

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

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 'nmanellata 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 Sieneese 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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