WOMAN EARTHY AND DIVINE
IN
THE COMEDY OF DANTE
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WOMAN EARTHLY AND DIVINE IN THE COMEDY OF DANTE

BY MARIANNE SHAPIRO
For Poog
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INTRODUCTION

In the Comedy, Dante's investigation of the potential horrors and glories of one man's soul clearly has universal associations. But his constructive reactions do not necessarily follow; the effort to make them seem a matter of course is heroic. "Dream-work or the making of symbols involves displacement, condensation and secondary elaboration. The last and simplest of these is giving an air of coherence to latent disorder. . . . The literary symbol is not dream but art or an element in a work of art. Belonging as much to the external world as to the internal, the literary symbol, mediating between them, follows not only the demands of the unconscious but social and aesthetic necessity." ¹ Symbols become cultural devices of practical importance, confirming and strengthening tradition by precedent, providing a retrospective pattern of moral values, and expounding a unity that encourages and substantiates absolutism in moral judgment.

The question of morality is inseparable from the question of woman. If we assume that the predicates of moral concepts are ultimately based on emotions, moral disapproval may be perceived as intimately related to anger and revenge, and moral approval to gratitude. The moral emotions are retributive in character, punishing and rewarding. The resentment involved in moral condemnation is a hostile attitude of mind toward a being perceived as a cause of danger or inflicted pain. It may be directed chiefly toward the improvement or toward the entire removal of that being. In any case, the emotion is a defensive and protective one.

If the virtuous life is regarded as a victorious struggle against evil, then the elimination or diminution of the cause of sin is the target of active strife. The theme of strife was never portrayed with more vividness and complexity than in the Comedy, where it profoundly affects the portrayal of woman, polarized into earthly and divine.

Di mano in mano che procede verso Ia sommità del cielo.... così si rivela nell’animo del Poeta un desiderio di lasciare indietro.... per ordine di progressione, tutte le altre donne, per le quali ha avuto visioni di sgomento e di vergogna e sulle quali ha dovuto levare la sua parola di severità o di compatimento. Egli vuole purificare la sua penna e il suo cuore; e quel concetto alto che ha della donna.... vuole ora rialzarlo, redimerlo, cingerlo di tutta la luce nella quale.... l’ha sempre sognato. ²

The above characterization of Dante’s expressed love for Beatrice is typical of critical statements on the subject of women in the Comedy. “Unlike Mary-worship,” Grandgent writes, “the love of Beatrice does not disparage other women.” ³ Dorothy Sayers states that “his love of Beatrice was completely taken up and resolved in the love of God, so that he remains for us the poet in whom, almost uniquely, sex is without sentimentality or bitterness.” ⁴ She goes on, however, to point out that love for Dante was indelibly associated with “worship, fear, beatitude, sorrow, wonder and loss,” and that it had no connection “either with the violent possessiveness of passion or the mutual comfort of marriage.” ⁵ Courtly love, she explains, had always stood apart from “the commonplace of sexual experience.” According to Charles Singleton, Dante subsequently “found a way to go beyond the conflict of love of woman with love of God, bringing to the thesis and the antithesis of the one and the other that synthesis which managed to reject neither the one nor the other but to keep both in a single suspension—in a single theory of love.” ⁶ It is at

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² Maria Zanella, L'idealità femminile nella Commedia (Florence, 1926), p. 156.
⁵ Ibid., p. 155.
least arguable that the solution of Beatrice answers the question of the Lady while avoiding the question of woman. 7

The uniquely personal solution that Dante offered in Beatrice to the apparently insoluble question of the position of woman in the universal hierarchy was not adopted by certain of his contemporaries and followers. It will be profitable to attempt a view of some of the particular characteristics of the society to which he belonged. In the search we may rebel against the medieval writer’s own conception of the universe as comprising norms established once and for all and in which reality necessarily unfolds in a single direction and in a predictable manner. In such cases it is well to remember that the historical period provides the formal frame for such abstractions from life as Beatrice.

Since the love of God is a father’s love, it follows that man as his child must love God with filial devotion and other men as brothers. The life that includes satisfaction of the senses is thus easily perceived as chaotic and dispersive; that of the spirit as tending to the desired unity of men and motives. The male principle of consciousness which desires permanence and not change, eternity and not transmutation, may discriminate against the feminine and demonize it. The stimulus of God the Father is not of the senses:

Quod oculus non vidit, nec auris audivit, nec in cor hominis ascendit, quae preparavit Deus iis qui diligunt eum.

(1 Cor. 2: 9)

At the same time, love “aut sistitur in pulchritudine creaturae, aut per illam tenditur in aliud. Si primo modo, tunc est via deviationis” (Saint Bonaventure, 1 Sententiarum 3: 1-2).

A close relationship exists between the symbolism of growth and the development of the protagonist’s character in the *Comedy*.  

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7 Francesco de Sanctis, in *Lezioni e saggi su Dante* (Milan, 1955), p. 637, remarks: “Ivi l’uomo riempie di sè la scena; è lui che opera e parla e fantastica; la donna ci sta in lontananza, nominata e non rappresentata... Ci sta come il riflesso dell’uomo, la sua cosa, la sua fattura, l’essere uscito dalla sua costa... Poi diviene un tipo nel quale il poeta raccoglie tutte le perfezioni morali, intellettuali e corporali... In questo genere la creature poetica più originale e completa è Beatrice.”
The journey initiated by Beatrice is a rebirth both in spiritual salvation and in creative wisdom. The culminating point for both is Paradise. There the desired immobility is attained; all is prayer and vision. The rapture of the final poetry of *Paradiso* belongs to a realm where feminine elements other than the single reformed soul itself cannot exist. Even Beatrice disappears, as her charge is confided to Saint Bernard, and here the language that expresses delight is the same as that which once praised the Lady in love poetry. Now it addresses her with a gratitude not unmixed with relief:

\[
\text{Di tante cose quant' i' ho vedute,} \\
\text{dal tuo podere e da la tua bontate} \\
\text{riconosco la grazia e la virtute.}
\]

*(Par. 31: 82-84)*

The greatest miracle associated with Beatrice may well be the affirmation of her patriarchal might.

My study will follow the development of Beatrice’s personality and her relationship to the protagonist in the direction of male ideals and attributes in terms of maternal protection fully subordinated to a masculine system of values. When her task is complete, this transformation of Beatrice is perceived as an agent of liberation and unity:

\[
\text{Tu m'hai di servo tratto a libertate} \\
\text{per tutte quelle vie, per tutti i modi} \\
\text{che di ciò fare avei la potestate.}
\]

*(Par. 31: 85-87)*

Before the final triumphs of the will to redemption may occur, the pilgrim’s journey is facilitated for him by several figures who participate in an image of beneficent guidance and whose prevalence is partially attributable to the role of the pilgrim as an errant and spiritual child. In the course of the journey through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, Virgil, so often referred to as father and teacher, nevertheless assumes certain characteristics attached to the mother entrusted with her child’s earliest care. He is the source of the first step toward everlasting good, combining traits of reason and probity with wistful allegiance to the purposes of
Heaven—and with the tenderness—that are expressive of the good mother. This aspect of the relationship between the pilgrim and Virgil, and of the ensuing connection between Virgil and Beatrice, constitutes one of the subjects investigated in the present study.

I will attempt in addition to show the composite picture that Dante offers in a poetic world inhabited by complex and varied feminine figures. My intention is not to add to the considerable agglomeration of knowledge on the historical or traditional identity of persons in the *Comedy* but to concentrate on the characterization of feminine personality. It would be interesting to examine Dante's interpretations of figures taken from classical mythology and to delineate his innovations. But since my subject is a broad view of feminine character, there will be no opportunity to attempt such a study here. I have avoided a psychological interpretation of Dante's work on the basis of the known circumstances and events of his life. I dwell relatively little upon characters, such as Rachel or Lucia, whose significance appears to be chiefly within the realm of pure symbol or allegory. In the case of characters with manifold significance, their presence as women is emphasized.

I hope that this book will shed some light on the conflicts which made woman a subject of perplexity in the Middle Ages and which, in my opinion, validate the consideration of woman as a topic of particular significance.
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CHAPTER I

LOVE POETRY IN A PATRIST SOCIETY

Patriarchal mythology starts from the assumption that the spirit is a priori eternal, that the spirit was in the beginning. In complete identification with the father, the male makes himself the source from which the feminine, such as Eve, originated in a spiritual and supernatural way. From that standpoint, as in the Comedy, derive the representations both of the devouring primeval female embedded in materiality and of the Lady of wisdom who extends her fullest efforts in the supreme gesture of giving. 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. Beatrice is, for this reason, largely expressive of masculine ideals. The patriarchal Middle Ages exaggerated the differences between the sexes. Nearly all women in the Comedy have some erotic significance, and nearly all are portrayed in a love relationship, however far-fetched that appellation may seem.

Dante repeatedly states that man must distinguish between primary and secondary goods at the expense of the latter, and between these and the sovereign good which is perfection as it exists in God.¹ Extremely important to any consideration of Dante's position in time is the fact that he lived through the

¹ *Purg.* 16: 31; 17: 33; 18: 7; *Par.* 16: 6. These and all other subsequent references to the works of Dante are to *Le opere di Dante*, critical text of the Italian Dante Society, 2d ed. (Florence, 1960), and will henceforth be indicated parenthetically in the text.
decline of many of the Church's most treasured ventures, among them scholastic philosophy and the Crusades. Innocent III referred to the "corruption of this world which is hastening to old age" and Saint Francis to "these times of superabundant malice and iniquity." Both were alluding to possibly different facets of a period of moral decay in the Church. Religion often became reduced to a mixture of paganism and superstition, a ceremony of penance and repetition of sin. In a laborious and growing task of political organization following the breakdown of the Holy Roman Empire, new nationalities escaped from centralization and engaged in frequent wars. The feudal aristocracy, which had owed its property and power to the same social order in which the privileges of great churchmen were rooted, ceased to be an exclusive power and was forced to enter into a series of struggles with royalty, clergy, and populace. Partly through the enfranchisement of serfs, new towns grew and evolved new laws. Notably, religion penetrated more deeply into the introspection of some individual consciences, though the main body of Christianity desperately required a stable government. Scholastic philosophy was "entering a period of decay—between its apogee and the beginning of its decadence, when Dante came on the scene." It had "degenerated into a skirmish of sophisms, a puerile and dangerous game: questions infinitesimally divided rose like dust under the feet of the combatants." Potential Crusaders realized that the Crusades would only produce more Crusades and "the transformation of all Europe into a military order."

The patriarchal society, dominated by father-identification, was authoritarian, sexually repressive, and ascetic in its moral ambitions. It was, accordingly, restrictive to the freedom of women, who were generally considered sinful and inferior. Sin itself was considered not unlike a material substance that was transmitted by propagation; children were seen as affected not

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only by the original sin of Adam but by the sins of their parents. From original sin alone resulted the loss of man's natural goodness which led to the rebellion of his lower parts against the higher. Since the natural capacity to recognize and will the good was only impaired rather than entirely eradicated, the struggle for virtue was necessary in the Christian doctrine of merit. Chastity became all-important; the distrust of academic inquiry for its own sake widened. Knowledge, whether of woman or of disinterested facts, provoked much the same reaction and the two became closely connected.

A community of feeling extended between the religious quest for love and the romantic, though the former based itself more completely on an ideal of purity. Both led to extreme subtlety of veracity and logic; both were of intensely inward origin and each was united, as an individual thing to its unique object. Both were concerned with journeying, seeking, and suffering, and were carefully represented in their stages of progress. They drew in part from the same sources of inspiration; rigidly kept apart, they were among the pairs of great alternatives opened to the imagination by the mid-twelfth century.

Undoubtedly the increasing degree of social mobility and dislocation from class to class and from place to place contributed in a large degree to the development of a uniquely personal search for love, no longer circumscribed by ties of land and lordship. The heroes of the Chanson de Roland call upon Saint Michael or Saint Denis, not upon the Virgin, and think of their familiar landmarks in France. But the wanderings of the knights of Chrétien de Troyes trace fanciful pathways through a wide world where danger may lurk anywhere but whose ineffectual confines man may pass without difficulty. The faithful undertake long pilgrimages, merchants journey from town to town, agricultural workers leave their land, artists roam in search of commissions, and scholars change universities. The romances of the North of France come to represent in narrative form the spirit that first

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took shape in the lyric poetry of the South and exemplify a particular antithesis of spiritual and amorous loyalties.

“What seems novel . . . in the poetry of the troubadours is not their sense of the joy of love, nor the refining power of love, nor the inspiration of love, but only their idea of the proper object of love. The troubadours made a virtue of the love of woman.”7 It must be clear from the first that regardless of the terms of self-abnegation in which troubadour love was usually couched, glorification of the lady was an outgrowth of self-love and its power to enhance anything connected with the self, and that it was the product of an age as noted for violent indulgence as for violent renunciation. Moreover, the flourishing of troubadour poetry coincided with a period that witnessed the emergence of a dominant type of woman. We know that respectable women scarcely figured in the love poetry of classical antiquity and that the sensual love this poetry expressed rarely placed emphasis on tenderness or spiritual affection. This tendency continued in the Latin lyric even contemporaneously with the flowering of courtly verse.

The idealized society of grace and beauty which more than four hundred poets helped to create established standards of conduct that to some extent came to act as models for noble behavior. The idea gradually arose that woman’s love was the reward of greater refinement on the part of him who desired it and that its bounty had to be earned. In that sense woman became to some degree the educator of man; Dante may well represent in his Comedy the culmination of that trend. Among the laws of courtesy, that of mezura, self-restraint, figured prominently. Undoubtedly this attempt to attenuate some of the rougher aspects of medieval behavior was an outgrowth of woman’s new influence upon knightly ideals. Good manners and gentlemanly conduct joined with Christian virtues and ideals in a movement that lacked social antecedents. The desire for feminine approval became a motive for valor combined with gentleness and politeness to ladies. Before the troubadours, love poetry had not expressed more than sensual desire in its variants or praised

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anything but the material qualities of its object. The poets of love had been aware of treating a relatively light theme devoid of serious manly concern and unfit for sublime poetry. By positing the lady on the top rung of the ladder to sublimity, courtly love, which developed in a Christian milieu, lived at variance with the Christian system of morality. The hierarchical thinking which marked the Christian system of the Middle Ages still persisted, but its object was a different one. The poet worshiped in his work the object of a usually inaccessible love, to which he referred the expression of his entire devotion, perfect submission, and absolute faithfulness. The lady was not infrequently addressed by the title of mastery, midons, my lord or liege, and her favor sought by the pursuit of honor.

The poetic genre called the pastorella was used to describe a facile encounter between a knight and a peasant girl, or shepherdess, whom he might take by flattery or by force. The genre illustrates something of the social relationship between noble and peasant in which scruple scarcely played a part. The troubadour Raimbaut d’Orange advised that force was the best way to win a woman; he behaved differently, he said, as he wished to be put to no more trouble for women than if they were all his sisters. The magic power of refinement and ennoblement could exist only in the lady who, as Dante himself was to put it, was “gentil e non pura femmina.” Only the aristocratic and socially powerful lady could afford to be demanding. For the lady was the ruler of the domain in which the courtly poet lived as subject, “and she was to be exalted as it was fitting that a lover and a servant’s song should exalt her: to a point beyond which there was no one higher . . . this love of woman which the poets sang was necessarily without subordination to God.”

The frankly sensual character of erotic attachment, even to a mother-figure, was dwelt upon in the production of the poets of the great age of troubadour poetry. When we seek to interpret the distinctions they made between the gai saber of courtly love and the “villainy” of ordinary love, it is difficult to translate fin as

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“pure” or “chaste” in view of the constant recurrence of physicality. Refined love does not exclude the physical by any means; its principles, wrapped in the obscurity created by those who would preserve its aulic and exclusive character, are of another sort. Courtly love demands loyalty: not fidelity, but the observance of secrecy that guards the lady’s honor. Courtly love cannot be mercenary: interest is a principal cause of offenses against it. Since conduct motivated by mercenary impulses is entirely unjustifiable, a lady must not, for example, take a lover of a higher social station than her own.

E donna fai gran folor
que s’enten en gran ricor. ¹⁰

Both of these principles of courtly love were based on a matristic outlook, guarding the exalted position of the beloved.

The catalog of troubadours who frankly addressed themselves to the sensual worship of the lady’s body is plentiful enough to convince one that fin amors and chaste love need not be synonymous.

Adonc esta ben c’om s’ai si
d’acho don hom a plus talan. ¹¹

Ren en beutat no gualia
ni’n fai nula fantumia
Lo joios,
joves, gens cors amoros.... ¹²

Deus....
s’ilh platz, m’en lais jauzir. ¹³

Beatriz de Dia, a trobairitz of stature, frankly disclosed her love for Raimbaut d’Aurenga. Guilhem de Cabestanh, the classic troubadour, locates the nature of amorous felicity:

¹¹ Guilhem de Poitiers, in ibid., p. 104.
¹² Bertran de Born, in ibid., p. 111.
¹³ Bernard de Ventadorn, in ibid., p. 108.
Belha dompna, mielher de las melhors, 
cuenda e plazens de cors e de faisso... 14

Arnaut Daniel, an unrivaled fabbro of language and meter according to Dante, triumphantly exults in his successful loves:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ges non es croia} \\
\text{cella cui soi amis;} \\
\text{de sai Savoia} \\
\text{plus bella nos noiris;} \\
\text{tals m'abelis} \\
\text{don ieu plus ai de joia} \\
\text{non ac Paris} \\
\text{d'Elena, cel de Troia.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

But in the canso “Lo ferm voler,” wishing to enter his lady’s room, he trembles as a boy before the rod. He says that he loves the lady more than his mother and that this love will break him. In “Duos braitz e critz” he prays to be with his lady and gaze at her fair form under a lamp, then upbraids himself: “Boca, que ditz?” At the bottom of the cup of love lay the dregs of the moralist.

By the eve of the Albigensian crusade, with the increasing specialization of the poet, the vocabulary of love had undergone some changes in the direction of delicacy and subtlety. But no outstanding change had occurred in the character of the feelings rendered in the poetry, which stood at the apex of its brilliance. The concept of love remained actively sensual. The period of troubadour poetry immediately preceding the Albigensian crusade is known as the classic period and includes most of the best-known troubadours. When the poetry began to lose in literary quality it became most moral in the last period, “necessarily called decadent.” 16

With the destruction of the society which brought about the development of troubadour poetry, the activity of some poets continued for a time under a profound change of feeling imposed

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14 Guilhem de Cabestanh, in ibid., p. 112.
15 Arnaut Daniel, in ibid., p. 118.
16 Valency, in ibid., p. 104.
upon it by Church power. Probably the gradual decline of the southern courts and the variables that dictate the decay of a poetic strain were contributing factors. Courtly love continued with diminishing reality and vigor to provide a point of departure for several generations of versifiers. The minds of surviving poets speeded a transformation of the concept of love, imparting to it an increased moral elevation. The idea of physical love as sin pervaded Provençal poetry. The poets competed in manifestations of modesty and the renunciation of love sentiments. Passion became wholeheartedly the passion for sacrifice. The poet-lover, still prostrate at his lady's feet, made a point of repudiating the happiness he might formerly have prayed for; and the prize of love, smiles, or kind looks were sufficient reward. Guiraut Riquier, who called himself the last troubadour, asked no love of his lady; but in the canso “Mout me tanc per ben pagatz” expressed his gratitude for the inspiration and fame that came to him through his loves, unstained by any evil thought. Open preference was given to unrequited love, which was said to die with fulfillment. The poet's devotion moved him, according to the conviction, to sing and spread abroad the praises of his lady, sharing in Christian neighborliness the benefits he felt when he approached her in song. One of the most ardent promulgators of reform was Guilhem de Montanhagol, who put forth the belief that

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots\text{ d'amor mou castitaz}, \\
\text{Quar qui 'n amor ben s'enten} \\
\text{No pot far que puois mal renh.}
\end{align*}
\]

This apologist of chaste love reassures lovers and their judges in conformity with the recently demonstrated exigencies of the Church. He asserts that the principles he upholds have been honored in all ages and that if they are not now observed, it is a sign of modern corruption. The reward of love is no longer love but moral perfection. The poet-lover and his lady are the guardians of one another's virtue.

Significantly, verses formerly composed to be sung were now written to be read. The poetry of love assumed a more learned character. It was during the period of decline that the art de trobar was named the gai saber by the Academy of Toulouse.
LOVE POETRY IN A PATRIST SOCIETY

in 1290. The song of love was developed in the areas of philosophy and religion, while its sensual component was increasingly minimized. Often the longing of the troubadour lover passed into adoration of the Virgin. Even the *alba* and the pastorella were turned to the service of piety. The portrayal of earthly passion in the context of worldly ideals ended sadly in the glorification of abnegation and chastity supported by philosophical arguments of increasing complexity. Such was the legacy that passed to Italy with the migrations of the remaining troubadours. The poetry of the golden age of the southern courts was known to Dante, though mainly through Italian troubadours who were acquainted chiefly with collaborators of the Church. The gulf between life and literature opened wider than ever as the poetry of love became increasingly abstract. Like the Provençal troubadour, however, the Italians continued to attest to the personal origin of the experience they described.

The poets of the Sicilian school in Italy, the troubadours still writing in Provençal, and the new bourgeois school originating in Bologna were roughly contemporary. In Sicilian poetry we find preserved the feudal superiority of the beloved lady and the subjection of the lover. It pleased Frederick II, who kept women secluded from the life of his court, to call himself the "servidore" of "la più amorosa" in a canzone, "Oi lasso non pensai." Prince Enzo refers humbly to "quella che m'ave e tene in sua bailla," and the imperial notary Giacomo de Lentino finds himself "sotto altrui senghoria" in imperial company. As might be expected there are no allusions to historically existing ladies; the tedious repetition of the vocabulary of love-service was directed to the interest of men. In this society of imperial notaries and chancellors the terms *potestate, impero, sovrana, servire,* and *balia* achieve a prominence which continues into the society of Dante and the *stilnovisti.* These poets, bound together by their duty to Frederick II, were military or legal personages first, poets

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17 See Dante's *canzone* "Io sento si d'amor la gran possanza" (*Rime* 47) and the sonnet "Ne le man vostre" (*Rime* 25). Also Cino da Pistoia, "Lo gran disio" and Guido Cavalcanti, "Se vedi Amore" and "Dante, un sospiro" in *I rimatori del dolce stil nuovo*, ed. G. R. Ceriello (Milan, 1950), hereafter cited as *Rimatori.*
second. With his death in 1250 and the ensuing disruption of the court, another school of Italian poetry, originating in Tuscany, came into prominence. Its master, Guittone d’Arezzo, continued to examine the love of the Lady in the pedantic terms set by late Provençal poetry. Largely a metrical and rhetorical exercise, this excerpt recalls the dissertations of Church Fathers on the excellence of chastity:

Castitate, tu luce e tu bellore!
Ah! quanto amo e commendo
donna che tene casto e corpo e core.
Vivere in carne fuor voler carnale
è vita angelicale. 18

He recalls original sin and the miserable state of lovers who forgot God and deified woman. The poetry written after he became a monk recants even chaste admiration of woman in a long process of meticulous reasoning.

One would be mistaken to suppose that Guido Guinizelli, caro padre of Dante

\[
\text{e de li altri miei miglior che mai}
\]
\[
\text{rime d’amor usar dolci e leggiadre}
\]

spontaneously generated an opposition to Guittone’s method. He, in turn, names Guittone caro padre meo in an early sonnet, turning to him for advice in his art,

\[
\text{che a vo’ in ciò solo com’a mastro accorgo.} 19
\]

But Dante, while recognizing in him the beginnings of the Italian lyric, discerned in his poetry a dearth of inspiration, a sterile imitation of extraneous sources, and elements of shallowness and vulgarity in its conventional linguistic expression:

Subsistant igitur ignorantie sectatores Guictonem Aretinum et quosdam alios extollentes, numquam in vocabulis atque constructione plebescere desueltos.

(De vulgari eloquentia, 2: 6)

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18 Guittone d’Arezzo, Rime, ed. Francesco Egidi (Bari, 1940).
He perceived their lack of elevation as a shameless bid for easy fame, taking refuge in artificiality and in usurping public acclaim. The group of poets who had formed spiritually around Guinizelli effected on the other hand an urgently needed rejuvenation of Italian lyric poetry.

Cosi fer molti antichi di Guittone,
di grido in grido pur lui dando pregio,
fin che l’ha vinto il ver con più persone.

(Purg. 26: 124-26)

In Dante’s time anything in fact or fiction could be understood as a figure of something else, and poetry came to incorporate the subject matter of scholastic disputations. Talk of love in the lyric became reasoning—ragionar—and the nature of love the primary concern. The poetry of the stilnovisti that can be rightly seen as belonging to the new style was a learned poetry. The Vita Nuova includes learned disquisitions on technique, meter, and vocabulary, while Guido Cavalcanti, one of the chief exponents of the new style, was known as an extremely erudite man. Combined with the increased insistence on principles of patristic morality, passion became a symbolic element in this poetry. The Lady is compared to the Madonna or to an angel and takes over their qualities.

La sua beltà piacente
e il fino amor ch’è puro
in ver me che son puro.  

Love is invested with implications which escape from the Lady into the rarefied atmosphere of transcendent metaphysics. Without entirely abdicating her reality, the Lady becomes representative of heavenly intelligence, another name for the angels who are the executors of God’s design. The period that witnessed the unifying triumph of scholasticism and new displays of religious fervor found its most advanced poets glorifying in their most ambitious work a fleshless love that would display erudition and preserve innocence.

20 Guinizelli, “Al cor gentil ripara sempre Amore,” ibid., p. 2.
The *stilnovisti* were not courtiers, nor did they write for a courtly public. Consequently, they evolved an ethical concept of nobility described as a special act of God's grace, manifesting itself in the high character of the person who possessed it. Clearly they could not do without some idea of nobility. Theirs simulated God's hierarchy of heavenly intelligence:

\[
\text{Deo e natura e il mondo in gradi mise e fe' dispari senni e 'ntendimenti.} \quad 21
\]

The aristocracy of the *cor gentile* is based less upon social parity than on a common spirit, which transformed the patterns of troubadour love poetry into the metaphysics of the schoolmen. In crystalline, limpid language the poets of the *stilnuovo* claim a sense of truth which no one else can understand.

More than one idea is at the root of the poetry of the *stilnovisti*. To Guido Guinizelli love, always guided by reason, is a pure form of man's aspiration toward God. Originating largely in the aesthetic admiration of physical beauty, love thereafter turns to the moral beauty which is its true goal. In the *cor gentil* the beautiful lady may induce a blessedness that is the image of the beatitude of heaven. Undoubtedly the first annunciation of love bears a promising sweetness. But even through the experience of Guinizelli it may result in bitterness, *inimistade*, and disconsolate weeping, *minaccia di battaglia*, and render the helpless lover similar to a statue which has only the face of a man.\(^22\) But only the noble soul can love; Dante acknowledges his debt to Guinizelli in this aspect of his love-concept:

\[\text{Amor e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa}\]
\[\text{si come il saggio in suo dittare pone.}\]

*(Vita Nuova 20)*

Love is a miracle descending to the chosen soul as a *mirabile visione* to be intimately experienced, a sign of a higher realm, which creates a separate life in the soul:


Guido Cavalcanti followed Guinizelli in his youth, then branched into a concept of love that in a far more detailed manner searches out its physiological and psychological causes and effects in the canzone “Donna mi prega.” For him love is not governable by reason. Its essence consists rather in constant and exaggerated desire wherein voluptuousness is suffused by gloom. It is a fatal passion which devours and destroys the soul taken by it, suspending its powers and the motions of life. For him love resides in the sensitive soul while the possible intellect is immune to it; this tends to withdraw the lover from the bene perfetto of life according to reason. While it is not death itself, death may ensue from its power. Certainly it does not benefit the lover morally; the dark images describing love would alone make it appear as an obscuring of the soul by a restless tormenting need of the flesh. Love is born under the malignant influence of the war planet Mars; the lover is in a state of wrath passing all bounds.

The poets of the new style draw no less from Cavalcanti than from Guinizelli. Never quite relinquishing the attraction of the flesh, they continue to strive for the things of the spirit, in a war of the faculties of the soul that can be divided into father- and mother-identifications. Love is a natural passion, real and irrepressible; the lady, its irresistible human object. But because love has become among the stilnovisti an entirely introspective passion, the gulf between love and its object is unbridgeable. The beautiful lady is no less lovely; the image of her renders her lover bereft of sense, “diviso di savere e di bene in poco giorno,” and extinguishes his vero lume, leaving him to grope in shadow. Indeed, the emphasis these poets for the most part place upon images of shadow and darkness all but obliterates the sunny beginnings of Guinizelli.

24 Lapo Gianni, in the canzone “Amor, nova ed antica vanitate,” ibid., p. 12.
The nature of the *vero lume* can scarcely be in doubt: it is the unswerving and constantly striving love of the Father. When Cino da Pistoia laments, “Io non so come ad esser mio ritorni,” the bewilderment he expresses refers to an entire identification of himself with the male principle. However powerful a guide to virtue the lady might be, she remained an obstacle to the single-minded devotion that alone promised salvation. The contrast between the destructive and tormenting love passion and its angelic object is constantly reiterated. Sometimes the aggression of the lover is transferred to the lady: Cino da Pistoia equates the entrance of love through his eyes with a dagger that the lady twists in his heart. Dino Frescobaldi portrays the lady as indifferent to the torments she witnesses, smiling her tranquil smile and captivating him with her *hauteur*. 

Cino da Pistoia invokes the aid of God in lessening his amorous ardor, fearful of approaching perdition. His mind dwells upon punishment and the Last Judgment:

\[
\text{Lo meo core altro che amor non brama} \\
\text{Per cui si si disama} \\
\text{Ch'errar da ferma veritá mi pare} \\
\text{ch'Amor gli occhi mi smove,} \\
\text{si che non guardan dove} \\
\text{possan veder mia salute verace.} \\
\text{Ahi fallace Amor, che 'n tanta erranza} \\
\text{posto ha' lo cor meo,} \\
\text{che metto in obrianza} \\
\text{lo nostro signor Deo.} \]

He ends by cursing the day he was born, much in the manner of the somewhat deprecated Cecco Angiolieri.

Perceiving himself as the entirely passive object of an attack, the poet usually responds with the immobility characteristic of insoluble conflict.

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25 Cino da Pistoia, “Per una merla, che d’intorno al volto,” ibid., p. 78.
29 See Cecco Angiolieri’s sonnet “Maladetta sie l’or’ e ’l punt’ e ’l giorno” in his *Canzoniere*, ed. Carlo Steiner (Turin, 1928), p. 56.
LOVE POETRY IN A PATRIST SOCIETY

Ben veggio mi convien morir del pianto,
che non si può per nulla cosa torre.  

The incapability for action identifies the man with his feminine aspect. The martyr to love is passive and resigned to the superior force which dominates him “contra cui non val forza nè misura.” Frescobaldi uses the vocabulary of bloodshed to describe the guerra spietata e faticosa in which he can only succumb to the sweetness of conquest. Even Guinizelli expresses wonder at the extent of love’s torment.

Io non pensava che lo cor giammai
avesse di sospir tormento tanto,
che de l’anima mia nascesse pianto,
mostrando per lo viso a li occhi morti.

In Cavalcanti a repressed unrest animates the quiet of resignation. He directs his poem to the church of the Dorata in Provenç and instructs it to tell every lady the name of the one he seeks. The poet appears here actively in search of an unspecific good. Elsewhere love continues mysterious and fascinating, as he wonders at the signs manifest in himself:

Noi siam le triste penne isbigottite,
le cesoiuzzze e ’l coltellin dolente
ch’avemo scritte dolorosamente
quelle parole che vo’ avete udite.
Or vi diciam perché noi siam partite
e siam venute a voi qui di presente:
la man che ci movea dice che sente
cose dubiose nel core apparire.

The poem is evidence of what we find most captivating in the works of these poets: it is the wonder of perpetual adolescence preserved even amid constant talk of death. But if love of woman were to end here it would die indeed with the death of the spirit:

\[\text{Cino da Pistoia, “Ogni allegro pensier ch’alberga meco,” Rimatori, p. 69.}\]
\[\text{Guinizelli, “Poscia che dir convienmi cio che sento,” ibid., p. 16.}\]
\[\text{Guinizelli, “Io non pensava che lo cor giammai,” ibid., p. 8.}\]
\[\text{Cavalcanti, “Noi siam le triste penne isbigottite,” ibid., p. 34.}\]
The tradition of excellence that the stilnovisti inherited was one in which Christian piety counted foremost. The strict control of the sex impulse in poetic expression was clearly entailed by the tradition. Where the poets depart from their noble style, we find them relaxing in genres such as Cavalcanti’s pastorella, which relates a frivolous adventure with a seductive young girl who volunteers that she had been sola sola (presumably waiting for a lover); or Guinizelli’s “Chi vedesse a Lucia un var capuzzo,” which sings the charms of another girl in almost popular form. In a poem that could have been the ancestor of Shakespeare’s sardonic mock encomium of his mistress, Angiolieri wrote of the not-so-magnificent appearance of his lady as she rose from her couch. The eulogy of money appears little less frequently in his work than complaints of Becchina, for whom he never seemed to have enough. According to him, man, the natural lord of creation, has lost his exalted place through slavery to love. From his poetry we derive a clear picture of the woman as well as of the poet. Folgore da San Gimignano also gives us a clear appreciation of the comforts and pleasures of life and speaks frankly of physical love. By no means did the stilnuovo become the only poetic...

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34 Cavalcanti, “Tu m’hai si piena di dolor la mente,” ibid., p. 16.
35 Cavalcanti, “Li mie’ foll’occhi, che prima guardaro,” ibid., p. 2.
36 Cavalcanti, “In un boschetto trova’ pasturella,” ibid., p. 37.
37 Guinizelli, “Chi vedesse a Lucia un var capuzzo,” ibid., p. 20.
38 Cecco Angiolieri, “I’ sono innamorato, ma non tanto,” in his Canzoniere, p. 68.
39 Angiolieri, “Quando mie donn’esce la man del letto,” in ibid., p. 72.
40 Angiolieri, “Ogn’altra carne m’è ’n odio venuta,” in ibid., p. 60.
41 Folgore da San Gimignano, “Di maggio si vi do molti cavagli,” in A. Massera, Sonetti burleschi e realistici dei primi due secoli (Bari, 1940), sonnet 6.
stream flowing in the Italy of Dante's time; the *stilnovisti* themselves occasionally wrote outside of it.

In their most valued and typical production, however, love is a spiritual state purifying the heart with searing fire. While physical attraction to the woman receded far into the background, the lady became a satellite of God. As a symbol of the workings of the poet's mind, she is all-powerful, though as a person she may all but disappear. The poet describes himself through her; she varies from poet to poet according to his disposition. It is in the guise of his own thought that the lady can bring a man to doom or to honor.

For Guinizelli the lady is chiefly the pure contemplation of beauty and a sign of the interior beauty of the soul revealed in exterior harmony and grace; for Cavalcanti a bittersweet enchantress who plunges her lover into dark introspection; for Dino Frescobaldi often a tyrannical image of masochistic desire, a beautiful monster destroying her poet's life.

Ma ella attende il suo crudel fedire,  
e fascia il cor, nel punto che saetta,  
di quel forte desire  
cui non uccide colpo di saetta.  

Among his poems of protest are signs of passive gratitude for the active sway the image of the lady holds in his heart:

\[
\text{ti signoreggia con tanta pianezza,} 
\text{ch'ogni grave tormento t'abandona.}
\]

The world outside this sacred grave of images is harder still, but

\[
\text{questa mi pon con le sue man nel core} 
\text{un gentiletto spirito soave.}
\]

Cino da Pistoia invokes the vision of Pity which appears to him to share the sadness of his spiritual life:

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42 Dino Frescobaldi, "Poscia che dir convienmi cio che sento," *Rimari*, p. 16.
43 Frescobaldi, "Giovane, che cosi leggiadramente," ibid., p. 12.
Fear is habitual in this poetry, an emotion cognizant of its own destructiveness and strong enough to impede all action on the part of the lover.

... lo cor che tu m'hai tolto,
Amor, l'ucciderà quella paura...  

Compounded of guilt and the conflicting desire for love, fear is focused upon the ever receding goal of desire and one's own inability to approach it.

It took the work of a will such as Dante's to construct by stages as organic unities out of the anguished spiritual situation that he inherited, first the Vita Nuova and then the Comedy. He acknowledged his debt to the new poets, by the tendency of his early work as well as by tributes in the Comedy. The sonnet “Amor e'l cor gentil sono una cosa” (Vita Nuova 20) recapitulates Guinizelli's rules of love 47 with one startling innovation that for the time being remains undeveloped; the assertion that women feel the same love for worthy men. The solemn and graceful game of love, however much life thwarted it, never lost its charm or its place in Dante's work. It did, however, have to be further sublimated and transformed according to the rules of caritas. The change is coincident with a growth in creativity that elevates the mother-figure to new heights of power. Dante's solution to the feminine question rested ultimately upon the avoidance of woman and glorification of the Lady. In this direction lay all that was considered most refined and noble in love.

Toward the end of Beatrice's guidance of the pilgrim in Paradise we learn that now her beauty is such that only God can take full pleasure in it (Par. 30: 21). As this beauty grew, the wisdom of the pilgrim and his devotion to God remained steadfast.

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46 Gianni Alfani, “De la mia donna vo' cantar con vio,” ibid., p. 6.
47 Guinizelli, “Al cor gentil ripara sempre Amore,” ibid., p. 5.
The troubadours hinted at the avoidance of woman; the *stilnovisti* connected it with the highest ethical aspirations and the striving after values in the sublimation of woman into lady and mother. The mother sublimation earns for Dante the only crown available to a poet writing in a patristic society. With the widening of the gap between man and woman the lady becomes a symbol of the fall of the last obstacle to religious devotion.
Most of the women who are mentioned or depicted as wives in the *Comedy* are sinful mainly in that they incite their husbands to sin. None of them are great sinners themselves—few are more than one-dimensional. We know that Francesca’s greatest sin is adultery and that Dido had a husband, but it is impossible to think of them as wives. The woman whose role as a wife defines her place in the *Comedy* is lacking in distinctive personal traits. Her virtues and vices are the same, by and large, as those of a young girl; what differentiates her from a young girl is the effect she may produce upon her husband or the kind of behavior she elicits from him. Dante does not enter deeply into the subject of marriage, which as an intimate relationship between two human beings did not attract much literary or scholarly attention in his time.

As demonstrated by the chaste who were sexually faithful to one another during their earthly lives and who are now an example in Purgatory, “che fuor casti come virtute e matrimonio impone” (*Purg.* 25: 133-35), chastity appears as the highest virtue expected of married persons. Sexual fidelity is depicted less as a mutual duty between husband and wife than as a common duty to God. The emphasis lies not on pleasure taken in one another but on the denial of any other pleasure and on the right of exclusive possession in marriage.

While preserving the vocabulary of courtly love with reference to many of the women characters in the *Comedy*, Dante did not choose to apply this vocabulary, and certainly not the binding,
exclusive emotion it describes, to the woman in her role of wife. Had he done so there would have been a precedent, however limited; the uxorious male is not entirely a creation of the recent past, nor is an intense, durable marital love entirely unworthy of recognition in the most elegant fantasy creations of medieval romantic literature. ¹ The love-duty conflict in marriage may hold much the same threat to the fulfillment of virility as the same conflict compounded by adultery.

Excessive love of one's wife does not appear among the many diversified love errors committed by Dante's characters. In the Comedy a gulf exists between the woman as wife and as lover; and, though they are sometimes the same person, we see these women in either the one or the other role. Dante seems to be following the general trend of contemporary institutions and literature: the passion of a husband for his wife does not exist; leading Church opinion was that it should not. ² Married life is a necessity accepted grudgingly by each person for different reasons. Its disadvantages and dangers to the whole man as seen in Dante's time are exhaustively, naturally, and vividly portrayed in popular literature and in clerical satire. But while they condemn the servitude of the spirit to the flesh, the bond is carnal and not sentimental.

There is in Dante's descriptions of married life an element of poetic chronicle which is timeless through its very involvement with his era. He even brings figures derived from distant history or mythology into the orbit of familiar life by including them among contemporary ones, illustrating the same points by their example and employing the same language and narrative style in writing about them. Mythological, legendary and biblical figures acquire contemporary attributes and manners and for this reason may be discussed on the same terms.

Greed, a besetting sin of woman, distinguishes Safira from the enemies of her husband, though he, too, is accused (Purg. 20: 112).


² The conflict in the West between passion and marriage is the subject of Denis de Rougemont's Love in the Western World, trans. Montgomery Belgion (New York, 1956).
Accomplices in a deed of avarice, they withheld from the Christian community a part of the profits of a sale of land. Subsequently, reproved by Saint Peter, they fell by the hand of divine power. Dante, alluding to her by name, thus designates Safira as the principal sinner of the two.

The same familiarity of tone that seems to bring Safira into the context of Dante's Florentine world applies to Potiphar's wife, identified as "la falsa ch' accusò Giuseppe" (Inf. 30: 97). The lustful motive that moved her to falsification in words is not mentioned. What is most important here and determines her place in the Inferno is that she used her arts in bad faith. As a potential adulteress she could occupy one of several other areas of the Comedy; as a wife she has influence over her husband and misuses it with a corruptive intention: her sin lies largely in this fact. ³

The sins of both women consist of active deeds and stem from the freedom they attempt to take with their condition in life. Feminine transgressions are largely active in nature; conversely, feminine heroism is usually negative. Its manifestations are passivity and suffering. The connotations of active self-assertion on the part of woman are mainly those of pride, unchasteness, or both.

In the examples taken from biblical or classical mythological sources, the punishment for pride seems somewhat mitigated by the consideration that perhaps, in more distant times, haughtiness was not a sin. It was Christianity that raised humility to its place among the highest civil and religious virtues. ⁴ Dante portrays proud women of the ancient world with compassion and dignity. Surrounded by the immunity of legend, their human suffering is described in terms which revive it on a contemporary and immediate level:

⁴ A detailed discussion of the grouping of the virtues and vices in Christianity may be found in Morton Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins (New York, 1954).
WIVES AND VIRGINS

Niobe is portrayed simultaneously as a statue, conferring upon her the timelessness proper to a classical legend; and as a bereaved woman, whose eyes alone remain the sign of life in the motionless tableau surrounding her.

The prime example of humility given by the Annunciation is immediately followed by the Old Testament King David, “l’umile salmista,” dancing before the tablets of the law—at that moment more than a king, and less in the eyes of those who like Michal, his wife, would see in his movements an abandonment of his kingly stature.

The image of the haughty daughter of Saul contrasts vividly with that of Mary’s humility in accepting God’s will (41-44). Her disdainful gaze is the exact reverse of Mary’s quick gesture of compliance. Like Niobe she is rendered as a statue and as a woman.

Again immediately following an example of Mary’s humility and meekness (Purg. 15: 88-92), heightened in this case by the omission of her name, we find that of a wife’s presumptuousness and arrogance, taken from the pagan world:

*Di contra, effigiata ad una vista*
*d’un gran palazzo, Micòl ammirava*
*si come donna dispettosa e trista.*

(Purg. 10: 67-69) 6

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*Indi m’apparve un’ altra con quell’acque*
*giù per le gote che ’l dolor distilla*

---

6 Niobe, proud of her fecundity, demanded that the Thebans offer sacrifices to her rather than to Latona, mother of only two children, Apollo and Diana. These gods thereupon put her children to death and Niobe, petrified with grief, was changed into a statue. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, in *P. Ovidii Nasonis Opera omnia*, ed. Rudolf Ehwald (Leipzig, 1915), 6: 146-312.

6 In 2 Kings: 6: 20, Michal reproves her husband for uncovering himself before the servants of his servants in celebrating God.
Her agitation is set off against the calmness “benigno e mite” (102) of her husband who refuses to take action against “quei che ci ama” (105). She is not too angry to use her feminine wiles: in her allusion to the grandeur of Athens and of her husband’s office there is both arrogance and flattery. In order that he may more strongly feel the outrage visited upon them, she reminds him that he is sire of a city over whose name the gods Poseidon and Athena contended, and that by retaliation he would avenge his own honor as well as that of their daughter. She is explicit in her representation of the embrace, unlike her husband who refers to it only as an expression of love. Contrasted with his gentleness, the anger in her words emerges more spiteful and virulent; his reticence makes her directness appear shrewish. But Dante does not pause to consider those characteristics or inveigh against them.

It is rather in the case of contemporaries or near-contemporaries that Dante satirizes the traits in a wife which move a husband toward evil. Men of his time and place less often command the stature and self-discipline of historical and legendary figures. Iacopo Rusticucci, pointing out the other sodomites in the Inferno (Inf. 16: 36-42) assures the pilgrim that in his case “la fiera moglie piú ch’ altro mi nuoce” (45), implying that his fall into vice was a consequence of her effect upon him.

All the men in this group are valued by Dante. He refers to them as degni (Inf. 6: 79) and speaks of “li altri ch’a ben far puoser li ’ngegni” (81), in praise of their civic virtues. Virgil has warned the pilgrim to be courteous to them as they approach (Inf. 16: 15-18). Having heard the recital of Rusticucci, he would be moved to throw himself into their midst but for fear (46-47) of the fire.
Their condition fills the pilgrim not with scorn but with grief at the thought of what these men represented in virtue during their lives (58-60). There seems to be a strong connection between pride and arrogance on the one hand and sexuality on the other; both containing a similar degree of self-assertion. In determining the fate of souls belonging to the Christian centuries Dante exhibits standards far more rigorous than those he applies to his Old Testament and pagan figures. An instance of this increase in moral requirements concerns the second marriage of widows, a subject that was treated with alternating rigor and contempt by the Church. However gently Dante may touch upon this matter, the attitude expressed by his repentant souls places great importance on the fidelity of the surviving wife to her dead husband.

The souls of two men in Purgatory beg Dante for his prayers but explicitly disclaim the remembrance of their widows. The first of these is Buonconte da Montefeltro (Purg. 5: 85-110), who died with the name of Mary on his lips.

Giovanna o altri non ha di me cura
per ch'io vo tra costor con bassa fronte.

(89-90)

Buonconte gives only the name of Giovanna among those who have forgotten him. Probably he is alluding to the redeeming prayers which are not forthcoming; it seems likely also that his widow has forgotten him in favor of another husband.

In the valley of princes the pilgrim encounters Nino Visconti, who asks him to call upon his daughter for her prayers.

Non credo che la sua madre piú m'amí,
poscia che trasmutò le bianche bende,
le quai conviene 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.

(Purg. 8: 73-78) 7

7 The fifteenth novella of Sacchetti tells of Beatrice, daughter of Obizzo II d'Este (Inf. 12: 111) and widow of Nino Visconti, who died in 1296;
Dante’s satirical words on woman’s weakness and physicality might find a place in the continuing trend of Ovidian satire on “the way to a woman’s heart.” Their message could be shared alike by author and audience in a time when remarriage was barely tolerated. The bianche bende which Beatrice removed when she married again do not indicate widow’s mourning as much as the renewed chastity that should have been her virtue. They are like the sacre bende of the nun taken from Costanza when she was forced to marry (Par. 3: 113-14).

A particular degree of avidity is attributed to women, based simultaneously on physical snobbery and on the exaggeration of women’s powers, making them the object of explicit and biting satire. “Rebellion and acceptance, satire and defense, can be organically joined to one another if we consider the criteria women were judged on: based on the negation of human and feminine rights and needs.” 8 Often the satirical attack extends from the accusation of unbridled lust to that of an all-devouring hunger, a multiform cupidity that grows from one desire to the next. It is only a few steps from the words given to Nino Visconti to Forese Donati’s indictment of modern Florentine women:

Quai barbare fuor mai, quai saracine,
cui bisognasse, per 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 avrien le bocche aperte;

(Purg. 23: 103-8)

in which he imagines the women with their mouths twisted into the howl expressive of their bestial condition.

Their vanity is of the same origin as the greed that persuaded Euriphile to betray her husband for the payment of a trinket.

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8 F. L. Utley, The Crooked Rib (Columbus, Ohio, 1944), p. 16.
Mostrava ancor lo duro pavimento
come Almeon a sua madre fe caro
parer lo sventurato ornamento.

(Purg. 12: 49-51)

The example is one of a pagan woman. Her crime is not stressed dramatically and both her betrayal of her husband's hiding place and her subsequent death by the avenging hand of her son are made to depend upon the *ornamento*. But no such reserve is evident in the case of Florentine women by contrast with whom only one virtuous woman is named. Forese Donati speaks tenderly of his widow, unique in virtue among all her feminine compatriots. Her prayers have delivered Forese from the Antipurgatory of the negligent earlier than the otherwise scheduled time. She alone has demonstrated genuine wifely loyalty:

Ond'elli a me: "Si tosto m'ha condotto
a ber lo dolce assenzio de' martiri
la Nella mia: con suo pianger dirotto,
con suoi prieghi devoti e con sospiri
tratto m'ha de la costa ove s'aspetta,
eas liberato m'ha de li altri giri.
Tanto e a Dio piu cara e piu diletta
la vedovella mia, che molto amai,
quanto in bene operare e piu soletta."

(Purg. 23: 85-93)

We discern in the sobs and sighs a particular devotion both to God and to her husband. In the diminutive *vedovella* modesty makes Nella seem to shrink physically but gives her a significance approaching that of a purely allegorical figure. Piety, humility, chastity, suffering—these attributes divest her of a physical presence and surround her with an attenuated light. It is implied that her self-sacrifice as well as her prayers have spared her husband the longer period of waiting and that her fidelity to Forese after his death contributes as much toward his salvation as do her prayers.

It has been suggested many times that by eulogizing Nella Donati, Dante compensated for the ribaldry of his jests about her and about Forese himself in his part of the *tenzone* of sonnets.
exchanged during their friendship. In the lines dealing with Nella in the *Comedy* there may remain the familiarity of a friendship or the remorse of a renewed sense of death. To the “mal fatata moglie di Bicci vocato Forese” (*Rime* 73) Dante now addresses the assurance that her husband truly loved her in life.

Whether it was Dante’s intention to purify Forese of a carnality which during his life may have induced him to misbehave toward his wife is not certain. His exaltation of the purity of this woman, however, certainly offsets his condemnation of other women. Of all the widows Nella alone is named. The words that seem to pass gently over her memory become whips and goads in the very physical representation of the Florentines that follows.

In the “good” wife whose example Dante represents as almost unique among Florentine women, one perceives the same willingness to suffer and endure, to suppress the demands of the self, and to subordinate that self to a husband as a saintly man might toward God.

Dentro alle sue figure muliebri udiamo fremere la sua voce per lo più di protesta o contro alla barbarie delle costumanze sociali, o la tirannide de le corti, o la violenza dei cittadini che la libertà hanno tramutata in licenza. In tal guisa idealizza il poeta la realtà obiettiva....

The woman who achieves this ideal in the *Comedy* is usually unique among her compatriots.

When the pilgrim, about to leave the presence of the former Pope Adrian V (*Purg.* 14: 97), has inquired of him whether he might speak for him in the world of the living, Adrian asks for nothing; but a sudden memory seems to bring him into the evocation of a niece, Alagia. He suggests a solitary vision of purity in a hard environment,

\[\text{buona da sè, pur che la nostra casa non faccia lei per esempio malvagia.} \]

\[(\text{Purg. 14: 143-44})\]

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The carnality of sin that surrounds Nella Donati without touching her is powerless. The images of both women, remembered as flowers of goodness and purity, are balanced by carnal, turbid scenes of feminine lust and greed. The canto that guides the pilgrim through the purifying experiences of the meeting with Adrian is the one that begins with the dream of the *femmina balba* (19: 7-33).

The chastity and unselfishness of good wives are often coupled with the profligacy and ruthlessness of their husbands. Perhaps because such women occur rarely and their appearances in the *Comedy* are brief and suffused with shadow and uncertainty, the power of suffering increases. The very lack of detail and development serves to heighten their disembodiment from the material carnal world. Their strength—a fragile meekness which is that of the young girl as well as of the woman—lies in silent resistance to corporeal impulses on the part of others or themselves. Indeed, these feminine figures scarcely seem cognizant of the constant demands made upon them in their earthly lives. They preserve a detachment from evil which might almost betoken ignorance of its existence. Though it is clear that they cannot resist violence, they are able with apparent singleness of mind to pardon it. The inner conflict that might precede forgiveness is never disclosed. We are in the presence of a passive heroism that would remain untouched, however the actual fate of the woman turned. She ends her life, in that sense, much as she begins it. Very little learning by experience takes place during her life; it is during the ascent toward Paradise that the woman grows in knowledge and understanding. Nor does she ever lose the emotional innocence that marked her life on earth or break the tie that bound her to that life.

From birth to death the names of two places, Siena and Maremma, mark the course of Pia’s life (*Purg.* 5: 130-36). Her speech is a kind of spoken silence, veiling far more than it reveals. Her tone is unerringly gentle. Rumors claimed that she had been unfaithful to her husband or that he discarded her in order to marry a rich and beautiful second wife. Even her identity has not been ascertained; “Siena mi fè; disfecemi Maremma” (134). In any case, the identity of the agent of her undoing is never revealed,
nor does any cry of protest escape her lips. She appears scarcely to hope that the voyager may take notice of her, but her delicate consideration for him penetrates through the mystery that continues to surround her.

Deh, quando tu sarai tornato al mondo
e riposato de la lunga via
......
ricorditi di me....

(1: 130-31, 133)

Before asking anything of him, however briefly, she thinks of the traveler's weariness on his long journey. Indeed, she is in a position to understand intimately whatever there might be of confusion, desperation, resignation, and solitude.

She represents her own destruction as if it had been generated by unknown forces in the midst of an unbroken isolation. Her husband is still only the indeterminate figure who once declared to take and keep her and gave her the ring of promise. The blind violence that accompanied her husband's crime disappears in Pia's words; he is only one who made a promise and pledged himself with the bestowal of the ring. His active part in the drama that may well have comprised the most terrifying of human experiences receives the merest of allusions.

In the time of Dante the breaking of a similar bond could instigate far-reaching family feuds. In fact it was a ruptured betrothal that brought about the murder of Buondelmonte and pitched Florence into a hundred years of dissension between Whites and Blacks (Par. 16: 140-41). In some cases the ring pledged two persons long before the contracting stage of marriage. Pia's innocent remembrance of the breaking of the promise is all the pilgrim hears of her husband. Her modesty in veiling the crime is maidenly. What we see is the destruction, as if self-imposed, of a delicate creature. She never commands perception of whatever anguish, despair, or tears attended her death. Her words at the end of the canto, leaving only a tenuous echo of her presence, could best be spoken with downcast eyes.

The gentle solicitude she shows the pilgrim is the same as that of the princess of chivalric romance. No harsh fact can
invade the precincts of her gentle speech or lengthen it into a tirade. Pia is a helpless victim, one who possibly was unable to be other than virtuous; but in Purgatory her virtue is a matter of choice, and her physical helplessness enhances her ideal femininity. Like many characters in the Comedy she is not remembered chiefly through her position in the universal hierarchy, for she speaks not as one who ultimately made her peace with God but as one who was violently and unjustly slain. Her helplessness in her plight invites the defense of the chivalrously minded man no less than does her gentle speech. The reader senses the reality (removed from the present by the choice of words allotted to her) of continued violence determining Pia's fate and of her solitary struggle. Even as one who was acted upon and did not act herself, she veils the crime committed against her. It would be unseemly to name the aggression and the aggressor: unseemly in a soul undergoing purification and particularly in that of a dutiful wife and a perfect lady. Her allusions to her earthly existence bear much of the quality of the princess imprisoned in a tower. We suppose that the actuality of her story supports the image of a noble lady languishing slowly in the captivity of an evil lord, succumbing to encroaching melancholy and to the darkness and vapors of her surroundings. She seems scarcely a part of the burgeoning town life that was so much a part of Dante's background, but rather a survival of the manorial, autocratically ruled castle. However, events not dissimilar to these occurred rather frequently in contemporary life in the feudal domains that were still very much in existence, as well as among the newly rich who traded in wives.

Pia's nobility is demonstrated by the differences between her and the "new woman" of Dante's day in Florence. The speech of Francesca (Inf. 5: 88-110) is strangely more like hers than like that of any other woman. Francesca, herself noble, greets the pilgrim with similar delicacy and comparable reticence. In their courtesy they are both part of the waning number of

\[
\text{le donne e i cavalier, li affanni e li agi,} \\
\text{che 'nvogliava amore e cortesia} \\
\text{là dove i cuor son fatti si malgavi. . . .}
\]

(Purg. 14: 109-11)
This nobility, pervading every aspect of Pia’s speech and manners, protects her modesty, which is in every sense comparable to that of a young girl. If she does not speak of the events leading to her death, it may be out of a lack of full comprehension of their import. Her reaction appears in a controlled sense of outrage, broken promise, and betrayed trust. Moreover, no other aspect of her marriage appears to have affected her, as if she had passed innocently and helplessly through the corrupt hands which destroyed her without becoming in the least altered. This quality is nurtured by a sheltered existence, at once that of a noblewoman and of a maiden whose bewilderment at contradictory violence and covetousness remains alive to the very last.

Martia, among the souls of the noble pagans (Inf. 4: 128), similarly retains in Limbo the qualities of gentleness and chastity that were her own on earth and marked her loyalty to her husband, Cato, now the guardian of Purgatory (Purg. 1). Before Cato, Virgil requests permission to enter his domain, pleading his own and his pupil’s cause. He invokes the name of Cato’s wife by way of appeal to his humanity, telling him that he comes from the region

\[
\text{.... ove son li occhi casti} \\
\text{di Marzia tua, che 'n vista ancor ti piega,} \\
\text{o santo petto, che per tua la tegni:} \\
\text{per lo suo amore adunque a noi ti piega.} \\
\text{(Purg. 1: 78-81)}
\]

Martia is pictured by only one detail, her chaste glance in which is concentrated the purity of her soul. Her attitude still expresses the silent plea that Cato keep her as his wife; Dante’s repetition of \textit{tua} emphasizes Virgil’s effort to influence Cato with the aid of human sentiment. He promises to bring Martia word of Cato upon his return to Limbo, then hesitates in awe and reverence for the figure before him: \textit{Se d’esser mentovato là giù degni.} (Purg. 1: 1.84). His doubt prepares the way for Cato’s answer.

\begin{quote}
“Marzia piacque tanto a li occhi miei \\
mentre ch’i’ fu’ di là” diss’elli allora, \\
“che quante grazie volse da me, fei.”
\end{quote}
This inflexibly reaffirms the barrier between the realm he guards and the one where Martia, now no longer his wife, dwells. By describing his former relationship to Martia as loving and benevolent, Dante makes it clear that the separation was not caused by some particular displeasure on the part of Cato or some lack on the part of his wife. Because his detachment from her is natural, it determines his attitude toward her. She dwells beyond the river Acheron by that law which definitively separated the souls in the Inferno from those destined for salvation when Christ descended into Limbo (Inf. 4: 63). Dante has Cato pause for a moment, reflecting upon the name of Martia, seeming to give way to memories that he attaches to her. But Cato speaks of his marriage the better to transcend it. The repeated words “di là,” beyond the realm he now guards, become decisive.

As a woman, even a model one exhibiting every virtue of chastity, humility, and unflagging loyalty, Martia no longer bears any influence over the man who was her husband.

Ma se donna del ciel ti move e regge,
come tu di’, non c’è mestier lusinghe:
bastisi ben che per lei mi richegge.

(\textit{Purg. 1: 91-93})

Beatrice, the Lady of Heaven, replaces Martia in Cato’s thoughts: he speaks now in austere tones and returns to his sacred office. Distant in time and sanctified in the eyes of his interlocutors, the solemn majesty of Cato suggests the continuity in a paternal line of such men throughout human history.

Married love is at best the “debito amore” (Inf. 26: 95) that husband and wife owe to each other according to the social order determined for the good of mankind. In the case of Ulysses (94-99) it is contrasted with the irresistible impulse toward knowledge and adventure whose strength far overcomes this and all other
family affections. Married love is not the first of these; the attachments to his son and to his father precede it. Life seen in its aspect of “picciola vigilia / de’ nostri sensi” (114-15) is at odds with the regularity and calm of a good marriage. The words seem to challenge every virtue and attraction of domestic life. Ulysses contrasts the heightening of experience and consciousness of the unlimited pursuit of knowledge with the tranquillity that fosters married life. He enjoins his men not to “negar l’esperienza / di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente” (116-17), alluding to the opposite hemisphere which is generally believed to be uninhabited and is thus seen in contrast with the known world of social obligations.

This presentation of Ulysses has given rise to speculation that the passage is of directly autobiographical origin. Boccaccio, first stating that Dante’s own marriage was urged upon him by friends and relatives to distract him from grief at the loss of Beatrice, later goes on to speak of Dante’s exceptional fortitude at the separation from his family in exile. On the other hand, later Dante scholars suggest that when Cacciaguida (Par. 27) foresees Dante’s exile he includes the poet’s wife in “ogni cosa diletta più caramente.”

The departure of so many actual wives from the ideal seems to account in great measure for the fact that the soul of Nino Visconti in Purgatory, asking for remembrance on earth, claims that of his daughters rather than of his widow. Nino enjoins the pilgrim

$$\text{Di a Giovanna mia che per me chiami}$$
$$\text{là dove a li ’nocenti si risponde.}$$

(Purg. 8: 71-72)

11 There is no reason to assume that Ulysses is expressing the attitude of the ancient world toward love. Dante translates many classical figures into contemporary language.


13 Among these is Edmund Gardner, in Dante’s Ten Heavens: A Study of the Paradiso (Westminster, 1898), pp. 55-56.
She is still his by election and representative of the virtue lacking in her mother. Her piety is strong enough to be his sole comfort during the long purification of his soul.

Lavinia is a daughter who combines devotion with the personal virtue of chastity (Purg. 17: 34-39). She is contrasted with her mother, Amata, who exemplifies anger rather than grief over the supposed death of Turnus (altrui).  

Ancisa t’hai per non perder Lavina:  
or m’hai perduta! Io son essa che lutto,  
madre, a la tua pria ch’a l’altrui ruina,  

(Purg. 17: 37-39)

When her chastity cannot be assured, Dante’s tone with reference to a young woman may be changeable or ambivalent. In two allusions to Ariadne, he refers to her first as the sister of the Minotaur (Inf. 12: 20) who led Theseus to kill the monster, then more gently as la figliuola di Minoi and a constellation in heaven “allor che senti di morte il gelo” (Par. 12: 13-15).

The soul of Manfred 15 is saved by Dante and guided to the way of redemption in Purgatory (Purg. 3: 112-20). Manfred is eager to speed his way with the aid of prayers in his favor. He prevails upon the pilgrim to speak the truth about him on earth, particularly to his daughter Costanza, if it is believed that he is damned (117). He first calls her genitrice de l’onor di Cicilia e d’Aragona as the Mother of two kings, Frederick II of Sicily and Giacomo II of Aragon. Her beauty (115) seems to consist partly in her noble function. But, when Manfred repeats his request, at the end of his words in a more intimate tone he speaks only of her goodness (143), referring to its inner beauty. He is eager for her prayers (145) but also anxious that she be assured that he is among the hopeful awaiting salvation. In her own innocence she will be consoled, knowing how and where the pilgrim has

14 Amata, mother of Lavinia who was promised to Turnus, believing Turnus slain by Aeneas, hanged herself so that she might not see Lavinia married to Aeneas. Virgil, Aeneid, in P. Vergili Maronis Opera, ed. A. Sedgwick (Cambridge, Mass., 1914-1934), 12: 1595.

15 Manfred, king of Naples and Sicily (1258-1266), was excommunicated by the Church.
seen him (143-44). The brief evocation of this royal daughter presents an image of devotion and purity which recurs again and again when the souls of men ask for the remembrance of their closest intimates.

All that Dante writes of the maidenly ideal, which appears as a fixed star in the order of blessedness, can be reduced to a general type. What appears to interest him more than the definition of individual traits is the care and protection of this type. Compassion runs freely when a virtuous maiden meets with violence, concupiscence, or any other sort of harm. By the very helplessness and vulnerability of this kind of woman, even biblical and classical figures in the moment of their appearance acquire a brooding pathos characteristic of medieval thought.

Ismene, Antigone’s sister who first witnessed the misfortune and death of her family, is distinguished in the catalog of characters from the poetry of Statius (Purg. 22: 109-14), “si trista come fue” (111). Paradise offers two examples, one biblical and one classical, of virgins sacrificed through the excessive or thoughtlessly impulsive sacrificial vows of their fathers. Dante speaks through Beatrice in the vehement tones of Jephthah. In a vow surely unacceptable to God, Jephthah has promised Him, if he triumphed in battle, the first thing that comes out of his house. This turns out to be his daughter (Par. 5: 66-68). Equally “stolto” was Agamemnon king of the Greeks, who vowed to Artemis, in exchange for winds favorable to his departure against the Trojans, the most beautiful being born in his realm that year, “onde pianse Ifigenia il suo bel volto” (69).

Among the fraudulent—those who most gravely degraded humanity—Dante locates in Malebolge the deceivers of woman: the seducers of virgins and those who corrupted them for material profit. Jason, who still retains his aspetto reale, is represented first as the leader of the Argonauts to the conquest of the Golden Fleece, whose grandeur manifests itself both in his physical appearance and in his moral fortitude under punishment: “Per dolor non par lagrima spanda” (84). But his place in the Inferno is with all those who deceived women for their own enjoyment (97), and following the poetic description of his attributes, he is detached from them entirely.
WIVES AND VIRGINS

Both the lovestruck attitudes suggested by Dante’s “segni e parole ornate” and the direct account of what followed vividly contradict the earlier image of majesty and magnanimity. Dante’s generalized, brief description of the victim Hypsiphile emphasizes the universality of her plight, all the more as she is contrasted with the “ardite femmine spietate” (89), whose destructiveness was concurrent with Jason’s arrival. Her image eclipses that of Medea, subsequently betrayed by Jason.

The modesty required of women may have been largely a protective device against seducers and ruffiani. Dante advises women not to be seen too much in public. In the canzone “Doglia mi reca”:

Disvelato v’ho, donne, in alcun membro
la viltà de la gente che vi mira,
perché l’aggiate in ira.

(Rime 106)

In the canzone, “Poscia ch’amor del tutto m’ha lasciato” (Rime 83), seducers “tutte smorfie e pose” speak “con vocaboli eccellenti,” and “come al furto illadro / così vanno a pigliar villan diletto.”

In the contemptuous reference to “segni e parole ornate” that led the innocent astray, there may be a condemnation not only of the use of such words and manners with a deceptive intention, but of the very language itself; the speech that troubadour poets and romancers gave to aspiring lovers. The double temptation of lust and avarice apparently offered opportunities to sinners of Dante’s time. His contempt for the ruffiani—traffickers in women—concentrates on one of these, Venedico Caccianemico (Inf. 18: 50-57), who is made to accuse himself:
Among the gluttonous in Purgatory (23: 25) we find the story of Erysichthon, who fell into dire hunger and sold his daughter.  

\[
\text{O avarizia, che puoi tu più farne,} \\
\text{poscia c'hai il mio sangue a te si tratto,} \\
\text{che non si cura de la propria carne?}
\]  
\[\text{(Purg. 20: 82-84)}\]

Dante assigns this lament to the soul of Hugh Capet speaking of his descendant, Charles of Anjou (1243-1309), who agreed to the marriage of his young daughter, Beatrice, to Azzo VIII d'Este of Ferrara according to a cynically prepared marriage contract. For the sake of an unwanted marriage, according to Dante, the sacred veil of chastity was taken from the Empress Constance (1154-98). Dante follows the legendary tradition that she became a nun and was forcibly abducted from her cloister to marry Henry VI so that the Southern Italian provinces could be united to the Holy Roman Empire. The violence done her is vividly contrasted with the refuge of the cloister and of the *sacre bende* that protected her, and also with the quiet firmness of her inner resolve: "Non fu dal vel del cor già mai disciolta" (*Par. 3: 117*). Her steadfastness now overcomes the transitory earthly events that forced her out of holy seclusion: she became the mother of Frederick II of Sicily, "del secondo vento di Soave / generò il terzo e l'ultima possanza" (119-20), both winds powerful enough but destined to pass. The highest power, Dante implies, is in herself, her inner disposition to purity.

The typical virginal woman who partakes of the honors of Paradise is Piccarda Donati, the sister of Forese, who speaks to the pilgrim of the various degrees of blessedness (*Par. 3*) and of her own broken vows as well as of Costanza's. Forese, as if in anticipation of the episode in the final *cantica*, praises her triumph in the struggle against worldly evil:

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La mia sorella, che tra bella e buona
non so qual fosse più, triunfa lieta
ne l'alto Olimpo già di sua corona.

(Purg. 24: 13-15)

She is presented here to the pilgrim who inquires about her familiarly (10) as a creature somewhere between the human and the angelic, a brief vision encircled by her aureole of light. Forese might have experienced some satisfaction that someone of his house achieved Paradise. Her beauty and her goodness derive from the same source. They fuse together inseparably and mirror one another.

Continuing the mirror-image of her virtues, Piccarda rises among the blessed souls to the pilgrim's vision in Paradise

Quali per vetri trasparenti e tersi,
o ver per acque nitide e tranquille,
non si profonde che i fondi sien persi,
tornan di nostri visi le postille
debili si, che perla in bianca fronte
non vien men tosto a le nostre pupille.

(Par. 3: 10-15)

Diaphanous, translucent, but not entirely distinct, her presence appears to the eye as delicately as the white of pearls on the whiteness of a brow. She is of those souls whose sacred vows in life were broken. The indistinct oscillation of the image of her spirit signifies the mutability of imperfect human resolution. Paradise in its immateriality is concretely rendered by a disintegration of matter into light. In the case of Piccarda its delicate fluctuations attenuate its strength and confer movement upon a scene that would otherwise denote the immobility of perfect resolve. The glass and the waters are taken from the concrete world. They become tenuous and incorporeal, part of the calm transparency of heaven, the background of a complete fusion of disembodied souls with their Creator. Beatrice has to assure the pilgrim that these are "vere sustanze" (28), real beings. He is still overcome after Piccarda identifies herself:
WOMAN EARTHLY AND DIVINE IN THE “COMEDY” OF DANTE

Ond’io a lei: “Ne’ mirabili aspetti
vostri risplende non so che divino
che vi trasmuta da’ primi concetti....” 17

(58-60)

Her eagerness to speak to the pilgrim (34-35) may be all the stronger because she was acquainted with him in the world and trusts that he will understand the tribulations of her earthly life. But her transfiguration is so complete that what was formerly physical and moral suffering is now a coefficient of her glory. Speaking of herself and remembering her mortal life, she attenuates its shocks and indignities by modest circumlocutions. In the charity that made her turn to the single love of God, she finds an excuse even for those whose cruelty resulted in her pain and death, “Uomini.... a mal pili ch’a bene usi” (106). She does not describe any specific person or detail, but her words return constantly to God: “Iddio si sa qual poi mia vita fusi” (108).

Dante merely alludes to the long illness Piccarda suffered before her death, but notably praises her beauty. She expresses herself with a gaiety applicable to earthly loves:

E se la mente tua ben sè riguarda,
non mi ti celerà l’esser più bella.

(47-48)

But the beauty of woman in the Comedy is a reflection of her inner state. In comparison to Francesca, whose beauty was taken away when her physical being was destroyed, we see that Piccarda is more beautiful than she had ever been on earth. This splendor has already been praised in that part of Purgatory where sins of the flesh are repented. The aim of Francesca’s love was physical delight; its incentive was physical beauty; Piccarda’s love grows from charity (43-44) and its fulfillment is in God. Francesca’s motive was self oriented; Piccarda’s, to transcend her self in conformity to His superior will,

17 According to early commentators Piccarda had been promised by her brothers to Rossellino della Tosa. The Ottimo Commento (2, p. 447) claims that she fled to the monastery of the Clarisses of Monticelli in order to avoid this marriage, and that her brother Corso took her by force and gave her into the hands of her husband.
perchè fino al morir si vegghi e dorma
con quello sposo ch’ogni voto accetta
che caritate a suo piacer conforma.

(100-102)

This is the common language of earthly love, and of the Church Fathers which Dante uses, influenced partly by the terms of Franciscan devotion. Others whose divine expression borrows from courtly forms are Saint Francis himself (Par. 11), Saint Bernard (11), and Saint Dominic (12: 55-56). Piccarda seems to participate in their glory all the more on account of her words, which contain the fervor and the elegance of rarefied human love.

Evident in Paccarda’s narrative is the background of a turbulent, even threatening, world that she fled in order to make the will of God her cloister. “E’n la sua volontade è nostra pace” (85). She is assigned the task of making it clear to the pilgrim that ambition, discontent, and avidity, even for a higher place in the sacred hierarchy, have no place in Paradise (70-87). In the earthly realm, withdrawal to a superior tranquility is an impulse of aristocratic feeling.

The virtue of humility triumphs further as we ascend in Paradise. Piccarda alludes to a lady whose “perfetta vita ed alto merto” (Par. 3: 97-102) confer upon her a higher place. While Saint Francis, whose devotion she followed, is lyrically depicted as the true lover of lady Poverty (Par. 11), Saint Clare does not speak of love at all, nor does the pilgrim pause long to contemplate her spirit.

The near-saintly figures of biblical women occupy places in the mystic rose by virtue of the bond they form between the Old and New Testaments (Par. 32: 7-12). They constitute a group, devoid of individuality or movement.\(^\text{18}\) No allusion to the deeds

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\(^{18}\) Sarah, from whom sprang those whom Dante believes to be the children of promise, is also a figure of the Church. Rebecca, through her marriage to Isaac, is a type of the Church in its mystic union with Christ. She stands near Judith, who is the deliverer of her people, thus similar to Mary and a type of Church Militant. As a member of a foreign nation who married an Israelite, Ruth is also a figure of the Church come from the Gentiles to Christ.
of these women breaks the status of the group, each figure sublimating her glory into the collective blessedness.

During her mortal life, Piccarda sought escape from all that was a part of cupidity and strife; now one of her rewards is the transfiguration of her beauty, no longer accessible to human appetite. Libidinous desire, which seems to demean to some degree whatever object it chooses, cannot aspire to her. Connected with it are all the impulses that degrade humanity. On earth the dolce chiostra separated her from worldly struggle and protected her wish for renunciation, and the nun’s habit shielded her from men’s eyes. Dante affirms that, throughout whatever troubles followed her abduction from the cloister, she retained the spiritual candor as well as the fragility of an ideal maiden. 19

Having finished her discourse, Piccarda begins to sing and “cantando vano come per acqua cupa cosa grave” (122-23). The awareness of gravity intrudes upon the miraculous weightlessness of Piccarda’s apparition as if to suggest the burden of her worldly condition, perhaps specifically the brief period she was Rosselino della Tosa’s wife. The pilgrim’s eyes follow her gradual disappearance as if she were a heavy object in deep water. This image replaces the melting of light into a greater luminosity, which Piccarda’s spirit actually represents and somewhat mars the ethereal clarity of her Ave Maria. The noble impulse to leave this world for one of greater peace and to deny the weight of social duty in favor of spiritualized devotion arises from the same fragility that made Piccarda helpless before worldly power. “Cupa” and “grave” remind us now of that power. At the close of the canto Dante turns again to Beatrice “segno di maggior disio” (126), whose role in the Comedy does not include trial by violence. Her light shines with an intensity that is almost unbearable (128-29), the glory of pure unchallenged will.

19 In the heaven of good but inconstant will, Dante presents only feminine spirits prevented from completing their vows by external violence. Charles Grandgent in The Power of Dante (Boston, 1918), p. 44, calls them “gentle, well-meaning creatures who lack the clean-cut vigor of those men and women whose spiritual sight is clearest,” and refers to Piccarda as “feeble” and “indeterminate.” However, Dante emphasizes the power of the forces that turned her back to the world against all resistance.
In the good maidens and wives represented in the *Comedy*, their earthly virtues unchanged, it is true that strength of will cannot be called an outstanding quality. But helplessness acquires a cherished quality not unlike virtue in the case of these women. It is often a natural coefficient of self-effacement and humility and a natural contrast to the prevailing audacity and violence: it may excuse the sexuality that cannot be denied as a concession to social necessity and human frailty. A victim of violence is the reverse of the wooing lady striving to satisfy her own demands.

Dante's portrayals of wives and maidens usually call attention to contemporary events and practices. His account of the Florentine women of his day is topical, reflecting the development of a dynamic municipal life and the waning of the feudal domain, the rise of the "gente nuova" and the approaching fall of an order that in spite of its faults offered stability and security to all who were subject to it. Forese's diatribe against Florentine women (*Purg.* 23: 94-108) connects their transgressions with future disaster in store for Florence (106-8), as if their unseemly customs could bring God's wrath to bear on all the Florentine people. Censure of the ostentatious and brazen women Dante sees everywhere in Florence is directed largely against the economic and political conditions that permit the profanation of noble ideals. As clearly as Piccarda belongs to an aristocratic ideal of woman, the newly created bourgeoisie compares unfavorably to her or to the Provençal chatelaine already legendary in Dante's time. Though no general social upheaval threatened to overturn male prerogatives, women over a broad range of classes had new opportunities to be seen and heard.

Undoubtedly the increase in class mobility gave rise to some uncertainty about woman's exact position and the behavior expected of her. For example, the aggregation of persons within the walls of Florence brought men and women into closer contact with one another; the secluded chatelaine no longer dominated the picture of domestic existence. Dante describes the "trionfo" of Beatrice in Purgatory with a minuteness which recalls that

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20 For a detailed discussion of such ladies, see Francesco Torraca, *Le donne italiane nella poesia provenzale* (Florence, 1901).
such processions did take place in his day.\(^\text{21}\) The ladies of Dante’s city lived more in public; his own idea of incorporating them into the prose narrative of the *Vita Nuova* derives as much from the new force of ladies in practical life as it does from the procedures of the courts of love. The place of woman is still in the home, but she is something more than a domestic drudge or a mere theme for rimes.

Dante’s evocation of a golden age in the history of Florence gives a picture of how he regarded the new social trends that offered so many opportunities for excess and disorder. In the time of his ancestor Cacciaguida,

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Non faceva, nascendo, ancor paura} \\
\text{la figlia al padre; che ’l tempo e la dote} \\
\text{non fuggien quinci e quindi la misura.}
\end{align*}\]

\[(Par. 15: 103-5)\]

He looks to a time when girls were not married before the appropriate age and did not require dowries exceeding a reasonable amount. In that ideal city the alliance of greed and lust did not threaten the social order.

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Non avea case di famiglia vote;} \\
\text{non v’era giunto ancor Sardanapalo} \\
\text{a mostrar ciò che ’n camera si puote.}
\end{align*}\]

\[(106-8)\]

Dante probably alludes here to the vice of lust that deflects conjugal relations from the sole purpose of procreation.

\(^{21}\) Gertrude Leigh, in *The Passing of Beatrice* (London, 1932), p. 34, includes in her argument that Beatrice could not have been a real woman since Dante could never have come face to face with her: “The City of Flowers was in truth in the thirteenth century no place for sentimental dalliance. The age had little respect for women, and outside the closely guarded precincts of their home none were safe from outrage. The wives and mothers of the most noble princes had been the prizes of the highest bidder. Daughters were at the absolute disposal of their legal guardians. To offer the tribute of open admiration to an unmarried maiden was to arouse suspicion of her virtue, an insult only to be wiped out with blood.” Chronicles and Dante’s own accounts of Florentine life, however, indicate that supervision of the wife or daughter of a city dweller could hardly compare with that imposed on the feudal chatelaine.
Not of least importance regarding Dante’s view of contemporary mores is the fact that he himself belonged to a class which felt the weight of changing laws. Born of a family of grandi of the city, he grew up amidst legal difficulties and strife against the communal government, and his own condition was characterized by a lack of stability and tenure. It is possible that as “submerged or emerging groups cling hard to what they know and fear that they may be the victims of a change in the social frame,” 22 Dante, as a member of the minor urban nobility submerged on the one hand by the more powerful and emerging in another sense as a new class, took part in opposition to the new classes.

“One constant form of accusation” against their rise “is that against the bourgeois wife, who threatened the framework of society by aping her betters.” 23 Andreas Capellanus had stated long before that courtly love was not for women of the middle class. In Dante’s time bourgeois versifiers such as Cecco Angiolieri, who vehemently complains of his wife’s shrewishness, testify to the commonly satirical bent of middle-class poets in reference to their own women. “La cittadinanza ch’è or mista” (Par. 16: 49), the city whose boundaries were extended time and again in order to include new arrivals from the surrounding territories of the contado, now housed a class of persons whose status was decided entirely on the basis of capital. Value had been regarded as a substantial quality, inherent in the commodity and fixed once and for all. Now that economic activity had become increasingly commercialized, the morally indifferent character of value was apparent. Donna Berta and Ser Martino (Par. 13: 139-41) are the names which apply to common types of husband and wife who, Dante warns, must not believe in their ignorance and presumptuousness that they can see “dentro al consiglio divino” (141). And it is with pride in the noble ancestry he claims for himself that Dante speaks through Cacciaguida of the noble virtues he claims for ancient Florence.

22 Utley, The Crooked Rib, p. 16.
23 Ibid., p. 17.
Throughout the *Comedy* the pilgrim has deferred to signs of aristocratic descent and to the august presences of kings. The seducer Jason is depicted in his “aspetto reale” (*Inf.* 18: 85). The pilgrim speaks humbly to Manfred (*Purg.* 3: 109-10) because he is of the “anime degne” (100), but also because he reflects the majesty of the imperial house. The beauty of his daughter Costanza is that of the mother of the honor of Sicily and Aragon (3: 115-16). The *splendor* that is the soul of the *gran Costanza* in Paradise surrounds both the saintly woman and the empress with “tutto il lume de la spera nostra” (*Par.* 3: 108-9). Justinian appears in the double light of blessedness and imperial dignity (*Par.* 7: 6). This second light is what distinguishes Justinian from the other souls around him.

The Paradiso is an “impero giustissimo e pio.” A close analogy between the earthly and the celestial realms is illustrated by frequent references to Rome. The holy court of the Paradiso resembles a curia whose *legato* is the Archangel Gabriel who came to Mary from the “senato celestiale.” The Virgin Mary is pictured as the Empress of heaven and is called “Augusta” (*Par.* 32: 119); the same epithet applied to Henry VII (*Par.* 30: 136-37). Dante appears to see in the saints the universal Church and the universal empire, the two ideals of his religious and political faith. We discern the close association of these ideals with a nobility that is at once intrinsic and dignified by worldly honor, the nobility of classical Rome. He contrasts it with the abjection of his native city, the “trista selva” (*Purg.* 14: 64) that is a micro-cosm of all earthly evil:

\[
\text{io, che al divino da l'umano,}
\text{a l'eterno dal tempo era venuto,}
\text{e di Fiorenza in popol giusto e sano,}
\text{di che stupor dovea esser compiuto!}
\]

(*Par.* 31: 37-40)

Dante’s picture of ancient Florence is that of a perfected social life, a city of God forming a complete antithesis to the *città dolente* which is the Inferno of contemporary Florence. The noble and sanctified city is populated by such austere and upright figures as Bellincion Berti, whose image, clothed in the
WIVES AND VIRGINS 63

most rudimentary “cuoio e osso” (Par. 16: 113), towers above those who conceal themselves under the elaborateness of their dress. He appears thus encased in materialized virtue representative of the most prized qualities in a carefully ordered patriarchal society. Like the Baptistery of Florence, he and Cacciaguida are monuments to the faith which in an indistinct past reigned undisturbed and aided by civic virtue. The women Cacciaguida praises are those ideally suited to be the consorts of such men.

The wife of Bellincion Berti rises from her mirror with an unpainted face (Par. 15: 113-14). Her companions do the same work as their maids. Their beauty lies in modesty, and their power is humility (116-17). Maternity further dignified their womanly functions; they are the first to teach their children the grandeur of their city and to delight in the intimacy and simplicity of home life. Like Ulysses’ Penelope, they are seen doing the domestic task of spinning (117, 124) or caring for their children.

L’una vegghiava a studio de la culla,
   e, consolando, usava l’idioma
   che prima i padri e le madri trastulla.

(121-23)

The use of studio, recalling the Latin studium or zeal, invests the duties of these women with the venerable dignity of antique legend. They become identifiable with the virtuous pagan women in Limbo (Inf. 4: 128) and with the Roman women who were “content with water for their drink” (Purg. 22: 145-46). They resemble the typically virtuous woman of Athens in Pericles’ panegyric.24 Theirs is a kind of nobility clearly distinguished from the aristocratic ladies of Dante’s day; their conversation is of the legends of Rome and Fiesole rather than those of Tristan or Lancelot.

Cacciaguida’s evocation of early Florence has been called a “chanson de geste” of the medieval commune.25 More likely it is a portrayal of a time that never existed. But the passage

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24 Thucydides, De bello peloponnesiaco libri octo, ed. Gottfried Boehme (Leipzig, 1858-1859), 2, 45.
contains the only details Dante gives of wives that, as a group, are acceptable to him. In depicting the ideal woman appropriate to a husband of exemplary moral and civic virtue, Dante did not look to the society either of the commune or of his own day. The eulogy of the early Florentines may be an attempt to fuse the qualities of classical feminine virtue together with a medieval ideal which was not of the city, but of feudal origin.

It is significant that his picture of the ideal wife in the Cacciaguida episode does not include a single instance of interaction between husband and wife. Their separate functions are clearly defined and do not appear to coincide with one another. No reference is made to the state of marriage itself, only a possible implication that family life was calmer when it was centered around procreation. The feeling strongly persists that marriage is rooted in family rather than family in marriage. It is Cacciaguida's duty to reveal to Dante the idealized world of the past as well as of his own future life; these events take their place in the course of patrilinear descent. Under such circumstances, since the care taken to preserve women's chastity falls in proportion with the value set upon chastity by men, those traits that aid in the preservation of chastity form the closest picture of the desirable wife.

The age in which Dante appears to find the nearest perfection of moral and civil life is the beginning of the wane of the feudal system in Italy, a period beginning, roughly, late in the twelfth century and ending approximately at the time of his birth. When Guido del Duca laments the life of Romagna in the past and compares it with the degeneration that is setting in during Dante's time, it is a lament for the ideal exemplified by such women as Pia and Piccarda, who appear consonant with Dante's aesthetic and patrician turn of mind. The persistence of the courtly ideal in Dante's concept of woman extends to the wife as well as to the woman seen as a "good" or "bad" lover—to

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26 Even the saints of his Paradise belong mainly to that age. Among the models of virtue in the Paradiso the poet presents for admiration a secular priest, Sigier, and the saints Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Bernard. Of the four, the last alone had then already been canonized Msgr J. J. Slattery, Dante's Attitude Toward the Church and Clergy of His Times (Philadelphia, 1921), p. 19.
an image comprising delicacy and modesty in appearance and speech. The institutions—the church and the feudal aristocracy—against whose background the ideal was formed live in Dante’s concept of woman as they do elsewhere in his thought. And the models of an age which Dante correctly assesses as fading dominate it.

The triumphant procession in the Terrestrial Paradise moves so slowly “che foran vinte da novelle spose” (Purg. 29: 60). Beatrice, among the Apostles in Paradise, stands apart, “pur come sposa, tacita ed immota” (Par. 24: 111). Elsewhere she turns pale

.... come donna onesta che permane
   di sè sicura e per l’altrui fallanza,
   pur ascoltando, timida si fane.

(Par. 27: 31-34)

Dante alludes to the modest blush of a lady:

E qual è ’l trasmutare in picciol varco
   di tempo in bianca donna, quando il volto
   suo si discarchi di vergogna il carco.

(Par. 28: 64-66)

In the Convivio (Canzone 3, “Amor che nella mente mi ragiona”) Dante likens women and youths in their susceptibility to the laudable feelings of modesty. Allied to the virtues of obedience and grace of body, it causes them to avoid foul and unseemly things. It is this shame that causes Pia and Piccarda to veil the events of their earthly lives and to preserve throughout the quality of maidenhood, prized above all else in wives as well as maidens, rare as it may be in the real world.

The only approved image of active women is furnished by Cacciaguida’s evocation of the mothers of a mythical Florence. The picture of a marriage comprising a loving and communicative relationship is entirely allegorical. It is that of Saint Francis, of his courtship and espousal of Lady Poverty, in which the similes of marriage are applied to a union devoid of precisely those attributes—lust and greed—which characterize human marriage:
poscia di dì in dì l'amò piú forte.

(Par. 11: 63)

La lor concordia e i lor lieti sembianti,
amore e maraviglia e dolce sguardo
facieno esser cagion di pensier santi.

(76-78)

Quando a colui ch'a tanto ben sortillo
piacque di trarlo suso a la mercede
ch'el meritò nel suo farsi pusillo,
a' frati suoi, si com'a giuste rede,
raccomandò la donna sua più cara,
e comandò che l'amassero a fede.

(109-14)

In the Comedy the pictures of young girls and wives are not easily distinguishable from one another. The same qualities appear desirable in both and are only somewhat less scarce in maidens than in women. This view is largely a response to social change, which was not of such a character as to effect the substitution of a monogamous ideal for the warring codes of courtly love, churchly celibacy, and an ethereal avoidance of woman.
CHAPTER III

LOVERS

HEIR TO A PERVERSIVE misogynous tradition that exacted a response from every writer who wrote about women, Dante accepted the fall of man as the fall of woman. In the Terrestrial Paradise he speaks only of the sin of Eve, not of Adam, “colpa di quella ch’al serpente crese” (Purg. 32: 32). It is through her transgression that all mortals, “figliuoli d’Eva,” (Purg. 12: 71) inherit a corrupt nature and mortal body, “quel d’Adamo,” (Purg. 9: 10) which is everywhere hindered in the quest for its lost peace and internal justice (see also Purg. 9: 44-45). ¹ Dante accepts together with a profound sense of loss the tradition fixing the time Adam and Eve spent in Eden at a minimum of six hours (Par. 26: 139-42). The lovely melody that the pilgrim hears announcing the delights of the earthly Paradise reminds him immediately of the cause of its loss:

\[
\text{Femmina sola, e pur testè formata,} \\
\text{non sofferse di star sotto alcun velo.} \\
\text{(Purg. 29: 26-27)}
\]

Dante repeatedly reminds us of Eve’s turning from obedience to God (Purg. 24: 115-16) and her surrender to the temptation which she represents in her own person, “la bella guancia / il

¹ Charles S. Singleton, Journey to Beatrice (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), discusses the use of texts from Genesis to illustrate Adam’s original perfection, the “animal perfezione” to which Saint Thomas Aquinas refers in the Paradiso (13: 83).
The gryphon, who by contrast has taken nothing from the forbidden tree, then reverses the myth of Eve. “Sì si conserva il seme d’ogni giusto” (Purg. 33: 48).

It is not surprising that under the circumstances there can be no happy lovers in the Comedy and that only the transfigured Beatrice is free to lead the pilgrim through the lands of the blessed. The Beatrice of the pilgrim’s conscience reprimands him for having looked upon other women with desire (Purg. 31: 58-60). Her transparent light renders the image of earthly lovers darker and more sinister. She is the promise of life while each of them is to some extent the explanation of how death came into the world. Significantly, it is Beatrice who subsequently expounds the doctrine of Christ’s atonement (Par. 7: 35-120). The Eve-Mary polarity continues in the Comedy, positing woman as the object of desexualized adoration or sinful depravity. Relieved of her sexuality, a woman may elevate man as well as herself and become the bearer of his salvation (Purg. 32: 4-6). Subject to the contingencies of her physical being she becomes the figure of malicious temptation (Purg. 19: 1-21).

The extent to which Dante follows prevailing views on love between man and woman is all the more interesting because of his complexity as a thinker and as a writer. Many female characters in the Comedy are not abstracted from their physical body and human functions. Dante does not directly condemn women or sex in general in the vehement manner of Church fathers or troubadours. Even a casual reader may find in the Comedy instances of timeless insight into human psychology and perceive in its creator a man not divorced from reciprocal communication with women on many levels. The variety and depth of his feminine characterizations could have been produced only by an exceptionally open mind simultaneously enlarging and dissecting its life experience. And while ascetic saints occupy the most prominent places in Paradise, none is praised specifically for his abstinence from female company. We are reminded nevertheless that all the feminine lovers in the Comedy participate to some degree in the Eve aspect of woman, that none of them exercise a beneficent influence over men, and that many of them are examples of
perversion in love. Through their relations with them, men distort the purpose for which they were originally intended, servants of God undivided in their loyalty and brought by their own will and reason into entire unity with Him. The connection between physical and sentimental love of woman on the one hand and the death of will and reason on the other is frequently reaffirmed.

Almost all the feminine lovers in the Comedy are temptresses and aggressors in love by whom men are diverted from productive pursuits or heroic destinies. The pargioletta of Beatrice's scolding, whether a specific woman or a symbol of femininity, weighed down the wings of the penitent and kept his mind grounded: that is, not she herself but the penitent's thoughts of her displaced the corrective influence of the transfigured Beatrice, who sublimes his guilt into an ideal. In order to continue in Beatrice's grace the penitent must be purified of physical desire for any woman. The earthly, human love-impulse accompanying desire is likewise condemnable and its guilt finally transferred to its object, the young girl. Lustful women accordingly outnumber the company of men in the Inferno. While men who lived against nature are shown more leniency in Purgatory, no women are found among the lustful (Purg. 26) who will one day attain Paradise.

The fact that the man on his way through Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise is a projection of Dante's self cannot be overemphasized. Any sermons addressed to Dante were written to be read by others. It is Dante, then, who chides himself and the projection of himself for squandering his vigor on women. The implicit idea that such vigor would be better spent elsewhere is a reflection of the views expressed by the poet whose universe one seeks to interpret.

"The image made by the poet includes an image of himself, though he himself transcends the image. It also includes an image of exterior reality, though not of the whole of reality. It is something more complex than either: an image of the relation between the poet and the exterior reality ... and it must not be identified with either in separation."  

WOMAN EARTHLY AND DIVINE IN THE "COMEDY" OF DANTE

a fictional Dante. His creation contains some elements of autobiography within the framework of a poem describing the possibility of the beatific vision. He reminds the reader of the earth that has been left behind. Only the symbolic pilgrim at the end of his ascent has consumed and extinguished all his worldly desires; Dante himself retains his earthly bonds.

S’io torni mai, lettore, a quel divoto
triunfo per lo quale io piango spesso
le mie peccata e ’l petto mi percuoto....

(Par. 22: 106-8)

Because his symbols keep the colors of reality, they may dazzle the reader into the fallacy expressed by the two gossips of Verona who pointed Dante out as the man who goes down to the Inferno and returns at his pleasure and brings back tidings of those that are below. It requires no mean effort to remember that Dante might have been in council in the Palazzo del Podestà or deputy of the Parte Guelfa at the very moment that his pilgrim scaled the heights of Paradise. He was, in fact, neither a recluse nor a professional theologian. Moreover, the monumental creation of his fantasy is a work of will and of choice organized in accordance with the Christian truth it seeks to teach. “A supremely great man may contain in his nature what has been attained in those prior periods of human development which constitute the past for him. Such a man does not feel and include the past as it was, but as it still is—transformed in the present.... Dante is preeminently the scholastic poet, who apparently sums up an actual past, which ends in him.”

Dante chose from a great many sources and wrote of the life of man in its multiple aspects in the interest of his Catholic faith. The pilgrim lives this full life in the three realms he explores: like his creator, he is “trasmutabile .... per tutte guise” (Par. 5: 99).

Dante’s encounters with sinners and penitents begin and end with the lustful, most of whom are women. The atmosphere they create is imbued with weakness and softness; their downward

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path to Hell is smooth, and their purgation occurs on the brink of spiritual freedom. While the sin of lust is not the one most fearfully punished in the *Comedy*, it is distinguished by its conspicuous position among the others. Dante the pilgrim faints at the end of Francesca’s story. In the last stage of his own expiation he can be brought through the fires of Purgatory only by an appeal to Beatrice, who is a negation of lustful love and whose function it is to return the pilgrim’s aspirations in their entirety to God. It is only as a result of the transcendence of the human self that the pilgrim may come to know the union with God that is his goal. The “asceticism of love” 4 which is necessary to this end forms the basis of Dante’s denial of carnal love in the *Comedy*.

The *trasumanar* spoken of as inexpressible in words is the triumph of the pilgrim’s attainment to Paradise. It is the result of a titanic effort of love that passes by far the point where Beatrice herself stands. For in his progress the pilgrim has become simultaneously stronger in virtue, regaining lost clarity and singleness of intention in relation to God. The joy of this raptness in God is indescribable to those who cannot experience it (*Par.* 10: 147-48). 5

The human soul has three prerogatives: immortality, freedom of will, and likeness to God. In this view there is an unceasing aspiration toward certainty and permanence which creates a constant tension between the specific and the universal. The *Comedy* is a synthesizing work expressive of an ideal order reflecting God’s unchanging will. In order to bring their will to peace under God, human beings strive to master their passions. Dante calls into action the power competent to restrain the progress of passionate sexual involvement, which has no place in a man’s world positing masculine ideals. The presence of desire bespeaks the influence of an external power upon men which destroys singleness of will. It was often feared that in this way the moral life of man, as well as a part of his physical life, would

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5 In the sonnet “Tanto gentile e tanto onesta” (*Vita Nuova* 26), Dante attributes a similar exclusiveness to his experience of Beatrice.
die. “That love which stopped short of God would be in the Christian view no more than lust.” 6 The romantic passion was then equated with lust and condemned by the Church which recognized its power and accurately appraised it as rivaling and contradicting its order. Good love led away from sexual passion and upward toward God; bad love created and increased passion and worshiped its object. Good love did not seek to invade the wholeness and sufficiency of man to himself or of his total worship of God. It promoted fraternity among men and kept women in their places. Bad love was the cause of distraction from God and disunity among His followers; it introduced into the sphere of man’s deepest consciousness the foreign element of woman. Seen as a challenge to man’s sovereign intellect, an angel of good and a devil of evil, she could not be overlooked; her mere presence constituted a threat to male supremacy. On the part of the social forces guiding it, no amount of vigilance was enough. The story of Dante’s poetry is largely that of the effort to resolve the resulting anguish.

The Comedy is an expression of his solution; the fruit of a constructive will abetted by the power of intellect whose re-evaluation of previous doctrines of love depended upon the positing of the origin of love in the rational faculty itself. Dante separated admiration for the beauty of a woman from the desire to possess her; the Vita Nuova defined the joy of love as distinct from lust and possession. As for the lady, she was somewhat less immobile than the dompna exalted by many of the troubadours. But nothing could be further from her approved function than physical desire. Dante’s emphasis in his early work began to fall almost exclusively on the part of the lover; more specifically, on the moral progress resulting from his sublimation of erotic feeling. The lover overcome by desire begins in a state of passion and wrath; the beloved is in a state of meekness, desiring nothing. The Vita Nuova is the story of the gradual development of love from this bewildering tension of inner emotions to the achievement of inner peace by sublimating intellectualization.

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What interests us here is the fact that Dante placed in his Inferno souls who in life had yielded to sexuality; he exalted to the skies the lady of his mind whom he divests of sexuality entirely. Love, including carnal relations to a greater or lesser extent, is defined by him as lust.

El estadio de la evolución sentimental que el representa no puede ser el último. Era preciso ciertamente descubrir la emoción espiritual hacia la mujer que antes no existía. Pero después de haber ascendido hasta ella, hace falta reintegrarla al cuerpo . . . .

With the aid of the disembodied Beatrice, the pilgrim ascends to the purification of lust.

Quinci su vo per non esser più cieco: donna è di sopra che m’acquista grazia.  
(Purg. 26: 58-59)

In support of the angelic lady who determinedly brings the pilgrim into port and through whose intervention his free will is awarded him, there stands a pyramid of more or less unhappy creatures. Their path in life leads away from the patrist goal of light into opposing and fearful darkness. These bad lovers sometimes possess powers approaching magic. Where Beatrice is a sublimation they are a denial of erotic experience. For the most part, like Beatrice, they are expressive of aspirations both Christian and aesthetic. The women lovers in the Comedy closely resemble two types that occur frequently in medieval literature: the helpless victim and the aggressive temptress. For Christian and pagan heroines alike, love ends in tragedy, punishment, or deprivation. They are found side by side; and, though the women of pagan mythology are not exclusively to blame for the ills of men, no lovers have a salutary effect.

In the Middle Ages even classical art was interpreted as moral allegory. Its goal was regarded as the elevation of life rather than the enhancement of it. The connection between the artistic form and extra-artistic purpose resulted in a view of antiquity that

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7 José Ortega y Gasset, *Estudios sobre el amor* (Buenos Aires, 1940), p. 177.
was both empirical and transcendental. The pagan women lovers illustrate (as do those taken from the Christian world) the futility of the love passion. They do, however, receive a somewhat greater degree of sympathy, not being expected to live in accordance with the awareness of a God the knowledge of whom was denied them. Outside the circle of the lustful, Dante evokes more than one unhappy lover with a melancholy that speaks of regret for the inevitable end of love: “Deidamia ancor si duol d’Achille” (Inf. 26: 62). We hear the voice of Echo, all that was not dissolved in her love for Narcissus: “quella vaga / ch’amor consunse come sol vapori” (Par. 12: 14-15), in words that seem to emulate its delicacy and fragility. Folco in the Heaven of Venus compares his greatness in love to that of the unfortunate Phyllis “che delusa / Fu da Demofonte” (Par. 9: 100-101) and of Hercules “quando Iole nel core ebbe rinchiusa” (Par. 9: 101-2). The pilgrim’s reaction to the name of Beatrice is likened to the fatality that moved Pyramus and Thisbe. Here the sentimental point lies in tragic end, in the loss of happiness already enjoyed.

Before passing through the purgative fire the impulses of the pilgrim more closely resembled those of the lovers (Purg. 27: 37-39); and later, having traversed the fire, the same impulse, now turned entirely away from carnality, is still expressed in amorous terms by comparison with another lover. In the Terrestrial Paradise the pilgrim finds himself only three steps away from Matelda; but Leander, who had to swim the Hellespont to reach Hero, was not as impatient as he (Purg. 28: 73-74). The affairs of all these lovers are ill-fated, and the atmosphere surrounding them is one of tender regret or nostalgia. They are used as illustrations of a condition involving both emotional sympathy and aesthetic appreciation. In a sense they are exempt, even though their loves are not rewarded, from the inflexible judgment

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8 Achilles, induced by Ulysses and Diomedes to follow them into the Trojan War, abandoned Deidamia.
10 Phyllis, daughter of the King of Thrace, loved Demophoon, son of Theseus and Phaedra. She killed herself when he failed to return to her from Athens at the time appointed for their wedding (Ovid, Heroides, 2).
11 Ovid, Metamorphoses, 4: 55.
which must bear upon those who are singularized in the *Comedy* for sins of lust. Even the circle of the lustful is imbued with allure and the magic of legend; but it is infallibly clear that love, contesting reason, is seen as invariably destructive. And the victim is joined by the seductive aggressor; indeed, this sector of the *Inferno* is the only one where a woman, Francesca, speaks for its inhabitants.

The pilgrim newly come to this realm of darkness is lost in the dreaming beauty of legend which surrounds the great lovers —poignant illustration of the brevity of earthly antiquity. Never did sin seem more attractive than in the evocation of the lovers' magnificence, seen through the veil of time that protects the protagonist's memory from the violence of the deeds that accompanied their loves: "Amor di questa vita dipartille" (*Inf.* 5: 69). Pity overcomes the pilgrim especially when he hears of the great ladies and their noble lovers. He is melancholy at the thought of those who once filled the world with their splendor.

It is significant that among them no difference is made between Semiramis "che libito fe' lecito in sua legge" (56), who perverted her function as ruler in order to create the conditions most propitious to her indulgence in every form of pleasure, and Dido "colei che s'ancise amorosa" (61). Both are subjected to the same fate. In this circle the gradations of sentiment associated with sex are hardly taken into account. Great loves in which attachment is uniquely discriminating are punished to the same degree as uninhibited carnality.

It is clear that most of the lovers singled out for special mention are women. The degree and kind of love is variable, but one factor is common to all the great ladies of antiquity: their loves were a source of social discord among men. The only man Dante names to whom he attributes qualities of commensurate grandeur is Achilles "che con amore al fine combatteo" (66), whose strength it would seem was finally undone by his love for Polyxena. In this characterization the Greek hero is transformed for a moment into a courteous knight fighting a medieval love-battle. The lady becomes the cause of his discomfiture.

"Cleopatrà lussuriosa" (63) is mentioned again in the *Comedy* in equally pejorative terms. Both Virgil and Justinian express
disgust at the woman who was almost fatal to Rome and its Emperor,

\[
\text{che, fuggendogli innanzi, dal colubro}
\]
\[
\text{la morte prese subitana e atra.}
\]

(Par. 6: 77-78)

Divested of her pomp and power in the Comedy, she is seen taking her own life in words that make her flight dramatic and grotesque. Then:

\[
\text{Elena vedi, per cui tanto reo}
\]
\[
\text{tempo si volse.}
\]

(Inf. 5: 64-65)

Dante recalls not Helen's great beauty but her destructive role, the cause of the Trojan War and of the fall of the city. It is she and not Paris who is seen as the active agent; he is mentioned only in passing.

In the terrace of Purgatory, where lust may be cleansed, there are no women. Here, in the Inferno, the female population represents the majority of lovers. Many are beautiful; some are susceptible; all were enslavers of men. Insofar as their power and weakness draw men into their possession, they are seen as evil, submerging their will, reason, and creative powers. Insofar as they make demands for themselves, they are seen as sexually rapacious and sometimes as fearful monsters. Their own desire is seen as self-perpetrating, endlessly grasping, and, in extreme cases, indiscriminate in its choice of object. The bad lover is not self-sacrificing; her own desires are foremost. She may possess varying degrees of power. The extent of her evil is decided generally by her effect on man; it may be determined either by her relative lack of power or her misuse of it. In human form, as distinguished from monsters, animals, or witches, the greatest challenge she presents to the individuality and self-sufficiency of man is her attraction. Hers is the path of ease opposed to that of vigilance; moreover, she usually makes the first move to which man need only to submit. From the time of his submission, he is cast into a sea of passions. Alternatives are seen in extremes.
Dante’s greatest woman lovers are both victims of their own weakness and, to some extent, their own aggressors.

Dante brings to the problem an unusual degree of psychological perception and a large part of the mercy that in the Middle Ages was often the alternative to cruel punishment. Mercy serves to accentuate rather than attenuate the gravity of sin. Both retaliation and mercy are responses to actions that are assumed to be wrongful. Dante’s perception of human nature in the service of Christian standards could evaluate it only in accordance with those standards, and he did so without compromise. In the case of earthly love he had to reject anything whose powers challenged or obstructed the way to the Father. Dante’s rejection of pure carnality is both Christian and aesthetic; his rejection of courtly love is mainly Christian rather than aesthetic.

In the Comedy, Dante has fully assimilated the idea of love as an *accidente in sustanzia* requiring no intermediary. The impetus to bad emotion flows directly from the lady herself. Francesca characterizes the circle of the lustful in the Inferno as “la schiera ov’è Dido” (85).

\[
\text{colei che s’ancise amorosa,} \\
\text{e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo.}\text{\textsuperscript{12}}
\]

(Inf. 5: 61-62)

Singularized in her position among other powerful women who gave way to unbridled pleasure, Dido prefigures the delicate and complicated characterization of Francesca herself. By her example from classical antiquity, Christian reality is further objectivized. Its censure of human passion is associated with the autonomous reality of an unhappy love. Dante had previously used her story to illustrate, in the Convivio, the restraint of appetite by reason. In the case of Aeneas, the glory of the man and the fulfillment of his destiny depended upon his victory in the struggle between the spirit and the senses. The founding

\textsuperscript{12} Though she had promised fidelity to the memory of her husband, Sicheus, Dido became enamored of Aeneas and when he abandoned her took her own life. Virgil, *Aeneid*, in *P. Vergili Maronis Opera*, ed. A. Sedgwick (Cambridge, Mass., 1914-1934), 1: 4.
At the same time as Aeneas freed himself from Dido in order that he might found the Roman Empire, the seed of Mary grew strong through the birth of David. Dante sees the two events as analogous and further related through their simultaneity. Mary's purity is made a connotation of the probity of Aeneas in a coincidence that appears to Dante as preordained by God. He praises Aeneas for his fortitude in the accomplishment of his manly duty by the restraint of his desire for Dido.

E quanto raffrenare fu quello, quando, avendo ricevuto da Dido tanto di piacere quanto nel settimo trattato si dicerà, e usando con essa tanto di dilettazione, elli si partìo, per seguire onesta e laudabile via e fruttuosa.... Per che appare che, ne la nostra gioventute, essere a nostra perfezione ne convenga temperati e forti.

(Convivio 4: 26)

Conversely, for Dante the case of Dido illustrates to what a degree the passion of a woman may lead a man, and through him, an entire people. We have seen that his censure of the other lovers of antiquity rested largely on the discord they sowed among their people. Dido is mentioned again in the Comedy by Folco di Marsiglia, referring to himself as a paragon of love:

chè più non arse la figlia di Belo,
noiando e a Sicheo ed a Creusa,
di me, infìn che si convenne al pelo.

(Par. 9: 97-99)

The characterization of Dido in the Aeneid is that of a woman and queen often strong and magnanimous: a ruler, lawgiver, and
defender of her own land. 13 The picture of her plight is drawn with compassion; Aeneas, encountering her again among the shades of Hades, feels pity and remorse. 14 Traces remain in her of a grandeur that is proper by and large to male figures in the Comedy. In the Comedy Dido is more or less the classical sister of the medieval Francesca, whose allusion to Virgil, when she recounts her own experience further, illustrates the community of interests between the two characters:

E quella a me: "Nessun maggior dolore che ricordarsi del tempo felice ne la miseria; e ciò sa 'l tuo dottore.

(5: 121-23)

Francesca's compassion may extend here to Virgil's own ambiguous position in the Inferno, but she may also be alluding to the lyric power of Virgil's abandoned queen. In the Comedy Dido has become entirely representative of unhappy love. Her effect is wholly detrimental and operates not only upon Aeneas himself but also upon the shades of Siches and Creusa, her husband and Aeneas' wife. Her function is clearly circumscribed; she exists in the Comedy for this purpose alone, and no further interest is taken in her character as represented in the Aeneid. Del Lungo points out that Florence up to Dante's time did not have heroines, nor does its history mention heroic acts of women. 15 Dante merely alludes to heroines of antiquity such as Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons, and Camilla 16 who died for quella umile Italia. There are no feminine examples of aggressive heroism corresponding to those in the Christian world in his principal area of concentration. Accordingly, the figure of Dido is divested of heroic attributes. All her aggressive impulses have been diverted to love-passion. She is at the same time an aggressor in love and a victim of its superior force.

13 Ibid., 1: 494-508.
14 Ibid., 6: 450-76.
16 Virgil, Aeneid, 7, 803: 8.
A discussion of Dido leads naturally to the episode of Paolo and Francesca. The point of view enunciated here will focus on the portrayal of Francesca and will become comprehensible only in the light of the conflicting issues that Dante resolves, through her, for the pilgrim ascending in virtue. A source of confusion among readers of the *Comedy* is the apparent divergence in this episode between its undoubtedly Christian ethics and the astonishing beauty of its representation of courtly forms. In examining the Paolo and Francesca tale it must be remembered that Dante uses it to introduce the protagonist to the realm of sin. This is his last poetry of the passionate love of two living beings. Subsequently Dante writes no more of such love but to renage or mortify it.

What is censurable in Paolo and Francesca cannot be defined solely as reciprocal physical attraction. Dante makes this palpable by his implied censure of the Lancelot story which the lovers were reading at the moment of their moral and physical undoing. In his discussion of the *Roman de la Rose*, C. S. Lewis writes: “To enter into . . . full enjoyment of the courtly life, a man still needs, along with certain gifts of nature and a sufficient fortune, a certain selection of genuinely moral qualities; it is for this reason that Hatred, Covetise and Envy find themselves side by side with Poverty and Age upon the outer side of the wall.” 17 Now: “Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse” (5: 137). Galehaut, the *haut prince* of the book of Lancelot, gave his name to the first part of the work that wrought the spiritual downfall of the lovers. He also made Lancelot and Guinevere aware of their mutual love. 18 The book, which was the agent of Paolo and Francesca’s revelation, is eminently representative of the cultural world which produced them as they exist in the *Comedy*. And it is important with reference to our topic to bear in mind that this world is not devoid of its own morality. Whatever the truth or falsity of the concretization of the chivalrous ideal, it was strong enough

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to captivate the imagination and interest of a writer such as Dante who, a century after its literary flowering, rejected its morality but embraced its aesthetic possibilities.

The goal of the chivalric lover is usually to win his lady fully. His love is not platonic or exclusively a wishful dream; he expects to realize it physically. But he recognizes, as such, its great power to move him to good or evil. Often he perceives it as a danger as well as delight, and "even in the romances where that love is idealized, the destructive element is always present." 19

The author of the Tavola Ritonda, the "most important Arthurian romance written in Italian," may well have perceived the interweaving of the Tristan romance into the story of Paolo and Francesca, which Gardner calls "practically an adaptation of the former to a contemporary Italian tragedy." 20 We may compare the reading scene in the Comedy to the game of chess that Tristan and Iseut play in the beginning of the romance; their kiss, to the drinking of the love potion; and the violent death of Paolo and Francesca, to the slaying of Tristan by King Mark.

The differences between the two legends (Lancelot/Guinevere—Paolo/ Francesca) are nearly as noteworthy as their points of contact. Lancelot, for example, expresses a feeling akin to religious devotion but in opposition to it. He treats Guinevere with an adoration of great faith, genuflecting before her bed as before an altar. But this single action alone affords a glimpse into what is a very great difference between the knightly romance and Dante's tragedy: the former describes the fruition of love while the latter shows it forever interrupted in the moment of mutual discovery. The Lancelot romance finds him embracing religion in later life while Paolo and Francesca remain entwined and light in the wind of passion because they are moved by the same interior impulse (84) which prompted their destruction on earth. In other ways as well, their conduct diverges widely from that of Lancelot and Guinevere. Only the book they were reading served their love. The knightly lovers required the services of

WOMAN EARTHLY AND DIVINE IN THE "COMEDY" OF DANTE

Galehaut, an intermediary. The kiss of Lancelot and Guinevere takes place in the presence of Galehaut, who has introduced Lancelot and begged the queen to have pity on him; that of Paolo and Francesca occurs in the intimacy and spontaneity of complete privacy. Finally, insofar as the Paolo and Francesca story transposes elements of chivalric romance into the lives of those who were not far removed in time from Dante's early readers, it illustrates more powerfully than legend the dangers to their own society of such a love.

Lancelot and Guinevere are possibly ancestors of Paolo and Francesca both because of their cultural influence and because the passion they express is not, and cannot be, as youthful as that of Dante's childlike lovers: "Soli eravamo e sanza alcun sospetto" (5: 129). The lack of foresight shown is not unlike that of the "anima semplicetta che sa nulla" (Purg. 16: 88), except that they have no excuse for not knowing. Their love is captured and kept in the moment when new feeling is still uncertain and tremulous and as such almost incredulously takes hold of the senses. This preserved quality of youthful freshness is largely responsible for the unwillingness on the part of so many readers to accept Dante's punishment of his lovers.

The episode is vibrant with the pilgrim's sympathy for Francesca who speaks for herself and for Paolo, her _espressione muta_. That she alone speaks makes this very much Francesca's episode; it is she with whom the pilgrim communicates directly. The fragility of her soul is more in evidence than Paolo's; consequently the pilgrim swoons and the poet judges on the basis of her recital. The greater the part she assumes in love the greater her part of the sin and of the common responsibility. The power as well as the delicacy of the love she describes appears attributable mainly to her.

The pilgrim feels deeply the sweetness of the affinity between the two noble souls, _anime affannate_ and _offense_, whose love was adorned with every grace and aesthetically ennobled by their reading. Francesca has greeted him with a frank gratitude and gentleness that are the epitome of courtly nobility. Recognizing his expression of pity for their condition as a demonstration of his courtesy, she receives him immediately as an elite. Her tone is
intimate and confiding and preserves throughout its virginal inno-
cence. The moral trait most immediately apparent in her is con-
constancy in love, which fuses perfectly with her refinement of speech and her knowledge of courtly codes. That she herself
possessed the cor gentil is indubitable from the moment she
welcomes the pilgrim to her infernal abode and assures him that
they would pray for his peace, “se fosse amico il re de l'universo” (5: 91). The god she knew in life was the friend of noble lovers.
Here she knows only that the Lord of the realm is not on her
side. And her repetition of “pace” (97) recalls simultaneously the
external wind that surrounds her now, the internal storm that
she carries within her, and the earthly turmoil that was an indirect
cause of her downfall.

In the speech of Francesca we easily recognize doctrinal
pronouncements made central to their concepts of love by the
contemporary poets Dante valued most. “Amor ch’ al cor gentil
ratto s’apprende, ch’a nullo amato amar perdona” (Inf. 5: 103-4)
brought the lovers by its own fatality ad una morte. By repeating
her litany Francesca is implying that love chose them as it did
Lancelot (“come amor lo strinse” [5: 128]) and fixed upon them
an ineluctable power.

The episode of Paolo and Francesca is set in the blackness
and storm of Cavalcanti’s oscuritade in the canzone “Donna me
prega.” Dante perfects death by positing the whole condition
in eternity; love and death become forever inseparable. But he
summarily rejects and condemns the doctrine of the inevitability
of love, removing forever its last excuse for existence. Francesca,
the spokeswoman of sweet compulsion, believes in it because she
died without repentance at the instant of her sin. Here again one
must not attribute an autonomous fatality to poetic events: if
Francesca did not repent it is because Dante her creator did not
choose to make her do so. Time itself would be no object, for
we know that the repentance of Buonconte da Montefeltro
(Purg. 5) took place at the ultima ora and consisted in dying
with the name of Mary on his lips (Purg. 5: 101). The direct
relationship between the mode of Francesca’s death and her
ignorance of her sin in the afterlife is not one of cause and effect.
Both facts coexist by purposeful arrangement. Were she to repent
she would be automatically ineligible for the Inferno. Moreover, the case for courtly love could not be put forth, in order to be destroyed, as convincingly as in the speech of a sinner still committed to her sin. The pilgrim’s shock at the workings of divine judgment must be powerful enough to conquer his initial pity. The episode displays his finite consciousness as opposed to the omnipotence of divine law.

The pilgrim’s interest in the progress of Francesca’s love contains a strong sensuality that, in the words of Irma Brandeis, who in this particular instance seems to differentiate little between Dante and his pilgrim, “show more strongly than ever how his own perilous inclination matches hers.”

Ma dimmi: al tempo de’ dolci sospiri,  
a che e come concedette amore  
che conosceste i dubbiosi desiri?

(5: 118-20)

The pilgrim’s first spontaneous self-assertion occurs when he expresses his desire to speak to these spirits. But the element of sensuality that accompanies his sympathy for their plight cannot be separated from a more objective interest. Francesca obliges readily with her answer, a superb example, when translated into dramatic action, of the sweet abandonment of such poets as Cino da Pistoia and Guido Guinizelli. Her words are an invitation to the pilgrim to submit to the magic of that world, and this he does though only temporarily and partially. But the vocabulary of their exchange remains plentiful in the *Comedy*, the common frame of reference of the “erotic institutionalism of the thirteenth century” and of the adoration of the Divinity alike. Each in its own sphere is conceived by its partisans as a law imposed absolutely: “Amore, / acceso di virtù, sempre altro accese” (*Purg.* 22: 10-11). These are the words of Virgil to Statius. It is difficult to contrast these words to Francesca’s, as Irma Brandeis does, though a comparison shows us that virtù is absent from Francesca’s description of helplessness under love’s magnetism. The concepts

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22 Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, p. 130.
are different but expressed in much the same terms. Undoubtedly they are rival concepts.

The nature of Francesca’s sin has more than one facet. Abandoning herself to her own desire she broke every social bond and as such was part and parcel of the tumult of her world. In her way she provoked the triumph of disorder among men. Dante refers to the lovers in their relationship as “cognati” (Inf. 6: 2) when the pilgrim has recovered from his faint. Certainly he meant that their love was incestuous as well as adulterous and excessive. Love had scorned the canons of social morality of the world in which it found itself and posited its own laws to which it still adhered.

More importantly Francesca is the exponent of what amounts to a rival form of worship. We have seen that the re de l’universo is foreign to her. She treated her feminine function as created for her rather than as if she were created for it. Her offense against social tradition is serious but inferior to such boundless presumption as distraction from the sole worship of God. Virgil’s words to Statius contain an implication of the upward continuity of love which ends in the God for whom he longs. Francesca’s “shallowness and self-exonerating motivation” ends in herself. The human grief she caused or helped to cause contains less danger than her view of the proper direction of love.

The punishment of Francesca can best be understood with reference to Dante’s own context and his own aims. Since the claims of the Lady usurp the devotion that should aspire endlessly to God, she must be destroyed. The story Francesca tells is principally that of her own downfall. “L’appassionato racconto è fatto dalla donna,” Nardi writes, “più facile ad esser vinta dalla passione; in bocca a Paolo sarebbe stato meno conveniente.” It is possible that Dante shared this view. However, from here on in, where the door has opened into fuller exploration of baser carnality, her character of aggressor takes precedence along with her danger to men rather than to herself.

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The loveliness of Francesca’s form tells us only that it would have been worthy of use in the service of virtue. But as a symbol of her principal delight and Paolo’s it became unworthy and was taken from her. She is the outward semblance of the angelic lady in every respect but one. Pride and lust move her to action that is self-assertive and concupiscent. In action she broke the physical and spiritual unity of the Lady and descended to the moral level of pura femmina. Among her punishments was the deprivation of her bella persona. But, just as Dante never defamed the art that created her prototype, he did not turn her into a monster. She speaks in the refined accents proper to the ambiance she represents. Morally condemned without reprieve, aesthetically a part of her is accorded leniency. Dante apparently had no wish to destroy the beautiful form of love poetry; yet the need to condemn its message is evident. Francesca is a warning to all who would transform the Lady into a Woman, and she is as such the embodiment and summary rejection of courtly love.

The Comedy is notably kind to poets (Inf. 1: Purg. 22, 24, 26). In Purgatory those among the souls who were poets have not only kept their appreciation of their art but are better able to evaluate their accomplishments. Receptive to aesthetic as well as moral illumination, they absorb honor with humility and instruction with aesthetic interest. In that curative realm the gulf between Guido Guinizelli in the dual role of love poet and grave sinner is not frightening. But in the Inferno (15), where the pilgrim confronts the shade of Brunetto Latini many circles below that of Francesca, the immature pilgrim’s shock of discovery is still vivid: “Siete voi qui, ser Brunetto?” (30). Even here Dante assigns to his learned mentor words that allude to his scholarly achievements on earth:

\[
\text{sieti raccomandato il mio Tesoro} \\
\text{nel qual io vivo ancora, e piú non cheggio.}
\]

(Inf. 15: 119-20)

Nothing illustrates better than this episode Dante’s ability (and that of medieval writers in general) to treat different concepts relating to the same figure severally. As retribution for the vice of sodomy Dante has located in Hell the same man who is to the
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pilgrim a “cara e buona immagine paterna” (83). But his respect for poetry and knowledge is such that Brunetto lives for us in both ways.

When the pilgrim encounters Francesca he is at a far lower level of maturity; he has to be shown the way to all sin. And he is taught in a manner which simultaneously exalts and deprestes the beautiful words that are sinful if misused. Francesca is by no means the whole story of the progress of lustful love. For that we need to descend much further into the Inferno of the soul where we hear no more of passionate love raised to art but to renounce it. The denial of Francesca has opened the way to the dream of the “femmina balba” (Purg. 19).

On the way to the stage of his maturity which will allow the pilgrim to gain understanding of the femmina balba, he encounters plentiful examples of unnatural or bestial lust. Nearly all are feminine. Pasiphae, to whom Dante first alludes by her disguise, “falsa vacca” (Inf. 12: 13), is the chosen example of sinners expiating natural lust (Purg. 26: 41-42). She combines in her action falsification and the bestiality that is punished in the Minotaur’s realm of the seventh circle. Dante’s repetition, “s’imbestiò nelle ’mbestiate schegge” (Purg. 26: 87), emphasizes his abhorrence of her and his acceptance of her bestiality. She becomes one of those who follow “come bestie l’ appetito” (Purg. 26: 84) and they a part of her, all sharing in the matta bestialità of the Minotaur. It is significant that Dante makes her an example of a lust that—however abhorrent and violent—is still natural because its object is a being of the opposite sex. In the symbolic form of the grotesque and misshapen he depicts a pathological degree of lust and the creature that is its result: a separate and monstrous entity. The example of Pasiphae and the Minotaur is a parody of the perpetuation of horror by procreation. It is equally basic to the concept of original sin, itself allied to lust.

Falsification of the self was an integral part of Pasiphae’s exemplary abomination which Dante repeatedly associates with physical desire and with femininity. Thais, who prostitutes lan-

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25 Pasiphae, wife of Monos, concealed in a wooden cow, coupled with a bull and conceived the Minotaur.
gage for the purpose of meretricious gain, is caught in the flattery which Dante sees as attending her occupation. He has placed her among the adulators, but the sense of hearing is not the first of the senses to perceive her fully. The environment Dante creates for her attacks all the senses with a simultaneous impact; all the senses of the sinners who populate it struggle against the filth that is heaped upon them.

Quindi sentimmo gente che si nicchia
ne l'altra bolgia e col muso scuffa,
e sè medesma con le palme picchia.

(Inf. 18: 103-5)

Their punishment is far more immediately disturbing to the senses than that of the seducers and ruffiani. Moreover, the squatting position in which Dante places Thais seems associated more directly with her carnality than with the use of her wiles for deception.

The overtly sexual image of Thais exudes in all its distastefulness an avid female craving only partially identifiable as adulation. It is at once the adulation and its underlying goal.\textsuperscript{26} Thais is a forewarning of the \textit{femmina balba}. Designated by a proper name and treated as a real person, she is nevertheless typical and exemplary of her function. Her wallowing in mire suggests the same connotations as the composite image of the \textit{femmina balba} in the still more profound darkness of the pilgrim's consciousness.

The circle of those who falsified their own persons contains the memory of Myrrha (Inf. 30: 32-41). She succeeded in satisfying an incestuous love for her father and is stamped with the epithet \textit{scellerata}, which the Roman Senate gave to the street in which Julia had her father trampled to death by a coach. Dante conceives of her as a violent spirit devoured by its own fury: this can only be the fury of physical passion under yet another guise. He allots to her a fate far worse than did his source, Ovid.\textsuperscript{27} She is a

\textsuperscript{26} The character of Thais is taken from Terence's comedy \textit{The Eunuch}. Her bit of dialogue represents her thanks for the gift of a slave (\textit{Eunuchus}, 3: 2).

\textsuperscript{27} Ovid, \textit{Metamorphoses}, 10: 298-502.
standard of unnatural love to which he had compared Florence itself in her unnatural liaison with the Pope: “Haec Florentia Myrrha scelestis et impia in Cinyrae patris amplexus exestuans” (Epist. 7).

By mating with her father, “fuori del dritto amor” (39), Myrrha seemed to Dante perverse in degree as well as in kind. He compares her to a pig “quando del porcil si schiude” (27), applying the same simile to her lust and Gianni Schicchi’s greed (32-33, 42-45). Here once again the sins work in consort, cooperating in the degradation of the human being. Falsification is the particular aspect of the specific crimes that earn Myrrha and Gianni Schicchi their places. But they are only one aspect of a far more extensive evil. The composite of that evil is summarized in the femmina balba.

There is nothing in the work of stilnovisti or of troubadours to compare with her. This allegorical creation is in that sense more peculiar to the Inferno than any other female, though that is not where we find her. Myrrha’s place is prepared for her by the lesson in love which the protagonist has just received in Cantos 17 and 18 of Purgatory. She is represented simultaneously as a dream and as an external reality through whom eternal truths are learned and remembered. Ephemeral and changeable as she seems to the pilgrim after he has found out what she is to him, to the reader she exhibits in turn two permanent sides of her nature. We are affected more by the concreteness of her image than by the knowledge that it is in the mind of the pilgrim, for she is a necessary prelude to the coming of Beatrice, whom we also accept in all her concreteness.

The femmina balba is not a real person, but the condensation and definition of a whole area of experience partaking of reality—in the physical aspect of a woman—and of a long tradition of fantasy. Combined in one image we find elements associated only by the similarity of their function and worked upon to follow both the demands of the unconscious mind and those of a given social order. She is then both the pilgrim’s dream and the public’s myth, a cultural device employed for a purpose: to bring those who experience her closer to the primal source of sin.
We are reminded immediately of the profusion of dreams and hallucinations of this nature endured by early Church fathers. It becomes apparent that the ancestors of the femmina balba, who form a kind of matrilinear continuity, were largely productions of hermitical minds. An important departure from earlier descriptions by Dante lies in his externalizing initially seductive traits of woman.

To a monk there appears a “mulier Aethiopissa, foetida et de turpis aspectu, ita ut foetiviam eius sufferre non possit.” He succeeds in chasing her off with no difficulty. On her way out she acknowledges her defeat: “Ego sum quae in cordibus hominum dulcis appareo sed propter oboedientiam tuam, et laborem quam sustines, non me permisit Deus seducere te,” and disappears. The similarity of her words to those of the femmina balba indicates her relationship to Dante’s allegorical figure. She is, however, not at all seductive at the outset. The hermit has described her as easily resisted by one whose travail and obedience to God insure against seduction. She even bears the stigma of black and heathen foreignness. Her devilish ugliness, we are given to understand, is perceived as dulcis by others; but the one experiencing it, who is after all our only source, immediately perceives it for what it is. There is here no problem of philosophical interpretation, for the monk’s simplicity has given us the externalization of what may well have been his secondary reaction.

Dante deals openly with the problem of the perception of evil. The sin of lust, as well as those of gluttony and avarice (which he sums up in the femmina balba), derives more from the outside than from the internal malice which engenders pride, envy, and anger. The necessity of a temptation to prompt sins of incontinence as distinguished from the graver sins defines the immediate function of the femmina balba. As that stimulus, she absorbs (insofar as she is concretely representative of temptation) a very large part of the guilt attributable to the acts she elicits.

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29 Quoted in ibid., p. 64.
As much as she represents the internal operation of the straying mind she is still concretized as a separate feminine entity; she is the externalization of an inner state and its provoking agent.

Night with all its connotations of sloth and surrender to darkness sets the scene for her appearance. The reassuring light of the sun has been temporarily overcome on earth by the cold associated with the moon. We are reminded that increasing cold is a sign of deeper descent into the Inferno. The pilgrim has just come from his lesson in sloth, but his thoughts wander and intermingle and are soon overcome like the “calor diurno” by sleep and transmuted into dream (Purg. 18: 141-45). Thus subject to the idle play of his own fantasy, the pilgrim is receptive to the visit of the femmina balba. The life of his spirit has momentarily given way much like any soul relaxing its self-vigilance. She appears before him at the apex of night in the silence of an atmosphere of purposeful deception:

mi venne in sogno una femmina balba,
ne li occhi guercia, e sovra i piè distorta,
con le man monche, e di colore scialba.

(Purg. 19: 7-9)

The femmina balba represents errant love “per troppo di vigore” (Purg. 18: 96) for secondary material goods. She is best regarded as a comprehensive allusion to the vices that morally deform man and impede his proper functioning. As such, she appears ugly and deformed when the pilgrim first perceives her. But she is soon warmed into life and beauty by his gaze. The mirar of the beholder’s eye develops into an operant force of an eroticism which colors the apparition with love and projects upon it the ardor of a mentally deluded but physically mature male. The development of the pilgrim has not kept equal pace in all its aspects. He will continue to be reminded of the dangers of lust until he attains Paradise.

In the same sense that the Devil is an ape of God the femmina balba is a falsified Beatrice. The color of love that is her outward semblance may well be the delicate shade of pearl (Vita Nuova, 19, 36) prized in the ladies of the stilnovisti, luminous in the darkness of the dream. As the mind re-creates her, it
transforms her deformities into beauty which now speaks for the Devil. The pilgrim's concentration is evidence not of the frivolous and brief interest of a child or the uncertain eroticism of a youth. All the force that has been employed to nurture his understanding momentarily falls prey to the woman.

Dark to Beatrice's light, directing the thought and emotion of the pilgrim away from the things of God to those of man, speaking in lies opposed to objective truth, the *femmina balba* is a perversion of the doctrine that love enters through the eye of the beholder. If Beatrice is to represent the pure, compassionate, and redeeming, there is a need for something to be overcome. Virgil's explanation was not sufficient warning; indeed, it was a prelude to concrete experience:

L'animo, ch'è creato ad amar presto,  
ad ogni cosa è mobile che piace,  
tosto che dal piacere in atto è desto.  
Vostra apprensiva da esser verace  
tragge intenzione, e dentro a voi la spiega,  
sì che l'animo ad essa volger face.  

*(Purg. 18: 19-24)*

The mind worked on the image of a concrete object until what it perceived was no longer the image but the object transformed. And the power of the object is such (by implication) that it may easily become sufficient to itself and to the man under its sway. For in relation to the pilgrim it is not the woman but his own senses under her spell that undergo change.

The poet of love wooed his lady by praising the entrance of love from her eyes into his. Dante's wooing image, born of that same phenomenon, speaks in intended lies. She sings triumphantly of her power over Ulysses, whom she claims to have turned from his voyage:

"Io son" cantava, "io son dolce serena,  
che i marinari in mezzo mar dismago;  
tanto son di piacere a sentir piena!  

*(Purg. 19: 19-21)*

To the charm of her beautiful person is added the additional enchantment of her song. She employs the power of music to
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which Dante has frequent recourse in depicting an event of emotional significance (see Purg. 2). Once again art becomes a tool of cruel deception. Her song links the femmina balba to her more seductive antecedents

Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago
al canto mio. ⁴⁰

(Purg. 19: 22-23)

The suffocating embrace in which the femmina balba would hold the pilgrim is that of the “antica strega” (Purg. 19: 58). Her origin undoubtedly goes back in Christian mythology to Eve and Lilith; in Dante’s day it was often perceived in the woman of the times. Belief in her affirmed solidarity by defining dramatically what was bad. The transfer of sin to her enabled men to believe that they could be liberated from it by her destruction. All the stigmata of evil could be attributed to her as cause and representative evidence. In this case the stuttering of gluttony, the sidelong of lust, and the crookedness of avarice in her limbs are the very extremity of the sins of incontinence. The principal sin is lust.

The apparition sings a promise of eternal satisfaction and perpetual peace so like that which only Beatrice can procure that we relate it to the properties of the woman against those of the lady and to a craving that was depicted again and again as typically female, driving the man back down the treacherous dark path from which only his will could extricate him. Hell, we are reminded, is a return to the beginning of that path. For Dante, love is a profound experience touching the heights and the depths. Here we are undoubtedly at the depths in the “perfection of non-functioning impotence” that is an effect of sloth. It is a region of aimless creativity and the indulgence of the fantasy in itself. The

⁴⁰ Commentators suggest that Dante did not know the Odyssey, in which only Circe succeeds in keeping back the impatient Ulysses, and may have misunderstood the episode. It seems as likely that by putting lies into the siren’s song he emphasizes her character of fraudulence. Moreover, as a creation of sloth, she further illustrates the forgetfulness which triumphs over the errant pilgrim’s mind. Her lying is an important facet of the contrast with Beatrice, from whom the pilgrim seeks and attains nothing but truth, so that he may be strengthened against possible future temptations.
dolce sirena speaks in alluring tones that intertwine her concupiscence and her femininity. Dante had written that the character of some words was childish, others virile, others womanly, such as “dolciada” and “piacevole” (“De vulgari eloquentia,” 7: 3-4) and thus too soft for use in the canzone. Here, as in the episode of Paolo and Francesca, Dante combines them with ideas of artistic creation. Misleading creativity contrasts here with the true and more powerful creativity that Beatrice inspires. One results from the absence of will which the other must restore.

Misdirected creativity goes hand in hand with other forms of impotence that bear upon “le fredde membra che la notte aggrava” (Purg. 19: 11). The ideas are connected in Beatrice’s reproof regarding the “pargioletta, gravar le penne in giuso” (Purg. 31: 58)—the wings of the will to good creativity. One assumes here that the pargioletta is (or represents) women to whom Dante had written love poems besides those addressed to Beatrice.

But we are dealing with the grotesque composite interpretation of the cause and effect of illicit desire and misdirected creativity. In the episode of the femmina balba we are in the presence of a witch. The pilgrim in this episode has fallen subject, however temporarily, to a kind of witchcraft that has enslaved his creative fantasy. The direction of that enslavement is toward lust and its attendant sins. In the episode of the monk the fantasies of sex encouraged by taboos are immediately apparent and uncomplicated by extension to other areas. Here the restriction covers not only sex but its beautification and elevation in art.

A donna santa e presta, who may represent our intellectual willpower in general and one of Dante’s blessed ladies in particular, calls Virgil to her aid, and he reveals the foul nature of the enchantress. Her cry “O Virgilio, o Virgilio, chi è questa?” (28) is certainly reproach to the master who had not been attending to his function as Reason. Virgil himself did not suffice to save the pilgrim from the lethal spell. It is likely, therefore that this symbolic lady is more than intelligence; intelligence in the service of Will and of Revelation, a kind of beatific emissary.

31 In Italy witchcraft was apparently concerned almost entirely with the purveying of love potions and fertility charms.
We recall Beatrice's allusion to sirene: if it refers to this episode it indicates the close watch she has been keeping over her charge. As the holy and alert lady comes to the rescue, one feels only the disembodied upward pull that reassures the pilgrim. The fetid evil underlying the appearance of loveliness, the bella menzogna, is made clear by the sensory value of things. A somewhat more studied effort is required for the perception of the Lady. The puzzo that awakens the supine pilgrim summarizes all the repugnant characteristics of the femmina balba

L'altra prendea, e dinanzi l'apria
fendendo i drappi, e mostravami 'l ventre:
quel mi svegliò col puzzo che n'uscìa.

(Purg. 19: 31-33)

These lines are harsh in sound, their words detached from one another with a willed harshness reminiscent of the poems for the donna pietra of Dante's earlier years.

The sins that first haunted the pilgrim in the selva oscura have returned in the guise of the femmina balba abetted by the pilgrim's temporary loss of will. Hers is the multiform cupidity of the she-wolf:

chè questa bestia, per la qual tu gride,
non lascia altrui passar per la sua via,
ma tanto lo 'mpedisce che l'uccide.

(Inf. 1: 94-96)

It is no wonder that the dream continues to trouble the pilgrim as he recollects it with the haze of sloth still hovering over him. The emotional content has outlasted the sensory and narrative content. The pilgrim has had to be rescued, snatched from the teeth of the dream; moreover, he will have to be repeatedly reminded in some way of the dangers that the dream represented. His aversion to the memory will not suffice to purge the errant impulse still inhabiting his body, or the resulting fear:

E io: “Con tanta suspizion fa irmi
novella vision ch'a sè mi piega,
si ch'io non posso dal pensar partirmi.”

(Purg. 19: 55-57)
Upon Virgil's brisk urging he continues with renewed determination:

Bastiti, e batti a terra le calcagne:
li occhi rivolgi al logoro che gira
lo rege eterno con le rote magne.

(Purg. 19: 61-63)

We are given to understand the laborious difficulty of the ascent from the terrible vision as well as the sense of liberation which the pilgrim temporarily experiences when he succeeds in shaking off the idleness that would impede his progress.

Except for Virgil none of the participants in the scene of the \textit{femmina balba} are real people. They are figurations of things and can be more clearly seen as aspects of one consciousness created as the expression of internal phenomena; as even Francesca da Rimini, for example, could not have been. The \textit{femmina balba} is entirely a creation of both single and collective fantasy in which patristic standards of determination, individuality, reason, aspiration of permanence, and unity all enter the service of the opposing power. The deformed and hideous creature embodies fear of the powers of darkness and is not a beast but a monstrous woman. The pilgrim is saved by emissaries of God—Virgil, the \textit{donna santa e presta}—by representatives of the divine hierarchy, not by the strength of his fear alone but by his determination.

The collective monastic fantasy is internalized to a far greater extent than by the monk. Ulysses had been shielded from the distraction of the Siren without much struggle by his own will; the monk, by his obedience and labor in the service of God; the pilgrim, by all of these and the readjustment of his intimate perceptions. The story of his salvation does not end here. He has required the intervention of the good lover and will continue to require it far into the \textit{Paradiso}. Evil has to be fought and destroyed by its opposite; not by a direct stroke from God, but by internal reparation from the Lady who speaks for the pure patristic ideal. The steps of the struggle documented with minute precision—"quando / Amor mi spira, noto" (Purg. 24: 52-53)—do not delineate a perfectly straight path. But according to the plan of the \textit{Comedy}, the things presenting themselves to the eye of
the pilgrim fall into a sequence of representations that bring him ever nearer to understanding the nature of the sin or virtue they represent. In the *femmina balba* we find the decomposition of some aspects of the same female entity whose other aspects are epitomized by the angelic Lady.

Whereas literary symbols such as the Panther or the *veltro* challenge the understanding of the modern reader who does not possess the key to their identity, there is no similar problem regarding the *femmina balba*. Some of her attributes are perhaps peculiar to the specific sins she represents, but her composite archetype, possessing a mythical and sensory reality of its own, is recognizable to anyone in itself. The arbitrariness of symbol does not apply to her; she is a perfect fusion of separate elements. Therefore, the perception of her coherence requires no effort of will. She is a creature of fantasy operating upon fear. To the poet of true love she is as necessary as the Lady with whom she is mutually dependent. The work of the pilgrim's errant fantasy was that of misdirected creativity. Henceforth his attention when directed to poets of love (*Purg.* 24 and 26) will be able to focus on matters of technical skill regarding the words that praise the Lady to the virtual exclusion of any consideration of the woman herself. His imagination will not dwell unduly upon physical desire; and, as he ascends in Paradise, the remoteness of the Lady will become increasingly a condition of her beneficence. The episode of Francesca was in a sense a prelude to the approaching definitive divergence between the woman and the Lady. The *femmina balba* is the concentration of the feared woman; and she is left behind, as later the Lady too will be transcended. But before the final transcendence is accomplished there are several stages of the journey away from the woman. The problem of wayward love must be solved and liberation from it demonstrated. This is done in Paradise and pronounced in the person of a woman, Cunizza da Romano.\(^\text{32}\)

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\(^{32}\) The daughter of Ezzelino II d'Este and Adelaide di Mangona, Cunizza was loved by three husbands and many lovers, among whom was the poet Sordello (*Purg.* 6). After the year 1260 she went to live in Florence where Dante might have seen her as an old woman. In 1265, in the home of the Cavalcanti, Cunizza freed her slaves, except for those guilty of treason, by
The actual memory of Cunizza was probably alive in the poet's mind. Known to her contemporaries as an example of amorous license, she is glorified in Dante's Heaven of Venus. One is reminded that Dante's characters are each unique and call for a unique response; they exist simultaneously on several levels of judgment. Here one confronts the puzzle of Dante's intentions within his hierarchical system on the one hand and the highly personal and subjective placement of characters within that system on the other. The uniqueness of each human soul, each created by a separate act of God and possessing a mortal existence in an individual body, attains its own destiny. It is this awareness of the uniqueness of every human being which makes it possible to attribute significance to individual action, however humble.

Dante expresses a judgment that allows the two possibilities of redemption: by God's mercy and by expiation. Since man originally sinned he cannot recover his innocence,

\[
\text{sanza passar per un di questi guadi:}
\text{o che Dio solo per sua cortesia}
\text{dimesso avesse, o che l'uom per se isso}
\text{avesse sodisfatto a sua follia.}
\]

(Par. 7: 90-93)

It is probable that Dante's knowledge of Cunizza in her earthly life satisfied the second of these requirements. Dante might well have found some common ground between her condition and his own. Both were deeply affected by the contingencies of war; both could remember bloodshed and political confusion as victims of strife between factions. The conversion of her life to repentance and good works would be the more triumphant for the dissoluteness of her youth. The picture of the corrupt, stormy environment of the "terra prava" (9: 25) where she was born and the emphasis on the tyrant born of the same parents set off her courteous manner. She shows in her "chiarir di fori" her wish to please the traveler and speaks as one "a cui di ben far giova" (24). When Dante wrote those words he may have had in mind

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a signed act; see Egidio Gorra, \textit{Il soggettivismo di Dante} (Bologna, 1899), pp. 89-90.
her humane act of manumission which preceded by more than twenty years the emancipation of the slaves in Florence (1289). She may have seemed a kind of Mary Magdalene: the poet placed her in the heaven of a love which is temperance and enabled her to pronounce upon herself the words of God's own pardon (34-35). In the Heaven of Venus, furthermore, the experience of ardent souls is contrasted with that of the indifferent. Cunizza had in life been subject to amorous passion, but in her it had been possible to transform evil into good by divine grace. Neither of these arguments suffices to tell us why Cunizza achieved the poet's grace. What is important is her role in the portrayal of human passion transfigured into saintly ardor.

Cunizza's very desire to please by appearing more luminous is the reverse of the medal of feminine allure, the innocent desire of the purified soul which has forgotten the experience of earthly seduction. Her greeting is prompt with the courtesy of a *cor gentil*, but the love of which she speaks and which soon develops into a tirade on the worthless population of the Marca Trevigiana (43-63) is the opposite of the passion that fixes itself on one mirroring object. In Cunizza mundane love transmuted into divine ardor has kept its force.

The ability to extend love over a wider area appears to depend upon the desexualization of love. Cunizza is the transformation of the *cor gentil* which in Francesca would have found its satisfaction in the love of a single being; in Cunizza it passionately desires the good of the world. Her words denote simultaneously the enlargement and the denial of the doctrine of love that Francesca expressed to the letter. She is completely detached from any relationship to the *femmina balba*, whose specter might well haunt any less exalted lover. In her speech amorous language has kept its forms, and one even detects echoes of the old theme of the recantation of love. Cunizza participates in the qualities of the compassionate lady of Guinizelli's poetry who is the receiver of divine virtue. Her grace is an external manifestation of her inner disposition and absorption of light. In her, Dante joins the concepts of disinterested charity and nobility of expression. Gallantry and devotion to God blend inseparably, epitomizing the maturity of the tradition of the *stil nuovo*. We are reminded of
the song of Casella (*Purg.* 2: 112-17). She belongs to the aristocracy of privileged lovers who have “intelligence of love” which excludes all who are not courteous. No longer a challenging obstacle to the love of God, the paradisiacal lady is, to the extent allotted her by Him, a smiling and assured guide to the realm she inhabits. In the portrayal of Cunizza we find the antithesis of the tentativeness, uncertainty of will, and spiritual discouragement which mars the peace the angelic lady radiated in the poetry of the stilnovisti. Cunizza also shares in the life of this lady in that she represents a step in the emotional growth of her poetic creator. But here the step is far greater, for she actively participates in the pilgrim’s reacquisition of faith in himself. She is to a considerable extent the background for the portrayal of the pilgrim; in addition she frequently points out other spirits in her sphere in order to indicate their worth and divide the attention accorded to her.

In Cunizza the exaltation of noble character over noble origin is apparent, partially through the condemnation of her brother. She transcends the boundaries of the stil nuovo undivested of its sweet speech and good manners. And her kind of love is the caritas that includes the absence, or at least the suppression, of passion. Her transfiguration involves the dematerialization of love and the familiar derogation of the material world. The condemnation of her native land that Dante puts in her mouth emphasizes her superiority to its denizens as much as the chiding love that she still bears them. Therefore, despite her evident interest in worldly events she may easily be seen as an expression of ideas of nobility that do not contain material values. The love relationships in which she engaged during her earthly life were goals in themselves as long as they lasted. Sublimated into a heavenly being she is devoid of finite attachments and emancipated from what are seen as sexual bonds.

And yet there is no reason to assume that Dante has surrendered in his most exalted representatives of love the aesthetic canons to which the courtly tradition that culminated in the stil nuovo contributed so generously. What is important here, alongside her elegant speech and magnanimous Christian ethics, may be detected in her allusion to “vostro vulgo” (36). Certainly
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the average reader might well be confused by the spectacle of the sinner who in her life was considered a magna meretrix pardoning herself for her sins. The extent of God's love for the repentant might appear exaggerated to those who cannot comprehend its liberating powers or to those who have not understood the function of the baptism which the pilgrim received from Matelda. The vulgo may be interpreted as consisting of those in whom love is helplessly tied to physicality and also those whose limited intelligence is incapable of following the arguments that Dante uses as expressions of love.

The need to detach oneself from the vulgar crowd was a distinctive feature of stil nuovo poetry. Distinction from the common man figured early as an element of love and salvation in the work of Dante. A function of the artist as well as of the lover, it originated not from monastic asceticism which detached itself from human tumult in order to experience its inner sufferings more intensely, but from a desire to elevate the self above the irrational impulses that control most human activity. The idea of an association of the solitary, a republic of the elect, answered the need to reaffirm the independence of the intellect and of the artist from political or economic contingencies. It also served to distinguish the novelty of their work from that of poets outside the association and posited the assumption that praise from superior minds would confer upon the chosen object a parallel superiority. The Lady, who was a projection of the poet's mind, depended upon him for her status. Dante refers to the pilgrim as worthy of Beatrice's compassion and aid:

\[
\text{ché non soccorri quei che t'amò tanto,} \\
\text{ch'uscio per te de la volgare schiera?}
\]

(Inf. 2: 104-5)

Cunizza's detachment from the vulgo would seem to bear some trace of defensiveness. Her vostro is not directed to the pilgrim but sweeps over her own environment, the world in general, and that of the poet himself. Cunizza's vulgo is necessary to her exalted position and, indeed, to the organization of the Comedy itself. She is a figure in whom aristocratic civilization joins with an exalted concept of love; both of these require a
negative basis of comparison. The theological, ethical, and poetic intricacies attached to the position of Cunizza in the *Paradiso* will stand between the vulgar reader and the kernel of the *Comedy* in much the same way that Bonagiunta da Lucca stood on the wrong side of the *nodo* which separated him from the poets of Dante's moral and aesthetic aristocracy. Cunizza's right to pardon her own transgressions is one of the final steps in the formalization of caritas which set it further apart from earthly passion. In the *Paradiso*, as the pilgrim's confusion grows ever less and he ascends in love, the correspondence between aesthetic and moral criteria becomes increasingly close. The inward nobility of soul which Dante attributes to Cunizza is set above the outward and formal nobility of birth. Both concepts are evidence and result of a profound social and emotional necessity, "a need that is the more imperious as life is more ferocious. Love has to be elevated to the height of a rite."  

The *luculenta e cara gioia* to whom Cunizza points in her Heaven is the spirit of Folchetto di Marsiglia, who during his earthly life succeeded in elevating two different loves, the one conquering the other. As a troubadour he was active between 1179 and 1195. Like Cunizza, he purified his life by recantation of earthly love following his youth. Of all troubadours he alone achieved Dante's Paradise. Even the examples of great lovers he cites by comparison with himself are all taken from the mythology of antiquity rather than from his contemporaries (*Par.* 9: 97-102).

He speaks the praise of the sole love of God emphasizing the change in the object of his devotion:

\[
\text{Qui si rimira ne l'arte ch'adorna} \\
\text{cotanto effetto, e discernesi 'l bene} \\
\text{per che 'l mondo di su quel di giù torna.} \\
\text{(Par. 9: 106-8)}
\]

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34 After 1195, Folchetto di Marsiglia abandoned worldly cares for the monastic life and ten years later was elected Bishop of Toulouse. He compensated amply for his amorous exploits by becoming a persecutor of heretics and active participant in the Albigensian crusade, see Nicola Zingarelli, *La personalità storica di Folchetto di Marsiglia nella Commedia di Dante* (Bologna, 1899).
As long as his age was conducive to passion (99) he had followed its guidance; but now, passing over the period of his life's transformation, the splendor of the light of God includes him in its brilliance (69). Sublimating human passion into divine love Folchetto remembers his past transgressions only to the extent that he may rejoice in gratitude for divine forgiveness and sing forever of God's mercies. There may be an allusion to the decline of the Crusades in Folchetto's references to the Pope and cardinals whose thoughts no longer run to Nazareth, the holy place (137), and to the saints and martyrs, "la milizia che Pietro seguette" (141). In any case the intensity of his present love of God is that of the temporal loves of his first life. While in Cunizza there remain traces of the compliancy that had formerly succumbed to earthly love (33), in Folchetto we perceive the masculine vigor that had applied itself to the same goal. Both are ingredients of the poetry that exalted woman above all else and, therefore, of misdirected love.

Dante dramatizes the triumph of divine over earthly love in these two Christian souls, mainly in Cunizza who expounds its doctrine. As the pilgrim progresses from her to Folchetto the feeling of conflict between the two loves decreases. The succession of transfigured lovers ends with Rahab, whose strictly poetic place might be with the biblical women in the mystic rose. She is a figure and a type far higher on the ladder of abstraction. Cunizza repented of her past sexuality; Rahab compensated for hers by good action. But here there is nothing to puzzle even a vulgar reader; there is simply a one-to-one relationship between the facts of her story and what they symbolize. Dante claims that when Christ descended into the underworld hers was the first soul that he saved (119-20), and makes it the most luminous (117) of the sphere. In his contemplation of her spirit no mention is made of her iniquitous occupation. Dante does, however, stress by contrast with it the brilliance and limpidity of her present form

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35 Rahab, a prostitute of Jericho, concealed in her house the explorers Joshua sent as an advance guard and thus abetted the fall of Jericho (Joshua 2: 1-24). During the Middle Ages she became a figure of the Church insofar as she favored the prima gloria of the Holy Land.
"come raggio di sole in acqua mera" (114). Now it is tranquil in a Paradise entirely opposed to her tumultuous earthly existence (115).

It is significant that the image of Rahab here has been thoroughly divested of anything resembling sexuality. Her value appears to be entirely symbolic, akin to that of the other Old Testament spirits who appear grouped together in the Rose. Rahab is the last named of the transfigured lovers. By the time the pilgrim hears Folchetto's explanation, nothing remains of any conflict between earthly and divine love among those whose spirits are in Paradise. No more is said of any tempted woman or of any man who succumbed to feminine temptation. The old conflict dies amid the splendor of a realm which is in its entirety a transfigured world. The solution to further questions is forthcoming from Beatrice herself and from the fathers who take over the education of the pilgrim from her.

The evocation of lovers ends with a recantation of earthly love and the denial of sex. The renunciation of the courtly love doctrine, the concretization of the fear of the passion that the feminina balba incarnates, and the tranquilization of the love-conflict by total sublimation in God—all these developments lead to the understanding that the woman of whom Dante writes as a true lover is the one who directs man away from herself and back to the right source of all worship. The power of woman was too strong to be overlooked as it had sometimes been in the earliest productions of medieval fantasy. The Comedy, the most enduring monument of medieval literature, found by effort of will a solution to the problem of woman which was a return to the sublimation of the mother.

The realm of the good mother is that of the good aspect of woman's love. Divested of the sexual role, the influence of the Eternal Feminine is brought into accord with patristic thought and with the aesthetic canons that derive from it. Through the intervention of Beatrice, Mary, and Lucia, the pilgrim returns to the complete absorption in God which he prays may keep him in the remainder of his earthly life. His boundless gratitude in-
eludes among its debts that of liberation from the woman in favor of the Lady, whose existence is dependent upon her subordination to the Father. The transformation of beloved women into maternal figures is accomplished by investing them with an authority used toward God’s glory. These women make no possessive claims nor do they in any respect impair the reason and will of the pilgrim. The use of their power to insure his complete allegiance to the Father is self-effacing, chaste, and humble.

The important women figures and extensions of women, such as allegorical ladies and monsters, can all be plausibly regarded as forms of the bad or good mother. In fact Dante’s imagery of motherhood is among the most realistic and intimate in the Comedy. This work is the culmination of the growth of the mother-image in the Middle Ages. It is with that understanding that one can best comprehend the role in it of the woman and of the Lady.
THE MATERNAL CHARACTER in the Comedy refers not only to a relationship of filiation but also to a complex situation of the mind. Life and death join, according to the Paradiso (Par. 32: 4-6), in the person of Eve. Earlier Thomas Aquinas had explained to the pilgrim that the process of generation was perfect on only two occasions, the creation of Adam and that of Christ (Par. 13: 49-87). That both of these were accomplished without the intermediary of a physical father is instrumental in the creation of the female archetypes in the Comedy.

Eve represents the negative death vessel leading man downward, and the female role becomes reduced to an inferior position. But the female archetype of spiritual ascent appears in the person of Mary. In Dante's poem her white rose is the ultimate flower of light, revealed as the supreme spiritual unfolding of the earthly. Enthroned among evangelists and angels, the Madonna is the incarnation of the feminine as the positive center of activity. Her name resounds in chorus among the elect as a light in the form of a crown surrounds her (Par. 30: 124-26, 31: 28-30). Her beauty, dominating all other beauty, is beyond the poet's descriptive power (Par. 31: 136-38); he regards her with mingled veneration, amorous wonder, and filial abandon. Her light transcends the dark night aspect of the feminine, for though she is a sun, and as such an original source of light, she also shines by the light of God which she reflects. Therefore all the blessed are illuminated by her (Par. 32: 107-8). Both Lucia and Beatrice derive their effectiveness from Mary.
Her way of redemption is entirely consonant with the idea that the salvation of each soul depends upon that soul itself. This way exacts the domination, curtailment, or sacrifice of the instinctual drives. In spite of the divine incarnation of human nature in her Son and his identification with man's inherited sin, the way to redemption is purposeful sacrifice and renunciation, through which individuals ripe for salvation may arise from the flood of a life caught in its own toils. To these elect Mary communicates the nourishing life of the spirit opposing earth-bound materiality. She answers the pilgrim's prayer to her in Purgatory (Purg. 8: 106-9) by battling successfully for him against temptation, sending two angels against the serpent. And when Saint Bernard implores her in favor of the pilgrim, he prays that the supplicant may continue to be protected by her from his own human passions: "Vinca tua guardia i movimenti umani" (Par. 33: 37). It is only with the aid of Mary that the pilgrim can meet the valore infinito of the Father. Before this occurs he has been subjected to a severe examination in the faith administered by male saints (Par. 26, 27). The salvation accorded to him was not obtained solely by the invocation of Mary's name; it was necessary for him to ascend gradually in the knowledge of the true purpose of human life.

Dante employs some forms of amorous expression toward the Virgin, the "bel fiore ch'io sempre invoco / e mane e sera" (Par. 23: 88-89). But the intimacy of this invocation to her becomes bound up with her queenly triumph. Mary occupies the place of intercessor between the pilgrim and the judging Father. Her benign serenity, however, cannot be thought of as the loverlike image which was often lent to her under the influence of mystical devotion. In the moments of her triumph we see her pictured as a mother and a queen, with a loving contemplation virtually devoid of eroticism.

Unlike the miracle-working visitant of legend, Mary in the Comedy is indeed the divine mediatrix but performs her acts of mercy vicariously. She summons Lucia to the aid of the pilgrim (Inf. 2: 97-99), directing from afar his transformation from elementary to superior levels of consciousness. A co-redemptress but not independent of the workings of her Son, she is a kind of
treasurer of divine favor, “quella / ch’ad aprir l’alto amor volse la chiave” (Purg. 10: 42). Her intercession is clearly but a step, though a necessary one, to the Father’s grace:

che qual vuol grazia ed a te non ricorre
sua disianza vuol volar sanz’ ali.

(Par. 33: 14-15)

Rather than eroticism, Bernard’s reference to her in the words of Dante is expressive of chivalrous deference. She is to him “la Regina del ciel, ond’io ardo / tutto d’amor (Par. 31: 100-101). When Bernard takes the place of Beatrice as the pilgrim’s guide, he directs his attention to the most remote circle

tanto che veggi seder la regina
cui questo regno è suddito e devoto.

(Par. 31: 116-17)

She is less a personal focus of adoration than a guide who directs the love of man from herself to the divine Father. Nowhere does she command her Son, as Albertus Magnus had maintained. ¹ As a spiritual mother she actively intervenes primarily in those stages of the pilgrim’s journey in which he manifests an advance­ment from the infantile or puerile state to that of a mature individual. The Heaven over which she presides as empress (Par. 32: 119) is composed of mature spirits, while her name is not pronounced at all in the Inferno. In the celestial realm, which appears to the poet a veritable Rome, the queen may figure the ideals of his political and religious beliefs—the universal Church and Empire. She presides over the appeal but not the jurisdiction of mercy. It is in this capacity that she is addressed by Saint Bernard as “regina, che puoi / ciò che tu vuoli....” (Par. 33: 34-35). But the contemporary belief that attributed to her the effective and direct control of human destiny, and in the case of

Saint Bonaventure turned prayer from God to Mary, ² is not present.

By making the glory of the elect in Paradise take the form of a rose (which is an emblem of Mary) Dante links her triumph with that of the Church. But this identification is far from the position of Albertus Magnus, who suggests that she herself dictated a considerable portion of the gospels to the Evangelists. ³ It is by compassion that the “donna gentil nel ciel” (Inf. 2: 94) may influence into dissolution the hardness of divine judgment and not by directly independent power of action. ⁴ Nor does Dante emphasize the character of the Virgin as chastiser of the obdurately sinful. ⁵ While elements of feudal honor and love-service exist in Dante’s tribute to the Virgin, what he emphasizes is her compensation for Eve and her role as intercessor reconciling man with God.

The concept of Mary as a tender mother is retained. Saint Bernard’s prayer to her in the vernacular contains no word of Latin, and its tone includes notes of great intimacy:

La tua benignità non pur soccorre
a chi domanda, ma molte fiate
liberamente al dimandar precorre.

(Par. 33: 16-18)

She is the protectress of women in childbirth (Purg. 20: 19-21), herself depicted in the role of a humble mother (Par. 8: 84; Purg. 15: 88-92; Purg. 20: 22-24). No longer the static image of probity, she is, however, the redeemer whose purity contrasts violently with the fallen, fragile, and dangerous Eve. Dante’s devotion favors her corporeal assumption into heaven (Par. 25: 127-29) and her divine maternity (Par. 23: 136-37), all of which are suitable to a conception of Mary in direct opposition to human frailty.

² He addressed to Mary the final prayer of the Te Deum, “In te, Domina, speravi.” Saint Bonaventure, “Psalt. majus beatae Mariae Virginis,” Psalm 30, in ibid., p. 123.
⁴ Albertus Magnus, “De laudibus,” 4: 30, in ibid., p. 121.
Never the protectress of sinners, she is the means by which God’s love for humanity was rekindled.

Mary’s virginity includes a general procreative principle which is independent of the personal man. Dante accentuates the paradox that made her the mother of her father and daughter of her son, bearing the male principle by which she was begotten. For the same reason her character of daughter is revealed in the rapt gaze of Anne,

\[ \text{tanto contenta di mirar sua figlia,} \\
\text{che non move occhio per cantare osanna.} \]

\[(\text{Par. 32: 134-35})\]

Dante thus emphasizes the maidenly youthfulness of her purity which makes her the central theme of the prayers of the lustful in Purgatory (\textit{Purg. 25: 127-30}), recalling her reply to the announcing angel, “virum non cognosco.” The Annunciation is the example purifying the sinners of the allied sin of pride (\textit{Purg. 10: 43-45}) by her words “ecce ancilla Dei.” The universal significance of the angel’s message and Mary’s consciousness that she is about to become the Mother of God are inseparably bound up with the motif of supernatural birth.

In his depiction of the heaven of Venus, Dante refers to the god of love who “sedette in grembo a Dido” (\textit{Par. 8: 8}) and chides the ignorant pagan world that did homage not only to Venus but to her mother, Dione, as well as to her son Cupid (\textit{Par. 8: 1-10}). We recall that the two angels who drove off the serpent with their swords in the Antepurgatory “vegnon dal grembo di Maria” (\textit{Purg. 8: 37}) and that subsequently the pilgrim is permitted to enter Purgatory proper with the aid of Lucia, one of the three blessed ladies. As the pagan world \textit{in suo periculo}, \textit{ne l’antico errore} offered sacrificial worship to their goddess of sensual love, the new Christian world owes to Mary a similar homage which would give way only to the supreme God. The lustful who are purging themselves in the singing of “\textit{Summæ Deus dementiae}” (\textit{Purg. 25: 121}) are proclaiming that homage. The classical example of purity upon which the sinners look in their repentance is Diana’s punishment of Callisto “che di Venere avea sentito il toresco” (\textit{Purg. 25: 132}). It is especially with regard
to matters of sexual purity that the bad mother follows somewhat submissively behind the good one. Mary is the queen of heaven and the vessel “che fu albergo del nostro disiro” (Par. 23: 105). The virtues, all of which she mirrors, proceed in some degree from the miracle of the birth of Jesus: her temperance (Purg. 22: 142-44), solicitude (Purg. 18: 100), mildness (Purg. 15: 85-92), and poverty (Purg. 20: 16-22)—in addition to those already mentioned and placed by Dante in the same order in which Saint Bonaventure classified them. 6

The connection of sex with death reappears often, notably in the above example of the world which had done honor to Venus and later accepted the heaven of a temperate love. The good mother is the one who allows the male to emancipate himself from her domination into a world where he can best serve the interests of the patriarchate. Her efforts are directed toward the relative independence of his ego, which soon becomes endowed with attributes such as free will. This release is the contrary of the bond that carnal relations with woman impose. The qualities of womanhood have been sublimated into the sphere of maternal life-and-death giving and all positive elements of existence associated with it.

The role of Mary in the Comedy is instrumental and exemplary to the work’s structure. Dante has emphasized her role of divine intercession for redemption. Much of the human nature formerly attributed to her has been transferred back to women. But the supernatural repression of the sexual impulse which is instrumental to her exaltation is held up to all women and made a condition of their worship. A woman lover in a patriarchate distracts from the one goal of devotion, God: a good mother leads her son to his Father. Giving him over to a man’s world, she guides the immature male to realize under her auspices a part of his potential.

The power of woman could not be overlooked in Dante’s world. At times the matrist response to patrism bordered upon a rebellion not against servitude itself but mainly against the object of that servitude. Where the maternal role is channeled into the

service of the Father, recognition of its powers is associated with benevolence and with firmness of discipline.

In the mother, necessarily, we see the same qualities prized in the young girl or good wife; but in her case they are carried to degrees that encourage extreme admiration. The original bond of motherhood, with its elementary material character, is broken; and the woman becomes a pure feminine spirit transcending all materiality. Then and only then does she follow the path of the Father and become an agent of the spiritual transformation of man's life. This is the role of Dante's Beatrice, who guides the pilgrim through a dangerous journey so that he may achieve moral rebirth. As a consequence, the mother-figure must bear within herself a potential for action that supersedes the weaker light of good qualities in the young girl or wife. Her modesty achieves a triumph of self-effacement; her duty becomes entire dedication; her loyalty, total and undivided; her humility, complete self-sacrifice. Her piety includes the component of intense participation with respect to the male under her guidance, and the entire matter of chastity contains no element of conflict. In this last respect the mother makes no claims at all.

The restrictions attending any consideration of the woman lover do not apply in the case of the mother whose role, however powerful, knows itself subordinate. In the Comedy the minor instances of motherhood are rich in affection and concrete detail. Apart from those scenes of childlike confidence and maternal tenderness that are associated closely with the pilgrim's voyage, the Comedy abounds in images of motherhood which in their concreteness and intimacy display Dante's understanding of the child's initial love for his mother. The blessed in Paradise (Par. 14: 61-66) desire the resurrection of the body not so much for the dead person himself but in order that they may see again those who were dear to them in life. The mother is first among these. The scene is a further step in the purification of love associated with the mother, which in its pristine state Dante dissociates entirely from the desire for worldly goods:

Tale, balbuziendo anchor, digiuna,
che poi divora, con la lingua sciolta,
qualunque cibo per qualunque luna.
The good and beloved mother is represented here as a restraining force against the baser desires of her child. Before his growth into maturity circumstances involving her authority keep him devoted to the simplicity and self-abnegation of the life that she teaches. Gluttony and worldly desire all too often replace this devotion and may even transform the child's love into a wish for his mother's death, which frees him of all restraint in regard to her own worldly possessions. The affection and tenderness of the good mother check material greed. Deprived of her control, the son may easily fall back into the power of cupidity and its attendant sins. At the beckoning of the siren-image, who in this case may be Circe herself, "la bella figlia / di quel ch'apporta mane e lascia sera" 7 (Par. 27: 137-38), the clarity of virtue is soon clouded over by her temptation: "Così si fa la pelle bianca nera" (Par. 27: 136). The potential effect of the bad mother is the concretization of danger.

One of the signs of the bad mother is the withdrawal of her love and all its positive functions from her son. Of all the deprivations involved in this exile, hunger and thirst may not be the greatest. Certainly, in a society composed of separate towns, the loneliness accompanying the pane altrui consumed through the grace of strangers was no less painful than material distress. Yet the idea of the city as a firm entity figures largely in the composition of the Comedy itself. The sinners see their sins exposed not only to themselves but to each other; in Purgatory they repent together.

Florence was Dante's city. To it he felt the passionate attachment everywhere manifest in the Comedy. He never ceased to long for it in exile. But the city appeared to him fickle, cruel, and presumptuous, a center of glib and inhuman politics. His repeated denunciations of Florence remind us of her presence in his most

7 Michele Barbi, in Problemi di critica dantesca (Florence, 1920-1937), offers this conclusion by analogy with the solis filia in the Aeneid (7: 11).
condemning thoughts (see Inf. 15: 78, 16: 75, Purg. 14: 49-51, 64). The city that first produced the “maledetto fiore” (Par. 9: 130) is to him the home of Lucifer, who, like Eve, “pria volse le spalle al suo fattore” (128). The pragmatism of her political life, her flourishing trade and games of force, her rising classes of new men he saw as debilitating influences:

Vedrai te somigliante a quella inferma
che non puo trovar posa in su le piume,
ma con dar volta suo dolore scherma.

(Purg. 6: 149-51)

Accordingly she was devoid of the virtues inherent to the unity of wills, which to Dante was the principal source of political security. Property, suspect from the ascetic point of view because it assumed pleasure in possession and in gain, was moreover a cause of social disruption and generative of the overriding vice of cupidity (see Inf. 12: 49, Purg. 6: 103-5, Par. 27: 121-23). The unbridled desire for earthly goods is to Dante evidence of the disordered will cast about on the mar de l’amor torto:

O cupidigia che i mortali affonde
si sotto te, che nessuno ha podere
di trarre li occhi fuor de le tue onde:

(Par. 27: 121-23)

Governed by the attraction of matter, all growth and change are determined by an aspect of transience whose treachery cuts deeply into man’s rational powers.

Dante reacts to it as to the treachery of a beloved woman upon whom men once could depend. His prophecies of approaching retribution alternate with evocations of a Golden Age. The Florence of old, he writes, was sobria e pudica, like its women, and proudly aware of its ancient origins. Dante attaches great import to the idea of the Roman descent of the Florentines which he claims was treasured by the mothers so different from the sfacciate donne fiorentine of his present. In an Eclogue (1) the whole of Italy becomes an idealized pastoral Sicily with Florence as the coy and obdurate Phyllis. But in the Comedy
this delicate image is superseded by the corporeal and brutal prophecy of Ugo:

Sanz’arme n’esce e solo con la lancia con la qual giostrò Giuda, e quella ponta si ch’a Fiorenza fa scoppiar la pancia.

(Purg. 20: 73-75)

With the lance of treason Florence’s own treacherousness will be rewarded. The poet’s love is now expressed in brokenhearted reproach and in anger at her ingratitude.

In his disillusionment at the deprivation of what he had considered his right, Dante had expressed in the Convivio the fullness of that loss:

Poi che fu piacere de li cittadini de la bellissima e famosissima figlia di Roma, Fiorenza, di gittarmi fuori del suo dolce seno—nel quale nato e nutrito fui in fino al colmo de la vita mia, e nel quale, con buona pace di quella, desidero con tutto lo cuore di riposare l’animo stancato.....

(1: 3)

Cacciaguida’s prophecy to the pilgrim in Paradise (Par. 17) compares Florence to the “spietata e perfida noverca” (47) Phaedra, whose false accusation against Hippolytus had resulted in great part from his own uprightness. The theme of the stepmother first appears with reference to Florence’s refusal to accept the rule of Henry VII.

When Henry came to the city it uncompromisingly closed its gates against him; he subsequently fought Florence with Pisan support. The new moneyed nobility, which looked to the Pope for support, rejected the Emperor, whom Dante had envisioned as a true Christian prince. That the Church proved itself averse to the Emperor is to Dante the underlying cause of Florentine chaos and, indirectly, of his own banishment.

Se la gente ch’al mondo più traligna non fosse stata a Cesare noverca, ma come madre a suo figlio beninga.

(Par. 16: 58-60)
Imperial authority would have prevented the confusion de le persone (67) that was the downfall of the city (68) and the source of its constant changes of fortune. Florence seems to him as it did when Beatrice left it (Vita Nuova 30), widowed and despoiled of all her dignity (Epist. 8). A new Myrrha and a second Amata (Epist. 7), his city has submerged the will and reason of its faithful; and, by attempting to surpass its own power, has lost what authority she formerly possessed. Devouring and possessive, her goals now lie within herself. These traits are prominent among those displayed by the Evil Mother in the Comedy, notably by the Church as it is now represented by the high clergy (see Epist. 8).

The greed and ambition of the clergy, which had destroyed the balance of power between pope and emperor (De Monarchia 3: 10), reduced the beautiful lady (Inf. 19: 57) to a harlot (Purg. 32: 147) whose eyes wander after any man in indiscriminate lust for earthly goods. The bride of Christ who rises “a mattinar lo sposo perché l’ami” (Par. 10: 141), is seen at the same time as the monstrous dominator of peoples (Inf. 19: 104-6) whose insatiability derives from the meretrice that is envy itself (Inf. 13: 64-66). In the symbolic vision of Purgatory the monstrously transformed Curia and the giant form a dramatic image which escapes the confines of arbitrarily symbolic representation (Purg. 32: 148-60).

Had Adam not sinned there would have been no need for institutions such as Church and Empire; they are in the mind of Dante indelibly associated with the work of redemption. The church made the cross of death a tree of life; the vessel of sin became that of spiritual redemption. Now the order of God is threatened by the prostituted Curia who has taken into herself the cupidity that was the cause of sin, thereby robbing the tree of justice. The episode is in that sense the reenactment of original sin itself.

The good mother is predominantly an agent of salvation. Like the mother of Cacciaguida, who is the counterpart to the upright life of the male, she gives birth under the protection of Mary (Par. 17: 133), who gives her the child. Her solicitude extends without limit to his frailty. She sighs over his illness (Par.
and comforts him in times of stress (Par. 22: 4-6), offering not only the passive service of a confidante but the active one of inducing in him right thinking by means of her voice “che l’suol ben disporre” (6). The readiness to sacrifice her own safety for her son is ever-present in times of danger:

come la madre ch’al romore è desta,
e vede presso a sè le fiamme accese,
che prende il figlio e fugge e non s’arresta,
avendo più di lui che di sè cura,
tanto che solo una camicia vesta.

(Inf. 23: 38-42)

Conversely, the bestial transformation of the mother who, blinded by her own hunger, “nel figlio diè di becco,” (Purg. 23: 30) causes her to reassimilate into her own body the child who once left it. This mother, dehumanized by the monstrosity of her need, is represented for eternity by the action that renders her a part of the composite evil threatening the maternal relationship.

Dante includes among his most powerful evocations of women of antiquity bereaved mothers who apparently suffered—far more than their children—the vicissitudes of the fate that separated them: The “doppia tristizia di Iocasta” (Purg. 22: 56) is the appellation by which Dante characterizes the fratricidal conflict of Eteocles and Polyneices. In the Inferno two condensed examples of maternal desperation appear in quick succession: one is that of Ino, who drowned herself when her crazed husband killed their son (Inf. 30: 12); the other is the anguish of Hecuba at the sight of the dead Polyxena:

Ecuba trista, misera e cattiva,
poscia che vide Polissena morta,
e del suo Polidoro in su la riva
del mar si fu la dolorosa accorta,

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8 According to Josephus Flavius in De bello Iudaico libros, Opera, ed. and trans. Thackery (New York: Putnam, 1926-1965) 7: 6, 3, when the Hebrews besieged by Titus in Jerusalem fell victim to famine, one woman among them consumed her own son.

Her torment, described in a doglike howl, is reminiscent of the passion Dante had described in the poem to Pietra, “Così nelle rime voglio esser aspro.” But here the sympathy of the poet manifests itself in the many compassionate epithets he attributes to Hecuba. The sound she utters is as bestial as that of animal longing, but the cause is human. The same compassion is evident in Dante’s evocation of Niobe as the concretization of bereaved motherhood “segnata in su la strada / tra sette e sette tuoi figliuoli spenti!” (Purg. 12: 38-39).

An example of pride among the ancients is Tomyris, queen of the Scythians, who succeeded in destroying the armies of Cyrus of Persia in revenge for his killing her son. She is represented speaking the vainglorious line, “Sangue sitisti, e io di sangue t’empio” (Purg. 12: 57). Significantly there is nothing here of the maternal grief that provoked her action. Yet the episode defines an attitude common to souls in time of war. The single line expresses the tragic hatred of a person more content with the misfortune of another than grieved by her own loss.

Sapia, who appears as an exception among Dante’s women in that she is not represented in direct relationship to specific men or children, harbored in her life the germ of a similar hatred (Purg. 13: 106-29). For an unknown reason envy of her Sienese countrymen led her to pray for their defeat in the battle of Colle Valdelsa, then held by the Florentines. Her characterization seems to prefigure a type of woman to whom Dante does not give much attention. The humorous boldness of her speech, even in repentance, indicates an emancipated middle-class woman uncertain of her place. The courtesy she displays toward the pilgrim is of a robust sort that vividly contrasts with the subdued grace of Pia:

\[
\text{E perché tu non creda ch'io t'inganni,} \\
oni, s'i' fui, com'io ti dico, folle. \\
\text{(Purg. 13: 112-13)}
\]
She displays no confusion or shyness but rather a wry humor at her own expense: “Savia non fui, avvegna che Sapia / fossi chiamata” (109-10). She wears her new humility with an ambiguous awkwardness. Telling of her treacherous prayer she veils it carefully: “E io pregava Iddio di quel ch’è volle” (117).

In describing her joy at the initial defeat of the Sienese, Sapia recognizes it as disproportionate, indicating the unnatural extent of her envy. In an arrogance passing the limits of sense she assumes they were defeated because of her prayer:

Letizia presi a tutte altre dispari,  
tanto ch’io volsi in su l’ardita faccia,  
gridando a Dio: ‘Omai piú non ti temo!  
(Purg. 13: 120-22)

But Dante has classified her sin mainly as one of envy. She has not prayed for her townspeople as a woman should but for the enemy, thereby abandoning in her boldness the unified devotion to a city of loyal mothers.

How different we find the boldness of the poor widow in the episode of the Emperor Trajan (Purg. 10: 76-90)! Her consciousness of her right amidst the splendor of the imperial procession does not seek to challenge imperial authority but, with ingenuous frankness, to enlist its aid. Dante emphasizes her maternal grief and her humble state, using the diminutives vedovella and miserella. Both justice and pity move Trajan to reward the widow’s candid simplicity (93).

The good mother is one who meets the needs of her child; the bad mother, one who is unwilling or unable to do so. The relationship of the pilgrim himself as a spiritual child to his guiding elders bears features of a similar one-sided dependence, as he looks to them for shelter, sustenance and encouragement,

.... come fantolin che ’nver la mamma  
tende la braccia, poi che ’l latte prese.  
(Par. 23: 121-22)

The devotion of the blessed souls to Mary is compared in this way to the first affections of the child who understands that his mother is a source of nourishment. Throughout the Comedy, as
the pilgrim progresses in understanding, the symbolism describing it is of growth.

The death of the old personality necessary to rebirth is denied the condemned in the Inferno. Those whom Dante locates in Purgatory have taken a long road to salvation, but to the pilgrim alone it is vouchsafed for the spiritual aspect of the feminine character to lead him through death to renewal, rebirth, and symbolic immortality. We perceive in him a man possessing a fund of knowledge and worldly accomplishment and abdicating none of these on his eternal voyage: he knows himself favored by God through the blessed ladies, as the recipient of their rare gift. Side by side with the sublimation of these ladies there lies the warning of abasement.

As an introduction to his voyage Dante finds himself lost to bestial powers who do not prove capable of destroying him. The vice of cupidity is represented by the she-wolf whose “bramosa voglia” is never satisfied in her constant mating (Inf. 1: 100) and who would impede the way of all men. Her “fame cupa” recalls the “cupo” of the infernal abyss itself (Inf. 7: 10). She represents dark and abysmal forms of life in the human mind which cause depression, fatigue of the will, and the incapacity for productive work and concentration, which are generally considered negative and life-denying states of consciousness. In the Comedy these states are additionally described by the reified vices of the femmina balba. Both of these signify a temptation to self-dissolution; both exercise the seductive influence which leads to sin and destruction, their female symbolism opposing the active principle of male consciousness.

The capsule life in which the pilgrim is reborn is conceived as a voyage. The Christian hero is a traveler who has lost the straight path by his fault. When he abandoned it he was overcome

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10 The exact symbolic significance of the lonza has not been determined. In a French poem, “Le dit de la Panthere d’Amours of Nicole de Margival,” preceding the Comedy, see Lewis Freeman Mott, The System of Courtly Love (New York, 1965), the panther stands for the lady and its colors for her virtues, for “as the panther has the colors of all other beasts, so this lady has all the graces and virtues of womankind” (pp. 76-77). Dante refers to the “gaietta pelle” of this beast (Inf. 1: 42), who may well represent some form of attraction relegated to feminine imagery.
by sleep, “pien di sonno” (Inf. 1: 12). His forgetfulness is that of a man prey to forces more powerful than himself. Here it additionally signifies surrender to the power of matter. The pilgrim, even as he resumes his way in the next phase of the transition from vice to virtuous life, is aware of the ponderous weight of his body:

Poi ch’ei posato un poco il corpo lasso,
    ripresi via per la piaggia diserta,
    si che ’l piè fermo sempre era ’l più basso.

(Inf. 1: 28-30)

Subsequently we learn that during the night it is impossible to ascend in Purgatory (Purg. 7: 44). The pilgrim is recurrently warned to quicken his step so that he may reach his goal before nightfall “mentre che l’occidente non si annera” (Purg. 27: 61-63). The darkness conducive to the sleep of the soul is seen as a partial threat to the faculties of awareness and movement. It is light that directly motivates action. In the moonlight the stars of Faith, Hope, and Charity are diminished (Purg. 18: 76), signifying a temporary atrophy of the spirit. The nightly recourse to sleep is seen as an emulation of death in the prevalence of matter obedient to fatigue and yielding to the downward pressure of its weight.

E la notte de’ passi con che sale
    fatti avea due nel loco ov’eravamo,
    e ’l terzo già chinava in giuso l’ale;
    quand’io, che meco avea quel d’Adamo,
    vinto dal sonno, in su l’erba inchinai
    la ’ve già tutti e cinque sedavamo.

(Purg. 9: 7-12)

The alluring light of the moon obfuscates that of the stars of virtue just before the dream of the femmina balba (Purg. 18: 76-78). The pilgrim has momentarily absorbed all he could of spiritual enlightenment and stava com’om che sonnolento vana (Purg. 18: 85). Before the dream begins we are acutely conscious of the dangerous potentialities of the nocturnal hours and of the cold that renders the moonlight yet more sinister.
Now the heat of the day is powerless over the moonlight. The moon forms a totality with the background against which it stands. It is connected with the heaviness of sleep and of the earth, as in Virgil’s praising words to Beatrice:

O donna di virtù, sola per cui
l’umana spezie eccede ogni contento
di quel ciel c’ha minor li cerchi sui,

(Inf. 2: 76-78)

“The ‘minor’ sky is the moon,” which encloses the earth and is nearest to it and within which all things are transitory. By contrast Beatrice herself is sometimes referred to as a “sun.” We have observed that in the heaven of the Moon the inconstant souls who dwell there are all women.

The intervention of night, sleep, and the moon are necessary where prolonged contact with the powers of enlightenment and direct action require some liberation from the body in dreams. This intervention illustrates the paradox of all the nocturnal feminine imagery: its transformative powers, usually represented as dangerous, perform in the service of spiritual achievement. The journey to the underworld, which is necessary in order to effect rebirth, comprises the voyage into the unconscious dream-world that marks important stages in the progress of the pilgrim. We recall that “of all created things, the moon is likest the sun, and the brightest after it.” 11

The pilgrim’s swoon at the end of Francesca’s story produces eventual enlightenment. Similarly it is in the hour “che la mente nostra, peregrina / più de la carne e men da’ pensier presa” (Purg. 9: 16-18) that the soul is most receptive to the vision of Lucia, or illuminating grace. The dream of the femmina balba is necessary to the pilgrim’s growth in understanding. Later a dream again forms the prelude to his attainment of the Terrestrial

Paradise (Purg. 27: 94-100), where again he sleeps lulled by the biblical song (Purg. 35: 61-69). When in the final vision of Paradise his state approaches that of a dreamer (Par. 33: 58-60), in his rapture he is incapable of recalling with precision the details of his dream. By then he has beheld the pure aspect of the moon, identified with the chaste Diana,

Vidi la figlia di Latona incensa
senza quell’ombra che mi fu cagione
per che già la credetti rara e densa.

(Par. 22: 139-41)

The face of the moon now turns toward Paradise, as opposed to the view of it from the earth which had previously caused the pilgrim to believe its atmosphere rare and dense. In the symbolism of night, sleep, and the moon, we observe both sides of the feminine transformatory influence: the dark earthly side representing the way downward to earth and mortality, and the celestial aspect leading upward toward immortality and the luminous heavens. A similar contrast exists between the symbolism of the sea as “il mar de l’amor torto” (Purg. 26: 62) and as the brilliant waters which are navigable by the pilgrim’s steadfastness and the poet’s genius (Purg. 1: 1-3). Under the supreme redeeming influence of the Father and the blessed ladies, the perils of the dark side of the feminine, or of the bad mother, are experienced as such in order to be transcended; or they are shown in their life-giving aspec.

L’acqua ch’io prendo già mai non si corse:
Minerva spira, e conducemi Apollo,
e nove Muse mi dimostran l’Orse.

(Par. 2: 7-9)

The role of pagan deities in the Comedy is undoubtedly secondary. They are, however, an instrumental part of the natural landscape and of the cultural environment of the poem. The discord or peace which they may bring about fully serves the intentions of the Christian forces that form its basic structure. As figures of “bad” or “good” female powers they frequently become symbolically indicative of states of consciousness on the part of
the pilgrim. Venus, “lo bel pianeta che d’amar conforta” (Purg. 1: 19), may signify “good” love inciting to purity, as the converse of the perilous earthly love that overcame Cunizza (Par. 9: 33) or the nymph Callisto (Purg. 25: 130-32). The comparison of the lovely vision of Matelda with

.... ninfe che si givan sole
   per le salvatiche ombre, disiando
   qual di veder, qual di fuggir lo sole,
   (Purg. 29: 4-6)

illustrates a play of light and shadow that far from any thought of harmed innocence serves to clarify the atmosphere of the Terrestrial Paradise. Similarly, the evocation of Minerva, the virginal goddess of wisdom, illustrates the growth of the pilgrim and the poet.

Frequently the references to pagan deities are connected with the advancement or use of knowledge and, more specifically, of poetry and creativity. Dante has recognized the generative and nourishing power of the illuminating aspect of the feminine character in the prose commentary of the Vita Nuova and praised it in the Lady Philosophy of the Convivio. In the Comedy this power is accorded to and shared by a variety of feminine representations. Dante endows his Muses with qualities eminently compatible with Christian virtues. They are to him the sacrosante Vergini to whom he as poet offered the appropriate sacrifices of hunger, cold, and long vigils (Purg. 29: 37-39, also Par. 25: 1-3). Their purity incarnates his ideal of poetry mirroring vision. He invokes them repeatedly as a source of inspiration which gives direction to his effort:

   e qui Calliopè alquanto surga,
   seguitando il mio canto....
   (Purg. 1: 9-10)

   e Urania m’aiuti col suo coro
   forti cose a pensar mettere in versi.
   (Purg. 29: 41-42)
The nourishment offered by the Muses extended in its fullest to Homer, "quel greco / che le Muse lattar più ch'altro mai" (Purg. 22: 100-101).

They are the singing, dancing, and prophetic forces to whom in time of need the poet turns for wisdom. Dante's invocation to them, besides stressing their power of conferring fame upon their followers "si ch'io rilevi / le lor figure com'io l'ho concette" (Par. 18: 82-84), implores their illumination. When the poet is actively aware of the discrepancy between man's creative potential and the miraculous nature of the things to which he must apply it, he has recourse to one of the hallowed feminine sources of inspiration.

Another instance in which Dante connects pagan female figures with the pursuit and attainment of knowledge or intellectual power occurs in Beatrice's explanation to the newly purified pilgrim (Purg. 33) of the meaning of the allegory of the Church that he has just witnessed.

\[
\begin{align*}
E & \text{ forse che la mia narrazion buia,} \\
& \text{qual Temi e Sfinge, men ti persuade,} \\
& \text{perch' a lor modo lo intelletto attuia;} \\
& \text{ma tosto fien li fatti le Naiade} \\
& \text{che solveranno questo enigma forte} \\
& \text{sanza danno di pecore o di biade.} \\
& \text{(Purg. 33: 46-51) 12}
\end{align*}
\]

The distinctions between "good" and "bad" knowledge include those arising from the consequences of knowing and their

---

12 The Naiades, nymphs of the terrestrial waters, were said to possess a prophetic gift (Ovid, Metamorphoses 4: 759). Varying interpretations assert that Dante read in his Ovid "Naiades" for "Laïades," or Oedipus, the son of Laius who solved the riddle of the Sphinx (Comedy, ed. Grabher, p. 383); or that according to a myth current among medieval scholars the Naiades did indeed solve a riddle posed by Themis to the Thebans (Fausto Ghisalberti, "L'enigma delle Naiade," Studi danteschi, 16 [1932]: 123). If the second interpretation is correct, Beatrice is comparing the dubious morality of the prophetesses of the ancient world with God's justice dispensed through her own person. By contrast with their intuition her divine prophecy is based on fact. According to this prophecy, the one who will resolve the present predicament of the world will do so without the consequences of war and struggle, the \textit{danno di pecore e di biade} that followed upon the solving of the ancient riddle (Ovid, Metamorphoses, 7: 759-65).
effects on social justice and the relation of the individual soul to the Divinity. Dante evokes the three Fates in the act of spinning and weaving their web (Purg. 21: 25-27; see also Inf. 33: 126, Purg. 25: 79). The work through which they were called klothes or spinstresses by Homer is an expression for the creation of human life itself which is restricted to the feminine principle. 13 In the circle of soothsayers and sorcerers in the Inferno are the witches:

Vedi le triste che lasciaron l'ago
la spuola e 'l fuso, e fecersi 'indivine;
fece malie con erbe e con immo,

(Inf. 20: 121-23)

i.e., women who put aside their rightful feminine occupation, espousing instead the magical art which is the deformed reversal of “good” knowledge. We observe that Dante accuses those who sought not only to know the future but also to cast spells upon enemies by means of herbs and images. Their punishment in the Inferno is that of being forever unable to see directly in front of them, for they must walk with their faces turned toward their backs:

ch'è da le reni era tornato il volto,
ed in dietro venir li convenia,
perchè 'l veder dinanzi era lor torto.

(Inf. 20: 13-15)

The actual practice of witchcraft could often be the expression of an attempt to satisfy lust for power on the part of the oppressed. To the more aggressive among them it offered the direct dramatization of antagonisms. Perceived as a secret and socially disapproved form of influencing the course of events, witchcraft provided a device for relieving unappeased resentments. Dante does not name any of the witches. It is not unlikely that none among them had achieved fame; moreover, as a class of feminelle, they would be unworthy of more detailed mention. However, in the Inferno they are grouped together with the

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negatively renowned figure of Manto, the *vergine cruda* who similarly departed from her feminine role (*Inf.* 20: 82), and is pictured as savage and hideous (*Inf.* 20: 52-54). Manto fled from all human contact (85). The *servi* who aided her in the practice of her illicit arts could well have been spirits rather than actual men. Isolation from society and sanctioned social practices is a condition of the sorceress whose twisted arts ape the mysteries of God. The story of Manto is one of a host of examples that Dante applies as a standing instance of a general moral truth. As a natural symbol of the dark arts she represents, Manto belongs to a cluster of types imparting Christian morality whose interest in the *Comedy* is restricted mainly to the sins or virtues they stand for. The emotion they arouse is unilaterally retributive in character. Manto’s grotesque physical appearance is a moral portrait:

\[ E\text{ quella che ricuopre le mammelle},\]
\[ che tu non vedi, con le treccie sciolte,\]
\[ e ha di là ogni pilosa pelle.\]

(*Inf.* 20: 52-54)

The adjective *cruda*, which Dante applies to her as well as to Eritone (*Inf.* 9: 23), refers to the dehumanized nature of her magic as well as to her person.

The protest against magic is expressed by Virgil, who had been popularly considered a *mago*, or sorcerer, throughout the Middle Ages. In his words on Manto there is an implicit contradiction of that legend.\(^4\) On the way to the circle containing the sorcerers, Virgil proves notably capable of negotiating with ease a steep cliff “che sarebbe a le capre duro varco” (*Inf.* 19: 132) while holding the pilgrim in his arms. Elsewhere Dante names him “quel savio gentil, che tutto seppe” (*Inf.* 7: 3), alluding pointedly to the “good” wisdom which guides the pilgrim and illuminates his way. Any magic power here would refer to Virgil’s poetry itself, which Dante regarded as symbolic. The guiding power of the “famoso saggio” (*Inf.* 1: 89) is that which saved

the pilgrim from the she-wolf and its effect, the contrary of that exercised by the dark powers of vice,

ond' hanno si mutata lor natura
li abitator de la misera valle,
che par che Circe li avesse in pastura.

(Purg. 14: 40-42)

His function insofar as he embodies human reason is to detract the pilgrim from false pursuits. In that spirit he warns the pilgrim against “bad” inquiry into the ways of God by eloquently delineating the limits of human knowledge: “State contenti, umana gente, al quia” (Purg. 3: 37-39). The sorceresses seek to seize a power that is not rightfully theirs to emulate and to triumph over the will of God. Virgil, insofar as he is capable, prepares his charge for the fullest acceptance of that will, constantly opposing the orgiastic and nightmarish forms of the feminine which confront the two on their journey with the steadfastness of a triumphant faith.

Under his benevolent protection the Harpies, chastising those who used violence against themselves, possess no excessive fascination (Inf. 13: 10-15). Though they wield the menacing birds’ claws which embody the rending attributes of the evil feminine aspect, Dante refers to their sad prophecy and plaintive laments (Inf. 13: 12, 15). Where Virgil himself had depicted these monsters in the full regalia of fear, 15 stressing their female characteristics and piercing cries, Dante synthesizes the bestial and the human. This results in a creation that is all the more fearful because it resembles humanity more closely.

The descriptions of monstrous female creatures calling up images of the soul’s potential toward evil out of its own depths are significantly more detailed than those of the feminine beauty that reflects the light of God. In the monsters there is the lack of harmony of proportions whereby all features would fall into an order simultaneously inclusive of all and subordinate to few. The eyes or the smile of the Lady symbolize an entity which we

understand as harmonious. Other features can be surmised and attributed to her by the attentive imagination aided by acquaintance with her prototype. But in the female monsters (as in the male monsters also) each detail taken separately has a life of its own which may conflict with that of other details in a picture lacking a central focus from which an order might otherwise radiate. The result of violently conflicting or disproportionate details taken collectively is the concrete realization of a restless immobility that is a sign of spiritual conflict or turbulence.

The apparition of the Furies (Inf. 9), who implacably persecute the guilty in the underworld with cruel remorse, embodies the terrible characteristics of the evil mother as a deity of vengeance (Inf. 9: 34). They announce one of the most unilaterally sinister visions of the feminine, the coming of Medusa. Simultaneously avengers and incarnations of evil, the Furies are fully assimilated into the Christian hell as a prelude to the circle of heretics (the first in the lower Inferno). Dante urges the reader to look beyond the veil of his verses to the doctrine concealed beneath them (9: 60-61); these words do not by themselves determine the exact symbolism of the Furies or of Medusa. That they are infernal incarnations of evil is manifest in their appearance, which evokes extreme fear on the part of the pilgrim, who presses close to Virgil at the sight of them (51).

The terrifying figure of the Gorgon appears on the scene before a celestial messenger disperses the Furies. But the three snake-entwined apparitions who adumbrate her are sufficient intensifications of the feminine in its most terrible character: the devouring aspect of earth, night, and underworld. Pictured with the familiar snake symbol as an integral part of their bodies they seem all the more demonic, for they are complete representations of the feminine evil principle including elements of the male (see Inf. 25: 115-17).

\[
es e c o n i d r e v e r d i s s i m e e r a n c i n t e ; \\
\text{serpentelli e ceraste avean per crine,} \\
\text{onde le fiere tempie erano avvinte.}
\]

\textit{(Inf. 9: 40-42)}
Dante recalls the episode in the *Aeneid*\(^6\) in which Theseus succeeded in returning from the underworld (54). Again one is simultaneously aware of the kinds of contact and of the gulf between the classical and the Christian hero bent upon salvation. The Furies invoke Medusa, turning downward:

\begin{quote}
"Vegna Medusa: si 'l farem di smalto"
dicevan tutte reguardando in giuso.
\end{quote}

(52-53)

The sight of Medusa may result in the petrifaction of the intellect. The symbol of stone is the obstacle that corrupted human reason opposes to illumination. In his character of human reason Virgil is especially necessary to Dante when the incarnate evil mother threatens to strike his mind with eternal immobility and turn the active faculties of his soul into stony coldness and dryness. Virgil instructs the pilgrim to cover his eyes against the invasion of his will. At the moment when he does so the angel, or divine messenger, descends to reaffirm his salvation. The Furies’ cry of rage and torment is the expression of the desire for revenge. The victory over Medusa dissipates the clouds that threatened to engulf the pilgrim’s determination to proceed on the way set for him by Providence. A purifying wind of superior force shakes the entire setting of the sinister apparition, throwing up clouds of dust,

\begin{quote}
non altrimenti fatto che d’un vento
impetuoso per li avversi ardori,
che fier la selva e sanz’alcun rattento
li rami schianta, abbatte e porta fori.
\end{quote}

(*Inf.* 9: 67-70)

Nothing illustrates better the reestablished servitude of matter to spirit than the wind driving before it all the physical manifestations of evil temptation. The nature of that temptation is probably twofold, one aspect a spiritual philosophic deviation and the other an attraction to carnal sin. These are the two phantoms called into play by the forces of the evil mother.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 6: 392.
The Furies and their Goddess are intimately related to the *femmina balba* (Purg. 19) and to the *sirene* (Purg. 31: 45) of Beatrice’s reproof. Their figurative and literal representations coincide in their mendacious appearances and petrifying power. Significantly, most of these images are conceived as dreams or visions. If we think of the angelic Beatrice as a creation of the will to redemption, it is not difficult to understand the terrible evocations of the evil feminine principle as the compensatory work of the mind bent upon a pure ideal and, consequently, at war with itself. The Lady is not a point of departure but a goal toward which the entire structure aspires until she is reached. The soul on its journey toward redemption must continually reject the temptations of its own earthly desires:

\[\ldots\text{l'anima più passionata, più si unisce a la parte concupiscibile e più abbandona la ragione. Si che allora non giudica come uomo la persona, ma quasi come altro animale pur secondo l'apparenza, non discernendo la veritade.}\]

*(Convivio 3: 10)*

The fear of passion that appears in this statement is also understandable as the fear of misusing philosophical knowledge and constitutes the double nature of Beatrice’s reproof:

\[
\text{Ma perch' io veggio te ne lo 'ntelletto}
\text{fatto di pietra, ed impetrato, tinto,}
\text{si che t' abbaglia il lume del mio detto.}
\]

*(Purg. 33: 73-75)*

Dante’s earlier work, particularly the poems to the *domna pietra* to which his allusion may be connected, often depicted in the desired lady a paradoxical simultaneity of “good” and “evil” factors. Like the poets of the *stil nuovo* which he favored, the early Dante found elements of the Lady in the woman. In the principal feminine personages of the *Comedy* the two sides of feminine nature depart from each other and their roles are

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17 “In psychological terms we speak of the law of compensation by which the unconscious ... through its reactions and its action-determining mechanisms, equalizes the one-sided deviations of the centroverted conscious personality” (Neumann, *The Great Mother*, p. 330).
distributed to different beings. When, in the image of Medusa, the symbol of stone returns in all its coldness, dryness, and bitterness, it is an integral part of the female seen as incarnate evil. The obstacle restraining the pilgrim from salvation is completely transferred outside of himself. But in the poems for the donna pietra, while the poet-lover is bewildered by her cruelty, he recognizes at the same time that her distressing effect is not a result of active effort on her part but rather of the operation of love upon him.

The gloom and darkness of the infernal scene is an intensification of that of the rime pietrose. Paradoxically, this love born in spring evokes constant representations of cold and empty winter. The lover’s alternating humble prayers and vituperations are phenomena arising entirely from his own impulses. The irrepressible physical impulse is accompanied by two others (also attributed to Francesca in Hell), bewilderment and the desire for revenge: “che bell’onor s’acquista in far vendetta” (Rime 104). His passion wounds his virility, and its languor threatens the death of his reason,

\[
\text{nè vo’ tornar; che se ’l martiro è dolce,} \\
\text{la morte de’ passare ogni altro dolce.}
\]

\textit{(Rime 100)}

Cavalcanti’s melancholy appears in the darkness of these poems that announce the dissolution of the soul’s integrity in the \textit{Inferno}.

The struggle goes on with alternate fury and calm without touching the lady herself. She remains the goal of desire and the focus of conflict but in no way participates in or encourages the disturbance. Sometimes Dante pictures himself and the lady as opponents in the battle, but more often the love he desires is treated as a favor withheld by a superior being and residing in her.

\[
\text{Canzone, or che sarà di me nell’altro} \\
dolce tempo novello quando piove} \\
\text{Amore in terra da tutti li cieli?} \\
\text{quando per questi geli} \\
\text{Amore è solo in me, e non altrove?}
\]

\textit{(Rime 100)}
The furious names he calls the lady of the *rime pietrose* reflect a passion “which depended for its happiness on some return from without”¹⁸ as did the far more sublimated feeling for the early Beatrice. With the teeth of love Pietra devours all his senses (*Canzone* 7: 31-32); in the *Vita Nuova*, preceding the refinement of his love, the poet-lover envisions Beatrice consuming his heart (*Vita Nuova*, 3). The voiced fear of showing his love coexists with his cry of resentment against her obduracy:

\[
\text{Ahi angosciosa e dispietata lima} \\
\text{Che sordamente la mia vita scemi,}
\]

and is followed by a more subdued lament:

\[
\text{Che più mi trema il cor qualora io penso} \\
\text{Di lei in parte ov'altre li occhi induca,} \\
\text{Per tema non traluca} \\
\text{Lo mio pensier di fuor che si scopra.} \\
\]

\[(Rime 103)\]

The contrasting expressions are outgrowths of the same fear. The ambivalent character of the *donna pietra* contains the excessive fascination she exercises over the poet-lover and subsequently threatens the disintegration of his will. By the intensification of this process the girl becomes a prefiguration of Medusa. She turns all who look upon her into stone, yet her glance is fatally seductive. The poet who writes of the *donna pietra* is conscious of a mission to which he is rightfully destined and from which he is being detained by sensual love:

\[
\text{Vedete quant'è forte mia ventura,} \\
\text{che fu tra l'altre la mia vita eletta} \\
\text{per dar esempio altrui: c'uom non si metta} \\
\text{a rischio di mirar sua figura.} \\
\]

\[(Rime 89)\]

The plangent beauty of these verses announces the terrible pathos of the Furies’ cry.

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In the *Comedy*, which is the work of the fully mature intellect, emotional resentment has grown into moral condemnation.

"Al pasar la frontera de ultratumba se lleva íntegro su equipaje de pasiones terrenas .... *La Divina Comedia* es ante todo un libro de memorias."  

These relived memories have been recreated in an entity, different from the sum of their parts, which fully embraces the strictures of patriarchal society and thought. The petrified victim of passion is sometimes a woman, as in the apparition of Aglauros:

> ed ecco l'altra con sì gran fracasso,  
> che somigliò tonar che tosto seguì:  
> "Io sono Aglauro che divenni sasso."

 (*Purg.* 14: 137-39)  

The death-cry of her soul concentrates in its thunderous power the anger, impotence, and overwhelming regret of the unsatisfied desire which turned her to stone. Hearing it, the pilgrim clutches Virgil for help, as he did when he heard the cry of the Furies (*Purg.* 14: 140-41).

In certain natural feminine imagery of the *Comedy*, such as nocturnal and lunar symbolism or of the human soul, we perceive the preservation of the ambivalent maternal character contained in one phenomenon. But in the case of individual animate figures, the images of good and evil have been differentiated from each other; for the most part they are not contained in the same person. The Lady of the *stilnovisti* presented a puzzle; the Beatrice of the *Comedy* does not. Any tendency to generate the conditions of wrongdoing has been shunted to the bad mother. The gift of positive transformation belongs to the good mother or the entirely pure Lady.

The evil feminine figure is often a composite of many vices. Thus the fox who represents heresy in the symbolic pageant of the Terrestrial Paradise is described as emaciated as she hurls

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20 Envious of Mercury's love for her sister, Aglauros was changed by him into stone (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2: 708-832).
herself at the chariot: "D'ogni pasto buon parea dignu" (Purg. 32: 120). The relation between concepts, that of heresy and greed in this case, is often not causal but rather one of signification. Symbolic assimilation takes place when two things are found to have some basic properties in common which can be classified under a general principle. Such a common value connects the idea of heresy with that of greed and the image of Medusa with that of the donna pietra, regardless of the manifold distinctive differences between them. The principal images of evil feminine power in the Comedy are products of the transference of evil outside the pilgrim himself. They provoke a passivity of the spirit against which he must constantly react with a constructive will. He cures himself, by stages, of uncertainty, tentativeness, and lack of effort, and achieves the highest contemplation of which a human soul is capable not through immobility and passivity but through activity and striving. This accomplishment is one of the major differences separating Dante from the stilnovisti. Paradoxically, he cures himself of their tender unrest by an unsparing examination of his own thought. The resulting voyage into the deepest reaches of his soul is the product of an organized, constructive will (lacking in the lesser poets) which involves the postulation and realization of a goal. This will requires the uncompromising rejection of all the temptations and impulses ruled over by the material and overbearing feminine side of human nature. Therefore, the acquisition of faith in himself by the pilgrim necessitates a constant surpassing of self that can only be tested by the frequent appearance of challenge and encouraged by benevolent positive forces.

By no means does Dante forgo the refined vocabulary or tender sentiment of his valued contemporaries. But to a considerable extent these are addressed not to the Lady but to male benefactors. Even Beatrice shares love-tribute with patriarchal figures, some of whom take over her work entirely. The ingeniously indifferentiated feelings which the stilnovisti applied to their ladies are carefully sorted out, developed to maturation, and redirected in a well-defined world. Love-language formerly used by secular poets as the expression of adoration of the human-
divine mother figure is used in the *Comedy* in full conformity with the requirements of patriarchal ideals.

The pilgrim speaks in a tender mood with Guido Guinizelli. The poet compares this encounter to a reunion of a long-lost mother with her sons (*Purg.* 26: 94-96). But the meeting with Guinizelli relates also to the praise of other fathers in poetry. No women having a creative poetic function exist in the world of the *Comedy*; the descent of poets is patrilinear. Here the love which, in the poetry of the *stilnovisti* took on a sense of intimate and nearly religious experience, is directed to the same masters of poetic wisdom “qui doctores fuerunt illustres, et vulgarium discretione repleti (*De vulgari eloquencia* 1: 15).

Paradise seen both as an experience of creation and as a document of human salvation is the culmination of the *Comedy*. The spirit selected to perform the service of leading the pilgrim to God in his essence is Saint Bernard, exalted by the poet as a type of contemplation and his spiritual father:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Diffuso era per li occhi e per le gene} \\
\text{di benigna letizia, in atto pio} \\
\text{quale a tenero padre si convene.}
\end{align*}
\]

(*Par.* 31: 61-63)

In this triumphant figure there is nothing of the ambivalence that characterized the meeting with Guinizelli, tainted by the nature of the sin being expiated. Saint Bernard speaks to the pilgrim in courtly language of his loyalty as a servant to Mary and a member of her knighthood. Like Saint Dominic, “l’amoroso dru­do de la fede cristiana” (*Par.* 12: 55-56), he expresses in matryst terms the highest precepts of patristic devotion. Where the pilgrim evokes the luminous spirits of church thinkers who aid his spiritual progress, he has recourse to sweet turns of phrase, referring, for example, to the *cortesia* of Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Bonaventure (*Par.* 12: 142-44), and even to that of God himself (*Par.* 7: 90-91). \(^{21}\) With regard to the language of courtliness and eroticism used in the service of the Father, we easily discern the combined influence of Saint Bernard himself, for the language of

\(^{21}\) In the *Vita Nuova* (7), Dante had referred to God as *sire de la cortesia*. 
his mysticism is that of the feminizing of the soul in relation to God. However corrupted it may be by vice, the human soul may yet return to the chaste love of God by conversion and reform. Its aim must be conformity with the Word. It is compared to a bride who stands in the highest degree of her spouse’s love, renouncing all affections other than his.

This conception of the mystic soul as feminine in relation to its Creator removes even further the possibility of satisfaction in experiencing its own masculinity in relation to another soul. Even Beatrice disappears at the accession of Saint Bernard to guidance of the pilgrim. The rapture of the final poetry of Paradise belongs to a realm where any feminine element other than the single reformed soul itself cannot exist. But the language that expresses its delight is the same as that which once praised the Lady. Now the pilgrim addresses her with relieved gratitude:

\[
\text{Di tante cose quant’i’ ho vedute,} \\
\text{dal tuo podere e da la tua bontate} \\
\text{riconosco la grazia e la virtute.}
\]

\text{(Par. 31: 82-84)}

Adoration has passed from the feminine to the masculine focus; this among other conversions of the soul is perceived as liberation and unity where previously there was servitude and the dispersion of forces:

\[
\text{Tu m’hai di servo tratto a libertate} \\
\text{per tutte quelle vie, per tutt’ i modi} \\
\text{che di ciò fare avei la potestate.}
\]

\text{(Par. 31: 85-87)}

Before the final triumph of the will to redemption occurs, the pilgrim’s way is illustrated for him by several figures who participate in an image of beneficent guidance. For purposes of guidance even Virgil, often referred to as father and teacher, assumes some of the properties of the good mother who is entrusted with the earliest care of the child. Saint Bernard, the triumphant affirmation of patriarchal might and the raptness of the feminine soul in God, is the last masculine guide in the
WOMAN EARTHLY AND DIVINE IN THE “COMEDY” OF DANTE

Comedy, and his appearance is concurrent with the withdrawal of Beatrice.

Virgil is the first guide. It is his mission to bring the pilgrim to Beatrice, who is perceptible as a figure of male consciousness though still a woman. She is a negation of the unconscious feminine, of the dark mother. When in her encounter with the pilgrim (Purg. 30) she stands in judgment over him, he turns toward the absent Virgil, who would then have acted as his intercessor, who has given way to the Lady. Up to the time of the arrival in the Terrestrial Paradise the role of Beatrice has been apparent only through Virgil’s discharge of his mission. Before Virgil can announce that he has accomplished all of which he is capable, he has led the pilgrim through the realms of Hell and Purgatory.

The relationship between the pilgrim and Virgil as it develops in the course of the voyage is scarcely rectilinear, but its limitations are clearly ordered in relation to those of the pilgrim and Beatrice. The pilgrim will eventually pass from Virgil’s natural guidance into Beatrice’s supernatural guidance which derives from God’s grace. The general direction of the relationship to Virgil as they gradually approach Beatrice is that of maternal affection. Not least important in this trend is the pilgrim’s knowledge that he will leave Virgil, transcending the realm which is the furthest Virgil can attain. Within the proportions of human perfectibility Beatrice relies upon Virgil and his poetry for the pilgrim’s moral correction. Virgil is the instrument of the first effort toward everlasting good.

Dante paid tribute to the Aeneid throughout the Comedy, once in the person of Statius (Purg. 21: 97-99) designating it as “mother” and “nurse” of later poetry. The accomplishment of the historical Virgil opened the way to his role in the Comedy and helped to define his fictional personality. Significant among the many reminiscences of Virgil’s poetry in the Comedy is the cry of the angels in Beatrice’s triumph, “Manibus, oh, date lilia plenis” (Purg. 30: 21). In addition to the “beautiful style” (Inf. 1: 87), the deep attachment to Latin soil, and the concentration

22 Virgil, Aeneid, 6: 883. Here Dante turns the funeral song for Marcellus into a song of triumph, negating Virgil’s intent.
of the highest culture of his time which Dante found in the *Aeneid*, his reading also interpreted what he perceived as a profound and prophetic religiousness. Virgil had described the realm of the dead. He had paved the way for later poets of sentimental love. But among the values that Dante synthesizes in him, the highest are bound up with the sense of mission that founded the Roman Empire and with the faith in the future life that Christian allegory attributed to him. The fourth *Eclogue* was interpreted as a prophecy of the coming of Christ (*Purg.* 22: 67-73).

Dante emphasizes the bond between Virgil and his Italian origin. The Mantuan Sordello addresses him: “O gloria de' Latin... per cui / mostrò ciò che potea la lingua nostra” (*Purg.* 7: 16-18). Alluding to the poetry itself as mother and nurse, maker and preserver, Dante calls Virgil “nostra maggior musa” (*Par.* 15: 26). He is an indirect link in the chain. Until the threshold of Purgatory is reached and Beatrice appears, challenging and reproving, benevolent father images take a subordinate place in the pilgrim’s journey. It often appears from Virgil’s point of view as if the culmination of the journey would indeed occur in the meeting with Beatrice, to whom Virgil refers all questions that he is unable to answer himself. Whatever his other merits, he remains painfully conscious that he will never sit among the blessed fathers in Paradise, for his fault is not of a nature that allows for purgation. We do not even glimpse through his eyes the realm where those who triumphed in the faith are rewarded. He is excluded from this vision of patristic glory though he leads the pilgrim toward it.

Dante may have intended to exonerate Virgil from the medieval legend of his sorcery or black magic when he put in Virgil’s mouth the denunciation of sorceresses (*Inf.* 20: 121-23). This point regarding an aspect of the evil mother coincides with others that describe a beneficent maternal figure working in the interest of right magic. Another episode relevant to the conception of Virgil’s role as maternal is that of Medusa and the Furies. Preceding the arrival of the divine messenger, he himself covers the pilgrim’s eyes (*Inf.* 9: 58-60). Within the limits allotted to him,
he enjoys considerable authority over the child whom he knows will eventually surpass him in the attainment of divine grace.

The *Aeneid* was a maternal and creative inspiration to Dante. The fictionalized personality of Virgil becomes representative of many of the qualities valued and stressed in the mother figure. Even in the *Inferno*, where his influence as leader and teacher is exercised over a pupil far more passive than the pilgrim in Purgatory, there are many instances of his ministrations to the needs of his charge that are expressive of maternal feeling. Their first encounter begins with the cry of the protagonist in the “selva oscura, ‘Miserere di me’” (Inf. 1: 65). Virgil appears as his “maestro” and “autore” (Inf. 1: 85), incarnating the grandeur and austerity of ancient Rome and the glory of his poetic achievement. Nevertheless, his attitude toward the protagonist is almost immediately protective:

\[
\text{Ond’ io per lo tuo me’ penso e discerno}
\]
\[
\text{che tu mi segui, e io sarò tua guida,}
\]
\[
\text{e trarrotti di qui per luogo eterno.}
\]
\[
\text{(Inf. 1: 112-14)}
\]

Virgil not only stands between the protagonist and Beatrice but between the natural and supernatural spiritual realms. He must encourage the first steps of the protagonist in the capacity of a patient master who stands close to his charge. Beatrice will not participate actively in the first phase of the journey, which the protagonist still fears. It is to Virgil that he must abandon all distrust (Inf. 3: 14) and into whose hands he must give himself up. Early in the journey Virgil first addresses him as “son” (Inf. 3: 121); at this point the protagonist must be constantly braced against fear (Inf. 3: 131, 7: 5, 8: 104).

He calls to Virgil in the manner of a child, “Dimmi, maestro mio, dimmi, signore” (Inf. 4: 46) and experiences bewilderment and abandonment when Virgil must leave him temporarily (Inf. 8: 109-11), even though he has been reassured that he will not be left alone in the “mondo basso” (Inf. 8: 108).

The progress of the relationship tends more strongly toward the maternal direction as they approach the lowest reaches of the *Inferno*. The arms of Virgil are a constant guard and protection.
His charge must often be carried from place to place. On the back of the monster Geryon he holds tightly onto Virgil (Inf. 17: 95-97), who had trembled as with fever when told to mount by himself (Inf. 17: 80-84): “Con le braccia m’avvinse e mi sostenne” (Inf. 17: 96). The docile protagonist continues to be governed by Virgil’s will and protected by his tenderness in Malebolge, where he is carried about by him and pronounces hardly a word without his approval (Inf. 19: 37-39): “Lo buon maestro ancor de la sua anca / non mi dispuose” (43-45). Virgil listens as if he were a proud parent while his charge berates the unworthy popes among the simonists (Inf. 19: 121-23). Then with tender solicitude he again lifts him up:

```
Però con ambo le braccia mi prese;
e poi che tutto su mi s’ebbe al petto,
rimontò per la via onde discese.
Nè si stancò d’avermi a sè distretto.
```

(124-27)

Foremost is his care in alleviating the difficulties of his charge, making his journey easier and guarding him from danger. He protects him against demons as well as against his internalized fears (Inf. 21: 127). Sometimes he is even able to foresee and incorporate the protagonist’s thoughts among his own. He is quick to perceive his fears and to act upon them with a maternal intuition.

```
Lo duca mio di subito mi prese,
come la madre ch’al romore è desta
e vede presso a sè le fiamme accese,
che prende il figlio e fugge e non s’arresta,
avendo più di lui che di sè cura.
```

(Inf. 23: 37-41)

Dante writes that the protagonist is carried as a son, not as a companion (Inf. 23: 51). Though he calls Virgil “maestro” again in these lines, he has already compared him to a mother and attributed to him a maternal course of action.

On one occasion Virgil reproves the protagonist for listening attentively to the dialogue between two damned souls in the
circle of falsifiers of their own persons (Inf. 30: 142-48). He warns him thereafter to stay by his side, the better to keep away from such talk, “che voler ciò udire è bassa voglia” (Inf. 30: 148). As early as the arrival of the messo celeste succeeding the Furies (Inf. 9: 87), Virgil had instructed his charge in manners, exhorting him to be still and to bow. His manner remains indulgent but firm throughout.

Physical contact between the master and his pupil acquires a character of reassurance and tenderness amid the terrors of the deepest Inferno. As they arrive in the lowest bolgia Virgil takes the protagonist by the hand, “caramente” (Inf. 31: 28). The protagonist requires the tangible reminder of Virgil’s presence. They are held as one in the hands of the giant Antaeus. To allay the protagonist’s terror Virgil stays close by him (Inf. 31: 133-35). In the last canto of the Inferno, Virgil’s pupil continues to cling to him (Inf. 34: 8-9) with a terror that the writer claims he can still recall. Virgil no longer appears the august representative of eternal virtues but “il maestro, ansando com’uom lasso” (Inf. 34: 83) as he deposes his charge on the way out of Hell.

As he comes to himself after his experience in Hell the protagonist turned pilgrim must make a new beginning in a projected new life. Though he is not literally a child, he has assumed in these unfamiliar realms the bewilderment and docile manners of childhood. None of the formal knowledge of the adult can direct him in this world or restrict the flow of various feelings and impulses to which he is prey. He responds to outward direction, therefore, with immediacy and promptness. Amid the intimacy and introspection of Purgatorio the interaction of Virgil and the protagonist becomes more tender. The epithet dolce is frequently attributed to Virgil, preceding such august appellations as maestro, patre, pedagogo, duca, signor mio. The calmer rhythm and increased sense of freedom in Purgatory are conducive to a more complete satisfaction of the pilgrim’s desire for knowledge. Virgil’s function is characterized not so much by the need to protect his charge and alleviate his fears, but by its instructive and constructive components. He can still read the changing expressions on the face of the pilgrim but does so in order to satisfy his growing need to understand and to mature spiritually.
His role of leader gives way in large degree to that of interpreter and becomes less authoritarian, for *Purgatorio* is in a sense less his own than the *Inferno* had been. His tender solicitude and grave anxiety regarding his charge are less expressive of absolute certainty and absolute protectiveness. In the *Inferno* and as he awakens on the first day of his voyage in Purgatory, the protagonist is like a child; later in the *Purgatorio* he becomes a youth and the role of Virgil as rescuer undergoes attrition. The dependence of the protagonist upon Virgil is of a different nature. It may be generally characterized as that of a maternal figure about to give up the matured child.

At the outset Virgil takes a subordinate position when faced with Cato, the guardian of Purgatory, a father-figure much sterner than Virgil himself had been. Once again Virgil instructs the protagonist to show reverence (*Purg. 1: 49-51*). He is as awed by Cato as the pilgrim himself and apologetically makes his excuses (*Purg. 1: 52-54*)

\[
\text{Si com’ io dissi, fui mandato ad esso per lui campare; e non li era altra via che questa per la quale i’mi son messo.}
\]

\[
(Purg. 1: 61-63)
\]

He is rebuked by Cato for invoking the name of Marzia in his plea and sternly instructed to cleanse the pilgrim from the darkness of hell. He does so with his own hands (*Purg. 1: 124-26*).

Though Virgil appears submissive in relation to Cato and his ministrations to the pilgrim are very much those of a watchful mother, he is not representative of any of the regressive tendencies that indicate the immoral, bad mother. He constantly encourages the pilgrim in active morality, the exact opposite of the pliable and facile Siren:

\[
\text{Vien dietro a me, e lascia dir le genti:}
\]

\[
\text{sta come torre ferma che non crolla già mai la cima per soffiar de’ venti.}
\]

\[
(Purg. 5: 13-15)
\]

Dante often puts into Virgil’s mouth words that remind the pilgrim of heaven and God:
Virgil does not cease to be in the strictest sense a father-figure; he is repeatedly called “father” by the pilgrim (Purg. 13: 35, 17: 82, 18: 7) as well as “alto dottore” and “maestro” (Purg. 18: 2, 10). But the pilgrim in Purgatory is undergoing a development which, translated into the terms of earthly life, would take many years. Under these circumstances Virgil must emphasize different aspects of his role at different times: displaying the traits of both parents and of a teacher, explaining matters to his charge in small amounts as the need occurs, and hovering over him at other times with solicitous caution. The manhood the pilgrim attains is that of humanity in its maximum natural capacity. In Paradise he will learn of the highest things from Beatrice and from the saints and doctors of the church. The role of Virgil is best seen in its limitations by comparison with these. One of its greatest sources of power is the closeness of the association which distinguishes it from any other relationship directly touching the protagonist of the Comedy. Dante calls Virgil “lo più che padre” (Purg. 23: 4) in acknowledgement of that difference between Virgil and the other fathers. In Paradise, in the company of his august ancestor Cacciaguida, the pilgrim recalls prophecies made to him

mentre ch’io era a Virgilio congiunto
su per lo monte che l’anime cura
e discendendo nel mondo defunto.

(Par. 17: 19-21)

This closeness reassures the pilgrim in the earthquake which liberated the soul of Statius: “Non dubbiar, mentr’io ti guido” (Purg. 20: 135). At his most severe, Virgil never elicited from the pilgrim any fear comparable to that which he experiences at the sight of Saint Paul, with his glittering sword in the procession of the Terrestrial Paradise (Purg. 29: 139-41).

The pilgrim goes through the purifying fire, which is the final penitence of all the souls in Purgatory, only under Virgil’s
exhortations and repeated promises of the coming encounter with Beatrice. When the pilgrim complies with his request, Virgil smiles “come al fanciul si fa ch’è vinto al pome” (Purg. 27: 45), having urged him in the plural, which is so often used in speaking to children, “Come? / volenci star di qua?” (43-44). Virgil must see him through this crisis, constantly encouraging him to test his protective capacity:

Ricorditi, ricorditi! E se io
sovresso Gerion ti guidai salvo,
che farò ora presso più a Dio?
(Purg. 27: 22-24)

and his own experience:

E se tu forse credi ch’io t’inganni,
fatti ver lei, e fatti far credenza
con le tue mani al lembo de’ tuoi panni.
(Purg. 27: 28-30)

Even after the pilgrim has entered the fire, Virgil continues to comfort him, holding up to him the promise of seeing Beatrice’s eyes (Purg. 27: 52-54).

Upon their meeting, Beatrice’s beauty and inflexible virtue strike the pilgrim a hard blow (Purg. 30: 40-42); he turns to Virgil and finds that he has disappeared:

Volsimi a la sinistra col rispetto
col quale il fantolin corre a la mamma,
quando ha paura o quando egli è afflitto.
(Purg. 30: 43-45)

He speaks of Beatrice’s effect upon him in Virgil’s own words: “Conosco i segni de l’antica fiamma” (48). The cluster of reminiscences of Virgil’s poetry and of Eve, as well as the comparison of himself to the child running to his mother for help,

23 Ibid., 4: 23.
appears at the moment the pilgrim realizes that he has left Virgil for Beatrice. Her hard words to him further emphasize the loss that the pilgrim has just sustained and the equally hard truth that his redemption is not complete.

Virgil has been succeeded by the *spada* of Beatrice (57): the memory and reproach of his period of sin. It would seem as if all the journey had to begin anew. Dante follows this introduction to the final redemption of the pilgrim, with the evocation of Beatrice as an admiral at the prow of a ship (58-60). By contrast with her authoritativeness, Virgil's aspect had indeed seemed that of a counseling and comforting mother. Now he has surrendered his charge into the hands of a direct emissary of the patristic world. However feminine she may be, Beatrice is a representative of a realm in which the mother is important but not uppermost. Virgil, though a *patre* to the last (*Purg*. 30: 50), possessed a great many of these qualities in addition to the basic function of the enlightened mother. It will become apparent that Beatrice similarly possesses significantly masculine attributes of character in the *Comedy*, particularly when she confronts Virgil's recently dismissed pupil. Arriving in the Terrestrial Paradise, Virgil admitted to the pilgrim that from there on he was no longer able to guide him (*Purg*. 28: 127-29), indeed, that his guidance would no longer be necessary. And as they watch the holy procession file past, Virgil's wonder is as strong as the pilgrim's:

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Io mi rivolsi d'ammirazion pieno
al buon Virgilio, ed esso mi rispuose
con vista carca di stupor non meno.
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(*Purg*. 29: 55-57)

That moment has found them virtual equals. It is clear that Virgil has nothing more to teach and that the pilgrim has grown to a spiritual stature quite similar to his own. It is the final moment that they spend together in awareness of one another's presence. The last image we have of Virgil is of his bewilderment when confronted by the blessed of Paradise. In the patristic realm of which Dante writes, all of his ethical qualities and august achievements in poetry cannot earn him a part. It is no wonder that he partakes to so great an extent in the qualities of the mother
which are in themselves largely excluded from this realm, and
that Beatrice subsequently becomes so much a figure of male
consciousness.

In the Comedy Beatrice is represented as a blessed creature
watching over the welfare of an individual man still living the
hard life of the world. While she incarnates divine perfection
she is transfigured in her earthly form. Yet a comparison of Dante's
Lady with the Laura of Petrarch's sonnet "Levommi il pensier" 24
would provide a demonstration of how Dante's concept inevitably
renders Beatrice transcendent of her feminine beauty. Petrarch's
io is transported to the sphere of Venus where Laura retains her
attraction in explicitly sensuous terms, while Beatrice is from the
beginning cast in terms of timeless inaccessibility. The later vision
is directed entirely to the beloved woman herself; the earlier, to
her Creator. The splendor she displays is referred to Him. Thus
love of her becomes caritas. Emotion passes into a rational virtue,
which is the pilgrim's strength and the salvation of his spirit. Her
light becomes the guiding star of his moral life and the supreme
aspiration of his art.

Beatrice is a moving force of the Comedy. It is she who sends
Virgil to the protagonist's aid, admits him purified into the
Terrestrial Paradise, and guides him in the celestial spheres.
She generates a love whose authority demands humility and
charity. Even judging her by her effect upon the protagonist, it
would be difficult to doubt her real womanhood. We recall that
the pilgrim in Purgatory about to pass through the last purgative
fires is persuaded to enter only by the promise of meeting her.
Even Virgil's reassurance that now his charge is nearer to God
than when he had guided him on the back of Geryon is insuffi­
cient:

Quando mi vide star pur fermo e duro,
turbato un poco, disse: "Or vedi, figlio:
tra Beatrice e te è questo muro."

(Purg. 27: 34-36)

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24 Number 302, in Francesco Petrarca, Il Canzoniere e i Trionfi, ed.
This produces the immediate and desired reaction. The pilgrim plunges into the fire which purges lust. Along with the femininity of Beatrice we are bound to accept the conflict of which she relieves him and the weight of the lust which she removes from him.

The protagonist’s return to God is accomplished through Beatrice, though her mission concerning him begins in Heaven with a salutation and ends on earth with a smile. He does not deviate from his initial wonder and adoration, nor does he take the step toward physical desire; her aspect is continually expressed as a light transcending visible expression. The fulfillment she herself provides contains no finality of finite contentment. The pilgrim faces God directly after having confronted many male saints, well after Beatrice has stepped aside and taken her place among the other blessed, giving way to those with functions still higher than her own. But Beatrice alone among women (except for the Virgin Mary) is like a sun lighting the way to ever-increasing growth.

The journey accomplished through Beatrice is a rebirth in spiritual salvation and creative wisdom. Beatrice is still the liberating force of Dante’s creative powers, as she was from the first poems of his real youth. Indeed, his love may be “directed far less toward the beloved woman than toward the work which she inspires—in short, it is the poet’s love for the woman whose presence liberates his genius and makes his song burst forth.” 25 Dante presents his hero in the process of rebirth, often rendering his words childlike, but he remains the skillful poet preoccupied with his own creativity. When Beatrice unveils her face in the Terrestrial Paradise, Dante emphasizes the effect of her appearance not mainly upon the lover, but upon the poet, and dwells on the difficulty of describing it accurately:

O isplendor di viva luce eterna,
chi pallido si fece sotto l’ombra
si di Parnaso, o bevve in sua cisterna,
che non paresse aver la mente ingombra,
tentando a render te qual tu paresti

Her light has the power to transform the man entrusted to her care. She manifests the beneficent aspect of the maternal transformative character which transcends the earth-night unconscious aspect of the forbidden feminine. This transcendence enables the genius of the individual to come forth in full display, unhindered by guilt or by any deviation from singleness of purpose. Beatrice is a creature of that part of the personality which strives for the fullest development of creativity. As such she is a constant source of spiritual nourishment and a revered principle of nature:

Come l’augello, intra l’amate fronde,
posato al nido de’ suoi dolci nati
la notte che le cose ci nasconde,
che, per veder li aspetti disiati
e per trovar lo cibo onde li pasca,
in che gravi labor li sono aggrati,
previene il tempo in su aperta frasca,
e con ardente affetto il sole aspetta,
ﬁso guardando pur che l’alba nasca;
insieme alla donna mia stava eretta
e attenta . . . .

(Par. 23: 1-11)

Dante has represented her as a giver of sustenance. This mother-ﬁgure does not betoken a regression to infantilism on the part of her dependent, in which an adult becomes a child or is moved by nostalgia for a mother’s love. Rather, the protagonist experiences the Lady as a symbol of the life upon which he depends as man and poet. There is a strong relation between the imagery of wisdom and that of food, for the creative rebirth and growth have been accomplished through the beneficent feminine principle. In the Comedy the natural thirst for knowledge is satisﬁed only by revealed truth. Beatrice, as well as all the blessed souls in Paradise, possesses that superior knowledge which she also represents. Good knowledge and the good mother cooperate in the salvation of the protagonist’s soul. In the poetic representation of Beatrice’s triumphant accomplishment and of her subsidence into
the framework of the patriarchal world, Dante infuses enduring elements of the poetry considered most noble in his time and constituting the triumph of his creative powers over all moral obstacles.

The love that the pilgrim feels for the transfigured Lady and finds again in the Terrestrial Paradise is of a nostalgic character. The nostalgia is for a past in which Beatrice did not knowingly or actively participate. The sex impulse had been deflected from her. It would have been unthinkable for Beatrice to be made to feel any physical desire for a man. It has been said that Dante's hero does not take the step to desire "because the story is trying to tell us something about that part of love which is not expressed or resolved in physical embraces." This suggestion alone would scarcely explain why physical embraces, real, imagined, or potential, needed to be excluded entirely. Rather, the exclusion of physical love between Dante and Beatrice is the outcome of a long process, the inception and maturation of a relationship that may most profitably be discussed in terms of its effect on poetry.

Beatrice is the mother of love in the Dante-hero. Accordingly, his soul, under the influence of love, becomes feminine and the bearer of love. According to the poetic doctrine of courtly love upon which Dante was nurtured, the lover naturally took a subordinate position with respect to his lady, an acknowledged superior. It is no wonder that something masterful appears among their qualities. This commanding presence has passed on to Beatrice, heightening her effect as a figure of moral rectitude and male aspirations. Upon her lyric personality Dante superimposes martial, pedagogic, and clerical elements which may be perceived as a threat to her divinely feminine beauty. Even before the meeting in the Terrestrial Paradise she had been referred to as teacher and guide rather than as the eternally remembered earthly love (Purg. 15: 76-78, 18: 46-48, 73-75). "Her learned and denunciatory speeches are less suited for the pilgrim's 'sweet guide and dear' than for some learned man." 

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As one of the supporting pillars of the *Comedy*, Beatrice incorporates elements that delineate her as a woman and also as revealed truth, theology, the church triumphant—or even as a figure of Christ himself. But the groundwork for the manifold (and often disturbing) triumph of Beatrice was laid by poets who idealized the lady as the final goal of all their aspirations and posited her as a superior force. One has only to remember the masculine qualities of character attributed to the *domina* and the mental procedures which easily create analogies even between physically unlike things. Poets used martial similes in adoration of the ladies who took the place in poetry of the liege lord. “When the military conceit is used ... the lady has arrows and javelins and other warlike equipment constantly at her command. She looks like an angel; but this angel is in permanent ambush, there is a bent bow in her eyes, and woe to him who stops one of her glances.”

It is natural that Beatrice, who points the way to a male world dominated by the Father, should sometimes appear and speak in the language of men; and that this tendency should most often manifest itself among the complicated glories of the *Paradiso* and in those higher reaches nearest to the doctors and saints of the Church. It is the more natural in that sex has been decisively eliminated from her role and sublimated into aspirations toward values associated with the individual male. This is the result of a process that ends in the avoidance of woman as well as the transfiguration and triumph of the Lady.

In a large part of the *Vita Nuova* the elementary feminine character still dominates the spiritual transformative potential of the Lady. Gradually it throws off that domination to assume its own independent form in the *Comedy*. As Dante represents her even in the early stages of his love, the superiority of Beatrice is tantamount to his own excellence as a poet-lover. He is properly jealous of his secret in accordance with the dictates of love codes. Others speaking to his lady, he tells us, called her *beatrice* without knowing her name (*Vita Nuova* 2). In the scene in which Beatrice appears accompanied by her friends, her divinity in the

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midst of their humanity is immediately in evidence. Her poet advises other ladies to seek her out so that they may admire her (Vita Nuova 21). Her saluto is immediately perceived as both salutation and salvation. The exaltation of noble character over noble origin, which began with the early troubadours and was developed and greatly emphasized by the stilnovisti, becomes in the case of Beatrice the exaltation of divine origin over everything, completely leveling the common criteria of materialism.

The connection between disinterested caritas and refinement of poetic expression becomes more and more a matter of pride to the poet. Deprived of exalted class status, he could still love in a noble manner. The desire to excel in poetic achievement that had appeared prominently among the troubadours continued with equal strength in the stilnovisti, further divesting poetry of materialism and of material love-expression. Dante represents the ultimate phase of this tendency: for him, the love of God disembodied from all other loves becomes the unique goal and object.

Dante was himself aware of the innovations he was making in Italian poetry by emphasizing the moral qualifications that set him apart from lesser poets and incorporating them into his concept of love. The need to surpass himself is very much a part of his poetic striving even in his early work.

E questo dubbio è impossibile a solvere a chi non fosse in simile grado fedele d’Amore.

(Vita Nuova 14)

The romantic idealism and the somewhat self-conscious heroism that are apparent in the Vita Nuova derive to some degree from the ambition and deliberation with which the new nobility set about evolving the idea of its own honor. Like the exchanges of sonnets among the poets, which amounted often to contests in the art of love-service, Dante brings a new aristocracy to the picture of idealizing love. To a higher degree than earlier poets he appears to measure the quality of love by its success in eliminating sensuality.

The role of Beatrice defines itself principally as that of actualizing in her admirer the moral qualities through love. The
poet expresses triumph at having passed the early stages of love without becoming ensnared by secondary loves. Beatrice's transformative character begins where his love no longer requires any sign of reciprocity from her and where the direction of love changes from her to God. Instead of the courteous mandates which bind the heart of the true lover, the suggestions operating within his soul become all-important. 29

The course of love that Dante chooses to follow with regard to Beatrice is a search for an absolutism of love embracing a will to perfection. He maintains the hallowed troubadour convention of the poet who has loved his lady from the first day he saw her and scarcely deviated from her for a moment. In the Comedy he expresses the wishful thought that his love has always been constant (Purg. 33: 91-93). It is at the height of her powers over him that he has lost Beatrice. From the time of the mirabile visione she will remain unchallenged and his allegiance to her will be restated to apply retroactively.

To keep faith with perfection is to break faith with imperfection. This state of mind carried within itself its own fatal and perpetual agitation. If love is movement seeking rest in union with the beloved one, there can be no union between a natural man and a miracle's dazzling presence. From the beginning Dante treated his love for Beatrice as unique. While he had corresponded with his friends about other loves that he had in common with them, he stated that his love for Beatrice was a secret which others might try to discover in vain, for he was obdurate in hiding it entirely (Vita Nuova 4).

Dante's love appears early to exalt in the privation of all sensual satisfaction. He depicts Beatrice constantly accompanied by other ladies, by Love, and by members of her family, but never alone. Soon his desire loses as its object the corporeal person, and the physical afflictions of love disappear. It is after her expression of disdain for him and the refusal of her greeting that his greatest love begins. The pain that the denial of the

29 At most times Dante took care that his words were understood in a noncarnal sense: after stating that the mouth is the object of love he adds that the salutation, which is the operation of the mouth, is the end of his desires while he is permitted to receive it (Vita Nuova 19).
greeting gives him is very acute; but for that reason it demonstrates to him the magnitude and depth of his sentiment and his need to nourish it forever. This love will give free rein to the song inside the lover and most completely stimulate his creative powers. In no way can this happiness fail him, for it exalts within his soul the luminous creature of the imagination (Vita Nuova 18). Thanks to the god of love, he has succeeded in effecting an avoidance of the lady which could only be of benefit to him. To him it reveals an order leading to God and to the only love, in fact, which would require no recantation before God. As this happiness may be allowed to arise freely and to flow out in poetry, love no longer appears to the poet in the guise of sadness. The lover is in effect the source of his own happiness. One who loves in this way cannot commit a base action without betraying his lady and rendering himself unworthy to love.

Now his love has advanced toward its perfection, as it will be after the final step—the death of Beatrice—has been accomplished: the departure from earthly love to caritas as heaven wills it. Soon the god of love, which had appeared to the poet-lover, loses his authority; love developing in the direction of Heaven must be ruled by the God of Charity Himself.

It is finally through the death of Beatrice that her poet escapes the confines of the condition of human love and is led to the source of eternal life. Even in the phase where his love had no longer searched for outward gratification in Beatrice's greeting, it had continued to depend on the sensory contemplation of her beauty.

The contradictions aroused even by the contemplation of a beautiful woman in life could only be resolved by her removal: "certainly it was blameless to love the beauty of a disembodied spirit . . . the best thing a lady could do for her lover was to die." 30 By her death it was proved that in her immortal state the Lady disembodied from her womanhood could be the bearer of a felicity that triumphed over the limitations of nature.

As soon as he speaks of the death of his lady, Dante attains a power of utterance that is new indeed. Without a break he

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carries his praise of her into heaven. There is no apparent change in the relationship at all. And it is a benign God who takes Beatrice to him from earth

perchè vedea ch'esta vita noiosa
non era degna di sì gentil cosa.

(Vita Nuova 31)

Her death is peaceful; there is no mention of illness or of a failure of strength that might have caused it. The poet prays for the grace of joining her in Paradise. Had Beatrice not died, her poet might well have had to invent her death. Only by the destruction of earthly matter does the Lady now stand finally in her most clearly inaccessible position, on the summit of the ladder toward luminous immateriality, which, according to the poet, would be the supreme desire of all creatures yearning to attain God.

The Lady, whose brief life rejects the turmoil of the world and who exists to bear witness to the love of God for his creatures, is the ultimate solution to the problem of the continued existence of woman in patristic literature. She does remain between the lover and God, but in her transformative illuminating character only. She is a Lady at the expense of being a woman, an illuminating Mother-figure at the expense of being a lover. It is not surprising that Petrarch and succeeding poets until the revival of Neo-Platonism return to woman and the conflicts she presents for them.

That Dante connected his exalted conception of the lady with his highest poetic triumph may well be an important reason for Beatrice’s position as one of the moving forces of the Comedy. In troubadour love the poetry retained its sensual and erotic character; embellished physical attraction was said to effect the moral betterment of the personality. Among the stilnovisti love was nourished by smiles, looks, and minuscule intimations of communicated feeling, even though, as Nardi puts it,

I rimatori del secolo XIII s’arrestano in generale sul limite imposto alla poesia dal freno dell’arte, e, quasi temessero di profanare la bellezza vagheggiata colla fantasia, non menan mai vanto di ciò che tacere è bello. 31

31 Bruno Nardi, Dante e la cultura medioevale (Bari, 1949), p. 86.
Dante said the last word on the transfigured lady of his mind, and primacy in the poetry of transcendent love passed to him undeniably. Beatrice is the ultimate outcome of a collective representation of the Lady and is experienced as an exterior and living thing, with an autonomous reality and a way of life.

The *Comedy* is partly the story of a reacquisition of faith in self. It is against the background of love, journeying, apparitions, punishments, and delights that the self of the protagonist is chiefly portrayed. The Lady becomes the principal direct agent of the growth of this self. As her role changes, her own personality undergoes corresponding transformations. When she first appears to Virgil to plead on the protagonist's behalf, her words are softly reminiscent of the *stil nuovo* and newly express a color and life that the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova* did not yet possess:

Vegno di loco ove tornar disio;  
amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare.  

(*Inf*. 2: 71-72)

As she assumes the responsibility of the salvation of the protagonist, she displays qualities of initiative and protectiveness which are not necessarily the part of the inaccessible Lady—who is the motionless object of static adoration—but rather that of a worried mother upon whom her charge depends. Her tears move Virgil to promptness in his appearance to the protagonist (116-17). Virgil assures him that with the protection of the three blessed ladies he has nothing to fear from the journey (121-25). But Beatrice speaks as a gentle maiden in a voice "soave e piana" (56).

And when the pilgrim meets her at last, his reaction is nostalgic: the words "Conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma" may refer to the moving moment of the first revelation of her beauty, which he has yearned to see again, as a child desires an apple (*Purg*. 27: 45-46). But this beauty is always expressed in terms of incorporeal light. Beatrice is exalted upon the chariot drawn by the Gryphon whose double nature signifies the two natures of Christ. She is saluted by the hymn "Benedictus qui venis." The pilgrim sees in her a splendor greater than he had expected. The Beatrice he meets again after a "decenne sete" (*Purg*. 32: 2)
is the dazzling, triumphant vision crowned with divine knowledge, a reality that is in a sense far less vague and subdued than the ideal Lady kept alive in the solitude of the poet’s mind. She represents the divine truth which to Dante is a supreme reality. It is no wonder that the pilgrim experiences a complicated physical reaction containing a large admixture of fear; his dream has been surpassed and eclipsed. He lapses into passivity and into a childlike state of mind.

Tosto che ne la vista mi percosse
l’alta virtù che già m’avea trafitto
prima ch’io fuor di puerizia fosse.

(Purg. 30: 41-42)

Her presence still produces an unendurably strong effect upon him. But it is a part of Beatrice’s function to turn the mind of the pilgrim toward the vision that awaits him, and this means the definitive purgation of all contrary impulses. Beatrice immediately sets about correcting anything in the pilgrim’s attitude toward her which does not betoken readiness by the processes of exacting confession and contrition. Since it was the function of priests to hear confessions, it is not surprising that Beatrice in her role of confessor and judge acquires more than a little mastery and masculinity. She, who in a soft voice had assigned Virgil the mission of showing the protagonist the terrors of hell, is the Lady we meet again, still like a mother. But now, “regalmente ne l’atto ancor proterva” (Purg. 30: 70), she accuses the sinner amid the heavenly court of angels intoning *In te Domine speravi*. She is also a godly figure. At the irony which Dante puts into her words, the pilgrim falls at her feet overcome by remorse and fear. The immediacy of his guilt and the shame of his sin are at one with the fantasy of the poet. The transition to this Beatrice is shocking but never unreal. The poet, through Beatrice, becomes his own accuser and judge. The pilgrim is humble before Beatrice as the poet is before God. Since the conditions of pardon are knowledge of sin, confession, contrition, and humility, the pilgrim must experience all these before he is lifted up into the celestial spheres. Since the rules of earthly convention do not apply in Heaven, Beatrice, who is herself a plaintiff, may also act as judge;
because as she has implied, the passions and miseries of lesser mortals do not touch her (Inf. 2: 91-93). She makes it clear that in some personal way she has been betrayed and that the pilgrim's accedence to his own baser desires effected on his part a conscious withdrawal from her.  

Between the sinner and his adored lady, between her resplendent truth and his darkened humanity tainted with evil, there is a gulf of sin. The nature of that sin is twofold, a lapse in thought and in deed. His unfaithfulness was to pure theology and to the Lady herself. In both ways he failed to live up to the potential that the voice of his conscience had marked out for him. Therefore, the connection was lost between his love for the Lady and the love she represented.

It is probable that Dante had leaned toward Averroism, which denied the individual immortality of man, thereby denying also the entire basis of man's redemption and purification, the source from which such a figure asBeatrice derives her most profound significance. When they meet Beatrice, Dante the man and his pilgrim are most closely associated. In the De Monarchia, for example, Dante had justified the independence of imperial authority from the ecclesiastical. With this argument alone he pitched himself against medieval theological tradition. His sin in thought was a sin against Beatrice as revealed truth; his sin in action was probably a corresponding sensuality to which he succumbed. Certainly to abandon himself to sensuality was to succumb to a rival representation of femininity as well as to other ladies.

Beatrice accuses the pilgrim of indifference to her after her death, implicitly including her own physical beauty among the "imagini di ben false" (Purg. 30: 131) which he subsequently followed. She dwells on her efforts after becoming pure spirit to remind the sinner of his true purpose, to prepare himself for the pursuit of heavenly things while abjuring false secondary goods. Certainly there is no difficulty in perceiving the allegorical significance of Beatrice's reproaches, but in the poetry these appear

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32 This meeting can be read also on the plane of earthly convention: that of the jilted woman who exacts the man's excuses and humbles him before readmitting him to her favor.
subsidiary to the personal anger of the Lady or mother who has been superseded by the woman.

Quando di carne a spirto era salita,  
e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m’era,  
fu’io a lui men cara e men gradita;  
e volse i passi suoi per via non vera.

(Purg. 30: 127-30)

The characteristics most apparent in her speech and carriage denote the authority which the approbation of patriarchal thought has accorded her. Her words are like a sword (57), and she becomes a sword-bearer no less frightening than Saint Paul in the triumphal procession, speaking “per punta” and “per taglio” (Purg. 31: 2-3) with unrelenting continuity (4). The pilgrim breaks into sobs like a bow snapping from excessive tension (16-18). Beatrice continues to expound the evangelical patristic view of life as a battle. The element speaking in her is the man of war to whom Dante compares her and who is capable of confronting any storm without fear while expecting the same of others.

Quai fossi attraversati o quai catene  
trovasti, per che del passare innanzi  
dovessi cosí spogliar la spene?

(Purg. 31: 25-27)

The Lady speaking in a man’s words deliberately represents a femininity that denies the validity of the power of sexual attraction. At her repeated scoldings the pilgrim stands as one helpless:

Era la mia virtù tanto confusa,  
che la voce si mosse, e pría si spense  
che da li organi suoi fosse dischiusa.

(7-9)

Beatrice emphasizes the appropriateness of this shame and fear, demonstrating the necessity for confession.\textsuperscript{33} Her words burn

\textsuperscript{33} Saint Thomas Aquinas “insisted more strongly than his predecessors on the necessity of contrition for forgotten as well as remembered sins”;
further into the consciousness of the pilgrim who is still in the process of learning the remorse that henceforth must become a part of his development.

Tuttavia, perché mo vergogna porte
del tuo errore, e perché altra volta,
udendo le sirene, sie più forte,
pone più il seme del piangere ed ascolta.

(43-46)

Not before his contrition is wholehearted can the pilgrim be bathed in Lethe, the river of forgetfulness of sin. In rough words she declares that confession under such circumstances blunts the sword of justice:

Ma quando scoppia de la propria gota
l'accusa del peccato, in nostra corte
rivolge sè contra 'l taglio la rota.

(40-42)

One is to understand that the pilgrim is being rescued from unworthy passions by the purity of Beatrice. He falls at her feet when she judges him not “as a dead body falls,” but with a pervading feeling of liberation:

Tanta riconoscenza il cor mi mors,
ch'io caddi vinto; e quale allora femmi,
salsi colei che la cagion mi porse.

(88-90)

His gratitude for the victory over the flesh which she has gained for him is a cathartic experience. She has taken his humiliation and confession in exchange for relief, his tears in exchange for consolation, and his shame for definitive rehabilitation. His experience was both mortifying and purifying. Just as the harshness of the good mother is always moved by affection for her child, so Beatrice has brought him mercilessly through a painful but salutary process. She has reconstructed his moral character in order that he may attain the highest degree of blessedness and qualify

for a position in a patriarchal world. Unlike the *pargoletta*, thoughts of whom had clipped the wings of the pilgrim's will (*Purg.* 31: 58) Beatrice gives him strength for the flight of his will to heaven (*Par.* 15: 53-54); she is referred to as

\dots\qua la pia che guidò le penne 
delle mie ali a così alto volo.

(*Par.* 25: 49-50; see also 71-72)

We have perceived the opposite image of the salutary mother-figure in many of the monstrous representations of femininity in the *Comedy*: the extreme magnifying of the *donna pietra* in the Furies and the Medusa; the dangers of aesthetically pleasing earthly goods in Francesca; along with the poetry and music that exalts them, the repugnance of black magic in the sorceresses; and the epitome of vice in the dream of the *femmina balba*. The Beatrice of the *Comedy* appears as well aware as her creator of the ever-present rivalry of those apparitions with her own way. In fact she requires the aid of the beautiful lady of the Terrestrial Paradise, Matelda, for the final effectuation of a moral Eden for the pilgrim. Before he can begin to comprehend the gravity of her message to him he must be made to experience and understand what the greatest earthly delights really are. Beatrice's exalted position does not allow her to act as intermediary between the earthly and the divine.

Even when she has completed her task as confessor and giver of absolution, Beatrice retains her character as divine emissary. The pilgrim newly come to her pardon cannot take his grateful eyes from her countenance; soon he hears a *Troppo fisol* from the heavenly chorus (*Purg.* 32: 7-9). In the tableau that summarizes the sad history of the Church, Beatrice stands near the tree of good and evil where Eve had been judged. One is reminded that she, Beatrice, has triumphed over the serpent and its attractions and that she participates in the nature of the sanctity of Mary.

E Beatrice, sospirosa e pia,
quelle ascoltava si fatta, che poco
più a la croce si cambiò Maria.

(*Purg.* 33: 4)
One recalls the connection between the pilgrim’s desire to reach her and the desired fruit which caused him to leap into the purgative fires (Purg. 27: 45-46)

Ed ella a me: “Da tema e da vergogna voglio che tu omai ti disviluppe.

(Purg. 33: 31-32)

Now she addresses the pilgrim in more soothing accents, inviting him to rid himself of the knot of fear and shame that would impede his free questioning.

In Paradise, as might well have been expected in view of the self-admitted difficulty of rendering both it and the increased insight on the part of the traveler, we find the greater part of Dante’s specific references to his poetic creativity. The regained selfhood of the pilgrim bears the fruit of renewed inspiration. We learn that throughout her ascent with him Beatrice’s physical beauty constantly increases in his sight. However, triumphant as she was in the Terrestrial Paradise, as lovely as she appeared amid the darkness of Hell, she is to some extent effaced among the dignitaries of Paradise. It is chiefly in those intermediary places of the Comedy which exact some special degree of introspection from the pilgrim that Beatrice shines with her own light, more beautiful the more closely she approaches God. It is always apparent that Divinity is working through her, attenuating the power of celestial rays by contact with her.

Much of the splendor of the patriarchal Heaven passes to her by analogy. The dominant and positive male symbol of the sun is used to designate her. The *sol iustitiae* of Scripture \(^{34}\) shines upon the mountain of Purgatory; Beatrice in her triumph appeared in the figure of the rising sun. In the *Paradiso* Dante calls her the sun that first kindled the pilgrim’s love (Par. 3: 1-3).

In many other instances she is identified with male roles and mastery. Her command over the pilgrim is as nearly absolute, perhaps even more so, than Virgil’s had been. Early in the heavenly portion of the journey she performs a physical experiment in

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the manner of a scientist (Par. 2: 64-108), which the pilgrim watches respectfully, straining to catch and comprehend her words, grateful for the truths whose dolce aspetto she has uncovered for him, “provando e riprovando” (Par. 3: 3). She lectures him on free will (Par. 4: 16, 5: 19), immortality (Par. 7: 19), the evils of the world (Par. 27: 106-48), and the angels (28: 98-139) and speaks like a man who does not interrupt his discourse (Par. 5: 17). As in the Purgatorio several of her figures of speech are martial. She mentions the bow and arrow (Par. 1: 119, 4: 69, 29: 24) three times, the poop and bow of a ship (Par. 27: 46) and the shield and lance once (Par. 29: 114). Her allusions are to saintly men rather than women; she mentions no female saints but refers to Plato and to theologians (Par. 4: 24, 49; 28: 130). She has been called a “heavenly schoolmistress.” 35 Since the pilgrim is expected to emancipate himself even from her dominion, it is natural that Beatrice prepares him to profit from experiences such as the meeting with Cacciaguida or the confrontation with the Warriors of the Cross (Par. 18).

Early in the journey through the Inferno Virgil tells the protagonist that when he is before Beatrice he will learn of his future in the world: “Da lei saprai di tua vita il viaggio” (Inf. 10: 132). But it is really Cacciaguida who enlightens him (Par. 17). This ancestor is an example of manly virtue; one observes the continuing importance to Dante of the hereditary family. The grave words regarding the pilgrim’s future life belong to the male who is a privileged descendent of ancient Florence. Beatrice stands by while he announces the hard fate of exile, discomfort, and bitterness that awaits her charge. Civil cares are clearly reserved for the man’s world of succession where the pilgrim fits into a long line. The Roman picture that Cacciaguida gives of Florence in former times is expressive of the integrity and concord which are prized among the valiant warriors of Paradise. As soon as Cacciaguida invites the visitor to speak his mind,

La voce tua, sicura, balda e lieta
suoni la volontà, suoni il disio,

(Par. 15: 68-69)

we understand that he too is a sun (Par. 15: 76-78). The pilgrim is dazzled by two lights: in Beatrice’s eyes and in his (Par. 15: 32-33).

Beatrice’s role is that of the comforting mother, turning the thoughts of her charge once more to divine justice when struck by ominous tidings and relieving the weight of the injustice visited upon him.

Tanto poss’io di quel punto ridire, 
che rimirando lei, lo mio affetto
libero fu da ogni altro desìre.

(Par. 18: 14-15)

She releases him from care, including the desire for vengeance over his oppressors, assuring him that she is “presso a colui ch’ogni torto disgrava” (Par. 18: 6) and may act as his advocate with God, sustaining him by her prayers. She supplants the father-figure Cacciaguida in watching over the state of mind of her charge and representing at the same time an area of feeling removed from earthly preoccupations. Cacciaguida has introduced the pilgrim to a world of reason and civil probity, to images of more noble times, and also to the event of his exile. The pure theology and pure love that Beatrice represents will outlast these contingencies. However, they place her undeniably outside the pale of reason and a vast world over which she possesses no control.

The pilgrim gazes at her transcendent beauty which reflects the divine rays until Beatrice orders him to turn from this contemplation to behold the warriors of the Cross:

Vincendo me col lume d’un sorriso,
ella mi disse: “Volgiti ed ascolta,
che non pur ne’ miei occhi è Paradiso.”

(Par. 18: 19-21)

A man must seek beatitude not only in the contemplation of divine beauty and even of theological truth but in following the examples set by valiant men. The progress to mature male consciousness must include the confrontation with exemplary male images. Named by Cacciaguida, the famed spirits of Mars flash across the pilgrim’s mind like soldiers moving to battle at the word
of command or the call of the trumpet. These spirits are influenced by the celestial virtues that control the heaven of valor to emulate divine fortitude. The pilgrim himself will in his hopes graduate to a similar autonomy and independence from the fatal, feminine, earthly elements in his nature. Beatrice plays no direct part in this kind of learning other than directing the pilgrim’s attention to it. In the Paradiso she is more than ever the mother preparing to surrender her child, wielding her command the better to relinquish it.

Her eyes as they turn toward her still inexperienced charge contain the look a mother casts upon her delirious child (Par. 1: 100-102), though her rebuke is sharp and pointed. She smiles tolerantly at his boyish thought:

"Non ti maravigliar perch’io sorrida"
mi disse “appresso il tuo pueril coto,
poi sopra ’l vero ancor lo piē non fida.”

(Par. 3: 26-28)

The reverence that he feels for her name (Par. 7: 13) rarely moves him to speak except with her approbation or to address other spirits without her permission (see, for example, Par. 9: 74). She is to him:

.... quella ond’io aspetto il come e il quando
del dire e del tacer....

(Par. 21: 46-47)

He looks to her for understanding of his duty. At such times her light eclipses all other surrounding light (Par. 18: 52-57). Saint Peter calls her his holy sister as his spirit whirls triumphantly around her (Par. 14: 28-30). But like a mother she does not forget to anticipate the needs of her charge, she thinks first of his release to liberty.

Io mi volsi a Beatrice, e quella udio
pria ch’io parlassi, e arrisemi un cenno
che fece crescer l’ali al voler mio.

(Par. 15: 70-72; see also 15: 53-54)
In spite of the *frate* with which she often addresses the pilgrim (*Par. 4: 100, 7: 58, 130*) in the spirit of a holy company, Beatrice does not definitely part in any decisive manner from the feminine lineaments of her protective role. The poet makes sure that the nostalgically adoring language of the *stil nuovo* continues to sing her praises with a renewed freedom in Paradise. He refers to his eyes as the gates through which she first entered with a fire from which he still burns (*Par. 26*), and reiterates the loyalty of his lifelong devotion to her. From the first his song has never been detached from her (*Par. 30: 28-30*). Her eyes provide a rope for his entrapment by love (*Par. 28: 12*). She is as always a miracle (*Par. 18: 63*), and even a goddess (*Par. 4: 118*). The vocabulary of love and praise never dies out when he concentrates upon her. When, in the episode of Cacciaguida, she smiles in the manner of the lady of Arthurian romance whose discreet cough heralds the revelation of Lancelot’s love (*Par. 16: 13-15*), we experience the Christian purification of courtly reminiscence. Her smile, which reminds the pilgrim absorbed in his conversation with Cacciaguida of her continued presence, has no courtly intention. It may well warn the pilgrim that she has perceived the element of vainglory in his noble ancestry that prompted him to use the formal *voi* to Cacciaguida. But an allusion to romance describes her manner as similar to that of the lady of Malehaut, in the midst of the patriarchal discourse involving men’s concerns.

The language of courtly devotion is particularly adaptable to a love such as Dante expresses for Beatrice in the *Paradiso*. It puts a desired distance between the physically inaccessible Lady and her suppliant. She may be indispensable to his happiness and even to his health. Dante alludes to the healing power of Beatrice:

> .... la donna che per questa dia
> region ti conduce, ha ne lo sguardo
> la virtù ch’ebbe la man d’Anania.

(*Par. 26: 10-12*)

But in relation to her the poet-lover is as helpless as a child at the mercy of his goddess. Certainly, Beatrice’s goddesslike qualities are clearly seen as subordinate to divinity; but with regard to the poet-lover’s dependence upon her ministrations, he stands
to her in a relationship involving the fear of an inferior toward a superior, the son to the mother.

At the same time she is the maternal focal point to which the pilgrim has recourse in times of other fear or stress, “come parvol che ricorre / sempre colà dove più si confida” (Par. 22: 2-3). While in the eighth heaven the pilgrim is stupefied by the thunderous cry that emanates from the contemplative saints of the sphere after Pier Damiano’s burning satire on evil pastors, he turns for reassurance to Beatrice’s eyes. The vengeance of the revealed God represented by his angry emissary is too much to bear alone:

\[
\text{e quella, come madre che soccorre} \\
\text{subito al figlio palido e anelo} \\
\text{con la sua voce, che il suol ben disporre,} \\
\text{mi disse: “Non sai tu che tu se’ in cielo?”} \\
(\text{Par. 22: 4-7})
\]

Her fervent prayer merges with that of the other blessed in supplication to Mary (Par. 23: 38-39) for the ultimate salvation of her charge.

\[
\text{Ancor ti priego, regina, che puoi} \\
\text{ciò che tu vuoli, che conservi sani,} \\
\text{dopo tanto veder, li affetti suoi.} \\
(\text{Par. 33: 34-36})
\]

Yet it is true that “the word \textit{donna} applied to her often indicates ‘mistress’ rather than simply ‘lady.’” \textsuperscript{36}

Several times her dazzling image is obscured from the pilgrim’s sight or awareness by the greater light of spirits closer to God in semblance and function. Amid the thanks to God delivered up by the spirits in the fourth heaven, she is entirely eclipsed in the pilgrim’s mind:

\[
\text{e si tutto ’l mio amore in lui si mise,} \\
\text{che Beatrice eclissò ne l’oblio.} \\
(\text{Par. 10: 59-60})
\]

\textsuperscript{36} Gilbert, \textit{Dante’s Conception of Justice}, p. 147.
Later the splendor of Saint John the Evangelist obscures Beatrice from his view:

Ahi quanto ne la mente mi commossi,
quando mi volsi per veder Beatrice,
per non poter veder, ben che io fossi
presso di lei, e nel mondo felice!

(Par. 25: 136-39)

In both cases the yet incompletely initiated pilgrim experiences some surprise at the workings of divinity which obscure so powerful a light as his lady's. But the poet places particular emphasis on her subordination to male figures of the patriarchal world. When at the accomplishment of her full mission, Beatrice disappears to take her place among the many blessed of Paradise. She is seen no longer as the weeping young girl pleading in the Inferno, nor as the regal lady on the sacred mount of Purgatory, nor as a celestial guide. In fact she is scarcely seen at all but as one of the group on a petal of the Mystic Rose whose voice is lost in the chorus invoking the salvation of God. Saint Bernard counsels the pilgrim to keep his eyes on Heaven in order to prepare himself for the final vision.

The Lady who alone called the pilgrim by name and lifted him to the celestial spheres is now as far from him as a heavenly being is from a mortal man:

Così orai; e quella, sì lontana
come parea, sorrise e riguardommi;
poi si tornò a l' eterna fontana.

(Par. 31: 91-93)

He appears as grateful for her present remoteness as for her past nearness to him. His gratitude goes out to her along with the supplication that she, or the idea of her, may keep him pure. He has attained a liberty which he desires to keep in the world:

Dal tuo podere e da la tua bontate
riconosco la grazia e la virtute.

(Par. 31: 83-84)
In order that he may die in the purity which the soul can render only to God, he prays that the purgation of all other desire in him may remain constant. The entire prayer is the paean of a soul in reconciliation with itself and a dual conquest of moral rectitude and creative triumph. The Lady of his mind has effected in him the highest possible transformation. Because these miraculous events have occurred he is now able to write of them. In the same sense as in the *Vita Nuova*, the *Comedy* begins with its end.

The *Paradiso* begins with the invocation to God and also to the poet’s own creative power, which approaches here its highest test (*Par.* 1: 28-33). The supreme effort to depict the glories of eternity is directed toward the disembodiment of the concrete and the finite. It was observed that to Dante the “knot” which hampered lesser poets consisted of a sensuality that limited the poetry of love to worldly things. The idea of Beatrice has freed her poetic lover from any such impediment. Sensuality regarding her as its object being forbidden even as a son’s sensuality toward his mother, she has moved her poet to sing an entirely new song in her praise and to supersede her with those who rightly do so in the heavenly order. He has triumphed over death with death’s aid, and throughout the peregrinations of his mind his Lady is never defiled. The poetry of love has been severed from the flesh at the dire expense of the woman, but to the greater glory of the angelic Lady, to whom her follower stands in a filial relation. The relationship in the *Comedy* between the protagonist and Beatrice marks the ultimate refinement of true love to the point where the maternal component remains to the exclusion of the sensual.

It remains for us to contemplate Matelda, the example of womanhood in the *Comedy* who, amid the powerful tensions of love-striving, miraculously approaches the ideal of fulfilled life on earth. Her enigmatic identity has inspired many conjectures, not all of which are guided by the understanding that she is an integral part of the Terrestrial Paradise. What must interest us here is the harmony of morals and art that she personifies and her allegorical rather than historical significance.

The landscape of the Terrestrial Paradise in which she meets the pilgrim fuses the charms of nature with the graces of a perfect
inner life. It is a state of the soul, that of the highest blessedness attainable on earth. Matelda figures the condition of justice which the first people enjoyed before their fall. She is at first apparently unaware of the pilgrim’s presence as she gathers flowers without changing her rhythmic step. She comes toward him, across a flowering meadow, in a slow dance that resembles a ritual, singing like a woman in love (Purg. 29: 1). She immediately reminds the wondering pilgrim of Proserpina when she lost her mother (Purg. 28: 49-51). His speech to her is immediately courtly:

"Deh, bella donna, che a’ raggi d’amore
ti scaldi, s’i’ vo’credere a’ sembianti
che soglion esser testimon del core...."

(Purg. 28: 43-45)

Her gait is like that of a dancing lady, a “vergine che li occhi onesti avvalli” (57) as she contents his humble request to approach more closely. She typifies the ideal beauty of the stilnovisti in action. The pilgrim is reminded of Venus, and of Hero and Leander. His mind newly come to ethical maturity is allowed to obey a deep and direct awareness of her loveliness. His reaction to her illustrates the first moment of the perception of beauty which precedes all subsequent desire for it. This episode is neither repressed nor inhibited but charmed as in a dream and caught in the wonder of disembodied sensory perception. The immediacy of admiration that overcomes the pilgrim is captured in the simplicity and ingenuousness of feeling which characterizes the most successful poetry of the stil novo. Matelda is never separated from the enchanted scene around her. The color and melody that surround her are also a part of the landscape as she moves forward

cantando e scegliendo fior da fiore
ond’era pinta tutta la sua via.

(Purg. 28: 41-42)

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37 It has been pointed out by Singleton (Journey, pp. 214-16) that the traits of the shepherdess of the pastorella appear in her but without the ambivalent connotations peculiar to that genre.
Her exceeding joy, expressed allegorically in the psalm “Delectasti me, Domine, in factura tua,” lies in the works of God. Thus the “aura dolce sanza mutamento” (Purg. 28: 7) rightfully encloses her in the peace that Francesca longed for in the Inferno. In this state of poetic innocence the pilgrim may watch her with delight as, by no means devoid of seductiveness, she even raises her eyes to his; and he compares the effect of her action to the light of Venus’ eyes on Cupid when she was pierced by his arrow (Purg. 28: 64-66). She does this upon reaching the spot where the waters of the stream that separates her from the pilgrim touch the delicate vegetation. Both plants and water are fraught with a particular destiny over which she presides as custodian.

Matelda behaves in a manner that is infallibly courteous. Indeed, the Terrestrial Paradise is a refuge of courtesy—if courtesy may be seen to include acts of delicacy, generosity, and gentleness. The joy in her song is of a love which is referred to God, but mediated by his creations. Her dance is a further revelation of that joy, a purposeful return on the part of the poet to primeval innocence and pleasure in Creation. Sensual and mystic elements join in the dance, which is a disciplined and harmonious movement involving the fusion of lovely sound and physical grace.\(^{38}\) Such accord may well symbolize the harmony of purified affections since in Paradise the souls of the blessed dance. Matelda, before she speaks of herself, directs the pilgrim’s attention to the scene around him, which she carefully explains. One understands through her words and movements the internal harmony of the blessed soul and its perfect fusion of moral virtues. This understanding occurs entirely through her appearance and behavior. In her presence the immediate experience of feminine charm is the paramount motif.

The Terrestrial Paradise, lost by man because of his sin (Purg. 28: 94-96), offered him the freedom in innocent pleasure which was most conducive to the enjoyment of beauty and under circumstances that entailed no harm or punishment. It was a realm

\(^{38}\) One is reminded of the call to the dance of Jacopone da Todi:

Ciascuno amante che ama il Signore
venga alla danza cantando d'amore.

(\textit{Laudi} 203)
free of fear. Matelda, unlike Beatrice, inspires no fear. She contains man's potential for love devoid of temptation or remorse. Her explanation is not accompanied by futile weeping but rather by an evaluation of the good which was lost after the infancy of the world was past.

Matelda is an instrument of purification and pardon. According to the literal meaning of Dante's words, the pilgrim experiences desire for her, hating the waters that keep them apart. But in no sense does the pilgrim come to possess Matelda, who soon steps out of the focus of desire. She, too, is the handmaiden of the patriarchal world. But since the pilgrim's desires by the moment of her appearance have been conditioned into accord with patriarchal moral strictures, there is no conflict between the movement of his thoughts and their right direction.

Matelda, the precursor of Beatrice, represents those delights which man may yet experience in the world, the perfection of the active life that was prefigured by the pilgrim's dream of Leah and Rachel (Purg. 27: 94-108). Unlike Beatrice she is a survivor of the Golden Age, with whose poets she appears intimately acquainted:

\[
\text{Quelli ch'anticamente poetaro} \\
\text{Età de l'oro e suo stato felice,} \\
\text{fores in Parnaso esto loco sognaro.}
\]

(Purg. 28: 139-41)

The preoccupation with poetic creativity is here again associated with the inspiration of the transformative character of the Lady, but in a sense more intimately related to human nature. Matelda allows one to glimpse the perfection of human nature as it will never be possessed by any man in life, but whose noble qualities may to a lesser degree be the privileged possession of the gifted. Her involvement with the lost perfection of Eden includes those qualities which constitute the creative potential of the poet. For when man departed from the divine likeness in which he was created, among the qualities of perfection that he lost must have been a creative power far greater than that allotted to fallen man. In his rendering of Matelda, Dante recaptures the rare and fleeting
inspiration which escapes both the human knowledge of good and evil and the beatific vision.

The part of the Dantean voyage that ends with her is directed to the reconquering of baptismal innocence and of the highest truth man could know in his condition before the Fall. The pilgrim marvels at her:

Tu mi fai rimembrar dove e qual era
Proserpina nel tempo che perdette
la madre lei, ed ella primavera. 39

(Purg. 28: 49-51)

Here the theme of the mother makes its definitive entrance and reveals the femininity of Matelda to be more than a convenience for allegory or symbolism. The active role of the transformation of the protagonist is reserved in the most important of such moments in the Comedy for the beneficent mother figure. Her power to bring forth light and spirit out of darkness, generating luminosity that endures despite change and turmoil, is one of her most commanding qualities. She herself remains forever unchanged and untouched. Dante’s association of Matelda with the land of eternal spring lost by humanity in the Fall links her with the loss of her mother which Proserpina sustained upon attaining womanhood. Matelda reminds the pilgrim of Proserpina as she had been, as well as of the mother of Proserpina and the mother of Cupid. The association of mother-loss signifies with manifest sadness the loss of man’s pristine condition (Purg. 30: 52).

The image of the bereaved mother of Proserpina is akin to the mater dolorosa of Christianity as a type of maternal suffering. The association of Matelda with the springlike being of Proserpina before she plucked the flower of sleep and death reminds us of Eve, the antica matre who brought death to herself and humanity by tasting the forbidden fruit. The inconsolable sadness of Ceres is that of fallen humanity forever in search of its original condition, which Proserpina represents.

39 Proserpina, daughter of Ceres, was abducted by Pluto, the god of Hades, and subsequently remained with him in joint rule of his kingdom (Ovid, Metamorphoses, 5: 385-412).
It would be difficult to consider the subject of primal innocence without reference to the sexual component in the interpretation of the Fall which so greatly influenced the attitude toward women of medieval western literature. In this earthly paradise the flowers Matelda plucks are produced by the earth alone. In other words, the function of the fatherhood of natural phenomena is entirely dispensed with. Virgil pointed out to the pilgrim:

\[
\text{Qui fu innocente l'umana radice;}
\]
\[
\text{qui primavera sempre ed ogni frutto.}
\]

\[\text{(Purg. 28: 142-43)}\]

The fruits of the Terrestrial Paradise are produced without sowing. Here the earth is a self-fertilizing Mother which Dante connects with Matelda's maidenliness and remoteness from sexuality in the fulfillment of her guiding and transforming function.

Women presided over the antique Dionysian transformation mysteries in which the first step was the confession of guilty actions. The same is true in regard to the mysteries of the Terrestrial Paradise in which Matelda initiates the pilgrim. When the pilgrim is overcome by the harshness of Beatrice he is revived by the waters of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness of sin, which are administered by Matelda. Even before the moment of purification the nymphs, to whose play of light and shadow Dante compares Matelda (Purg. 29: 4-6), seem to welcome the pilgrim in an imitation of the feminine groups present at the Eleusinian rites.

Subsequently the merciful and compassionate Matelda effaces for him all the traces of the memory of sin. As Beatrice's precursor and minister Matelda plays a role analogous to that of John the Baptist. In the rebirth that gives the pilgrim his second chance he seems to become dead to his sins.

The waters over which Matelda presides are endowed with a primordial sacred character, as are all things that dwell in the depths of the earth. Matelda is related not only to the Chris-
tian figure of the Baptist but to the Lady Philosophy and to Proserpina in her knowledge of the wisdom-bringing waters. It is natural that this lady understands the origin of the trees and plants and all the signs of the nature with which she is so closely bound up. It is her function to know the waters, which operate variously as medicinal and intoxicant, as the potion of divine love and the poet's elixir. These waters are a vehicle of transformation which throughout the Comedy has been chiefly the work of the benevolent mother-figure. Through her operative power the pilgrim rises to a sublimated, enthusiastic, and fully spiritualized vision of clarity and creativity and to a state in which he is ready to be the instrument of divine power (Purg. 33: 133-37). Matelda dispenses for her charge a form of the water of life naturally represented as administered by feminine power.

It is a testimony to the poet's genius that this lady who possesses a function not unlike that of the ancient seeress remains an

.... anima gentil, che non fa scusa,
    ma fa sua voglia de la voglia altrui
    tosto che è per segno fuor dischiusa.

(Purg. 33: 130-32)

Her aesthetic likeness to the lady of Guido Cavalcanti, known as Primavera, is never marred by her function of submitting the pilgrim to mysterious rites and immersion in Lethe, thus indirectly opening his way to solemn and terrible visions such as the transfiguration of the Tree (Purg. 32: 38-42) and the symbolic Chariot. The aesthetic and moral concepts of Matelda are in perfect harmony with one another and with her mythical function. The delicate Lady adored by the stilnovisti and by Dante possessed powers which could logically develop in the direction of the cooperative mother-figure whose perfection we observe in Matelda. She possesses a charm which only the fleshless delight of the senses could render complete enough to return the errant pilgrim to Beatrice.
CONCLUSION

SAINT AUGUSTINE accused poetry of functional untruthfulness and condemned poets as the exponents of paganism.¹ In this he was supported by Thomas Aquinas, who claimed that poets were "inveterate liars and poetry ... the science which contained the very minimum of truth."² When Dante placed himself in the group of the great ancient poets who did him honor in his Comedy he attributed a different status to poetry. The title of poet is the "nome che più dura e più onora" (Purg. 21: 85). The contrite pilgrim hears the spirits expiating sins of pride and identifies himself with them, walking bent to the ground as they do (Purg. 11: 73, 12: 1-3). Here the pilgrim closely approaches Dante the poet; but, while the man recognizes the sin, it is chiefly the pilgrim who expiates it. The Comedy abounds in references to the man and his outstanding role in the development of poetry:

¹ Saint Augustine, Confessionum, ed. Karl von Roumer (Guetersloh, 1876), 1: 13: "Non clamant adversum me venditores grammaticae vel emptores: quia si proponam eis, interrogans utrum verum sit quod Aeneam aliquando Carthaginem venisse Poeta dicit; indoctiores se nescire respondebunt, doctiores autem etiam negabunt verum esse. At si quieram quibus litteris scribatur Aeneae nomen, omnes mihi, qui haec didicerunt, verum respondebunt; secundum id pactum et placitum, quo inter se homines ista signa firmarunt. Item, si quieram quid horum majore vitae hujus incommodo quisque obliviscatur, legere et scribere, an poetica illa figmenta; quis non videat quid responsurus sit, qui non est penitus oblitus sui?"

Cosi ha tolto l’uno a l’altro Guido  
la gloria de la lingua; e forse è nato  
chi l’uno e l’altro caccera del nido.  

(Purg. 11: 97-99)

Claiming that his name has achieved little fame so far (Purg. 14: 21), Dante has many of the spirits promise him future glory. His former teacher Brunetto Latini assures him,

..... “Se tu segui tua stella,  
non puoi fallire a glorioso porto,  
se ben m’accorsi ne la vita bella.”  

(Inf. 15: 55-57)

Cacciaguida encourages him to fortitude:

Chè se la voce tua sarà molesta  
nel primo gusto, vital nutrimento  
lascerà poi, quando sarà digesta.  

(Par. 17: 130-32)

The fame he hopes to achieve by restructuring the marvels of the three supernatural realms brings him to beseech God to preserve for him the memory of the marvels he has seen, so that the glory of God may become more clearly manifest through his verse,

chè, per tornare alquanto a mia memoria  
e per sonare un poco in questi versi,  
più si conceperà di tua vittoria.  

(Par. 33: 73-75)

There is little doubt that he associates poetic achievement with personal honor, social rehabilitation, return from exile, and the poet’s crown of laurel.

It is not surprising that the poet seeks a major reconciliation of his personal ideals with the noblest of his time and with the strictures that underlay them. The task he set himself drew him into conflicts between religion and chivalry, morality and aesthetics. This is illustrated by his varying conceptions of feminine character.
Those who in the *Comedy* play the roles of wives or virgins are inactive for the most part and are evaluated according to the gravity of their various sins (if any). Those who are depicted as lovers are generally condemned and found wanting in the other virtues associated with chastity. Their part, however, is active and mainly destructive, since they dictate the general concept of an evil feminine principle. It is upon the figure of the good mother that the hope and dependence of the male who recognizes the importance of feminine influence rests. Among the good and evil mother-figures are many who are representations from dreams or composite images; in other words, deviations from the concentrated attention of the poetic faculty on specific women.

By Dante's time, the vehemence of Church fathers and the tremulous devotion of poets had lavished attention upon feminine power which exaggerated it entirely out of proportion. In art what was considered worthy of emulation rarely participated in the earthy, satirical, relatively casual, thoroughly derisive view of woman which seemed proper to the deprecated middle classes. Within the structure of patriarchal society, a trend toward mother-worship grew dangerous to that society and required some check on the part of the exponents of the status quo. The Middle Ages, for a variety of reasons, did not succeed in integrating devotion to woman with devotion to God. But in the effort of will to make her a part of God's approved hierarchy, the complete woman had to be virtually discarded and her sexual role derogated or denied. Sometimes, as in the case of Beatrice, the adored Lady who replaces woman becomes partially an expression of male aspirations and goals. Insofar as woman did not participate in the great denial of the Mother, she was devalued or stylized out of existence.

Where love took on the character of fealty, as it did of necessity in the Middle Ages, it was virtually impossible to uphold a dual loyalty to Father and mother. Any solution to the ubiquitous dualism accompanying the love of woman involved the removal of obstacles to the singleminded love of God. In the *Comedy* the good and evil aspects of the mother are clearly separated from each other in nearly every case. The fear directed to evil in the form of the *femmina balba* has little in common with that directed to good in the form of Beatrice. Extremes
support one another, never occurring in the same figure. The good mother divested of her sexual power and replenished in authority confronts the evil one, rending apart the beautiful habit in which the tempted mind of man may clothe her. The good mother is strong, but she does not constitute a threat. Her transformative character works in the interest of masculine identity, wholeness, and participation in God.

The function of good mother is allotted to a select few women in the *Comedy*. When a critic claims that “even at their worst Dante’s women always remind us of their relation to Mary and Beatrice—they can always direct or control; meekness is no virtue of theirs,”³ he may be overlooking a pyramid of helpless creatures grounded in their humanity.

In support of the exalted Beatrice, Dante uses all the methods most prized in his time: the language of refined love, scholastic reasoning, and celestial associations. There is a variety of feminine representations which, less carefully elaborated, vividly contrast with Beatrice. It is probable that in the concept of his triumphant Lady Dante had two objectives: to surpass in poetic excellence all who immediately preceded him, and to reconcile the love of woman with that of God. His success in the first and his accomplishment of it in terms of the requirements of his society are beyond doubt. But in the second it would be difficult to declare the conflict ended. The Lady is a solution only in terms of supernatural life; a real resolution of the conflict is yet to be achieved.

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