweet siren
who beguiles mariners on distant seas,
so great is their delight in hearing me.
I drew Ulysses, eager for the journey,
with my song. And those who dwell with me
rarely depart, so much do I content them.”]

(*Purg.* 19.16-24)

If the *femmina-serena* is frightful, Dante's transforming gaze (likened to the comforting effect of the sun on stiffened limbs) makes her dangerous as it assumes the power of persuasion and allows its object the ease of mutability.¹⁶ Assuming control over its subject by way of objectification, Dante's gaze communicates the message that culpability and sin can also occur through inertia when the process of deliberation is cut short of the self-reflective act of discernment. The *femmina-serena's* anamorphic nature dramatizes the anxiety of deliberation that is fundamental to the healthy exercising of free will, but the problem is left unresolved for both Dante-dreamer and Dante-of-the-dream until the pilgrim is able to see himself fully for what he is (through the process of full contrition in *Purgatorio* 30 and 31).¹⁷

Note the mollifying and seductive quality of the siren's song as *io son* repeats gently around *cantava* then as alliteration in the following verse *marinari, mezzo, mar dismago* develops in alphabetic order (*m* to *p*) to the alliterative and sensuous *piacere, piena, appago*. The conclusion in rhyming *vago* with *appago* suggests indiscriminating desire satisfied. Her third utterance of *io*, subject of the verb *volsi*, describes her greatest power as the personification of deviation from the right way. Beatrice will command the same attention to her *essere* in *Purgatorio* 30, but she fashions it as the conduit to the true way whereas the siren is a dead-end and *terminus* (“rado sen parte”; line 24). In the absence of *parere* there is no lens of unreality here, this quality builds the anxiety of the dream experience and complicates the potential harm of deceptive appearances. The danger of misperception is explained just inside the entrance of Purgatory at canto 10. This panoramic first tercet

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synthetically explains the quality that separates souls allowed to move forward to salvation from those left behind:

Poi fummo dentro al soglio de la porta
che 'l mal amor de l'anime disusa,
perché fa parer dritta la via torta.

[Once we had crossed the threshold of the gate
not used by souls whose twisted love
attempts to make the crooked way seem straight.]
(*Purg.* 10.1-3)

Mal amor, or love used badly, corrupts one's ability to distinguish good from bad thus barring passage of the gate. The analogy of straight / twisted is reiterated in the landscape as Dante hears the gate close behind and looks with hesitation at the winding path leading out from the mountain's gate. The pilgrim will later formulate this worry into a question posed to Virgil:

«ché, s'amore è di fuori a noi offerto
e l'anima non va con altro piede,
se dritta o torta va, non è suo merto.»
Ed elli a me: “Quanto ragion qui vede,
dir ti poss' io; da indi in là t'aspetta
pur a Beatrice, ch'è opra di fede.»

[“For if love is offered from outside us
and if the soul moves on no other foot,
it has no merit in going straight or crooked.”
And he to me: ‘As far as reason may see in this,
I can tell you. To go farther you must look
to Beatrice, for it depends on faith alone.’]
(*Purg.* 18.43-48)

Anatomical reference to the foot reminds us of the pilgrim's *piè fermo* that hindered his ambulation back in *Inferno* 1. In *Paradiso* 5 Beatrice says that perfect vision moves the foot whereby the foot of the soul is love directed by the intellect.¹⁸ That the *femmina-serena* is “*sovra i piè distorta*” indicates that her brand of love makes her very foundation faulty and imbalanced. Conversely, Beatrice is the “*opra di fede*” – love that leads to God by discernment through faith.¹⁹

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Returning to the dream, a subsequent phase of correction occurs by a second female figure, she also enters boldly but without the blurry mutability that characterizes the *femmina-serena*:

Ancor non era sua bocca richiusa,
quand' una donna apparve santa e presta
lunghezzo me per far colei confusa.
«O Virgilio, Virgilio, chi è questa?»
fieramente dicea; ed el venìa
con li occhi fitti pur in quella onesta.
L'altra prendea, e dinanzi l'apria
fendendo i drappi, e mostravami 'l ventre;
quel mi svegliò col puzzo che n'uscìa.

[Her lips had not yet closed
when at my side appeared a lady,
holy and alert, in order to confound her.
“O Virgil, Virgil, who is this?”
she asked, indignant. And he came forward
with his eyes fixed on that virtuous one.
The other he seized and, ripping her garments,
laid her front bare and exposed her belly.
The stench that came from there awoke me.]
(*Purg.* 19.25-33)

This scene dramatizes the ability to discern good love from bad in a syncretic unveiling of the truth; Virgil-of-the-dream knows that the *femmina-serena* is bad and Virgil-not-of-the-dream knows why she is bad. The *donna santa* makes no effect on Dante in the dream but her interruption results in Dante-dreamer awakening. His faculties are disturbed at his role in the dream, his body is bent in a posture reminiscent of his reaction in *Inferno* 20 to the physical contortion of the diviners. There and here, Virgil's remedy is an imperative to his charge to raise his eyes, readjust perspective, and to remember the task at hand. God is falconer and the pilgrim is falcon that first looks down at its feet before looking up, this self-check resets moral compass; perspective is no longer presented in blurred double vision but focused to the star-filled heavens that are God's eternal lure, “li occhi rivolgi al logoro che gira / lo rege eterno con le rote magne” (*Purg.* 19.62-63).

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In *Paradiso* 2, Beatrice will reapply the same directive as the pilgrim transitions from the grounded thinking essential to the navigation of the mountain to the transcendent viewpoint required for movement through the heavenly spheres:

giunto mi vidi ove mirabil cosa
mi torse il viso a sé; e però quella
cui non potea mia cura essere ascosa,
volta ver' me, sì lieta come bella,
«Drizza la mente in Dio grata,» mi disse,
«che n'ha congiunti con la prima stella.»

[suddenly I found myself there
where my eyes were drawn to an astounding sight.
And she, from whom my thoughts could not be kept
turned to me, as full of joy as she was fair,
to say: “Direct your grateful mind to God,
who has conjoined us with the nearest star.”]
(*Par.* 2.25-30)

In this instance, the *torcere* / *drizzare* motif takes on a new meaning as the verb *drizzare* is employed in an imperative and in a semantic variant from “to straighten” to “to direct.” The transposition of vision in optical and mental terms relates a body language now familiar to the reader, and perceptual redirection reestablishes the journey by shifting emphasis from the body to the mind. In *Paradiso* 3, the next phase of the pilgrim’s self-rediscovery is introduced in a return to the Narcissus story:

tali vid' io più facce a parlar pronte;
per ch'io dentro a l'error contrario corsi
a quel ch'accese amor tra l'omo e 'l fonte.
Sùbito sì com' io di lor m'accorsi,
quelle stimando specchiati sembianti,
per veder di cui fosser, li occhi torsi;
e nulla vidi, e ritorsi avanti
dritti ne lume de la dolce guida,
che, sorridendo, ardea ne li occhi santi.

[I saw many such faces eager to speak,
at which I fell into the error opposite to that

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which inflamed a man to love a fountain.
As soon as I became aware of them,
believing them to be reflections,
I turned around to see from whom they came
and, seeing nothing, I returned my gaze
to the light of my sweet guide,
whose holy eyes were glowing as she smiled.]
(*Par.* 3.16-24)

Let us examine this *torcere* / *drizzare* occurrence here made fitting in its employment of two utterances of *torcere* (“li occhi torsi; / e ritorsili avanti”): the pilgrim turns his eyes away, and then turns them again in a double take as he seeks the origin of the faces before him. While the Narcissus program is marked in the *Commedia* at the thirtieth canto of each of the canticles, this episode inverts Narcissus’ error (Ovid’s figure mistakes his own image for an other’s) and appears outside of the predicted program; in this way, it feasibly constitutes a second phase to its objective in *Purgatorio* 30. There, in reaction to Beatrice’s calling out, the pilgrim looks into the water of the Lethe but seeing his reflection and feeling shame, he looks away. In *Paradiso* 3, Dante’s self-professed *error contrario* couples with the gesture of the double take to indicate the pilgrim’s new ability of self-correction and brings the pilgrim’s attention to Piccarda Donati. Piccarda responds to the pilgrim’s questions in perfect clarity, she explains that being at peace with sinfulness is a product of one’s free will that appropriately accepts all of heaven as a place of happiness, Cunizza da Romano will reiterate this point in *Paradiso* 9.

Upon entering heaven, the pilgrim is placed safely within the motion of the divine order that bears him to God:

e ora lì, come a sito decreto,
cen porta la virtù di quella corda
che ciò che scocca drizza in segno lieto.

[and there now, as to a place appointed,
the power of that bowstring bears us,
aimed, as is all it shoots, at a joyful target.]
(*Par.* 1.124-126)

In writing the *Commedia*, Dante rewrites his life by fashioning a journey assisted by female figures who cooperate and redirect his

path to God. In this way, the poet's life is recreated by the order of the poem as time and purpose meet with new result. These syncretic moments reveal that reorientation of life's journey is possible and that the *Commedia* is the vehicle by which we may call ourselves back to the right way.

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NOTES

¹ “e ora lì, come a sito decreto, / cen porta la virtù di quella corda / che ciò che scocca drizza in segno lieto.” [“and there now, as to a place appointed, / the power of that bowstring bears us, / aimed, as is all it shoots, at a joyful target.”] (*Par.* 1.124-126). The teleological implication described in this metaphor of God as archer is qualified by Dante's lexical choice of *decreto* from Latin *decretum* signifying decree and derived from *decernere* (to deliberate). In this way, humans participate with God in the soul's journey to its final resting place. The text of the *Commedia* cited in this study is reprinted from *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, edited by Giorgio Petrocchi, Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Dante Alighieri a cura della Società Dantesca, Florence, 1994 (1966-67).

² Translations of the *Commedia* are by Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander.

³ For a treatment of Beatrice's role in *Purgatorio* 30 as a place of transition in the journey of the pilgrim and in the youthful Dante, see Storey.

⁴ The event of Beatrice's physical death in the *Vita Nuova* comes to Dante first through presentiment (ch. 23), he records the event (ch. 28-29), postpones its treatment but continues to materialize her being (in chapter 34, he sat thinking of her while drawing an angel) until the sequences of time fall in line (at ch. 39) when he visualizes her in glory. See also Hollander, 1974.

⁵ Another example of Dante's use of *impetrare* and its semantic association with the efficacy of prayer can be found in *Purg.* 19.97-145 with the figure of Pope Adrian V whose story is emblematic of a conversion experience.

⁶ Beatrice will spell out Dante's errors clearly in the Terrestrial Paradise using an extended metaphor of waywardness that is introduced by Dante's tearful incipit, “Piangendo dissi: ‘Le presenti cose / col falso lor piacer volser miei passi, / tosto che ’l vostro viso si nascose.’” [“In tears, I said: ‘Things set in front of me, / with their false delights, turned back my steps / the moment that Your countenance was hidden.’”] (*Purg.* 31.34-39).

⁷ Barolini discusses the notion of pilgrimage (retracing that connection by beginning with *Convivio* 4.12.14-16) and Dante's recuperation of time in Purgatory as it aligns with Augustine's understanding of discernment in the desire of temporal and eternal goods.

⁸ References to Ovid's Narcissus are found at *Inf.* 30.128, *Purg.* 30.76-78, *Par.* 3.17-18 and *Par.* 30.85. See Brownlee and Starck.

⁹ The *torcere / drizzare* motif is designed by any variant of the verbs appearing together in ten or fewer verses. There are twenty-one occurrences of this motif in the *Commedia*, see Triggiano, 2010 and 2015.

DANTE'S POETICS OF REDIRECTION

¹⁰ *Convivio* IV.xii.18-19 explains the relationship between human desire and a soul's search for God through the metaphor of the pilgrim who is best advised to take the most direct route to his destination, "Veramente così questo cammino si perde per errore come le strade della terra. Che sì come d'una cittade a un'altra di necessitate è una ottima e dirittissima via, e un'altra che sempre se ne dilunga ... E sì come vedemo che quello che dirittissimo vae alla cittade, e compie lo desiderio e dà posa dopo la fatica, e quello che va in contrario mai nol compie e mai posa dare non può, così nella nostra vita avviene;" ("We may, however, lose this path through error, just as we may the roads of the earth. For just as from one city to another there is only one road which is of necessity the best and most direct, and another which leads completely away... And just as we see that the path which leads most directly to the city fulfills desire and provides rest when work is finished, while the one which goes in the opposite direction never fulfills it nor provides rest, so it is with our life.") Translation Princeton Dante Project (<https://dante.princeton.edu/pdp/convivio.html>).

¹¹ Of the many resources that shed light on the dreams of *Purgatorio*, these have been most useful in evidencing the function of dream in the education of the pilgrim: Basile, Boyde, Caligiure, Cervigni, Gregory, and Raby.

¹² Kirkpatrick's commentary of *Purgatorio* 19 highlights the quality of conversion at work in this episode as central to the personal history of Statius and in preparation for the pilgrim's catharsis in *Purgatorio* 30, "But, having established that free will is the central factor in human personality, Dante now goes on to explore an ultimate freedom that is located at the intersection of will and divine grace, whereby the mind is able to free itself entirely from the hold of ingrained habits – be they sensuous, emotional or intellectual – and embark entirely upon a new life" (413).

¹³ "Ne l'ora che non può 'l calor diurno / intepidar più 'l freddo de la luna, / vinto da terra, e talor da Saturno / –quando i geomanti lor Maggior Fortuna / veggiono in oriente, innanzi a l'alba, / surger per via che poco le sta bruna" ["At that hour when the heat of day, / cooled by earth and at times by Saturn, / can no longer temper the cold of the moon, / when geomancers see their *Fortuna Major* / rise in the east before the dawn, / which does not long stay dark for it"] (*Purg.* 19.1-6)

¹⁴ Count Ugolino is trapped in the frozen nature of his sin and has rendered himself incapable of conversion. While the semiotic value of his dream is not lost on him (Ruggieri = hunter; Ugolino and children = wolf and cubs), he does not apprehend its anagogical value as warning to his destructive ending. His inability to see beyond his self (he sees his face stamped on his children's faces) is subsumed in the notion of imprisonment: in his past in the Tower of Mews, and in the present and future in the frozen Cocytus.

¹⁵ Barańsky's nuanced analysis of the *femmina balba* with the discourse on love in *Purgatorio* 17 and 18 makes direct connections "as a mosaic put together from elements related to his guide's earlier account of the functioning of love in human beings" (216).

¹⁶ The cold and dark of the opening verses carry over and the reader is reminded of the simile of *Inferno* 2 when Dante, feeling bolstered by Virgil's words of promise and the guaranteed efficacy of the *tre donne benedette*, likens his renewed strength to flowers bent in the cold and dark that straighten under the light of the sun, "Quali fioretti dal notturno gelo / chinati e chiusi, poi che 'l sol li 'mbianca, / si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo" (*Inf.* 2.127-29).

¹⁷ See Gaunt.

¹⁸ "non ti maravigliar, ché ciò procede / da perfetto veder, che, come apprende, / così nel bene appreso move il piede" (*Par.* 5.4-6).

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¹⁹ St. Augustine says in his *Exposition* on Psalm 9, verse 15: “The foot of the soul is well understood to be its love: which, when depraved, is called coveting or lust; but when upright (*cum autem rectus*), love or charity.”

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‘Facce a parlar pronte’: Speaking Women in *Vita nuova* 18-19 and Occitan Songbook Vatican Latin 3207 (H)

As the editors of this volume observe, the “facce a parlar pronte,” the faces ready to speak, recognized by the Pilgrim in *Paradiso* 3.16, represent one of many instances where women talk in Dante’s *Commedia*. In *Paradiso* 3, this volume’s point of departure, Dante stages a community of women speaking on ethical issues. This was not, however, his first attempt to do so. Dante’s *Vita nuova* (hence: *VN*) also contains small-scale attempts to represent women as speakers on ethics and conduct. Teodolinda Barolini sees Dante’s use of women interlocutors as a literary innovation, culminating in the figure of *Beatrice Loquax* (“Notes” 363). This essay aims to contextualize Dante’s innovation within the broader literary landscape of the *Duecento*. I argue that Dante’s deployment of gender in articulating his “sweet new style”—both in “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” (“Ladies who have intelligence of love”) and his use of women speakers in *VN* 18—reflects a deep synthesis of medieval lyric traditions in the *lingua del sì* and the *lenga d’oc*, and the Italian book culture that transmitted them.

Both the initial reception and the *Vita nuova*’s subsequent framing of “Donne ch’avete” (“Ladies who have”) reflect visual and textual representations of speaking women found in anthologies of Occitan verse produced in Italy during Dante’s lifetime. Vatican Latin 3207 (hence: Vat. lat. 3207) is one such anthology. In this manuscript, the exchange of *coblas* between two speaking women, Iseuz and Almucs, provides one example of women in the Occitan tradition discussing the ethical implications of speech. This exchange literalizes the metaphor of text-as-woman, found in the *congedo* of Dante’s “Donne ch’avete”.¹ The *mise-en-scène* of *VN* 18, where “Donne ch’avete” appears, also parallels the *mise-en-page* of Vat. lat. 3207. *VN* 18 stages a group of Florentine women debating the ethical merit of Dante’s poetry, echoing the compilation of Vat. lat. 3207, which brings together a group of *trobairitz* (the Occitan term for a woman poet, or poets) to create a collection of noble women who speak on love, a group of Dante’s ideal (women) readers.

I suggest that Dante uses gendered conventions similar to those that shape the representation of speaking women in Vat. lat. 3207, to stage the revelation of his new poetics in the *Vita nuova*. This poetic innovation rests on Dante’s new interpretation of *fin’amor*, or courtly love. Any brief definition of the ideology and rules of engagement for

this courtly game inevitably fails to capture its many tensions but, for the purposes of this essay, the reciprocal, transactional nature of *fin'amor* proves important. As Teodolinda Barolini states, a lover — who, in lyric, is often male—expects a reward, a *guerdon* or *guiderdone*, from the beloved, which might range from a sign of acknowledgment to, as is often implied, sexual favours (“Lyric Past” 14). The existence of these almost contractual expectations means that it is possible for one party to fail to exhibit the behaviour of a courtly lover, who is ideally discreet, loyal, and, crucially, willing to grant the *guerdon*. As I will demonstrate, the concept of failure, or “faillmen,” and the blame that arises as a consequence, are invoked in Vat. lat. 3207 by men and women speakers. The women speakers depicted as poets, or *trobairitz*, in Vat. lat. 3207 evaluate individual conduct to establish who is at fault in a specific relationship, while the manuscript’s *florilegium* leverages the term “faillmen” against aristocratic women writ large, portraying them as subjects of blame as well as objects of praise, as the lyric tradition often positions them.

In *VN* 18, Dante places the rhetoric of blame in the mouths of women, echoing the way the *trobairitz* of Vat. lat. 3207 use the same concept. In the narrative gloss of *VN* 18, it is Dante’s shame at his own culpability in desiring a greeting that spurs him to write “Donne ch’avete”. While Dante uses this moment in the *Vita nuova* to mark his own poetic originality, freeing himself from the courtly *guerdon*, the imagery of speaking women found in “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore”, “Ben aggia l’amoroso et dolce chore” (“Blessed be that love-filled and sweet heart”)—the response to Dante’s *canzone* found in Vatican Latin 3793—, and the subsequent reframing of “Donne ch’avete” in *VN* 18-19, all echo the representation of speaking women found in the Occitan tradition as received in Italy, specifically within Vat. lat. 3207.²

In addition to Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae*, Occitan anthologies and their prose biographies — which appear to have first emerged in anthologies made in Italy — are considered models for the *Vita nuova*’s *prosimetrum* form. As Manuele Gagnolati observes, the performative nature of this text allows Dante to create “an author through language” (128), by becoming, in Michelangelo Picone’s terms, *scriptor*, *compiler* and *commentator* (“Teoria” 173-191; *Percorsi* 225-226). Examining Vat. lat. 3207, an Occitan songbook compiled in or around Padua between 1275-1300 (Careri xvii), reveals that Dante’s *libello*, or little book, is indebted to the Occitan tradition in its treatment of gender, as well as form. I view the *canzone*

“Donne ch’avete” and the *mise-en-scene* of *VN* 18 as participating in a broader literary trend of using speaking women to vocalize rhetorical and ethical problems, one that can be seen in the moralizing tradition of Guittone, but also in Occitan manuscripts from the Veneto, specifically Vat. lat. 3207.

While it remains impossible to determine whether Dante knew Vat. lat. 3207, scholars such as Jelena Todorović have already established its importance as a precedent for the *Vita nuova*. Vat. lat. 3207’s extended *razo* commentaries, which often gloss lyric texts by inserting them into a narrative, function as “mini” *prosimetra* (Todorović 114) and the manuscript contains a version of the “eaten heart” *razo* of Guilhem de Cabestanh, a narrative referenced in *VN* 3. My analysis of Vat. lat. 3207 focuses specifically on the “collection” of texts attributed to *trobairitz* that bookend the manuscript’s florilegium. Vat. lat. 3207 contains the highest number of *trobairitz* of any extant manuscript, with seven named voices who speak as women.³ In particular, I focus on the exchange of *coblas tensonadas* between two noblewomen, Iseuz de Capion and Almucs de Castelnuou, “Domna N’Almucs, si’us plages” (“Lady Almucs, if it please you” P-C: 20.2/253.1), found only in Vat. lat. 3207 on f.45v and f.46r. These *trobairitz* texts adjoin 3207’s *florilegium* that runs from ff.47v-49r and excerpts the incipits and exordial stanzas of lyrics to create a guide for the would-be lover to seduce or coerce his beloved through verse. The glossing of Occitan lyric in *florilegia* seems to have been particularly prominent in the Italian peninsula and Vat. lat. 3207 contains the oldest extant example of the practice (Kay 73-74).⁴ The position of the *trobairitz* texts, adjacent to the florilegium, invites the reader to consider these speaking women in relation to its glossing of lyric texts. Reading this manuscript, with its gendered lyric glosses and numerous representations of speaking women, alongside Dante’s texts provides an opportunity to recontextualize the poet’s own deployment of gender in his *canzone* “Donne ch’avete” and the reframing it receives in his *libello*.

“Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” provides the *raison d’être* of *VN* 18. Within the context of the *Vita nuova*, the *canzone* “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” inaugurates a new poetics, which Dante ostensibly alludes to later as the “dolce stil novo” (*Purg.* 24.57).⁵ This new poetry has a new ethics: it does not demand reciprocation from the beloved, effectuating what Barolini calls a “theologizing of the troubadour *guerdon*” (“Lyric Past” 23). As Mira Mocan argues, the *canzone* uses the idea of the “intellect of love” to creatively

synthesize elements of affective mysticism, found in the writings of William of Saint-Thierry and Richard of Saint Victor (Mocan 93-94). In doing so, Dante produces a text that dialogues with the Occitan tradition's transposition of mystical rhetoric into lyric, only to go beyond existing models by evading the contractual structure of *fin'amor*, emphasizing instead the "calore dell'*affectus*" ("the warmth of mystical affect"; Mocan 83) and aspiring to the "perfetta fusione fra amante e amato" ("perfect fusion between lover and beloved"; Mocan 86) found in this Latinate tradition. For Stefano Carrai, the *canzone* as it appears in the *Vita nuova* not only contains a prefiguration of Beatrice's death, but inaugurates a "parabola" visible in the *libello's canzoni*, from the euphoric annunciation of Dante's new style to the elegiac "Donna pietosa di novella etate" ("A lady compassionate and young"; *VN* 23.17) to the funeral lament of "Li occhi dolenti per pietà del core" ("The eyes grieving for the heart's pity"; *VN* 31.8) (Carrai 71, 91).

This doctrinal *canzone*, with its scholastically inflected understanding of love, was likely intended for a predominantly male readership (and is frequently read in dialogue with Guido Cavalcanti's "Donna me prega"). Despite the homosocial network amongst which the text would have originally circulated, both the *canzone* itself and the prose that introduces it in the *Vita nuova* present the poem as responding to or addressing women who are "readers," understood in the broadest sense as recipients and addressees of texts, as outlined by Elena Lombardi (3).

To address a *canzone* to an audience of women was not, in itself, an innovation: Alison Cornish has argued that in Cavalcanti's own doctrinal *canzone*, "Donna me prega," a woman is presented as the Aristotelian "efficient cause" of the *canzone's* composition (171). As Pirovano and Grimaldi note, the *congedo* of Chiaro Davanzati's "Da che mi conven fare" ("Since I must do") addresses a group of women, suggesting they discuss the *canzone* amongst themselves and that they "blame" ("biasmate"; line100) his beloved for her "great falseness" ("gran falsitate"; line101) (Alighieri, 2015 408; Davanzati 80). Pirovano and Grimaldi observe that Dante's innovation is to apostrophize an audience of women — plural — in the incipit of the poem, making them the "fulcrum" of the text (Alighieri, 2015, 408). In *Imagining the Women Reader in the Age of Dante*, Elena Lombardi reads the final stanza, or *congedo*, of "Donne ch'avete" as offering a particularly unusual configuration of women, as it stages a personified *canzone*, gendered feminine, which is sent to speak to other women:

'FACCE A PARLAR PRONTE'

Canzone, io so che tu girai parlando
a donne assai, quand'io t'avrò avanzata.
Or t'ammonisco, perch'io t'ho allevata
per figliuola d'Amor giovane e piana,
che là ove giungi tu diche pregando:
'Insegnatemi gir, ch'io son mandata
a quella di cui loda io so' adornata'.
E se non vuoi andar sí come vana,
non restare ove sia gente villana:
ingegnati, se puoi, d'esser palese
solo con donne o con omo cortese,
che ti merranno là per via tostana.
Tu troverai Amor con esso lei;
raccomandami a lui come tu dei.

[Canzone, I know that you will go forth speaking to many ladies, after I will have released you. I now admonish you, since I have nurtured you as a daughter of Love young and forthright, that where you arrive you say, beseeching: 'Teach me the way, for I am sent to her with whose praise I am adorned.'" And if you wish not to go like a useless thing, do not remain where folk are villainous: strive, if you can, to open yourself only to ladies or to men of courtly ways, who will guide you there by the speedier way. You will find Love abiding with her; commend me to him as you should.]

("Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" 57-70)⁶

In her reading of the *congedo*, Lombardi focusses on the use of metaphors of circulation, for instance "girai parlando" ("go forth speaking"; 57), that evoke the notion of the text moving and talking, which Lombardi contrasts with the typical image of the silent courtly Lady (94-95). The *canzone*-as-daughter appears far more strictly feminized, however, than the silent *dompna*, who, as Sarah Kay reminds us, always escapes strict gender binaries by embodying the conventionally masculine qualities of *senhoratge* (Kay, *Subjectivity* 86). Yet, despite marking the *canzone* itself with youthful, feminine naïveté, Dante makes clear that the *canzone*'s women readers remain

associated with the conventional qualities of the *dompna*. In *VN* 19, Dante asserts that he addresses his text to “coloro che sono gentile e che non sono pure femine” (“those who are gentle and not just women”; *VN* 19.1). Although his addressees may be the women residents of urban Florence and therefore not of the court, Dante sets his woman readers apart from others of their gender, evoking the figure of the “Courtly Lady”.

In gendering both text and reader as female, Lombardi claims “Donne ch’avete” participates in an important shift between the Occitan tradition and the Italian tradition:

In the Italian tradition, where music and performance are minimized, and lyric becomes more written, other patterns of envoy are rejected in favor of the personification of the song. [...] the woman as *canzone*. (91)

According to Lombardi, casting the text as female signals its vulnerability, both to scribal interference and to Bad Readers, who threaten the text and its poet, much like the Occitan *lausengier*. This feminine mobility dramatizes textual instability and the anxieties of both oral circulation and manuscript production (92). In this sense, the *canzone*-as-woman “describes a primal state of circulation, fresh out of the author’s pen” (92).

Lombardi reads the personification of text as woman as defining the *congedo*, dramatizing the process of reading by framing sender, text, and recipient as individual, human agents. While such prosopopoeia may be characteristic of the *canzone* in the *lingua del sì*, texts in the *lenga d’oc* frequently literalize this metaphor, using woman as the conduit for dialogue between a lover and a beloved. The exchange of *coblas tensonadas* between Iseuz de Capion and Almucs de Castelnou provides one example of this structure, as the *razo* introducing the first *cobla* from Iseuz demonstrates:

N’iseutz de capion si preget madompna almucs de castelnou
qela p[er]dones an gigo de tornen qera sos cavailers . et avia
faich vas ella gran faillimen . e non sen pentia ni no[n]
demandava perdon. (Vat. lat. 3207, f.45v)

[Lady Iseuz de Capion beseeched Lady Almucs de Castelnou to forgive Gigo de Tornen, who was her knight and had

'FACCE A PARLAR PRONTE'

committed a great fault against her without repenting of it or asking forgiveness for it.]⁷

The *razos* establishes this exchange of *coblas tensonadas* as functioning much like a *partimen*, in that it begins by outlining a problem to be solved: Gigo has not apologized for the wrong he has committed against his beloved. Should Almucs forgive him or not?

In her *cobla*, Iseuz pleads the case for Almucs to show mercy to Gigo (or, Gui), who now “q[u]ier perdon humilmen” [“humbly asks forgiveness”] (line 7; P-C: 20.2/253.1; Bec 124) through the words of Iseuz. The *razo* preceding Almucs’ reply states:

E ma do[m]pna n’almucs la cals volia ben an gigo d[e] torno
si era mout dolenta car el no[n] demandava p[er]don del
fallime[n]. (Vat. lat. 3207, f.45v)

[And my Lady Almucs who cared for Sir Gigo de Tornen was greatly pained because he did not ask for forgiveness for the fault.]⁸

Almucs’ *cobla*, “Domna N’Almucs, si’us plages”, engages with the question of ethical behavior in *fin’amor* by outlining under what circumstances it would be right to forgive Gigo:

Dompna Niseuz si eu saubes
Qel se pentis del engagn
Qel a fait vas mi ta[n] gra[n]
Ben fora dreichz qeu nagues
merces mas a mi nos taing
Pos qe del tort no sa fraing
Nis pentir del faillime[n]
Qe naia mais chausimen
Mas si vos faitz lui pentir
Leu podes mi convertir.

(11-20, P-C: 20.2/253.1)

[Lady Iseuz, if I knew that he regretted the deception so great he committed toward me, indeed it would be right that I should have mercy. But he doesn’t belong to me, since he does not address his wrong nor repent of it, so

that I no longer find joy in him; but if you make him repent, you could happily persuade me.]⁹

Here, naming particularizes the ethical question of blame. Through the use of the *razo* texts to name all the participants in the debate, the lexis of moral and religious culpability “pentis,” (“repent”; 17), “merces,” (“mercy”; 15), “dreichz,” (“right”; 14) which permeates Occitan lyric is taken from the abstracted realm of the courtly *canso* and drawn into the highly specific scenario of one particular woman asking for an apology from one particular man. Almucs makes it clear that if Gigo had made amends for his errors, it would only be right (i.e., it would be her ethical duty) to grant him forgiveness. Yet, as the *razo* and then Almucs herself makes clear (16-17), he has not done so. This exchange contains traits Barolini associates with both the “courtly” and “moralizing approach to women” (“Notes” 363) in the *lingua del sì*: Almucs functions as the courtly “arbiter” of Gigo’s behavior but she must also consider how she herself should ethically respond to the situation. While these *coblas* would hardly pass the Bechdel test, as a *trobairitz*, Almucs clearly is a “user of poetry” in her “own right”, reflecting what Barolini terms the “moralizing” approach, which positions women as “arbiters of themselves” (“Notes” 363).

At the end of the exchange, Almucs positions not Gigo himself but Iseuz as the agent of her former-lover’s redemption; she can convince both Gigo to make his apology and Almucs to accept it, as Elizabeth Wilson Poe observes (19-20; Poe 154). This positioning of a woman as the fulcrum of communication between two lovers recalls the widely circulated *tenso* by Giraut de Bornelh “S’ie’us quier conselh, bela’ amia Alamanda” (“If I ask your advice lovely friend Alamanda” P-C: 12a.1/242.69), where Giraut asks Alamanda for help in persuading his beloved to forgive him. Pistoleta also uses this conceit in “Bona domna, un conseill vos deman” (“Good Lady, I’m requesting some advice”, P-C: 372.4) and, as Poe has noted, Azalais d’Altier’s *salutz d’amor* “Tantas salutz et tants amors” (“So many greetings, so much love” P-C: 42a) stages an intervention for a male lover in a manner very similar to Iseuz (Poe 151, 155).¹⁰ Iseuz, as the go-between, plays the role of the text: she is the vehicle for persuasion, for language. A similar image of two women involved in a persuasive poetic exchange appears as a metaphor in Dante’s “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore.” Lombardi reads the *congedo* of the *canzone* as emphasizing the text’s metaphorical transformation

into a speaking woman, a “Figliuola d’Amor” (“daughter of Love”; 60), who addresses the beloved, “quella di cui loda io so’ adornata” (“her with whose praise I am adorned”; 64). While in “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” the feminine personification of the *canzone* becomes the agent of persuasion, Iseuz embodies this image, as a literal speaking woman and fulcrum of communication.

Before it was encased in the prose of the *Vita nuova*, “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” circulated independently, and the women to whom the *canzone* is addressed were not so precisely defined.¹¹ The *canzone* was taken as an invitation to dialogue by the composer of “Ben aggia l’amoroso et dolce chore (“Blessed be that love-filled and sweet heart”), who responds in the voice of the same “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” addressed by Dante. The many Occitanisms in “Ben aggia” (“Blessed be”) lead Grimaldi to categorize its poet as from the Guittonian old guard (Alighieri, 2015, 424). Both Grimaldi and Steinberg suggest the *canzone* was likely penned before Dante used “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” as the inauguration of a new poetics in the *Vita nuova*; in fact, Steinberg argues that this early reading of the text may have influenced Dante’s later reframing of the *canzone* (Alighieri, 2015, 423; Steinberg 82). Regardless of whether the text influenced Dante’s reframing of “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore”, the poet of “Ben aggia”, known simply as the “Amico di Dante” after the rubric in Vatican Latin 3793 (hence: Vat. lat. 3793), places Dante’s *canzone* in dialogue with an Occitan trend for using speaking women as poetic messengers.

As Justin Steinberg notes, “Ben aggia” participates in Vat. lat. 3793’s interest in debate genres between men and women, as evidence by the manuscript’s compilation of numerous *contrast*i and *tenzoni fittizie*, including two *tenzoni fittizie* by Guittone (69). Vat. lat. 3207 shares this interest in dialogue, compiling a large number of “parodic *tenzos*”, as the fourteenth-century, Lombard-made anthologies **G** and **Q** would later do (Burgwinkle 256, 261).¹² “Ben aggia” marks itself as in dialogue with “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” by replicating the text’s meter and rhyme-scheme. Such formal imitations, or *contrafacta*, in the feminine-voice were common in Occitan tradition and Iseuz and Almucs’ exchange provides one example, as Elizabeth Wilson Poe has suggested that their text is a *contrafactum* of “Anc enemies qu’eu agues” (P-C: 457.3; Poe 154) by Uc de Saint Circ, the troubadour known as the compiler/composer of troubadour *vidas* (Meneghetti 245; Burgwinkle 259).¹³

“Ben aggia” stages the same kind of intercession on the behalf of the beloved as found in “Domna N’Almucs” (“Lady Almucs”). The final lines (11-14) of the first stanza outline the pleas for mercy that will be made by the women speakers:

sicché di noi chatuna il dritto istile
 terrà, preghando ongnora dolçemente
 lei chui s’è dato, quando fia cho noi
 ch’abbia merçé di lui chogli atti suoi.

(“Ben aggia” 11-14)

[Because of this, each one of us, maintaining the proper style, will always, whenever she is among us, sweetly beseech the lady to whom he is pledged that she may show mercy to him with her acts].¹⁴

As Steinberg observes, within the *Vita nuova* itself, Dante would correct his previous self-serving desire to possess his beloved by addressing Beatrice as “Nostra donna” (“our lady”) instead of “donna mia” (“my lady”; Steinberg 89). In “Ben aggia,” however, the women speakers position themselves as the fulcrum of communication between the lover and the (de-theologized) beloved. Just as in the Occitan exchanges that use women as go-betweens and intercessors for their beloved, the women speakers of “Ben aggia” take on the role that an *envoi/congedo* might otherwise fulfil in a *canso/canzone*, expanding that conceit to occupy the entire text. To borrow a formulation of Lombardi’s, if, in the *congedo* of “Donne ch’avete,” the text speaks as a woman, in “Ben aggia” and the Occitan texts that inform it, women speak as text (78).

In *VN* 18, Dante restages the moment of initial composition and circulation of “Donne ch’avete,” allowing the *canzone* to become, as Justin Steinberg notes, “a turning point in the poet’s career as well as a crucial point of self-definition” (Steinberg 61). Scholars frequently consider gender a device that signals the singularity of Dante’s poetic innovation. Steinberg reads the “female audience of the *Vita nuova*” as “crucial” in demonstrating Dante’s “shift from an individualistic, ego-driven poetry” (88). Gorni reads the presence of women in this episode as signaling the poet’s unique understanding of Love, playing on “L’intuizione femminile piú sottile, il riconoscimento quasi profetico di un amore *novissimo*” (“the subtlest feminine intuition,

the almost prophetic recognition of an extremely new kind of love” (Alighieri, 1996, 256; qtd. in Alighieri, 2015, 154). I suggest, however, that while his formulation of a new praise-style may be unprecedented, Dante’s deployment of gender in the *mise-en-scene* of this episode is not entirely unparalleled.

VN 18 begins with Dante walking by a group of women on the streets of Florence. One of the women in the group, sometimes referred to as the “Florentine Muse” (Barolini, *Poets* 43), questions Dante in her “molto leggiadro parlare” [“graceful way of speaking”] (*VN* 18.2) and asks him what he gets out of loving Beatrice, when he cannot bear to be in her presence (*VN* 18.3). This prompts Dante’s assertion that his beatitude lies not in the reciprocation of love but in the “parole che lodano la donna mia” [“words that praise my lady”] (*VN* 18.6). Dante’s interlocutor questions this: “Se tu ne dicessi vero, quelle parole che tu n’hai dette in notificando la tua condizione, avrestú operate con altro intendimento” [“If you were speaking the truth to us, those words you have said to us in making known your condition you would have used with another purpose”] (*VN* 18.7). Shamed, the Dante of the prose narrative asks himself: “Poi che è tanta beatitudine in quelle parole che lodano la mia donna, perché altro parlare è stato lo mio?” [“Since so much beatitude lies in those words that praise my lady, why have other words been mine?”] (*VN* 18.9). The suggestion of an unethical rhetorical deception on Dante’s part is what prompts him to redress his ethical and poetic failings by authoring the *canzone* “Donne ch’avete.”

VN 18 centers around a group of women, sometimes known as the *coro femminile*, the “feminine chorus,” implying that they speak as one voice through the figure of the so-called “Florentine Muse.”¹⁵ Unlike the allegorical Muses or Boethius’ Lady Philosophy, the woman who speaks to Dante and her companions is embedded within the chronology of the prose narrative, recognizing Dante from previous social occasions, appearing in the context of the Florentine cityscape. The critical homogenization of the women as a “chorus” emphasizes Dante’s depiction of them as a group but minimizes the words they exchange with each other. On first encountering them, Dante introduces the reader to these “certe donne, le quali adunate s’erano diletlandosi l’una ne la compagnia dell’altra” [“certain ladies who had gathered to enjoy each other’s company”] (*VN* 18.1). Dante relates that once he had answered their first question “queste donne cominciaro a parlare tra loro” [“these ladies began conversing amongst themselves”] (*VN* 18.5). They discuss his response, their

words and sighs comparable to rain mixed with snow (*VN* 18.5), before asking Dante, through the Florentine Muse, from where he derives his “beatitudine” [“beatitude”] (*VN* 18.6). The staging of this group allows Dante to briefly represent, if not report, a conversation between women about Dante’s conduct as a lover and poet.

Like the women of *VN* 18, Iseuz and Almucs debate the conduct of a lover amidst a group of speaking women. Vat. lat. 3207 groups *trobairitz* texts around the manuscript’s *florilegium* and creates what John H. Marshall describes as “une petite collection d’oeuvres de *trobairitz*” [“a small collection of *trobairitz* works”] (Marshall 403). The “collection” begins with the anonymous *cobla* “Deus sal la terra el pa” [“God save the land and the [country/palace]”] (P-C: 461.81), possibly taken from a larger text which no longer survives in its entirety (Bec 112). The author of the text is not given in a rubric, nor does the language of the text reveal the gender of the speaker, but the miniature accompanying the text depicts a woman religious, implying that she is the speaker of the text. Below is a *razo* attributing the following *cobla*, possibly part of a *salutz d’amors*, to Na Tibors, who the *razo* describes as a Lady from Provence, “for maistra” [“well-educated”], “cortesa” [“courtly”], “Mout tesmuda e mout obedida” [“greatly feared and much obeyed”] (Bec 109). At the end of the *florilegium*, on f.49v, we find the only *trobairitz canso* of the manuscript, the Comtessa de Dia’s “Ab joi et ab joven m’apais” (P-C: 46.1). This effectively creates a cluster of women speaking about love, in which Iseuz and Almucs address each other.

These *trobairitz* texts (and only *trobairitz* texts) are accompanied by miniatures showing the speakers as noblewomen (Jullian 7; Rieger 391). It is in this compilatory feature that the echoes between Vat. lat. 3207 and *VN* 18-19 resound: by creating this “collection” of white, wealthy and/or noble speaking women, who are “users of poetry in their own right” (Barolini “Notes” 363), Vat. lat. 3207 effectively presents a selection of “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore”, a group of readers for Dante’s *canzone*, as resembling those described in *VN* 19, their illuminated faces ready to speak. The women of Florence *mises en scène* in *VN* 18, in essence, mirror the *trobairitz mises en page* in Vat. lat. 3207.

If the compilation of Vat. lat. 3207 demonstrates the extent to which the *mis-en-scène* of *VN* 18 imitates representations of speaking women found in the book-culture of the late thirteenth century, the manuscript’s *florilegium* demonstrates Dante’s ethical innovation.

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Dante posits an ethical problem in *VN* 18, namely an expectation of reward, or *guerdon*, from his beloved, and then frames it as an aesthetic one that centers around his poetics. Barolini describes the *Vita nuova* as a text where “aesthetic praxis is viewed as a function of ethical commitment” and sees “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” [“Ladies who have intelligence of love”] as the prime example of this connection between poetics and ethics (*Poets* 42). Vat. lat. 3207’s *florilegium*, which runs from ff.47v-49r, presents a conventional understanding of the object of *fin’amor*: the *dompnas* favor and the *guerdon*. Yet, in certain respects, it echoes Dante’s own thoughts on love, for instance, that *fin’amor* rests on individual merit rather than merit bestowed by material wealth (f.48v):

Qestas coblas deuen mandar li paubre amador alas gentils
ricas domnas. Qant los an tetengutz p[er]servidor. mostran
com lo paubres amics grazir plus honors qel rics ecom
finamors no[n] garda ricors. mas valor. e bontat e cortesia . e
bella captene[n]sa. (Vat. lat. 3207, f.48v)

[These stanzas the poor lover must send to the noble, rich lady. When they have taken them as a servant, they show how the poor lover pleases with more honor than the rich man, and how *fin’amors* does not take account of wealth but worth and generosity and courtesy and fine manners].¹⁶

This rubric echoes the sentiments of Dante’s *canzone* “Le dolci rime d’amor ch’i’ solia” (“The tender rhymes of love” *Convivio* IV), in which the poet decries those who associate nobility with wealth, and the sonnet that follows “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” in *VN* 20.3, “Amore e’l cor gentil sono una cosa” (“Love and the gentle heart are one thing”).¹⁷

Yet, Vat. lat. 3207’s *florilegium* does not project an egalitarian or pro-feminine understanding of *fin’amor*, despite the number of women represented elsewhere in the manuscript. As Kay observes (*Parrots* 417 n.24), Vat. lat. 3207’s *florilegium* proves highly “antifeminist,” introducing its excerpts with rubrics such as: “Aqesta cobla repre[n] las dompnas q[ue] no uolen los ualenz fins amics” (“this stanza reproaches Ladies who do not want worthy, fine lovers” f.48r); “Aestas coblas son bonas ad home qes iratz co[n] sua dompna a la desauentura [et] al tort dela” (“these stanzas are good for the man who is angry with his lady, at the hardship she causes and her wrongs”

f.48v). The following commentary on f.49r glosses extracts from a *canso* by Folquet de Marselha

Aqesta coblas mostran qe las grans autas do[m]pnas no creson poder fallir. E si mostra co[m] lo faillmen d[e] la dompna es maier qe cel de la bassa. Qaisi con il es grans de ricor aissi es grans lo faillimens. e si co[m] ella ual pauc es pauc la faillida. e qi p[er]dona la pena lo blasme no po p[er]donar.

(P-C:155,16; Careri, 315):

[These *coblas* show that great, high Ladies do not believe that they can be at fault. And it shows how the faults of the [high-born] Lady is greater than that of the low-born one. That in this way, as great as is his wealth, so is his failing equally as large. And just as she is worth little, so is her failing. And whosoever pardons the hurt, cannot pardon the blame].¹⁸

This gloss defines the stakes of *fin'amor* as gendered and differing by social rank. It leverages Folquet's lines against aristocratic women and implies that a whole social category of women has failed to live up to the ideals of *fin'amor* by breaking its transactional framework, namely by withholding the *guerdon* that a lover (particularly the compiler of Vat. lat. 3207), feels he deserves. Book-ending a *florilegium* focused on the seduction of women with *trobairitz* texts only re-enforces the connection between Iseuz and Almuc's debate, so concerned with ethical responsibility for questionable behavior, and the ethical burden that the compiler confers upon noble women. The *florilegium* reminds us that noblewomen have a stake in the ethics of *fin'amor* because they are not only subjects of praise but also of blame, constructed from the misogynistic structure of *fin'amor*. Vat. lat. 3207's *florilegium* establishes a paradoxical ethical burden for them: noblewomen, like the manuscript's *trobairitz*, or the addressees of Dante's *canzone*, are expected to have an increased "understanding" of love because of their rank. Yet, precisely because of this rank, they belong to the very category of women the compiler sees as likely to fail in perceiving their own flaws and, therefore, in granting the *guerdon*. In failing to grant the expected reward, these women supposedly break the transactional conventions of *fin'amor*.

This moment in the *florilegium* throws Dante's innovation in VN 18 into sharp relief. In "Donne ch'avete", Dante dramatizes the

same fantasy of the unfailing Lady, who does not fall short of the expectations of *fin'amor* in failing to grant the *guerdon*, by translating Beatrice into a woman "disiata in sommo cielo," ("desired in highest heaven"; "Donne ch'avete" line 29). Hence, for Barolini, the *canzone* marks Dante's emancipation from Cavalcantian poetics and the "total emancipation from the Provençal *guerdon*" (*Poets* 42). By adopting his new praise style, through his "poetics of sublimation" (Barolini *Poets* 43), Dante suggests that to see the beloved as "failing" reflects not an error in her conduct, but a failure of poetic practice.

Figures of speaking women both articulate and question the structures of *fin'amor* and its ethical burdens, be it Almucs defending her right to an apology, or the Florentine Muse questioning Dante's own ethics in *VN* 18. Both the compilation of Vat. lat. 3207 and the staging of *VN* 18 situate these speaking women within larger groups, exchanging words with other women. Dante puts the rhetoric of blame in the mouth of a speaking woman to denounce his ethics as a poet and lover, such that shame (*VN* 18.8) then becomes the productive emotion behind his love poetry. Almucs, too, shames her own beloved through her words to be transmitted by Iseuz. This makes speaking women convenient vehicles for reflection and innovation in medieval poetic discourse — an opportunity that the author of "Ben aggia" may have failed to appreciate, but one that Dante seized upon when redefining "Donne ch'avete" in the prose of *VN* 18.

Considering Vatican Latin 3207 alongside the *canzone* "Donne ch'avete" suggests that gendered conventions and aesthetic expectations surrounding speaking women circulated in the book cultures of medieval Italy, shaping the way readers encountered both Occitan and Italian texts. The echoes of the conventions used to represent speaking women in Vat. lat. 3207 within the *Vita nuova* demonstrate the impact of these gendered aesthetics in both traditions. This reminds us that Dante was not alone in representing "ladies who have understanding of love," as the Florentine women of *VN* 18 and the illuminated miniatures of the *trobairitz* in Vat. lat. 3207 look back at us from the page with "facce a parlar pronte," faces ready to speak.

NOTES

¹ *Coblas* are units of verse equivalent to stanzas, and are frequently exchanged in poetic dialogue, when they are known as *coblas tensonadas*. To view 3207 online, see Works Cited.

² All Italian citations from the *Vita nuova* and associated lyrics are taken from 2015 edition by Pirovano and Grimaldi. All English translations from the *Vita nuova* are taken from the 1995 edition by Dino S. Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Alighieri 1995). Italian edition and English translation of “Ben aggia” are taken from Steinberg (2007).

³ Alamanda, f. 37v, Almucs de Castelnou, f.45v (miniature on f.46r), Comtessa de Dia, f.49v, Iseuz de Capion, f.45v, Lombarda, f.43v, Maria de Ventadorn, f.53r (plus “Dieus sal la terra e.l pais”, which remains unattributed but appears in the *trobairitz* section of the manuscript next to a miniature depicting a woman), Tibors, f.45r, plus fragments of a *canso* (P-C:43,1) by Azalais de Porcairages that appear, without attribution, on f.46r and f.57r, giving a total of eight *trobairitz* texts. Additionally, Caudairenga appears as a *trobairitz* in the *razo* of Raimon de Miraval, 20r.

⁴ The following songbooks contain florilegia: **Cm**, **Dc**, **Fa**, **G**, **H**, **J**, **N**, **P**, **Q**, and **T**. Only **J** was not made in Italy (Kay 75). These sigla refer to sections of the following manuscripts: **Cm** = Castagnolo Minore, Archivio Parrocchiale; **Dc** = Modena, Biblioteca Estense α, R.4.4; **Fa** = Rome, Vatican Chigi L.IV.106; **G** = Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana R 71 sup.; **H** = Rome, Vatican Latin 3207; **J** = Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Conv. Sopp. F.IV.776; **N** = New York, Pierpont Morgan 819; **P** = Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana XLI.42; **Q** = Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana 2909; **T** = Paris, BnF fonds français 15211.

⁵ Bonagiunta’s speech at *Purg.* 24.55-57 has been edited and interpreted differently. While in *Dante’s Poets* Barolini (85) reads line 57 as “di qua dal dolce stil novo ch’i’ odo!”, following the Petrocchi edition, Federico Sanguineti, in his 2001 critical edition of the *Commedia* (Alighieri, *Comedia* 321) gives: “di qua dal dolce stil! e il novo ch’io odo!”, thereby breaking apart the notion of the “stilnovo”, a term that does not appear in other manuscripts of the time and did not draw much attention from early commentators. For a summary of this debate and other textual variants see Cipollone (105-109).

⁶ For Italian, see Alighieri, 2015, 420-421; for English translation, see Alighieri, 1995, 85.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all transcriptions and translation of quoted Vat. lat. 3207 passages in this study are my own. For critical edition including French translation, see: Bec, 121.

⁸ Transcription and translation my own. See Bec, 121 for critical edition including French translation.

⁹ Transcription and translation my own. See Bec, 124 for critical edition including French translation.

¹⁰ For editions and English translations see Bruckner, Sherpard and White 37-41, 48-52, 112-115.

¹¹ The *Vita nuova* itself makes several references to contemporary practices of circulating poetry. Dante recounts in *VN* 3 that recipients of “A ciascun alma presa” (“To every captive soul”, translation my own) offered some infelicitous interpretations, perhaps the most well-known of which is Dante da Maiano’s “Di ciò che sei stato dimandatore” (“Regarding what you asked about”, Maiano 57, translation my own). Steinberg’s argument implies that, in “Ben aggia”, Dante once

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again faced a respondent who offered a misguided interpretation of his work—this time, a canzone, rather than a sonnet. “Donne ch’avete” appears to have had a wide circulation as independent text, outside the *Vita nuova*, including in Bologna where, as Steinberg notes, in 1293, a notary named Pietro Allegranza included stanzas of “Donne ch’avete” in his notarial register, or *memoriale* (now designed *Mem.* 82, Steinberg 18).

¹² This trend applies to *trobairitz* texts too: Bossy and Jones have argued the compilation of *trobairitz* texts in the Venetian manuscript N (Pierpont Morgan 819) reflects the compilers reading “the female *canso* through the lens of the *tenso*” (273).

¹³ For an overview of the debate on the authorship of the *vidas* and *razos* of the see Todorović, 112.

¹⁴ For Italian transcription and English translation, see Steinberg 73, 75.

¹⁵ For the term “Florentine Muse”, see: Barolini, *Poets*, 43; Donato Pirovano and Marco Grimaldi use the term “coro femminile” in their 2015 edition (Alighieri, 2015, 153).

¹⁶ Transcription and translation my own. For critical edition, see: Careri, 293-318.

¹⁷ “Riprovando ‘l giudicio falso e vile | di quei che voglion che di gentilezza | sia principio ricchezza” (lines 15-17), “Le dolci rime d’amor ch’i’ solia”, (Alighieri 216; *Convivio* IV).

¹⁸ Transcription and translation my own. For critical edition, see: Careri, 315.

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Dante, Lady Poverty, and the Donation of Constantine¹

Few themes are as persistently recurrent and as obsessively repeated in Dante's work as the condemnation of church corruption, which he considers the cause for all political malaise and social affliction in his contemporary society. It is the church's wealth, in Dante's view, that originates its political power and is the cause of the deplorable situation of the Italian peninsula, split as it is in a myriad of tiny states fighting each other and being unable to unify under a strong empire that could compete with France. The event that Dante considers at the root of this endemic problem in European politics is the Donation of Constantine.²

In his work, and particularly in the *Comedy*, Dante speaks repeatedly, almost compulsively, about the Donation of Constantine as constituting the stumbling block for all possibilities of solving Italy's problems. In the Malebolge, he explodes in an invective against it:

Ahi, Costantin, di quanto mal fu matre,
non la tua conversion, ma quella dote
che da te prese il primo ricco patre!

[Ah, Constantine, what wickedness was born—
and not from your conversion—from the dower
that you bestowed upon the first rich father!]
(*Inf.* 19.115-117)³

In the third pouch of the eighth circle among the fraudulent souls, Dante places the simoniac popes, those who corrupted the church by selling and buying ecclesiastical privileges, sacraments, and absolutions; they are buried head down in small holes in the ground that are a parody of baptismal fonts, and are also a reminder that in Dante's time the capital punishment for murderers was to be buried alive head down. The similarity seems to indicate that, precisely like murderers kill their fellow humans, the higher clergy is guilty of assassinating the church with their wrongdoing.

Dante refers to the Donation again in *Purgatorio* 32, when the greediness of ecclesiastics is attributed to the church's legitimation, which stopped its persecutions, but allowed it to acquire the power that corrupted its original spirit:

VETTORI

Poscia per indi ond' era pria venuta,
l'aguglia vidi scender giù nell'arca
del carro e lasciar lei di sé pennuta;
e qual esce di cuor che si rammarca,
tal voce uscì del cielo e cotal disse:
«O navicella mia, com' mal se' carica!»

[Then I could see the eagle plunge—again
down through the tree—into the chariot
and leave it feathered with its plumage; and,
just like a voice from an embittered heart,
a voice issued from Heaven, saying this:
“O my small bark, your freight is wickedness!”]
(*Purg.* 32.124-129)

The Donation becomes synonymous with corruption of the church and Dante refers to it again when he evokes Constantine in the Heaven of Mercury in *Paradiso* 6.1-6 and again in the Heaven of Jupiter, when he sees Constantine in the eye of the allegorical eagle in *Paradiso* 20.55-60. He is always careful to separate the virtues of the emperor who legitimized Christianity from the mistake he made of endowing the church with money, land, and power, but his condemnation of this wrongful action is unmitigated.

Because the Donation of Constantine has mysterious origins and a very complicated history, it is important to highlight how it came about and developed.⁴ What we commonly identify as the “Donation of Constantine” is a document officially known as the *Constitutum Constantini*, which was readily available to churchmen throughout the Middle Ages in any copy of Gratian’s *Decretum*, at Chapter 14 of the 96th Distinction. The *Decretum* is the first comprehensive and systematic compilation of Canon Law that Gratian put together in the twelfth century to collect and organize all the laws and regulations the church had accumulated over the twelve centuries of its history. The *Constitutum Constantini* that became part of the *Decretum* is a short book, a first-person narrative, that doesn’t quite look or sound like a juridical document; it is a quasi-hagiographical text, in which the Emperor Constantine himself (272-337 CE) offers a personalized—and, quite clearly, a fictional—version of his own conversion and baptism. The Emperor writes that, when he was sick with leprosy, the pagan priests attempted to cure him by making him bathe in the blood of innocent infants, but he refused these barbaric

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practices in horror, accepting instead to consult Pope Sylvester, who cured him by simply immersing him in a pool of water three times. Touched by the miracle of being healed, Constantine converted to Christianity and was baptized. As a gesture of gratitude for his restored physical health and for the salvation of his soul, Constantine donated Rome and the western half of the Roman Empire to the pope; he also handed over to Sylvester the imperial insignia, including scepter, lance, orb, and various other *ornamenta*, and declared the pope the leader of the western empire. In the text, Constantine finally announces the foundation of a new city named Constantinople after himself, which he will adopt as the new capital of the empire, because it would not be appropriate for the emperor and the pope to share the same location. Subsequently, he leaves Rome to the pope and moves to Constantinople. This is the account offered in the booklet.

Historians have later reconstructed the facts on the basis of other sources. Finding himself at the crucial moment of transition from paganism to Christianity, Constantine, as the astute and pragmatic politician that he was, saw all the advantages of making Christianity legal; he allowed it to spread widely and become the main unifying element for the empire (especially in the west, where Christians were still a minority). He sympathized with it and even presided over the Council of Nicaea in 325, when the bishops came together to determine important dogmas of the faith and decry heretical movements. However, he never actually converted until the end of his life, when he was baptized shortly before dying, as was customary for many Christians at the time. Because of his role in history as the first Christian emperor, who turned Christianity from the persecuted sect of a minority to a tolerated religion of the empire, throughout the Middle Ages Constantine was hailed a saintly figure who allowed the gospel to spread in a reunified and thriving empire. That is also why he was the perfect candidate for the role of writer of the *Constitutum*, the booklet also known as the Donation of Constantine.

The Donation itself would have happened at the beginning of the fourth century, after Christianity had been recently declared a legal religion with the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, and the newly proclaimed legitimate church can assume an even more important role in the social and political life of the empire. The Edict of Milan is viewed as the beginning of the Roman church's political and temporal power, which up to now had been purely spiritual. Moreover, Constantine's submission to the Pope is later considered the origin of the papal

crowning of kings and emperors and the emperors' and kings' subordination to the Pope throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.

Dante considers Constantine's Donation to be at the origin of church corruption; he rages and rants against the *Constitutum*, calling it an illegitimate document, even though he considers it authentic. When discussing the division of powers between Empire and Papacy in *De monarchia* 3.10.5, he quotes Aristotle's *Ethics* and claims with impeccable logic that, in order for any donation to be legitimate, two conditions need to be met: 1) the donor needs to have the authority and power to donate something; and 2) the receiver must be authorized to receive it. He also shows clearly that the emperor doesn't have the authority and power to donate any part of the empire, for it is his duty to administer and manage it, but he doesn't own it, so he cannot dispose of it as his possession. Similarly, the pope is a spiritual leader, not a political leader, so he doesn't have the authority to receive land and wealth (Alighieri 345).

Even in the middle of a highly philosophical and political argumentation involving the division of powers between the Pope and the Emperor, Dante was thinking about the importance for the church to remain poor and pure, when, in the same passage of *De monarchia*, he quotes the gospel of Matthew 10:9-10, "nolite possidere aurum neque argentum neque pecuniam in zonis vestris, non peram in viam neque duas tunicas neque calciamenta neque virgam / dignus enim est operarius cibo suo," "provide yourselves with no gold or silver, not even with coppers for your purses, with no haversack for your journey or spare tunic or footwear or a staff, for the laborer deserves his keep" (*The New Jerusalem Bible* 1624). Just to reinforce Christ's command to keep the precept of poverty, Dante also quotes the parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke 22:35-36. Interestingly, he opposes the validity of the Donation by quoting sacred scripture; he eschews the argumentations of political and ecclesiastical leaders who mix Christianity with worldly affairs and goes straight to the source of the Christian message.

Dante blames the Donation of Constantine for the church's transformation from a spiritual institution, purified by persecutions and rendered alive by internal and external tribulations, into a political entity that was corrupted by its constant dealings with power and money. What Dante didn't know, and could not know at the beginning of the fourteenth century, is that the Donation of Constantine is a fake document that was fabricated approximately three centuries after Constantine, when the King of France wanted to

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protect the papacy from Lombard invasions and drafted this document to show that the territories in central Italy actually belonged to the papacy and could not be taken over by the Lombards. It was not Constantine who donated land and riches to Pope Sylvester, as the fake document stipulates, but it was instead Pepin the Short, the King of the Franks, who donated his lands to Pope Stephen II in approximately 755 CE in an act that is known as the Donation of Pepin. The forgery was discovered in the fifteenth century and the Donation was disproved at first by Nicholas of Cusa on theological grounds and then—and even more convincingly—by Lorenzo Valla on philological grounds.

Dante didn't have the theological, the philological or the historical knowledge to prove that the Donation was false, but he showed that logically, even though for him it was authentic, it was nevertheless illegitimate; he also realized that such an act unleashes all kinds of theological and political complications, as, for example, the clash between earthly and heavenly power, the pope's authority as deriving from the emperor and not vice versa, and it is also in stark opposition to Christ's mandate for the foundation of a heavenly kingdom that is very different from an earthly kingdom. That is why Dante considers it to be at the root of all church corruption and involvements with the secular world and condemns it repeatedly in his writings.

While considering the negative repercussions of wealth and possessions on the history of the church, Dante is also concerned with the issue of managing money more in general, both for the clergy and for secular people, and he makes a point of condemning excessive saving and extravagant spending in Hell and also in Purgatory. In Hell the poet places Plutus, the Greek god of riches, as guardian of the avaricious and the prodigal in the Fourth Circle, and he calls him "il gran nemico," "the great enemy" (*Inf.* 6.115). These souls are punished by having to roll heavy weights in opposite directions to confirm their commitment to burdensome and oppressive possessions in their earthly lives; Virgil explains to Dante that these souls, "con misura nullo spendio ferci" ("no spending that they did was done with measure"; 42), so now they are damned to shout at each other "Perché tieni?", "why do you hoard?" and "Perché burli?" ("why do you squander?"; 30), as part of their *contrapasso*. This sin originates in excessiveness and the text insists on the sinners' lack of control and measure in administering their money. The concept of *misura* is the vernacular expression for Aristotle's idea of continence, which these

souls clearly lack, as does their guardian Plutus, whose monstrosity contrasts Aristotelian logic and introduces the incontinence of the avaricious and the prodigal (see *Commento Baroliniano*).

I believe the direct reference here is to the culture of money in Dante's time that allowed excessive accumulation of wealth, but also excessive spending. Interestingly, Dante remarks that the majority of these sinners are clerics. This is the case also in Purgatory, where the avaricious and the prodigal are condemned to lie facing downward and stare at the floor of the Fifth Ledge of the Purgatorial Mountain, with their hands and feet tied down, to signify their love for material things during their life on earth. Pope Adrian V confesses to Dante that his most excruciating suffering is caused by being unable to look upward toward God, but still having to look down at the earth, whose possessions caused him to sin (*Purg.* 19.88-145).

In Dante's world, however, the most egregious sin related to money is usury. Having been raised in Florence during the second half of the thirteenth century, Dante had witnessed the radical change from an agricultural and manufacturing economy to the culture of commerce and money that had been established by few families that had accumulated immense wealth through banking. That explains how his condemnation of monetary accumulation in the hands of few people is unmitigated. In *Inferno* 17, the usurers suffer a particularly harsh punishment under a rain of fire, together with the other violent against God, the blasphemers and the sinners against nature, in the third ring of the Seventh Circle. Dante blames their "sùbiti guadagni" ("quick gains"; *Inf.* 16.73), their desire to make money quickly, and the expression he uses is in line with a contemporary interpretation of usury as a sin related to time. Usury was a grave sin and corresponded to what is known in contemporary society as loansharking, a process that has been normalized with the banking system, which has made lending money for interest a common and acceptable practice. Initially, usury was directly related to the rise of mercantile exchange, because any merchant was in need of cash and needed to borrow it from somewhere. The only difference between a goods merchant and a usurer, in Jacques Le Goff's opinion, is that the goods merchant deals with merchandise of some sort, while the usurer only moves money around (Le Goff 25-52).

The condemnation of usury is biblical and occurs in Genesis 3:17-19, but it is also in Aristotle's *Physics*, as Virgil reminds Dante in *Inferno* 11. Nature is God's creation and art is mankind's creation, argues Dante's Virgil, so that art becomes God's granddaughter. As

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instructed by God, women and men are supposed to earn their living with the sweat of their brow, working the earth or laboring in art, and, while even commerce involves some form of laboring, usury is instead all based on lending money and waiting for it to grow interest; it is its profitable inertia and lucrative apathy that make it sinful. That is why the *Tabula exemplorum*, the thirteenth-century collection of moral tales and proverbial wisdom, states that “usurers were bandits (*latrones*) because they sold time, which did not belong to them” (Le Goff 35). In medieval spirituality, time belonged to God alone and it was offered as a gift to human beings so they could employ it to save themselves; that is why using time to make money is considered sinful. In iconographic representations of the late Middle Ages, usurers are depicted on their deathbed with a pouch or a small bag hanging from their neck or from their waist, which contained the money they had unlawfully earned in life and were now asked to give back. This is exactly how Dante portrays the usurers, who sit under the rain of fire, which is the common punishment for all the violent against God, and they carry a pouch hanging from their neck; they do nothing and seem to be simply waiting, in the same way that in their lives they had waited for their money to grow interest. The Poet Dante goes even a step further, however.

In *Inferno* 17, the Pilgrim Dante looks at the emblems the usurers hold on their chests and, thanks to the family’s coat-of-arms depicting various animals (the lion, the goose, the sow), he meticulously identifies their families as having degenerated their aristocratic standing with lucrative but demeaning monetary transactions as usurers. The poet clearly intends to blemish them and smear their names in public. He condemns loansharking but also, more generally, the greedy behavior of those who have abandoned courtly virtues and noble attitudes for a culture solely centered on money. Although he died too early to see the fortunes of the Bardi, the Peruzzi, and the Acciaiuoli rise and acquire fame through banking, thereby making Florence rich and a center of international finance in the fourteenth century, Dante did however witness and condemn the money-lending activities of the Florentine Gianfigliuzzi and the Obriachi, and also of the Scrovegni of Padova (*Inf.* 17.58-66). It has been argued that usury was also a practice the Alighieri family may have been implicated in, so the poet’s feelings against this sin are particularly strong (Barbero 91-93).

If wealth is synonymous with political power and corruption, Dante indicates he believed in a poor Church, for poverty equaled

purity. The debate on Church poverty goes back at least two centuries before Dante's time, when Bernard Clairvaux preached in favor of poverty as the main reforming strategy for his religious order, the Cistercians, and against the accumulation of land and riches in the style of other Benedictine foundations. One example is the Monastery of Cluny, which was the largest and most powerful in Europe until the beginning of the twelfth century; from an economic point of view Cluny relied heavily on rents, tithes, feudal rights, as well as pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela, who were charged a toll by the monastery in order to pass through its territories. On the contrary, the renewed Cistercian application of the rule of poverty obliged monks to simply work the land in order to support themselves. With Saint Bernard as their main proponent and advocate, the Cistercians implemented a return to agricultural labor, which was the original means of sustenance for Benedictine monks, as stipulated in St. Benedict's rule; growing their own food made them independent of all the monetary exchanges and financial transactions that Cluniac life depended on. Cistercians made their living from the sweat of their brow, not by piling up money and riches, to use Dante's semantics when he condemns usurers. The contrast between the Cluniac monasteries and the Cistercian reformation will culminate with the Cistercians supplanting the Cluniacs as the most important religious order at the end of the twelfth century (Rapley 23-28). Dante's stand in relation to these two orders is clear in the condemnation of Cluny in *Inferno* 23, where the hypocrites of the sixth pouch in the eighth circle wear long cloaks resembling those donned by the monks at Cluny:

Là giù trovammo una gente dipinta
 che giva intorno assai con lenti passi,
 piangendo e nel sembiante stanca e vinta.
 Elli avean cappe con cappucci bassi
 dinanzi a li occhi, fatte de la taglia
 che in Clugnì per li monaci fassi.
 Di fuor dorate son, sì ch'elli abbaglia;
 ma dentro tutte piombo, e gravi tanto,
 che Federigo le mettea di paglia.
 Oh in eterno faticoso manto!

[Below that point we found a painted people,
 who moved about with lagging steps, in circles,

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weeping, with features tired and defeated.
And they were dressed in cloaks with cowls so low
they fell before their eyes, of that same cut
that's used to make the clothes for Cluny's monks.
Outside, these cloaks were gilded and they dazzled;
but inside they were all of lead, so heavy
that Frederick's capes were straw compared to them.
A tiring mantle for eternity!]

(*Inf.* 23.58-67)

Completely opposed to the hypocritical Cluniac monks evoked so far down in Hell is Dante's portrayal of the Cistercian Saint Bernard Clairvaux, whose role as the third guide for the Pilgrim Dante in the *Comedy* testifies to his importance in the poet's spiritual panorama. He picks up from Beatrice and leads the Pilgrim in heaven all the way to the vision of the Trinity, no doubt because he wrote a fundamental theological treatise on the Virgin Mary, and his prayer to Mary in *Paradiso* 33 will allow him the necessary intercession to disclose the door of the Trinity for Dante. I would also argue, however, that Bernard is assigned this crucial role because of his indefatigable work as reformer of the Benedictine Order, the Cistercians being newly devoted to poverty and totally detached from corrupt means of earning money.

Closer to Dante's time, poverty had become a hot topic that was widely debated both inside and outside the church. The Poor Men of Lyon, headed by Peter Waldo (1140-1205) at the end of the twelfth century, proposed poverty as the main asset in the Christian spiritual path and protested that the opulence and power of the Roman curia were contrary to evangelical teaching (see Little 120-128). They were considered heretical and persecuted; they eventually formed a proto-Protestant church in the western Alps between France and Italy that has survived to this day and is known as the Waldensian Church (Chiesa Valdese or Église vaudoise [see Volpe 51-61]).

Within the Roman church, the rise of Mendicant Orders, in particular the Franciscans, spurred new discussions on the importance of material poverty for spiritual edification. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Francis of Assisi undressed on the square of San Rufino in his hometown to show the importance of going back to the essential purity of nakedness. He claimed that this was the condition of humanity in the Garden of Eden, when the absence of clothing signified mankind's freedom from the entanglements of materiality

as well as their freedom from sin. Francis's action resulted in the subsequent stipulation and ratification of a Rule for his newly founded Franciscan Order, according to which poverty features as an essential virtue for everyone who wants to join. This started an animated debate (this time from within the church, as a legitimate, non-heretical movement) on what radical poverty exactly means, why it is important for the life of the church, and how it ought to be implemented. The debate was lively from the start, because, if it was easy to agree on the importance of poverty, it was difficult to define a practical application of the rule of poverty in the daily life of the brothers and sisters of the Order.

Dante witnessed firsthand the split created by different interpretations of the rule of poverty among the Franciscans, which very early on separated in two factions, the Observant or Spiritual side maintaining the importance of a strict adherence to absolute poverty, and the Conventual or Relaxed side believing in a less rigid application of the rule. Dante reports the oscillating fortunes of one or the other faction of the Franciscan Order and its relationship to church establishment. Matteo d'Acquasparta, who was general of the order from 1287 to 1302, advocated certain relaxations of the rule prescribed by Francis; these relaxations were vehemently opposed by Ubertino da Casale, the leader of the Observants; under Pope Celestine V the Observants prevailed; Boniface VIII during his tenure as pope sided with the Conventuals and in 1317 Pope John XXII likewise condemned the Observants and accused Ubertino of heresy. In a famous episode that spans canto 11 and 12 of *Paradiso*, Dante aims for a poetic reconciliation of the two sides, when he has Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, former general of the Order and its most important theologian, speak about a possible compromise between radical and relaxed interpretations of the Franciscan rule of poverty:

Ben dico, chi cercasse a foglio a foglio
 nostro volume, ancor troveria carta
 u' leggerebbe 'I' mi son quel ch'i' soglio';
 ma non fia da Casal né d'Acquasparta,
 là onde vegnon tali a la scrittura,
 ch'uno la fugge e altro la coarta.

[I admit that, if one were to search
 our volume leaf by leaf, he might still read
 one page with, 'I am as I always was';

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but those of Acquasparta or Casale
who read our Rule are either given to
escaping it or making it too strict.]

(*Par.* 12.121-126)

Bonaventure complains that there is no consistency, so very few can say “I am as I always was,” and, through his words, the Poet Dante himself seems to be making the same complaint. The two opposite sides of the Franciscan Order contend over the interpretation of poverty, whether too rigidly applied or too loosely understood, so that neither Matteo d’Acquasparta nor Ubertino da Casale seem to merit the title of loyal follower of their founder. The bitter battle between the two sides of the Order will result later on (in 1517) in two separate Orders, the Friars Minor and the Conventuals, later on followed by further division and the creation of the Capuchins (in 1528).

Despite the internecine debate, the poet finds in the Franciscan attitude to wealth a relieving solution to the culture of money that was developing fast around him and that he considers particularly dangerous for the secular world, but especially troubling for the church. While he embraces the spiritual concept of going back to the essential elements of evangelical life, Dante also values the Franciscan literature that develops all around the idea of poverty, which becomes a symbol besides being a virtue. Francis’s pursuit of poverty for himself and for his Order is documented from very early on in several hagiographic texts that show in allegorical terms Francis’s quest for a woman called Lady Poverty, whom he woos like a lover in the style of Provençal poetry. Far from being the beautiful, elegant, and richly attired woman Provençal poets pursued, Lady Poverty presents herself as a disheveled woman, dressed in rags, starved, but completely contented in her impecunious, destitute condition. In one of these texts, the *Sacrum Commercium Sancti Francisci cum Domina Paupertate*, Francis and his brothers want to be united with Lady Poverty forever, so they decide to seek her out and marry her.⁵ They embark on an expedition to find her; they climb a mountain and undergo many trials and tribulations in the fashion of many romantic heroes or suitors, until they find her at the top of the mountain. This very poetic narrative of Francis’s love pursuit for Lady Poverty is an anonymous text, whose dating is still debated. The majority of critics at the moment agree that it may have been written very early on after the death of the Saint and survived the purging of all Francis’s biographies during Bonaventure of Bagnoregio’s tenure as general of the Order, when he destroyed all previous accounts of the Saint’s life

and published the official biography, the *Legenda maior*, after the 1260s or even the 1270s. This highly spiritual text is rife with biblical quotations and filled with references to other Franciscan texts; it is quite clearly inspired by courtly love literature with its topoi of *Frauendienst*, the protagonist being at the service of the Lady, whose status is so far above the poet's or the male protagonist's that he can't even dream of reaching her as equal or loving her as a partner. Lady Poverty is an oxymoron, and the woman shows in her name the irony of inheriting a legacy of love and devotion for wealthy and beautiful women starting from the Provençal model, but reversing all the topoi of that tradition. Unlike the beautiful, elegant, and exquisitely attired woman many poets described, Lady Poverty is ugly, dirty, uncombed, and dressed in rags—and yet her description is not satirical. She would be comical if Francis and his companions were repulsed by her. On the contrary, they aspire to conquer her love and appreciation, and they love her exactly because her qualities are the reverse of the earthly, mundane attributes of other women. In literary terms, this is an esthetics of ugliness *avant la lettre*. Poverty in the *Sacrum Commercium* is also an allegory for Wisdom, the virtue that in biblical terms preexisted everything and was God-the-Creator's companion in an empty universe before the creation of the cosmos. She also prepares and opens the way for the Incarnation, as Francis reminds her when they encounter:

before he (Christ) came to earth from his radiant homeland, you prepared an appropriate place for him, a throne upon which he would sit and a dwelling-place in which he would rest, that is, a very poor virgin from whom his birth would shine upon this world. (Armstrong 535)

Her loyalty makes her stand by Christ and follow him to his death, as the same text underlines:

You were with him in the mockery of the Judeans, in the insults of the Pharisees, in the curses of the chief priests. You were with him in the slapping of his face, in the spitting, in the scourging. He who should have been respected by everyone was mocked by everyone, and you alone comforted him. You did not abandon him even to death, death on the cross. (536)

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Dante's *Paradiso* also mentions poverty as being by Christ's side and appropriates the parallel between the life of Francis and the life of Christ with regards to poverty. When the poet depicts a masterly portrait of Francis of Assisi in *Paradiso* 11, there is no longer much room for misunderstanding what poverty really means to Dante; it is the main Christian virtue as it was—or should have been—for the Franciscan Order. Francis is represented as the loyal supporter of Lady Poverty throughout his earthly life, exactly like Christ himself, an idea which is in line with the narrative of the *Sacrum commercium*. This is how he describes Francis's relationship to an allegorized Poverty:

Questa, privata del primo marito,
millecent'anni e più dispetta e scura
fino a costui si stette senza invito;

.....

sì che, dove Maria rimase giuso,
ella con Cristo pianse in su la croce.
Ma perch'io non proceda troppo chiuso,
Francesco e Povertà per questi amanti
prendi oramai nel mio parlar diffuso.

[She was bereft of her first husband; scorned,
obscure, for some eleven hundred years,
until that sun came, she had had no suitor

.....

when she, even when Mary stayed below,
suffered with Christ upon the cross. But so
that I not tell my tale too darkly, you
may now take Francis and take Poverty
to be the lovers meant in my recounting.]

(*Par.* 11.64-66; 71-75.)

In the narrative of Francis's mystical marriage to Lady Poverty, Dante uses typically Franciscan symbolism and terminology, but he even goes a step further than hagiographic texts and declares that Poverty has been deprived of a husband for eleven hundred years between Christ and Francis, because no one liked her enough to be married to her after she accompanied Christ on the cross. Not even Mary went up on the cross with Jesus, but Poverty did, accompanying him to his martyrdom and death. The poetic imagery of a contrast

between the two women, Poverty and Mary, creates an interesting parallel and a dichotomy. The detail of Poverty accompanying Christ to his death, while Mary stays behind at the foot of the cross, seems to have been borrowed directly from the *Sacrum Commercium*.

In poetic and hagiographic terms, Lady Poverty can and must be desired. She is an aspiration and an ideal more than a real presence. The *Sacrum Commercium* describes in full Francis's longing to attain her and narrates a symbolic wedding banquet made of a piece of stale bread and just water consumed out of a broken cup. But, in its essence, the virtue of poverty remains unattainable, as shown by the long, divisive, and combative debate between the various factions of the Franciscan Order, in an attempt to decide to what degree radical poverty was realistic and practicable. Lady Poverty is also geographically distant and difficult, almost impossible to reach. She lives at the top of a high mountain and the friars climb for days before they can get to her. Her identity constantly shifts between real, tangible presence and diaphanous, eternal symbolism. For Dante she is the Franciscan alternative to a corrupt Church, and he adopts her as the spiritual and political ideal that will reform the Church and purify it from within. Although his knowledge of the texts of radical Franciscans, such as Peter of John Olivi or Ubertino da Casale, is still debated, the insistence on Francis's undressing (*Par.* 11.58-63), the mystical marriage with Lady Poverty (*Par.* 11.64-75), and the friars taking off their shoes in order to join the Order (*Par.* 11.79-87) confirm Dante's adherence to the idea of poverty proposed by the Observant faction of the Franciscans. Dante is also aware, however, of the poetic value of the personification of Poverty, who for Francis is a Lady in the style of Provençal poetics. As he was forging his own Lady Beatrice, Dante may have had this model in mind; Beatrice is equally unattainable as Poverty and he will honor her at the summit of Purgatory, which is partly an earthly mountain and partly a heavenly kingdom; in the Garden of Eden he will enjoy her presence beyond space and time, where he can admire her in glorified form. Being unable to love her in the world after her death, the Pilgrim Dante travels to the afterworld to be reunited with her and show her his devotion.

Dante's transgressive thinking involves dreaming of a reformed church that goes back to the poverty preached in the Gospel; it also involves arresting the rise of indiscriminate monetary gains by few wealthy families that only get wealthier through usury, now legitimized by the rise of banking; and finally it involves being

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reunited with his beloved in the kingdom of the dead. While many evils of his world originate in the Donation of Constantine that corrupted the Church's spiritual purity, Dante clearly indicates how radical Franciscan thought seems to bring the only viable solution to the propagation of a culture of money and the restoration of true evangelical values.

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NOTES

¹ A slightly different version of this article appeared in Italian in Vettori, "Costantino, il Papa, Dante e la Povertà Franciscana."

² The following studies have been particularly useful for the connection between Dante and the Donation of Constantine: Maccarrone 71–86; Maffei; Nardi, "La 'donatio Constantini' e Dante;" Nardi, *Nel mondo di Dante*, 109–159; Pagliaro, 281–289; Puletti.

³ For the text of the *Comedy*, see Petrocchi; for the English translation, see Mandelbaum.

⁴ The bibliography on the Donation of Constantine is very long; for this study I referred in particular to the following: Barnes; Cessi; Pamphilus; Fried; Hermann-Otto; Maffei; Marcone, *Costantino il Grande*; Marcone, *Pagano e cristiano*.

⁵ The English version of the *Sacrum Commercium* consulted for this study is Armstrong et al.

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De mulieribus claris*: A New and Humanistic Portrait of Women

Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* is the first collection of the biographies of female secular historical figures in Western literature, as well as a revolutionary work of fiction and a cultural artifact that established new ways of representing women in writing.¹ My study seeks to demonstrate that Giovanni Boccaccio is the first European author to portray women realistically in his writings, especially in comparison with the technique of cataloguing brief biographies of women during the Middle Ages. Rather than idealized women or pure metaphorical representations, Boccaccio's female characters are creatures of flesh and blood. In this respect, the *De mulieribus* marks a cultural shift away from a stereotypical depiction of women, making it possible to cast women in a new light: multifaceted, more intimately psychologized and human, and inspired by civic humanism.

Portraying Women in the Italian Trecento

Creating a parallel with the visual arts and discussing the depiction of women in painting can enhance and illustrate the great shift which Boccaccio precipitates in his new manner of writing about women. In the history of Italian art, it is possible to note a similar shift in the representation of women: with few exceptions up until Giotto, female figures in medieval Italian art were represented as abstractions. Instead of reproducing the features of specific individuals, painted women were the visual equivalents of ideas and ideals. After Giotto, women began to be depicted with a new sense of individual expressivity based on three-dimensionality, physiognomy, and psychology. Theresa Flanigan analyzes Giotto's frescoes in the Lower Church at Assisi and asserts that "certain figures display a dramatically enhanced naturalism in the bodies, specifically in the emotions expressed by their actions, gestures, and facial movements" (Flanigan 73). Before Giotto, female figures were almost exclusively depicted as the Holy Virgin, saints, and martyrs, or as allegorical representations. As Chiara Frugoni states: "A female image also was used to illustrate concepts or institutions: liberal arts, mechanical arts, geographical sites, cities, or, as above, vices and virtues. See, for example, a miniature dated about 850, illustrating Boethius' *De arithmetica*. Four veiled, similar-looking women are distinguished only by the instrument each holds. They represent respectively Music, Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astrology" (Frugoni, *The imagined Woman* 370). In most cases, therefore, figures in

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medieval painting would represent women not only in flat, two-dimensional images, but with very little physiognomic characterization. Only beginning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and particularly with the distinct naturalism of Giotto and his followers, women came to be depicted with a new sense of expressivity based on three-dimensionality, physiognomy, and expression.

A figurative example closer to Boccaccio's time is the *Allegory of Good and Bad Government*, painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena's City Hall between February 1338 and May 1339.² In the foreground, at the feet of the allegorical figures representing Peace, Fortitude, and Prudence, the viewer can admire the procession of the twenty-four magistrates of contemporary Siena, quite recognizable by their somatic features.³ Behind them, on a stage, sit allegorical female figures representing Good Government: "Justice" is represented balancing the scale held by "Wisdom." The Virtues are represented by six crowned, stately female figures: Peace, Fortitude, and Prudence on the left, Magnanimity, Temperance, and Justice on the right. In this case, the Virtues are recognizable first because of the written cartouche above them, but also thanks to certain iconographical attributes such as the sword in the hand of Justice. It is remarkable that Peace and Fortitude are represented as twin sisters: they are almost identical except for their dress.



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Good Government* (1338–1339): Siena, City Hall—Sala dei nove.

It is also interesting to note that Boccaccio's contemporary women might have been very well aware of the abstraction of these representations: at the very least, the fictional women described in Boccaccio's *Corbaccio* were aware of this artistic trend, since the author states:

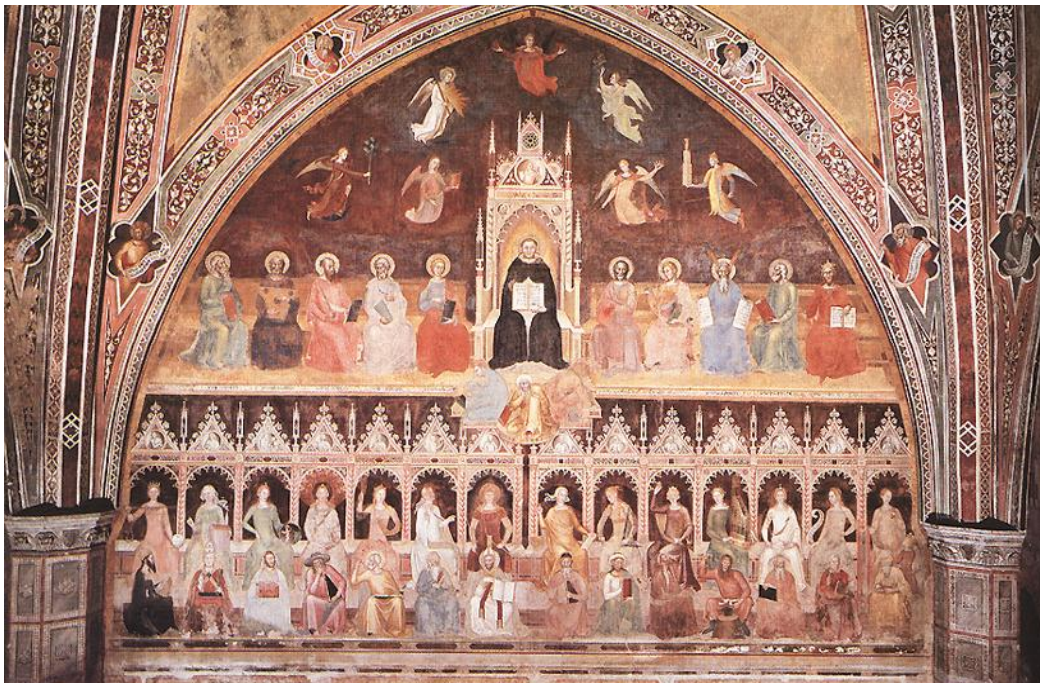
DE MULIERIBUS CLARIS

E tra l'altre lor vanità, quando molto sopra gli uomini si vogliono levare, dicono che tutte le buone cose son femmine: le stelle, le pianete, le muse, le virtù, null'altro si vorrebbe rispondere se non: "Egli è vero che tutte son femmine, ma non pisciano." (*Il Corbaccio* 175)

[Among their other vanities, when they wish to exalt themselves far above men, they say that all good things are of the feminine gender: the stars, planets, Muses, virtues, and riches. If it weren't indecent, to this you would only want to reply, "It's quite true they're all feminine, but they don't piss!"] (Cassell 32).

In this way, Boccaccio counters the abstractness and the incorporeality of the allegorical representations (stars, planets, Muses, virtues, and riches) against the quite corporeal physicality of real women. Similarly, the virtues frescoed by the Lorenzetti brothers are not characterized by distinct physical traits precisely because they are intended to embody ideal rather than real women. These women must look as artificial as possible to convey the idea of the conventional and canonical perfect beauty of the time: blond hair, a curvaceous body, a far-off look in their blue eyes, and a typical softness and elegance in their movements.

Another beautiful fresco that includes many female allegorical figures is the *Triumph of St. Thomas and the Allegory of Sciences*, painted by Andrea da Firenze in Santa Maria Novella's Spanish Chapel between 1365 and 1368.⁴ Here we can see St. Thomas enthroned amongst other saints; under his feet are the heretics he defeated; and then, amid the gothic architecture of wooden benches, are many female figures, all seated. They depict the allegories of the seven "methodological disciplines" on the left,⁵ and of the seven liberal arts on the right.⁶ Each discipline and art is paired with and looks upon her biblical or classical male representative. All the female figures look very similar to one other, whereas the men are represented in a more detailed way. For instance, Euclid is identifiable by his dark skin, long black curly hair, and a beard; Solomon, too, is easily recognizable by his crown and long beard. Some men appear younger, some older, and each is doing something specific: one thinks, one shouts, one writes, and one hammers an anvil.

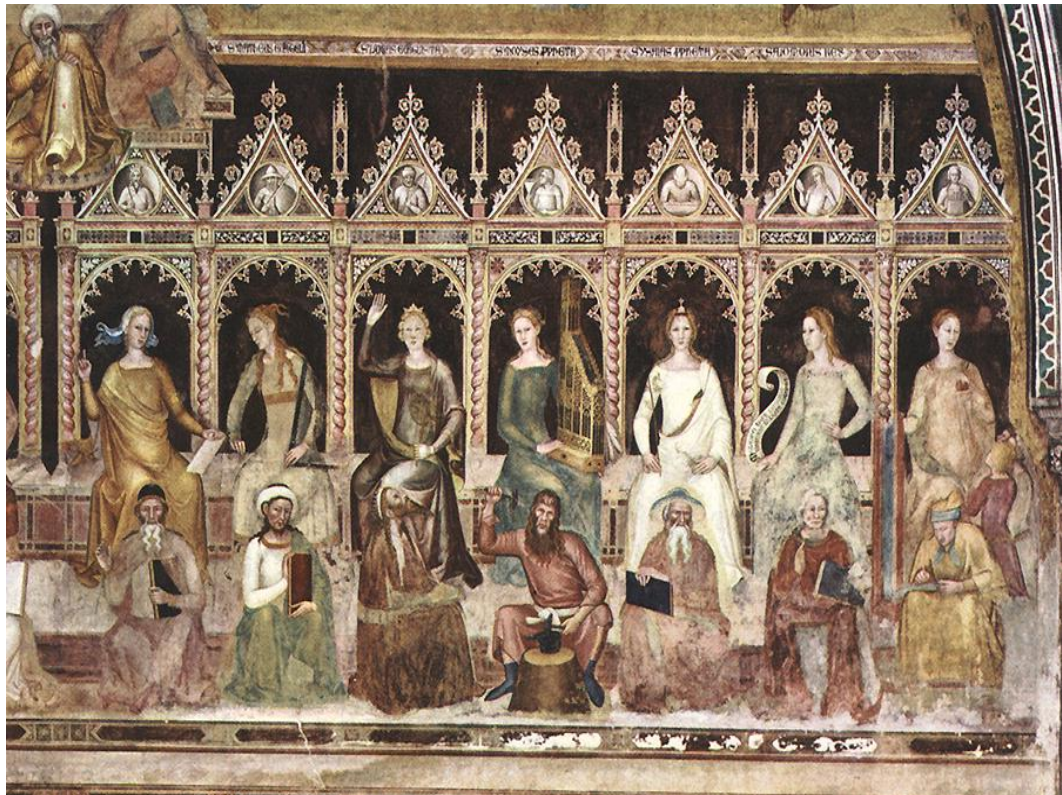
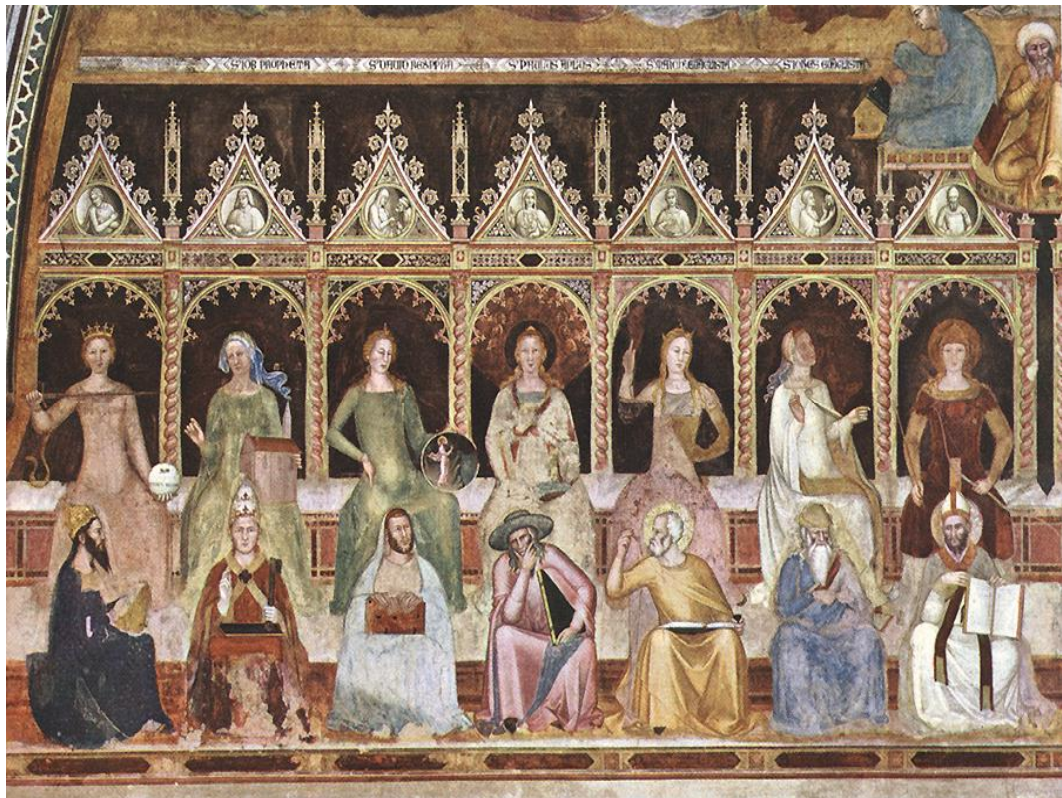


Andrea da Firenze, *Triumph of St. Thomas and the Allegory of Sciences* (1365–68): Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Spanish Chapel.

The same stands true if we look at the figurative portraits of Madonnas or female saints and martyrs. In gothic art, each of these women is recognizable not through her individual physiognomic characteristics, but by her iconographical attributes in the codified hagiographical tradition.⁷ This has indeed engendered some confusion throughout the centuries, because of the similarities between several saints and martyrs, as George Kaftal explains:

The medieval rules of iconography seem to have slowly fallen into complete oblivion. Only a few distinctive signs for a small number of very popular saints remain known to the art historian; the name of one of these saints is often given to any saint who has a similar attribute; thus St. Dominic is frequently confused with St. Anthony of Padua for the sole reason that he is holding a lily, without any consideration for the difference between the Dominican and the Franciscan habit; this is also true for St. Bridget and St. Clare who are often confused with St. Catherine of Siena; St. Romuald is taken for St. Benedict etc. The difficulty of identifying each saint, owing to the intermingling of their legends, existed also in those days when the faithful were most familiar with them (Kaftal 19–20).

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Andrea da Firenze, Triumph of St. Thomas and the Allegory of Sciences (1365–68): Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Spanish Chapel.

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Another magnificent example are the two panels of a lost polyptych portraying Saint Catherine of Alexandria on the left and Saint Lucy on the right, by Simone Martini, a painter who was a near contemporary of Boccaccio and a friend of Petrarch in Avignon. The two saints, now facing each other because the central panel has been lost, look like twin sisters, or indeed one person looking at herself in the mirror. The medieval artists' goal was not to depict specific individuals, but to capture an ideal beauty of heavenly perfection which might inspire the spectator to such an ideal.



Simone Martini: *Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint Lucy* (ca.1320-25), Villa I Tatti, Berenson Collection.

The two saints represent that beauty typical of gothic art which finds its own parallel in the idealized woman in literature, such as Dante's Beatrice or Petrarch's Laura, the latter of whom Simone Martini portrayed in a work that unfortunately has been lost. Petrarch, in turn, recalls Simone Martini's celestial inspiration in Sonnets 77 (below) and 78 of the *Canzoniere*, observing that the artist is able to "translate" in perceptible terms a beauty that exceeds human possibility:⁸

Per mirar di Policleto a prova fiso
con gli altri ch'ebber fama di quell'arte
mill'anni, non vedrian la minor parte
de la beltà che m'ave il cor conquiso.

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Ma certo il mio Simon fu in paradiso
onde questa gentil donna si parte:
ivi la vide, et la ritrasse in carte
per far fede qua giù del suo bel viso.
L'opra fu ben di quelle che nel cielo
si ponno imaginar, non qui tra noi,
ove le membra fanno a l'alma velo.
Cortesìa fe'; né la potea far poi
che fu disceso a provar caldo et gielo,
et del mortal sentiron gli occhi suoi.

(Santagata 400)

[No matter how hard Polyclitus looked,
and all the others famous for that art,
not in a thousand years would they see even
part of the beauty that has won my heart.
For certain my friend Simon was in Heaven
the place from which this gracious lady comes;
he saw her there and copied her on paper,
as proof down here of such a lovely face.
The work is one that only up in Heaven
could be imagined, not down here with us,
where body serves as veil for souls to wear.
a gracious deed that could not have been done
once he came down to feel the heat and cold,
and his eyes saw their own mortality.]

(Musa 131)

Simone Martini's portrait of Laura surpasses any other possible portrait of her, as it depicts her in paradise. The perfection of the painting is such that it makes the viewer think that Simone could have contemplated Laura not as a terrestrial woman, but rather in her ideal form before it entered her mortal body. While another artist might have caught her exterior and earthly beauty, Simone was able to capture her supernatural beauty. Simone Martini's work is not one of naturalistic mimesis, but one dictated by a superior inspiration, the product of ecstasy, an ascension to the highest spheres in order to show "here below" what one can see "up above" (Baggio 326). In other words, Petrarch expresses precisely the medieval representational limits concerning saints and martyrdom: the human mind cannot perceive, much less portray visually, the celestial

perfection of the figures of paradise. Therefore, art can only allude to paradisiacal perfection: there is no such thing as the mimesis, or faithful representation, of what is ineffable.

Everything changed with Giotto, whose art embraced the Franciscan ideal of the humanity of Jesus; his pain, joy, and suffering all emphasized the human side of the Son of God. Giotto's paintings restore not only dimensionality with intuitive perspective, but also an unprecedented expressiveness. Giotto's *Lamentation* in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, a fresco depicting the deposition of Christ's body from the Cross, portrays the Holy Virgin as a mother in despair over her son's death, and Mary Magdalene's weeping expresses genuine torment. The whole fresco conveys expressive details of human emotion and movement. Even the angels show sorrow for the death of Jesus.

Portraying Women in Medieval Literature

A comparable distinction can be seen in the literary representation of women before and after Boccaccio: the Certaldese did for literature what Giotto did for the visual arts, as Attilio Hortis (71) first claimed. Prior to Giotto and Boccaccio, the representation of womanhood was mostly idealized, with little interest in actual women. In medieval literature, biographers of the lives of female saints only portray actions and events pertaining to their martyrdom and to their spiritual life, such as visions or dreams, but not to their individual identities as human beings. Hagiographical literature was a pervasive and widely read genre in the Middle Ages, and its prevalence tended to obscure other sorts of narratives about the lives of women. Boccaccio, in his preface of *De mulieribus claris*, says that with his work, he wants to do for classical women what other authors had done for Christian women. Even though the lives of the saints were well known, some catalogs with historical and classical women existed—not as a stand-alone genre, but as inserts in other works. These female figures have primarily symbolic value: for example, Lucretia, who committed suicide rather than endure the shame of rape, is presented as a model of chastity, while Messalina, by contrast, stands for exaggerated female sexual desire.

Some paragraphs of Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* constitute the first important catalog of exemplary women of the Christian era and are our best source for studying how the classical legacy was absorbed into Christian thought and how the catalog's call to authority could mask an essential rewriting of sources. As Glenda McLeod states: "St.

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Jerome uses his heroines within a rhetorical *persuasio* to prove that pagans had also valued chastity, albeit with an inferior understanding” (McLeod 39). This work became a model for later writers, and the same approach was adopted in other medieval catalogs. McLeod states that “Historical relevance is unimportant in *Adversus Jovinianum*, whose most important frame is ideological and heavenly” (McLeod 5). For example, in Chapter 41, entitled “Examples from secular history,” Jerome begins by saying that virginity and chastity were values respected by the ancient Greeks, Romans and barbarians, and then he draws up a list of women:

Referunt fabulae Atalantam Calydoniam virginem semper in venatibus, semper in silvis, non tumentes uteros feminarum fastidiaque conceptuum, sed expeditam et castam amasse virtutem. Harpalicen quoque virginem Thraciam, insignis Poeta (Virgil. I Aeneid.) describit; et reginam Volscorum Camillam, quam Turnus, cui auxilio venerat, laudare volens, non amplius habuit quod diceret, nisi virginem nominaret. [...] Quid referam Sibyllas Erithraeam atque Cumanam, et octo reliquas: nam Varro decem fuisse autumat, quarum insigne virginitas est, et virginitatis praemium divinatio?

(Hieronymus, *Adversus Jovinianum* Col. 270A)

[It is told that Atalanta, a virgin of Calydonia, was always hunting in the woods, and not bothered by female sexual desire or by childbirth pains, but she always loved the chaste virtues. And then, the illustrious poet Virgil describes Harpalyce, virgin of Thrace; and, wanting to praise Camilla, the Queen of Volsci — to whom Turnus asked for help — he only had to say that she was a virgin. [...] What should I recount about the sibyls from Erythrae and from Cumae, and the other eight? Varro said that they had divinatory power as a gift for their virginity]. (My translation)

It is clear, from this representative example, that very little is actually told about these women, other than the fact that they were virgins and they loved chastity: throughout the Middle Ages, famous women were depicted in such a narrow binary association, with no interest in their individual identity. In this way, they remain unreal, allegorical figures, symbols of a particular vice or virtue. Pagan women are taken, in a process of “Christianization,” as models for

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Christian women, to follow or reject. Their physical or psychological traits are not important; the only elements of importance are the abstract qualities they are taken to symbolize.

During the twelfth century, with the secularization of certain cultural aspects, new catalogs of women began to appear. One famous work of this period is the *Dissuasio Valerii ad Rufinum* by Walter Map, who borrowed examples from the classical tradition, alluding to mythology and quoting from pre-Christian philosophers. Also in this case, as we saw in the quotation by Jerome, it is easy to recognize the binary structure that connects each name to a vice or virtue: so, Scylla, who betrayed her father because she was in love with the enemy, represents the betrayal of parents, while Myrrhas, who engaged in incest with her father, represents unnatural love. To Map's work we can add, among others, Chaucer with *The Legend of Good Women*, and Jean de Meun, who proposes a catalog of the protagonists of the *Heroides* (Dido, Phyllis, Oenone, and Medea). Writing about Jean de Meun, McLeod states: "The Women from Ovid's epistles are not evoked as interesting psychological portraits but as examples of feminine fidelity" (McLeod 55). Equally eloquent is Victoria Kirkham's observation about the few women who appear in the commentaries on the *Divine Comedy*: "The only *terzine* about women on which commentaries swell wide are those whose subjects read symbolically, sentimentally, or uncertainly" ("A Canon" 18). In essence, Kirkham elaborates, "interpretative tradition on the *Commedia*, in other words, has most to say about a woman when it sees her as something else: Allegorical Reality, a Lyrical or Dramatic Moment, a Problem-in-the-Text. The others, those women who seem just to be a woman, remain by comparison in obscurity, their status reduced to nominal items. Such a dismissive tendency is particularly strong when critics come to subjects presented in groups" (Kirkham 19).

Female figures are thus portrayed as the embodiment of something else, signifiers whose signified disappears, mere emblems of a specific virtue or vice. In literature, women undergo a process of "christianization" by which they become moral examples to reject or follow. Even Petrarch, considered the father of humanism, sustains this kind of binary construction in talking about women. An example is the Epistle 2:15 from the *Familiars*, written in Rome on 23 March 1337 to Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, "on the highly justifiable praises of his sisters, Giovanna and Agnes":

Sunt qui Romanorum veteres matronas singulas singulis
laudibus attollunt; et Lucretie quidem pudicitiam ascribunt,

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Martie gravitatem, pium impetum Veturie, coniugalis amoris ardorem Portie, Claudie hilaritatem sobriam, Iulie facetias et eloquentiam muliebrem, Livie maiestatem, Corneliarum alteri generosum robur animi, alteri morum verborumque dulcedinem. Sunt et qui peregrinas suis laudibus prosequuntur: honestatem in Penelope, in Arthemisia amorem immortalem, in Ipsicratea tolerantiam, in Thamiri fortitudinem, consilium in Thetide, modestiam in Argia, pietatem in Antigone, in Didone constantiam admirantes.

(*Le familiari* 337–338; ch. 2:15)

[There are those who exalt unique Roman matrons of old with unique praises, and indeed ascribe to Lucretia chastity, to Maria seriousness, a holy inspiration to Veturia, the ardor of conjugal love to Portia, a sober joyousness to Claudia, wit and feminine eloquence to Julia, refinement to Cecilia, dignity to Livia, a noble firmness of mind to one of the Cornelias, an attractiveness of conduct and language to the other. Then there are those who have honored other foreign women with their praises, admiring honesty in Penelope, undying love in Artemisia, tolerance in Ipsicratea, fortitude in Thamyra, judgment in Thetis, modesty in Argia, devotion in Antigone, and constancy in Dido.] (Bernardo 114)

Of the many letters which Petrarch wrote, only another discusses women (*Familiari* 21.8, addressed to the empress upon the birth of her first child, a baby girl).⁹ In these two letters, Petrarch does in fact introduce new models for women to follow, beyond those of the Christian tradition: Sappho and Proba, both of whom composed verses; Orythia or Penthesilea, Amazons with expertise in warfare; and the eloquent Livia, Giulia, and Cornelia. However, the treatment of these female figures seems closer to the rhetorical technique of enumeration, typical of medieval erudition, than to Livy's remarkably complex description of Lucretia, or Sallust's portrayal of Sempronia. In contrast to Petrarch, Boccaccio used these sources directly to create the respective chapters on these women in his *De mulieribus claris* (Chapter 48: *De Lucretia Collatini coniuge*, and Chapter 86: *De Sempronia Romana*).

Portraying Women in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*

The 106 women's biographies of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (*On Famous Women*) represented a sea change in the genre. Instead of the concise medieval convention of cataloguing women with brevity, Boccaccio develops long and ample narrative modules about his female characters. In Boccaccio's passages, women are given not only their own corporeal features, but their own psychology, their own individualized story, their own historical context, and their own voices, thoughts, and lives. Boccaccio begins by presenting these ancient women in a vast literary space. He narrates, in the form of short stories, the life of each woman, inventing what amounts to a new genre in literature: the collection of female biographies.

Composed in the 1360s, Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* is the first collection of female biographies in the history of Western literature. The success of *De mulieribus* was immediate and widespread, as attested by the numerous manuscripts, translations and editions of the work which appeared all over Europe. Stephen Kolsky, the author of *Boccaccio's Ghost*—a book on the influence of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus* in the Renaissance—observes that the work became an obligatory reference point for all writings on women: “Boccaccio's secularized presentation of women in the *De mulieribus claris* is one of the foundational texts for our modern discourse on women, inaugurating a literary genre that flourished in the early modern period” (Kolsky, *Genealogy* 1).

How did Boccaccio bring about this radical shift in the depiction of women? What innovative techniques did he employ to transform the possibilities of representing women and womanhood in writing? Since he wanted his stories about women to be based on their ancient, original sources, Boccaccio retraced and utilized several classical texts. Like his friend and master Petrarch, Boccaccio approached ancient texts from a philological perspective, intending to achieve a deep and broad knowledge of classical literature. Consequently, he avoided references to medieval texts that repeated, and corrupted, the stories he selected. After having rediscovered the original sources of information on classical women, he developed his characters' psychological profiles; he created an historical context for the characters; he presented female characters with more agency. By analyzing Boccaccio's method of researching classical sources, his creative engagement with those sources, and his experimentation with new narrative techniques in *De mulieribus*, it is possible to

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establish the breakpoint between the more stereotypical portrayal of women in medieval literature and the initiation of more individuated, flesh-and-blood representations of women in Western literature.

In order to show an example of Boccaccio's methodological approach, it might be useful to consider a passage of the classical author Valerius Maximus, and then examine the narrative technique which Boccaccio adopted to reshape the earlier literary text. For this comparison, we will examine the case of Turia (or Curia, as Boccaccio spelled it), a Roman matron whose information comes to us only through Valerius Maximus from his *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* VI.7.2 in the chapter titled "De fide uxorum erga viros":

Q. Lucretium proscriptum a triumviris uxor Turia inter cameram et tectum cubiculi abditum una conscia ancillula ab imminente exitio non sine magno periculo suo tutum praestitit singularique fide id egit, ut, cum ceteri proscripti in alienis et hostilibus regionibus per summos corporis et animi cruciatus vix evaderent, ille in cubiculo et in coniugis sinu salutem retineret. (*Detti* 451)

[When the triumvirs put Quintus Lucretius on their death list, his wife, Turia, hid him between the ceiling and the roof over the bedroom, letting just one young female slave in on the secret. Whereas other men on the death list went through great physical and mental agonies and barely escaped to foreign and hostile regions, her exceptional loyalty allowed him to stay safe in the bedroom and bosom of his wife.] (Walker 224)

These few words become the inspiration for Boccaccio to write a longer chapter on Turia entitled "Curia, Wife of Quintus Lucretius" ("De Curia Quinti Lucretii coniuge", Chapter 83). As usual, Boccaccio begins this female biography with the geographical, historical, and social contextualization of the protagonist in the first paragraph: "*Curia* romana fuit mulier et, si nomini fidem dabimus, ex prosapia Curionum, si operibus, mire constantie atque integerrime fidei vetustatis splendidum specimen" ("Curia was a Roman woman. If we can put any stock in her name, then she belonged to the Curio family; if we believe in her deeds, she was a splendid example in the ancient world of extraordinary constancy and absolute fidelity"; 83.1).¹⁰ Because of this, we now have a historical character with specific temporal and spatial coordinates, and not just a symbolic

name. Thereafter, when discussing antecedents—namely, the hit list of wanted persons and their reactions—Boccaccio amplifies the original text of Valerius Maximus by using the rhetorical technique of enumeration, in the form of a tricolon: “*ceteris fuga celeri patrium solum liquentibus, et vix tutam, inter ferarum speleas et solitudines montium, seu apud hostes romani nominis, latebram invenientibus*” (“The others swiftly fled their native soil and found insecure places in the dens of wild animals and lonely mountain regions or with the enemies of Rome”; 83.2). Moreover, Boccaccio emphasizes that Turia herself formulates the idea of hiding her husband in his own house: “*solus ipse, amantissime uxoris usus consilio, intra romana menia, intra domestici laris parietes, intra coniugalis cubicula secretum, in sinu coniugis intrepidus latuit*” (“only Lucretius, following the advice of his loving wife, hid fearlessly within the walls of Rome itself, inside the confines of his own house, in the secret of the marriage chamber, indeed, in the bosom of his wife”; 83.2). Again, Boccaccio applies the rhetorical technique of climax to draw focus from the expansive Roman countryside to the intimacy of Turia’s bosom, using the repetition of *intra...intra...intra... in sinu coniugis*. The next sentence is an exaltation of her actions, expressed with the repetition of *tanta...tanta...tanta...ut* in a consecutive clause: “*et tanta uxoris solertia, tanta sagaci industria, tanta fidei integritate servatus est ut, preter ancillam unam consciam, nemo etiam ex necessariis arbitrari, nedum scire, potuerit*” (“Curia protected him so cleverly and zealously and faithfully that, with the exception of a servant girl who was part of the plan, not one of their friends and relatives even suspected, much less knew, the situation”; 83.2).

In the following paragraphs, the reader is treated to Boccaccio’s narrative genius since everything written from that point forward is the author’s own invention. Here, Messer Giovanni simply imagines what happened, and he involves the reader in his fantasy. In fact, he starts by saying: “We can imagine” (“*Credere possumus*”), and that “we” is used to engage the reader’s participation in this adventure of visualizing Curia.

Quotiens ad contegendum facinus arte credere possumus mulierem hanc, exoleta veste, habitu sordido, mesta facie, flentibus oculis, neglecto crine, nullis comptam de more velamentis, anxio suspiriis pectore, ficto quodam amentis stupore, in medium prodisse et, quasi sui inscia, discurrisset patriam, intrasse templa, plateas ambisse et tremula ac fracta

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voce, dum videretur deos precibus votisque onerasse, percontasse obvios amicosque numquid Lucretium vidissent suum, an scirent numquid viveret, quorsum fugam ceperit, quibus sociis, qua spe; preterea se summopere desiderare fuge exilique et incommodorum comitem fieri; et huiusmodi plura factitasse que infelices consuevere facere, latebris quidem viri integumenta prevalida. (*De mulieribus* 332; ch. 83.3)

[We can imagine how often Curia, in order to provide an artful disguise for the true state of affairs, appeared in public wearing an old dress and exhibiting an unkempt appearance, a sad face, tearful eyes, disheveled hair, her veils disordered, a heart wracked with sighs, and a kind of simulated mad stupor. We can visualize her as if in a daze, running through the city, going into the temples, drifting around the squares, and, in a cracked and trembling voice (so as to seem already to have burdened the gods with vows and petitions), inquiring of friends and passersby if they might have seen her Lucretius or knew if he still lived, whither he had fled, with whom, and with what hope—adding that she wished above all to share his flight and exile and misfortune.] (Brown 170)

In this passage Boccaccio employs the technique of *amplificatio*, or what in the Middle Ages would have been called *argomentum*. In the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, studied widely by scholars of the period, narrations were divided into three kinds: *historia*, the narration of facts that really happened; *fabula*, the narration of invented facts and imaginary things; and *argumentum*, the narration of facts that might have happened, thus something between history and invention. The goal of the *argumentum* was to make the narration more credible. What Boccaccio did, in comparison with Valerius Maximus, was therefore to amplify the text thanks to a series of invented argumentations which gave a nuance of reality. Curia is no longer a symbol: she is a historical character, a woman with feelings, clever ideas, and agency.

Let us consider another biography (“Virginia virgine Virgini filia”—“The Virgin Virginia, Daughter of Virginius”), which represents an important example for two reasons. The first is that the classical source for this chapter is Livy, whose prose differs significantly from that of Valerius Maximus: if Valerius’s prose is concise, Livy’s prose is expansive. So, Boccaccio cannot expound as

he did with Valerius; instead, he must reduce the original source. It is indeed extremely interesting to witness the narrative choices he makes in rewriting the story. The second reason for considering Virginia is that, throughout the Middle Ages, this young girl was used as an example of virginity, but with Boccaccio she receives a very important new shift in meaning.¹¹

In Livy's account of the story, the people of Rome were already angry with the decemviral leaders for not calling proper elections and for other abuses of power. In 451 BC, Appius, one of the *decemviri*, began to lust after Verginia, a beautiful plebeian girl and the daughter of Lucius Verginius, a respected centurion. Verginia was betrothed to Lucius Icilius, a former tribune of the plebs, and when she rejected Appius, he had one of his clients, Marcus, claim that she was actually his slave. Marcus then abducted her while she was on her way to school. The crowd in the Forum objected to this, as both Verginius and Icilius were well-respected men, and they forced Marcus to bring the case before the *decemviri*, led by Appius himself. When Verginius arrived, Appius would not let him speak, and declared that Verginia was indeed Marcus's slave. Verginius grabbed a knife and stabbed Verginia in the heart, the only way the father felt he could uphold his daughter's freedom. Verginius and Icilius were arrested, and the people revolted. This sequence of events led the people, out of pity and disgust, to overthrow the *decemviri* and to re-establish the Roman Republic.

Livy tells this story expansively and with great detail, but the narration focuses entirely on the male figures, who in his account are the true protagonists of the story, and not on the girl, who is ultimately just the object of desire. This long episode is shrunken down in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus*, where Virginia goes from being the object of desire, as presented in Livy's narrative, to being the protagonist of the account. The chapter starts, as usual, with historical details about Virginia, describing her social status, and locating her in place and time:

Virginea nomine et facto romana Virgo pia est recolenda memoria: fuit enim insignis decoris conspicua et Auli Virgini, plebei hominis sed honesti, filia. Que esto optime esset indolis, non tantum tamen sua constantia clara quantum scelere amantis infausti et severi nimium patris facinore, ac ex illo Romanorum libertate secuta, facta est. (*De mulieribus* 236; sec. 58.1)

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[Virginia, a Roman, was a virgin in name and in fact, and she should be remembered with reverence. Notable for her remarkable virtue, she was the daughter of Aulus Virginius, a plebeian but an honorable man. Although Virginia had an excellent character, she became famous not so much for her constancy as for the wickedness of her ill-starred lover, the extraordinary severity of her father, and the liberty of the Romans that resulted from it.] (Brown 120)

In these few lines, the narrator identifies Virginia immediately as a Roman virgin, honest and of humble status, who became famous for the perversity of her lover and the severity of her father. Boccaccio then adds a significant detail missing from the original source: thanks to the sacrifice of the girl's life, the most important of values—freedom—was restored to Rome.

After framing the characters and the historical antecedents offered by Livy, Boccaccio begins to tell the story, and the action passes to the female protagonist, who becomes the active subject of the following sentence:

Cuius adhuc tenella Virgo cum frustrasset blanditias, nec illis nec donis ingentibus neque precibus aut minis flecteretur imbutum sanctitate pectus, tanto insano furore succensus est Appius ut, cum in varia labantem volvisset animum, nec satis tantum vim publice inferre arbitraretur, in fraudem ingenium verteret ... (*De mulieribus* 238; sec. 58.4)

[The young girl spurned his advances, and her pure heart was not swayed by his flattery or extravagant gifts or entreaties or threats. Appius burned with such a mad passion that, after hesitantly turning over various possibilities in his mind, he opted for cunning, regarding a public display of force as unsafe.] (Brown 120)

In this passage, Virginia actively refuses Appius's advances and becomes the subject of the story. The grammatical construction—and therefore the narrative agency—are reversed with respect to Livy, where Virginia appeared in the accusative case, that of the object, and the *decemvir* Appius acted out his evil intentions as the subject:

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Hanc virginem adultam, forma excellentem, Appius amore ardens pretio ac spe perlicere adortus, postquam omnia pudore saepta animadverterat, ad crudelem superbamque vim animum convertit. (*Ab urbe condita* 144; sec. 3.44.4)

[Appius, burned of passion toward the virgin, physically well-developed and extraordinarily beautiful, tried first to seduce her with gifts and promises; but, as soon as he understood that he could not make her change her mind, he turned his mind to cruel and violent actions.] (Foster, 145)

Appius then sends his client Marcus to kidnap her, declaring that she is his slave. At this point, in Livy's account, Virginia is frightened and astonished ("Pavida puella stupende"), while the nursemaid reacts by screaming, calling out to everybody ("Ad clamorem nutricis fidem Quiritum implorantes"). In Boccaccio's version, it is the protagonist, Virginia, who acts in resistance, while the nursemaid and other women react in chorus:

Quam cum paucos post dies ausu temerario transeuntem cepisset libertus et sua diceret, proclamante virgine atque pro viribus impuro homini obsistente, iuvantibus matronis, cum quibus una incedebat, factus est repente hominum concursus. (*De mulieribus* 238; sec. 58.5)

[A few days later, the freedman seized Virginia with reckless boldness as she passed by, and he claimed that she was his slave. The girl cried out and resisted the wicked man with all her might.] (Brown 120)

The story as told by Boccaccio continues to summarize Livy, always focusing as much as possible on Virginia, avoiding, for example, all the speeches delivered in the tribunal. In these passages, we can see briefly but clearly how Boccaccio orchestrates a shift from a male-centered to a female-centered perspective in order to tell the story of this young girl: a real girl, and not a mere allegory or symbol of virginity, as we see in other medieval texts.

Depicting real women, who lived in a real past, is a strategy that causes the reader to identify much more easily with the protagonist of the biography. But we may ask at this point: what kind of women are represented in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*? What kind of

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values does the author want to teach through his book? There is a bit more, perhaps, to understand about Virginia and the message in her biography. Virginia has always been linked with virginity, like Lucretia with chastity. However, themes such as chastity and virginity, absolute virtues for the Christian Middle Ages, are represented with complex nuances in some biographies of the *De mulieribus*. These virtues are no longer connected with the purity of the body and the soul. Rather, they are related to the dignity of the State: chastity is an ethical value that reflects the civic ethos.

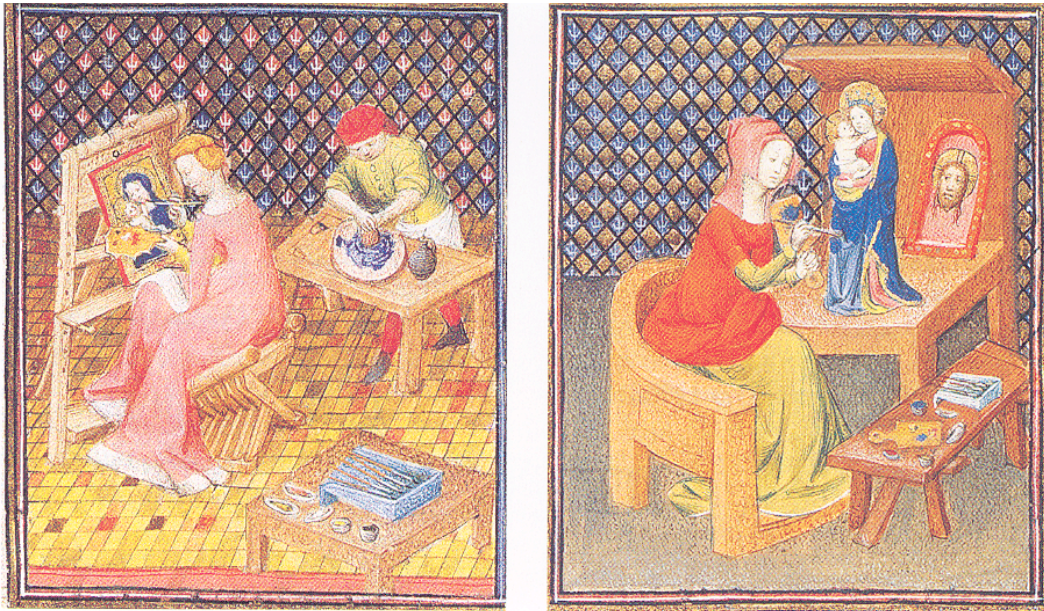
The biographies of Lucretia and Virginia are ideal expressions of civic humanism. The two women are not examples of chastity for its own sake, as is so often the case in the Middle Ages: through their chaste behavior and through their tragic and unjust deaths, the Romans are driven to insurrection against tyranny, and Rome succeeds in restoring freedom. Lucretia and Virginia become symbols of the fight against immorality and corruption in the *Res Publica*. If Lucretia had silently accepted her destiny of violence under the sway of Tarquinius Superbus, hence living with this stain of dishonor, and if Virginia had given herself to the lustful *decemvir*, the Roman people would not have risen against tyranny and corruption. In *De mulieribus*, therefore, private life is the mirror of public life; private virtues and vices reflect the characteristics of the state. If private life is corrupt, the state is also corrupted. Women should be chaste for the welfare of the republic, so private life seeks to serve the welfare of the state.

Many illustrious women in *De mulieribus claris* choose to take their own lives rather than fall into the hands of their enemies, live under tyranny, or be enslaved. Impassivity toward death, in particular when death is the only escape to preserve personal freedom, is yet another stoic classical value revived by pre-humanists and by Boccaccio, in a spirit contrary to Christianity's condemnation of suicide.

The greatest and most evident innovation in the *De mulieribus claris* is its addition of women to the pantheon of intellectual figures: for the first time since classical antiquity, the reader is swept up in the celebration of female painters, sculptors, writers, and poets. The mere presence of these kinds of women in Boccaccio's society is a remarkable phenomenon, and his reader has the possibility to envision a new kind of femininity and womanhood that vivifies classical models: like Sappho and Cornificia, the new woman is able to compose poems; like Proba, she can read and write in Latin and

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ancient Greek; like the Queen of Sheba, she is an intellectual; like Thamyris, Irene, and Marcia, she can paint and sculpt; like Minerva, (inventor of fiber arts, of olive oil, war strategy, numbers, and the flute), Ceres (inventor of the plow and the plowshare), Isis (inventor of the alphabetical characters), and Pamphile (inventor of the art of cotton weaving), she is capable of inventing important tools for humankind. In a fifteenth-century illuminated copy of *Les livre des cleres et nobles femmes*, a French translation of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, Chiara Frugoni identifies a new kind of image in which women are active and creative. On folio 86r of this manuscript (Paris Bibliothèque Nationale fr. 12420), the artist Thamyris is portrayed painting on a canvas, while next to her a male servant prepares colors for her.



Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Le Livre des cleres et nobles femmes*. Paris: Bibliothèque National, ms fr. 12420, f. 86r.

Moreover, these new women are inclined to honor the value of friendship and civic ethics, new values exalted by burgeoning humanism. For example, the biographies of Leaena and Epicharis (*De mul.* Chapters 50 and 93), which are very similar, promote friendship as the most important value. The Greek hetaera Leaena took part in the plot organized by Harmodius and Aristogeiton to overthrow the tyranny of Hipparchus: once she was arrested and tortured, she preferred to bite off her own tongue in order to avoid naming her friends. Similarly, the Roman freedwoman Epicharis was a member

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of the Pisonian conspiracy against Nero: once she was caught and tortured, she preferred to die rather than accuse her co-conspirators. The two women chose to commit an act of violence against themselves, rather than betray their fellow conspirators against tyranny in favor of democracy and the Roman Republic. Other heroines, in particular those of the Roman period, are remembered for the good they did for the state, sacrificing their own interests to protect the highest of values: the freedom of the Roman Republic. An eloquent example is Veturia, the mother of Coriolano, who reprimanded her son for attacking Rome: “Satius quippe non concepisse fuerat: potuerat sterilitate mea Roma absque oppugnatione consistere et ego misella anus in libera mori patria” (“Better, truly, not to have conceived! By my sterility Rome could have remained free from siege, and I a poor old woman, could have died in a free country”; 55.9).¹²

To conclude, Boccaccio’s narration, humanization, and historicization of women creates new role models and envisions a future for the humanistic woman. *De mulieribus claris* proposes new values in contrast to those of the medieval Christian tradition—values often modeled after those rediscovered in classical sources. In the Proem, the author declares that Christian women are indeed superior because they seek eternal and true glory, in contrast to pre-Christian women who pursue earthly fame. In the 106 biographies, many heroines are representative of typical Christian values—such as a chaste widowhood (Dido, Pompeia Paolina, Antonia), conjugal love (Portia, Curia, Tertia Emilia, and others), or virginity (the sibyls are a primary example)—, reflecting the stereotypical division of women into virgin, wives, and widows. Still, among these, new elements transcend the traditional medieval values and make a leap toward the culture of Renaissance, and toward a new model of women that was destined to persist in the subsequent literature.

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NOTES

*This work was born from material originally developed to present my book, *Tre studi sul De mulieribus claris* (Milan: Edizioni Universitarie LED, 2012), and has since been expanded and updated. I delivered the paper at Vanderbilt University in 2012, at Christopher Newport University in 2013, and at Emory University in 2014.

¹ *De mulieribus claris* presents itself as a collection of 106 biographies of female figures gathered in 104 chapters, all of them preceded by a dedication to Andrea Acciaiuoli and a proem, and followed by a conclusion. The biographies of the queens of the Amazons, of Marpesia and Lampedo, and those of Orithya and Antiope, are respectively ensembled in Chapters XI-XII and XIX-XX. In this essay I use the term “female” as an adjective related to gendered sex designation, whereas I use the term “woman” as a noun for gendered social construct with agency. Also, when talking about women, I am referring to secular female figures, without taking in consideration saints and martyrs.

² For a thorough analysis of the fresco in all its detail, see Frugoni (2019). For an overview of the fresco’s meaning see Polzer.

³ The Sieneze magistrates have not been identified by name; nevertheless, it is safe to assume that contemporary viewers would have been able to recognize them, given the painter’s accuracy in reproducing highly individualized somatic features.

⁴ For an introduction to the Spanish Chapel, see Bargellini 1954; Romano 1976; Baldelli 1981; and Dieck 1997.

⁵ On the identification of the figures to the left, art historians are not in agreement. In this essay, I embrace the proposal by Serena Romano, who argues that these are the “methodological disciplines,” the *modus scientia*, according to the commentary on Thomas Aquinas’s fifth question on Boethius’ *De trinitate*. In his commentary, Thomas explores how humans can acquire knowledge thanks to sciences and disciplines. The first woman on the left is Civil Law with her signs of power (crown, sword, and globe), and in front of her sits Solomon, the greatest of all judges; following is Canonical Law, presented with the Church within her. Many art critics recognize the representative of Canonical Law as Boniface VIII, precisely because of the resemblance to many of his portraits (Haidacher 1965, 30). Following is Physics, holding a globe, along with Galen; Biblical Studies with Saint Jerome; Dogma with Gregory of Nazianzus; Mysticism, represented with a veil covering her eyes and ears, in order to avoid any external influence, and a white glove for falconry (the symbol of mysticism), with Dionysius the Areopagite; and Apologetics, armed with helmet, arc and arrows, along with Saint Augustine.

⁶ Critics agree in recognizing these female figures as the Liberal Arts (*artes liberales: trivius et quadrivius*; Romano 1976, 192 n.54). Beginning from the left, we have the arts of the *quadrivium*: Math with Pythagoras; Geometry, holding a square, with Euclid; Astronomy with a globe in her hand and Ptolemy looking up to the sky; Music is presented holding an organ with Tubal-Cain, the biblical smith who invented the first musical instrument by noticing the sound of a hammer on an anvil. After the *quadrivium*, we find the *trivium*: Dialectic, with a branch in the right hand and a scorpion (symbol of the syllogism) in her left hand, is represented with Aristotle; Rhetoric, with a sign reading “*Mulceo dum loquor varios induta colores*” (“I soften with many nuances while I speak”), with Cicero; and Grammar, holding a fruit in her right hand and the narrow door of wisdom in the left, with either Priscian or Donatus. For identification, see Romano 1976, 192–ff.

⁷ For hagiography indispensable is Giorgi 2003, *passim*.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of these sonnets, see Mazzotta 1988; Ciccuto 1991; and Mirabile 2019, 22-23, who offers an updated bibliography.

⁹ On *Familiares* 21.8, see Kolsky 1993 and 2001, 42–47; Filosa 2004 and 2012, 51–62; Lukaszewics-Chantry 2017.

¹⁰ All English translations of the *De mulieribus claris* are by Brown, in Boccaccio 2001. The oscillation in the spelling Turia/Curia is not random, but intentional: in

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this essay, I use Turia when quoting Valerius Maximus, and Curia when quoting Boccaccio. In my book on *De mulieribus claris* (2012), I hypothesize that the orthographical change T > C in the name of Turia > Curia is due to the fact that, in reading Turia's biography by Valerius Maximus, Boccaccio might have used a manuscript written in semiuncial, a script in which it is easy to confuse the capitalized T with a C.

¹¹ Botticelli's *The Story of Virginia* quite possibly was based on Boccaccio's biography: Nelson 2010, 196; Filosa 2019. For the representation of Virginia in art, see Loda 2018.

¹² For anti-tyrannical themes in some biographies of the *De mulieribus claris*, see Filosa 2015–2016.

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Reimagining Griselda: Christine de Pizan's Rewriting of Boccaccio.

In the conclusion of her article “*La Griselda* di Christine de Pizan,” Giovanna Angeli ends her analysis on the sources and characteristics of Christine De Pizan’s rewriting of *Griselda* by inviting critics to investigate the hints of Christine’s attentive reading of the *Decameron* shining through *La Cité des dames*. Indeed, according to Angeli, the absence or insistence of certain narrative elements in relation to Boccaccio speaks volumes on Christine’s re-elaboration of the source material. In Christine’s hands, unexpected aspects of *Griselda*’s personality are revealed, supporting a secular interpretation, instead of a religious one, which critics, first among all Petrarch, have traditionally ascribed to Boccaccio’s *novella*¹. Specifically, by reimagining this character and reframing her story in the larger context of the project of the *Cité*, Christine rids *Griselda* of the aura of religious virtue that characterizes her in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and makes her a human heroine able to speak to the heart of Christine’s female readership.²

In the *Cité*, after an introduction in which she examines the misogynist literature of her time, Christine provides an extensive list of women who excelled throughout their lives and who embody femininity in a wide variety of ways. Offering concrete examples of valiant heroines to support her key theoretical premises that women can excel in any field, the poet liberates the female body from its supposedly natural condition of inferiority foisted on it by literary misogyny. The list of chosen female exemplars includes mythological women, female literary characters, and historical women—counting some of Christine’s own contemporaries or near contemporaries among them. By melding these categories into the same work, Christine draws attention to the importance of literary representation as a means for expressing the power and authority of women in multiple realms. The character of *Griselda* embodies all the laudable traits and intentions that the women on her list represent. Indeed, her story is a signal point in the *Cité*; in serving as a moment of self-affirmation as well as an act of freedom from male authority, it results in a new appreciation—even reclamation—of the female body and its larger signifying capacity in medieval literary culture.

Like Boccaccio, Christine accords *Griselda*’s story a preferential place within her work; unlike him, however, she places this episode not at the very end, but squarely in the middle of the second part of

her collection, as a keystone for the construction of her *Cité*. She also makes Griselda's one of the longest stories in the text. Maureen Quilligan underscores the great value attributed to Griselda through literary foreshadowing in the tenth chapter of the second section (Quilligan 118). Here, the narrator, Droiture, tells the reader about the greatness of daughters' love and specifically mentions Griselda as an example worth exploring:

Encore a propos d'amour de fille a pere, puet on dire de la tres bonne et saige Gliselidis, qui puis fu marquise de Saluces, de laquelle te recomptera cy après la grant vertu, fermeté e constance. (Curnow 813)³

[Turning again to the question of a daughter's love for her father, one can mention the most virtuous and wise Griselda, who was the marquise of Saluces, whose great virtue, firmness and constancy I will presently describe to you.] (Richards 116)

The poet then quickly moves to another topic and states that Griselda will find a more appropriate place later on. By postponing an in-depth description of Griselda's virtues, Christine arouses the reader's curiosity and creates a sense of expectation. She also foregrounds a connection between herself as authorial figure who was "made" in the image of her intellectual father, and Griselda, whose virtue has been signaled by pious filial devotion to the father. Furthermore, if God, via Christ, is the "father" of the third hagiographic section of the *Cité*, one could consider Boccaccio the literary "father" of the second section. In fact, Christine follows Boccaccio closely, and he serves her both as a source and as a point of departure, as Kevin Brownlee convincingly argues (245).

Indeed, while Christine takes the majority of the stories on exemplary women from Boccaccio's tradition, she invests the term "exemplary" with new meaning. Interestingly enough, Brownlee suggests that Christine makes use of the *Decameron* "as part of her strategy of correctively rewriting Boccaccio's *De mulieribus*" (247).⁴ Christine's rewriting starts by shifting the focus of the tale, as Patrizia Caraffi underscores, from the male character ("vo' ragionar d'un marchese"; 867) ["I want to tell you about a Marquis"; 838] to the female one ("Cy dit de Gliselidis, marquise de Saluces, forte femme en vertu"; 900) ["She speaks of Griselda, the marquise of Saluces, a

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woman strong in virtue”; 170]. This is the case also for the other tales that Christine borrows from the *Decameron*: “Barnabò da Genova,” “Tancredi, prenze di Salerno,” and “I fratelli dell’Ellisabetta,” all of which, in Christine’s rewriting, respectively revolve around Barnabò’s wife, Sigismonda, and Lisabetta.⁵ Christine’s change of perspective becomes even more relevant when considering that scholars have pointed out how in Boccaccio Gautier’s “matta bestialità” [mad bestiality] is the real protagonist of the tale. Indeed, according to Teodolinda Barolini “power struggle between the marquis and his wife is secondary to that between the marquis and his men” (28), consequently, cutting back the role of Griselda in Boccaccio’s version. In a similar manner, Susanna Barsella underscores how domestic and political tyrannies are deeply interwoven, therefore connecting ethics to politics.

When readers first meet Griselda, she is just a peasant. Despite her low social status, Gautier, the Marquis of Saluces, who is looking for a woman to continue his lineage, notices not only the beauty of her body and face, but also her loyal conduct. Because of this virtue, he decides to take Griselda as his wife. However, since he is burdened with an inexplicable sadism and mistrust of women, Gautier constantly challenges his wife and puts her love to the test: not only does the Marquis go as far as to make Griselda believe that her daughter and son have died, he even repudiates her. One day, long after this repudiation, Gautier calls Griselda back to the palace and tells her that he is about to marry another woman, who is in fact none other than Griselda’s daughter. Ultimately, impressed by Griselda’s virtue, the Marquis confesses his manipulative actions and asks her to join him in the palace and to put on her elegant clothes so that she can once again hold the title of Marquise of Saluces.

Griselda’s sartorial transformations, as Roberta Krueger convincingly argues, foreground the changes in social class that the character undergoes throughout the narrative.⁶ Griselda ceases to be a peasant and becomes a noblewoman only when she wears the appropriate attire; conversely, she returns to her previous condition simply by taking off the sartorial trappings of nobility. Her first sartorial transformation coincides with the beginning of the narrative itself. When Gautier decides to marry Griselda, the ladies of his court bring a noblewoman’s clothing to her humble house and dress her as a bride:

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Sy entrerent les dames dedens la petite maisonnette, et vestirent et parent l'espousee moult noblement—si comme a l'estat du marquis appertnoit – de robes et de joyaulx que il avoit fait apprester. (Curnow 902)

[Whereupon the ladies entered the little cottage and dressed and adorned the bride in the noble fashion befitting the position of the marquis – with the robes and jewels which he had readied.] (Richards 171)

In other words, Griselda reifies her status as a marquise through the act of dressing like one. However, Griselda's transformation into a marquise is possible through the presence of her husband, who authorizes and validates this act of transformation and chooses and sets up the clothes she is to wear. This passage emphatically underscores the gender and class distinction underlying the whole narrative and anticipates the importance of Griselda's reclaiming her own socio-sartorial agency later on in the story.

When, twelve years after the wedding, Gautier sadistically decides to repudiate Griselda to test her love and her fidelity, Griselda promptly starts undressing in response. She declares that since she did not bring any dowry when she got married, she will return to her father's house completely naked. While Gautier's request and his reference to the dowry are explicit in Boccaccio (“ma che tu a casa Giannucole te ne torni con la dote che tu mi recasti”; 874) [“You should return to Giannucole's house with the dowry you brought me”; 845], in Christine (“qu'elle s'en ralast chieux son pere, ainsi qu'elle estoit venue”; 904) [“I'm ready to return to my father's house” ;173], Griselda sanctions this act of cruelty herself:

Si est raison que je te restitue ton meuble: et voycy ta robe dont je me despouille, sy te restitue l'anneau dont tu m'espousas, et te rens tous les autres joyaulx, aniaux, vestemens et atours par lesquelz j'estoye aournee et enrichiee en ta chambre. (Curnow 904-05)

[Here is the dress which I myself will strip off, and let me give you back the ring with which you married me, and I will return to you all the other jewels, rings, vestments, and ornaments with which I was adorned and enriched in your chamber.] (Richards 173)

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The scene has a structural parallel in the moment of undressing/dressing at the beginning of their marriage. Although in both contexts the husband determines the state (and style) of dress, a few differences appear in terms of how the character acts. During the wedding, Griselda remains silent as the women of the court dress her as part of the wedding ritual. At the moment of Gautier's repudiation, however, Griselda takes her clothes off by herself, claiming her agency through an eloquent speech.

Yet, another key difference exists between these two episodes: whereas Griselda's initial sartorial transformation (into a noblewoman and wife) takes place in Gautier's private chambers, the brutality of her repudiation occurs in public, at the court. Here, Griselda's strategic reference to the chamber points to marriage as both legal contract and spiritual covenant between man and wife. By explicitly referring to the location of the original act of adornment, Griselda calls Gautier out as someone whose word cannot be trusted, a man who will not honor a contract, legal or spiritual. Equally, Griselda's allusion to her initial transition from her father's house to her new husband's chamber foregrounds women's lack of agency in marriage. It is the transfer of women from one male space into another that expresses the change of status from daughter to wife.⁷ Furthermore, by alluding to Gautier's incapacity to observe a commitment, Christine implicitly restates Griselda's moral superiority.

Griselda's last sartorial transformation occurs at the very end of the story, after the Marquis reveals the truth: Griselda's children are still alive, and her daughter is in fact the young woman whom he claimed to be marrying. Griselda will get her title back, and domestic tranquility will finally be restored, it seems: "La fu autorisee Griselidis plus que oncques mais, sy fu revestue et paree moult richement" (909). [Griselda was restored to greater authority than ever before, and she was richly fitted out and bejeweled] (176). This last scene echoes the beginning of the tale—or rather, the marriage—once again: the ladies of the court will dress Griselda and thereby reify her transformation, again, into a noblewoman. Yet, there is another crucial difference: by using the term "autorisee," Christine renders Griselda the author of her nobility and her destiny. In doing so, Christine is also aligning Griselda as literary character with Christine's own literary activity. Indeed, when Christine draws on other authorizing structures (beyond Gautier) to restore Griselda's

authority, she affirms herself as a female author in a male-dominated world. The first part of the *Cité* is devoted to disproving common beliefs about women's inferiority, both by denouncing the difficulties women encounter in receiving an appropriate education and by establishing women's value philosophically and then historically. By telling these stories of "exceptional women," Christine is also claiming her own agency and authorship by proving herself deserving of her own space in the literary tradition.

One of Christine's first entries into public literary life is her well-known repudiation of a cornerstone text of medieval French vernacular literature: *Le Roman de la Rose*. Christine's own public authorship is thus largely foregrounded, at the outset, by an explicit challenge to male literary authority, and in particular, Jean de Meun as the major (and final) author of the *Rose*. As Quilligan argues, the *Cité* is an anti-misogynist willful reaction against *Le Roman de la Rose*. Christine develops "a repertoire of strategies for anti-misogynist rhetoric" according to which she revises and then rewrites male literary tradition in order to make it capable of "articulating a female's experience of history" (Quilligan 192).⁸ With this in mind, one can also interpret Christine's rewriting of Boccaccio as a way for her to overturn another foundational vernacular literary male authority and to begin to impose her own voice. Here, she will choose to depict key characters of Boccaccio's work in a different manner, while keeping the overall plot faithful to the original.

The core of Christine's reinterpretation of Boccaccio's tale lies in the way she transforms the female character. Throughout the entire tale of Griselda, the theme of women's body, both dressed and nude, recurs as both indirect allusion and direct concrete referent. For instance, to climb the social hierarchy and marry the Marquis, Griselda has to give up her old clothes; when she needs to leave, she does not own anything she can use to cover herself:

Toute nue de la maison de mon pere je yssis; et toute nue je y retourneray, sauve que ce me semble incouvenable que cestuy ventre, ouquel furent les deux enffans que tu as engendrez, deust apparoit tout nu devant le puepple ... je te pry que pour recompensacion de ma virginité que j'apportay en ton palais ... que il te plaise que une seulle chemise me soit laissiee, de quoy je couvreray le ventre de ta femme jadis marquise.' ... Adonc en la presence de tous les chevalier et dames, Griselidis

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se depoulla et deschauca, osta tous ses aournements, et ne luy remaint que sa seulle chemise. (Curnow 905)

[I left my father's house completely naked, except that it does not appear fitting to me that this womb, wherein lay the children which you fathered, should appear totally naked before the people, and so for this reason, if it pleases you, for no other ... that a single slip be granted to me, with which I shall cover the womb of your former wife and marquise ... Then Griselda stripped herself before all the knights and ladies, removing her shoes and all her jewelry, and she had on nothing except her slip.] (Richards 173)

Interestingly enough, by referring to herself as “former wife and marquise,” Griselda is again doubling down on the question of her legal status. Gautier took Griselda as his wife, thus legally granting her the title of marquise, but then he strips her of it without any explanation. In addition, even though Griselda is no longer marquise, she remains Gautier's wife, highlighting that the marriage commitment is one that cannot be rescinded.

The reference to female nakedness constitutes such a pivotal narrative moment in *Christine* as well as in Boccaccio, for different reasons. At the end of the *novella*, Dioneo, the narrator, takes advantage of the scene of Griselda undressing in order to deliver a sarcastic comment, whose sexual reference contrasts with the figural reading promoted by the critics:

Al quale non sarebbe forse stato male investito d'essersi abbattuto a una, che quando fuori di casa l'avesse in camicia cacciata, s'avesse sì ad un altro fatto scuotere il pelliccione, che riuscita ne fosse una bella roba. (*Dec.* 10.10.69)

[Perhaps it would have served him right if, instead, he had run into the kind of woman who, upon being thrown out of the house in her shirt, had found some guy to rub her fur and got a nice new dress in the bargain.] (Rebhorn 850)

Dioneo's lubricious remarks, as Robert Hollander and Courtney Cahill convincingly argue, confirm the explicitly anti-exemplary intent of the *novella* and the irony underlying the narration. This *novella* is also the last one in the *Decameron*, and as Millicent Marcus

underscores, its position is revelatory of how to interpret it (108). Despite the convincing arguments in favor of a figural reading, confirmed by the extensive religious imagery that Boccaccio consistently uses throughout the narrative, such a radical shift in literary register would be odd at the very least. Griselda's devotion is not exemplary, but rather exaggerated to such an extent that it becomes ridiculous, ultimately losing that solemnity that characterizes her in the first place (Courtney and Hollander 137).

On the contrary, Christine restores Griselda's exemplarity by downplaying Boccaccio's religious imagery. As Rosalind Brown-Grant has persuasively argued, Christine conceives and writes the *Cité* with a specific anti-misogynist agenda in mind. Even though Brown-Grant does not mention explicitly the episode of Griselda, Christine's intent is to denounce widespread abuses inflicted on women, and specifically, abuses grounded in common cultural narratives, such as the Griselda tale. For this reason, a character like Griselda, rewritten *ad hoc*, becomes the occasion for the author to denounce injustices and foster female solidarity. Rewriting Boccaccio, Christine reverses the norm, and grants agency to the female character, whose active choice to undress rejects the male figure's authority to do it for her or to her. The act of undressing loses its function as mere performance for a male spectator, and instead, transforms into a gesture of self-affirmation. Indeed, while it is an external presence that performs the act of dressing over Griselda's body, she acts on her own behalf in undressing herself. Removing the clothes that Gautier gave her allows Griselda to denounce publicly her husband's unjustified cruelty, marked by his breach of trust and social violence. In fact, even if Gautier wants to humiliate his wife by ordering her to undress in front of the court, he ends up confronted with the opposite effect: Griselda is entirely willing to demonstrate her purity through the very act meant to destroy her through abasement and to renounce immediately her privileges, thereby proving a complete detachment from material goods. Self-asserted nudity thus allows Griselda to regain her agency by rejecting social norms embodied by clothes.

To emphasize the poignancy of Griselda's words with respect to women's social condition, Christine, in contrast to Boccaccio, reduces the character's instances of direct discourse to two moments in the whole story in order to draw attention to the importance of her speeches. Not coincidentally, in Christine's rewriting, Griselda speaks directly for the first time when she undresses before leaving

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Gautier's court. Wanting to preserve her modesty, Griselda asks for a piece of clothing to cover herself. In making this request, she underscores that she did not have any choice when she left her father's house: she was not allowed to bring any items of clothing with her since she had nothing that would have been appropriate for a marquis's wife to wear. At the moment of repudiation these tables are turned: if Gautier sends her away from her marital home with nothing whatsoever, he will bring shame upon himself. Since Griselda describes her body as that which carried the children that Gautier fathered, his repudiation of her will, in effect, extend to his own "authoritative" body by making visible to all his ethical failings and lack of morality. In this context, Griselda's body standing nude in front of the court does not evoke sexual connotations, nor does it communicate either weakness or shame.

Yet, Christine also does not present the character of Griselda as a proper *exemplum* on the model of a recognized saint. Boccaccio structures his tale tightly around the contrast between Gautier's cruelty and Griselda's sanctity; the crueller he is, the more patient she is:

Che si potrà dir qui, se non che anche nelle povere case piocono dal cielo de' divini spiriti, come nelle reali di queglii che sarien più degni di guardar porci che d'aver sopr'uomini signoria? (*Dec.* 10.10.68).

[What more is there left to say except that divine spirits may rain down from the heavens even into the houses of the poor, just as there are others in royal palaces who might be better suited to tending pigs than ruling men?] (Rebhorn 850)

Christine, in contrast to Boccaccio, downplays this aura of sanctity and instead attributes Griselda's strength to her humanity, not to the divine. The specific terms Christine uses when she refers to Griselda emphasize the character's strength and agency, rather than her passivity. For instance, after the final reconciliation, the narrator, Droiture, enumerates Griselda's many qualities as "grant fermete, force et constance, et grant admiracion de sa vertu" (Curnow 908) [unsurpassed steadfastness, strength, and constancy and was filled with admiration for her virtue] (Richards 175). Christine's word choice creates an image of heroism distinct from Boccaccio's docile and submissive Griselda in the *Decameron*: "era tanto obbediente al

marito e tanto servente” (871) [“She was so obedient and attentive to her husband” Rebhorn 842].

Christine maintains Boccaccio’s image of Griselda as a woman subjugated to the husband in Gautier’s direct speech, which immediately follows the narrator’s intervention on Griselda’s strength and value. The Marquis wants to reiterate his wife’s exceptional nature, but he praises her for different reasons from those that the narrator had highlighted: “l’esprouve de ta constance et de la vraye foy, loyaulté et grant amour, obeyssance et humilité esprouvee que tu as vers moy” (Curnow 909) [the proof of your constancy and true faith, loyalty and great love, obedience and proven humility which you feel for me] (Richards 175). What stands out here is the presence of the husband as the sole focus of Griselda’s attention and reason for virtue. Moreover, this portrait revolves around religious values, such as faith and dedication, in line with Boccaccio’s source. Christine’s juxtaposition of these two radically different visions of Griselda—the one of the female narrator and the one of Gautier—shows the incapability of the male gaze to grasp Griselda’s true nature. As a matter of fact, the human tenacity that Christine foregrounds is in Boccaccio a pearly devotion to patient piety: “La donna con paziente animo” (873) [The lady listened patiently] (Rebhorn 844); “frutto della tua lunga pazienza” (877) [the fruit of your long patience] (Rebhorn 849). In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio, through Dioneo’s focalization, evokes Griselda’s patience in five different occurrences, and it becomes the distinctive feature that makes her more saintlike than human. Her description is highly reminiscent of that of the patriarch Job from the Old Testament. Confirmation of this connection between Boccaccio’s Griselda and Job is in the way that both characters embrace their fate: “He said: ‘Naked I came forth from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I go back there’” (*New American Bible*, Jb 1:21). Stripped from all his belongings and naked, Job embraces death, as Griselda does when she returns to her father’s house.⁹ By comparing Griselda to Job and emphasizing her transcendental goodness to such an extent that it becomes exaggerated, Boccaccio turns the *novella*, which Petrarca interpreted as an *exemplum*, into the parody of itself. In this way, Boccaccio deprives Griselda of her human willpower, which is central in Christine’s rewriting.

Griselda’s second instance of direct speech in the *Cité* further accentuates her human strength and occurs when she begs Gautier not to harass his future wife as he did her. Following Krueger’s

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observations, in comparing Griselda's speeches in Christine's version to those in Boccaccio's, readers immediately notice fundamental differences in the style rather than in the content:

Ma quanto posso vi priego che quelle punture, le quali all'altra che vostra fu già, déste, non diate a questa, che appena che io creda che ella le potesse sostenere. (*Dec.* 10.10.59)

[However, I beg you with all my heart not to inflict on her the same wounds you once gave the other spouse you used to have, because I find it hard to believe she'll be able to endure them.] (Rebhorn 849)

Mais d'une chose par bonne foy je te vueil prier et admonnester, c'est que tu ne la vueilles pas molestier ne aguillonner des aguillons dont tu as l'autre si fort esprouvee. Car ceste est plus jeune et plus souef nourrie ; si ne pourroit pas souffrir par aventure come l'autre a fait. (Curnow 908)

[I would however make a single request of you and give you only one bit of advice: that you neither trouble nor needle her with the torments you inflicted on your first wife. This woman is younger and has been raised more delicately so that she probably cannot bear as much as your other wife did.] (Richards 175)

In both cases, Griselda asks Gautier to have mercy upon the young girl who is about to become his wife. However, focusing on Christine's linguistic choice helps us understand the direction that the author is giving to her rewriting. By using the term "puncture," Boccaccio echoes the Epistle to the Galatians, in which Saint Paul claims to bear on his body the marks of Jesus Christ. By thus alluding to the stigmata, Boccaccio establishes a clear connection between Griselda and Christ, and reinforces an aura of holiness all around her. On the other hand, compared to Boccaccio, Christine uses terms such as "molestier," "aguillonner," "aguillons," and "souffrir" to create vividly domestic images of violence, which are absent in Boccaccio. In Christine's version, the prayer becomes, in effect, an occasion for denouncing Gautier and the abuses of a violent husband over the female body and soul. Griselda is not really addressing the man here; instead, she is speaking primarily to a female audience. Christine's

ideal reader may well be a female one who not only understands but can also relate to Griselda's words. In this regard, as Rosalind Brown-Grant states, Christine is in line with her late medieval male contemporaries, linking the figure of the author to that of the teacher, or better said, the "advisor" (Brown-Grant 3).

This female presence, embodied both in the female audience and in the person of the author, invites a reading of Christine's work through the lens of Luce Irigaray's seminal text, *Speculum de l'autre femme*, a critique of Lacanian theory through the lens of female subjectivity. In fact, while men, according to Jacques Lacan's theory, constitute their subjectivity through their own image, women, according to Irigaray, recognize themselves and constitute their femininity via other women. For Irigaray, women constitute the process of knowing themselves through recourse to physical acts that pass through bodily awareness. For this reason, Irigaray sets the image of the speculum against the Lacanian mirror. Whereas the mirror passively reflects the image of the subject, the speculum allows for multiple refractory views of the female body, both by itself and by others. The speculum, as a medical tool, used by health practitioners to examine the female body, also allows a woman to achieve external visualization of the intimacy of her own body. The speculum, simply put, allows both self and others to view some of the most private elements of the female body. Moreover, the term speculum alludes also to the speculum as medieval genre, intended as a compendium—an encyclopedic text that explicitly encodes male authoritative knowledge, which Christine challenges with her *Cité des dames*.

Reexamining the polysemous nature of Griselda in the context of Irigaray's "autre femme" draws attention to the fact that Griselda starts talking by using the first person, and then slips into the third, even using the term "autre" repeatedly to refer to herself while addressing Gautier: Griselda calls herself "*l'autre* [que tu as] si fort esprouvee" [the other [whom you] tested so severely]; she then immediately states, "ceste . . . ne pourroit pas souffrir par aventure come *l'autre* a fait" [that one . . . wouldn't be able to endure as much suffering as the other one did]. When she mentions the new wife by using the third person "ceste," she is creating an immediate identification between the two women. Indeed, Christine's Griselda is acutely aware of the injustice to which she is subjected, and she expresses this awareness through the lens of linguistic alienation from the self. In doing so, "ceste," which changes its sense, too, according

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to the linguistic context, assumes a universal value, simultaneously referring to Gautier's new bride and to any other woman. Christine's technique is a powerful one. In relating for us an individual woman's experience of alienation and in allowing the character to articulate it for herself on her own terms, Christine gives us a portrayal of alienation capable of representing multiple fractures in the lens of subjectivity: the "other woman" and all women, the "other women" and one's own self. Whether Griselda, Christine, or the reader finds herself paradoxically grounded in alienation and solidarity: the alienation felt at the heart of female subjectivity when confronted with dominant discourses of misogyny, and solidarity promoted among women as a productive response to this profound alienation.

In *Visualizing Boccaccio*, Jill M. Ricketts devotes the first chapter to an analysis of the relationship between Griselda and Gautier in Boccaccio's tale and the effect that it has on the audience of the *Decameron*. Ricketts emphasizes how the audience feels a profound sense of discomfort towards both a manipulative character, like Gautier, and a passive one, like Griselda. Whereas in Christine's rewriting, Griselda's resistance results in a harsh critique of the patriarchy, in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Griselda does not redeem herself from her condition of passivity. However, although the title of Ricketts' book refers specifically to illustrations of the *Decameron*, this chapter does not discuss any visualization. Indeed, illustrations would be helpful to further our understanding of the reception and visual interpretation of the dynamics of gender and class distinction in this narrative. As Todd Boli asks in his book review, what could be learned from actually looking at a visualization of the Griselda story? (508). In the article "Attorno al corpo di Griselda," Giovanna Angeli includes several fifteenth-century illustrations displaying key moments in Griselda's story. Among these examples, however, there appears no illuminated manuscript in which visualization is invested with paratextual value, nor any whose direct interaction of text and image allows a comparative reading.¹⁰ Nevertheless, a notable and illuminating example of the visual interpretation of the character of Griselda appears in the manuscript Pal. Lat. 1989.¹¹

This beautifully illuminated manuscript dates back to 1414 and is the result of the joint efforts of copyist Laurent de Premierfait and the Master of *La Cité des dames*. The illustration—tempera and gold foil on parchment—appears on folio 320r, at the bottom of the page, and depicts two crucial moments in Griselda's life, which are juxtaposed to each other and framed under two arcades. In the scene on the left,

Griselda is represented in the act of undressing. Even though she is still partially dressed, the illuminator suggests Griselda's nudity by depicting her barefoot and with unadorned hair. Gautier's authoritative posture is represented by his firm open hand, ready to receive the dress that Griselda is removing. Griselda, on the other hand, looks downward, avoiding Gautier's gaze, in a posture of total submission.

Conversely, on the right, domestic peace has been reestablished, and Griselda again dons her sumptuous dress and all her accessories, including hair decorations and an ornate belt. Hindman and Hedeman have underscored the striking ability of the Master of *La Cité des dames* to reproduce the finest details of contemporary clothing and other setting elements with a notable accuracy that is one of the main virtues of this artist and his workshop. In contrast to the scene of the undressing, Griselda's and Gautier's heads are aligned at the same level, and Griselda seems to be smiling at her husband as her gaze meets his. The scene on the right follows the typical presentational logic of medieval iconography with the man located on the right and woman on the left. However, in the scene on the left, we observe a full reversal of this presentation: Gautier is on the left, while Griselda stands to the right; the female figure is the one situated at the "right side" indicative of the divine, whereas the male figure is in the position of weakness and "error" traditionally attributed to the woman.

The children, who appear next to Griselda to complete the family portrait, are dressed as richly as their parents. The Master of *La Cité des dames* was well known for his careful attention to depicting an abundance of details adopted from the scenes of domestic life, as evinced also by the presence of the dog and the dinnerware on the table. The choice of the artist to make this illumination the last of the entire manuscript is the ultimate demonstration of the pivotal role that the gesture of undressing has in the development of the plot and imagery of Griselda's story. Even if Christine gives to Griselda a connotation different from Boccaccio's by eliminating imagery of deferential obedience and having her denounce the injustice of women's condition, both the *Decameron* and the *Cité* seem to mainly revolve around sartorial transformations, although for different purposes. Interestingly enough, the Master of *La Cité des dames*, the artist responsible for illustrating Christine's works, did so under her direction; it is thus conceivable that she gave explicit input for the

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illuminations of other manuscripts particularly dear to her, such as Boccaccio's.¹²

The scene of undressing, the closing illumination of the *Decameron's* manuscript and a key ritual gesture in medieval society (and our own), still speaks to us today. The example of Griselda, while not so exemplary in the canonical sense, becomes, in Christine's hands, a new way to understand the female body as that which does not have to follow the logic of the patriarchy, but instead, can open up new possibilities in studies on female corporeality as an expression of the self. It also has the potential to serve as an expression of solidarity in the constitution of a new community. Through her rewriting, Christine is able to confront Boccaccio and establish her own authorial presence. Boccaccio, one of the most influential *auctoritates* in the medieval literary canon, becomes a crucial touchstone for Christine's own self-affirmation. Future research into other occurrences of Boccaccian characters, not only from the *Decameron* but also from *De mulieris claris*, will doubtless cast additional light on the way Christine interprets Boccaccio's source, channels it, and makes it part of the new voice with which she advocates for female agency and solidarity.

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NOTES

¹ The status of Boccaccio's *novella* is highly debated among scholars and will be problematized in this paper later on.

² As both Maureen Quilligan and Rosalind Brown-Grant point out, Christine has a female audience in mind when she writes the *Cité*, which is without a doubt the text that best embodies her constant attention to the defense of women.

³ All the citations from the original text of *La Cité des dames* in Old French come from Curnow. Maureen Cheney Curnow's dissertation is the available edition for the text in Old French. English translations of these passages are from Richards, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ For further information on Boccaccio's *Decameron* as one of the sources of the *Cité* see also Bozzolo.

⁵ It is worth mentioning that besides Boccaccio, the critics have pointed at other authors who have recounted Griselda's story and who may have influenced Christine's rewriting, namely Petrarch in the *Seniles*, and Philippe de Mézières in *Livre de la vertu du sacrement du mariage*. According to Angeli, Christine disregarded Petrarch's adaptation, preferring Mézières's text, references to which can be found in Griselda's episode in the *Cité*. For further information see also Koutouzoff.

⁶ For further information on the role of clothing in the courtly context, amorous attire and gendered sartorial difference between men and women, see Burns.

⁷ In *Visualizing Boccaccio: Studies on Illustrations of the Decameron, from Giotto to Pasolini*, Ricketts (20) emphasizes how Griselda has no mother and she is caught between two patriarchal figures.

⁸ The use of the term anti-misogynist as found in Quilligan refers to Christine's explicit and deliberate stance against the misogynist literary tradition and defense of women. For further information, see also McLeod.

⁹ For a more in-depth analysis of Griselda's comparison with Job, see: Ferrante.

¹⁰ For a deeper understanding of the visual tradition of Boccaccio's works, see Branca. On Griselda's depiction see especially Simcik in volume two of Branca.

¹¹ Readers can browse the digitized copy of the manuscript MS Pal. Lat. 1989 at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana: digi.vatlib.it/view/bav_pal_lat_1989/0651.

¹² About this topic see also Laura Rinaldi Dufresne, *The Fifteenth-Century Illustrations of Christine De Pizan's 'The Book of the City of Ladies' and 'The Treasure of the City of Ladies': Analyzing the Relation of the Pictures to the Text*. Edwin Mellen, 2012.

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SECTION 2
BOOK REVIEWS

REVIEWS

Abbiati, Roberto, and Simone Marchesi, *A proposito di Dante. Cento passi nella Commedia*. Rovereto, Keller editore, 2020. Pp. 252.

In their collaborative book, Simone Marchesi and Roberto Abbiati suggest a synecdochic approach to the *Comedy*, inviting their readers to view the poem with fresh eyes.

A proposito di Dante is the beginning of a conversation, one that is relaxed and friendly, as well as profound and full of unexpected detours. The *cento passi* are a selection of one hundred tercets from the *Comedy* accompanied by one hundred drawings, presented as windows into the whole poem. They are also one hundred steps, a stroll, a peripatetic exchange on topics such as life and afterlife in the Middle Ages, as well as timeless questions and reflections on the meanings of existence for men and women throughout the centuries. From the very beginning, the authors invite the readers to join the conversation: Simone Marchesi addresses them directly using the second person, and Roberto Abbiati shows Dante as a strikingly real figure, who gazes, gestures, and walks toward them from the front cover, asking them to read just a few of his verses.

Marchesi selected one tercet per canto, a challenge that allowed him to approach the even most suspicious and difficult reader with a Japandi-style layout: a minimalist, almost entirely white-page, on which the words sit comfortably on large, clean margins. Abbiati completed each tercet with a drawing, a sort of Instagram post reacting to a tweet. The commentary plays then its part: measured and self-contained, it dives deeply into centuries of annotations, *lecturae*, and scholarship, and surfaces again, condensed, concise, provocative. Bearing just one (key) title, one tercet, one image, and the textual comment, every double page takes the form of a modern emblem for the non-initiated reader. Visual and verbal elements complete each other and are accessible to those curious enough to take a look, progressing in linear fashion from cover to cover, jumping around, or resting on selected passages.

The authors succeeded in keeping the conversation light yet profound, and vivid throughout all the three realms. The black-and-white contrasts that characterize Hell soften gradually, and lighter shades make space for music at the beginning of *Purgatory*. Highlighting the novel geography of this third place in between Hell and Paradise, the authors transport us to other liminal places of our own time. While in the first canticle they invite the reader to

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undertake the journey, in *Purgatory* those of us who have accepted the invitation are traveling together. Later, in Heaven, Dante gradually disappears from the illustrated pages as he walks with us to the first spheres, and his absence from the illustrations establishes a more explicit contemporary engagement with the text.

Abbiati's drawing of Dante feels like a statue and a cartoon at the same time. He leans towards the first page from the right margin, for literally "the straight way is lost": his dramatic profile and tense hands show the readers his struggle upon finding oneself in a savage, dense, and harsh wood. Far away from the hieratic profiles we have learned to associate with the great poet, Dante's head and hands dominate the first images, and recur throughout the entire book, more often than any other image. If the readers think they have grasped Abbiati's version of the poet from the cover and the first illustration, they would be surprised, as Dante's hands and head metamorphose in the second, third, and fourth cantos, filling the gap between Dante and antiquity, and the divide between Dante's time and ours. While Virgil puts his hand on Dante's own, we enter the third canto and "the city of woe". Dante's readers will certainly remember the sign on the gate: "Justice moved my maker on high. / Divine power made me, / wisdom supreme, and primal love" (Hollander translation). Those who are unfamiliar with Dante's verses will be reassured that no prerequisites are necessary. Marchesi and Abbiati, with their two-word title and close-up of black and white hands grasping one another, lead us to focus on what Justice means to us as readers from the twenty-first century. Then, in the fourth canto, it is now Dante's head that transforms, creating an ambiguous image that combines opposites, dark and light, past and present.

The visual tradition of Dante's *Comedy* is almost as long as its textual one. The earliest illustrations appeared just a few decades after the poet's death, and all the manuscripts show a strong focus on one aspect that must have produced a considerable effect on the first readers: Dante the poet becomes Dante the character, and the readers are invited to follow him on the journey to the afterlife, and to visualize Dante's own vision. What did it mean, for a fourteenth-century reader, to follow this incredibly audacious katabasis: not that of Ulysses or Aeneas, but that of a contemporary individual? Not a predestined hero, but a Guelf who fought in battle; a Prior of the Florentine Republic sentenced to a life in exile and treated as a dangerous enemy to his homeland; a poet writing in the vernacular, whose growing fame had not yet crystallized his role as the father of

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the new Italian literary language. The first illustrations needed to insist, incessantly, almost obsessively, on this exceptional aspect, emphasizing the presence of Dante and Virgil as protagonists and eyewitnesses of this unprecedented journey. Printed woodcuts over the centuries, along with twenty-first-century illustrations, would often share this same focus. Abbiati, instead, seems to concentrate on Dante the poet, rather than Dante the character.

Abbiati's Dante is a canonized poet, wearing the laurel crown which he received only after his death, when he was called "supreme" and "divine". Nevertheless, his metonymical hands and his dramatic expressions are powerfully human. At times his body seems to be carved in a monolith, other times it looks like a two-dimensional puppet made of different pieces of fabric; and yet he walks the pages with pensive strides and sudden jerks and twitches, emphasized by foreshortened perspectives and unexpected angles.

Struggle, tension, rage, and darkness seem to prevail, as they should, in Hell. But in the eleventh canto, gazing at the starry sky reflected in the sketch of a human eye, the reader catches a glimpse of the luminous end that awaits. All the vulnerability of human nature and the inherent power of *sentire* and *intellegere* coexist in a small image, a synthesis of microcosm and macrocosm that anticipates the very essence of the journey as well as the last word of each canticle: "stars."

Marchesi's Dante is a poet we are invited to meet, forgetting for a moment his venerable grandiosity and the seven centuries that separate us, in order to get acquainted or re-acquainted with the *Comedy*. On the 700th anniversary of Dante's immortality, Simone Marchesi and Roberto Abbiati invite any and all readers to read and to imagine.

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Bregni, Simone. *Locus Amoenus. Nuovi strumenti di analisi della Commedia*. Ravenna: Longo, 2020. Pp. 248.

Il libro risponde criticamente a un saggio del 2004 (“Against Intertextuality,” *Philosophy and Literature*, 28), nel quale William Irwin invitava, in una forte reazione all’approccio critico fondato da Julia Kristeva e Roland Barthes, ad abbandonare l’intertestualità come metodo di indagine critica. Irwin, Bregni nota, scriveva da studioso di filosofia, con una prospettiva, quindi, diversa da chi si occupa di critica letteraria. Simone Bregni argomenta, al contrario, e da quest’ultima specola critica, che l’intertestualità è tuttora un approccio vivo e proficuo, offrendo una lettura del poema dantesco fondata proprio sulle dinamiche di allusione, citazione e imitazione che la *Commedia* dantesca intrattiene nei confronti della letteratura classica e biblica.

Dopo una breve introduzione ricapitolativa, che prende le mosse appunto dal saggio di Irwin, il primo capitolo (“Intertestualità, interdiscorsività e letteratura medievale”) getta le basi metodologiche per la trattazione della tesi dell’autore, fondata sulle importanti ricerche nel campo dell’intertestualità a partire da Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Michail Bachtin, e per quanto riguarda più specificamente la letteratura italiana, Cesare Segre, Maria Corti, Stanley Benfell e Christopher Kleinhenz. Con queste autrici e autori, Bregni stabilisce un dialogo critico puntuale e complesso, avvalendosi—opportunamente—anche della critica americana.

Il secondo capitolo, “Paradisus terrestris – Loci amoeni imperfetti, *Inferno* IV e *Purgatorio* VII,” si addentra nel testo dantesco presentando la selva oscura come luogo letterario e simbolico opposto al giardino delle delizie. Di quest’ultimo esistono però varie versioni, nella tradizione letteraria e anche specificamente nella *Commedia*, a partire dal palazzo dei pagani virtuosi nel Limbo di *Inferno* IV e dalla valletta dei principi di *Purgatorio* VII. Bregni mostra in modo dettagliato e convincente come gli elementi costitutivi di questi luoghi letterari provengano a Dante tanto dalla traduzione bucolica greco-latina quanto da quella biblica, specialmente Genesi e Apocalisse. Si deve dissentire dall’affermazione che “[a]ll’interno del limbo il poeta ha posto un’oasi di quiete e serenità per le anime nobili dell’era pagana” (50), perché il testo di *Inferno* IV 26-28 dice chiaramente che se nel limbo i dannati non piangono, essi però sospirano fino a far tremare l’aria

per un dolore tutto interiore e psicologico (“non avea pianto mai che di sospiri / che l’aura eterna facevan tremare; / ciò avvenia di duol senza martiri”). Ma a parte questo, il capitolo argomenta con efficacia che l’intertestualità classica è volta a ritrarre un locus amoenus di una certa piacevolezza ma escatologicamente imperfetto, i cui limiti sono invece messi in evidenza dell’intertestualità biblica (58).

Il terzo capitolo, intitolato “Paradisus terrestris – Il paradiso terrestre (*Purgatorio* XXII-XXIII; XXVIII-XXXIII)” prende in analisi le sezioni della seconda cantica—compresi canti dei golosi—che presentano il mito classico dell’Età dell’Oro come dilatazione del significato allegorico del testo per mettere in evidenza, in contrasto, la verità rivelata dalle scritture sacre, sempre attraverso un sottile intreccio allusivo. Qui, Bregni estende le sue considerazioni alle relazioni intertestuali e interdiscorsive che la *Commedia* intratterrebbe (il condizionale è dettato dal dibattito aperto sulla questione, giustamente riconosciuto da Bregni) con il *Liber Scalae Machometi*, e a quelle, più solidamente accertate, con la tradizione romanza (la pastourelle cavalcantiana in *Purg.* XXVIII).

Un caso più specifico rappresenta la trattazione della processione nell’Eden, oggetto del quarto capitolo (“Paradisus terrestris - *Purgatorio* XXIX”), in cui l’autore si muove a partire dallo studio di Lino Pertile *La puttana e il gigante*, per distanziarsene progressivamente e considerare la processione—che Bregni definisce “sacra rappresentazione”—il compendio del cammino salvifico del pellegrino (120). L’autore rileva l’unicità e la singolare assenza di precedenti letterari per la “sacra rappresentazione” di *Purg.* XXIX, rintracciandone però alcuni elementi nel Testamento di Abramo, testo pseudoepigrafico del I-II secolo (123), e in un mosaico nella chiesa romana di Santa Prassede (129, nota 47), che costituirebbero quindi possibili intertestualità e addirittura intermedialità. Data l’insistenza dell’autore sulle espressioni “sacra rappresentazione” e “dramma sacro” (120-124), la trattazione di Bregni avrebbe forse potuto esplicitare ciò che comunque qui si intuisce fra le righe, e cioè che le fonti dell’ispirazione dantesca vanno oltre la sfera strettamente scrittoria, estendendosi alle arti figurative e alle esperienze teatrali e performative accessibili a Dante nei luoghi e tempi della sua vita. Ma d’altronde il fulcro del ragionamento di Locus amoenus rimane strettamente letterario, basato sulla relazione dialogica fra testi scritti, che diviene strumento ermeneutico e addirittura salvifico se “[l]’intertestualità, da parte dello scrittore, è strumento allegorico-drammatico; ma dalla parte del lettore si profila come strumento

ermeneutico, in quanto illumina e permette di chiarire il senso allegorico generale non solo di uno specifico passo, ma, in ultima analisi, del poema intero” (124).

Si prosegue con “Paradisus terrestris – *Purgatorio* XXX-XXXIII,” che sviluppa ulteriormente la tesi che l’intertestualità biblica, progressivamente superando per densità e per oscurità di significato, l’intertestualità classica, prepara la via al paradisus coelestis. Particolarmente suggestiva è la riflessione sulla drammatizzazione del battesimo nel Lete, che è, sì, un chiaro topos classico, ma in questo caso cristianizzato in funzione salvifica: non la vita va dimenticata nelle acque del fiume edenico, ma la “negatività della vita,” il che salvaguarda quindi la positività della vita terrena, preservata dall’immersione nell’Eunoè. L’effetto straniante del gioco intertestuale, e la necessità per il lettore di interpretare sulla base dei riferimenti intertestuali, conclude Bregni, avvicinano la narrazione dantesca alla letteratura profetico-sibillina.

Il sesto e ultimo capitolo “Paradisus coelestis. Il paradiso celeste e la beatitudine spirituale” ribadisce ed espande le conclusioni che l’intertestualità funge da strumento poetico, allegorico ed ermeneutico per orientare il lettore al senso ultimo della scrittura e della lettura: codificare e far recepire il messaggio di Salvezza del cristianesimo. Le ultime pagine di questo avvincente saggio argomentano dunque che per il topos del locus amoenus, Dante si avvale sia di fonti classiche e pagane sia di fonti cristiane (liturgiche, teologiche, e bibliche) e che queste due tradizioni sono impiegate con uno scopo ed un effetto precisi nell’economia testuale della *Commedia*. L’intertestualità con la letteratura pagana, sostiene Bregni, prevale nelle sezioni che evocano il paradiso terrestre, presentato come perduto e limitato, colmo di una piacevolezza ingannevole, di contro a quello celeste, vero traguardo escatologico dell’umanità (83). Diversi punti del poema richiamano il mito classico dell’hortus deliciarum, spiega l’autore, attraverso riferimenti intertestuali e interdiscorsivi: il limbo, la valletta dei principi e la cornice purgatoriale dei golosi, dove la presenza dell’albero rimanda al topos del giardino delle delizie. Al contrario, i rimandi alla letteratura cristiana mostrano invece come “attraverso un’intertestualità di tipo biblico, Dante stia additando al credente l’intera Rivelazione, il cammino di Salvezza” (112).

Le osservazioni dell’autore mostrano una certa finezza interpretativa e vanno anche oltre l’approccio strettamente intertestuale, proponendo analisi linguistiche e grammaticali volte a

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sottolineare, ad esempio, la strategia con cui il poeta invita l'immedesimazione del lettore nel pellegrino Dante/Everyman (109), o questioni filosofico-teologiche poste nei termini della scolastica medievale come quella del libero arbitrio (147-149). Solidi sono anche gli elementi di coerenza interna dell'argomentazione, basati sulla tradizione critica degli studi intertestuali sia teorici sia direttamente collegati al testo dantesco. Se qualche piccolo refuso rischia di confondere il lettore non specialista (zeia mania a p. 162, anziché theia mania come invece appare correttamente scritto a pp. 119, 183 e 217 nota 24), il saggio rimane uno strumento critico utile che rilancia convincentemente l'opportunità e l'utilità dell'approccio intertestuale nella letteratura medievale e in particolare negli studi danteschi.

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Pellegrini, Paolo. *Dante Alighieri. Una vita*. Turin: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 2021. Pp. 246.

The past decade has seen a number of new biographies dedicated to Dante, especially more recently in the lead-up to the 700th anniversary of the poet's death. This tendency to biographize is particularly understandable in the case of a poet whose main works are all written through the lens of the first person and who repeatedly attempts to write and re-write his own poetic and individual history. The incidence of autobiographical material throughout Dante's production (and especially in his vernacular works) poses a problem for the modern biographer: to what extent is the poet himself to be believed? Is the material of autobiography transferable to biography, and indeed can a literary work be read as a source for biographical material? The major contributions to the genre, such as Marco Santagata's *Dante. Il romanzo della sua vita* (2012), Giorgio Inglese's *Vita di Dante. Una biografia possibile* (2015), and now most recently Paolo Pellegrini's *Dante Alighieri. Una vita* (2021), and Elisa Brillì and Giuliano Milani's *Vite nuove. Biografia e autobiografia di Dante* (2021) are in great part defined by their respective authors' willingness to take the author at his word (or lack thereof). This same issue has also recently been the subject of debate among scholars in the 2018 volume of *Dante Studies*. The scarcity of reliable sources related to Dante's life further compounds the problem, often leaving biographers with no choice but to make hypothetical inferences from the poet's own writings. In the introduction to his work, Pellegrini explicitly situates his biography with respect to those that have preceded it: having delineated the advantages and disadvantages of the more novelistic approach adopted by Santagata (and before him, Umberto Carpi, in *La nobiltà di Dante*) and the more philologically-oriented method adopted by Inglese, Pellegrini ends up siding largely with the latter. He explains that the attempt to see the *Comedy* as a direct reflection of historical and biographical realities constitutes a risky enterprise for the historian, given the oftentimes fragile link between the two. Consequently, Pellegrini stresses the need for external sources to confirm or confute hypotheses based on Dante's own literary production, and the result is a highly rigorous historical approach that, perhaps more than any other Dantean biography before it, aims to

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foreground both the sources that it employs and the work of the historian in piecing them together.

Pellegrini's book begins with a chapter on Florence in the 12th and 13th centuries, which aims to describe the fundamental political, social and cultural context that conditioned Dante's life and serves as a highly useful historical introduction for those less familiar with the period. The biography proper therefore starts with the second chapter, which describes Dante's Florentine period between 1265, the year of his birth, and his exile in 1302. Here, Pellegrini manages to intertwine personal and literary history, giving not only an account of Dante's youth but also of his literary production, most notably the *Vita nuova* and the poet's other *rime*. The largely literary focus of the second chapter yields to a more political one in the third, which traces the poet's involvement in Florentine politics and the events that eventually precipitated his exile. The first period of the poet's banishment along with the composition of the treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio* are described in the fourth chapter, with Pellegrini arguing that Dante may have spent much of this time in Verona, where the first three books of the *prosimetrum* are likely to have been written. Dante's return to Tuscany and the beginning of the *Comedy* are treated in the fifth chapter, where the author deals with the legend surrounding the first seven *canti* of the poem (which, according to Boccaccio, were written in Florence) as well as the question of Dante's travels to Paris (considered unlikely by Pellegrini). Remaining true to the historical rigor that he displays throughout the volume, the author adopts a conservative approach to the poem's dating, limiting himself to establishing the *termini post quem* of individual *canti*, based on the historical events they refer to. Central to Dante's political views and activities is Henry VII's descent into Italy to be crowned Holy Roman Emperor, which occupies the entirety of Chapter Six. Pellegrini agrees with Petrocchi that Dante returned to Verona sometime around 1312, where under the patronage of Cangrande della Scala he would go on to write the *Purgatorio*, as well as part of the *Paradiso*. According to the biography, the composition of the *Quaestio de aqua et terra* and the *Monarchia* coincides with the end of Dante's sojourn in that city around 1320, before the poet moved to Ravenna. The final chapter is then dedicated in part to Dante's epistolary exchanges with Giovanni del Virgilio as well as to the poem's earliest dissemination by the poet's sons, Pietro and Iacopo.

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The portrait that Pellegrini paints is that of a particularly Veronese Dante, especially during the early period of the latter's exile. The biography also gives him the opportunity to weigh in on several key issues of authorship. Thus, following the opinion of Gianfranco Contini, the author argues for the attribution to Dante of the *Fiore*, and the same goes for the Epistle to Cangrande. As far as sources are concerned, it is of notable interest that throughout the biography Pellegrini lends particular credence to the testimony of Leonardo Bruni and Biondo Flavio (as Inglese does as well), though their temporal remove from Dante and the philological standards of the time may make them less trustworthy sources than the author assumes. But what is perhaps even more valuable than Pellegrini's *prises de position* is the transparency of his argumentation and his foregrounding of the sources he uses. One may agree or disagree with the conclusions he reaches, but his rigorous historical approach will no doubt be of great use to future scholars of Dante. The perhaps inevitable side-effect of this more philological method is that Pellegrini's biography lacks the novel-like fluency and readability of Santagata's. The work does not try to in any way psychologize Dante or paint a broader picture of him as a character, preferring instead to stick to whatever facts can be known or deduced from the material available. What Pellegrini clearly does do is attempt to strike a balance between reaching a scholarly audience and a broader one which may lack the former's expertise. In part, this work of mediation is accomplished via chapter sub-sections on broader topics such as the *stil novo* or Dante's minor works; while someone familiar with the subject can skip over them, they may prove beneficial to others encountering the poet's work for the first time. The biography's readability, even in its drier, more technical moments, is also undeniably an advantage in reaching a more diverse reading public. University students working on Dante will find Pellegrini's biography particularly useful, not only for the wealth of information it offers but also for its transparent historical methodology. For the general reader, it serves as an excellent counterpoint to Santagata's work, and will in all likelihood be preferred by those who favor a more philologically-oriented approach to Dante's life and works.

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