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Vertical Readings in Dante's *Comedy*. Volume 2
| George Corbett, Heather Webb

18. Women, War and Wisdom¹

Anne C. Leone

p. 151-171

Full text

- 1 Many aspects of the eighteenth cantos of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* resist meaningful comparison. The cantos differ significantly in terms of their dominant imagery,

motifs, structure, topography and astronomy, and characters. Nonetheless, despite these major differences, there are some suggestive parallels between the cantos that relate to their portrayal of women. Across the Eighteens, Dante alludes to female figures in classical, biblical and historical sources, which are often — but not always — negative and narrowly prescribed. Positive and negative images of women in the cantos share a number of characteristics and behaviours, and women are often defined in terms of their political or social functions — specifically in terms of how they aid or impede men engaged in military or heroic exploits, or in terms of their reproductive roles.

2 The topography of each canto could hardly be more different. At the beginning of *Inferno* xviii, Geryon sets the pilgrim and Virgil down in the first *bolgia* of the Malebolge. The narrative voice describes the structure of the eighth circle, comparing the rocky, iron-coloured terrain of the place to the defensive architecture surrounding a castle (ll. 1–18). *Purgatorio* xviii, by contrast, barely mentions the setting, although we may infer from the previous canto that it takes place on the fourth terrace where *acedia* is purged. The appearance of the moon — shaped like a bucket and dimming the other stars — comprises the only topographical and astronomical image in the canto (ll. 76–78).

3 If we consider as ‘astronomical’ the image of the souls of the blessed appearing as lights in the heavens, then *Paradiso* xviii — predictably — contains more astronomical images than the other two cantos. While still in the Heaven of Mars, Dante witnesses Cacciaguida’s ascent to the cross of light, as well as the simultaneous flashing and naming of other members of the Church Militant on the cross (ll. 34–48). Turning to Beatrice (l. 52), Dante realizes that he has risen up to the Heaven of Jupiter (l. 69), where the souls of the blessed, singing, flying and dancing across the sky, spell out the first sentence of the Book of Wisdom: ‘Diligite iustitiam

qui iudicatis terram' [Love justice, you that are the judges of the earth] (ll. 73–93),² the 'M' of the last word taking on the shape of an eagle (l. 107) before sprouting into the figure of a lily (l. 113).

4 The characters that the travellers meet and the activities in which they engage also differ significantly across the cantos. In the first *bolgia* of *Inferno* xviii, the pilgrim and Virgil witness the punishment of the pimps and the seducers, who walk naked in two lines moving in opposite directions, like people crossing the Ponte S. Angelo in Rome during the Jubilee (ll. 28–33), while demons whip them (ll. 35–36). In the second *bolgia*, they find the flatterers, who, immersed in human excrement and suffocating on the mouldy vapour rising from the *bolgia* below, strike and scratch themselves (ll. 103–08; 131). The figures appearing in *Inferno* xviii come from sources both contemporary (Venedico Caccianemico, who pimped his sister Ghisolabella to the Marchese Obizzo II da Este, and Alessio Intermineri of Lucca, who beats his own head, hair wet with shit, denying his sin, ll. 121–26), and classical (Jason, who impregnated and abandoned both Hypsipyle and Medea, ll. 85–96, and Thais, a prostitute guilty of flattering her 'drudo' [lover], ll. 130–36).

5 In *Purgatorio* xviii, by contrast, Virgil and Dante speak with only one soul, although they see and hear others running along the terrace purging the vice of *acedia*: Gerard, who was the Abbot of San Zeno in Verona under emperor Frederick I Barbarossa and who died in 1187, and about whom nothing more is known. The other individuals mentioned in the canto, drawn from biblical and classical sources, are not characters as such, but are presented by the penitent souls as *exempla* of their vice and its opposing virtue. The positive *exempla* are the Virgin Mary who ran to congratulate Elizabeth when she heard about her pregnancy from the Angel Gabriel (Luke 1.39–42), and Julius Caesar who rushed to battle in Spain (*Purg.*, xviii. 100–02; and compare Book iii

of Lucan's *Pharsalia*). The negative *exempla* are the Israelites who did not make it to the Promised Land (*Purg.*, xviii. 133–35; and compare Numbers 14.20–33), and the Trojan women who stayed in Sicily when Aeneas continued on to Italy to found Rome (*Purg.*, xviii. 136–38; and compare *Aen.*, v. 680–776).

- 6 In *Paradiso* xviii, Dante encounters the 'nine worthies' who comprise a mixture of Christian and Jewish warriors from historical, fictional and biblical sources: Cacciaguida, whom he has been with since entering the Heaven of Mars, Joshua, Charlemagne, Roland, Maccabeus, William, Renouard, Duke Godfrey and Robert Guiscard (ll. 34–48). Except for Cacciaguida, who directs the pilgrim's attention to the cross before becoming part of it again, the souls making up the cross do not speak to the pilgrim. Instead, he experiences his encounter with them through a kind of synaesthesia of word and light: the naming of each soul and its flashing along the cross of light are one and the same event (l. 39). The other central character of the canto is Beatrice, who guides the *viator*'s experience throughout: with the 'amoroso suono' [loving sound] of her voice (l. 7), the love in her eyes (l. 9) which is inexpressible through language, the brightness of her smile (l. 19) and her sage directions (ll. 20–21).
- 7 At least on the surface, the central issues of each canto are dissimilar. *Inferno* xviii focuses primarily on fraud; *Purgatorio* xviii is concerned with the nature of love and the purgation of *acedia*; while *Paradiso* xviii focuses on the Church Militant and the issue of divine justice. While it might prove fruitful to explore the interconnections between fraud, love, *acedia* and justice in the *Commedia*, such a task would go well beyond the scope of a single chapter, given that each concept occupies a central place in Dante studies and medieval scholarship more generally.
- 8 At a deeper level too, the imagery and central motifs of each canto differ significantly. A recurring metaphor in *Inferno*

xviii concerns food,³ and the structure of the Malebolge as a whole has been associated with Satan's intestines.⁴ In addition, the flatterers are immersed in human excrement — the waste that results from food not absorbed by the body as nutrients. In *Purgatorio* xviii, by contrast, images of fertility from the natural world permeate Virgil's (mainly scholastic) explanation of love: he mentions bees (l. 58), roots, leaves, plants (l. 54), and he refers to pastoral themes (l. 126). In addition, the penitent souls' evocation of Mary alludes to the moment when she was told by the Angel Gabriel that both she and Elizabeth were pregnant, and two further references to birth and pregnancy are found in the canto (ll. 42 and 142). In *Paradiso* xviii, the synaesthesia found throughout much of the canticle achieves a notable climax: the reader is inundated with descriptions of scintillating, flying, spinning, singing and dancing lights of souls who shape themselves into letters in the sky. While there is one reference to food in *Paradiso* xviii (the souls' movement is compared to the delight with which birds fly, 'quasi congratulando a lor pastura' [seeming to rejoice together at their feeding], l. 74), associating this with the food references in *Inferno* xviii does not seem to be meaningful. Indeed, references to food throughout the poem as a whole are numerous, so their recurrence in two cantos of the same number is not necessarily significant.

Prostitutes and Pregnant Women in *Inferno* xviii and *Purgatorio* xviii–xix

- 9 Despite the various ways in which the cantos do not interconnect, their juxtaposition nevertheless brings to light an important issue concerning the treatment of women in the poem. Indeed, two of the most offensive — perhaps even misogynistic — representations of women in the *Comedy* occur in *Inferno* xviii and, as far as the Eighteens are concerned, in the suggestively proximate nineteenth canto of

Purgatorio.⁵ In *Inferno* xviii, Virgil directs the pilgrim's attention toward the prostitute Thais, who flattered her 'drudo' [lover] by pretending to be gratified by his sexual favours (ll. 127–36). In Virgil's words, she is: 'quella sozza e scapigliata fante/ che là si graffia con l'unghie merdose,/ e or s'accoscia e ora è in piedi stante' [that filthy baggage with disordered hair who is scratching herself with her shitty nails, now squatting, now standing on her feet] (*Inf.*, xviii. 130–32). The situation of the other flatterers is briefly mentioned: they are also immersed in excrement (ll. 113–14); and the other (male) flatterer who is named is mocked: the pilgrim says that he recognizes Alessio Interminei of Lucca from having seen him when his hair was dry — in other words, before it was covered in shit (ll. 122–22).

10 Thais's condition, however, is described in much greater detail than Alessio's, and the nature of her crime is associated with her gender, and with sex.⁶ Not only did she flatter someone, but she did so in a sexual situation, while she was selling her body. She used the organ in her body that defines her as female in order to make money. Furthermore, her posture emphasizes her sexual role as well as her gender: by squatting, she makes visible her genitals in a gesture that might recall the image of the squatting (often female) carvings found above the entrances of many churches in medieval Europe. By squatting, such carved women reveal their sexual organs in a way that, instead of titillating the male viewer, is meant to disgust him, thereby encouraging him to avoid sexual transgression — hence the carvings' prominent positions on churches.⁷ Thus, we might read Thais's squatting posture as a moralizing image as opposed to a pornographic one. This reading complements Zygmunt Barański's argument that Dante's depiction of Thais draws on an established biblical tradition in which prostitutes are smeared in faeces, the purpose of which is to disgust the reader and thereby deliver a moral lesson.⁸

11 In *Inferno* xviii, Dante uses misogynistic tropes to make his point about the nature of flattery and also of fraud more generally. *Purgatorio* xix opens with another disturbing female image. Having fallen asleep at the end of *Purgatorio* xviii, Dante, in the following canto, begins to dream of a siren — the ‘femmina balba’ — who at first appears deformed, pale and stammering, but is then transformed by Dante’s gaze into a beautiful woman. She sings enticingly of seducing Ulysses, mesmerizing the pilgrim until a ‘donna santa e presta’ [a lady holy and quick] (l. 26) appears and scolds Virgil, who rips open the siren’s garment to expose her ‘ventre’ [belly, or womb] from which a foul stench pours forth (ll. 32–33), awakening the pilgrim. The dream shares several elements with *Inferno* xviii. At the most obvious level, the siren in *Purgatorio* xix is a seductress, while one of the sins punished in *Inferno* xviii is seduction. The sexual organs of both the siren and Thais are revealed; and while Thais is naked throughout the canto, the siren becomes partially naked when her clothes are torn open. A foul stench emanates from both female characters.⁹ Thais misrepresents the truth with false words of praise, while the siren is herself an image of misrepresentation. Finally, while the siren stammers, recalling the way a child might struggle to speak — ‘balba’ is derived from *balbettare* (*Purg.*, xix. 7), — Thais is described as ‘fante’ (*Inf.*, xviii. 130) — a word associated not only with servility, but also with children and their capacity for speech.¹⁰

12 On the one hand, perhaps we should not be surprised by the sexual squeamishness revealed in these two episodes given that Dante’s depictions of Thais and of the *femmina balba* draw on established traditions which characterize women as sexually dangerous and repulsive: the faeces-smear harlot is a biblical trope; and scholars have posited a wealth of potential sources for Dante’s *femmina balba* in *Purgatorio* xix, many of which emphasize physical transformation,

female monstrosity and seduction or sexual jealousy.¹¹ For instance, Teresa Caligiure examines numerous sources for Dante's *femmina balba*, including, but not limited to, the harlot or seductress in Proverbs, classical depictions of sirens (the early commentators identified her with Circe specifically), and the tale from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which Minerva incites Envy to infect Aglauros so that she will obstruct Mercury's seduction of her sister Herse. Caligiure's argument focuses especially on the striking parallels between the physical appearances of Envy and that of the *femmina balba*.¹²

13 On the other hand, *Inferno* xviii and *Purgatorio* xviii–xix also include references to women that are not necessarily negative — or at least are not negative in the same way that the representations of Thais and the *femmina balba* can be seen to be. In *Inferno* xviii, the seducer whom Virgil and the pilgrim recognize among the throng of sinners is male: Jason (l. 86), who seduced and abandoned Medea and Hypsipyle (ll. 92–96). While Dante's source texts stress the treachery and dangerousness of the two women (in the classical sources, the jilted Medea kills not only Jason's new lover, Creusa, and Creusa's father with poisoned robes, but also her own children to avenge Jason's betrayal; and Hypsipyle betrays all her female companions on Lemnos in order to save her own father), Dante downplays their culpability. He mentions Medea only in the context of Jason's abandonment of her, and he depicts Hypsipyle as an innocent victim of Jason's seduction. Dante describes her with unthreatening diminutives: she is 'la giovinetta' [the young girl] (l. 92) who is left 'gravida' [pregnant] and 'soletta' [alone] (l. 94) by her callous lover. By making her seem innocent and pitiable, Dante makes Jason appear more cruel. Interestingly, it is with recourse to Hypsipyle's reproductive role that Dante seeks to garner the reader's pity.

14 A similar point might be made about Dante's Medea.

However surprising it may seem that Dante portrays Medea as anything other than an evil seductress, she is still defined in terms of her (violated) nuptial relationship to Jason and, albeit implicitly, in terms of her role as the mother of his children. Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that female figures in *Inferno* xviii and in *Purgatorio* xix are associated primarily with their sexual organs and reproductive functions. Furthermore, the women in these cantos are often represented in ways that alternate between desire and revulsion. As we saw above, the *femmina balba* appears to Dante alternately as beautiful and ugly, smelly and alluring. While she made a career out of appearing desirable in life, Thais appears as revolting in Hell. Both Medea and Hypsipyle are victims of Jason's inconstancy — presumably itself a state of alternation between desire and revulsion for the women he has seduced. Furthermore, while Dante does not explicitly mention this part of her story, Hypsipyle had witnessed male fickleness before Jason's arrival: Venus punished all the women of Lemnos for neglecting her shrines by afflicting them with a bad smell, causing their husbands to leave them and take up with slaves. Thus, references to women (both positive and negative) in *Inferno* xviii and *Purgatorio* xix reveal an emphasis on female reproductive functions, sexual organs and unpleasant smells.

- 15 The issue of pregnancy is emphasized in *Purgatorio* xviii as well. The penitent souls run through the terrace shouting out positive *exempla* of zeal (the opposite of *acedia*):

‘Maria corse con fretta a la montagna!’

e: ‘Cesare, per soggiogare Ilerda,
punse Marsilia e poi corse in Ispagna!’ (*Purg.*, xviii. 100–02)

[‘Mary ran with haste to the mountain!’ and: ‘Caesar, to subdue Lerida, struck Marseilles and then hastened to Spain!’]

- 16 The first *exemplum* refers to the passage in the Gospel of

Luke where Mary goes with haste to the hill country to salute her cousin: ‘Exsurgens autem Maria in diebus illis, abiit in montana cum festinatione, in civitatem Juda: Et intravit in domum Zachariae, et salutavit Elisabeth’ [And Mary rising up in those days, went into the hill country with haste into a city of Juda. And she entered into the house of Zachary, and saluted Elizabeth] (Luke 1.39–40). When Mary greets Elizabeth, John the Baptist leaps in her womb (1.41), and Elizabeth says to Mary that she is blessed amongst women: ‘Et exclamavit voce magna, et dixit: Benedicta tu inter mulieres, et benedictus fructus ventris tui’ [And she cried out with a loud voice, and said: Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb] (1.42). Interestingly, the description of the pilgrim’s subsequent dream repeats Luke’s language but to different ends: a stench emanates from the ‘ventre’ (*Purg.*, xix. 31–32) of the ‘femmina balba’ (*Purg.*, xix. 7). The siren is a perverted image of Mary,¹³ Dante accomplishing the juxtaposition of the two female figures by referring to their wombs.

17 The second *exemplum* of zeal (*Purg.*, xviii. 100–02) refers to a passage in Book iii of Lucan’s *Pharsalia* where Julius Caesar rushes to Spain to do battle with the forces of Pompey. It is worth noting that, of the two positive *exempla*, the first alludes to women and pregnancy, while the second to male heroism in warfare. A similar pattern, in terms of gender, is repeated in the penitents’ appeal to two negative examples of *acedia*: the Israelites who did not make it to the Promised Land, and the Trojan women who stayed behind in Sicily when Aeneas sailed to Italy:

Di retro a tutti dicean: ‘Prima fue
morta la gente a cui il mar s’aperse,
che vedesse Iordan le rede sue.

E quella che l’affanno non sofferse
fino a la fine col figlio d’Anchise
sé stessa a vita sanza gloria offerse’. (*Purg.*, xviii. 133–38)

[Behind all the others they were saying: ‘First all the people died for whom the sea drew back, before Jordan saw their heirs!’ And: ‘Those women who did not endure hardship to the end with the son of Anchises, chose life without glory!’]

- 18 The positive and negative instances of the vice are symmetrical not only in terms of their references to Roman and biblical themes, as many scholars have noted, but also in terms of their gender divisions. Furthermore, in the second negative *exemplum*, in which the penitents refer to the Trojan women remaining in Sicily, we find an instance of female figures trying to impede the progress of male heroes. Not only did the women set fire to Aeneas’s ships in the hope that it would prevent the men from continuing their journey to Italy, but they did so at the instigation of Iris,¹⁴ who disguised herself as Boroës, an old woman of their group, in order to gain their trust. Thus, many female figures — the Trojan women and the goddess Iris — conspired to impede Aeneas’s divinely-ordained mission. Similarly, the appearance of the siren in *Purgatorio* xix changes in a way that confuses the pilgrim and threatens to impede his journey. By comparing the siren to Iris, Dante once again invites the reader to compare his ‘hero’ to Aeneas.
- 19 Of course, the ‘*donna santa e presta*’ in *Purgatorio* xix is also a woman, so we cannot claim that Dante sees all woman as seductresses trying to mislead men. Nor can we claim even that all seductresses are bad according to Dante: Judith, who saved the people of Bethulia from the siege of Holofernes by seducing him and chopping off his head, sits beneath the Virgin Mary in Heaven — right beneath Rachel, Beatrice, Sarah and Rebecca.¹⁵ But, we can affirm that, at least in these cantos, Dante seems to categorize women according to a limited number of characteristics and functions. Indeed, we find in *Purgatorio* xviii–xix and in *Inferno* xviii several very negative portrayals of female figures — some of whom are repulsive, smelly temptresses, ‘*antiche streghe*’, or

prostitutes. Positively portrayed women in these cantos are often pregnant or, in the case of Hypsipyle, formerly smelly. The shared characteristics of the female characters in these cantos do not of course render them identical. But Dante does repeatedly associate the female figures in *Inferno* xviii and *Purgatorio* xviii–xix with their reproductive functions and, specifically, their sexual organs.¹⁶

Lady Justice, Wisdom and the Seductress

20 The Eighteens stand out in their negative portrayal of women when compared to similar images elsewhere in Dante's oeuvre.¹⁷ For instance, in 'Tre donne intorno al cor mi son venute' (*Rime* civ), Dante depicts Drittura, or Lady Justice, the reader of the dishevelled, partially or fully naked figures of Thais and the *femmina balba*:

discinta e scalza, sol di sé par donna.
Come Amor prima per la rotta gonna
la vide in parte che 'l tacere è bello,
e pietoso e fello
di lei e del dolor fece dimanda. (*Rime* civ. 26–30)

[ungirt and barefoot, only in person does she reveal herself a lady. When Love first saw, through the torn dress, that part of her which it is decent not to name, in pity and anger he asked about her and her grief.]

21 Just as the sexual organs of Thais and the siren are revealed, so too does Drittura's ripped skirt reveal the part of her about which it is better 'to be silent'. It is clear that Dante means to refer to Drittura's sexual organs here given that, in *Purgatorio* xxv, he uses almost exactly the same phrase to describe the place into which the reproductive fluid 'descends' during the process of human conception.¹⁸ However, Drittura is portrayed in a positive light, while Thais and the siren are decidedly negative figures. Thus, when Dante describes the exposure of a woman's body, he does not always do so in order to cast her in a negative

light.¹⁹ The fact that Lady Justice's reproductive organs are exposed does not make her a whore or a seductress; in this case, it simply makes her into a figure who elicits compassion.

22 In fact, Olivia Holmes argues that both Drittura in 'Tre donne' and the 'femmina balba' are based on the Lady Wisdom archetype — a figure that emerged from the Wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible and was developed and transformed in different ways by Boethius, Bernardus Silvestris and Alan of Lille, amongst others.²⁰ Alan's goddess Natura and Boethius's Lady Philosophy both have dirty and tattered dresses, which indicate that they have been scorned by society, as does Dante's Lady Justice. In Holmes's opinion, Dante's treatment of the siren and of Drittura exemplify the dichotomy established in biblical Wisdom literature between the good woman, or Sapientia, and the temptress or harlot who leads men astray. Proverbs warns against the temptations of the dangerous woman: 'muliere aliena' [strange or foreign woman] (Proverbs 2.16); 'muliere mala' [evil woman] (6.24); 'muliere extranea' [foreign woman] (7.4); and 'meretrix' [prostitute or adulteress] (5.3).²¹ This woman is typically associated with the sweetness of her misleading words: 'Favus enim distillans labia meretricis, et nitidius oleo guttur ejus' [For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and smoother than oil is her speech] (5.3).²² Indeed, Dante's dream of the enchanting siren in *Purgatorio* xix might very well have been inspired, at least in part, by material from Proverbs, wherein the 'strange woman' is associated not only with her enchanting tongue, but also with dreaming, falling asleep and ships: after drinking wine, 'oculi tui videbunt extraneas, et cor tuum loquetur perversa./ Et eris sicut dormiens in medio mari, et quasi sopitus gubernator, amisso clavo' [your eyes will see strange things, and your mind will utter perverse things. And you will be like one who lies down in the middle of the sea, or

like one who lies down on the top of a mast] (Proverbs 23.3–34).

23 In addition, the dangerous woman in Proverbs might also have informed Dante's portrayal of Thais. While Thais squats in a ditch of excrement, the harlot in Proverbs is described as a 'deep ditch' herself: 'Fovea enim profunda est meretrix, et puteus angustus aliena' [For a harlot is a deep pit, and an adulterous woman is a narrow well] (Proverbs 23.27); and the mouth of a sinful woman is a 'fovea profunda' [deep ditch] (22.14). While Thais is punished in Hell for having flattered her lover, the harlot in Proverbs leads astray a young man specifically with the 'flattery of her lips': 'Irretivit eum multis sermonibus, et blanditiis labiorum protraxit illum' [With her many persuasions she entices him; With her flattering lips she seduces him] (7.21).

24 In Proverbs, as well as in the Book of Wisdom, the temptress or adulteress is the enemy of Wisdom, personified in female form. The latter speaks wise words: 'Os suum aperuit sapientiae, et lex clementiae in lingua ejus' [She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue] (Proverbs 31.26). She leads the just man away from enemies and seducers ('Custodivit illum ab inimicis, et a seductoribus tutavit illum, et certamen forte dedit illi ut vinceret, et sciret quoniam omnium potentior est sapientia' [She kept him safe from his enemies, and she defended him from seducers, and gave him a strong conflict, that he might overcome, and know that wisdom is mightier than all] (Wisdom 10.12). And the king wishes to have her as his spouse (Wisdom 8.2). Thus, she is explicitly characterized as the opposite of the harlot, seductress or mistress.

25 I agree with Holmes that these archetypal portrayals of Lady Wisdom and her enemy, an adulterous seductress, may inform Dante's treatment of women in his works. In fact, I believe that they may inform even more portrayals of women in Dante's works than Holmes discusses.²³ However,

parallels between Dante's women and the archetypal bad woman of biblical Wisdom literature seem much more explicit at the textual level than parallels between Dante's women and the good woman or Lady Wisdom. This is especially evident in *Paradiso* xviii as I argue in the following subsection.

Female Figures in *Paradiso* xviii

- 26 *Paradiso* xviii conspicuously draws attention to the Wisdom books of the Bible given that the souls spell out the first sentence of the Book of Wisdom: 'Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram' (*Par.*, xviii. 73–93; Wisdom 1.1). Yet, nowhere in *Paradiso* xviii does an explicit personification of Lady Wisdom appear; nor have I found explicit references in the canto to the female figure in the Book of Wisdom. Thus, despite *Paradiso* xviii's treatment of wisdom and the related issue of justice,²⁴ Dante elides reference to the central figure in the tradition of biblical Wisdom literature, who is female. Dante also elides mention of another female figure traditionally associated with justice, who comes instead from the classical tradition: the Goddess Astraea, or Lady Justice.²⁵
- 27 A third, albeit partial elision of a powerful female figure in the canto concerns the pagan goddess of wisdom and war: Minerva. Dante describes his ascent from the Heaven of Mars to the Heaven of Jupiter — from the red light of the former to the white of the latter — with reference to a blush fading on a fair woman's cheek:

E qual è 'l trasmutare in picciol varco
di tempo in bianca donna, quando 'l volto
suo si discarchi di vergogna il carico,
tal fu ne li occhi miei, quando fui vòlto,
per lo candor de la temprata stella
sesta, che dentro a sé m'avea ricolto. (*Par.*, xviii. 64–69)

[And like the changing in a short interval of time of a lady's

white face, when it unburdens itself of the burden of shame: such was what I saw, when I turned about, in the whiteness of the temperate sixth star, which had received me within itself.]

- 28 Commentators (starting with Scartazzini and Poletto) have traced this image to a passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (vi. 45–49) in which Minerva, disguised as an old woman, challenges Arachne, famous for her 'spinning of fleecy wool', to a contest in weaving. When the goddess reveals herself, Arachne's blush is short-lived, fading too quickly, and thereby reveals her lack of humility in the face of the divine. Minerva punishes the girl by transforming her into a spider.
- 29 The allusion to Arachne's cheeks obliquely draws attention to the figure of Minerva, the pagan goddess of war and wisdom. In a canto that straddles the heavens of Mars and Jupiter and treats explicitly the issues of just, religiously motivated war and of divine justice itself, one might expect Minerva to play a somewhat more prominent role. Indeed, for this reason alone, one might wonder if the 'M' of the phrase written in the sky might serve to allude to the pagan goddess, perhaps in addition to — or instead of — the monarchy, as scholars have previously suggested.²⁶ However, reference to the goddess is oblique to say the least, as it is relegated to a simile that marginalises her by describing Arachne's cheeks. Thus, Dante misses a third opportunity in *Paradiso* xviii to feature one of the female figures traditionally associated with the canto's main issues of wisdom and war.
- 30 Indeed, Dante misses a fourth opportunity to mention a positive female figure in the canto, despite the fact that this same woman plays a prominent role in *Paradiso* ix. In the first half of *Paradiso* xviii, when Dante and Beatrice are still in the Heaven of Mars, Cacciaguida calls out the names of martial heroes on the cross of light, among whom is Joshua, a spy sent by Moses to Canaan, who subsequently led the Israelites in capturing the Promised Land. Joshua's mission

was significantly aided by Rahab, the prostitute who harboured two of his spies in her house within the walls of Jericho (Joshua 2). For this just and courageous act she is granted a place in Heaven, as the poet explicitly declares in *Paradiso*, ix. 112–26. Yet, no mention of Rahab occurs in *Paradiso* xviii. There is little doubt, therefore, that Dante's list of heavenly warriors in the canto is decidedly male-centric.

31 In sum, Dante elides reference to three positive female figures — Sapientia, Lady Justice and Rahab — who are associated (in Dante's own treatment elsewhere in his works and in the biblical and classical traditions) with three of the central issues of *Paradiso* xviii: wisdom, justice and the heavenly militia, respectively. In addition, Dante only obliquely alludes to another powerful, if not necessarily positive, female figure: Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and war. One possible reason for these elisions could be that Dante subsumes biblical and classical figures of justice and wisdom into the figure of Beatrice. Yet, Dante's portrayal of Beatrice in *Paradiso* xviii betrays no conspicuous hints of wanting to allude to Lady Justice or Lady Wisdom. To put it simply, *Paradiso* xviii frames its central issues in ways that seem calculated to downplay the role of women.

32 However, female figures do appear in *Paradiso* xviii. Yet, they are portrayed negatively, and according to a relatively strict pattern. First, Dante mentions them implicitly, drawing almost exclusively from classical sources wherein they play instrumental roles in hindering the progress of male heroes — a pattern that we also noted in Dante's treatment of female figures in *Inferno* xviii and *Purgatorio* xviii. Second, the female figures in *Paradiso* xviii are often associated with negative emotions (shame, rage and jealousy). For instance, as Cacciaguida names the martial heroes, the souls' movement in the sky is compared to a spinning top:

E al nome de l'alto Macabeo
vidi moversi un altro roteando,
e letizia era ferza del paleo. (*Par.*, xviii. 40–42)

[And at the name of the great Maccabee I saw another move
spinning, and joy was the whip for the top.]

- 33 According to Tozer, the image comes from the passage in the *Aeneid* where the rage of Queen Amata (who was incited by the Fury Alecto to instigate war among the Latins in resistance to Aeneas's marriage to Lavinia), is described with recourse to the image of the whipping motion of a child's toy:

Ceu quondam torto volitans sub verbere turbo,
quem pueri magno in gyro vacua atria circum
intenti ludo exercent; ille actus habena
curvatis fertur spatiis; stupet inscia supra
inpubesque manus, mirata volubile buxum;
dant animos plagae: non cursu seignior illo
per medias urbes agitur populosque feroces. (*Aen.*, vii.
378–84)

[As at times a top, spinning under the twisted lash, which
boys intent on the game drive in a great circle through an
empty court — urged by the whip it speeds on round after
round; the ignorant childish throng hang over it in wonder,
marvelling at the whirling boxwood; the blows give it life: so,
no slacker in her course, is she driven through the midst of
cities and proud peoples.²⁷]

- 34 While the female figures in *Purgatorio* xviii–xix impede Aeneas's journey to Italy (figuratively in the case of the siren impeding Dante-personaggio as a figure for Aeneas, and literally in the case of the Trojan women), Amata impedes Aeneas's establishment of the Roman Empire in a different way. Amata incites Turnus, who was originally betrothed to Lavinia, to turn against her own husband, King Latinus, thereby fomenting war and delaying the foundation of Rome. While the other reference to civil war in *Paradiso* xviii mentioned above (namely, the avian skywriting) indicates the progress of a male heroic figure (Caesar's crossing to

Brundisium in Lucan's *Pharsalia* v), this reference to civil war brings to the fore three female figures who incite what Dante considers to be an unjust war: one resulting from a mother's rage, instigated by the Fury Alecto, at the command of the jealous goddess Juno. Furthermore, while in the *Aeneid* the image of the spinning top refers to Amata's fury, Dante uses the image in *Paradiso* xviii to figure the joyful spinning of the soul of Judas Maccabeus. In this way, the poet sets up a powerful set of juxtapositions: between classical literature and the Bible, between fury and joy, between pagan female figures who instigated the war that hindered Aeneas's divinely-ordained founding of Rome and male figures from the Old Testament who acted as leaders in holy wars.

35 When Dante alludes to Amata, Alecto, Arachne and Minerva in *Paradiso* xviii, he does not play up or play down the negative roles they play in their source texts, he simply assumes them. Yet, it is worth noting that most of the female figures evoked in the canto play negative roles in the classical tradition, and share several characteristics. They obstruct men in just or heroic exploits, and they incite unjust struggles for selfish or jealous reasons (for instance, when Minerva instigates a weaving contest with Arachne to prove her superiority). Their emotions — jealousy, shame, anger — instigate wars. They are changeable or *mobile*, that fundamental feminine characteristic according to medieval lore: Arachne is transformed into a spider; Amata is possessed by Alecto.

36 In addition, the classical women alluded to in *Paradiso* xviii also share traits with the women represented and evoked in the other eighteenth cantos. Goddesses pose as old women (Minerva disguises herself to fool Arachne; Iris gains the trust of the Trojan women disguised as Boroës). Beautiful maidens become monsters (Arachne becomes a spider; the *femmina balba* appears as a beautiful siren before also being

exposed as monstrous and sexually repulsive). Cheeks pale and grow rosy again (Arachne's cheek, fading to pale, might recall the siren's pale face in *Purgatorio* xix, which is soon warmed into beauty by Dante's hopeful gaze). Consistently, classical female figures — divine and human — that are alluded to in the Eighteens undergo physical transformations that belie their motivations, their worth, and their attempts at treachery.

Conclusion

37 The comparison of female figures in *Inferno* xviii, *Purgatorio* xviii–xix and *Paradiso* xviii has revealed some interesting parallels, particularly at the level of intertextual allusion. However, this kind of reading must not exclude the need for other 'vertical' readings with cantos of different numbers. For instance, a striking number of parallels at the textual level may be found when comparing the description of Thais and the flatterers in *Inferno* xviii with the description of the Furies in *Inferno* ix. The Furies appear in a tower above an ancient, stinking swamp:

‘Questa palude che ’l gran puzzo spira
cigne dintorno la città dolente,
u’non potemo intrare omai sanz’ ira’.

E altro disse, ma non l’ho a mente;
però che l’occhio m’avea tutto tratto
ver’ l’alta torre a la cima rovente,

dove in un punto furon dritte ratto
tre furie infernal di sangue tinte,
che membra feminine avieno e atto,
e con idre verdissime eran cinte;
serpentelli e ceraste avien per crine,
onde le fiere tempie erano avvinte.

E quei, che ben conobbe le meschine
de la regina de l’eterno pianto,
‘Guarda’, mi disse, ‘le feroci Erine.

Quest’è Megera dal sinistro canto;

quella che piange dal destro è Aletto;
Tesifón è nel mezzo'; e tacque a tanto.

Con l'unghie si fendea ciascuna il petto;
battiensi a palme e gridavan sì alto,
ch'i' mi strinsi al poeta per sospetto. (*Inf.*, ix. 31–51)

[‘This swamp that breathes forth the great stench, girds the grieving city all about, where now we cannot enter without wrath’. And he said more, but I do not remember it; for my eyes had made me all intent on the great tower with its glowing summit, where suddenly, in an instant, stood up three Furies of Hell, stained with blood, who had the limbs and gestures of women and were girt with bright green water snakes; little asps and horned serpents they had for hair, which wound about their fierce temples. And he, who well knew the maid-servants of the queen of eternal weeping, ‘Look’, he told me, ‘at the ferocious Erinyes. This is Megaera on the left; she who weeps on the right there is Allecto; Tisiphone is in the middle’, and he fell silent. With her nails each was tearing at her breast; they beat themselves with their palms and shrieked so loudly that for fear I drew closer to the poet.]

- 38 In both *Inferno* xviii and ix, special emphasis is placed on hair and its capacity to repulse: the Furies’ hair is made of living snakes (*Inf.*, ix. 40–42), and the flatterers’ hair provides evidence of their filthy state (Thais is ‘scapigliata’ and Alessio’s hair is wet with shit, *Inf.*, xviii. 130 and 121). While the Furies are covered in blood (*Inf.*, ix. 38), which was considered a form of bodily waste in the Middle Ages, Thais is covered in faeces. The Furies scratch their chests with their nails (*Inf.*, ix. 49), and beat themselves with their palms (*Inf.*, ix. 50), while Thais scratches herself with shitty nails (*Inf.*, xviii. 131), and the flatterers beat themselves with their palms (‘e sé medesma con le palme picchia’, *Inf.*, xviii. 105); and Alessio strikes his own head, (*Inf.*, xviii. 124). While the Furies are described as ‘meschine’ [maidservants] (*Inf.*, ix. 43), Thais is described as ‘fante’ (*Inf.*, xviii. 130) — a word associated with servility, as noted above. The Furies

perch above a foulsmelling swamp that gives off a bitter vapor: ‘schiuma antica/ per indi ove quel fummo è più acerbo’ [that ancient foam, there where the smoke is darkest] (*Inf.*, ix. 74–75). The *bolgia* of the flatterers stinks not only because of the excrement in which they are immersed, but also because of a stench that wafts up to them: ‘Le ripe eran grommate d’una muffa,/ per l’alito di giù che vi s’appasta,/ che con li occhi e col naso facea zuffa’ [the banks were encrusted with a mold from the breath from below that condenses there, which assailed both eyes and nose] (*Inf.*, xviii. 106–08).

- 39 Another parallel between *Inferno* xviii and *Inferno* ix concerns the image of whips. In *Inferno* xviii, the pimps and seducers are whipped by demons in punishment for their sins, while the Furies in *Inferno* ix are girded by snakes (l. 40), perhaps alluding to the conventional whips with which Furies were often depicted, and which symbolized their traditional role of instigating war and possessing people. Indeed, as we saw in our analysis of *Paradiso* xviii, Dante alludes to a passage in the *Aeneid* in which the Fury Alecto sends Amata into a frenzy (by poisoning her with a viper’s sting) in order to instigate civil strife among the Latins (*Aen.*, vii. 341–406). In Dante’s allusion to the Virgilian passage, he uses the image of whips to describe the spinning motion of the toy: ‘vidi moversi un altro roteando, / e letizia era ferza del paleo (*Par.*, xviii. 41–42). Since the word ‘ferza’ is used only four times in the poem (twice in *Inferno* xviii with reference to the punishment of the pimps and seducers, once in *Purgatorio* xiii in reference to the scourging of envy,²⁸ and once in the image from *Paradiso* xviii of the spinning tops), its appearance in two of our three eighteenth cantos may be significant. In this way, the reference to Alecto in *Paradiso* xviii may recall, via associations with *Inferno* ix, the episode of Thais in *Inferno* xviii. However, a key component of this type of ‘vertical’ reading requires a sort of triangular reading,

including the analysis of another canto of a different number. In addition, the use of the word 'ferza' in these passages calls further attention to the pattern seen above with which Dante depicts women throughout the Eighteens: they are monstrous; they are either possessed by fury, or they incite others to fury; they are sexually repulsive; and they often incite war or hinder male heroic exploits with sexual temptations or personal desires.

40 While the number of characteristics shared by female figures in the eighteenth cantos is striking, Dante's inspiration for many of these allusions comes from biblical and classical sources which are themselves saturated with misogynistic and narrowly prescribed images of women. Unfortunately, it is nothing new to find examples in western culture of men portraying women either as saints or seductresses. This does not absolve Dante, however, from charges of misogyny. The poet misses numerous opportunities to represent women positively in *Paradiso* xviii; and in *Inferno* xviii and *Purgatorio* xviii–xix, the difference between negative and positive portrayals of women seems to correlate strongly with the ways in which they use their reproductive organs. By choosing to allude to negative images of women more frequently than positive ones, Dante reveals that he may not have managed to escape the prejudices of his time.

41 Whether Dante sets up parallels in his treatment of women across the eighteenth cantos consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally – something that cannot be known with certainty – it is clear that these parallels exist, and that they reveal a negative bias against female figures. To ascertain whether this negative bias is localized solely in the eighteenth cantos, and to what extent the negative bias may be blamed on the way in which the source texts from which Dante borrows portray women, are questions for a more systematic study, which would have to address Dante's treatment of women across the *Commedia* and throughout

his works.

Notes

1. I would like to thank George Corbett and Heather Webb for organizing the *Vertical Readings* project, and for inviting me to participate in this challenging, collaborative and rewarding initiative. I owe a debt of gratitude to Heather and George, as well as to the anonymous peer reviewers, for their thoughtful and helpful comments on my essay. I would also like to express my heartfelt thanks to Zygmunt Barański, whose feedback was invaluable.

2. Translations of passages from the *Book of Wisdom* are based on the Douay-Rheims edition of the Bible.

3. Some of the food references in *Inferno* xviii include: ‘Già di veder costui non son digiuno’ [I am certainly not fasting for sight of him] (l. 42); ‘Ma che ti mena a sì pungenti salse?’ [But what leads you to such pungent sauces?] (l. 51); ‘Perché se’ tu sì gordo/ di riguardar più me che li altri brutti?’ [Why are you so hungry to look more at me than the other filthy ones?] (ll. 118–19); ‘Ed elli allor, battendosi la zucca’ [And he again, beating his noggin] (l. 124); and ‘E quinci sian le nostre viste sazie’ [And therewith let our eyes be sated] (l. 136).

4. See Robert M. Durling, ‘Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell’, *Allegory and Representation: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979–80*, ed. by Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 61–93. These suggestions are also developed in the Durling and Martinez commentary on *Inferno*, particularly in the note to l. 47 (p. 194), and in the ‘Additional Note 2: The Body Analogy (Part 1)’, pp. 552–55. See Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, ed., trans. and notes by Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996–2011).

5. The idea of including *Purgatorio* xix in my reading of the Eighteens was suggested by Heather Webb during the discussion following my lecture for the *Vertical Readings* series. Although the methodological implications of including proximate cantos in vertical readings deserve further investigation, this approach is not unprecedented. Certain episodes in the *Comedy* exceed the boundaries of one canto, and are interpreted in a way that reflects this. For instance, the central cantos of *Purgatorio* are often considered together for a number of structural and thematic reasons. Structurally, they occupy a central place in *Purgatorio* as well as the *Comedy* as a whole, and according to Singleton, they include a numerical signature based on the number seven. These are

often read together for thematic reasons as well: Virgil's disquisition on the nature of love spans two cantos (*Purgatorio* xvii–xviii), and the issue of how love relates to free will may be said to span three cantos (*Purgatorio* xvi–xviii). In addition, it would seem that several other contributions to the volume have benefited from this method of grouping cantos together. For instance, Tristan Kay graciously allowed me to read his vertical reading of the Seventeens, before the volume came out, which makes use of connections with cantos xvi and xviii of *Inferno*. Indeed, readers may find interesting parallels between my reading of the Eighteens (with its foray into *Purgatorio* xix), and Kay's reading of the Seventeens (with its foray into *Inferno* xvi and xviii), particularly in terms of issues relating to representation and misrepresentation, seductive uses of language, and references to Arachne.

6. For Dante's treatment of female sinners in Hell and their sexual transgressions, see Rachel Jacoff, 'The Tears of Beatrice: *Inferno* II', *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 100 (1982), 1–12. See also Victoria Kirkham, 'A Canon of Women in Dante's *Commedia*', *Annali d'Italianistica* 7 (1989), 16–41, which argues that 'female sensuality runs deep in the funnel of Hell, underlying different faults officially charged to four other members of the sex [Thais, Myrrha, Potiphar's wife, and Manto]' (pp. 25–26).

7. See *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches*, ed. by James Jerman and Anthony Weir (London: Batsford, 1987).

8. Barański argues that 'the connection between the promiscuous woman and excrement is in fact a biblical commonplace famously established in the story of Jezebel'. Zygmunt G. Barański, 'Language of Sin and Salvation: A *Lectura* of *Inferno* 18', Bernardo Lecture Series 19 (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), pp. 1–38 (p. 11).

9. For examples of bad smells saving men from sensual traps, see Giuseppe Toffanin, 'La foetida aethiopissa e la femmina balba', *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 77 (1921), 147–49.

10. For instance, the word is used to describe how a foetus becomes human when it gains the capacity for speech: 'Ma come d'animal diveгна fante' [But how from an animal it becomes capable of speech] (*Purg.*, xxv. 61). In *Paradiso*, it is again associated with speech and infancy: 'Omai sarà più corta mia favella,/ pur a quel ch'io ricordo, che d'un fante/che bagni ancor la lingua a la mammella') [Henceforth my speech will be briefer, even about what I remember, than that of a child that still bathes his tongue at the breast] (*Par.*, xxxiii. 106–08). See also the entry on 'fante' in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* for its associations with servility and prostitution, as well as with infancy and speech, <http://www.>

treccani.it/enciclopedia/fante_(Enciclopedia-Dantesca)

11. For a useful synthesis of the numerous sources for the siren in *Paradiso* xix that have been proposed by commentators, see Teresa Caligiure, ‘La “femmina balba” e la “dolce sirena”’, *Rivista di studi danteschi* 4 (2004), 333–66.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 337–38.

13. I follow the lead of Zygmunt G. Barański, ‘Dante’s Three Reflective Dreams’, *Quaderni d’italianistica* 10 (1989), 213–36, who interprets the dream of the siren as displaying ‘backward-looking features’ (p. 213). In Barański’s words: ‘the siren, a symbol of the perversion of love, ideologically and formally distorts Virgil’s words [about the nature of Love from the previous cantos]’ (p. 217). He goes on to demonstrate that several other elements of the dream of the siren are also distorted reworkings of passages from *Purgatorio* xvi–xvii (pp. 214–18).

14. Barański, in ‘Dante’s Three Reflective Dreams’, notes Iris’s intertextual significance in the passage (p. 217).

15. ‘Ne l’ordine che fanno i terzi sedi,/ siede Rachel di sotto da costei/
con Bëatrice, sì come tu vedi./ Sarra e Rebecca, Iudìt...’ [Below her, in the third tier of seats, sits Rachel with Beatrice, as you see. Sarah and Rebecca, Judith...] (*Par.*, xxxii. 7–10).

16. Joan M. Ferrante, ‘Women in the Shadows of the *Divine Comedy*’, in *Reading Medieval Culture*, ed. by Robert M. Stein and Sandra Pierson (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 409–27, makes a different but related point: that while most of the women in *Inferno* are portrayed in misogynistic ways, those in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are portrayed in more positive ways that focus on their value in family structures.

17. For important studies on women in Dante, see Marianne Shapiro, *Woman Earthly and Divine in the ‘Comedy’ of Dante* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1975); Robert Hollander, ‘The Women of *Purgatorio*: Dreams, Voyages, Prophecies’, in his *Allegory in Dante’s ‘Commedia’* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 136–91; Kirkham, ‘A Canon of Women’; and Olivia Holmes, *Dante’s Two Beloveds: Ethics and Erotics in the ‘Divine Comedy’* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

18. ‘Ancor digesto, [sangue perfetto] scende ov’ è più bello/ tacer che dire; e quindi poscia geme/ sovr’ altrui sangue in natural vasello’ [Digested further, it descends to the place of which it is better to be silent than to speak, and then from there it flows onto another’s blood in a natural vessel] (*Purg.*, xxv. 43–45).

19. See for instance Dante's dream in the *Vita nova* (Book iii) in which he sees Beatrice, seminude, eating his heart.
20. See Holmes, *Dante's Two Beloveds*, pp. 8, 12, 24–25, 56.
21. These are my own translations.
22. This and subsequent translations of passages of the Bible are from the New American Standard Bible.
23. Holmes's argument deals not only with the characterizations of Drittura in 'Tre donne' and the 'femmina balba' in *Purgatorio* xix, but also with Beatrice in the *Comedy* and Lady Philosophy in the *Convivio*, among others. However, the association between the harlot in *Proverbs* and Dante's Thais is my own.
24. Holmes argues that the issues of justice and wisdom are closely related in *Paradiso* xviii (*Dante's Two Beloveds*, p. 56).
25. Astraea/Lady Justice appears elsewhere in Dante's works. On Matelda's associations with Astraea in the Terrestrial Paradise, see Charles S. Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1958), pp. 184–203. As we have seen above, Lady Justice appears as Drittura in the 'Tre Donne' canzone.
26. While Francesco da Buti claimed the 'M' stood for 'mondo', modern critics have tended to see it as standing for 'monarchia'.
27. Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
28. 'E 'l buon maestro: "Questo cinghio sferza/ la colpa de la invidia, e però sono/ tratte d'amor le corde de la ferza"' [And my good master: 'This circle whips the guilt of envy, and therefore the cords of the whip are braided of love'] (*Purg.*, xiii. 37–39).

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