

Female Spirituality in *The Divine Comedy*: Can Women Aspire to Dante's Paradise?

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The cultural influences that shaped Dante's personal ideology create a presence in *The Divine Comedy* that is particularly relevant to women. Perhaps one of the first questions to emerge following this statement would be, how should women readers approach a traditionally male-oriented text like *The Divine Comedy*? Contemporary feminist readers can apprehend this text's pervasive patriarchal influence on Western culture and cite it as one of the chief sources of stereotypical gender-bias that women continue to experience today. Therefore, as twentieth-century women and scholars attempting to unravel the threads of cultural assumptions tangled by centuries of social dogmatism, we can find in the often perplexing and evasive genius of Dante's greatest poem an invaluable resource. *The Divine Comedy* is rich in classical mythology, Biblical references, and medieval Christian mysticism, and in this way provides a variety of paradoxically converging influences. But of equal importance is the fact that Dante's own spiritual evolution is an inseparable element of the poem as a whole. The metaphorical journey through *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* poetically parallels the inner spiritual pilgrimage of seekers everywhere, whether Christian or not. And herein lies the genius behind *The Divine Comedy*. For, despite Dante's undeniably Christian intent, this poem functions first and foremost as Everyman's spiritual pilgrimage. I could end this discussion here were it not for the disturbing fact that the "man" of "Everyman" clearly represents more than just a convenient expression that ac-

counts for both genders. For inherent in both the cultural and personal attitudes of *The Divine Comedy* is the implication that women have a less-than-honored place in spiritual pursuits. In attempting to account for this ambivalence toward the female, I've asked some questions of *The Divine Comedy*. For example, does the noticeable dearth of women in *The Divine Comedy* denote their corresponding lack of spiritual relevance? And, how representative is Dante's portrayal of women like Francesca, La Pia, and Piccarda as potential female spiritual seekers? Finally, does Dante's characterization of these women reveal a misogynistic bias (evidenced, for example, by his frequent invectives against Eve and by the Siren dream)? Or, is it symptomatic of his personal struggle to resolve the "mutually exclusive" issues of sexuality and spirituality within himself?

The influence of St. Augustine is apparent in the issues Dante addresses in the *Comedy*, like the problem of where to place sexuality in the Christian framework. Augustine's struggle to maintain celibacy resulted in some curious and authoritarian Christian doctrines. Elaine Pagels, in her essay "The Politics of Paradise," traces how Augustine's biased scriptural exegesis went virtually unchallenged at a time when it could conceivably have been labeled heretical. Instead, its influence was so pervasive by Dante's time that it had attained a degree of validity and divine authority equal to the Bible itself. Augustine's reading of Paul's Epistle to the Romans 5.12, reveals the inescapability of sin: "We are all that one man (Adam), since all of us were that one man who fell into sin through the woman who was made from him" (Pagels 32). What is particularly disturbing for women is the resulting doctrinal emphasis on Eve's disobedience, the idea that her "original" sin is sexually transmitted through semen at every conception, and the corresponding idea of the desirability of Mary's immaculate, passionless conception as the womanly ideal. In this way, women become the vessels through which sin is perpetuated, and represent that portion of the population whose all-consuming sexuality is antithetical to the spiritual path. My question is, if original sin is contained within the male essence of semen, then why are women—who are idealized as the passive receptors—held more accountable than men for the continuation of sin? One can only speculate how Augustine would respond to late twentieth-century experiments with artificial insemination!

Even this brief examination of Augustine's influence on medieval thought and, subsequently, on Dante, opens up intriguing avenues of conjecture about the women of *The Divine Comedy*. Francesca da Rimini is the only woman in *Inferno* Dante allows to defend herself verbally. Although he places her in the circle of the lustful where those

guilty of subjecting "reason to desire" are punished, he allows her to speak directly, and does not render her silent in deference to her male partner, Paolo. The lovers are doomed for eternity to be tossed about by Inferno's winds as they were tossed about on the winds of adulterous carnal passion. In his commentary, Singleton suggests that

. . . according to the principle of just punishment, the heightened violence of the wind signifies that the love which led them in life and leads them now, was, and is, most passionate.

(82, notation 75)

As an exemplary Christian, Dante no doubt felt compelled to denounce the sin of adultery; nevertheless, he tempers this by presenting Francesca as a wistful, noble soul who suffers from lack of peace (5.99). And, although he allows her to speak lines from his early love poetry, this, too, is tempered by the fact that part of her punishment is the deprivation of that "fair form" through which she experienced earthly love. In other words, the punishment for sexuality is to be unsexed; and further, Francesca is doomed to eternal denial of the spiritual beauty we later encounter in Beatrice and Piccarda. Such beauty is the reward for chastity and a love that is focused unwaveringly on God.

Marianne Shapiro points out the importance of considering the Francesca encounter in light of the "conflicting issues that Dante resolves, through her, for the pilgrim ascending in virtue. . . . Subsequently Dante writes no more of such love but to revenge or mortify it" (80). Canto 5 concludes when Dante faints, apparently overwhelmed with pity for Francesca or perhaps fear of the sexuality she represents. The unity that is the ultimate purpose of love is grotesquely realized in this eternal sexless whirlwind wherein "love and death become forever inseparable" (83).

Dante clearly does not see Francesca as a woman of intrinsic spiritual worth, and yet the sympathy with which he qualifies her eternal condemnation to Hell seems to be a defense of her character. For here, as in other instances throughout *The Divine Comedy*, Dante strives to reconcile Christian doctrine with his own sometimes conflicting instinctual sense of justice. Francesca is not a bad woman; in fact, we sense her only real transgression is this one instance of adultery. As a Christian, Dante must make an example of her for breaking one of the Commandments. Yet, as a fellow human being, he pities her vulnerability to sensual desires, knowing himself to be similarly susceptible. Looked at in this way, it is but a short step to

the idea that the conflicts and resolutions presented in *The Divine Comedy* reflect Dante's inner struggle between his own sexuality and his internalized Christian repudiation of that sexuality. In Shapiro's words,

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. (86)

Conceivably, Dante's foregrounding of the female character could be seen to emphasize her singular guilt. But here Dante deliberately aligns himself with the female sex, culturally regarded as his inferior, and in so doing accords women both spiritual and cultural equality. Further, as we shall see, he increasingly identifies metaphorically with the traditional feminine quality of nurturance as a source of spiritual direction as well as a way to eradicate sexuality.

This alignment with women opens up a network of textual possibilities. For example, Lorraine K. Stock's essay, "Reversion for Conversion: Maternal Images in Dante's *Commedia*," traces the parallelism of Dante Pilgrim's descent into Hell in order to ascend to Heaven with his regression into an increasingly childlike dependence in order to progress into the ultimate Independence. As a spiritual infant, Dante moves from one metaphorical mother-figure to another, regardless of actual gender. Stock notes that "part of Dante's education in the poem consists of his increasing ability to recognize the true mothers from the false, to distinguish mothers *in bono* from mothers *in malo*" (6). But among the range of issues inspired by Dante's heavy reliance on the maternal motif, the one that repeatedly surfaces and is of particular concern to this paper, is Dante Pilgrim's perpetual struggle with sexuality.

As a spiritual seeker, Dante's passion for Beatrice becomes a medium through which the sexual desire so antithetical to his aspirations becomes transformed and therefore acceptable. While I have deliberately chosen to exclude Beatrice from this study, it is worth noting briefly in this context how Dante's verbal maternalization of Beatrice removes the threat of her sexuality, in what Rachel Jacoff calls "Dante's particular form of sublimation" (8). In her essay "The Tears of Beatrice: *Inferno II*," Jacoff traces the language that accomplishes this maternalization to the resulting desexualization of Beatrice in particular and womankind in general:

The maternal language has an analogous role in its attribution to Beatrice, where it subverts potential erotic tensions generated by the intensity and associations of the language Dante uses to describe her beauty and its effect on him. (9)

Carol S. Rupprecht's essay entitled "Swallows, Sirens, and Sisters: Female Transformations in Dante's Purgatorial Dreams," extends the consideration of the above contradictory erotic/maternal motifs to even further boundaries, with more serious implications than have previously been suggested. In Rupprecht's reading, Dante's text constitutes a

. . . dismemberment and disincarnation carried out by Dante Poet on the female body as a necessary prerequisite for Dante Pilgrim's flight from female flesh into the Earthly Paradise and eventually the Empyrean. (2)

Citing examples of female disembodiment throughout the *Comedy*, she reveals how

. . . the progression is one of dematerialization and desexualization until femaleness reaches its only acceptable form in the closing canticle of the *Comedy*: woman as spiritual goad serving man as inspiration and intercession. (3)

Thus, through a reading that seeks to explore an intricate and multileveled text by revealing its latent implications for women, Rupprecht demonstrates how Dante's "particular emphasis on body and body parts, on eroticism and violence and the relationship between the two" (6) has thus far been overlooked in the existing male-oriented readings. Taken to its logical conclusion, the defusing of the female sexual threat through maternalization becomes a disempowering of women by refusing to see them holistically. Such disempowering is accomplished through female bodies that have been "deformed and dematerialized, raped and violated" (15). Finally, the traditional readings have failed to account for a sublimation of suppressed sexual anxiety, the extent of which perhaps even Dante himself was unaware.

While the Francesca canto does not resolve Dante's sexual conflicts, it does at least reveal the central issues. However, as the Pilgrim's journey progresses and his spiritual perception gradually alters, the issues so readily comprehensible to readers' "infernal" sensibilities become obscured in spiritualized rhetoric. This ambiguity is evidenced

by Dante's presentation of La Pia in *Purgatorio* 5. Her actual words are few:

'Pray, when thou has returned to the world and art rested from the long way, . . . do thou remember me, who am La Pia. Siena gave me birth, Maremma death. He knows of it who, first plighting troth, wedded me with his gem.' (5. 130-136)

It is symptomatic of Dante's subtlety that her words convey a sense of gentle wistfulness and a sweet humility that is strangely compelling. For Shapiro, the significance and singularity of Pia's words center on the broken promise of the marriage vows which resulted in Pia's death: "The blind violence that accompanied her husband's crime disappears in Pia's words." Further,

Her modesty in veiling the crime is *maidently*. 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. (46; emphasis mine)

Pia never condemns her murderer/husband, and Shapiro seems to suggest that, for Dante, this quality of maidenly modesty embodies the feminine ideal. Clearly, Dante still adheres to the chivalric code of courtly love, a very earth-bound concept. This is underscored by the fact that in this scene sexuality is absent, while there is a corresponding lack of substance in the female form. Pia seems to materialize in a literally disconnected fashion, she projects an "image comprising delicacy and modesty in appearance and speech" (65). Further,

. . . 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. (47)

Both Francesca and Pia are characterized by a gentleness that suggests a helpless sort of girlish dependence. In proportion to the greater degree of spirituality represented in Pia, there is also a corresponding increase in the asexual personification that renders her more spiritual, and therefore more acceptable as a female.

A number of questions arise from this. What does the "ideal feminine" of courtly standards have to do with women of a higher spiritual realm? Does Dante invite us to draw this analogy because

ordinary words and concepts fail him in his attempt to accurately render Purgatorio? Or is he reverting to the time-honored patriarchal suppression of women by giving them an impossible standard to live up to, which he justifies by lending it a quasi-religious authority?

Dante's dream of the Siren occurs after La Pia and before meeting Piccarda, and reveals a greater degree of sexual ambivalence in him than previously expressed. In this dream, a monstrously deformed woman appears to him; as she beguiles him with sweet words, her appearance is transformed, her features "coloured . . . as love desires" (19.245). Dante is released from this dream with difficulty when Virgil perceives the danger Dante is in and, with his eyes focused on the "Lady Holy and Alert," he seizes the Siren, and exposes her belly. Dante Pilgrim now wakes "with the stench that came from her" (247). Clearly, the evil of female sexuality is overcome here only by literally gazing unflinchingly at her personification of female purity, which is, of course, sexless.

Sinclair's interpretation of this passage points out that Dante is still not fully committed to divine ends; he is still vulnerable to the "sins of the flesh." This includes avarice and gluttony as well as lust, yet the personification focuses on the female form. In addition, the undeniable reference to the "innerness" of female genitalia carries with it the implied fear and loathing men have traditionally held for the secretiveness of female sexuality, for the mysteries hidden from view and therefore threatening, and for the seemingly boundless capacity of women to devour men sexually—to literally swallow them whole—just as unequivocally as the gluttonous consume food. Further, that the Siren is superimposed with the concepts of avarice and gluttony suggests that female sexual satisfaction is obtained only when the man has been totally absorbed by her, annihilated by a fierce and greedy lust. But Sinclair's reading unfortunately does not address the following relevant questions: Why does Dante use the *female* personification here as opposed to any other, and why is Beatrice's ideal preferable only insofar as she is proportionately unsexed by Dante? The answer, as we shall see, reverts to the same unresolved sexual ambivalence.

Clearly, in this scene the Siren represents the bewitching ugliness of sin that is veiled from sinners while it is through Beatrice's chaste spiritual purity that "man is freed" from such false enchantment. Dante's Siren characterization is unmistakably misogynistic, and Singleton's commentary apprehends this fact where Sinclair's did not:

. . . in this dream the Siren (later termed an old witch) can represent any aspect of the seductive *malo amor* that is purged

in upper Purgatory. . . . But she never fulfills her (sexual) promise . . . since no secondary good can wholly satisfy our natural desire. (449.15, 451.22, 24)

The violence of Dante's repudiative representation of woman in this scene is indicative of his ongoing struggle with sexual desire. With Francesca, he reacted with empathy; with La Pia, he resorts to the language and ideals of courtly love that serve to remove or distance him from concrete sexual reality. But with the Siren, all the frustration generated within Dante by his "disobedient members" results in a revulsion that turns against the female form by creating a fictive monstrosity. Like Augustine, whose *Confessions* reveal his self-defeating efforts to rationally control all manifestations of sexual arousal, Dante expects his mind and imagination to be as celibate as his body. If, like Augustine, he views carnal desire as an obstacle on his spiritual path, one might ask why he objectifies his ambivalence on women, rather than on his own vulnerability or lack of discipline. Apparently, even a man of Dante's genius and perception could not extricate himself from the contemporary doctrines of church and state, in which women and their sexuality were most commonly targeted for blame. Such an ideology was further buttressed by the added authenticity of the will of God according to medieval scriptural exegesis.

The last of Dante's female representations that I will examine here is Piccarda Donati. Although Dante knew her on earth, when he meets her in *Paradiso* she is so transformed in spiritual beauty that he does not recognize her. Piccarda's place in the heavenly realm is the sphere wherein "all weak and inconstant persons who win salvation are connected . . . the nuns being chosen as extreme examples" (Singleton 66.30). Here, we are once again offered the matter of spiritual inconstancy, with sexuality and femaleness representing obstacles to male spiritual realization. Given this, it seems to me that in Dante's attempt to personify Woman-made Beautiful through one-pointed love for God, he undermines his own purpose. For how are we to interpret this example of the consequences of "faithfulness marred by inconstancy" (of which Dante himself was found guilty in the Siren dream) that depicts a woman who as a nun *was* constant, before being forced from the convent into a politically-arranged marriage? Because she is a woman, her spiritual salvation seems somehow less consequential than that of a man. The dual implication here is that male spirituality is threatened by the feminine presence (for example, the sensual attraction the Siren excites in Dante) but the reverse does not hold true. For even as a renunciate

Piccarda is vulnerable to a patriarchal and political manipulation that clearly overrides any sanctified commitment she has made to God. Since she was thus figuratively and spiritually raped—and perhaps physically as well—why is she the one accused of inconstancy, and not her violators? Why is she granted the grace of Paradiso only to have it qualified by being relegated to Heaven's lowest level for this "crime" against her vows which she was forced into?

Piccarda moves gently in the "true light that gives [her] peace" (3.33), an appropriate contrast to both the turbulence of Francesca's infernal (and similarly qualified) state and that lady's longing for the peace she will never have. On one end of Dante's spectrum is Francesca, who willingly gave herself up to the carnal expression of love; on the other is Piccarda, who was forced into that carnality against her will. Francesca's punishment for carnality occurs in the highest or least severe level of *Inferno*, while Piccarda's punishment occurs in the lowest or least blissful level in *Paradiso*. But for Dante, Francesca belongs in Hell because of the wilfulness that not only led her into sexuality but also kept her there, unrepentant; and Piccarda belongs in Paradise because both her body and her will were victimized by force. Her vows thus broken caused her great anguish; yet her placement in the realm of inconstancy suggests that Dante holds her responsible somehow for the lapse in will that rendered her body vulnerable. Dante gives her these words: ". . . this lot which seems so low is given us because our vows were neglected and in some part void" (3.56-57).

Augustine's struggle to maintain celibacy led him to conclude that disobedience (those "disobedient members" responsible for his spiritual downfall) is God's punishment for Eve's disobedience and the subsequent spiritual downfall of all humanity. If this is true, then celibacy is *not* a matter of free-will at all; its failure is a predetermined punishment from God that functions as a continual reminder of our fallen state and further serves as a permanent obstacle to God-realization. The woman Eve was the initial cause, and every woman after her perpetuates the sin, the punishment for it, and the subsequent separation from God. And now my question is, how do we, as the inheritors of such thinking, go about separating a gender-suppression that has been put forth as God's own determinism from Augustine's own self-serving justification for failure of his free-will? If the starting assumption is this divinely established determinism, is it not curious that the female sex has become the scapegoat in the scramble to divert spiritual responsibility from men and project it somewhere—anywhere—else?

The attempt to write a conclusion to a paper that asks so many

questions seems like a contradiction in terms. But my intent throughout has focused on stirring up the issues rather than resolving them. In this way, I've attempted to challenge the traditional propensity to overlook or bypass certain discomfiting elements in *The Divine Comedy*, and provoke alternate readings. In the process, I've discovered that women are increasingly coming into their own as readers of the *Comedy*, as well as re-claiming the female spiritual tradition. The scholarship of women like Shapiro and Jacoff, Rupprecht and Stock, has made it possible for me to pose these questions; clearly, I am in the company of others similarly seeking a way both to value this text and retain their integrity as women and scholars.

The questions I've put forth here may never be satisfactorily answered; yet the very process of formulating them will perhaps provide new ways of looking at the text. For all of us writers, however mundane or divine their literary purpose, Dante is one who clearly never wrote a word that did not serve his overall intent. It is for this reason that the text of *The Divine Comedy* carries with it such an enduring challenge. Women readers in particular can ill afford to underestimate the extreme subtleties and complexities of style Dante employs; nor should we minimize the cultural impact *The Comedy* has had and continues to have. As fellow literary pilgrims, we need a greater awareness of the seductive powers of great poetry. For Dante seems to continually challenge our infernal perspectives with spiritually elevated insight, or at least an insight informed by that imposing body of medieval patriarchal values and justifications. The challenge our questions present to that system of values is indicative not only of the timelessness of Dante's text but also of the timeliness of our presence as women readers. That his poem continues to provoke such lively discussion, I believe, would please Dante infinitely. ■

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