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Le Donne di Dante: An Historical Study of Female Characters in The Divine Comedy

Brooke L. Carey

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Le Donne di Dante:
An Historical Study of Female Characters in *The Divine
Comedy*

Brooke L. Carey

Candidate for B.A. Degree
In History with Honors

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APPROVED

Thesis Project Adviser: _____
Dennis Romano

Honors Reader: _____
Samantha Kahn Herrick

Third Reader: _____
Beverly Allen

Honors Director: _____
Samuel Gorovitz

Date: _____

Abstract

This thesis explores the characterizations of women in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and uses this information to assess Dante's opinion of women, including their behaviors, traits, and roles in society. It approaches *The Comedy* from a specific historical angle and requires a basic knowledge of the poem in order to understand some of the references. The entire text incorporates historical sources and evidence to support these interpretations of women in *The Comedy*, as they demonstrate why and how Dante might have characterized women in the way he did. Many of the arguments are supported by the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas and several texts by Aristotle, as both of these writers influenced Dante's writing. The first chapter examines the women of the *Inferno*, especially those punished for lust, and determines that Dante considered women to be less reasonable and more susceptible to temptation than men. This chapter also highlights Dante's use of the defiled female body to portray the perversion that results from sin as well as the dangers of female sexuality. The second chapter looks at the women of *Purgatorio* and deduces that Dante placed immense power in feminine prayer. Most of the evidence for this argument comes from the fact that several male souls in Purgatory emphasize the importance of the prayers from their female relatives in shortening their stay in Purgatory. The third chapter studies the women of *Paradiso* and shows that Dante believed that women possessed free will that allowed them to resist temptation and make rational decisions. This chapter also shows that Dante had a high regard for mothers, as is evident by his worship of the Virgin Mary. It also shows that Dante advocated separate social spheres for men and women and endowed each sex with a different set of appropriate virtues. The final chapter focuses on Beatrice and shows that, although Dante believed women inherently lacked the courage, strength, and intelligence of men, they possessed the capacity for revelation, which they could use not only to help themselves understand divine truth but also reveal these truths to others. Overall, the paper concludes that, although Dante agreed with many of his contemporaries that women were physically and mentally weaker than men and that they should not take up the same social functions as men, he believed that, in the afterlife, men and women could achieve equality and that, due to their immense spiritual power, women could potentially become perfect.

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Introduction: “The wound that Mary closed and then anointed was the wound that Eve – so lovely at Mary’s feet – had opened and had pierced.¹”

When students of Dante think about women and *The Divine Comedy*, they usually think of Beatrice. This is understandable as Beatrice is the most prominent female figure in *The Comedy* and the subject of Dante’s collection of love poetry, *La Vita Nuova*. Though she may be the most famous and the most important, she is by no means the only woman in *The Comedy*.

While men dominate Dante’s account of the afterworld, women also figure prominently as characters. Those familiar with *The Comedy* may recall Francesca’s speech in the Inferno, the siren’s putrid belly in Purgatory, or Mary’s reign over Paradise. Women are present in all three canticles – the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Some are damned, others are saved; some are praised, others are scorned. They are guilty of a variety of vices and possess many different virtues; they embody chastity, honesty, and charity - the characteristics Dante considered laudable – as well as lust, deception, and selfishness – the traits Dante considered damnable. The ways in which Dante portrays these women demonstrate how he viewed women in general – their strengths and weaknesses, their temperaments, their relationships with men, and their place in medieval society.

The goal of this thesis is to examine the female characters in *The Divine Comedy* and formulate an argument concerning how Dante considered women and their roles in both social and spiritual life. Most scholarship on the topic of

¹ Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Dell, 1984), 287. Canto 32, lines 4-6. <<La piaga che Maria richiuse e unse, quella ch’è tanto bella da’ suoi piedi è colei che l’aperse e che la punse.>>

women and Dante tends to focus on the figure of Beatrice. Charles Singleton, Charles Williams, and Robert Pogue Harrison have all written books on this topic. Singleton uses Beatrice as an allegory of divine truth and philosophy, which Dante tries to attain in his journey. Williams treats her as an image of salvation which allows Dante to love God. Harrison goes beyond the concept of images and argues that, along with her allegorical significance, Beatrice should be treated as the physical and sensual object of Dante's love.²

Other scholars have examined other female figures, most prominently Francesca da Rimini and the siren of Purgatory.³ In her book *Women, Earthly and Divine in the Comedy of Dante*, Marianne Shapiro conducts a study of women in *The Comedy* and provides an excellent argument for the various roles Dante assigns to women.⁴ She classifies the female characters into groups of wives, virgins, lovers, and mothers and asserts that many of the descriptions are misogynist in their generalizations of women's dispositions. These works, though convincing, well-argued, and significant to Dante studies, look at *The Comedy* from a literary standpoint. They use the poem itself as the basis for their arguments and cite Dante's literary and philosophical predecessors, most importantly Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, as influences. Since *The Divine*

² c.f. Charles S. Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1958).; Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (New York: Octagon Books, 1978).; Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

³ c.f. Peter Levine, "Why Dante Damned Francesca da Rimini," *Philosophy and Literature* 23, no. 2 (1999): 334-350.; Renato Poggioli, "Tragedy or Romance? A Reading of the Paolo and Francesca Episode in Dante's Inferno," *PMLA* 72, no. 3 (1957): 313-358.; Naomi Yavneh, "Dante's 'dolce serena; and the Monstrosity of the Female Body,'" in *Monsters in the Italian Literary Imagination*, ed. Keala Jewell (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 109-126.

⁴ Shapiro, Marianne, *Woman Earthly and Divine in the Comedy of Dante* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975).

Comedy is a work of literature, the literary approach is the most obvious way to confront it, however, I argue that it is not the only way.

Since I am determining how Dante viewed women within their social frameworks, I would like to look at *The Comedy* from both a literary standpoint and an historical one. Writers are ultimately the products of their time. They are shaped by the values and practices of their societies, whether or not they agree with or subscribe to them. Though modern readers may enjoy reading Dante, the poet lived in Italy from the latter half of the thirteenth century through the beginning of the fourteenth century. He operated within a specific social context and was no doubt influenced by the common beliefs of his contemporaries. As a Christian writer, Dante was also shaped by the teachings of the Church, which clearly expressed its opinion of women, their behavior, their shortcomings, their inferiority to men, and their role in the Church.⁵ In order to build my argument, I will incorporate historical as well as literary evidence. I will also, like other students of Dante, draw heavily upon Aquinas, as many of Dante's ideas, including those related to women, complement those of his predecessor.⁶

A few things must be understood before I begin my discussion. First, though *The Divine Comedy* is a work of fiction, Dante borrowed most of his characters from history, the Bible, and classical mythology.⁷ Dante assigns these people a place in the Inferno, Purgatory, or Paradise based on things they actually

⁵ I will discuss each of these points further in later chapters. The Church supported their arguments regarding women using evidence from the Bible, namely Genesis 3 – the story of the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden - and Ephesians 5 – one of St. Paul's epistles in which he orders women to obey their husbands. Later Church figures, including St. Jerome and St. Thomas Aquinas also comment on the inferiority of women to men.

⁶ Levine, 335.

⁷ Anne Paolucci, *The Women in Dante's Divine Comedy and Spenser's Faerie Queene* (Dover, Del.: Griffon House Publications, 2005), 184.

did – or were believed to have done – or traits they actually possessed – or were believed to have possessed.

The intended audience must also be taken into consideration when examining any literary work. Dante strayed from the medieval standard of writing in Latin by writing *The Divine Comedy* in Italian. In his letter to Can Grande della Scala, a friend of Dante with whom he lived during part of exile,⁸ Dante defended his decision to write in the vernacular because “it is the vernacular speech in which very women communicate.”⁹ This statement indicates that Dante intended *The Comedy* to be read, or at least heard, by everyone, not just educated men. He wanted all people to appreciate his poetry, and so tried to make it available to the widest possible audience. Women were a valued part of that audience.

Women who read or heard *The Comedy* were confronted with several depictions of women. In the *Inferno*, they encountered images of lustful, deceptive women who, through their feminine wiles, try to destroy men and the masculine world. These women are repulsive, perverse beings who, like all damned souls, suffer in pain as retribution for their sins. In *Purgatorio*, women are hailed for their holy qualities and punished for their sins. As I will discuss in my chapter on *Purgatorio*, the male characters of this canticle place immense value on women’s prayers. The women of the *Paradiso* are lauded for their grace, beauty, and chastity, in contrast to the women of the *Inferno*. Foremost among them are Mary and Beatrice, whom Dante praises as exemplars not just of feminine but of human virtues.

⁸ Bernard Delmay, *I Personaggi della Divina Commedia* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1986).

⁹ Dante Alighieri, “Letter to Can Grande,” in *The Latin Works of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Philip H. Wicksteed (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 350.

The way in which Dante uses descriptions of the human body to illustrate his text also highlights differences between the souls of the three realms. In the *Inferno*, he emphasizes the body by describing pain, nakedness, and filth. In *Purgatorio*, he does this as well, but to a lesser extent. Here, the body is not a source of humiliation but a vehicle for repentance. In Hell, one is punished by having his or her body defiled, while in Purgatory, one is able to purge oneself by enduring physical pain. In *Paradiso*, the souls have lost their physical structure except for an image of their faces. The body is replaced by the spirit, which is more sacred.

Although the transition from bodies to shades applies to both men and women, it is still useful for us to look at it in our discussion of women. According to Dante, the body is a woman's main tool for deception. She uses it to gain power over men, to tempt them into sinning, and to get what she wants. The holy woman, however, shuns her body and dedicates herself to meditation.

These depictions give us two opposing concepts of woman – the godly and the devious. Obviously, Dante believed that not all women could be categorized as merely one or the other, but that, depending on their natures, they could earn a place in either Heaven or Hell. I will examine each of the canticles in depth to develop an idea of how Dante regarded the female nature. I will demonstrate how Dante considered women to be less reasonable than men, thus often causing them to make destructive decisions. I will also show, however, that Dante believed that women possessed a great potential for holiness and that this potential was equal, if not superior, to that of men. Dante derived this concept from Aquinas, who, as I

will demonstrate, wrote that women were by nature physically and mentally inferior to men, but that spiritually they were just as able to achieve salvation. Because, however, women were believed to have frailer constitutions and less intelligence than men, Dante asserted that it was difficult, though not impossible, for them to choose virtue over vice and the divine over the profane. But, he also shows us that intelligence, though imperative to the pursuit of Heaven, was not the only trait one needed. Holy women possessed an innate ability to understand God that surpassed, and sometimes even defied reason. Despite the flaws Dante associates with women, he gives them this superior gift.

Chapter One: “Their reason mastered by desire¹”

The souls in the Inferno are by far the most physical and the most active that Dante meets during his journey, and this physicality makes them resemble the living more than any other souls in *The Comedy*. The damned writhe and scream in pain. Their naked bodies are covered in dirt, blood, and feces. Their skin is chapped and blistered. Dirt clogs their fingernails, hair, and teeth.² They provide us with a portrait of what damned souls look like, and they do this with shades of the same bodies they possessed on earth. The only things these shades lack are breath, a beating heart, and density. In all other aspects they resemble us.

By expressing the pain of the souls in the Inferno and describing their bodies, Dante uses them to convey a warning: those who offend God in life will suffer torment in death. Readers can imagine, if not completely grasp, the suffering to which the damned are subjected. They can picture the images of the Inferno more readily than they can those in Purgatory and Paradise because they are the most vivid and the most graphic.³

This emphasis on the body provides an important context for my discussion of the women in the *Inferno*. As noted above, the women in this realm resemble human women, at least as far as their corporeal structure is concerned. Dante uses the female body to link all of the women in Hell proper by what he considers their primary sins: seduction and lust.⁴ The body is the vehicle for

¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno of Dante*, trans. Robert Pinsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 39.; Italian text: Canto V, line 39. <<Che la ragion sommettono al talento.>>

² John A. Scott, *Understanding Dante* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 199.

³ Thomas Goddard Bergin, *A Diversity of Dante* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 48.

⁴ “Hell proper” includes all the circles of Hell except Limbo. Limbo is the place in which the souls of virtuous pagans reside without pain or hope. These souls are not being punished like the other

human sexuality; and by portraying the bodies of the damned women, Dante reinforces the idea behind their transgression.

Of course, the image of the body merely reinforces the nature of sin. Dante ultimately describes the sins of his characters by placing them in various circles of the Inferno. He begins with the sins of incontinence: lust, gluttony, and avarice. As Virgil explains, these offend God the least because they are sins of weakness rather than willful malice.⁵ The middle circles contain those who sinned in violence, while the lowest circles are reserved for those who committed acts of fraud. Violence and fraud require the sinner to act purposefully, to make a conscious decision to sin. Sins of incontinence result when one succumbs to temptation. These are passive sins. They require only submission to desire and a rejection of reason.

Dante championed reason above all things except revealed truth of the divine.⁶ He chose the poet Virgil, a classic example of the triumph of reason, to lead him on his path through the Inferno and Purgatory and teach him how to use his God-given intelligence to avoid sin.⁷ It is Virgil who explains that in Hell “you will behold the wretched souls who’ve lost the good of intellect.”⁸

souls in the Inferno, but they cannot reach Heaven because they did not know Christ. Catholics believed that the only way to achieve salvation was through Christ.

⁵ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 89. Italian text: Canto 11, lines 81-90 – “...le tre disposizion che ‘l ciel non vole, incontenenza, malizia e la matta bestialtade? E come incontenenza men Dio offende e men biasimo accatta? Se tu riguardi ben questa sentenza, e rechiti a la mente chi son quelli che sù di fuor sostegnon penitenza, tu vedrai ben perché da questi felli sien dipartiti, e perché men crucciata la divina vendetta li martelli.”

⁶ I will continue by discussion of revealed truth when I examine the character of Beatrice more closely in my last chapter, as Beatrice represents revealed truth. C.f. Williams, 153 in which Williams says that where Virgil represents intellect, Beatrice represents truth.

⁷ Nicole Pinsky, “Notes,” in *The Inferno of Dante*, trans. Robert Pinsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 307.

⁸ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 19. Canto 3, lines 17-18 – “Tu vedrai le genti dolorose c’hanno perduto il ben de l’intelletto.”

According to Dante, a man's ability to reason directly measures his ability to avoid sin.

Medieval thought in general also considered reason a valuable trait and held that, in their capacity to reason, women were less capable than men. The Creation story of the Old Testament provided the necessary Biblical proof to support this assertion.⁹ In this episode, the serpent tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge; and after she ate of it, she offered some to her husband, Adam, who also partook. In the Christian world, this was considered the beginning of original sin as it led to the immediate fall of mankind and God's expulsion of the human race from Paradise.¹⁰ Here is a woman who succumbs to temptation and, in the process, rejects reason. During the Medieval period, the story of Adam and Eve was used as a rationalization for women's subjugation to men due to their weak intelligence.

This biblical passage also reinforced the association between women and sensuality and women and the body. Eve was viewed as a provocation to Adam's lust, a temptation in her very being. Once Adam saw her, she became dangerous to him – a possible gateway to sin. In this way, women were considered both passive objects and instigators of lust.¹¹ A woman could actively use her body to tempt a man, or she could merely exist, and in her existence as a female she was blamed for the sexual transgressions of a man because her body incited him to

⁹ Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Women: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 15.

¹⁰ Gen. 3. New King James Version

¹¹ Maclean, 16-17

lust. Because of her association with the body, a woman was by definition unchaste and lustful.

Theologians of this period, such as Thomas Aquinas, also cited the process of creation itself as proof that God intended women to be inferior to men. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas argued that, “it was more suitable for the woman to be made from man...in order thus to give the first man a certain dignity consisting in this, that as God is the principle of the whole universe, so the first man, in likeness to God, was the principle of the whole human race.”¹² In other words, as God created man first and in his image, he created woman second and in the image of man. Just as man is an imperfect reflection of God, woman is an imperfect reflection of man. She resembles him but lacks some of his qualities, such as intelligence. For this reason, it was believed that men should rule over women and provide them with instruction on how to behave and avoid sin.¹³ Aquinas also made the case for why woman was created from man’s rib. He wrote, “It was right for the woman to be made from the rib of a man. First, to signify the social union of man and woman, for the woman should neither ‘use authority over man.’ And so she was not made from his head; nor was it right for her to be subject to man’s contempt as his slave, and so she was not made from his feet.”¹⁴ Hence, women were inferior to men, as they lacked the mental and physical capacity required of the dominant sex, but they should be treated with

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province in New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa> (accessed March 28, 2007). Latin text: *Prima Pars*, Question 92, Article 2.

¹³ Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson, eds., “Thomas Aquinas: The Man Who Should Have Known Better,” in *Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought*, 78-101 (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 82-83.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Prima Pars*, Question 92, Article 3.

respect and patience.

Medieval scientific texts further supported the idea that women were weaker than men. Medical theory, which derived heavily from the writings of Aristotle and Galen, postulated that women were essentially a birth defect and the result of something gone awry during conception. Both of these ancient authors argued that females resulted from cold and moist conditions during conception and, as a result, they were imperfect males. Men, on the other hand, were conceived in hot, dry conditions and therefore possessed perfect, robust bodies.¹⁵

Aristotle remarks on the superiority of the male form in his *Historia animalium*:

Again, the female is less muscular and less compactly jointed, and more thin and delicate in the hair - that is, where hair is found; and, where there is no hair, less strongly furnished in some analogous substance. And the female is more flaccid in texture of flesh, and more knock-kneed, and the shin-bones are thinner; and the feet are more arched and hollow in such animals as are furnished with feet. And with regard to voice, the female in all animals that are vocal has a thinner and sharper voice than the male.¹⁶

In addition to physical characteristics, ancient medical theorists, such as Galen in Hippocrates, asserted that a person's sex determined his or her mental characteristics. Men were courageous, honest, and morally strong males, while women were frail and often lacked the more noble, masculine qualities.¹⁷

Since women lacked the necessary characteristics to succeed in the public realm (e.g. intelligence and courage), they were relegated to the domestic sphere where they looked after their husbands' home and children. Their main

¹⁵ Maclean, 30-31.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Historia animalium*, trans. D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, in The Internet Classics Archive, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/history_anim.html (accessed March 28, 2007). Latin text: Book IV, Part 11.

¹⁷ Maclean, 32.

responsibility was to remain chaste, modest, and faithful.¹⁸ According to the fourteenth-century writer, Giovanni Boccaccio, in his book *Famous Women*, Christian women could seek glory through “virginity, purity, holiness, and invincible firmness in overcoming carnal desire” – in other words, they should strive to separate themselves from the weaknesses of their sex.¹⁹

Boccaccio, like other writers of his day, adhered to the Aristotelian notion that virtues were inherently masculine or feminine in nature. Whereas women should strive to be chaste, men should strive to be courageous so they could participate actively and successfully in public life. In his book *Politics*, Aristotle states that “the temperance of a man and of a woman are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying.”²⁰ Here again is the idea that man is perfect and that woman should strive to be like him, and to be virtuous was to be masculine. Any woman who could overcome feminine vice and behave more like a man, was considered exceptional and worthy of praise.

The concept of the morally and physically inferior female complements the way in which Dante organizes the Inferno and selects characters to occupy its circles. It is among the incontinent, more specifically the lustful, where Dante meets the first women in the Inferno. Here, in the second circle of Hell, a terrible whirlwind mercilessly flings the souls of the lustful through the air. Dante says that it is here, in this “hurricane of Hell,” where “they suffer here who sinned in

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

¹⁹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, trans. Virginia Brown (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) 13. Preface, line 11; Margaret Franklin, *Boccaccio's Heroines* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 29.

²⁰ Maclean, 54.

carnal things – their reason mastered by desire, suborned.”²¹ This whirlwind, which follows an illogical course and senselessly changes direction, symbolizes the unreasonable and capricious sin to which the sinners submitted in their lives.²²

A closer look at the lustful souls reveals that, among those whom Virgil mentions by name, five out of nine are women. At first, this ratio may not seem to reveal much, but when one considers that this is the only circle of the Inferno in which women outnumber men, this slight difference in numbers becomes significant.²³ Virgil spends a total of fourteen lines identifying the lustful women, but he spends only three on men.²⁴ This infernal roll call begins with detailed descriptions of these women, while the men are afforded a mere mention. It is also important to note that the women in this list – Semiramis, Dido, Helen, and Cleopatra – were all famous queens, while the men – Achilles, Paris, and Tristan – were only princes.²⁵ Then there is the most famous couple in all of *The Comedy* – Paolo and Francesca, both of whom were nobles from the same family. Dante placed more women than men in the lustful circle – a sin that lacked reason. By damning prominent female characters for sexual transgressions – and so many of

²¹ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 39. Canto 5, lines 29-39 – “Che muggia come fa mar per tempesta, se da contrari venti è combattuto. La bufera infernal, che mai non resta, mena li spirti con la sua rapina; voltando e percotendo li molesta. Quando guingon davanti a la ruina, quivi le strida, il compianto, il lamento; bestemmian quivi la virtù divina. Intesi ch’ a così fatto tormento enno dannati i peccator carnali, che la ragion sommettono al talento.”

²² Pinsky, 313.

²³ Bergin, 60. Dante mentions seventeen women as being present in the Inferno. Eight of these are in Limbo and are merely referenced. Out of the remaining nine (with whom I will deal closely in this chapter), five are punished for lust, one for flattery, one for divination, and two for falsification. In Purgatory, Dante mentions several more women as being in Limbo, bringing the total number of women in the Inferno to twenty-four.

²⁴ The line count is determined by the Italian text, not the translation.

²⁵ Renato Poggioli, “Tragedy or Romance? A Reading of the Paolo and Francesca Episode in Dante’s Inferno,” *PMLA* 72, no. 3 (1957): 341.

them at that – Dante supports the idea that women are inherently more lustful and less reasonable than men.

As Dante enters the circle of the lustful and sees the souls of the damned carried mercilessly by the raging wind, he asks Virgil “Who are these people, by black air oppressed?”²⁶ At this request, Virgil identifies the souls as they rush past him. He begins with the four queens:

“First among these you wish to know,” he said,
 “Was empress of many tongues – she so embraced
 Lechery that she decreed it justified
 Legally, to evade the scandal of her lust:
 She is that Semiramis of whom we read,
 Successor and wife of Ninus, she possessed
 The lands the Sultan rules. Next, she who died
 By her own hand for love, and broke her vow
 To Sychaeus’s ashes. After her comes lewd
 And wanton Cleopatra. See Helen, too,
 Who caused a cycle of many evil years.”²⁷

Here we see four powerful women, each damned for succumbing to the passions of their bodies. Virgil’s description of these women suggests that they were not the victims of male lust, but rather sly seductresses who used their power to tempt men and, in the process, cause chaos and strife in their kingdoms.²⁸ But, as this passage reveals, sex was only part of their transgression.

²⁶ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 39. Canto 5, lines 50-51 – <<Maestro, chi son quelle genti che l’aura ner si gastiga?>>

²⁷ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 39. Canto 5, lines 52-65. <<“La prima di color di cui novelle tu vuo’ saper”, mi disse quelli allotta, “fu imperadrice di molte favelle. A vizio di lussuria fu sì rotta, che libito fé licito in sua legge, per tòrre il biasmo in che era condotta. Ell’ è Semiramis, di cui si legge che succedte a Nino e fu sua sposa: tenne la terra che ‘l Soldan corregge. L’altra è colei che s’ancise amorosa, e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo; por è Cleopatràs lussuriosa. Elena vedi, per cui tanto reo Tempo si volse...>>

²⁸ Shapiro, 75.

Semiramis, according to legend, legalized incest so she could justify sleeping with her son.²⁹ Dido, Queen of Carthage, the second soul named by Virgil, killed herself out of love for Aeneas, according to Virgil's *Aeneid*, and "broke her vow" to her husband, Sychaeus, after his death by becoming Aeneas's lover.³⁰ Next is Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, another suicide and lover of both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony.³¹ Finally, there is Helen, whom Virgil deems responsible for the Trojan War because she ran off with her lover, Paris, thereby causing the rift between Troy and Greece.³² Even though he mentions Paris, Dante blames the war on Helen, not on her lover.³³ Here one sees examples of the destruction lust can cause not only for individuals but for entire cities, states, and populations as well.

In addition to these stories, Dante would have been familiar with a similar incident in which the actions of a woman resulted in violent factionalism throughout the city. This was the division between the Guelfs and Ghibellines of Florence, which, according to Florentine historians, was caused by the actions of one woman.³⁴ The chroniclers Giovanni Villani and Dino Compagni, who wrote their respective histories of Florence around the same time that Dante lived, both tell the story of a nobleman named Buondelmonte dei Buondelmonti who had

²⁹ Pinsky, 314; Boccaccio, 23; Bernard Delmay, *I Personaggi Della Divina Commedia: Classificazione e Regesto* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1986), 353.

³⁰ Pinsky, 314.

³¹ *ibid*, 305.

³² *ibid*, 305.

³³ Shapiro, 76.

³⁴ R.W.B Lewis, *Dante* (New York: Viking, 2001), 80-83. Dante was familiar with the power struggle between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, as well as the later rift between the Black and White Guelfs because on March 10, 1302, two years after the year in which *The Comedy* takes place, he, a White Guelf, was sentenced to death and forced to go into exile by the priorate of Florence, which was comprised entirely of Black Guelfs. After this, Dante never entered his beloved city again, and his bitterness shows throughout *The Comedy* especially in his condemnation of certain political rivals, namely Pope Boniface VIII.

promised to marry the daughter of Lambertuccio degli Amidei.³⁵ One day, Buondelmonte passed by the house of the Donati family, and the wife of Forteguerra Donati, Aldruda, called to him from her balcony and showed him one of her own beautiful daughters. “Who have you chosen to be your wife?” she asked. “I was saving this girl for you.”³⁶ According to Villani, Buondelmonte was “immediately by the inspiration of the devil” struck by her beauty and was engaged to her.³⁷ On the day of the wedding, members of the Amidei family, along with some of their kin from the Uberti clan, attacked and slaughtered Buondelmonte as he crossed the Ponte Vecchio. According to Villani, because of this incident, “All of the families of the nobles and other citizens of Florence were divided, and some held with the Buondelmonti, who took the side of the Guelfs, and were its leaders, and some with the Uberti, who were the leaders of the Ghibellines, whence followed much evil and disaster to our city.”³⁸

Although men were the main instigators of the violence that started this division among the citizens of Florence, and a man had shamed an entire family by breaking off his betrothal to their daughter, both Villani and Compagni point to the role of a woman in these events. Aldruda Donati used one of her daughters to convince Buondelmonte to break his vow to the Amidei, and, although Compagni

³⁵ Giovanni Villani, *Selections from the First Nine Books of the Croniche Fiorentine of Giovanni Villani*, ed. Philip H. Wicksteed (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1896), 121. Original Text: Book V, Chapter 38; Dino Compagni, *Dino Compagni's Chronicle of Florence*, trans. Daniel E. Bornstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 6; Original Text: Book I, Chapter 2. Compagni actually says that Buondelmonte promised to marry the daughter of Oderigo Giantruffetti, but the translator of this edition of the chronicle, Daniel E. Bornstein, acknowledges the fact that most historians believe her to be a member of the Amidei clan.

³⁶ Compagni, 6.

³⁷ Villani, 121; Compagni's account of this episode is slightly different in that, according to him, Buondelmonte at first rejected the lady's proposal because of his promise to the Amidei, but, after she promised to pay the penalty for him breaking his betrothal, he decided that he preferred the Donati girl, and accepted the offer.

³⁸ Villani, 122-123.

and Villani fail to describe this woman's intentions, both imply that this woman persuaded Buondelmonte to do what she wanted regardless of the consequences. Aldruda was a medieval Florentine, and any medieval Florentine would have been aware of the concept of vendetta – the idea that people could seek revenge against someone who dishonored them, their name, or their family.³⁹ Though she may not have anticipated the years of unrest that would result from her actions, Aldruda nevertheless could have expected the aftermath to be violent. Villani even foreshadows the disastrous consequences in his reference to the devil, and, though he may not have meant that Aldruda was the devil incarnate, he does imply that she was his agent. In this way, Aldruda is similar to the lustful queens who pursued their selfish desires regardless of their cost.

As mentioned above, many of the women of the lustful circle were responsible for inciting violence and chaos within their kingdoms, but they are punished for lust, not the devastating results of their lust. In fact, most of the women of this circle committed other, seemingly graver sins. Dante could have easily placed Dido and Cleopatra, both suicides, in the Forest of Suicides located far deeper in Hell in the seventh circle.⁴⁰ He could have placed Semiramis in the same circle as those who used violence against their families because of her unnatural relationship with her son. He could even have placed Helen among the sowers of discord as penalty for the rift she caused between Troy and Greece. He chose, however, to damn them together for the sin they had in common: lust.

³⁹ Carol Lansing, *The Florentine Magnates: Lineage and Faction in a Medieval Commune* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 165.

⁴⁰ Giuseppe Aprile, *Dante Inferni Dentro e Fuori: Omosessualità, Antifemminismo e Sadomasochismo del Poeta* (Palermo: Editrice de il Vespro, 1977), 15.

According to Dante's organization of Hell, souls are assigned to circles depending on the sin that consumed them the most. Sinners are typically guilty of more than one sin. People lie, lust, and commit violence all the time; but Minos, the "great connoisseur of sin," who chooses where each soul must go, makes his decision based on each person's most prominent sin.⁴¹ In the case of the queens, Dante believed that their most destructive sin was their rampant lust.⁴² To him, and to others of his time, a woman's chastity was her greatest gift from God. This was the one thing that, if preserved, would allow her to emulate the Virgin Mary – the most perfect human, other than Christ, who ever lived.⁴³ Thus, if a woman lost her chastity, it was more self-destructive than suicide and an even greater offense to God than war. According to Dante, a woman's lust also outweighed any leadership skills or intelligence she might possess. Dante made no allowance for queens, like Semiramis, who gave up their chastity in exchange for effective leadership, as did some writers in the centuries after him.⁴⁴ For the poet, there was no sufficient compromise that involved the loss of a woman's chastity.⁴⁵

After Virgil introduces the queens, he briefly identifies the three men who were also damned for lust – "And great Achilles, the hero whom love slew in his

⁴¹ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 37. Canto 5; lines 4-12 - <<Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia: essamina le colpe ne l'intrata; giudica e manda secondo ch'avvinghia. Dico che quando l'anima mal nata li vien dinanzi, tutta si confessa; e quel conoscitor de le peccata vede qual loco d'inferno è da essa; cignesi con la coda tante volte quantunque gradi vuol che giù volte.>>

⁴² Bergin, 70-71.

⁴³ Mary Newman Williams and Anne Echols, *Between Pit and Pedestal: Women in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1994), 3.

⁴⁴ Maclean, 62. Torquato Tasso, a sixteenth-century Italian writer argued that a princess's main responsibility is to her kingdom. Thus, it is acceptable for her to place less emphasis on her moral welfare if doing so ensures effective leadership.

⁴⁵ Dante explains the importance of chastity in *Paradiso*, Canto 5, lines 61-63. In this canto, Beatrice explains to Dante that there is no worthy compensation to make up for breaking a vow of chastity. <<Però qualunque cosa tanto pesa per suo valor che tragga ogne bilancia, sodisfar non si può con altra spesa.>>

last battle. Paris and Tristan are here.”⁴⁶ Dante fails to describe the details of their lust nor does he suggest that it caused any destruction. None of them are described as “wanton,” “lewd,” scandalous, or lecherous as are the women, and this canto, the fifth in *The Comedy*, is the only one in the *Inferno* in which more women are identified and discussed than men. Dante’s obvious emphasis on women in this canto affirms the idea that women’s greatest vice is lust and that they are more prone to it than men due to their inferior intelligence.

Several decades after Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy*, Giovanni Boccaccio wrote about the same lustful queens in his book *Famous Women*. In his short biographies of them, he uses phrases like “feminine cunning” and “womanly deceit” to describe the means they used to seduce others.⁴⁷ Speaking of Semiramis, Boccaccio actually makes a generalization about all women saying, “Like others of her sex, this unhappy female was constantly burning with carnal desire.”⁴⁸ Although he praises the bravery and intellect of some of these women, he pays significant attention to what he considers their inherent female carnality. In doing so, he seems to suggest that their success in getting what they want stems

⁴⁶ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 39. Canto 5, lines 65-67 - <<E vedi ‘1 grande Achille, che con amore al fine combatteo. Vedi Paris, Tristano.>>

⁴⁷ Boccaccio, 19. Chapter II, verses 4 and 7. <<First she deceived her late husband’s army by means of a colossal trick plotted with feminine cunning...Semiramis spared herself no labors, feared no dangers, and with her incredible actions overcame all envy. Only then was she unafraid to reveal to everyone who she really was and how with womanly deceit she had pretended to be a man. It was almost as if she wanted to show that spirit, not sex, was needed to govern.>>

⁴⁸ Boccaccio, 23. Chapter II, verse 13. “Her accomplishments would be extraordinary and praiseworthy and deserving of perpetual memory for a vigorous male, to say nothing of a woman. But with one unspeakable act of seduction Semiramis stained them all. Like others of her sex, this unhappy female was constantly burning with carnal desire, and it is believed that she gave herself to many men. Among her lovers – and this is something more beastly than human – was her own son Ninyas, a very handsome young man. As though he had changed sex with his mother, Ninyas languished idly in bed while she exerted herself in battle against her enemies.”

directly from their ability to deceive and seduce others into giving it to them. For example, in his description of Cleopatra, Boccaccio says that:

She thought she had a good chance of getting the kingdom for herself if she could entice Caesar, the conqueror of the world, to desire her. As she was very beautiful indeed and could captivate almost anyone she wished with her sparkling eyes and her powers of conversation, Cleopatra had little trouble bringing the lusty prince to bed.⁴⁹

Dante's emphasis on female sexuality continues in this canto when he encounters the lovers Paolo and Francesca. Francesca da Rimini and her lover Paolo were contemporaries of Dante, and, although their story caused much scandal at the time, it was Dante who immortalized them for future generations.⁵⁰ Francesca was married to Gianciotto Malatesta but fell in love with his brother Paolo. Gianciotto discovered the two in the middle of one of their trysts and murdered them on the spot. Thus, the two lovers died in a state of sin and were unable to repent. Hence Dante places them in hell.⁵¹

The episode with the lovers begins when Dante recognizes the two joined together among the windswept souls and beckons them to stop and speak to him.

As doves whom desire has summoned,
With raised wings steady against the current, glide
Guided by will to the sweetness of their nest,
So leaving the flock where Dido was, the two sped

⁴⁹ Boccaccio, 363. Chapter LXXXVIII, verse 7. "Caesar ordered them to appear before him to plead their case. I shall not speak of young Ptolemy here, but Cleopatra, naturally malicious and extremely self-confident, was happy to comply and arrived in royal splendor. She thought she had a good chance of getting the kingdom for herself if she could entice Caesar, the conqueror of the world, to desire her. As she was very beautiful indeed and could captivate almost anyone she wished with her sparkling eyes and her powers of conversation, Cleopatra had little trouble bringing the lusty prince to her bed. In the midst of the Alexandrian revolt she stayed with him for many nights and, as practically everyone agrees, conceived a son, whom she later called Caesarion after his father."

⁵⁰ Teodolinda Barolini, "Dante and Francesca: Realpolitik, Romance and Gender," *Speculum* 75, no. 1 (Jan. 2000): 1.

⁵¹ Pinsky, 314; It should also be noted that Dante did not believe Gianciotto's violence was justified. In fact, he reserves a special place for him in Caina, the ninth circle of the Inferno where those who betrayed their kin are punished.

Through the malignant air till they had crossed
 To where we stood – so strong was the compulsion
 Of my loving call.⁵²

Here, Francesca begins to speak directly to Dante. In fact, Francesca carries the entire conversation and speaks for a total of thirty-six lines while Paolo “at her side was weeping.”⁵³ Francesca stands before the two illustrious poets and tells the story of her and Paolo’s adulterous affair. She is the only woman in the *Inferno* to speak on behalf of other souls.⁵⁴ She seems calm, though guilty, poised, though in pain. She speaks with remorse, but she never bursts into tears or shouts with grief or anger. Paolo, on the other hand, is completely broken by his ordeal in Hell and cannot bring himself to speak through his sobs. He cowers at Francesca’s side like a child whose mother scolds him for misbehaving. Here we see a complete reversal of accepted roles for men and women. Instead of a quiet, obedient woman who takes careful instruction from her husband, the man is helpless, weak, and inarticulate, while the woman speaks plainly to men on his behalf.

Upon first reading this canto, one may assume that Dante was attempting to destroy stereotypes of passive women through his portrayal of Francesca. A closer examination will reveal that Francesca’s role reversal actually reinforces this stereotype.

Although Francesca appears confident and speaks with ease and eloquence

⁵² Alighieri, *Inferno*, 41. Canto 5, lines 82-87. <<Quali colombe dal disio chiamate con l’ali alzate e ferme al dolce nido vegnon per l’aere, dal voler portade; cotali uscir de la schiera ov’è Dido, a noi venendo per l’aere maligno, sì forte fu l’affettüoso grido.>>

⁵³ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 43. Canto 5, lines 139-140 - <<Mentre che l’uno spirto questo disse, l’altro pingëa>>

⁵⁴ Shapiro, 75.

in the company of such illustrious men, she is, in fact, delusional and naïve.

Although she and Paolo are punished for lust, throughout her speech, she refers to the relationship between them as love. “Love, which in gentle hearts is quickly born, seized him for my fair body,” she explains, implying that the emotion between the two lovers was sweet and true rather than destructive and artificial. She goes on to suggest that love itself was the culprit and that she and Paolo were mere victims. “Love, which absolves none who are loved from loving, made my heart burn with joy so strong that as you see it cleaves still to him, here,” she says. “Love gave us both one death.”⁵⁵ She also places blame on the story of Lancelot and Guinevere, which she and Paolo were reading immediately before they commenced their affair; and she cites a specific passage in the story that tempted Paolo to kiss her.⁵⁶ It is apparent from her unwillingness to accept blame that Francesca fails to understand her fault.⁵⁷ Paolo, however, recognizes his situation and shows remorse through his incessant weeping.

While listening to Francesca’s story, Dante tells her that “your suffering makes me weep for sorrow and pity” and laments “that sweet conceptions and passions so deep should bring them here!” The canto closes with Dante

⁵⁵ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 41. Canto 5, lines 100-106 - <<Amor, ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende, prese costui de la bella persona che mi fu tolta; e ‘l modo ancor m’offende. Amor, ch’a nullo amato amar perdona, mi prese del costui piacer sì forte, che, come vedi, ancor non m’abbandona. Amor condusse noi ad una morte.>>

⁵⁶ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 43. Canto 5, lines 127-138 - <<Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto di Lancialotto come amor lo strinse; soli eravamo e senza alcun sospetto. Per più fiate li occhi ci sospinse quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso; ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse. Quando leggemmo il disiato riso esser baciato da cotanto amante, questi, che mai da me non fia diviso, la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante. Galeotto fu ‘l libro e chi lo scrisse.>>

⁵⁷ Barolini, 9.

“swooning as in death” and fainting because his pity overwhelms him.⁵⁸ Dante’s reaction would seem to indicate the poet’s belief that the punishment inflicted on Francesca and Paolo is unjustified and that they are in fact victims of love’s passion. However, as stated in the third canto in the inscription above the entrance to Hell “Justice moved my high maker, in power divine, wisdom supreme, love primal.”⁵⁹ Hell is governed by Divine Justice, which cannot be questioned. Otherwise, it implies that God has erred. Dante’s pity is misplaced and unjustified, which the pilgrim will learn as he continues his journey through the infernal abyss. The pity he shows toward the lovers serves only to illustrate this point and convey Dante’s spiritual immaturity. He too has allowed himself to be seduced by Francesca’s sad story and poetic words.⁶⁰

Another reading of this canto is that Dante faints because Francesca is elegant and charming in the way she speaks of love and thus reminds the pilgrim of his own poetical roots.⁶¹ Before Dante wrote *The Comedy*, he belonged to a school of poetry called the *dolce stil nuovo* (“sweet new style”). The *stilnovisti*, as the practitioners of this style were called, believed that anyone with a gentle heart (*cor gentil*) could love and that love was a noble pursuit. In her discourse, Francesca speaks like a *stilnovist* whose gentle heart was taken by love and overcome by it. Dante recognizes this and is moved because it reminds him of his own lyric poetry, especially that of *La Vita Nuova*, in which he writes of his love

⁵⁸ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 43. Canto 5, lines 140-142 - <<Sì che di pietade io venni men così com’ io morisse. E caddi come corpo morto cade.>>

⁵⁹ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 19. Canto 3, lines 4-6 - <<Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore; fecemi la divina podestate, la somma sapienza e ‘l primo amore.>>

⁶⁰ Mark Musa, “Ego and Cosmos: The Lover of the ‘New Life’ and the Pilgrim of the ‘Divine Comedy,’” *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 7, no. 2 (Autumn, 1974): 10.

⁶¹ Musa, *Ego and Cosmos*, 9.

of Beatrice, often describing it as a painful, violent, and emotional experience.⁶²

Dante understands what it is like to be a victim of love and feels that he too is guilty of lust because he has allowed love poetry to consume his thoughts.

Perhaps he faints because he feels that love has overcome him, and he fears that he will meet the same fate as Francesca.

Although Dante does not explicitly state that the pilgrim faints for this reason, it is a valid interpretation. After all, *The Comedy* takes place in the year 1300, about the same time that Dante was writing *La Vita Nuova*.⁶³ However, Dante wrote *The Comedy* several years after this, so the character of Dante is much younger than the author. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between Dante the pilgrim and Dante the poet. Dante the poet is the author of *The Divine Comedy* who created the character of Dante the pilgrim. Although we may assume that the pilgrim possesses many of the qualities, beliefs, and emotions of the poet himself, we should not view him as a complete reflection of the writer. The pilgrim travels through the Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise that the poet created. The pilgrim meets Francesca and Paolo, laments their fate, and faints due to his overwhelming pity on their behalf; but the poet damns the lovers and creates a Hell in which pity has no place. Dante the poet illustrates that Francesca and Paolo were indeed guilty of lust and that they deserve their miserable fate.⁶⁴

The pity Dante the pilgrim feels for the lovers also supports another belief

⁶² Musa, *Ego and Cosmos*, 12.; c.f Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Dino S. Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 73 for an example. Chapter 14, verse 12. <<Ché Amor, quando si presso a voi mi trova, prende baldanza e tanta securtate, che ere tra' miei spiriti paurosi, a quale ancide, a eual pinge di fore.>>

⁶³ Musa, *Ego and Cosmos*, 6

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 9-10. Musa posits that Dante created the encounter with Francesca as a test of the pilgrim's ability to perceive sin. Dante, who is himself susceptible to the power of *amore*, uses Francesca to show what happens when love is misguided.

regarding women's seductive nature, which, although not directly discussed by Dante in *The Comedy*, was widely held in medieval society. This is the idea that women used speech to persuade and deceive. This concept derived from the story of the temptation of Adam and Eve. Some medieval theologians argued that Eve was the one who was deceived first and she then used her power of speech to persuade Adam to take a bite from the apple. The notion that a woman's speech could deceive and tempt provided one of the major arguments for why women should remain silent in church.⁶⁵ Aristotle also postulated that "'Silence is a woman's glory' but this is not equally the glory of man." Whereas men should cultivate eloquence and practice rhetoric so they could participate in public affairs, the weakness of feminine constitutions and minds rendered speech a dangerous tool when used by women more than necessary.⁶⁶

Francesca's speech in canto five perfectly illustrates this point. She speaks in place of and on behalf of a man. She speaks eloquently and assuredly, like a poet; and in the process, she deceives Dante into thinking that she is innocent and deserving of pity. She resembles Eve in that she was deluded into sinning; and in failing to recognize her transgression, she tempts others to sin.

The setting in which Dante places Francesca and Paolo also provides a context for how the poet reinforces stereotypes about the inherent inferiority of women and superiority of men. As mentioned earlier, this particular canto is dominated by women. In addition, the fact that Dante renders Francesca the dominant figure in the canto illustrates the anomaly of the assertive woman and

⁶⁵ Maclean, 15.

⁶⁶ *ibid*, 54-55.

passive man. Everything in Hell, except for the justice that governs it, is perverse. Throughout the *Inferno*, Dante shows us figures with distorted bodies, demons defecating, completely mythological figures dominating the landscape, and other odd and unnatural beings and events. From this perspective, the scene with Francesca and Paolo can also be considered a perversion of reality because, in the medieval context, Paolo's sniveling and silent figure cowering in the shadow of a woman was considered feminine. On the other hand, Francesca's poise, elegance, and assertiveness were regarded as masculine traits. By switching feminine and masculine characteristics and situating the lovers in Hell, Dante perverts the lovers and makes them unnatural.

Francesca also serves to illustrate the medieval belief that sexually powerful women could render men impotent. Women were expected to be passive and obedient to their husbands. The notion of female passivity also extended to ideas about accepted sexual roles and practices during the medieval period. Since Dante damned Francesca and the ancient queens for lust, and all of these women are portrayed as dominant, powerful, influential, and therefore masculine, it is useful to examine medieval sexual norms as they pertained to different genders.

According to medieval Catholic belief, the man should always assume the dominant or top position in heterosexual intercourse. If the woman assumed this position, it signified her "usurpation" of her husband's superiority and control and was therefore considered unnatural in that it rendered the woman powerful and the man weak. Whether or not couples in the Middle Ages actually adhered to this idea and refused to engage in sex with the "woman on top" is, of course, difficult

to ascertain; but the Catholic church did ban the practice, thus showing that it was considered a danger to society.⁶⁷

We do know, however, that it was socially acceptable for men to assert their virility through sex. Great pains were taken to preserve women's chastity until, and even during, marriage, but this was not the case for men. Men generally married later than women; and there was no rule, either formal or informal, which prohibited young men from engaging in fornication before marriage. Therefore, young men experimented sexually, often with slaves, servants, poor women, and prostitutes who were unable to reject the advances of their social superiors.⁶⁸ Both the Church's and society's toleration of urban prostitution stemmed from the idea that it was better to let men sow their wild oats with immodest women who lacked a need to preserve their reputations, than for them to commit the more horrible transgression of sleeping with a virgin, married woman, or widow.⁶⁹

Men sometimes even resorted to violence and force to fulfill their sexual desires. Although there were laws against rape, young patrician men often raped women, especially those from inferior social classes, as a way to prove their physical strength.⁷⁰ It was also considered a way for a man to assert his dominance by sodomizing a boy younger than himself. Adult males would assume the "active" or penetrative role while teenage boys, usually age 20 or younger, would allow themselves to be anally penetrated until they were old

⁶⁷ Michael Rocke, "Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 153.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 152.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 159.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 164.

enough to assume the dominant position. Although this practice served as a sort of right of passage for young boys – a kind of initiation into manhood – those who assumed the passive position were ridiculed by being called a variety of derogatory feminine names such as “whore” and “bitch.” Sometimes, others would refer to them merely as “wife” or “woman” in reference to their sexual passivity. This practice reinforced the idea of feminine sexual passivity and male superiority.⁷¹ Dante himself even refers to it in canto twenty-six of the *Purgatorio* when the Bolognese poet, Guido Guinizzelli, describes how Julius Caesar was called a “queen” in response to rumors of his homosexual trysts.⁷²

Dante also indirectly touches on the sexual passivity of women in Purgatory when the poet, Statius explains how the soul is formed:

The thirsty veins drink up the perfect blood –
 but not all of that blood: a portion’s left,
 like leavings that are taken from the table.
 Within the heart, that part acquires power
 to form all of another’s human limbs,
 as blood that flows through veins feeds one’s own limbs.
 Digested yet again, that part descends
 to what is best not named; from there it drips
 into the natural receptacle,
 upon another’s blood; the two bloods mix,
 one ready to be passive and one active,
 because a perfect place, the heart, prepared them.
 The active, having reached the passive, starts
 to work: first it coagulates – and then
 quickens – the matter it has made more dense.
 Having become a soul (much like a plant,
 though with this difference – a plant’s complete,
 whereas a fetus still is journeying),

⁷¹ Rocke, 167-168. For more information on male homosexual relations in the fifteenth century, c.f. Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁷² Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Dell, 1984), 245. Canto 26, lines 77-78 - <<di ciò per che già Cesar, triunfando, ‘Regina’ contra sé chiamar s’intese.>>

the active virtue labors, so the fetus
may move and feel, like a sea-sponge; and then
it starts to organize the powers it's seeded.⁷³

The “perfect blood” refers to the semen, which “descends to what is best not named” (the penis) and “drips into the natural receptacle” (the womb). The semen takes the role of the “active” blood and works to form the body and later the soul, while the womb acts as the passive setting in which all of this takes place. With this passage, Dante supports male dominance in procreation with the woman as a mere receptacle. This is also an extension of Aquinas’s assertion that “Among perfect animals the active power of generation belongs to the male sex, and the passive power to the feminine.”⁷⁴

By damning so many powerful women for lust, Dante reaffirms the idea that a woman’s dominance over a man, even in sex, is perverse and ungodly. It seems that their gravest sin is not that they succumbed to the pleasures of the flesh but, rather, that they actively tried to fulfill their sexual desires by seducing and overpowering men, thus rendering the men impotent and ridiculous.

Dante continues to encounter women even after he has left the circle of the lustful. His next meeting with a female shade comes in canto eighteen in the second valley of the malebolge, which is filled with the souls of the flatterers. Virgil identifies some of the souls punished there, and, immediately before the

⁷³ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 233. Canto 25, lines 37-57. << “Sangue perfetto, che poi non si beve da l’assetate vene, e si rimane quasi alimento che di mensa leve, prende nel core a tutte membra umane virtute informativa, come quello ch’a farsi quelle per le vene vane. Ancor digesto, scende ov’è più bello tacer che dire; e quindi poscia geme sovr’ altrui sangue in natural vasello. Ivi s’accoglie l’uno e l’altro insieme, l’un disposto a patire, a l’altro a fare per lo perfetto loco onde si preme; e, giunto lui, comincia ad operare coagulando prima, e poi avviva ciò che per sua matera fé constare. Anima fatta la virtute attiva qual d’una pianta, in tanto differente, che questa è in via e quella è già a riva, tanto ovra poi, che già si move e sente, come spungo marino; e indi imprende ad organar le posse ond’è semente.” >>

⁷⁴ Clark, 87.

canto ends, he tells Dante to:

Extend your gaze a little farther ahead,
 So that your eyes may fully observe the face
 Of that disheveled strumpet who in the mire
 Scratches her body, as she stands or squats,
 With shit-rimmed fingers – she is Thaïs, the whore
 Who, asked, ‘*And is my favor with you great?*’
 Replied, ‘*Enormous,*’ to her paramour –
 And let our sight be satisfied with that.⁷⁵

Thaïs was a character in the play *Eunuchus*, written by the Roman playwright, Terence.⁷⁶ Dante, however, most likely obtained his information about her from a passage in Cicero’s *De Amicitia*.⁷⁷ In this commentary, Cicero refers to Thaïs, and all flatterers, as “parasites,” who prey on people who long to possess personal virtue and excellence.⁷⁸ Thaïs took advantage of her lover’s desire for self-worth by uttering flattering words to him and deceiving him. Here again we see the putrescence of feminine sensuality and cunning. We also see once again the image of a dangerous, loquacious woman who flatters and misleads using speech.

Dante illustrates the nature of feminine sensuality and deception by emphasizing Thaïs’s body. Instead of describing the beautiful woman that Thaïs undoubtedly was in life, he refers to her dirty face and fingernails and describes her as scratching and squatting in muck, once again associating women with the body and sensuality. In life, Thaïs used her body and her beauty to seduce men,

⁷⁵ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 149. Canto 18, lines 128-136. << “Il viso un poco più avante, sì che la faccia ben con l’occhio attinghe di quella sozza e scapigliata fante che là si graffia con l’unghe merdose, e or s’accoscia e ora è in piedi stante. Taïde è, la puttana che rispuose al drudo suo quando disse “Ho io grazie grandi apo te?”: “Anzi maravigliose!”. E quindi sian le nostre viste sazie” >>.

⁷⁶ Musa, *Inferno*, 238. Although Cicero attributes this flattering response to Thaïs, in the play it is actually a servant, Gnatho, who exaggerates the response.

⁷⁷ Pinsky, 332.

⁷⁸ Cicero, *On Old Age and Friendship*, trans. Frank O. Copley (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1971), 87. Original Text: Chapter XXVI, 98-99

and now she pays for her sin by being covered in filth and grime. What she once used to her advantage now causes her discomfort and shame; what was once beautiful is now repulsive. The true nature of the female body is revealed.

As Dante descends further into Hell, he encounters more women among the diviners, who dwell in the fourth pouch of the malebolge. After identifying several male fortune tellers, Virgil points out the soul of Manto, the supposed founder of Virgil's hometown of Mantua:

And she, whose loose hair covers her breasts unseen
 On the side away from you, where other hair grows,
 Was Manto – who searched through many lands, and then
 Settled in the place where I was born. Of this,
 Hear me awhile: her father dead, and Bacchus's
 City enslaved, she for a long time chose
 To roam the world.

Virgil then describes the area surrounding Mantua and says that:

There Manto the savage virgin saw in mid-fen
 A stretch of dry land, untilled, uninhabited:
 And there she stayed and lived, where she could shun
 All humans to ply her arts in a place she shared
 Only with servants. And when her life was gone
 And her soul descended, there its shell was interred.
 Afterward, families scattered about that country
 Gathered where marsh on all sides made a ward
 Against attackers. And when they built their city
 Over her bones, with no lots or divination
 They named it Mantua...
 ...So let no other history,
 I charge you, belie my city's true inception.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 161-163. Canto 20, lines: 52-99. << “E quella che ricuopre le mammelle, che tu non vedi, con le trecce sciolte, e ha di là ogni pilosa pelle, Manto fu, che cercò per terre molte; poscia si pose là dove nacqu’ io; onde un poco mi piace che m’ascolte. Poscia che ‘l padre suo di vita uscìo e venne serva la città di Baco, questa gran tempo per lo mondo gio.” >> <<Quindi passando la vergina cruda vide terra, nel mezzo del pantano, senza coltura e d’abitanti nuda. Lì, per fuggire ogni consorzio umano, ristette coi suoi serve a far sue arti, e visse, e vi lasciò suo corpo vano. Li uomini poi che ‘ntorno erano sparti s’accolsero a quel loco, ch’era forte

Virgil's oral history of his hometown is the longest speech in the *Inferno*, and it blames a woman for the ill-fated history of an entire city.⁸⁰ It is noteworthy that, according to Virgil's *Aeneid*, it was not Manto who founded Mantua, but her son, Ocnis.⁸¹ Dante appears to have mistakenly placed the blame on Manto.

Whether purposeful or not, it is striking that Dante faults a woman for the corrupted history of a city just as others of his time placed the blame for the fall of humankind on Eve and Dante himself blamed the lustful queens for the chaos and havoc they caused in their kingdoms. As Aldruda Donati caused a rift between Florentines, Manto set a precedent of fraud that continued to plague her city centuries after she died.

Although Manto is the first woman we meet in Hell who is not punished for an overtly sexual sin, Dante does treat her as a sexual object in this passage. Virgil identifies her to Dante as the one whose hair covers her breasts, and he makes a seemingly gratuitous reference to her pubic hair. Both of these references serve to illustrate how Manto's sin has corrupted her feminine form making it a repulsive, not attractive, figure.⁸²

The deepest part of Hell in which Dante encounters female souls is among the falsifiers in the last trough of the malebolge. Here he encounters two female figures. The first is "Myrrha the infamous, whose love was drawn toward her

Per lo pantan ch'avea da tutte parti. Fer la città sovra quell'ossa morte; e per colei che 'l loco prima elesse, Mantua l'appellar sanz'altra sorte...Però t'assenno che, se tu mai odi originar la mia terra altrimenti, la verità nulla menzogna frodi." >>

⁸⁰ Pinsky, 334.

⁸¹ Pinsky, 334-335; Virgil, *Virgil's Aeneid*, trans. Rev. Oliver Crane, D.D. (New York: The Baker & Taylor Co., 1888), 191. Original text: Book X, verses 198-200.

⁸² It should be noted that Dante also perverts the bodies of several men in the *Inferno*, especially in Cantos 24 and 25, in which the bodies of the thieves are transformed into serpents. However, he does not treat all the men of Hell this way, and I am examining how the body figures into the discussion of all the damned women, even those who are not punished for sexuality.

father beyond what's honorable. She engaged in sin with him by falsifying herself as someone else."⁸³ Myrrha was a character in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, who disguised herself so that she could sleep with her father.⁸⁴ According to Ovid, Myrrha knew that her love for her father was unnatural; and in order to escape the torment these feelings caused her, she attempted suicide. However her nurse promised Myrrha that she would do whatever she could to end her suffering, and so they devised a plan in which Myrrha entered her father's room in the dark of night to lie with him. She did this several times before her father discovered her identity, after which she ran away.⁸⁵

The other woman he meets in this circle is Potiphar's wife, who in Genesis, accused Joseph of rape after he rejected her advances.⁸⁶ Both she and Myrrha represent feminine deceit. They also show how far women will go in order to fulfill their sexual desires.

In Myrrha we also see how rampant feminine sexuality can be. Though she tried with all her will to overcome it, her lust for her father consumed her to the point where she had to choose between succumbing to it or killing herself. She shows, once again, the idea that women are inherently carnal creatures who, if they fail to overcome their lust, are devoured by it.

So far, the female characters discussed have all served as examples of "bad," Eve-like women. These women are sensual, lustful, deceptive, and

⁸³ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 257. Canto 30, lines 38-41 - <<Quell' è l'anima antica di Mirra scellerata, che divenne al padre, fuordel dritto amore, amica.>>

⁸⁴ Aprile, 18.

⁸⁵ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 340-345.

⁸⁶ Pinsky, 349.

seductive. They remind women of how they should not behave and of what will happen to them if they fall into error. However, prior to entering the Inferno, Dante visits Limbo, the place in which virtuous pagans – those who behaved morally but lived before Christ and therefore cannot receive divine grace – spend eternity. Here, Dante meets several illustrious classic poets such as Homer, Aristotle, and Ovid, but Virgil also introduces him to several women. Among them are Electra, the mother of Dardanus, founder of Troy; Camilla, a virgin who died fighting the Trojans; Penthesilea, queen of the Amazons who defended Troy; Lavinia, the wife of Aeneas who conquered the Latins; Lucretia, a Roman who committed suicide after she was raped; and Julia, Marcia, and Cornelia who exemplified female Roman virtue.⁸⁷

Dante considered female Roman warriors to be virtuous, and, in reading *The Comedy*, it becomes obvious that Dante admired the unity and majesty of the Roman Empire and longed for an emperor who could reunite the Christian world once more.⁸⁸ Perhaps he considers fighting to defend Rome as virtuous for all humans, male and female. The other virtuous pagan women, however, seem to

⁸⁷ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 33. Canto 4, lines 121-128 <<I' vidi Eletra con molti compagni, tra' quai conobbi Ettore ed Enea, Cesare armato con li occhi grifiagni. Vidi Camilla e la Penthesilea; da l'altra parte vidi 'l re Latino che con Lavina sua figlia sedea. Vidi quel Bruto che cacciò Tarquino, Lucrezia, Iulia, Marzia e Corniglia.>>; Pinsky, 312.

⁸⁸ Scott, 231. This is also evident within *The Comedy* itself in Dante's choosing Virgil as his guide and as a symbol of reason, his constant references to classical historical and mythological figures, and his invocation of the Muses. c.f. Alighieri, *De monarchia*, 173-174. Book 2, Chapter 1, Line 3. "Time was that I, too, marveled that the Roman people had been raised to supremacy on the terrestrial globe, with none to resist. For it was my thought, as I looked upon the surface only, that they had gained it by no right but merely by force of arms. But now that I have pierced with the eyes of my mind to the marrow of it, and have seen by most convincing signs that it was divine providence which effected this, my wonder has vanished, and a certain derisive contempt comes in its place when I understand how the nations muttered against the pre-eminence of the Roman people, when I see the peoples mediating vain things, as I myself was once wont to do; when, moreover, I see the grievous sight of kings and princes agreeing in this alone, to oppose their Lord and his anointed Roman prince."

gain virtue by association with powerful men. For instance, Electra is the mother of the founder of Troy, and Lavinia is the wife of a conqueror. They fulfilled their feminine duties as wives and mothers, a topic that I will discuss in later chapters, and for this Dante considers them worthy of praise. The character who stands out as seemingly sinful is Lucretia, a suicide. Why does Dante place her in Limbo instead of in the Forest of Suicides? Because she killed herself in order to preserve her chastity after being raped. Instead of living with the shame of her defilement, Lucretia chose to end her life and protect her honor. Here again, Dante stresses feminine chastity by refusing to damn Lucretia.

The condemned women in the *Inferno* are all guilty of seduction. Those in the circle of the lustful used their bodies to tempt men and satisfy their sexual desires. That's used words. Myrrha employed a disguise. Manto seduced others into thinking she could see into the future. This complements the medieval notion that women were inherently sinful creatures who lacked the intelligence to recognize right from wrong. Consequently, they were more prone than men to sin.

Dante did believe that women could achieve salvation. He, like his contemporaries, believed that women – except for Beatrice, whom Dante places in a category of her own⁸⁹ – could potentially reach one of two extremes: that of Eve – weak, deceptive, and disobedient – or that of the Virgin Mary – chaste, humble, honest, and perfect.⁹⁰ Women were, after all, created by God and therefore possessed the same potential to reach Heaven as men did. However, since they lacked the same mental and physical capabilities of men, they were

⁸⁹ I will continue my discussion of Beatrice in my last chapter. Even though she is mentioned in all three canticles, she cannot be classified with the other women in each realm because she is special.

⁹⁰ Williams and Echols, 3.

more apt to end up like the women in the *Inferno*. However, just as the *Inferno* is only one stage of Dante's journey, the women in Hell represent only one category of their sex. In Purgatory, Dante will show us another, more worthy, class of women.

Chapter Two - “She with sighs and prayers devout has set me free¹”

As Dante leaves Hell behind, he also leaves the terror and pain that characterized the experience of all of the souls dwelling there. Whereas Hell is filled with a spirit of hate, violence, and torment, the next realm of the Christian afterlife, the mountain of Purgatory, exudes a collective spirit of hope, atonement, and redemption.² Though the souls here experience pain, they seem able to bear it because they know their discomfort is only temporary. They understand that this pain will allow them to obtain salvation.

Even Dante seems relieved to have left the infernal abyss as he emerges from the underworld and beholds the stars in the heavens above.³ From this moment, despite the pain endured and the seemingly endless amounts of time spent waiting to ascend the mount, a sense of joy pervades this canticle. When they see Dante, the “happy” souls crowd around and speak to him.⁴ They gladly sing hymns and prayers of hope even while they suffer unimaginable torment.⁵ They ask the pilgrim to pray for them, and they ask him to tell their relatives and friends on Earth to pray for them so they may reach Heaven sooner.⁶

This is a chief difference between the souls in Hell and those in Purgatory. While the souls in the Inferno curse God and their neighbors for their

¹ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 215. Canto 23, lines 88-89. <<Con suoi prieghi devoti e con sospiri tratto m’ha de la costa ove s’aspetta.>>

² Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 346.

³ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 2-3. Canto 1, lines 13-18. <<Dolce color d’oriental zaffiro, che s’accoglieva nel sereno aspetto del mezzo, puro infino al primo giro, a li occhi miei ricominciò diletto, tosto ch’io usci’fuor de l’aura morta che m’avea contristati li occhi e ‘l petto.>>

⁴ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 14-17. Canto 2, lines 67-75. <<L’anime, che si fuor di me accorte, per lo spirare, ch’i’ era ancor vivo, maravigliando diventaro smorte. E come a messagger che porta ulivo tragge la gente per udir novelle, e di calcar nessun si mostra schivo, così al viso mio s’affisar quelle anime fortunate tutte quante, quasi obliando d’ire a farsi belle.>>

⁵ Le Goff, 349.

⁶ *ibid*, 350.

eternal damnation⁷, the souls of the mountain admit their faults and are eager to repent.⁸ This is how the souls in Purgatory avoided perdition – they prayed for forgiveness before they died and therefore passed into eternity in a state of grace.⁹

This grace becomes evident as Dante encounters the souls in Purgatory. They speak plainly of their lives and the sins they committed, and they humbly thank God for granting them salvation and the opportunity to purge their sins and achieve Heaven. In their demeanor, one can see their virtue, just as in the *Inferno*, where the evil natures of the damned became apparent in their foul language and violent behavior.

Although a large majority of the souls climbing the mountain are men, the women Dante meets also possess these characteristics. The first woman he encounters is La Pia of Siena. The encounter between the poet and this lady lasts only seven lines:

“Pray, after your returning to the world,
when, after your long journeying, you’ve rested,”
the third soul, following the second, said,
“may you remember me, who am La Pia;
Siena made – Maremma unmade – me:
he who, when we were wed, gave me his pledge
and then, as nuptial ring, his gem, knows that.”¹⁰

Pia, who is punished here among the late-repentant who died by violence at the base of the mountain known as “ante-Purgatory,” spends the first two lines of her

⁷ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 22-23. Canto 3, lines 103-105 <<Bestemmiavano Dio e lor parenti, l’umana spezie e ‘l loco e ‘l tempo e ‘l seme di lor semenza e di lor nascimenti.>>

⁸ Joseph Gallagher, *A Modern Reader’s Guide to Dante’s the Divine Comedy* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 1996), 70.

⁹ *ibid*, 69.

¹⁰ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 44-45. Canto 5, lines 130-136. <<“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 ‘nnaellata pria disponando m’avea con la sua gemma.”>>

speech beseeching Dante to rest after he finishes his long and arduous journey. She sounds like a mother looking after her son, making sure he refrains from over-exerting himself and putting his well-being before her own. Her first concern is not in introducing herself to the pilgrim or entreating him to listen to the story of her murder but in showing her concern for the weary traveler.¹¹

After her entreaty to Dante, Pia finally introduces herself to the pilgrim in the hope that he will remember her once he returns to Earth. She gives a brief yet to-the-point account of her life. Though she fails to give her full name, most scholars identify her as Pia of the Tolomei family of Siena. According to history, her husband, Nello, hurled her from the balcony of her house and killed her.¹² Since the events leading up to her death occurred suddenly and Pia was most likely killed instantaneously, she lacked an opportunity to atone for her sins while she still lived. According to Dante, however, one could be saved at the last moment by praying to God for forgiveness.¹³ This is the function of Purgatory – to allow those who repented but failed to atone for their sins a chance to earn salvation.¹⁴

Though she could speak scathingly of her husband and curse him for murdering her, Pia does not do so. Unlike Francesca da Rimini, who stated that a special place in the lowest circle of Hell waited for her husband, Pia does not

¹¹ Allen Mandelbaum, "Introduction," in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Purgatorio* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004), xxii.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 42-43. Canto V, lines 104-108. When Buonconte da Montefeltro tells of his death, he explains that at the last moment an angel snatched him away from a demon set to carry him to Hell because he repented at the last minute. <<L'angel di Dio mi prese, e quell d'inferno gridava: 'O tu del ciel perché mi privi? Tu te ne porti di costui l'eterno per una lagrimetta che 'l mi toglie; ma io farò de l'altro altro governo!''>>

¹⁴ Le Goff, 5.

damn her husband. Instead, she merely alludes to his action as a way of identifying herself. She does not speak bitterly, but modestly. In fact, without knowing the story behind her death, the reader might assume that Pia feels more anger toward her husband for breaking his marriage vow than for murdering her.

Although she is only present for a few lines, Pia embodies the spirit of Purgatory. Her piety and modesty and her humble plea to the pilgrim to be remembered among the living are shared by every soul in this realm. She also, however, provides a portrait of a female contemporary of Dante. She shows courtesy to Dante by expressing concern for him and placing her interest in his well-being before the selfish desire to tell her story.¹⁵

The patriarchal system that dominated Europe during the Middle Ages rendered women pawns within their families – disposable relatives who were married off and then became members of their husbands’ families.¹⁶ As a wife, a woman was expected to take special care of her husband, his home, and his children. Her primary role in life was to manage her husband’s belongings, and her realm was his household. Medieval theologians and preachers, including Saint Bernardino of Siena, asserted that without women, men would be alone and their households would fall to ruin.¹⁷ As we have already seen, Saint Thomas Aquinas argued that woman was created from man’s rib in order to signify her status as his helpmate.¹⁸

This attitude towards women’s function in society was supported by the

¹⁵ Helen M. Luke, *Dark Wood to White Rose: Journey and Transformations in Dante’s Divine Comedy* (New York: Parabola Books, 2004), 65.

¹⁶ David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 82.

¹⁷ Williams and Echols, 15.

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Prima Pars*, Question 92, Article 3.

story of creation in the second chapter of Genesis, which postulated that since woman was created from man and after man, God intended for her to be his helpmate and companion.¹⁹ In this chapter, “the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.’”²⁰ Medieval readers of these passages interpreted them to mean that women were secondary creatures who were created to support the world of men.

Pia fulfills her feminine function by looking out for Dante – a weary male traveler. She plays the role of the good woman, ensuring that men are taken care of before tending to her own needs. Only after she has done this does she deem it prudent to direct the attention to herself, and, even then, she is not selfish or proud, but courteous and demure. She is the first woman whom Dante meets in the *Comedy* to behave this way and, in doing so, provides an alternative feminine representation to that of the naked, vile, and loud women in the *Inferno*.

Dante meets only one other woman in Purgatory before he reaches the Earthly Paradise at the pinnacle of the mountain. She is Sapia of Siena, and she introduces herself to the pilgrim during his passage through the second terrace on which the envious purge themselves. Her speech is notably longer than Pia’s, but it also serves to reinforce both the spirit of Purgatory and the image of the proper feminine penitent.

My brother, each of us is citizen
of one true city: what you meant to say
was ‘one who lived in Italy as pilgrim...
I was a Sienese,” she answered, “and
with others here I mend my wicked life,

¹⁹ R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 24.

²⁰ Gen 2.18. New King James Version.

weeping to Him that He grant us Himself.
 I was not sapient, though I was called Sapia;
 And I rejoiced far more at others' hurts
 than at my own good fortune. And lest you
 should think I have deceived you, hear and judge
 if I was not, as I have told you, mad
 when my years' arc had reached its downward part.
 My fellow citizens were close to Colle,
 where they'd joined battle with their enemies,
 and I prayed God for that which He had willed.
 There they were routed, beaten; they were reeling
 along the bitter paths of flight; and seeing
 that chase, I felt incomparable joy,
 so that I lifted up my daring face
 and cried to God: 'Now I fear you no more!' –
 as did the blackbird after brief fair weather.
 I looked for peace with God at my life's end;
 the penalty I owe for sin would not
 be lessened now by penitence had not
 one who was sorrowing for me because
 of charity in him – Pier Pettinaio –
 remembered me in his devout petitions.
 But who are you, who question our condition
 as you move on, whose eyes – if I judge right –
 have not been sewn, who uses breath to speak?"...
 ...And I: "He who is with me and is silent.
 I am alive; and therefore, chosen spirit,
 if you would have me move my mortal steps
 on your behalf, beyond, ask me for that."
 "Oh, this," she answered, "is so strange a thing
 to hear: the sign is clear – you have God's love.
 Thus, help me sometimes with your prayers. I ask
 of you, by that which you desire most,
 if you should ever tread the Tuscan earth,
 to see my name restored among my kin.
 You will see them among those vain ones who
 have put their trust in Talamone (their loss
 In hope will be more than Diana cost);
 but there the admirals will lose the most.²¹

²¹ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 116-121. Canto 13, lines 94-154. << "O frate mio, ciascuna è cittadina d'una vera città; ma tu vuoi dire che vivesse in Italia peregrina...Io fui sanese," rispuose, "e con questi altri rimendo qui la vita ria, lagrimando a colui che sé ne presti. Savia non fui, avvegna che Sapia fossi chiamata, e fui de li altrui danni più lieta assai che di ventura mia. E perché tu non creda ch'io t'inganni, odi s'i' fui, com'io ti dico, folle, già discendendo l'arco d'i miei anni. Eran li cittadin miei presso a Colle in campo giunti co' loro avversari, e io pregava Iddio di quel ch'e' volle. Rotti fuor quivi e vòlti ne li amari passi di fuga; e veggendo la caccia, letizia presi a tutte

Sapia spends a great deal of time recounting her sin, whereas Pia failed to mention any specific sins she had committed during her life. However, Sapia does speak in the same pious manner as her fellow Sieneſe lady. Her ſpeech is ſomewhat reminiscent of Francesca’s in canto five of the *Inferno* in both its length and in the amount of time ſpent diſcuſſing her ſin and personal history. However, whereas Francesca reſuſed to accept reſponſibility for her luſt, Sapia acknowledges her wrongdoing and obviously regrets the envy and the pride that conſumed her life. She calls her life “wicked,” and even ſays that ſhe was undeſerving of the name “Sapia,” which implies wiſdom and diſcretion – two things Sapia feels ſhe did not poſſeſs. She is humble, whereas Francesca was proud. She ſpeaks honeſtly of her ſin and takes reſponſibility for the actions ſhe committed, whereas Francesca blamed other things – the power of Love, the romantic ſtory of Lancelot and Guinevere, even her lover – for inducing her to ſin. Sapia alſo ſtates that ſhe “looked for peace with God at my life’s end” and is grateful for the chance to pay the “penalty I owe for ſin,” while Francesca ſeems to wonder why ſhe is being puniſhed at all and tries to evoke pity from Dante.

Sapia does not expect the pilgrim to pity her. Inſtead, like the other ſouls Dante meets in this canticle, ſhe aſks only that he pray for her and bring news of

altre diſpari, tanto ch’io volſi in ſù l’ardita faccia, gridando a Dio: ‘Omai più non ti temo!’ come fé ‘l merlo per poca bonaccia. Pace volli con Dio in ſu lo ſtremo de la mia vita; e ancor non ſarebbe lo mio dover per penitenza ſcemo, ſe ciò non foſſe, ch’a memoria m’ebbe Pier Pettinaio in ſue ſante orazioni, a cui di me per caritata increbbe. Ma tu chi ſe’, che noſtre condizioni. Vai dimandando, e porti li occhi ſciolti, ſi com’io credo, e ſpirando ragioni?...Chi t’ha dunque condotto qua ſù tra noi, ſe giù ritornar credi?’ E io: “Coſtui ch’è meco e non fa motto. E vivo ſono; e però mi richiedi, ſpirito eletto, ſe tu vuo’ ch’i’ mova di là per te ancor li mortai piedi.” “Oh, queſta è a udir ſì coſa nuova,” riſpoſe, “che gran ſegno è che Dio t’ami; però col priego tuo talor mi giova. E cheggioti, per quel che tu più brami, ſe mai calchi la terra di Toſcana, che a’ miei propinqui tu ben mi rinfami. Tu li vedrai tra quella gente vana che ſpera in Talamone, e perderagli più di ſperanza ch’a trovar la Diana: ma più vi perderanno li ammiragli.”>>

her whereabouts to her family on earth. She knows that only prayers of the faithful will expedite her cleansing process and allow her to reach Paradise sooner. She even acknowledges a man – Pier Pettinaio, a Sieneese contemporary of Sapia who earned a reputation for piety during his life – for praying for her and consequently relieving some of the burden she must bear.²²

The theme of prayer extends throughout Dante’s Purgatory. Not only do the penitents of the mountain pray ceaselessly while they work, but they also ask Dante to pray on their behalf. Likewise, the souls constantly hound the pilgrim to remind their friends and families to pray for them.²³

At first, Dante fails to understand how the prayers of the living help the souls of the dead, but Virgil explains this in canto six:

The peak of justice is not lowered when
the fire of love accomplishes in one
instant the expiation owed by all
who dwell here; for where I asserted this –
that prayers could not mend their fault – I spoke
of prayers without a passageway to God.²⁴

Virgil leaves a more detailed explanation of this phenomenon for Beatrice and assures Dante that she will answer all of his questions in time. In the meantime, he clarifies some of Dante’s perplexity by explaining a passage in the *Aeneid* in which he asserted that prayer cannot influence Heaven’s will. He justifies this position as adhering to the laws of Purgatory because in his epic, he was referring to pagan prayers – “prayers without a passageway to God.” However, since

²² Allen Mandelbaum, “Notes,” in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Purgatorio* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004), 347.

²³ Le Goff, 350.

²⁴ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 50-51. Canto 6, lines 37-43. << “Ché cima di giudicio non s’avvalla perché foco d’amor compia in un punto ciò che de’sodisfar chi qui sa’stalla; e là dov’io fermai cotesto punto, non s’ammendava, per pregar, difetto, perché ‘l priego da Dio era disgiunto.” >>

Christian prayers are founded on faith in the True God, they may affect his will if they are humble and pious.²⁵

Although the concept of Purgatory and of the efficacy of prayers for the dead reached its zenith with Dante's interpretation of it in *The Comedy*, the idea originated several centuries before Dante's time.²⁶ According to Jacques Le Goff in his book *The Birth of Purgatory*, the idea of a realm located between Heaven and Hell in which faithful sinners could repent for their transgressions took root in Western Christianity sometime between 1150 and 1200.²⁷ Here, the dead are subjected to several physical trials, which allow them to repay the debt they owe to God for their unholy behavior during their lives.²⁸ Medieval Christians believed that the prayers of the living on behalf of the dead could help to alleviate the amount of time a penitent had to endure these trials.²⁹

Brian Patrick McGuire, in his essay on Le Goff's book, argues, however, that the idea of intercessory prayer on behalf of the dead pervaded Christian thought well before Le Goff's estimate of when the Church adopted a formal notion of Purgatory. McGuire cites evidence that St. Augustine wrote in the early fifth century about the importance of prayers for the dead who were not damned³⁰ and that Pope Gregory the Great believed that the prayers of the faithful could shorten the amount of time penitents spent cleansing their sins.³¹ Although Christians were supposed to pray on behalf of all the souls who had passed on,

²⁵ Mandelbaum, *Purgatorio*, 329.

²⁶ Le Goff, 13.

²⁷ *ibid*, 4-6.

²⁸ *ibid*, 7.

²⁹ *ibid*, 11.

³⁰ Brian Patrick McGuire, "Purgatory, the Communion of Saints, and Medieval Change," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 20 (1989), 70-73.

prayers from one's family members were considered particularly effective in shortening one's purgatorial sentence, as is evident from an eleventh-century account of a priest who had a vision of his dead brother chastising the cleric for forgetting the blood-bond between them and asking him to, "Remember me, I beg: help me with your prayers and compassionate alms."³²

Dante repeatedly emphasizes the importance of prayer for the dead, and he stresses the efficacy of prayers on behalf of one's kin. The souls Dante encounters beg to be remembered.³³ Within these pleas, Dante highlights the prayers of women. Although he only meets two women, Pia and Sapia of Siena, on the mountain, many of the male souls he meets name specific women in their lives, most often relatives, whom they want to pray for them. In these instances, Dante introduces us to a new feminine role – that of spiritual intercessor who acts on behalf of men.

As stated above, a medieval wife was expected to take care of her husband by tending to his health and home. Dante unites this notion of the woman who minds her husband's, or other male relatives', needs before her own with the notion of prayer for the dead. Through his encounters with the souls of purgatory, he demonstrates the need for women to remember their men, even those who have passed on. The pilgrim converses with several men on the mountain who speak of living female relatives. Some speak fondly, praising these women for their fidelity, while others speak bitterly, chastising them for their inconstant love.

The first soul to speak of a woman he knew on Earth is in fact not a

³² *ibid*, 78-79.

³³ Luke, 62.

penitent. He is Cato, the pagan guardian of the entrance to Purgatory whom Dante meets in the opening canto of this canticle. According to Dante, Cato was released from Limbo during Christ's Harrowing of Hell and charged with the duty of minding the gate to the mountain.³⁴ However, his wife, Marcia, remains in Limbo, and is in fact mentioned in canto four of the *Inferno* as an example of Roman virtue.³⁵ Cato has not forgotten his wife, even though divine ordinance has mandated that they be separated for all eternity; he speaks fondly and longingly of her to Dante and Virgil after Virgil says he is from Limbo:

But I am from the circle where the chaste
eyes of your Marcia are; and she still prays
to you, o holy breast, to keep her as
your own: for her love, then, incline to us.
Allow our journey through your seven realms.
I shall thank her for kindness you bestow –
if you would let your name be named below.”
“While I was there, within the other world,
Marcia so pleased my eyes,” he then replied,
“each kindness she required, I satisfied.
Now that she dwells beyond the evil river,
she has no power to move me any longer,
such was the law decreed when I was freed.
But if a lady come from Heaven speeds
and helps you, as you say, there is no need
of flattery; it is enough, indeed,
to ask me for her sake.³⁶

Virgil describes Marcia as chaste and says that, even in death, she continues to pray for her husband. She remains faithful to a man whom she will never meet

³⁴ Mandelbaum, *Purgatorio notes*, 318.

³⁵ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 32-33. Canto 4, line 128; Pinsky, 312.

³⁶ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 7. Canto 1, lines 78-93. << “Ma son del cerchio ove son li occhi casti di Marzia tua, che ‘n vista ancor ti priega, o santo petto, che per tua la tegni: per lo suo amore adunque a noi ti piega. Lasciane andar per li tuoi sette regni; grazie riporterò di te a lei, se d’esser mentovato là giù degni.” “Marzia piacque tanto a li occhi miei mentre ch’i’ fu’ di là,” diss’ elli allora, “che quante grazie volse da me, fei. Or che di là dal mal fiume dimora, più muover non mi può, per quella legge che fatta fu quando me n’uscì’ fora. Ma se donna del ciel ti move e regge, come tu di’, non c’è mestier lusinghe: bastisi ben che per lei mi richegge.” >>

again. At this point, Virgil and Dante are trying to gain access to the mountain and have already explained that God has given permission for them to travel there. However, it is not until they mention Marcia and Virgil promises to return news of him to her that Cato allows them to pass. He sees in Dante's relationship with Beatrice something of his relationship with Marcia and understands the love that inspired Beatrice to lead Dante on this journey. He softens and lets the two wayfarers pass.

Marcia, a pagan sentenced to Limbo, continues to pray for her husband, another pagan who will never reach Paradise. Cato explains that her prayers are ineffective both because she is in Hell and because God has ordained that he remain at the base of Purgatory. Nonetheless he is moved by her fidelity, and we can see that Dante the poet is as well. In addition to making her a figure of Roman virtue in *The Comedy*, Dante also made her a symbol of the noble soul in his book *Il Convivio*.³⁷ He suggests that, because of her steadfast love and unwavering devotion, had Marcia and Cato been Christians, her prayers would have shortened her husband's sentence in Purgatory. She is a perfect example of the ideal medieval wife, and she typifies the devout relative described by Pope Gregory the Great who prays for the dead in order to relieve their time of penitence.

Marcia's prayers may be ineffective, but many of the other men with whom Dante converses during his ascent speak of women whose prayers are helping or could help them reach Heaven sooner. Those who pray for their loved ones are spoken of with praise, love, and affection. Those who fail to do so are

³⁷ Mark Musa, *Dante: The Divine Comedy, Vol. II: Purgatory* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 105; Dante Alighieri, *The Banquet of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Elizabeth Price Sayer (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1887), 274-275. Italian text: Fourth Treatise, Chapter XXVIII.

considered neglectful, fickle, and unfaithful.

The first account of a “good” woman comes in canto three while the pilgrim speaks with Manfred, a late-repentant and excommunicate. Christians believed that excommunicates were damned to Hell because they died without the grace of the Church, but Manfred explains how God allows all the faithful a chance at salvation:

Despite the Church’s curse, there is no one
so lost that the eternal love cannot
return – as long as hope shows something green.
But it is true that anyone who dies
in contumacy of the Holy Church,
though he repented at the end, must wait
along this shore for thirty times the span
he spent in his presumptuousness, unless
that edict is abridged through fitting prayers.³⁸

Manfred explains that anyone who has faith and asks for forgiveness dies in a state of grace. But since those Manfred left behind assumed that his excommunication was tantamount to eternal damnation, they are unaware that he is in Purgatory and not in Hell. For this reason he tells Dante, “I pray that when you reach the world again, you may go to my lovely daughter, mother of kings of Sicily and Aragon – tell her the truth, lest she’s heard something other.”³⁹ After he explains the events surrounding his excommunication and death, he ends the canto with a final plea to Dante: “Now see if you, by making known to my kind Constance where you saw my soul and why delay’s decreed for me, can make me

³⁸ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 26-27. Canto 3, lines 133-141. << “Per lor maladizion sì non si perde, che non possa tornar, l’eterno amore, mentre che la speranza ha fior del verde. Vero è che quale in contumacia more di Santa Chiesa, ancor ch’al fin si penta, star li convien da questa ripa in fore, per ognun tempo ch’elli è stato, trenta, in sua presunzion, se tal decreto più corto per buon prieghi non diventa.” >>

³⁹ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 27. Canto 3, lines 114-117: <<Io priego che, quando tu riedi, vadi a mia bella figlia, genitrice d’onor di Cicilia e d’Aragona, e dichì ‘l vero a lei, s’altro si dice.>>

happy; those here – through those beyond – advance more quickly.”⁴⁰ Manfred knows that if Constance knew her father’s whereabouts, she would pray for him. She fails to pray for him now, not because she has forgotten him or stopped caring for him since his death, but because she believes her prayers would be ineffective. From Manfred’s speech, one can deduce that in all other aspects his daughter has fulfilled her filial duty, as he calls her “kind” and “lovely,” so he has no reason to believe that she will let him down now.

Manfred also believes that Constance’s prayers will be enough to grant him a speedier salvation, as he fails to mention any other relatives, friends, or acquaintances whom he would like to pray for him. Instead, he makes it abundantly clear that his happiness rests in the hands of his daughter – that she alone can bring her father to Paradise.

Manfred is one of many souls to invest such power in a woman’s prayers. In the Valley of the Rulers in Ante-Purgatory, Dante meets his friend Nino Visconti, who tells the pilgrim to, “Ask my own Giovanna – there where the pleas of innocents are answered – to pray for me. I do not think her mother still loves me: she gave up her white veils – surely, poor woman, she will wish them back again”⁴¹ Later in his ascent up the mountain, Dante encounters the spirit of Pope Adrian V who says, “Beyond, I have a niece whose name’s Alagia; she in herself is good, as long as our house, by example, brings her not to evil; and she

⁴⁰ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 27. Canto 3, lines 142-145: <<Vedi oggimai se tu mi puoi far lieto, revelando a la mia buona Costanza come m’hai visto, e anco esto divieto; ché qui per quei di là molto s’avanza.>>

⁴¹ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 73. Canto 8, lines 71 -72. <<Dì a Giovanna mia che per me chiami là dove a li ‘innocenti si risponde. Non creda che la sua madre più m’ami, poscia che trasmutò le bianche bende, le quai convien che, misera!, ancor brami. >>

alone is left to me beyond.”⁴²

In both of these passages we see men who yearn for the prayers of their female relatives. These women share more than just their gender and a role in the salvation of a man, however. They are also relatively young women in comparison to the men who speak of them: one is a daughter, the other a niece. In fact, Nino Visconti’s daughter, Giovanna, was only nine years old in the year 1300, when *The Comedy* takes place.⁴³ Giovanna and Alagia are also cited as the last hopes of Visconti and Pope Adrian, as everyone else in their respective families has turned against them or become corrupted. These women are not only faithful Christian women, they are also unspoiled and innocent. Dante believed that their juvenile innocence and naïveté made their prayers more effective than those of their older, tainted relatives.

The last soul to speak of the prayers of a woman is Forese Donati, who repents his sins among the gluttonous on the sixth terrace of the mountain. He tells Dante:

It is my Nella who,
to drink the sweet wormwood of torments: she,
with sighs and prayers devout has set me free
of that slope where one waits and has freed me
from circles underneath this circle. She –
my gentle widow, whom I loved most dearly –
was all the more beloved and prized by God
as she is more alone in her good works.⁴⁴

⁴² Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 177. Canto 19, lines 142-145. <<Nepote ho io di là c’ha nome Alagia, buona da sé, pur che la nostra casa non faccia lei per essempro malvagia; e questa sola di là m’è rimasa.>>

⁴³ Musa, *Purgatory*, 90.

⁴⁴ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 215. Canto 23, lines 85-93. <<Sì tosto m’ha condotto a ber lo dolce assenzo d’I martiri la Nella mia con suo pianger dritto. Con suoi prieghi devoti e con sospiri tratto m’ha de la costa ove s’aspetta, e liberato m’ha de li altri giri. Tanto è a Dio più cara e più diletta la vedovella mia, che molto amai, quanto in bene operare è più soletta.>>

Forese appreciates the fidelity of his widow. Nella exemplifies the “good wife” who puts her husband’s and family’s needs before her own and remembers them after they have passed on.

There is also a dramatic scene on the mountain in which a woman intercedes on behalf of the pilgrim himself. This occurs in Canto nineteen when Dante dreams of the siren or *femmina balba* who tries to lead Dante’s mind astray.

And when her speech had been set free, then she
 began to sing so, that it would have been
 most difficult for me to turn aside.
 “I am,” she sang, “I am the pleasing siren,
 who in midsea leads mariners astray –
 there is so much delight in hearing me.
 I turned aside Ulysses, although he
 had longed to journey; who grows used to me
 seldom departs – I satisfy him so.”⁴⁵

In this case, the siren represents the sins of excessive love for an unworthy object– avarice, prodigality, gluttony, and lust. She seems beautiful but in reality, she is hideous.⁴⁶ Dante realizes the true nature of this ghastly creature only through the help of a woman.

Her lips were not yet done when, there beside me,
 a woman showed herself, alert and saintly,
 to cast the siren into much confusion.
 “O Virgil, Virgil, tell me: who is this?”
 she asked most scornfully; and he came forward,
 his eyes intent upon that honest one.
 He seized the other, baring her in front,
 tearing her clothes, and showing me her belly;

⁴⁵ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 171. Canto 19, lines 16-24. <<Poi ch’ell’avea ‘l parlar così disciolto, cominciava a cantar sì, che non pena da lei avrei mio intento rivolto. “Io son,” cantava, “io son dolce serena, che’ marinari in mezzo mar dismago; tanto son di piacere a sentir piena! Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago al canto mio; e qual meco s’ausa, rado sen parte; sì tutto l’appago!”>>

⁴⁶ Mandelbaum, *Purgatorio notes*, 361-362.

the stench that came from there awakened me.⁴⁷

The woman who appears and alerts Virgil to what is going on represents enlightenment and embodies characteristics of several different women: the Virgin Mary, who told St. Lucy that Dante needed her help; St. Lucy, who urged Beatrice to seek the help of Virgil in guiding the pilgrim toward Paradise, and Beatrice herself, who sent for Virgil and will eventually guide Dante through the Heavenly Paradise.⁴⁸ This saintly lady reveals the true nature of sin, which allows Dante to understand and discern the guises temptation employs to lead us away from God.

Although the event of the siren functions mostly as an allegory and is not meant to be taken literally,⁴⁹ it is significant that Dante uses the feminine as both a symbol of temptation and a symbol of salvation. It is also relevant to the discussion in this chapter that the saintly woman intercedes on Dante's behalf. This is, of course, not the first time a woman has intervened for the pilgrim. As Virgil explains in the second canto of the *Inferno*, three women – Beatrice, Mary, and Lucy – all had a hand in sending Virgil to help Dante find the true way to salvation.⁵⁰ Without women Dante would have been doomed to wander the dark wood until the day he died.

Although the souls in Purgatory are overwhelmingly male, women are

⁴⁷ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 171-173. Canto 19, lines 25-33. <<Ancor non era sua bocca richiusa, quand'una donna apparve santa e presta lunghezzo me per far colei confusa. "O Virgilio, Virgilio, chi è questa?" fieramente dicea; ed el venia con li occhi fitti pur in quella onesta. L'altra predea, e dinanzi l'apria fendendo i drappi, e mostravami 'l ventre; quel mi svegliò col puzzo che n'uscia.>>

⁴⁸ Musa, *Purgatory*, 209.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 209.

⁵⁰ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 17. Canto 2, lines 124-126. <<Poscia che tai tre donne benedette curan di ten e la corte del cielo, e 'l mio parlar tanto ben ti promette.>> c.f. Canto 2, lines 52-120 in which Virgil explains how each of these ladies beckoned him to help Dante.

cited as potential intercessors on behalf of dead loved ones. Dante believed that women had a particular function to act on behalf of others. Whence did this notion spring? Did Dante believe that a woman's prayers were more worthy than a man's? Perhaps. As mentioned in the discussion of Giovanna and Alagia, these women were young and innocent and had not been exposed to much sin. It would then be fair to say that, since a medieval woman was expected to stay in the home and away from the temptations of public life, Dante believed that a woman's prayers could be more effective than the prayers of those constantly exposed to corruption and vice.⁵¹

Dante may have also extended the social role of medieval women to complement their spiritual role. A woman who prayed for her dead husband, father, or uncle would have performed similar tasks for these same men while they lived.

During the first stage of a woman's life she was a daughter and was expected to obey and serve her father. The primary duty of the daughter was to marry once she reached puberty. Medieval families, especially patrician ones, used marriage to form alliances with other families and maintain their social status.⁵² Women were the primary pawns in the marriage market; and fathers considered them to be temporary family members who, once married, would become part of their husband's patriline.⁵³ In this way, to a certain degree, women

⁵¹ Maclean, 43.

⁵² Stanley Chojnacki, "'The Most Serious Duty': Motherhood, Gender, and Patrician Culture in Renaissance Venice," in *Refiguring Women: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, eds. Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 137.

⁵³ Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 118; Chojnacki, 143.

acted, albeit passively, on behalf of their families by forming these beneficial connections.

Once married, a woman took on her wifely duties. The wife's primary responsibility was to obey her husband.⁵⁴ Among other things she was expected to protect the family's belongings, monitor who came into the home, stay out of her husband's personal affairs, including business and politics, and always be eager to please her husband.⁵⁵ Her most important duty, however, was to bear and raise her husband's children.⁵⁶

Since they stayed at home, mothers were more able than fathers to care for their children.⁵⁷ Not only did they bear and give birth to the children, if wet nurses were not hired, they nursed them and raised them for the first few years of their lives. Mothers were usually responsible for the early education of their children, which ended for girls when they married and for boys when they began to work.⁵⁸ Because fathers were often away from home and had little responsibility in rearing their children, mothers often acted as intercessors between their sons and husbands during property contests or other conflicts. Mothers were usually closer in age to their children and spent more time getting to know them and forming emotional attachments to them. This put them in a perfect position to settle disputes and communicate between the generations.⁵⁹

With this fact in mind, we can see how it would not have been a stretch for Dante

⁵⁴ Rudolph Bell, *How to Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 222.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁵⁷ Herlihy, 124.

⁵⁸ Klapisch-Zuber, 111.

⁵⁹ Herlihy, 120-121.

to emphasize the ability of women to act as intermediaries in spiritual matters because their social roles prepared them for it.

To comprehend the significance of Dante's assertion that women could and should act as spiritual intercessors on behalf of men, one must remember that the medieval church limited the power of women to act in religious matters. Although women could enter convents (and many did if their fathers could not afford to give them a dowry that would allow them to marry), they could not become priests or clerics within the Catholic Church. This regulation was supported by the argument that since Eve had used speech to seduce Adam to sin, and because she had demonstrated the inferiority of feminine intelligence, women should not be allowed to speak in church because their words could act as a gateway to the devil.⁶⁰

Though Dante does not explicitly say that women should be allowed to speak in church or be ordained as priests, and even though the idea of women praying on behalf of dead relatives did not contradict the notion that women should be denied authority within the church, there is an episode in *Purgatorio* which suggests that the poet endowed women with a more prominent spiritual function than the medieval church deemed appropriate. This is the scene in the Earthly Paradise in which Matilda, the unidentified woman who precedes Beatrice's entrance, dunks Dante beneath the waters of the River Lethe, in which the memory of sin is erased:

I saw the woman whom I'd found alone,
standing above me, saying: "Hold, hold me!"
She'd plunged me, up to my throat, in the river,

⁶⁰ Maclean, 15.

and, drawing me behind her, she now crossed,
 light as a gondola, along the surface.
 When I was near the blessed shore, I heard
 “*Asperges me*” so sweetly sung that I
 cannot remember or, much less, transcribe it.
 The lovely woman opened wide her arms;
 she clasped my head, and then she thrust me under
 to that point where I had to swallow water.
 That done, she drew me out and led me, bathed,
 into the dance of the four lovely women.⁶¹

Essentially Matilda baptizes Dante in this scene: she immerses him in holy water that erases all memory of sin and renders him innocent so that he may enter the Heavenly Paradise. The poet could have easily chosen a male, even John the Baptist himself, to bathe the pilgrim in Lethe, but he chose an anonymous, and perhaps even purely allegorical woman.⁶² In fact, the entire Earthly Paradise is dominated by women. Women represent the three theological virtues and four cardinal virtues,⁶³ and only women speak directly to the pilgrim. Dante’s preparation for the entrance into Heaven is led by Beatrice and Matilda, who take on the role of priests, acting as intermediaries between the earthly and divine realms.

I do not postulate that Dante believed women should be priests or take an active role in the Church. I believe that his notions of a woman’s spiritual function differed greatly from his notions of a woman’s place in the church. As I

⁶¹ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 291. Canto 31, lines 92-104. <<La donna ch’io avea trovata sola sopra me vidi, e dicea: “Tiemmi, tiemmi!” Tratto m’avea nel fiume infin la gola, e tirandosi me dietro sen giva sovrasso l’acqua lieve come scola. Quando fui presso a la beata riva, “*Asperges me*” sì dolcemente udissi, che nol so rimembrar, non ch’io lo scriva. La bella donna ne le braccia aprissi; abbracciommi la testa e mi sommerse ove convenne ch’io l’acqua inghiottissi. Indi mi tolse, e bagnato m’offerse dentro a la danza de le quattro belle.>>

⁶² Mandelbaum, *Purgatorio notes*, 386; Musa, *Purgatory*, 305. Both authors state that there has been much debate over the identity of Matilda, but neither of them believe she was an historical figure.

⁶³ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 273. Canto 29, lines 121-131.

discussed in the previous chapter, Dante regarded women as physically and mentally weaker than men; and I do not believe that by emphasizing the power of feminine prayer, he was trying to spearhead a medieval feminist movement. But I do suggest that Dante considered the spiritual world to be distinct from the temporal world (as he argued so vehemently in his treatise on government, *De monarchia*) and he thus would have made a distinction between a woman's spiritual role and her temporal one.⁶⁴

In this respect, Dante adhered to the beliefs of Saint Thomas Aquinas. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas asserted that, contrary to some previous opinions, because they were necessary for the generation of the species, women were not misbegotten men in terms of human nature. However, men were more perfect than women because, "Man is yet further ordered to a still nobler vital action, and that is intellectual operation."⁶⁵ Just as Dante described in his explanation on the formation of the soul, Aquinas stresses that "Wherever there is distinction of sex, the active principle is male and the passive is female; the order of nature demands that for the purpose of generation there should be concurrence of male and female."⁶⁶

In matters besides generation, Aquinas subscribed to the belief that women were defective males. He believed that "woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a

⁶⁴ Scott, 144-145. In *De Monarchia*, Dante argues that there should be two separate rulers on Earth: the monarch who rules the temporal world, and the church, which rules over matters of the spiritual world.

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *Prima Pars.*, Question 92, Article 1; Clark, 87.

⁶⁶ Aquinas, *Prima Pars.*, Question 98, Article 2; Clark, 92.

perfect likeness in the masculine sex.”⁶⁷ He believed that women were unfit to receive the orders of the Church because such an occupation was designed for those who could signify “eminence of degree,” in other words, those who were not in a state of subjection as women were.⁶⁸

Aquinas argued, however, that although these regulations regarding women were to be followed on Earth, the spiritual realm existed under a different set of guidelines. He stated that although there will be a difference between the sexes even after death, there will be no lust or sin and hence no danger in men and women coexisting. He also postulated that “woman is subject to man on account of the frailty of nature, as regards both vigor of soul and strength of body. After the resurrection, however, the difference in those points will be not on account of the difference of sex, but by reason of the difference of merits.”⁶⁹ Thus, women could achieve spiritual equality with men if their souls were worthy.

It is apparent in Dante’s emphasis on the power of female prayer that he agreed with this theory of Aquinas. This did not, however, interfere with the idea that God designed women for different worldly occupations than men. Though this theory may not have accorded more freedom or social mobility to women, it did allow them to obtain salvation instead of damning them to hell based solely on their sex.

Despite the obvious link between women, fidelity, innocence, and intercessory prayer that Dante stresses in Purgatory, he also refers to women who behave badly. Although the souls of the mountain anxiously ask for the prayers of

⁶⁷ Aquinas, *Prima Pars.*, Question 92, Article 1; Clark, 87.

⁶⁸ Aquinas, *Supplementum Tertia Partis*, Question 39, Article 1; Clark, 96.

⁶⁹ Aquinas, *Supplementum*, Question 81, Article 3; Maclean, 14.

good, faithful, and loving women, some of them – including many of those discussed above – also point out the fickle and insincere women in their lives. The descriptions of these women provide further insight into what Dante considered to be reprehensible female behavior.

The first two of these women are mentioned in canto five, where Dante meets the soul of Buonconte da Montefeltro. Buonconte, who died by violence and failed to repent until the moment of his death, must wait the period of thirty times his life span before he may begin his ascent up the slope. He knows prayers from the living would help expedite his waiting period; and he asks Dante, “So may that desire which draws you up the lofty mountain be granted, with kind pity, help my longing! I was from Montefeltro, I’m Buonconte; Giovanna and the rest – they all neglect me; therefore, among these shades, I go in sadness.”⁷⁰

Giovanna was Buonconte’s widow, and “the rest” most likely refers to his daughter, Manentessa, and brother.⁷¹ Since Buonconte laments the fact that he must wait out the full sentence of Ante-Purgatory, the word “neglect” suggests that his relatives do not pray for him. Curiously, Buonconte seems to blame his fate on his family rather than the fact that he chose to put off repentance until his final moments. He speaks as though prayers are expected, and is angry when they fail to come.

Later, in canto eight, Dante speaks with Nino Visconti, who, although he praises the virtue and love of his daughter, Giovanna, juxtaposes her with his

⁷⁰ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 43. Canto 5, lines 85-90. <<Se quell disio si compia che ti tragge a l’alto monte, con buona pietate aiuta il mio! Io fui di Montefeltro, io son Buonconte; Giovanna o altri non ha di me cura; per ch’io vo tra costor con bassa fronte.>>

⁷¹ Musa, *Purgatory*, 55; Delmay, 229

widow Beatrice. “I do not think [Giovanna’s] mother still loves me,” he says. “She gave up her white veils – surely, poor woman, she will wish them back again. Through her, one understands so easily how brief, in woman, is love’s fire – when not rekindled frequently by eye or touch.”⁷² Visconti considers his wife unfaithful because she remarried after his death and thus broke her marriage vow. He also obviously believes that his daughter’s fidelity and innocence are exceptions to the typical female traits of inconstancy, vanity, and selfishness. Whereas Giovanna maintains a steadfast loyalty to her father’s memory, most women instantly forget those who cease to give them attention.

The fact that Visconti uses the phrase “I believe” (*Credo*) in referring to his widow’s neglect demonstrates that he thinks any prayers she might say on his behalf would be futile because she has remarried. He does not specifically say that she fails to pray for him, only that he thinks she has forgotten him and replaced his memory with concern for her new husband. The question of a woman’s remarriage not only presented a problem for Dante and Visconti but also to medieval society as a whole.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, houses, families, and estates were ruled by men. Family names, property, and land passed through male lines; and women were considered temporary members of the family, who, once married, became part of their husband’s lineage. An unmarried woman was identified through her father’s name, and a married woman was identified by her

⁷² Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 73. Canto 8, lines 73-78. <<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.>>

husband's.⁷³ The only property that a woman could legally claim as her own was her dowry, which was her sole means of supporting herself if she lost her husband's wealth.⁷⁴ If her husband died, she could leave his family and use her dowry to arrange a new marriage.⁷⁵ However, any children from a first marriage stayed with the father's family, and if their mother remarried, she took the dowry – a significant means of financial support – away from them.⁷⁶ If the widow was young, however, her kin might want to arrange a second marriage for her in order to build a new alliance. Though a wife identified mostly with her husband's family, she did not sever all bonds with her family of birth, who could, if they chose, reclaim their right to her dowry if she was widowed.⁷⁷ Thus, a widow was faced with two very difficult choices: she could remain with her husband's family and fulfill her role as mother to her children or she could assent to the wishes of her own family and remarry in order to satisfy their interests.⁷⁸ No matter what decision she made, she would disappoint someone.⁷⁹

Medieval society considered the “good mother” one who, once widowed, chose to remain with her children and raise them as both mother and father.⁸⁰ The woman who chose to remarry, even if she was obeying the wishes of her birth family, was deemed “cruel” and was considered selfish, greedy, inconstant, and flighty. She was also, in a certain sense, rendered a whore who succumbed to her ravenous lust by choosing another spouse instead of remaining

⁷³ Klapisch-Zuber, 117-119.

⁷⁴ Chojnacki, 137.

⁷⁵ Klapisch-Zuber, 122.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 125.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 123.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 126-127.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 130.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 128.

chaste and loyal. She not only betrayed her husband, she dishonored him.⁸¹

With such a stigma attached to the widow who remarried, it is no wonder Dante chose to have Visconti lambast his wife for her infidelity. By remarrying, she not only abandoned him and his family, she put her own lust and selfishness before the needs of others. Because of her sin, even if she continued to pray for her late husband, her pleas would be futile because they would be tainted by her infidelity and impurity.

Through Visconti's condemnation of his wife, Dante reveals yet again what he believes to be the characteristics of the typical woman – she is egocentric, capricious, and lustful. He compares this vile thing with the lovely, gracious, innocent, pious, and faithful Giovanna. This is not the only instance in Purgatory, however, where Dante makes such a comparison.

In canto twenty-three, as Forese Donati praises his wife Nella for her unwavering devotion to him, he says that she is “alone in her good works” and immediately begins a verbal tirade against the women of Florence:

For even the Barbagia of Sardinia
is far more modest in its women than
is that Barbagia where I left her. O
sweet brother, what would you have me say?
A future time's already visible
to me – a time not too far-off from now –
when, from the pulpit, it shall be forbidden
to those immodest ones – Florentine women –
to go displaying bosoms with bare paps.
What ordinances – spiritual, civil –
were ever needed by barbarian or
Saracen women to make them go covered?
But if those shameless ones had certain knowledge
of what swift Heaven's readying for them,
then they would have mouths open now to howl.⁸²

⁸¹ *ibid*, 129-130.

Though Donati praises Nella, he considers her atypical as most Florentine women are shameless, vulgar harlots. Compared to them the wild and barbarous women of Sardinia are saints.⁸³ In Dante's eyes the women of Florence are more akin to the lustful women of the Inferno than they are to the righteous women discussed in Purgatory.

There is yet one more example of a woman in Purgatory, other than Beatrice (whom I will discuss in a later chapter⁸⁴) who acts as an intercessor. This is the Virgin Mary, who, although not physically present on the mountain, plays an important role in the purgation of the penitent. On each of the terraces of Purgatory, examples of each of the Christian virtues are provided to remind the souls of how they should behave. Although many different men and women are cited as exemplars of these virtues, the Virgin is the only person who is given as a model for each of the seven virtues: humility,⁸⁵ fraternal love,⁸⁶ gentleness,⁸⁷ zeal,⁸⁸ poverty and generosity,⁸⁹ temperance,⁹⁰ and chastity.⁹¹ Mary embodies the Christian ideal in all aspects and shares nothing in common with the deceptive

⁸² Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 215. Canto 23, lines 94-108. <<Ché la Barbagia di Sardigna assai ne le femmine sue più è pudica che la Barbagia dov'io la lasciai. O dolce frate, che vuo' tu ch'io dica? Tempo futuro m'è già nel cospetto, cui non sarà quest'ora molto antica, nel qual sarà in pergamano interdeto a le sfacciate donne fiorentine l'andar mostrando con le poppe il petto. Quai barbare fuor mai, quai saracine, cui bisognasse, par farle ir coperte, o spiritali o altre discipline? Ma se le svergognate fosser certe di quel che 'l ciel veloce loro ammanna, già per urlare avrian le bocche aperte.>>

⁸³ Mandelbaum, *Purgatorio notes*, 374.

⁸⁴ Beatrice first appears to Dante in the Earthly Paradise in Canto 30, but I do not want to discuss her among the women in Purgatory because her significance to my discussion extends beyond the significance of the women in Purgatory. I discuss the Virgin Mary because she plays a role in the penitence of all the souls of Purgatory, whereas Beatrice acts only on the behalf of Dante.

⁸⁵ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 89. Canto 10, lines 130-132.

⁸⁶ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 113. Canto 13, lines 28-30.

⁸⁷ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 139. Canto 15, lines 88-92.

⁸⁸ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 167. Canto 18, line 100.

⁸⁹ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 181. Canto 20, lines 19-24.

⁹⁰ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 207. Canto 22, lines 142-144

⁹¹ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 237. Canto 25, lines 128-129.

temptresses of the Inferno. Dante makes a woman the primary role model for all Christians and refrains from mentioning Christ among the examples of the virtues.

Despite his obvious praise of Mary, Dante also faults a woman for the introduction of sin to human society. This is Eve. Dante claims that Eve was the first to commit the sin of pride and refers to all those guilty of this sin as the “sons of Eve,” thereby suggesting that Eve herself begat the sin.⁹² He also describes how Eve’s decision to eat of the forbidden fruit was the root of all gluttony.⁹³ Upon entering the Earthly Paradise, Dante blames Eve’s behavior for the loss of innocence and, consequently, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

And through the incandescent air there ran
sweet melody; at which, just indignation
made me rebuke the arrogance of Eve
because, where earth and heaven were obedient,
a solitary woman, just created,
found any veil at all beyond endurance;
if she had been devout beneath her veil,
I should have savored those ineffable
delights before, and for a longer time.⁹⁴

Since Eve was the first to sin, she was responsible for humankind’s fall from grace. If only she had been more like Mary and behaved like a good Christian woman, we would still be laughing and dancing through Eden without knowledge of vice or disobedience. Instead, because Eve submitted to temptation and in the process showcased her lack of reason, she caused all women after her to become subject to their husbands and provided later centuries with a strong argument for

⁹² Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 109. Canto 12, line 71.

⁹³ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 227. Canto 24, lines 115-117.

⁹⁴ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 267. Canto 29, lines 22-28. <<E una melodia dolce correva per l’aere luminoso; onde buon zelo mi fé riprender l’ardimento d’Eva, che là dove ubidia la terra e ‘l cielo, femmina, sola e pur testé formata, non sofferse di star sotto alcun velo; sotto ‘l qual se divota fosse stata, avrei quelle ineffabili delizie sentite prima e più lunga fiate.>>

female subordination.⁹⁵ Mary, on the other hand, made human salvation possible; and her perfection allowed the faults of Eve to be washed clean.⁹⁶

The medieval images of Eve and Mary provided two opposing ideas of woman: one was weak and imperfect while the other was humble, pious, chaste, and forgiving. Some medieval writers believed that women more closely resembled Eve, while others thought they shared more in common with Mary.⁹⁷ Dante believed most women fell somewhere in between. Although we see cases of lustful, deceptive, and unreasonable women among the souls in Purgatory – both those present and those cited – we also see examples of feminine loyalty, chastity, and innocence. Pia and Sapia behave courteously and graciously to the pilgrim, demonstrating the accepted modes of female behavior during the Middle Ages. Several male souls ask for their female relatives to pray for them in order to shorten their time of penance. And above all, the Virgin Mary serves as the ultimate reminder to the souls of the mountain of how a good Christian should behave. Just as Purgatory is a place in between deficiency and perfection, the souls here illustrate how individuals, even women, may exhibit both good and bad qualities.

⁹⁵ Maclean, 17-18.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 20.

⁹⁷ Williams, ix.

Chapter Three: “More humble and sublime than any creature¹”

In the Inferno and Purgatory each level brings a new punishment or penitence and the souls labor under various types of strain or suffering. In Paradise the most obvious change that occurs as one ascends to higher spheres is the increasing brightness of the Celestial Light. The souls in Paradise do not engage in any physical activity. They merely exist. In the first two canticles, the constant focus on pain and bodily strain makes it easy for the reader to forget that, even though they are able to feel, the souls possess no corporeal structure.² However, when the souls of Paradise first appear to Dante, he mistakes them for reflections:

Just as, returning through transparent, clean
glass, or through waters calm and crystalline
(so shallow that they scarcely can reflect),
the mirrored image of our faces meets
our pupils with no greater force than that
a pearl has when displayed on a white forehead –
so faint, the many faces I saw keen
to speak: thus, my mistake was contrary
to that which led the man to love the fountain.
As soon as I had noticed them, thinking
that what I saw were merely mirrorings,
I turned around to see who they might be;
and I saw nothing; and I let my sight
turn back to meet the light of my dear guide,
who, as she smiled, glowed in her holy eyes.
“There is no need to wonder if I smile,”
she said, “because you reason like a child;
your steps do not yet rest upon the truth;
your mind misguides you into emptiness:
what you are seeking are true substances.”³

¹ Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 297. Canto 33, 2. <<Umile e alta più che creatura.>>

² Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 23. Canto 3, lines 31-33. <<A sofferir tormenti, caldi e geli simili corpi la Virtù dispone che, come fa, non vuol ch’ a noi si sveli.>> Virgil explains that, although they lack bodies, the souls are able to feel different sensations.

³ Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 21. Canto 3, lines 10-29. <<Quali per vetri trasparenti e tersi, o ver per acque nitide e tranquille, non sì profonde che i fondi sien persi. Tornan d’i nostri visi le postille debili sì, che perla in bianca fronte non vien men forte a le nostre pupille; tali vid’io più

The souls in Paradise are less dense, less solid, and less real than those in the Inferno and Purgatory, and Beatrice, Dante's "dear guide" who by this point has replaced Virgil – a symbol of human reason who lacks the grace to fully comprehend the divine – must explain to the pilgrim that they are not "merely mirrorings" but the spirits themselves. In Paradise there is less emphasis on the body than in the previous canticles because the saved feel no pain, only joy, which is experienced emotionally not physically.

In the *Inferno*, Dante's emphasis on the body highlights the differences between men and women and, in particular, women's sexuality and tendency toward lust and seduction. In the *Paradiso*, Dante focuses on a soul's virtue. Though both men and women exist in Heaven, their sex has little significance. Here people are not judged by the strength of their bodies but the strength of their character. As noted in the previous chapter, this idea derived from Aquinas, who believed that, "Woman is subject to man on account of the frailty of nature, as regards both vigor of soul and strength of body. After the resurrection, however, the difference in those points will be not on account of the difference of sex, but by reason of the difference of merits."⁴

Despite the lack of emphasis on physical differences between the sexes, it seems clear from *Paradiso* that Dante ascribed certain virtues to women. Judging by the souls the pilgrim meets there, most of the spheres of Heaven are dominated

facce a parlar pronte; per ch'io dentro a l'error contrario corsi a quel ch'accese amor tra l'omo e 'l fonte. Sùbito sì com'io di lor m'accorsi, quelle stimando specchiati sembianti, per veder di cui fosser, li occhi torsi; e nulla vidi, e ritorsili avanti dritti nel lume de la dolce guida, che, sorriendo, ardea ne li occhi santi. "Non ti maravigliar perch'io sorrída," mi disse, "appresso il tuo püeril coto, poi sopra 'l vero ancor lo piè non fida, ma te rivolve, come suole, a vòto: vere sustanze son ciò che tu vedi.>>

⁴ Aquinas, *Supplementum*, Question 81, Article 3.

by one sex. This trend is true of all spheres except the Sphere of Venus and the Empyrean – the center of the Universe – in which the gender ratio is fairly balanced.

It must be noted that the concept of “spheres” of Heaven is designed only to allow the pilgrim (and the reader) to understand how Heaven is organized.⁵ Beatrice explains that all the souls of Paradise exist in the Empyrean with God and that their association with particular spheres serves only to demonstrate that, within the Empyrean, some are closer to God than others.⁶ Depending on his or her virtue, a soul is placed nearer or farther from God and, as a result, receives a greater or lesser amount of divine light.⁷ This is why the souls become more radiant as Dante nears the Empyrean. For my purposes, I will use the hierarchy of spheres to examine Heaven because this is how the pilgrim experiences it and how the poet describes it to the reader.

The first sphere, and thus the dimmest and farthest from God, is that of the Moon where those who broke their vows to God under the threat of violence spend eternity.⁸ Here Dante speaks with one woman - Piccarda Donati⁹ - and identifies another - the Empress Constance.¹⁰ Piccarda tells her story to the pilgrim and explains why she belongs among the vow-breakers.

⁵ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 33. Canto 4, lines 40-42. <<Cosi parlar coniensì al vostro ingegno, però che solo da sensato apprende ciò che fa poscia d'intelletto degno.>>

⁶ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 33. Canto 4, lines 34-39. <<Ma tutti fanno bello il primo giro, e differentemente han dolce vita per sentir più e men l'eterno spiro. Qui s'è mostraro, non perché sortita sia questa spera lor, ma per far segno de la celest'ial c'ha men salita.>>

⁷ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 19. Canto 2, lines 145-148. <<Da essa vien ciò che da luce a luce par differente, non da denso e raro; essa è formal principio che produce, conforme a sua bontà, lo turbo e 'l chiaro.>>

⁸ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 27. Canto 3, lines 113-114. <<Sorella fu, e così le fu tolta di capo l'ombra de le sacre bende.>>

⁹ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 23. Canto 3, line 49. <<Ma riconoscerai ch'è son Piccarda.>>

¹⁰ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 27. Canto 3, line 118. <<Quest'è la luce de la gran Costanza.>>

“A perfect life,” she said, “and her high merit
 enheaven, up above, a woman whose
 rule governs those who, in your world, would wear
 nuns’ dress and veil, so that, until their death,
 they wake and sleep with that Spouse who accepts
 all vows that love conforms unto His pleasure.
 Still young, I fled the world to follow her;
 and, in her order’s habit, I enclosed
 myself and promised my life to her rule.
 Then men more used to malice than to good
 took me – violently – from my sweet cloister:
 God knows what, after that, my life became.”¹¹

The “woman whose rule governs” is St. Clare of Assisi, who founded the order of the Poor Clares. Piccarda joined this order, took a vow of chastity and, figuratively, married Christ. However, her brother Corso, whose damnation Piccarda’s other brother, Forese, foretells in the *Purgatorio*, forced her to leave the convent and marry against her will.¹²

The Empress Constance has a similar story. As Piccarda explains, “She was a sister, and from her head, too, by force, the shadow of the sacred veil was taken. But though she had been turned back to the world against her will, against all honest practice, the veil upon her heart was never loosed.”¹³

The fact that these women are faulted for the violent actions of others seems incredibly unjust by today’s standards, and if one considers the social practices of medieval Italy, it seems almost cruel. In Dante’s Italy men used their

¹¹ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 25. Canto 3, lines 97-108. << “Perfetta vita e alto metro inciela donna più sù,” mi disse, “a la cui norma nel vostro mondo giù si veste e vela, perché fino al morir si vegghi e dorma con quello sposo ch’ogne voto accetta che caritate a suo piacer conforma. Dal mondo, per seguirla, giovinetta fuggi’ mi, e nel suo abito mi chiusi e promisi la via de la sua setta. Uomini poi, a mal più ch’a bene usi, fuor mi raprion de la dolce chiostra: Iddio si sa qual poi mia vita fusi.”>>

¹² Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 225. Canto 24, lines 82-84. << “Or va,” diss’el; “che quei che più n’ha colpa, vegg’iö a coda d’una bestia tratto inver’ la valle ove mai non si scolpa.”>>; Allen Mandelbaum, “Notes,” in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradiso*, (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004), 320.

¹³ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 27.

female relatives to form beneficial marriage alliances.¹⁴ If her family had the money to give her a sufficient dowry, a woman would marry. If not, she would be sent to live in a convent where she would be financially supported and her chastity would be protected.¹⁵ Under this system, a woman's only financial support was her dowry, as she was generally excluded from any inheritance.¹⁶ Thus, unless she married or entered a convent, a woman's financial situation was unstable. The medieval working world was dominated by men, and women who did work outside of the home usually performed unskilled and low-paying tasks.¹⁷ In Florence, women were also excluded from joining guilds, which regulated various industries.¹⁸ Therefore, it was often in a woman's best interests to obey her family's wishes in order to protect her financial security.

In addition to the practical considerations that compelled a woman to obey her parents, Catholic doctrine during Dante's time held that men were superior to women and should rule over them. In addition to the creation story of Genesis, the church used the epistles of St. Paul, one of Christ's most important disciples, as biblical evidence for the notion of male dominance over women. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body."¹⁹ In the fourth century, St. Jerome advised men who intended to marry that "a faithful slave is a far better manager, more submissive to

¹⁴ Lansing, 125.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 131.

¹⁶ Herlihy, 82.

¹⁷ Williams and Echols, 53.

¹⁸ Williams and Echols, 53.

¹⁹ Ephesians 5.22-23. New King James Version.

the master, more observant of his ways, than a wife who thinks she proves herself mistress if she acts in opposition to her husband, that is, if she does what pleases her, not what she is commanded.”²⁰ Although all of these writings deal specifically with marital relations, the Fifth Commandment states that good Christians must, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you.”²¹ All of these Church teachings compelled Christian European women of the Middle Ages to obey their male relatives in order to escape the consequences of doing otherwise.

The reader may question why God would blame Piccarda and Constance for succumbing to force, especially considering that both social practice and church doctrine commanded that women obey the wishes of their families. Beatrice explains how souls may be faulted for this after the pilgrim himself questions the fairness of it.

If violence means that the one who suffers
has not abetted force in any way,
then there is no excuse these souls can claim:
for will, if it resists, is never spent,
but acts as nature acts when fire ascends,
though force – a thousand times – tries to compel.
So that, when will has yielded much or little,
it has abetted force – as these souls did:
they could have fled back to their holy shelter.
Had their will been as whole as that which held
Lawrence fast to the grate and that which made
of Mucius one who judged his own hand, then
once freed, they would have willed to find the faith
from which they had been dragged; but it is all
too seldom that a will is so intact...
At that point – I would have you see – the force
to which one yielded mingles with one’s will;

²⁰ Emilie Amt, ed. *Women’s Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 26.

²¹ Exodus 20.12. New King James Version

and no excuse can pardon their joint act.
 Absolute will does not concur in wrong;
 but the contingent will, through fear that its
 resistance might bring greater harm, consents.²²

Beatrice justifies God's placement of Piccarda, Constance, and the other vow-breakers by arguing that they failed to exercise their free will and, consequently, supported the violence used against them. She explains that although violence, desire, or some other force may urge someone to sin, free will allows human beings to choose to obey God, even if the choice results in nasty consequences. Beatrice differentiates between two types of will: the "absolute will" and the "contingent will." The souls of the Moon obeyed their absolute will because they did not desire to break their vows and leave the convent. However, they allowed their contingent will to succumb to pressure and in the end let violence and threats triumph over their promise to God. In short, they only acted against their will in the sense that they disobeyed their absolute will or true desire.²³ They are allowed to enter Paradise because they did not break their vow to God in their hearts and minds, only in their actions.

This is not the first discussion about free will that appears in *The Comedy*. Dante first introduces us to the topic in *Purgatorio* where he meets the soul of Marco Lombardo, who explains how God gives every individual freedom of

²² Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 35-37. Canto 4, lines 73-87, 106-111. <<Se violenza è quando quel che pate niente conferisce a quel che sforza, non fuor quest' alme per essa scusate: ché volontà, se non vuol, non s'ammorza, ma fa come natura face in foco, se mille volte violenza il torza. Per che, s'ella si piega assai o poco, segue la forza; e così queste fero possendo rifuggir nel santo loco. Se fosse stato lor volere intero, come tenne Lorenzo in su la grada, e fece Muzio a la sua man severo, così l'avria ripinte per la strada ond'eran tratte, come fuoro sciolte; ma così salda voglia è troppo rada...A questo punto voglio che tu pense che la forza al voler si mischia, e fanno sì che scusar non si posson l'offense. Voglia assoluta non consente al danno; ma consentevi in tanto in quanto teme, se si ritrae, cadere in più affanno.>>

²³ Mandelbaum, *Paradiso notes*, 321.

choice.

The world is blind, and you come from the world,
 You living ones continue to assign
 to heaven every cause, as if it were
 the necessary source of every motion.
 If this were so, then your free will would be
 destroyed, and there would be no equity
 in joy for doing good, in grief for evil.
 The heavens set your appetites in motion –
 not all your appetites, but even if
 that were the case, you have received both light
 on good and evil, and free will, which though
 it struggle in its first wars with the heavens,
 then conquers all, if it has been well nurtured.
 On greater power and a better nature
 you, who are free, depend; that Force engenders
 the mind in you, outside the heavens' sway.
 Thus, if the present world has gone astray,
 in you is the cause, in you it's to be sought.”²⁴

According to Dante, free will is a God-given blessing that not only allows individuals to make their own choices but also holds them responsible for these choices. Beatrice's justification of God's decision to place the souls of the vow-breakers away from the center of the Empyrean makes it clear that Dante believed God had endowed women with free will and that it was not something reserved for the stronger, more intellectually capable male sex. Dante did not believe that women were mere subjects to the wills of their fathers, brothers, and husbands, but that they possessed an innate and divine ability to decide for themselves what they would do and how they would behave. This is why he judges them equally to men and does not excuse their misbehavior based on their supposed weak

²⁴ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 147-149. Canto 16, lines 67-83. <<Voi che vivete ogni cagion recate pur suso al cielo, pur come se tutto movesse seco di necessitate. Se così fosse, in voi fora distrutto libero arbitrio, e non fora giustizia per ben letizia, e per male aver lutto. Lo cielo i vostri movimenti inizia; non dico tutti, ma, posto ch'è 'l dica, lume v'è dato a bene e a malizia, e libero voler; che, se fatica ne le prime battaglie col ciel dura, poi vince tutto, se ben si notrica. A maggior forza e a miglior natura liberi soggiacete; e quella cria la mente in voi, che 'l ciel non ha in sua cura. Però, se 'l mondo presente disvia, in voi è la cagione, in voi si chiegia.>>

judgment or gullibility. Just as Eve was considered responsible for humankind's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Piccarda and Constance are responsible for obeying the evil wishes of others. They could have chosen martyrdom instead of passive obedience to sin and joined the ranks of illustrious female saints like Lucy who died rather than betray her faith.²⁵

Beatrice also explains that one cannot compensate for breaking a vow to God because no service offered would make up for the service that went unfulfilled.

The greatest gift the magnanimity
of God, as He created, gave, the gift
most suited to His goodness, gift that He
most prizes, was the freedom of the will;
those beings that have intellect – all these
and none but these – received and do receive
this gift: thus you may draw, as consequence,
the high worth of a vow, when what is pledged
with your consent encounters God's consent;
for when a pact is drawn between a man
and God, then through free will, a man gives up
what I have called his treasure, his free will.
What, then, can be a fitting compensation?
To use again what you had offered, would
mean seeking to do good with ill-got gains...
Thus, when the matter of a vow has so
much weight and worth that it tips every scale,
no other weight can serve as substitute.²⁶

²⁵ c.f. Delmay, 344. Saint Lucy was a third-century Christian who took a vow of chastity and refused to marry a pagan man. The man, Pascasio, denounced her to the prefect as a Christian and she was tortured. Afterward, Lucy plucked out her own eyes to avoid falling in love with anyone and was stabbed to death as a gesture of pagan mercy.

²⁶ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 39-41. Canto 5, lines 19-33, 61-63. <<Lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza fesse creando, e a la sua bontate più conformato, e quel ch'e' più apprezza, fu de la volontà la libertate; di che le creature intelligenti, e tutte e sole, fuore e son dotate. Or ti parrà, se tu quinci argomenti, l'alto valor del voto, s'è sì fatto che Dio consenta quando tu consenti; ché, nel fermar tra Dio e l'omo il patto, vittima fassi di questo tesoro, tal quale io dico; e fassi col suo atto. Dunque che render puossi per ristoro? Se credi bene usar quel c'hai offerto, di maltolletto vuo' far buon lavoro...Però qualunque cosa tanto pesa per suo valor che tragga ogne bilancia, sodisfar non si può con altra spesa.>>

Thus, when a woman enters a convent and makes a holy vow, she chooses to surrender her free will in order to obey the will of God. If at any point she decides to disobey God's will, she can never fully repay God the debt that she owes him because it is too great. This explanation serves to reinforce the placement of the vow-breakers in the lowest sphere of Heaven.

Dante's next encounter with women occurs in the Sphere of Venus, the third circle of Paradise. As its name suggests, this sphere is home to famous lovers.²⁷ This sphere differs from the second circle of the Inferno, in which the lustful are punished, and the seventh terrace of Purgatory, where those who performed unnatural sexual acts purge their sin, in that "One does not repent here; here one smiles – not for the fault, which we do not recall, but for the Power that fashioned and foresaw."²⁸ The spirits of Venus died in a state of grace and have already purged their sins in Purgatory and had the memory of their transgression washed away in the river Lethe.²⁹

Dante meets two men – Charles Martel, a French contemporary of Dante³⁰, and Folco of Marseille, a Provençal love poet who, toward the end of his life became a Cistercian monk³¹ – and two women – Cunizza da Romano and Rahab – in this sphere.

Cunizza was a thirteenth-century Italian woman who, throughout the course of her life, had many lovers and husbands, among them the poet Sordello,

²⁷ Scott, 203.

²⁸ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 79. Canto 9, lines 103-105. <<Non però qui si pente, ma si ride, non de la colpa, ch'a mente non torna, ma del valor ch'ordinò e provide.>>

²⁹ Mandelbaum, *Paradiso notes*, 341.

³⁰ *ibid*, *Paradiso notes*, 335.

³¹ *ibid*, *Paradiso notes*, 339.

whom Dante places in Purgatory.³² Cunizza admits that “this planet’s radiance conquered me” but says she was pardoned because, in her later years, she directed her love toward God.³³ She does not speak much of her own life, but two fourteenth-century commentators on *The Comedy* discuss her virtue. The first, Jacopo della Lana describes her as “a woman in love in all her ages, and so generous in her love she would have counted it a great villany to refuse it to any man who sought it courteously.” In a later commentary, Benvenuto da Imola writes that she was “a true daughter of Venus, she was always amorous and desiring...and at the same time she was full of pity, kind, merciful, and compassionate toward the poor wretches whom her brother [Ezzelino, whom Dante places among the violent against their neighbors in Hell³⁴] so cruelly afflicted.”³⁵ Cunizza was not a lustful woman who sought the company of men for her own pleasure. Instead, she bestowed love and kindness on her husbands and lovers and was entirely faithful to them. The manner in which she loved, not the act of loving, allowed her to gain a seat in Heaven.

The other woman in the Sphere of Venus is the harlot Rahab, who, according to the book of Joshua helped two messengers, who were sent by Joshua to spy in Canaan and Jericho, by hiding them in her house. According to St. Paul, Rahab was saved because she welcomed the spies into her home out of faith; and St. James uses her as an example of salvation through good works.³⁶ In Paradise,

³² *ibid*, *Paradiso notes*, 339.

³³ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 77. Canto 9, line 33. <<Mi vines il lume d’esta stella.>>; Mandelbaum, *Paradiso notes*, 339.

³⁴ Mandelbaum, *Paradiso notes*, 338.

³⁵ *ibid*, 339.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 341; James 2.25 New King James Version. “Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?”

she is the brightest soul in the Sphere of Venus, and the spirit of Folco explains that she was the first soul that Christ freed from Limbo after the Resurrection.³⁷

The souls of Venus are blessed not because of their love but because of the way in which they loved. Their love was not lustful, but mimicked the love that Christ showed toward the world. It is the same type of love that God shows toward all of his creation. It is also the same type of love that Dante describes in *La Vita Nuova* when he writes of how he feels toward Beatrice. This love is described by St. Paul in his famous letter to the Corinthians:

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails...And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.³⁸

Love is the greatest of the virtues. St. Thomas Aquinas expounds on this notion of love, or charity, by saying “that friendship consists in loving rather than in being loved. Now charity is a kind of friendship. Therefore it consists in loving rather than in being loved.”³⁹ Dante believed both women and men possessed the capacity to love in this way and thus participate in the greatest of the virtues.

After Dante leaves this sphere, he does not encounter another female soul, except of course that of Beatrice, until he reaches the Heaven of the Empyrean. In the other spheres he meets only men. These spheres, just like the others, represent certain actions, and it is useful to compare these actions with those of vow-

³⁷ Ibid., 341; Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 81. Canto 9, lines 112-120. <<Tu vuo’ saper chi è in questa lumera che qui appresso me così scintilla come raggio di sole in acqua mera. Or sappi che là entro si tranquilla Raab; e a nostr’ordine congiunta, di lei nel sommo grado si sigilla. Da questo cielo, in cui l’ombra s’appunta che ‘l vostro mondo face, pria ch’altr’alma del trionfo di Cristo fu assunta.>>

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 13.4-8,13 New King James Version

³⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Secunda Secundae Partis, Question 27, Article 1.

breaking and zealous love, both of which he associated with women. The virtuous who acted out of a desire for glory (Sphere of Mercury)⁴⁰, the wise (Sphere of the Sun)⁴¹, the warriors of the faith (Sphere of Mars)⁴², the merciful and just defenders of the faith (Sphere of Jupiter)⁴³, and the contemplatives (Sphere of Saturn)⁴⁴ are all men, and, based on Dante's descriptions of them, they could not be women.

The occupations that allowed the men of these spheres to obtain their respective place in Heaven were those that, in medieval society, were generally dominated by men. Given that women were expected to stay at home, it was unlikely that many of them would have been able to perform acts which would allow them to achieve fame equal to that of the souls in Mercury. Likewise, kings, not queens, were favored to rule the lands of medieval Europe unless circumstances deemed it necessary that a woman take power, thus making it unlikely that a woman would be able to achieve the Sphere of Jupiter.⁴⁵ Although many women participated in the Crusades, women warriors were generally forgotten in the chronicles of war, thus making it difficult for them to be honored

⁴⁰ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 55. Canto 6, lines 112-114. <<Questa picciola stella si correda d'i buoni spirti che son stati attivi perché onore e fama li succeda.>>

⁴¹ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 87. Canto 10, lines 49-51. <<Tal era quivi la quarta famiglia de l'alto Padre, che sempre la sazia, mostrando come spira e come figlia.>>; Mandelbaum, *Paradiso notes*, 343.

⁴² Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 159-161. Canto 18, lines 28-33. <<In questa quinta soglia de l'albero che vive de la cima e frutta sempre e mai non perde foglia, spirti son beati, che giù, prima che venissero al ciel, fuor di gran voce, sì ch'ogne musa ne sarebbe opima.>>; Mandelbaum, *Paradiso notes*, 371.

⁴³ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 163. Canto 18, lines 88-93. <<Mostrarsi dunque in cinque volte sette vocali e consonanti; e io notai le parti sì, come mi parver dette. "DILIGITE IUSTITIAM," primai fur verbo e nome di tutto 'l dipinto; "QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM," fur sezzai.>>; Mandelbaum, *Paradiso notes*, 373.

⁴⁴ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 197. Canto 22, lines 46-48. <<Questi altri fuochi tutti contemplanti uomini fuoro, accesi di quel caldo che fa nascere i fiori e' frutti santi.>>

⁴⁵ Williams and Echols, 187.

in the Sphere of Mars.⁴⁶ In terms of education, young girls in Florence generally only received rudimentary schooling, while more advanced instruction was reserved for boys.⁴⁷ This would have made it rare for a woman to obtain the wisdom necessary to be deemed worthy of the Sphere of the Sun. Finally, the souls mentioned among the contemplatives, including the most prominent one, St Benedict, were significant Church figures, and in the Bible St. Paul had explicitly stated that “women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says.”⁴⁸ Although there were female saints and several women founded monastic orders for women, in general women were relegated to within the walls of the convent. Even though Dante himself mentions one of these women, St. Clare, as being among the souls of Paradise, he fails to mention her here or anywhere else in this canticle.⁴⁹

By examining how Dante associates different activities with men and women one can see how he praises men for their active pursuits – war, education and teaching, ruling, etc. – while damning women for the same thing.⁵⁰ The great women rulers discussed in *The Comedy* are damned among the lustful. Women who conquered men using sexuality or deception are also punished in the Inferno. This double standard reinforces the medieval belief that women and men were designed for different occupations –domestic for women and public for men.

The poet reflects his belief that this division of labor is divinely ordained in several passages of the *Paradiso*. The first occurs in canto eight where the soul

⁴⁶ Williams and Echols, 115.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, 218.

⁴⁸ 1 Corinthians 14.34 New King James Version.

⁴⁹ Mandelbaum, *Paradiso notes*, 320.

⁵⁰ Shapiro, 38.

of Charles Martel explains to Dante how a person's character can differ from that of his or her parents. He asks the pilgrim, "Can there be citizens if men below are not diverse, with diverse duties? No, if what your master writes is accurate...Engendered natures would forever take the path of those who had engendered them, did not Divine provision intervene."⁵¹

Dante's "master" in this case is Aristotle,⁵² who, in his *Politics*, wrote that, "There must be a union of those who cannot exist without each other; namely, of male and female." Therefore, man cannot exist alone, and "he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state. A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature."⁵³ Dante expanded on this idea in his *Convivio* when he stated that, "man has need of many things which one person alone is unable to obtain."⁵⁴ Martel's explanation of this concept shows that Dante believed that God gave each individual unique abilities and dispositions so society could meet all of its needs and man would not live alone.

The discussion of divinely bestowed free will returns in canto thirty-two with the explanation of how infants may obtain Paradise if they die before maturation. St. Bernard says that, "The King through whom this kingdom finds content in so much love and so much joyousness that no desire would dare to ask for more, creating every mind in His glad sight, bestows His grace diversely, at

⁵¹ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 73. Canto 8, lines 118-120, 133-135. <<E puot' elli esser, se giù non si vive diversamente per diversi officii? Non, se 'l maestro vostro ben vi scrive...Natura generata il suo cammino simil farebbe sempre a' generanti, se non vincessse il proveder divino.>>

⁵² Mandelbaum, *Paradiso notes*, 337.

⁵³ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in The Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.html> (accessed March 28, 2007). Latin Text: Book I, Part 2; Mandelbaum, *Paradiso notes*, 337.

⁵⁴ Alighieri, *The Banquet*, 173. Fourth Treatise, Chapter IV.; Mandelbaum, *Paradiso notes*, 337.

His pleasure – and here the fact alone must be enough.”⁵⁵ Though of course Dante was by no means a Calvinist, in this passage he asserts the basis for the argument for predestination: God bestows his grace to different souls in different measures therefore making them more or less apt to obtain salvation. This holy favoritism may seem to contradict the entire notion of free will, but it merely suggests that God makes some people more apt to make the right choices without completely denying someone the ability to choose the path that will lead him or her to Heaven. Dante does not distinguish between men and women in this case, because there is no distinction. Although the poet seems to advocate separate social spheres for men and women, and although he seems to associate different vices and virtues with each sex, he never states that God has bestowed women with less grace. In fact, though there are more men in heaven than women, it is a woman who rules the Empyrean, and it is a woman whom the souls of Heaven praise above all else.

This is of course the Virgin Mary. She sits at the top of the White Rose of the Empyrean and is “the Queen to whom this realm is subject and devoted.”⁵⁶ She healed the wound that Eve had opened and resembles Christ more than any other human being.⁵⁷ Her virtue made it possible for God to become human and

⁵⁵ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 289. Canto 32, lines 61-66. <<Lo rege per cui questo regno pausa in tanto amore e in tanto diletto, che nulla volontà è di più ausa, le menti tutte nel suo lieto aspetto creando, a suo piacer di grazia dota diversamente; e qui basti l’effetto.>>

⁵⁶ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 285. Canto 31, lines 116-117. <<La regina cui questo regno è suddito e devoto.>>

⁵⁷ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 287. Canto 32, lines 4-6. <<La piaga che Maria richiuse e unse, quella ch’è tanto bella da’ suoi piedi è colei che l’aperse e che la punse.>>; Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 291. Canto 32, lines 85-87. <<Riguarda omai ne la faccia che a Christo più si somiglia, ché la sua chiarezza sola ti può disporre a veder Cristo.>>

allowed Christ to be born.⁵⁸ Without her, there would have been no savior, and without a savior, the world would have been doomed.

But why exactly does Dante deem her worthy of such high praise? She was an exemplar of virtue, as is evident by her role in the redemption of the souls of Purgatory,⁵⁹ but what exactly did she do? St. Bernard's prayer to her reveals the answer:

Virgin mother, daughter of your Son,
more humble and sublime than any creature,
fixed goal decreed from all eternity,
you are the one who gave to human nature
so much nobility that its Creator
did not disdain His being made its creature.
That love whose warmth allowed this flower to bloom
within the everlasting peace – was love
rekindled in your womb; for us above,
you are the noonday torch of charity,
and there below, on earth, among the mortals,
you are a living spring of hope.⁶⁰

Mary was a supremely devout woman, who, from the time she was conceived, possessed divine grace, but she was also a mother, and it was her role as mother that allowed her to play a role in the salvation of humankind. The Incarnation would not have been possible without a woman. Although the emphasis on sex is diminished in Heaven, one cannot forget that Mary was a woman because her femininity makes her special. Dante observes that, "like an

⁵⁸ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 297. Canto 33, lines 4-7. <<Tu se' colei che l'umana natura nobilitasti sì, che 'l suo fattore non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura.>>

⁵⁹ The souls of Purgatory are given several examples of the virtue they lacked in life, but the only person who is cited as an example of every virtue – humility (Canto 10), fraternal love (Canto 13), gentleness (Canto 15), zeal (Canto 18), poverty and generosity (Canto 20), temperance (Canto 22), and chastity (Canto 25) – is Mary.

⁶⁰ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 297. Canto 33, lines 1-12. <<Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio, umile e alta più che creatura, termine fisso d'eterno consiglio, tu se' colei che l'umana natura nobilitasti sì, che 'l suo fattore non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura. Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'amore, per lo cui caldo ne l'eterna pace così è germinato questo fiore. Qui se' a noi meridiana face di caritate, e giusto, intra' mortali, se' di speranza fontana vivace.>>

infant who, when it has taken its milk, extends its arms out to its mother, its feeling kindling into outward flame, each of those blessed splendors stretched its peak upward, so that the deep affections each possessed for Mary was made plain.”⁶¹ Even in Paradise, Mary fulfills her role as a mother.

Mary is not the only maternal figure in Paradise. Although not technically a mother, Beatrice takes on the role of a mother to Dante in his journey toward divine understanding. When he meets her in the Earthly Paradise, Dante describes Beatrice as a “stern mother” after she reprimands him.⁶² Like a child, the pilgrim waits for Beatrice to give him permission to speak before he asks a question to a spirit.⁶³ Unlike the love object that Beatrice was in *La Vita Nuova*, which I will discuss further in the next chapter, the Beatrice of *The Comedy* assumes responsibility for Dante’s spiritual salvation and acts as a superior to the pilgrim who, without her, would still be lost in the dark wood.⁶⁴ In their roles as mothers, both Beatrice and Mary are responsible for the salvation of others. Beatrice reveals the divine to Dante, and Mary makes it possible for humans to enter Heaven. In the Christian world, salvation is the goal of all humans, so any agents who make this possible are both necessary and praiseworthy.

According to Dante, the mother who fulfills her duty is worthy of the highest praise; and motherhood is the most noble worldly occupation a woman can pursue. This was reflected in medieval society where a woman’s primary

⁶¹ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 211. Canto 23, lines 121-126. <<E come fantolin che ‘nver’ la mamma tende le braccia, poi che ‘l latte prese, per l’animo che ‘nfin di fuor s’infiamma; ciascun di quei candori in sù si stese con la sua cima, sì che l’alto affetto ch’elli avieno a Maria mi fu palese.>>

⁶² Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 283. Canto 30, lines 79-81. <<Così la madre al figlio par superba, com’ella parve a me; perché d’amaro sente il sapor de la pietade acerba.>>

⁶³ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 187. Canto 21, lines 46-48. <<Ma quella ond’io aspetto il come e ‘l quando del dire e del tacer, si sta; ond’io, contra ‘l disio, fob en ch’io non dimando.>>

⁶⁴ Shapiro, 156.

responsibility was to produce children. But this responsibility did not end with the birth of her progeny. Mothers were supposed to emulate the Virgin Mary, who symbolized the good mother and wife.⁶⁵ Mothers were charged both with carrying their children in the womb and nursing them after birth. The pagan writer, Plutarch wrote that “a woman’s imagination in conception impresses a shape upon the infant,” therefore she has tremendous power in shaping the temperament of her children.⁶⁶ In the early fifteenth century, Giovanni Dominici wrote a tract on the religious education of children, which he intended for women to read.⁶⁷ For the first few years of life, during which a child’s mind is the most impressionable, the mother was in charge of his or her education.⁶⁸ Thus, a mother had a profound influence over the development of her child, and this influence could possibly determine how a person behaved later in life and whether or not he eventually reached Heaven.

Even within a patriarchal society, the mother played an important role, and Dante illustrates this in the *Paradiso*. In fact there is another famous mother who, perhaps surprisingly, is present in the Empyrean. This is Eve – the mother of all humankind who, because of her sin, caused all of her descendents to be expelled from the Garden of Eden. Even though Dante holds her responsible for the fall of humankind, he places her at the foot of Mary in the hierarchy of the White Rose.⁶⁹ Dante never fully explains this. He does state that Old Testament figures,

⁶⁵ Herlihy, 119.

⁶⁶ Plutarch, *Concerning Nature*, <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/p/plutarch/nature/> (accessed March 28, 2007) Original Text: Book V, Chapter 12. Herlihy, 120.

⁶⁷ Herlihy, 123.

⁶⁸ Klapisch-Zuber, 111.

⁶⁹ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 287. Canto 32, lines 4-6. <<La piaga che Maria richiuse e unse, quella ch’è tanto bella da’ suoi piedi è colei che l’aperse e che la punse.>>

who by the law of Paradise could not obtain salvation because they were born before the time of Christ, are granted admission to the realm of God because they had faith that Christ would come.⁷⁰ But, this still does not explain why Adam and Eve, who created original sin, would be assigned a place in the Empyrean, let alone such a lofty one. One explanation is that, since they were created by God directly, they are endowed with more divinity and therefore more worthy of Heaven. But, I would argue that the most important reason for their salvation is that they were the parents of all humankind, and without them the human race would not have multiplied.

Dante's high regard for the mother and, in particular, the Virgin Mary illustrates the potential the poet saw in women. Although they are not designed to be warriors, rulers, theologians, or prominent church figures, they are endowed with the abilities to love, nurture, and teach; and they possess the free will to decide how they will behave. Dante not only believed that women could obtain Heaven but that, if they could avoid temptation and exercise their virtuous feminine qualities, they were worthy of the highest praise.

⁷⁰ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 287. Canto 32, lines 22-24. <<Da questa parte onde 'l fiore è maturo di tutte le sue foglie, sono assisi quei che credettero in Cristo venturo.>>

Chapter Four: “The light between your mind and truth¹”

The figure of Beatrice is somewhat problematic to our discussion because she cannot be compared to other women. Although she resides in Paradise, her image is with the reader from the very beginning until the very end of Dante’s journey. In fact, Dante wrote of her before he had even conceived the idea for *The Comedy*, and he wrote of her in a completely different way. He first mentions her in *La Vita Nuova* - a collection of sonnets and prose he wrote in praise of Beatrice and of love. Because Beatrice may be interpreted in several different ways, we must examine her separately and treat her as her own category of woman.

Like many of the characters in *The Comedy*, Beatrice is based on a real woman. Little is known about her, but she was most likely Beatrice Portinari, a contemporary of the poet who was born in Florence in 1266 and died there in 1290.² Though the Beatrice of *The Comedy* refers to Dante as “my friend”, the two most likely interacted only briefly during their lives.³ Both married other people – Dante wed Gemma Donati, though Dante never references her in any of his known works; and Beatrice married Simone dei Bardi.⁴ What little we do know of the relationship between the poet and the lady comes from Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*. In fact, it was at the end of *La Vita Nuova*, when Dante realized love sonnets failed to praise Beatrice in a worthy manner, that he, “resolved to write no more of this blessed one until I could more worthily treat of her.” He wanted to

¹ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 51. Canto 6, line 45. <<Che lume fia tra ‘l vero e lo ‘ntelletto.>>

² Pinsky, 307-308.

³ Alighieri, *Inferno*, 13. Canto 2, lines 61-63. <<L’ amico mio, e non de la ventura, ne la diserta piaggia è impedito sì nel cammin, che vòlt’ è per paura.>>

⁴ Mark Musa, *Dante: The Divine Comedy, Vol. 1: Inferno* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 18-19.

“say of her what was never said of any other woman,” and so he began to write what would eventually become *The Divine Comedy*.⁵

In *La Vita Nuova*, Dante describes his first encounter with Beatrice when they were both about nine years old. Immediately, he became enamored of her:

She appeared humbly and properly dressed in a most noble color, crimson, girded and adorned in the manner that befitted her so youthful age. At that moment I say truly that the spirit of life, which dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so strongly that it appeared terrifying in its smallest veins; and trembling it said these words “Behold a god more powerful than I, who comes to rule over me”. At that point the animal spirit, which dwells in the upper chamber to which all the spirits of the senses carry their perceptions, began to marvel greatly, and speaking especially to the spirits of sight, it said these words: “Now has appeared your beatitude”. At that point the natural spirit, which dwells in that part that ministers to our nourishment, began to weep, and weeping said these words: “Wretched me, for often hereafter shall I be impeded!”. I say that from that time forward, Love ruled over my soul, which was so early espoused to him, and he began to assume over me such assurance and such mastery, through the power that my imagination gave him, that I was obliged to do all his bidding fully.⁶

In this first vision we see how, for Dante, Beatrice represents more than a woman. She is his salvation, his blessedness. She is not a distant agent of God but

⁵ Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Dino S. Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 145. Chapter 42, verses 1-2. <<Appresso questo sonetto apparve a me una mirabile visione, ne la quale io vidi cose che mi fecero proporre di non dire più di questa benedetta infino a tanto che io potessi più degna mente trattare di lei. E di venire a ciò io studio quanto posso, sì com'ella sae veracemente. Sì che, se piacere sarà di colui a cui tutte le cose vivono, che la mia vita duri per alquanti anni, io spero di dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto d'alcuna.>>

⁶ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 47. Chapter 2, verses 3-7. <<Apparve vestita di nobilissimo colore, umile e onesto, sanguigno, cinta e ornata a la guisa che a la sua giovanissima etade si convenia. In quello punto dico veracemente che lo spirito de la vita, lo quale dimora ne la secretissima camera de lo cuore, cominciò a tremare sì fortemente, che apparia ne li menimi polsi orribilmente; e tremando disse queste parole: “Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur michi.” In quello punto lo spirito animale, lo quale dimora ne l'alta camera ne la quale tutti li spiriti sensitivi portano le loro percezioni, si cominciò a maravigliare molto, e parlando specialmente a li spiriti del viso, sì disse queste parole: “Apparuit iam beatitudo vestra.” In quello punto lo spirito naturale, lo quale dimora in quella parte ove si ministra lo nutrimento nostro, cominciò a piangere, e piangendo disse queste parole: “Heu miser, quia frequenter impeditus ero deinceps!” D'allora innanzi dico che Amore signoreggiò la mia anima, la quale fu sì tosto a lui disponsata, e cominciò a prendere sopra me tanta sicurtade e tanta signoria per la virtù che li dava la mia imaginazione, che me convenia fare tutti li suoi piaceri compiutamente.>>

rather the object of Dante's love, a love that completely consumes his soul. This love, however, does not merely allow Dante to feel pleasure and pain at the thought of Beatrice, it also makes him noble. As Dante describes in the following poem, Beatrice possesses a supernatural ability to make others holy and is thus deserving of praise from all people:

In her eyes my lady brings Love,
 whereby is ennobled whatever she looks upon;
 where she passes, everyone toward her turns,
 and whoever she greets trembles at heart,
 so that, lowering the eyes, one grows all pale,
 and for each fault one then sighs:
 before her flee pride and wrath.
 Help me, ladies, to do her honor.
 Every sweetness, every humble thought
 is born in the heart of whoever hears her speak,
 and one is praised who sees her first.
 What she seems when she but smiles
 cannot be described or held in mind,
 so much is she a miracle new and gentle.⁷

Poetic praise of love and the lady began with Dante's literary predecessors. In twelfth-and thirteenth-century France, courtly love poets described women as the embodiment of love, who could inspire men to perform noble acts.⁸ Courtly love scholars argue that these men were the "first to express that romantic species of passion which English poets were still writing about in

⁷ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 89-91. Chapter 21, verses 2-4. <<Ne li occhi porta la mia donna Amore, per che si fa gentil ciò ch'ella mira; ov'ella passa, ogn'om ver lei si gira, e cui saluta fa tremar lo core, sì che, bassando il viso, tutto smore, e d'ogni suo difetto allor sospira: fugge dinanzi a lei superbia ed ira. Aiutatemi, donne, farle onore. Ogni dolcezza, ogni pensiero umile nasce nel core a chi parlar la sente, ond'è laudato chi prima la vide. Quel ch'ella par quando un poco sorride, non si pò dicer né tenere a mente, sì è novo miracolo e gentile.>>

⁸ Joan M. Ferrante and George D. Economou, *In Pursuit of Perfection: Courtly Love in Medieval Literature* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975), 5.

the nineteenth [century]”.⁹ They were the first to describe love as a joyful thing instead of a foolish or tragic pursuit.¹⁰ Like Beatrice, the women of these poems were usually based on real women but were idealized by the poets to the point where they became less like individuals and more like supernatural beings who protected their lovers and gave meaning to their lives.¹¹ For these poets, love of a woman was a reward for nobility. In their quests to earn this honor, they strove to refine themselves and make themselves worthy of their ladies’ favor.¹²

In the latter part of the thirteenth century, a new school of poetry, in which Dante took part, arose in Italy. This was the *dolce stil nuovo*, which departed from courtly love by postulating that anyone with a noble heart, regardless of social status, could love. For the courtly love poets, only those in the upper classes, those at court, were noble enough to love.

The *stilnovisti* wrote of the struggle between love and the soul and described the overwhelming effect that love had on the bodies, hearts, and minds of the lovers.¹³ Guido Cavalcanti, Dante’s mentor and fellow stilnovist described how:

My force withdrew / after it left my heart / at the battle where my lady was: who, with her eyes, had struck / in such a way that love / threw all my spirits into flight. / One cannot describe this lady; she is so adorned with beauties / that the mind here below cannot sustain her.¹⁴

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 4; c.f. Sarah Kay, *Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 1.

¹⁰ Lewis, C.S., 4.

¹¹ Joan M. Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 65-74.

¹² Shapiro, 20.

¹³ Ferrante, 125.

¹⁴ Ferrante, 123-124. <<La mia virtù si partì sconsolata poi che lasciò lo core a la battaglia ove madonna è stata: la qual de li occhi suoi venne a ferire di tal guisa ch’amore ruppe tutt’i miei

Comparing this poem with Dante's reaction upon first seeing Beatrice, one sees the direct influence that the *stilnovisti* had on Dante's conception of the Lady.

The *stilnovisti*, however, were wary of secular love in and of itself and believed that a woman's presence could cause chaos and turmoil within a man's soul.¹⁵ Dante, on the other hand, valued the love of a woman in its pure form, and believed that this love was necessary in a man's understanding of God.¹⁶ In fact, the reason that Dante ended *La Vita Nuova* so abruptly was that he believed mere love poems failed to praise his lady appropriately. In his letter to Can Grande della Scala, Dante explains the four levels of signification, as practiced by medieval writers – the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical (or mystical).¹⁷ Before Dante, medieval writers believed that only scripture could signify on all four of these levels because it was divinely inspired. Human prose and poetry, which lacked this divinity, could signify only on a literal, allegorical, or moral level. Dante, however, tells Can Grande that he plans to imbue *The Comedy* with an anagogical significance, thus allowing it to surpass all of his previous poetry.¹⁸

As promised at the end of *La Vita Nuova*, Dante found a way to praise Beatrice by making her the focus of a work with a deep mystical significance. He writes of her in the same way that the authors of the Bible wrote of God and Christ, and even gives her Christ-like abilities. It is Beatrice who acts as Dante's savior by rescuing him from the dark wood and ultimately revealing the truth of

spiriti a fuggire. Di questa donna non si può contare; chè di tante bellezze adorna vene che mente di quaggiù no la sostene.>>

¹⁵ Ferrante, 126.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 130.

¹⁷ Alighieri, *Letter to Can Grande*, 347-348.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 348.

Heaven and the cosmos to him. However, though Beatrice's spiritual function becomes stronger in *The Comedy*, Dante began associating Beatrice with Christ in *La Vita Nuova*.

From the beginning of *La Vita Nuova*, Dante associates Beatrice with the number nine. They first met "at about the beginning of her ninth year" and "at about the end of [his] ninth."¹⁹ She speaks to him for the first time at nine o'clock in the morning nine years after their first encounter.²⁰ He deems her the ninth most beautiful woman in Florence, and she dies on the ninth day of the ninth month in the year 1290.²¹

Dante explains the significance of Beatrice's association with the number nine in order to prove her divinity:

The number three is the radical of nine, since, without any other number, through itself it makes nine, as we see self-evidently that three times three is nine. Therefore, if three multiplied by itself is three, that is, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are three and one, this lady was accompanied by this number nine to make it understood that she was a nine, that is, a miracle, whose root – that is, of the miracle – is solely the wondrous Trinity.²²

¹⁹ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 47. Chapter 2, verse 2. <<Quasi dal principio del suo anno nono apparve a me, ed io la vidi quasi da la fine del mio nono.>>

²⁰ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 49. Chapter 3, verses 1-2. <<Erano compiuti li nove anni appresso l'apparimento soprascritto di quest gentilissima...L'ora che lo suo dolcissimo salutare mi giunse, era fermamente nona di quello giorno.>>

²¹ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 55. Chapter 6, verse 2. <<E presi li nomi di sessanta le più belle donne de la cittade ove la mia donna fue posta da l'altissimo sire...e non n'avrei fatto menzione, se non per dire quello che componendola, meravigliosamente addivenne, cioè che in alcuno altro numero non sofferse lo nome de la mia donna stare se non in su lo nove, tra li nomi di queste donne.>>; Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 117. Chapter 29, verse 1. <<Io dico che, secondo l'usanza d'Arabia, l'anima sua nobilissima si partio ne la prima ora del nono giorno del mese; e secondo l'usanza di Siria, ella si partio nel nono mese de l'anno, però che lo primo mese è ivi Tisirin primo, lo quale a noi è Ottobre; e secondo l'usanza nostra, ella si partio in quello anno de la nostra indizione, cioè de li anni Domini, in cui lo perfetto numero nove volte era compiuto in quello centinaio nel quale in questo mondo ella fue posta, ed ella fue de li cristiani del tercodecimo centinaio.>>

²² Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 117. Chapter 29, verse 3. <<Lo numero del tre è la radice del nove, però che, senza numero altro alcuno, per sé medesimo fa nove, sì come vedemo manifestamente che tre via tre fa nove. Dunque se lo tre è fattore per se medesimo del nove, e lo fattore per se medesimo de li miracoli è tre, cioè Padre e Figlio e Spirito Santo, li quali sono tre e uno, questa

Not only does Dante describe Beatrice as a holy and blessed lady who, through her love and grace may inspire him to love God, he says that she is a direct product of the Holy Trinity. Dante continues to relate Beatrice to the Trinity and the number nine throughout *The Comedy*: there are three canticles of thirty-three cantos each (excluding the first canto of the *Inferno*, which serves as an introduction), nine circles of Hell, nine terraces of Purgatory (including ante-purgatory and the Earthly Paradise), and nine spheres of Heaven.²³

The number nine is only one connection that Dante establishes between Beatrice and Christ in *La Commedia*.²⁴ Her actions also highlight this parallel. Just as God descended from Heaven in the form of Christ in order to save humanity, Beatrice “allowed [her] footsteps to be left in Hell” in order to save Dante.²⁵ As Dante and Beatrice ascend through Paradise, she becomes more radiant, thus enabling Dante to finally behold the brilliance of God. The role that Dante assigns to her is reminiscent of the role that Christ plays in allowing humans to know God and achieve Heaven. Beatrice is also a symbol of contemplation, as is evident in her position next to Rachel – a symbol of the contemplative life – in Heaven.²⁶ This relationship reinforces Beatrice’s

donna fue accompagnata da questo numero del nove a dare ad intendere ch’ella era uno nove, cioè uno miracolo, la cui radice, cioè del miracolo, è solamente la mirabile Trinitade.>>

²³ Charles Tomlinson, *Dante, Beatrice, and the Divine Comedy* (London: Norwood Editions, 1978), 63.

²⁴ Ferrante, 139.

²⁵ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 283. Canto 31, lines 80-81. <<Che soffristi per la mia salute in inferno lasciar le tue vestige.>>

²⁶ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 253. Canto 27, lines 100-108. Here Dante dreams of Rachel’s sister Leah, a symbol of the active life, who says, <<Sappia qualunque il mio nome dimanda ch’i’ mi son Lia, e vo movendo intorno le belle mani a farmi una ghirlanda. Per piacermi a lo specchio, qui m’addorno; ma mia suora Rachel mai non si smaga dal suo miraglio, e siede tutto giorno. Ell’è d’i

resemblance to Christ, as it is only by contemplating Christ that one may understand God.²⁷ For Dante, Beatrice represents a direct link between Heaven and Earth, just as Christ represents this for all humankind.

Charles Singleton argues that Beatrice also represents the Christ-to-come. He likens her appearance in the Garden of Eden to the Second Coming and says that she comes to judge the soul of Dante just as Christ will judge the souls of all men and women.²⁸ This is evident in canto thirty-one of *Purgatorio* when Dante confesses that he turned to sin after her death, and Beatrice reprimands him for forgetting her and God:

Had you been silent or denied
 what you confess, your guilt would not be less
 in evidence: it's known by such a Judge!
 But when the charge of sinfulness has burst
 from one's own cheek, then in our court the whet-
 stone turns and blunts our blade's own cutting edge.
 Nevertheless, that you may feel more shame
 for your mistake, and that – in time to come –
 hearing the Sirens, you may be more strong,
 have done with all the tears you sowed, and listen:
 so shall you hear how, unto other ends,
 my buried flesh should have directed you.
 Nature or art had never showed you any
 beauty that matched the lovely limbs in which
 I was enclosed – limbs scattered now in dust;
 and if the highest beauty failed you through
 my death, what mortal thing could then induce
 you to desire it? For when the first
 arrow of things deceptive struck you, then
 you surely should have lifted up your wings

suoi belli occhi veder vaga com'io de l'addornarmi con le mani; le lo vedere, e me l'ovrare appaga.>>; Mandelbaum, *Purgatorio notes*, 385. According to the Bible, Jacob worked for seven years for Laban to win his daughter, Rachel, in marriage. But, on his wedding night, Laban switched Rachel with her sister, Leah, and Jacob was forced to work for seven more years before he could marry Rachel. Leah bore Jacob seven children, while Rachel only bore two, so according to tradition, Leah is often associated with active, physical labor, while Rachel is associated with the loftier labor of contemplation.

²⁷ Ferrante, 138.

²⁸ Singleton, 79.

to follow me, no longer such a thing.²⁹

Along with her role as a judge, Beatrice acts as a teacher who reproaches the pilgrim as a means of instruction. Christ did likewise when he rebuked his disciples for their lack of faith and, in the process, taught them the importance of belief.³⁰ Thus, Dante is Beatrice's disciple in that he learns the truth of the universe from her. She explains to him the laws of the heavens and allows him to behold the light of Paradise.³¹ Whereas Virgil represents human reason, Beatrice represents divine wisdom and thus the medium through which one understands God.³² Without Beatrice, Dante could not know God. Without Christ, the world could not know Him.

One cannot help but notice the male-female role reversal that comes when Beatrice assumes responsibility for Dante's education. As already discussed in previous chapters, medieval men considered it their responsibility to educate their wives and daughters. Women, by contrast, were supposed to be apt pupils who were ready to receive and obey instruction. In *Paradiso*, however, Beatrice

²⁹ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 289. Canto 31, lines 37-57. <<Se tacesi o se negassi ciò che confessi, non fora men nota la colpa tua: da tal giudice sassi! Ma quando scoppia de la propria gota l'accusa del peccato, in nostra corte rivolge sé contra 'l taglio la rota. Tuttavia, perché mo vergogna porte del tuo errore, e perché altra volta, udendo le serene, sie più forte, pon giù il seme del piangere e ascolta: sì udirai come in contraria parte mover dovieti mia carne sepolta. Mai non t'appresentò natura o arte piacer, quanto le belle membra in ch'io rinchiusa fui, e che so' 'n terra sparte; e se 'l sommo piacer sì ti fallio per la mia morte, qual cosa mortale dovea poi trarre te nel suo disio? Ben ti dovevi, per lo primo strale de le cose fallaci, levar suso di retro a me che non era più tale.>>

³⁰ Matt. 17.18-20 New King James Version. "And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not cast it out?' So Jesus said to them, 'Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.'"

³¹ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 125. Canto 14, lines 79-84. <<Ma Bèatrice sì bella e ridente mi si mostrò, che tra quelle vedute si vuol lasciar che non seguir la mente. Quindi ripreser li occhi miei virtute a rilevarsi; e vidimi translato sol con mia donna in più alta salute.>>

³² Tomlinson, 59. c.f. Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice* in which Singleton develops thorough arguments for why and how Beatrice symbolizes both wisdom and grace.

assumes the dominant male role while Dante assumes the obedient female one.

She not only instructs and admonishes him, but she also speaks on his behalf.

When Dante is about to answer Saint James's questions regarding Hope, he says that Beatrice "did thus anticipate my own reply," and answered for him.³³

From this point of view, it is easy to see Beatrice as inherently masculine, and one could argue that because of this, she loses some of her femininity.³⁴

However, Beatrice is a woman – granted a powerful one – and this fact is undeniable. Dante fell in love with her because of her feminine beauty, and it was this heterosexual love that rendered her such a dominant force in his life. In life she became his muse; in verse she became his savior. In *La Vita Nuova*, she gives him courage to face death because, after she dies, he realizes that if death is worthy enough to enter Beatrice, it must be a noble thing.³⁵ In *The Comedy*, she gives him the courage to walk through the purging fire once Virgil tells him that it is the only barrier between him and his love.³⁶ In Heaven, her increasing beauty through the celestial spheres readies Dante for the moment when he will behold God. It gives him the strength to endure the revelation of Divine Truth, and his

³³ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 227. Canto 25, lines 49-54. <<E quella pia che guidò le penne de le mie ali a così alto volo, a la risposta così mi prevenne: "La Chiesa militante alcun figliuolo non ha con più speranza, com'è scritto nel Sol che raggia tutto nostro stuolo.">>

³⁴ Shapiro, 17. Shapiro argues that in *La Commedia*, "The roles of women are determined chiefly by the identification of the upward-striving consciousness with the male and of the regressive, dangerous unconscious with the female." Hence, Beatrice, since she is "upward-striving" and thoughtful, is more masculine than feminine.

³⁵ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 97. Chapter 23, verse 9. <<In questa imaginazione mi giunse tanta umilitate per vedere lei, che io chiamava la Morte, e dicea: "Dolcissima Morte, vieni a me, e non m'essere villana, però che tu dei essere gentile, in tal parte se' stata!.">>

³⁶ Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 251. Canto 27, lines 34-45. <<Quando mi vide star pur fermo e duro, turbato un poco disse: "Or vedi, figlio: tra Bèatrice e te è questo muro." Come al nome di Tisbe aperse il ciglio Piramo in su la morte, e riguardolla, allor che 'l gelso diventò vermiglio; così, la mia durezza fatta solla, mi volsi al savio duca, udendo il nome che ne la mente sempre mi rampolla. Ond' ei crollò la fronte e disse: "Come! Volenci star di qua?", indi sorrise come al fanciul si fa ch'è vinto al pome.>>

love for her prepares him to receive God's grace.³⁷

By giving Beatrice both the Christ-like role of savior and the priest-like role of mediator, Dante also makes a distinction between her and Virgil. Whereas Virgil only instructed Dante on matters that human reason could grasp, Beatrice reveals truths to the pilgrim that, by natural law, are incomprehensible. The miracles of Paradise, the Incarnation, God's love, and the creation story require an acceptance and an understanding of God's will. Virgil possessed a superior human mind that allowed him to separate right from wrong and thus escape Hell proper. But, he cannot enter Heaven because he lacks what Beatrice represents – revelation.³⁸

Dante associates this ability to comprehend God with other women in *The Comedy* as well. His emphasis on the prayers of women in *Purgatorio* demonstrates his belief that women possessed some direct connection with the divine. He champions the Virgin Mary as the mother of God, knowing full well that if she had only obeyed her reasonable mind, she would have dismissed the Archangel Gabriel's news that she was pregnant with the son of God as a figment of her imagination. Reason sees miracles as coincidences; faith accepts them as possible; divine revelation understands their value in God's plan. Reason leads Dante out of Hell; faith gets him through Purgatory; revealed truth allows him

³⁷ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 39. Canto 5, lines 1-12. <<S'io ti fiammeggio nel caldo d'amore di là dal modo che 'n terra si vede, sì che del viso tuo vinco il valore, non ti maravigliar, ché ciò procede da perfetto veder, che, come apprende, così nel bene appreso move il piede. Io veggio ben sì come già resplende ne l'intelletto tuo l'eterna luce, che, vista, sola e sempre amore accende; e s'altra cosa vostro amor seduce, non è se non di quella alcun vestigio, mal conosciuto, che quivi traluce.>>

³⁸ Williams, 153. Williams cites the passage in *Purgatorio* in which Virgil refers to Beatrice as "the light between truth and intellect" and defines "Truth is the thing existing; intellect is the thing known." Beatrice is Truth. Virgil is intellect.

passage to Paradise.³⁹

Dante casts Beatrice into the masculine role of teacher, but he also endows her with revealed truth and grace, which is feminine. Men have reason, but without this feminine grace, they may not enter Heaven. Thus, experience of the feminine is essential to salvation. Without Beatrice, Dante would have remained lost in the dark wood; and without her by his side during his journey through Paradise, he would never have been able to withstand the illumination of Heaven. Love of a woman makes man complete and enables him to unite with God.⁴⁰

In this respect, Dante differed from his troubadour predecessors, who, through their poetry, served the gods of love rather than the Christian god and shunned the clerical idea that sex should only be used to procreate. The troubadours believed that lovers should desire and delight in the passion of sex.⁴¹ Dante, however, did not make sex or physical union with Beatrice his main goal, at least according to his poetry. He uses his worship of her as a stepping stone in his worship of God. Unlike the courtly love poets, Dante fuses the religious with the erotic in a way that allows both of them to exist without denying the other.⁴²

This does not mean that Dante advocated celibacy. On the contrary, he was a married man and produced several children.⁴³ Dante fails to mention his wife or any of his children in his poetry though, and in this respect he follows the courtly love tradition of seeing no relationship between love and marriage.

³⁹ Pinsky, 307-308. This can be inferred through the fact that Virgil represents reason and Beatrice represents blessedness and grace.

⁴⁰ Ferrante, 150-152.

⁴¹ Lewis, C.S., 18.

⁴² *Ibid.* 21.

⁴³ Gallagher, xvi. Dante married Gemma Donati when he was in his thirties and produced one daughter, Antonia, and at least two sons, Pietro and Jacopo. There is some speculation as to whether he had another son named Giovanni.

Marriage was a political and economic tool, rather than an expression of devotion; and medieval society shunned any romantic notions of it. Love then, according to the courtly tradition, was adulterous.⁴⁴ Although Dante adheres to this idea that love exists outside marriage, he does not advocate sexual union with the beloved.

Some scholars argue that since *La Commedia* is an allegory and Dante did not know the real-life Beatrice on an intimate level, the character of Beatrice in the poem is merely an abstract ideal with no basis in reality. In her essay, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” Joan Kelly-Gadol asserts that Beatrice “may just as well be dead” because she does not exist in the way Dante describes her. She argues that his love for her lacked physicality and that “the feelings she arouses in him turn into a spiritual love that makes of their entire relationship a mere symbol or allegory.”⁴⁵

Other writers dispute this theory and assert that, had Beatrice been essentially dead or a mere figment of Dante’s imagination, she could not have had such a profound influence over his life and redemption. In his book, *The Body of Beatrice*, Robert Pogue Harrison examines *La Vita Nuova* and asserts that, even though Dante makes Beatrice a symbol of love, he never denies the physical and historical reality of Beatrice.⁴⁶ He cites chapter three of *La Vita Nuova*, in which Dante dreams of the nude figure of Beatrice, shrouded in a crimson cloth, being cradled by the Lord of Love, who forces her to eat Dante’s flaming heart, in order

⁴⁴ Lewis, C.S., 13.

⁴⁵ Joan Kelly-Gadol, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, eds. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz and Susan Stuard (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 190.

⁴⁶ Harrison, 54.

to demonstrate how Dante stressed both Beatrice's body and her womanhood.⁴⁷

Harrison also shows that, in several instances, Dante is physically affected by the mere presence of Beatrice, even before he knows she is there, thus proving that, even outside her symbolic role, Beatrice affects both Dante's mind and his body.⁴⁸

Both points of view regarding the corporeality of Beatrice contain some merit. Beatrice did exist, but we cannot know if she possessed the virtue and grace that Dante ascribes to her. If she had never existed, Dante would not have been inspired to write either work, as both were homages to her. However, because he describes her as flawless in every way, she seems too good to be true, too much of an ideal to be real. Dante gives her the qualities he considered ideal in a woman. She is chaste, humble, wise, patient, and caring, but she is also powerful, divine, and glorious in that she is his agent of salvation.

In his book, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, R. Howard Bloch argues that Dante's image of an ideal, chaste, and godly woman is just as misogynist as an image of a deceptive, stupid, and lustful one

⁴⁷Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 49-51. Chapter 3, verses 3-6. <<E pensando di lei, mi sopraggiunse uno soave sonno, ne lo quale m'apparve una maravigliosa visione: che me pareva vedere ne la mia camera una nebula di color di fuoco, dentro a la quale io discerneva una figura d'uno signore di pauroso aspetto a chi la guardasse; e pareami con tanta letizia, quanto a sé, che mirabile cosa era; e ne le sue parole dicea molte cose, le quali io non intendea se non poche; tra le quali intendea queste: "Ego dominus tuus." Ne le sue braccia mi pareva vedere una persona dormire nuda, salvo che involta mi pareva in uno drappo sanguigno leggermente; la quale io riguardando molto intentivamente, conobbi ch'era la donna de la salute, la quale m'avea lo giorno dinanzi degnato di salutare. E ne l'una de le mani mi pareva che questi tenesse una cosa la quale ardesse tutta, e pareami che mi dicesse queste parole: "Vide cor tuum." E quando elli era stato alquanto, pareami che disvegliasse questa che dormia; e tanto si sforzava per suo ingegno, che le faceva mangiare questa cosa che in mano li ardea, la quale ella mangiava dubitosamente.>>; Harrison, 22.

⁴⁸Ibid. 48. Harrison references Chapter 14, verse 4-5. <<E nel fine del mio propoinmento mi parve sentire uno mirabile tremore incominciare nel mio petto da la sinistra parte e distendersi di subito per tutte le parti del mio corpo. Allora dico che io poggiai la mia persona simulatamente ad una pintura la quale circondava questa magione; e temendo non altri si fosse accorto del mio tremare, levai li occhi, e mirando le donne, vidi tra loro la gentilissima Beatrice.>>

because real women can never measure up to this standard. The image of Beatrice suggests that, in order to be perfect, a woman must stay separate from the harsh world of men. Bloch quotes Jean-Marie Aubert who says, “There are two ways of placing woman outside of all public life or refusing her the rights monopolized by men: one to consider her as an imbecile and to place her squarely in tutelage...the other to exalt her through a sublimation which renders her unworthy of all worldly tasks.”⁴⁹ In many ways, this applies to Beatrice, as Dante never describes her performing “worldly tasks.” She deals only with spiritual matters, in both *La Vita Nuova* and *The Comedy*, and her realm is that of Paradise. She is otherworldly and only takes on human form to inspire and save Dante.

The notion that the ideal image of woman ultimately damns real women does not function here. It would be hard to imagine that the real-life Beatrice met the standards Dante describes.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, we are concerned here with how Dante depicts Beatrice as perfect. As he says when he is describing Beatrice’s similarities to Christ, “Perhaps a still more subtle person might see in this matter a more subtle reason; but this is the one I see in it, and which most pleases me.”⁵¹ Dante offers a vision in which a woman could obtain this ideal and, according to him, Beatrice was living proof. He may not have thought women should work alongside men in public, running governments or writing books, but he did think they belonged in Paradise, at the foot of the Virgin Mary, overseeing the spiritual welfare of their loved ones on Earth. To him, this was more praiseworthy than any

⁴⁹ Bloch, 197.

⁵⁰ Williams, 27.

⁵¹ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 117. Chapter 29. verse 4. <<Forse ancora per più sottile persona si vederebbe in ciò più sottile ragione; ma questa è quella ch’io ne veggio, e che più mi piace.>>

worldly undertaking.

Conclusion: “Reason, even when supported by the senses, has short wings¹”

The Divine Comedy is a complex work of literature, and one can interpret it on several different levels. Thus, we fail to do *The Comedy* justice by examining its female characters in oversimplified terms. Dante endows the women of the poem with a variety of traits and manners. He created a spectrum of female behavior and characteristics that begins in the *Inferno* with the sinners, progresses to *Purgatorio* with the repentant, and ends in *Paradiso* with the blessed. The women in these realms represent both the best and the worst, the perfection and imperfection of humanity.

Dante did not believe that women were inherently evil, nor did he believe that women were inherently good. To do so would have been to reduce them to weak, irrational creatures who were unable to make decisions on their own.² Instead he believed that they shared the same potential for holiness as men, and where he punished men for their sins, he punished women. Where he lauds men for their virtue, he lauds women, as well, for theirs.

Though women occupy all three realms of *The Comedy*, and although they usually reside side-by-side with men, the previous chapters have explained that Dante associated certain vices and virtues with women that he did not necessarily associate with men. Whereas he praised men for their valor, courage, and intelligence, he rewarded women for their chastity, faith, and obedience. The women of the *Inferno* are guilty of sins like lust and deception and are portrayed

¹ Alighieri, *Paradiso*, 15. Canto 2, lines 56-57. <<Poi dietro ai sensi vedi che la ragione ha corte l'ali.>>

² Bloch, 5.

as unreasonable and carnal. They lack the intelligence to decipher right from wrong and choose to pursue their selfish desires instead of the righteous path.

These particular females, however, comprise only one category of women. If the poet had believed that all women were inherently unreasonable, he could not have subjected women to the rules of his afterlife, which operates under the idea that intelligence is one of the most noble human virtues and the ability to make one's own decisions (free will) is the greatest gift from God. The women of the *Inferno*, especially those punished for lust, illustrate the consequences of allowing desire to overcome good judgment, and show that women had to overcome the hurdle of their inferior intelligence in order to achieve their full potential.

Through his characterizations of the women in Purgatory and Paradise, one can see that Dante believed women could use their God-given free will to choose to behave in a holy manner. They could choose chastity over lust, love over hate, or honesty over deception and, in the end, escape Hell. As seen in Purgatory, the truly devout woman could even help others attain Paradise. Women's lack of reason may make this effort more difficult for them than it is for men; but, according to Dante, it is by no means impossible.

In Dante's eyes, reason was essential to achieve salvation, but it was not the only crucial element. One needed to possess divine grace and a deeper understanding of God in order to enter Paradise, and exceptional women, like Beatrice and Mary, as well as Matilda and St. Lucy, exemplified this grace. Both are so holy that they serve as agents for the salvation and revelation of others.

God chose Mary to bear his son, making it possible for humankind to be saved.

Beatrice plays the role of Dante's priest and mentor, helping him understand God so he may act in accordance with divine will.

These two women are exceptional, and although he describes them within the allegorical parameters of *The Comedy*, Dante implies that all women can attain this perfection. He believed that women were physically and mentally inferior to men and that their lack of intelligence and willpower made them more prone to sin. But Dante refused to believe that women were doomed to spend eternity in the Inferno. He gives them an inherent ability to understand divine will and charges them not only with the task of saving themselves but also with saving any man who finds himself lost in a dark wood.

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