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“So Great a Lover”: Facts and Narratives in the Love Stories of the Lustful



In our polarized times, we often accuse others or are accused by others of choosing our facts to suit our own particular narrative, our narrative of choice. Calling out this prejudicial behavior is to highlight the superiority of fact over fiction; it is a call to examine facts that “don’t fit the narrative.” This could be seen as a desire to break out of Plato’s cave, out of the “story” told by shadows projected on our screens, to get to the real real – not just to the campfire forming the shadows, but to the source of all light: the sun, blinding as it might be to anyone accustomed only to shadows and darkness. Plato’s allegory of the cave is, of course, just another narrative, an allegorical one at that, and its fundamental point is that the truth lies somewhere behind or beyond things merely evident to the senses; that the truth is ultimately in the realm of the abstract, the mathematical, the irrefutably, axiomatically, and eternally true. Escaping from the cave requires not that we reject the evidence before our eyes, but that we read it, and the only way we can read anything, including things that challenge our assumptions

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and preconceived notions, is to place it within a pre-existing narrative or hypothesis. In other words, the facts we see tend to be the ones we are looking for, the ones we need, the ones that fit. But if we are ruled by narratives, then how might we ever change our minds? If it is not alternate (or alternative) facts that can do it, perhaps an alternative narrative could. Perhaps it is possible to choose among available narratives, especially if one is familiar with narratives, and to discover, or decide, what particular role one is or should be playing in a particular narrative. To put it most starkly: is my life a tragedy or a comedy? Am I a victim or a villain? Am I headed for glory or for shipwreck?

The “moral” of a story comes at its end. The end is one of the reasons Dante referred to his poem as a “comedy,” as attested by the explanation of the work’s title in the Letter to Cangrande della Scala (attributed to Dante), since a comedy begins with harshness and ends prosperously.¹ The *Comedia*, as Dante called it, is a comedy because it has a “horrible and fetid” beginning – the *Inferno* – and a prosperous, desirable and welcome end, which is *Paradiso*. But the single work contains a polyphony of different stories, all of which have come to an end, because they are set in the afterlife, from which this life can be, finally, judged. It is eschatological; which is to say, a vista in retrospect, a view from the end.² Everything looks different from within that narrative framework; and the poem dramatizes that difference: between the way things look while one is in the midst of them, and the way they look beyond the close-up, outside the local frame where what appear to be random facts, or a series of unfortunate events, can be discerned as conforming to

a larger pattern, structure, logic, or narrative – or what might be thought of as a master narrative.³

This master narrative is one that is both familiar and forgotten.⁴ It may not be surprising that it is forgotten to us, since we live in a very different time and place, but it also seems to be forgotten, or obscured, by characters we meet in his imagined afterlife, judging from the surprise registered by both the damned and the saved that things turned out as they did. Dante's narrative is set against other narratives, such as those of the ancient pagans, which is to say, non-Christians; a gesture that enables him to critique his own modernity by measuring it against another, venerable paradigm, as well as to delineate what makes modernity different, better even, and how exactly it has changed the narrative and shifted the paradigm. It is not a question of facts versus fiction, or reality versus preferred narrative; it is a recognition that narratives are the only reality we inhabit. It is not so much prescriptive as descriptive to recognize that we are always and everywhere called to read (to interpret, to make sense of) what is set before us, and respond accordingly. Dante's *Comedy* is a book, like other books, that you can read however you want to, but it does have a preferred narrative, which is to say, a narrative the author thinks is true, or chooses to believe, and his own story dramatizes the risks and rewards of different ways of reading, or what we might call competing narratives.⁵

In the *Divine Comedy*, the whole house of cards depends, we might say, on the truth of the master narrative. But truth, as we experience it, is a matter of reading, in fact a matter of choice; which is not the same as saying that we each have "our own truth." As indicated in the first line

of Dante's poetic autobiography, where the context is our life ("In the middle of the journey of *our* life [*nostra vita*], I found myself in a dark wood"), there is indeed a reality outside individual experience, and it is against this reality that the individual life can be read, can be seen to make sense, and to have purpose and direction, or to be way off track.

Dante's character, his first-person protagonist, gets lost in the midst of things. He manages to get out of the woods by morning (by line 12), reflecting on his survival of a kind of spiritual shipwreck by describing himself as one who has emerged from the deep to the shore (*uscito fuor del pelago a la riva*). The sun is shining and he looks up; he sees a mountain and has the aspiration to climb it.⁶ In metaphoric directional language of universal valence, he is now headed up, rather than down, and that can be read as "good." It turns out, though, that however much he would like to climb the hill, he finds his way obstinately obstructed by impediments allegorically represented as three beasts. His only way around them is to acquire a guide, someone wiser than himself, and to try a different route which, it turns out, is down and not up. Or rather: first down, and then up. Or maybe even: what looks like down, but is in fact up. The relevant point here is that the way out is offered by a book – and not the Book that we would expect medieval people to turn to first. Virgil is an ancient pagan author, that is, a non-Christian, and he resides in hell. Dante brandishes his having read Virgil's book to recommend himself to his ghost:

vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume

(*Inferno* 1.83–84)

Which might be translated something like: “may my long and careful reading of your book avail me.” The arrival of Virgil on the scene to rescue the lost Dante indicates precisely that: that reading this book, this pagan book, is what got him out of his predicament.

As John Freccero pointed out in detail, the strange allegorical landscape of the first canto of the whole *Divine Comedy* is a “region of unlikeness” – a phrase that originated perhaps in Plato’s *Statesman*, where the stranger describes a universe gone off the rails as “in the bottomless abyss of unlikeness,” but became equated in Judeo-Christian thought with Exodus and exile, with wandering in the desert.⁷ To be in the region of unlikeness might be understood as a failure to perceive likeness or resemblance with a pre-existing narrative. Rather than random suffering, what is happening to you now is like a story that is already written, a story of exodus, which is a story not of being lost, but of patiently making one’s way out of the desert into the promised land. Or, to summarize another, parallel narrative, it could be like the one told in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the journey out of an exploded city, the city of Troy (*poi che ’l superbo Ilión fu combusto* [1.75]) to found the seat of Empire, the city of Rome.

Dante’s claim that his love for Virgil is what saved him contrasts fairly starkly with another account of reading this same book, in Augustine’s *Confessions*, where the Bishop of Hippo observes that, in memorizing the wanderings of Aeneas as a boy, he forgot his own errors, and, in weeping for dead Dido “who killed herself for love,” he did not weep for himself.

What, after all, is more pitiful than a pitiable person who does not look with pity on their own pitifulness – and who weeps for

the death of Dido, which came about through her love for Aeneas; yet does not weep for their own death, which was coming about because they had no love for you, O God, who are the light of my heart and bread of the mouth of my soul deep within, and courage wedded to my mind, and the bosom of my thoughts?⁸

This passage, especially in Carolyn Hammond's translation in the Harvard Loeb edition, opposes pity to pity. What could be more miserable (*miserius*) than a miserable wretch (*miserus*) who does not commiserate (*non miserante*) with himself, but rather weeps (*flente*) for dead Dido instead of weeping for his own death (*non flente autem mortem suam*)?⁹ Ever the rhetorician, Augustine compares Dido who died for love, for loving Aeneas (*amando Aeneam*), to his own death, resulting from *not* loving God (*non amando te*). He goes on to describe the worthy object of his love as "light of my heart and bread of the mouth of my inmost soul," but also as married love: "the virtue married to my mind" (*virtus maritans mentem meam*) and the "bosom of my thought" (*sinum cogitationis meae*). The unnamed things he went off and loved that were not God are pointedly described as an adultery, a fornication (*fornicabar abs te*), a love outside the proper marriage he had with God. Even more perverse, it appears to him now, was the encouragement he received for this fornication, because fornication is what he calls "friendship" with the world (*amicitia mundi huius fornicatio est abs te*). This friendship is clearly not what we would now call "Platonic"; the word *amicitia*, typically translated as "love," indicates a "physical infidelity" (*fornicatio*), as Hammond puts it in her version.⁹

The question of whether a love relationship is licit or illicit – outside legal constructs and constraints – is a key

issue in the love story of Dido and Aeneas themselves. When Dido realizes Aeneas is readying his ships to sail for Italy and abandon her, she sarcastically addresses him as “guest” (*hospes*), which is the only name that remains for the person she thought of as her husband (*hospes*, / *hoc solum nomen quoniam de coniuge restat* [IV.333-334]) because, as his imminent departure underscores, he in fact owes her no conjugal debt. This is, indeed, part of his defense: “I never held out a bridegroom’s torch or entered such a compact.”¹⁰ But if we return to the cave where they first got together, with the energetic collusion of the gods, it is easy to see how Dido might have thought that their physical love was noble and sanctioned: “Primal Earth and nuptial Juno give the sign; fires flashed in Heaven, the witness to their bridal, and on the mountaintop screamed the Nymphs.” The poet ominously tags this consummation in the cave, as the storm raged outside, to the death and catastrophe that will follow almost directly upon it: “That day the first of death, the first of calamity was cause.” Dido nonetheless manages to convince herself that she no longer needs to live her passion as a furtive love: “she calls it marriage and with that name veils her sin.” Fairclough translates the word for fault (*culpam*) as sin.¹¹

Dido, being a widow, was of course free to remarry. Yet she had sworn never to marry again. It was an oath she had taken on the ashes of her murdered husband, Sichaeus. Or at least that is what she had told her suitors, the neighboring kings, who eyed her as a profitable, as well as enticing, match. Before Virgil Dido had had a reputation for extreme chastity, which the Roman poet spectacularly

besmirches in the tale of her love for Aeneas.¹² Dante edits the account in the *Aeneid* somewhat, perhaps to underscore Virgil's judgment on the Phoenician queen, by placing her in the afterlife not with the suicides, as Virgil did, but with the lustful. In Dante's underworld, Dido is remembered not as Augustine thought of her, as "she who killed herself for love," but as the one who "broke faith" with the ashes of Sichaeus. Dante's Paolo and Francesca, whose love story will become as famous and as tear-soaked as Dido's, are said to be in her same group, the subcategory of lovers who, either by their own hand, or by that of another "tinged the world with blood."¹³

For a book like the present one, about how it is we believe in books and, in particular, how we might "believe" in Dante, it is important to start with the episode of Paolo and Francesca among the lustful in the fifth canto of the *Inferno*. Dante makes the ultimate love story a story about how we read love stories; how we believe in them. Francesca's tale of love's revelation while reading a romance is surely influenced by other famous episodes of reading, such as Augustine's conversion in the garden when he hears children calling, "Take up and read," or Abelard's account of seducing his pupil Héloïse during their tutorials over a book. As Elena Lombardi observes, the canto of Francesca is "the canto with the greatest number of references to the act of reading."¹⁴ Martin Eisner has shown how Dante could well have had in mind the growing iconographical idea in Dante's time that Mary herself was reading a book when she was surprised by the Holy Spirit, perhaps in the form of a dove, and

learned she was pregnant. The book Mary reads in many a depiction of the Annunciation is the book of Isaiah (7:14), “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,” so that she hits upon the place in the book that speaks of this actual experience in her life at the exact moment she is living it. As with any reader’s moving moment of identification with what she is reading, her “lived experience” coincides exactly with what is recounted in the book. It is the moment, literally, of incarnation.¹⁵

Francesca’s first account of her tragic tale is in three succinct acts, in which Love did three things: Love, which is kindled quickly in the gentle heart, seized her companion by means of her beautiful body (*la bella persona*); Love, which absolves no one from reciprocating love, seized her by means of his attractive appearance (*del piacer*); and Love led them to one death.¹⁶ The manner of her death, when her beautiful body (*la bella persona*) was taken from her, still offends her deeply. This is because it was murder and also, perhaps, because it was sudden and unexpected, which is how all sinners might be surprised by damnation. The person who killed them is awaited in some place, some infernal place, called “Caina,” which strongly suggests that the lovers’ double murder involved fratricide, as well as femicide. Indeed, as will be clear in the first lines of the next canto, referring to the two in-laws (*cognati*), Francesca’s lover was her husband’s brother. But it is Dante’s probing question, his desire to know the details, the sort of prurience on which romance (as well as pornography) depends, that induces her to narrate the momentous scene of their reading. Overcome with emotion, he asks how and by what means they came to recognize their fearful (or doubtful) desires.¹⁷

So, Francesca narrates, they were reading one day. We can tell by some details she lets drop that they were reading out of a big book, a very big book, spanning many volumes, written in a language Francesca understood. Most of the books in the world around her were in a bookish language that would require a certain kind of education that she was not given, because it would not have been necessary to her social station. But this book was written in a spoken tongue with which she was familiar. It was not exactly the one she herself used to speak to her servants, her children, and her husband, or the slightly different one she heard as a child, from her parents, her nurse, and the other children in the courtyard, but close enough that she could follow the plot and imagine what the book describes. It might have been in another dialect of the Italian peninsula where she was born and died; but more likely it was in its original French, a literary language avidly read, copied, and employed by writers in Italy, the language and culture indicated by Francesca's own given name.¹⁸

This book described another world, another place, long ago, with people in it who were both like and unlike the people she knew. The ladies were beautiful and the men were gallant, and the best ones were in love. She was not alone in reading – or rather, she was alone together with another person – perhaps because she didn't read, or perhaps because she preferred to listen to another person read, or perhaps because it is more enjoyable to read in the company of another. The book narrates extraordinary adventures and forbidden longings – of the sort that made her blush, particularly as she was not alone, but in the company of a young man who was very handsome

and not her husband. They were both enjoying the book, especially those parts that made their eyes meet and their cheeks flush. And they kept reading until one of those moments overcame them. The book told of Lancelot and how love gripped him. But it was only when they read how the desired smile was kissed by “so great a lover” that the woman’s reading partner kissed her mouth all trembling, and that day they read no further.¹⁹

This is, in a nutshell, the famous story of Dante’s Francesca, apparently damned – damned! – for love. As many readers have pointed out, reading the effect of the book on Francesca has a similar effect on Dante who hears her story and then on us who read of his experience of her experience. He passes out. It is a universally exhilarating and terrifying moment, because it is exhilarating to discover that you love and that what, or whom, you love, loves you back, and terrifying that this might entail the destruction or abandonment of everything else you hold dear. “The first day of death, the first cause of calamities,” as Virgil portended. On its most superficial level, it seems to be a story about the dangers of romantic literature, especially for women, perhaps especially in a repressive society brutally intolerant of female pleasure and autonomy. Indeed, without that element of the forbidden, or transgressive, would the discovery be anywhere near so exhilarating? Although she herself calls that moment of recognition (when they recognized their fearful desires) a defeat (“that moment vanquished us”), it can be and has been read as a victory. When she says of the unnamed weeping spirit accompanying her on the hellish storm, “he who never shall be parted from me, kissed my mouth

all trembling,” it appears to be a triumph of love over death, a love that makes the lovers forever inseparable, despite the constraints of religion, family, and society, in the face of all objections and judgments, human and divine, even the judgment of hell itself. It would appear, as in the title of a recent very controversial evangelical book, that “love wins.”²⁰

It was a book that made this happen, that opened new worlds to her, that let her see inside her own heart, to recognize her love. It is a revelation, and it is mediated. In the end (is it a curse? or just a matter of fact?) she calls the book and its author a name, a name she has learned from the book: *Galeotto fu il libro*. The book was a Gallehault, and so was its author. You would have to have read the book, or have been told about it by someone else, to know that Gallehault was the go-between, the liaison who brought Lancelot, loyal knight of King Arthur, together with Guinevere, Arthur’s wife, into the forbidden, passionate, and adulterous affair that, as the book recounts much later, eventually brings down Camelot. What she means, then, is that the book was a go-between, an intermediary, a panderer, an agent of seduction. It bears the blame, or the credit, for her own story.

Are some books, therefore, guilty? Should they be banned?²¹ And does it depend on whether their potentially transformative effect is considered for good or ill? If the book gave Francesca her one taste of self-determination, pleasure, or what we sometimes call “true love,” it might be seen as a very good book indeed, a welcome gift to oppressed women, which seems to be why Giovanni Boccaccio, a little later in the same

century, gave the subtitle of “Galeotto” to his own long book, the *Decameron*, containing salacious tales for the consolation of ladies. If, however, as Francesca herself seems to suggest, the book can lead people, perhaps especially women, perhaps especially women as sheltered and naive as herself, to their ruin, then perhaps it should be banned, or at least excoriated in such a way as to dissuade anyone from reading it or taking it seriously. Recently scholars have pointed out a letter that Boccaccio wrote to a friend in Florence, warning him not to let his daughters read his *Decameron*, quite in contradiction to the book’s stated claim that the author wrote it for the ladies.²²

Francesca’s story dramatizes the act of reading and its potentially disastrous consequences. Scholars have long pointed out that Francesca apparently misreads the very passage that she claims so affected her: In the medieval French romance they were reading, the so-called *Prose Lancelot*, it is Guinevere, with a great deal of help and encouragement from Gallehault, who takes the initiative to kiss Lancelot who, however great a knight, was shaking like a leaf. Even without reading the book, you can see it in the pictures.²³ In the illustration of this scene in a fourteenth-century manuscript of this French romance kept in the Morgan Library in New York, it is quite easy to see how Lancelot was coerced into the kiss.²⁴ With an arm laid on her back, Gallehault is practically pushing the queen toward the frightened-looking knight, whose face she holds with both her hands.

The fact that Francesca misremembers, misreads, or misrepresents who kissed whom first calls into question her own witness, particularly with regard to agency or, to



The Morgan Library, MS M 805, fol. 67r, northwestern France, c. 1310–1315

put it in more morally determined terms: fault. In her first spectacularly concise narrative of the events, she ascribes all agency to Amor: an irresistible power or deity who quickly takes hold particularly of noble, gentle, or soft hearts, by means of beautiful people; a god who demands that love be reciprocated, and who led the lovers to their common death. This comes out of a whole tradition of

amorous literature, involving troubadour lyric as well as French romance, that poets in Sicily and in Tuscany after them had appropriated into their own idiom. The idea, in particular, that love is kindled quickly in the gentle, or rather genteel, heart parrots a famous poem by the thirteenth-century Bolognese poet, Guido Guinizelli, “Love always repairs to the gentle heart” (*Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore*), cited by Dante himself in a sonnet, “love and the gentle heart are one thing” (*Amor e ’l cor gentil sono una cosa*).²⁵ The doctrine of the gentle heart is essentially an adaptation of a French aristocratic ideal, the stuff of romance, that love was for knights and ladies. In the urban, non-courtly, anti-magnate climate of northern and central Italy, love became a sign of one’s inner gentility or worthiness, not one’s social class. Francesca has clearly imbibed the idea that, in order to be genteel, one must be in love. One interpretation of Dante-character’s collapse into unconsciousness at the end of her tale is his sense of culpability: that his poems of love could lead to this sort of perdition.

Yet we could just as easily turn this around. Is Francesca herself not guilty of snaring Dante-character in exactly the same web in which she herself was caught? Her credibility as a witness is put into doubt by the fact that her account of what she read in the book is severely at odds with what the book actually says. Does that mean she is lying? Or does it simply mean that she read it that way; she gave it that spin; that is what it meant to her? There is a logic of reciprocity in the canto, stated as a decree issued by the god of love himself: “love pardons no one who is loved from loving in return” (*Amor ch’a nullo amato amar perdona*). Virgil tells Dante that if he wants to talk

to those two who are “so light on the wind” he should “appeal to them by that love that carries them, and they will come.”²⁶ Desire is answered by desire. The two lovers respond to Dante’s call like doves called by desire, carried by their will, to their sweet nest. Francesca says they will listen and speak about whatever it pleases this visitor to have them speak or talk about. She is very obliging. She is willing even to recall the past, that “happy” past, even though to do so is the greatest of all sorrows, as Dante has surely been taught, simply because this newcomer to hell has asked her to do so and has shown so much affection, so much emotion or *affect*, so much desire to know the first root of their love. She responds to desire and reflects it back.²⁷

Yet in what sense is it true that we are obliged to love someone who loves us in return? In purgatory, upon hearing the poet Statius declare his immense love for him, Virgil kindly responds that he loves him too because, he says, love kindled by virtue always kindles love in return.²⁸ So too Augustine writes that

the human conscience feels guilty if it does not love what loves it in return (*si non amaverit redamantem*), or does not love in return that which loves it first (*aut si amentem non redamaverit*). It asks for nothing in return from that person except for evidence of goodwill (*nihil quaerens ex eius corpore praeter indicia benivolentiae*).²⁹

To spell it out for Francesca, the requirement to reciprocate love does not necessitate capitulation to a demand for sex.

Francesca did not simply read a book, she let the book read her. The book told her what part she might be playing

in her own drama: the part of Guinevere in the presence of her Lancelot in a world ruled by the god of Love. Yet a way in which she might have read the book differently is suggested by many of the things she says. She would like to be kinder and more useful to the visitor to hell, Dante, than she can be. She would generously pray for his peace, she says, “if the king of the universe were my friend” (*se fosse amico il re de l’universo* [5.92]). In romances, the term “friend,” *amico*, or in the French, *ami*, meant “lover.” But, evidently, since she uses the past subjunctive contrary-to-fact, she is not so fortunate to have intimate friends in such high places. It exudes a certain regret, perhaps regret in her choice of lover. At the crucial moment, when Francesca and her brother-in-law read how “the desired smile was kissed by so great a lover,” it would seem that the greatest of lovers must be Lancelot. In brutal contrast, at that very moment, to have your mouth kissed by the sweaty-palmed fellow sitting next to you in the room, the unnamed “this one,” from whom you will now never be parted, might be something of a disappointment. If not total hell.³⁰

But if the king of the universe could be a friend, indeed, a lover, an *ami*, would he not be the greatest lover of all? When Francesca states, axiomatically, that “love pardons no beloved from loving in return,” as if to say that all invitations must be accepted, one might ponder the first and foundational invitation to love. As a chivalrous Italian will put it later in the poem, the simple little soul issues from the hand of him who loves her, who desires her, who courts her, and makes love to her (*Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia*).³¹ These are all possible translations of the verb *vagheggia*, a word that characterizes the

Creator's relationship to the individual human soul he creates as an amorous, even an erotic one. The character Marco Lombardo, in response to the pilgrim's question of whether the fault for the world's ills is in us or in our stars, describes the simple soul, grammatically feminine, like a little girl, playing, weeping and laughing. In her radical ingenuity, knowing nothing, she turns to whatever delights her, precisely because she is moved in the first place by happiness, by the happiness that made her. That is love's invitation: to reciprocate love. The phrase that the credulous Francesca uses to excuse her surrender to her husband's brother's amorous solicitation ("love pardons no one who is loved from loving in return") is actually an indictment of her own failure to respond to the love that really was offered first. She either did not know that such a love, so great a love, was on offer (Virgil says the flame of love has to be externally apparent for it to catch fire), or she did not believe it.

Many readers have pointed out that Francesca's mistake was not necessarily to read the book she was reading, a romance, but to stop reading it in the middle – in the middle of a sentence, in fact, as Lombardi notes – and not follow it through to the end, since the *Prose Lancelot* actually contains a lesson about the rippling negative repercussions wrought by a single love affair.³² So too, in her account of what happened, of who did what to whom first (Love caused Paolo to love her first, a love she was bound to return) she is also omitting the beginning of a narrative that would apply to her. Francesca skips over the fact that there was a first lover, who loved her first, a lover greater even than Lancelot. For readers who have gotten to the end of the poem, love is what motivates the

whole universe, what “moves the sun and the other stars” (*l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*). Love is also what binds up, binds together, all the scattered accidents, all the apparently random occurrences, the inclinations, the mistakes, the false starts, into a single volume, a single book (*legato con amore in un volume*).³³

If “all you need is love,” or “it doesn’t matter who you love or how you love, but that you love” (as the Beatles and Rod McKuen advise us), then what is love doing in hell? And not only in the circle of the lustful. Particularly jarring to our modern sentiments is the claim that love, in fact, the “first love,” which is essentially God, or more specifically, the Holy Spirit, the one associated with the symbol of the dove, actually *made* hell, or at least its entrance. Inscribed on the Gates of Hell, like Marcus Agrippa on the portico of the Pantheon, is the signature of the architect. The gate tells us that it was made by divine power, highest wisdom, and the first love.³⁴ Now if the “first love” made hell, we might want to look around for alternatives. Yet the love of Francesca’s narrative, the one that demanded she reciprocate, the one that led her to death and damnation, seems to have been equally fatal. Does love lead inexorably to death? Or to hell? Or is love simply the motivator whichever way one is headed? And is it therefore neutral?

A facile modern reading of Francesca’s predicament is to lament her misfortune of being born in a dark time when her love, indeed any “true” love, freely chosen, was forbidden by others, by society. It was illegitimate, outside the law, outside cultural norms, which of course may have been established only by men and oppressively imposed upon women against their will. This underlies

the “triumphal” reading. Francesca breaks through such arbitrary and unjust strictures; she has agency; she touches joy.³⁵ She claims to have been happy, even if it was a happiness that was too short-lived, and unjustly cut short. “No greater sorrow is there,” she says, “than to recall happiness in misery.” Who are we, in fact, to question whether she was “really” happy in adultery? Especially when we suspect (and Boccaccio in his commentary on this episode spun out the plausible details) that she was unhappy in her marriage. Who is to say whether some loves are good and others bad?

We learn from Boccaccio that Francesca was betrothed for political reasons, to seal the peace and put an end to hostilities between her father Guido da Polenta, the ruler of Ravenna, and the Malatesta family of nearby Rimini. The Malatesta heir apparent, Gianciotto, is dirty, or morally repugnant (or both), and physically lame (*quantunque sozo della persona e sciancato fosse*). In order to get the proud madonna Francesca to acquiesce they make her believe that she is going to marry Gianciotto’s brother who is very beautiful, pleasant, and well-mannered (*era Polo bello e piacevole uomo e costumato molto*). Until the morning after the consummation of her marriage she believes that she is marrying the handsome Paolo with whom, of course, she had already fallen in love. Her sentiments were not only authentic; they were noble and *within* the law, because she thought she was going to marry the person with whom she had fallen in love. This is a lot of narrative back-filling, aimed not just at embellishing the story, but at morally determining it. Francesca was deceived; she is a victim. Boccaccio seems to tip his hand at one point in his fabulous yarn when he says that he had never heard from any

source other than Dante how the two lovers got together, and he believes it is just a fiction constructed on top of what could possibly have been. Boccaccio, who has given us a myriad of delicious, lurid, and intimate details without naming any source, says he does not believe that the author, Dante, could possibly know that that was how it happened, and simply made it up. He also offers his opinion about French romances in general: that they recount many fine and praiseworthy things, things, Boccaccio believes, that are composed more to be pleasing than to conform to the truth.³⁶

Leaving aside Boccaccio's own exculpatory romance, let us interrogate Dante's Francesca herself as to why her choice might have been the wrong one. The most compelling argument against her own freely chosen love is the fact that she herself says she is not happy; she is in fact miserable, despite being conjoined forever with her supposed beloved. In the "triumphal" reading, "forever" is defiant; it indicates a love that survives even death. But, alternatively, "forever" is a long time to spend alongside someone who does not make you happy. And Paolo – it surely pains him, because he never seems to stop crying – is clearly not making her happy.³⁷ That is because they are being punished, one might retort, because someone stuck them in hell. There is *no* earthly love that can make people happy if the external conditions are brutal enough.

Precisely the point, Dante might say. There is no earthly love that can make people happy through hard times if they are hard enough.

Also embedded in her account is the reality of what it was that she, they, actually loved. As already suggested, it is fairly clear that Francesca fell in love, not with Paolo,

but with Lancelot, the paragon of “so great a lover.” Moreover, in her very brief account of Love’s deeds, she indicates that both she and her lover were “taken” / “seized” / “gripped” by the corporeal beauty of the other. He by her *persona*, or body, or physical appearance; she by his *piacere*, a word that indicates pleasure, but also the physical attractiveness that the old troubadour poets called *plazer*. These things, these beautiful bodies with which they each fell in love, are of course not currently present in hell.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with being smitten by a beautiful body. Dante says as much, under interrogation in heaven (as authoritative a circumstance as the poem might offer), when he says that Beatrice originally entered through his eyes, “with the fire that makes him still burn.”⁸ And at their reunion in purgatory, Beatrice herself, with astonishing immodesty, describes her physical body – her limbs that are now scattered in the earth – as the most beautiful thing that Dante ever encountered, either in real life, or in artistic representation. She calls these beautiful limbs the “highest pleasure,” greater than any other found in nature or art. Hers was a body that, at least while she lived and he could see it, was leading him on a virtuous path. That is what she claims: “for a while I sustained him with my face, leading him with me in the right direction; when I was no longer flesh and became spirit, in which my beauty and power increased, he loved me less.” Instead he followed “false images of good,” and she succinctly supplies a definition of “false image” as one that doesn’t keep its promises (*che nulla promession rendono intera*).⁹

The issue is not that beauty is skin-deep, or that we should love the “person” rather than what Francesca

means by *persona* (body).⁴⁰ It turns out that the only things we can love are, precisely, images. At the center of the whole poem, in *Purgatorio*, the well-informed Virgil will explain that the mind abstracts images from reality and opens them up internally, and if it bends toward that unfolded image, that bending is love (*quel piegare è amor*).⁴¹ The problem is that we always and only fall in love with images, images, in fact, of our own making. The judgment of whether an image is false or true, good or bad, is based on whether it can deliver on its promise, the promise that it can make you happy.⁴² We learn from Virgil that everything that *is* is to some extent good; and everything that *is* loves, and loves what it perceives, at least, as a glimmer of the good. So much for Rod McKuen's pseudo-profound sentiment: "it's only important *that* you love," not what or how, since neither Creator nor creature ever existed that did not have love.⁴³ The problem, as Virgil logically lays out, is that you can have too much or too little love for good things, or you can love the wrong thing. The only wrong object of love is not the wrong person, or the wrong good, but wanting something not good for someone else: when people desire evil for their neighbor, that is, when they hate. This wrong love, or desire for evil, underlies the first three capital sins: pride, envy, wrath.⁴⁴

Lust, which is Francesca's sin, is not a wrong love; it is in the category of excess. Following Virgil's speech in purgatory, we can say that there are many goods that we apprehend confusedly, in which we think our mind may rest, and that is what we desire, but some goods, although good, are not what makes people happy. Lust (like gluttony and greed) is when people abandon themselves

excessively or entirely to such things that do not actually make them happy. To say that this is God's judgment is only another way of saying that it is the truth of the matter. And the romance that pretends otherwise is a lie.

It is not hard to understand why Francesca's story is gripping. It does to us what the story of Lancelot and Guinevere did to her. It seizes our sympathies. It makes us identify with her. It is perhaps *the* story: how we come to love what we love and how we become aware of it. Her scene of reading answers Dante's question of how it happened, by what and how love conceded that they recognized their doubtful, dubious, or fearful desires. It is a question demanding a story. More fundamentally, it is a question about *how*: by what means, by what medium. Her answer involves what we would call media: a hand-held device that can increase knowledge and kindle desire. And it is not simply that she should "get off her phone" and pay attention to the reality around her. It is precisely the move from reading to reality that got them in trouble. Some people say the lovers read too little; others say they read too much. Her statement, "that day we read no further," is highly reticent. Boccaccio admires how opportunely she wants to give the reader to understand, without actually saying it, what exactly happened after she was kissed.⁴⁵ But not saying it leaves other, more charitable options open. That day, that very moment, they were brutally murdered. Or, perhaps, at that point they realized the explosiveness of their situation (being alone, reading for pleasure, unsuspecting) and called it a day. But the ambient reality of where they are now placed by the savvy Minos, in hell, tells us that the lovers must have acted out, in the flesh, the adultery of which they

were reading. The disaster happens in her identification of her present situation with the one she reads of in the book. Like Mary who was reading, at the very moment the winged creature appeared in her room, that “a virgin shall conceive,” the lovers incarnate the text.

In settling for Paolo, who happens to be sitting next to her, Francesca misses the point, the very principle of love’s reciprocity. Love’s dictate would require her to reciprocate the “first love,” who “made love to her” (*che la vagheggia*) even before she existed (*prima che sia*). Her fascination with “such a great lover” should have reminded her of the greatest of lovers – that she can do better! In her courtly imagination, in the narrative she believes, God is a king who might have been a lover (*amico*). Such a lover and such a king dispenses favors to his friends and lovers. Even in that calculating paradigm, since she identified herself with the “desired smile” of the queen, it might behoove her to stay loyal, and to keep her promises, to the king himself, and not betray him by transferring her love to one of his vassals.

From the beginning, questions of power, rulership, order, control and authority to judge, mark this canto, which is ostensibly about random, uncontrollable desires, stray arrows from Cupid’s bow, that beset the unsuspecting. The first lovers pointed out to us are queens, women with great power. The first is the ancient Assyrian queen, widow and successor to Ninus, whose territory, according to Dante, extended to Egypt that in his day was ruled, literally “corrected,” by the Sultan. She is Semiramis “about whom one reads” (*Ell’ è Semiramis, di cui si legge*), introduced as so “broken” by lust that she made libido licit in her law (*che libito fè licito in sua legge*).⁴⁶

There is significant punning not only between what is desired and what is licit, but between reading and the law. The word for “law” (*legge*) looks exactly the same as the indicative present third-person form of the verb “to read” (*legge*), and lust (*libito*) can be made licit (*licito*) by changing a single letter.⁴⁷ Dante is closely following the account by the fifth-century historian, Paul Orosius, even to the wordplay of this quip. Orosius tells of the queen’s “continuous adulteries and homicides,” since she put to death “all those whom she had delighted to hold in her adulterous embrace and whom she had summoned to her by royal command for that purpose.” As her crowning iniquity, she had incestuous relations with her own son, and then

covered her private disgrace by a public crime. For she prescribed that between parents and children no reverence for nature in the conjugal act was to be observed, but that each should be free to do as he pleased (*cuique libitum esset liberum fieret*).⁴⁸

Dante likewise explains that, with her power as “empress of many tongues,” Semiramis altered the law in order to remove the blame for what she had done, or for what she had been led to do (*per tōrre il biasmo in che era condotta*). Culpability, then, depends upon the law. If you are as powerful as was Semiramis, the law does not judge you; you judge the law.

In *Inferno* 5, lust is introduced in the context of the *Inferno*’s structure and its immediate law-giver, or bureaucratic minister. The scene of love is prefaced by the scene of judgment. Having descended from the first to the second circle, proceeding with order, we now come upon a judge. The mythological king of Crete already had

such a role in the underworld of the *Aeneid*, calling order in the court and learning people's lives and crimes. Virgil will later point out that he has a special status in hell, by not being "bound by Minos." He and the other residents of limbo are above that law.⁴⁹ Dante's Minos is not the judge of *whether* a soul should be damned, but *where*. It takes a real connoisseur of sin (*conoscitor de le peccata*) to determine which single sin might define an individual, since everyone is usually beset by a multitude of them.

How indeed might the infinity and variety of human desires be constrained within codes, within the confines and constraints of society? And should they be? Anthropologists have identified the constraints on sex, in particular the regulation of marriage and the incest taboo, as universal to human society in all times and places.⁵⁰ The libido, or pleasure, is the principle of the arbitrary (*ad libitum*). To "ad lib" is to make it up as you go along. The carnal sinners subject reason to desire, order to whim. By contrast, the law is something that is laid out in advance, something written down, something set in stone, established, agreed upon, consented to, decreed. A law is what is not in the power of the individual to change. Francesca portrays herself as following the dictates of love, as if she were not free to do otherwise. The punishment of bad weather, the infernal storm (*la bufera infernal*), literalizes this incontinence, her loss of control.

In our own time, we have seen laws change and taboos topple. In the third millennium, we have also seen instituted new rules about sexual conduct, new codes and new contracts of consent and consequences for transgression. Free love is less free than it was fifty years ago. The existence of laws – either of nature or of society or the divine

order – means there is something for free-wheeling desires to bump up against. Everything cannot be as you wish. Your desires do not make the world. There is also reality, which you did not make, and perhaps did not want and do not desire.

Francesca speaks the language of the love poets, particularly the coterie of vernacular lyricists who wrote in an ideology of refined, courtly passion in which the enamored heart was by definition noble and the beloved lady, more exalted still, became a kind of angel. Dante referred to this literary group as “love’s faithful” (*fedeli d’amore*). Francesca subscribes to their ideology, as do we: love ennobles. The point of her damnation, excogitated by the self-reflective poet, not by some unmerciful God, is to expose the distance between romance and reality, between the desired smile and the trembling mouth, between what we promise and what we do, between narrative and fact. Depicted in *Inferno* 5 is not a failure of imaginative literature, but a failure to imagine enough. It is a tragedy to reduce the “desired smile” to a literal, corporeal *mouth*, that happens to be at hand, rather than pursue it upward toward what Dante will refer to later in the *Paradiso* as the “smile of the universe.”⁵¹

Francesca herself has become a book, a romantic story, with which it is quite possible to identify. Indeed, as many have noted, her narrative can have exactly the same effect on us as the French romance did on her. We stop reading and we choose her. The fact of the matter is that we are always reading books, or subscribing to certain narratives – some sustained by popular culture, some latent in our cultural inheritance. Some narratives are persistent, so that Dante can see the founding of

Rome as consonant with the story of Exodus and even with the story of salvation – stories Virgil neither knew nor imagined. We never have just the facts; and our story is never solely our own. It is never a question of thinking or even reading “alone” (the way Francesca claims she and Paolo were – “alone and unsuspecting”).⁵² There is always a narrative in play, and we can never get “just the facts.” We are always looking for the moral of the story and wanting to know how it ends. The purpose of reading, and rereading, which must be pleasurable if we are going to do it (Dante says it was love that made him search Virgil’s volume), is to get at the truth: where romance coincides with reality.

For Francesca, the point of the story is the point at which she identifies with the story the romance seems to be telling and is utterly conquered by it. In retrospect, she missed the point entirely. “Point” (*punto*) is, as many readers have noted, a keyword of the *Divine Comedy*.⁵³ One of the most evident re-evocations of Francesca’s conquering point comes at the far end of the journey and the poem. Toward the end of the *Paradiso*, the point described as “conquering” is a visual representation of God. As the final face-to-face vision approaches, all images and intermediaries begin to fade out, and this at last includes even Beatrice, the object of Dante’s intense and sustained erotic love. As Robin Kirkpatrick reminds us, the *Commedia* is, in the end, a love poem.⁵⁴ Just as the stars wink out at the approach of dawn, down to the most beautiful and brightest of them all, she finally recedes from view to inhabit her indescribable truth and Dante has to confess himself defeated in his lifelong attempts to tell us who she is. His conclusion is that only a lover greater than himself could

fully enjoy her beauty.⁵⁵ The end of Beatrice's story is analogous to her fading into the light of the bright point that represents the target of every desire, once and finally attained. The point Francesca encountered in her reading is a simulacrum of that point, where the story cuts off and reality remains.

Notes

1. The Letter to Cangrande, attributed to Dante, is the thirteenth epistle in *Epistole*, ed. Arsenio Frugoni and Giorgio Brugnoli, in Dante Alighieri, *Opere minori*, vol. 11 (Milan and Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1979): "Comedia vero inchoat asperitatem alicuius rei, sed eius materia prospere terminatur." Robert Hollander, *Dante's Epistle to Cangrande* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993). Zygmunt G. Baranski, "Comedia: Notes on Dante, the Epistle to Cangrande, and Medieval Comedy," *Lectura Dantis*, 8 (1991): 26–55.
2. Charles S. Singleton, "The Vistas in Retrospect," *Modern Language Notes*, 81 (1966): 55–80.
3. Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante: Poet of the Desert* (Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 314: "This 'sense of the ending' of history is the perspective from which the process of history is given a 'finality' and becomes an intelligible totality." As Mazzotta acknowledges after this in a note, this is the "principle that subtends St. Augustine's view of the importance of the 'ending'" as exemplified in the recitation of a psalm (*Confessions* XI.xxviii.38); he is also invoking John Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).
4. Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 111–112,

- observes that what Dante himself can narrate is not the “master-narrative,” because “the story of salvation can be told only in part.”
5. Albert Ascoli, “The Author in History,” in *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 49–50, points to the inescapability of plural discourses, even those that consider themselves historically grounded: “The conflicted history of Dante criticism itself proves *prima facie* that the choice of which discourse or discourses to focus on in historicizing the poet and his works results in a wide spectrum of separately but more or less equally historicized Dantes.”
 6. *Inferno* 1.23–60.
 7. John Freccero, “Dante’s Prologue Scene,” *Dante Studies*, 84 (1966): 1–25. Also in John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1986), pp. 1–28. Margaret Ferguson, “Saint Augustine’s Region of Unlikeness: The Crossing of Exile and Language,” in D. Selden and R. Hexter (eds.), *Innovations of Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 69–94. The topos of exile, particularly as it regards reading, is fundamental to Mazzotta’s *Poet of the Desert*.
 8. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.xiii.20–21, in Augustine, *Confessions, Volume i: Books 1–8*, ed. and trans. Carolyn Hammond (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 37: “Quid enim miserius misero non miserante se ipsum et flente Didonis mortem, quae fiebat amando Aenean, non flente autem mortem suam, quae fiebat non amando te, deus, lumen cordis mei et panis oris intus animae meae et virtus maritans mentem meam et sinum cogitationis meae? non te amabam, et fornicabar abs te, et fornicanti sonabat undique: ‘euge! euge!’ amicitia enim.” Sara Ruden’s translation (New York: Modern Library, 2018), p. 22, similarly emphasizes the repetition of pity: “What was

more pitiful than me, a pitiful person not pitying himself but weeping for the death of Dido.” On Augustine’s reading of Virgil, see Sabine MacCormack, *The Shadows of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augustine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For the practice of performing Virgil in late antique education, see Marjorie Woods, *Weeping for Dido: The Classics in the Medieval Classroom* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

9. Ruden, *Confessions*, p. 22, is even more colorful: “The manliness that actually marries my mind and is a legitimate husband to the bosom of my meditations? I didn’t love you, and I cheated on you like a true slut.”
10. Virgil, *Aeneid* iv.323–324, 338–339, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), p. 444: “hospes, hoc solum nomen quoniam de coniuge restat? ... nec coniugis umquam / praetendi tae-das aut haec in foedera veni.”
11. *Aeneid* iv.165–172, pp. 432–433: “speluncam Dido dux et Troianus eandem / deveniunt. / prima et Tellus et pronuba Iuno / dant signum; fulsere ignes et conscius Aether / conubiis, summoque ulularunt vertice Nymphae / ille dies primus leti primusque malorum / causa fuit ... nec iam furtivum Dido meditatur amorem; coniugium vocat; hoc praetexit nomine culpam.”
12. For Virgil’s alteration of the historical Dido, of which both Petrarch and Boccaccio were well aware, see Marilyn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
13. *Aeneid* iv.52: “non servata fides cineri promissa Sychaeo.” *Inferno* 5. 61–62: “l’altra è colei che s’ancise amorosa, / e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo.” Claudia Villa, “Tra affetti e pietà: per *Inferno* V,” *Lettere italiane*, 51 (1999): 513–541, has delineated the many connections between Dido and Francesca.

14. Elena Lombardi, "Reading," in E. Lombardi, *The Wings of the Dove* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), pp. 212–247. See also John Freccero, "The Portrait of Francesca: *Inferno* V," *Modern Language Notes*, 124 (2009): S7–S38, pp. S32–S35; Peter Dronke, "Francesca and Heloise," in P. Dronke, *The Medieval Poet and his World* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1984), pp. 359–385; Sandro Orlando, "Suggerimenti intertestuali in *Inferno* V 127–129," *Studi testuali*, 3 (1994): 75–80; Stefano Carrai, "Il lamento di Francesca, il silenzio di Paolo," *Nuova Rivista di Letteratura Italiana*, 9 (2006): 9–26.
15. Martin Eisner, "The Word Made Flesh in *Inferno* 5: Francesca Reading and the Figure of the Annunciation," *Dante Studies*, 131 (2013): 51–72.
16. *Inferno* 5.100–106: "Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende, / prese costui de la bella persona / che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende. / Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona, / mi prese del costui piacer sì forte, / che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona. / Amor condusse noi ad una morte."
17. *Inferno* 5.118–120: "Ma dimmi: al tempo d'i dolci sospiri, / a che e come concedette amore /che conosceste i dubbiosi disiri?"
18. We know that Italian aristocrats did indeed read or listen to such romances in French well into the fifteenth century and beyond, and translations of them into Italian in the thirteenth century, when Francesca lived and died, were still quite rare. Italians of her time read and even wrote in French, praised by Brunetto Latini, who wrote a whole encyclopedia in it, as "the most delightful of languages." Brunetto Latini, *Tresor* 1.i.4, ed. P. G. Beltrami (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), p. 6: "Et se aucun demandoit por quoi ceste livre est escrit en roman selonc le patois de France, puis que nos [so]mes ytaliens, je diroie que ce est par .ii.

raisons: l'une que nos [so]mes en France, l'autre por ce que la parleure est plus delitable et plus comune a touz languaiges." There are some twenty surviving manuscripts of the French *Lancelot* that were produced or circulated on the peninsula in addition to others, now lost, documented in inventories, catalogues, and library records of aristocrats and wealthy city-dwellers. Yet unlike the romance of Tristan, which was translated more than once, *Lancelot*, the central romance and original core of the cycle, seemed to have made its way in Italy without translation. Luca Cadioli's discovery of a fragment of a fourteenth-century Tuscan version does not fundamentally change this landscape, since it remains a rarity, if not a singularity, and probably did not exist in Francesca's time. *Lancellotto: Versione italiana inedita del "Lancelot en prose,"* ed. Luca Cadioli (Florence: SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2016). Daniela Delcorno Branca, *Tristano e Lancilotto in Italia* (Ravenna: Longo, 1998).

19. *Inferno* 5.133–138: "Quando leggemmo il disiato riso / esser baciato da cotanto amante, / questi, che mai da me non fia diviso, / la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante. / Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse: / quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante." As critics have noted (e.g., Lombardi in *Wings of the Dove*, p. 185), Lancelot does not seem like so great a lover, at least in the scene referenced in the prose romance.
20. Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2012). Stefano Carrai, "Il lamento," p. 11, calls it a privilege for them to be conjoined forever in their eternal punishment.
21. Lorenzo Renzi, *Le conseguenze di un bacio: L'episodio di Francesca nella "Commedia" di Dante* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), p. 30, recalls certain medieval admonitions against reading pagan works that might promote lascivious thoughts.

22. Renzo Bragantini, "L'amicizia, la fama, il libro: sulla seconda epistola a Mainardo Cavalcanti," in F. Ciabattini, E. Filosa, and K. Olson (eds.), *Boccaccio 1313–2013* (Ravenna: Longo, 2015), pp. 107–115, analyzes Boccaccio's warning to his younger friend not to allow the ladies of his household to read Boccaccio's "libellos."
23. Anna Hatcher and Mark Musa, "The Kiss: *Inferno* V and the Old French Prose *Lancelot*," *Comparative Literature*, 20 (1968): 97–109. Susan Noakes, "The Double Misreading of Paolo and Francesca," *Philological Quarterly*, 52 (1983): 221–239. There are a few manuscripts where it could be understood that Lancelot was doing the kissing, but since the perils of reading are indisputably at stake in Dante's creation and he has Francesca make one excuse after another, it makes eminent sense that he would catch her, if not in a lie, then in a misreading. Daniela Delcorno Branca, "Dante and the *Roman de Lancelot*," in N. J. Lacy (ed.), *Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature* (New York and London: Garland, 1996), pp. 133–145.
24. The Morgan Library, MS M 805, fol. 67r, northwestern France, c.1310–1315.
25. Maria Luisa Ardizzone, "Guido Guinizzelli's 'Al cor gentil': A Notary in Search of Written Laws," *Modern Philology*, 94 (1997): 455–474. Donato Pirovano, "'Il padre mio e degli altri miei miglior': Guido Guinizzelli," in D. Pirovano, *Il dolce stil novo* (Rome: Salerno, 2014), pp. 266–280. Paolo Borsa, *La nuova poesia di Guido Guinizzelli* (Florence: Cadmo, 2007). Tristan Kay, *Dante's Lyric Redemption: Eros, Salvation, Vernacular Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 63–69.
26. *Inferno* 5.77–78: "più presso a noi; e tu allor li priega / per quello amor che i mena, ed ei verranno."

27. *Inferno* 5.121–126: “E quella a me: ‘Nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / ne la miseria; e ciò sa ‘l tuo dottore. / Ma s’a conoscer la prima radice / del nostro amor tu hai cotanto affetto, / dirò come colui che piange e dice.’” Freccero, “Portrait,” p. S11, points this out as a perfect example of what René Girard called “mimetic desire.” René Girard, “The Mimetic Desire of Paolo and Francesca,” in R. Girard, *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 1–8. See also Manuele Gragnolati and Heather Webb, “*Dubbiosi disiri*: Mimetic Processes in Dante’s *Comedy*,” in P. Antonello and H. Webb (eds.), *Mimesis, Desire, and the Novel: René Girard and Literary Criticism* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), pp. 113–132.
28. *Purgatorio* 22.10–12: “quando Virgilio incominciò: ‘Amore, / acceso di virtù, sempre altro accese, / pur che la fiamma sua paresse fore.’”
29. Augustine, *Confessions* IV.ix.14, Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. and trans. Hammond, pp. 154–155; cf. Freccero, “Portrait,” p. S24.
30. Edoardo Sanguineti in “Il realismo di Dante,” in E. Sanguineti, *Dante reazionario* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1992), p. 288, describes Francesca as a medieval Emma Bovary “who dreams of kissing Lancelot and enjoys, in a tragic letdown, the embraces of her brother-in-law.” See David Lummus, “Edoardo Sanguineti’s New Dante,” in P. Chirumbolo and J. Picchione (eds.), *Edoardo Sanguineti: Literature, Ideology and the Avant-Garde* (Leeds: Legenda, 2013), pp. 40–55.
31. *Purgatorio* 16.85–93: “Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia / prima che sia, a guisa di fanciulla / che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia, / l’anima semplicetta che sa nulla, / salvo che,

- mossa da lieto fattore, / volontier torna a ciò che la trastulla.
/ Di picciol bene in pria sente sapore; / quivi s'inganna, e di-
etro ad esso corre, / se guida o fren non torce suo amore.”
32. Lombardi, “Reading,” p. 215.
 33. *Paradiso* 33.86 and 33.135.
 34. *Inferno* 3.5–6: “fecemi la divina podestate, / la somma sapienza e ’l primo amore.” Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, pp. 90–91 explains that hell is a part of the order of love, a “possibility available to free human choice.”
 35. Teodolinda Barolini, “Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender,” *Speculum*, 75.1 (2000), 1–28, 10: “Francesca may be seen as asserting her agency and her personhood against a dynastic patriarchy that assigned no value to her pleasure.”
 36. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante*, ed. Giorgio Padoan (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), p. 316: “Col quale come ella poi si giugnesse, mai non udi’ dire se non quello che l’autore ne scrive; il che possibile è che così fosse: ma io credo quello essere più tosto fizione formata sopra quello che era possibile ad essere avvenuto, ché io non credo che l’autore sapesse che così fosse”; and p. 323: “Del quale molte belle e laudevole cose racontano i romanzi franceschi, cose, per quel ch’io creda, più composte a beneplacito che secondo la verità.”
 37. *Inferno* 5.139–140: “Mentre che l’uno spirto questo disse, / l’altro piangëa.”
 38. *Paradiso* 26.13–15: “Io dissi: ‘Al suo piacere e tosto e tardo / vegna remedio a li occhi, che fuor porte / quand’ ella entrò col foco ond’ io sempr’ ardo.’”
 39. *Purgatorio* 31.49–54: “Mai non t’appresentò natura o arte / piacer, quanto le belle membra in ch’io / rinchiusa fui, e che so’ ’n terra sparte; / e se ’l sommo piacer sì ti fallio / per la mia morte, qual cosa mortale / dovea poi trarre te nel suo disio?” *Purgatorio* 30.121–123, 131–132: “Alcun

tempo il sostenni col mio volto: / mostrando li occhi giovanetti a lui, / meco il menava in dritta parte vòlto. ... immagini di ben seguendo false, /che nulla promession rendono intera.”

40. On all the meanings of *persona*, see Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford University Press, 2016).
41. *Purgatorio* 18.22–27: “Vostra apprensiva da esser verace / tragge intenzione, e dentro a voi la spiega, / sì che l’animo ad essa volger face; / e se, rivolto, inver’ di lei si piega, / quel piegare è amor, quell’ è natura / che per piacer di novo in voi si lega.”
42. *Purgatorio* 17.133: “Altro ben è che non fa l’uom felice.”
43. *Purgatorio* 17.91–93: “Né creator né creatura mai, / cominciò el, ‘figliuol, fu senza amore, / o naturale o d’animo; e tu ’l sai. / Lo naturale è sempre senza errore, / ma l’altro puote errar per malo obietto / o per troppo o per poco di vigore.”
44. A very sensitive explanation of this passage is in Robin Kirkpatrick’s introduction to his translation of *Purgatorio: The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio* (London and New York: Penguin, 2007), pp. xxx–xxxiv.
45. Boccaccio, *Esposizioni*, p. 324: “Assai aconciamente mostra di volere che, senza dirlo essa, i lector comprendano quello che dell’essere stata basciata da Polo seguitasse.”
46. *Inferno* 5.55–60: “A vizio di lussuria fu sì rotta, / che libito fé licito in sua legge, / per tòrre il biasmo in che era condotta. / Ell’ è Semiramìs, di cui si legge / che succedette a Nino e fu sua sposa: / tenne la terra che ’l Soldan corregge.”
47. Elena Lombardi, “Lust and the Law: Reading and Witnessing in *Inferno* V,” in G. Gaimari and C. Keen (eds.), *Ethics, Politics and Justice in Dante* (London: University College London Press, 2019), pp. 63–79.

48. Orosius, 1.iv.4.7–8; *Seven Books of History against the Pagans: The Apology of Paulus Orosius*, trans. Irving Woodworth Raymond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), pp. 49–50.
49. *Aeneid* 6.432–33: “Quaesitor Minos urnam movet; ille silentum / conciliumque vocat, vitasque et crimina discit”) (“Minos, presiding, shakes the urn; ’tis he calls a court of the silent, and learns men’s lives and misdeeds”). *Purgatorio* 1.76–77: “Non son li editti eterni per noi uasti, / ché questi vive e Minòs me non lega.”
50. Rachel Sharaby, “An Anthropological View on the Taboo Incest Social Structure and Family Order,” *Advances in Anthropology*, 9 (2019): 169–189.
51. *Paradiso* 27.4–6: “Ciò ch’io vedeva mi sembiava un riso / de l’universo; per che mia ebbrezza / intrava per l’udire e per lo viso.” Peter Hawkins, “All Smiles: Poetry and Theology in Dante,” *PMLA*, 121 (2006): 371–387. Republished in *Dante’s “Commedia”: Theology as Poetry*, ed. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press), pp. 36–59.
52. Laura Miles, “The Origins and Development of the Virgin Mary’s Book at the Annunciation,” *Speculum*, 89.3 (2014): 632–669, observes that the iconography of the book is connected with Mary’s solitude, and her solitude is connected with her virginity, which is of course essential to the miracle. In the last chapter of her recent book, *Una meravigliosa solitudine: L’arte di leggere nell’Europa moderna* (Turin: Einaudi, 2019), Lina Bolzoni recalls Proust’s objection to Ruskin’s idealizing notion of reading as a “conversation,” insisting instead on the necessity of solitude.
53. Christian Moevs, “‘Il punto che mi vinse’: Incarnation, Revelation, and Self-Knowledge in Dante’s *Commedia*,” in V. Montemaggi and M. Treherne (eds.), *Dante’s “Commedia”: Theology as Poetry*, pp. 267–285.

54. Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London and New York: Penguin, 2007), p. xiii.
55. *Paradiso* 30.19–21: “la bellezza ch’io vidi si trasmoda / non pur di là da noi, ma certo io credo / che solo il suo fattor tutta la goda.”