

**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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