

Beatrice's Maternity and Dante's Eros: The Transformation of Italian Love Poetry

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When Beatrice first appears at the end of *Purgatorio* and then throughout the last twelve cantos of *Paradiso*, Dante employs maternal metaphors to describe his beloved's relationship with him. Recent scholarship has focused very little on this apparent problem of Dante identifying his beloved as also, at different points, his mother.¹ James McMenamín, in an article titled, "The Poet's Inner Child: Early Childhood and Spiritual Growth in Dante's *Commedia*," addresses only the purgatorial maternal images of Beatrice, and quickly dismisses as unproblematic Dante's

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¹ I should clarify that, throughout the essay, when I discuss Beatrice as beloved, I am talking about Dante's Troubadour-like love for Beatrice as his lady. When I discuss Beatrice as mother, I am talking about Beatrice's motherly love for Dante which wishes to lead Dante to God, and secondarily about Dante's reception of that love. I am not talking about Dante's love for Beatrice as a mother-figure.

maternal imagery addressed towards his beloved.² Michael Vander Weele, in “Mother and Child in *Paradiso* 27,” addresses maternal imagery, but only in *Paradiso* 27, which lacks Beatrician maternal images.³ How are we to resolve the tension between Dante’s *eros* for Beatrice and his use of parent-child imagery regarding Beatrice and himself? What does Dante mean to convey by juxtaposing beloved and mother? In this essay, I will argue that the tension between Beatrice as beloved and Beatrice as mother is resolved in Dante transforming his tradition of Italian love poetry. Rather than exalting Beatrice merely as an object of desire, as is conventional in the troubadour tradition out of which Dante’s poetry comes, the poet, by Beatrice’s guidance and St. Bernard’s example, seeks to resolve his inherited tradition’s tension between allegiance to one’s lady and one’s God.

I. DANTE AND HIS TROUBADOUR TRADITION

In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante very consciously presents himself within a tradition of Italian poetry, acknowledging his debt to those prior to him in it. Teodolinda Barolini explains, “Dante is heir to a complex and lively Italian lyric tradition... [that employed] the conventions of troubadour love poetry—based on the notion of the lover’s feudal service to ‘*midons*,’ his lady, from whom he expects a ‘*guerdon*,’ or reward.”⁴ Dante himself says that his “sweet new style” is new not because of his stylistic deviations, but because he lets love speak in him. Dante most emphatically acknowledges his debt to his tradition by altering a famous poem of Guido Cavalcanti, but in doing so, he begins to reveal the way in which he will transform the tradition. In *Purgatorio* XXVIII, Dante the poet creates a scene between the pilgrim and Matilda that begins in quite similar fashion to Cavalcanti’s “*In un boschetto trova’ pasturella*.” In both poems, the man encounters the woman alone in a forest while the woman is singing an inaudible song, and the man notices that the woman appears to be in love. One familiar with Cavalcanti’s poem would expect Dante to ask “of her

² James F McMenamin, “The Poet’s Inner Child: Early Childhood and Spiritual Growth in Dante’s ‘*Commedia*,’” *Italica* 93, no. 2 (2016): pp. 225-250, <https://aati.uark.edu/italica/>, 234.

³ Michael Vander Weele, “Mother and Child in *Paradiso* 27,” *Religion and Literature* 26, no. 3 (1994): pp. 1-17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40059592>.

⁴ Teodolinda Barolini, “Dante and the Lyric Past,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 14-33, 14.

only permission to kiss/ And to embrace—should she so wish,” (Cavalcanti 21). However, in the previous canto, Dante already reached the earthly paradise and had his will declared “free... and whole” (*Purgatorio* XXVII, 140). After passing through Hell and Purgatory’s final refining fires, for Dante to succumb to temptation now and to commit the sin of lust would contradict the movement of the two canticles.

Instead, Dante deviates from the expectations of the Cavalcantian scene to prepare his reader for a new kind of love poetry. Instead of seducing Matilda, Dante allows her to educate him concerning the nature of the earthly paradise. Unlike the narrator of Cavalcanti’s poem, who claims to see the god of love through his tryst, Dante receives a vision from God when Matilda directs him—as “brother,” not lover—to “look and listen” to the incoming procession (*Purgatorio* XXIX, 15). Dante’s eros, initially focused upon Matilda, becomes directed towards God through the mediation of the woman. In this scene, Dante begins to resolve a fundamental tension within the poetic tradition he inherited. Barolini explicates, “At the heart of troubadour poetry is an unresolved tension between the poet-lover’s allegiance to the lady and his allegiance to God.”⁵ In the scene with Matilda, the tension between lady and God resolves with Dante, through Matilda’s guidance, joining Matilda in gazing upon the heavenly vision.

While Dante can be moved within the course of two cantos to see Matilda not merely as an object of desire, but also as an authority guiding him to the total fulfillment of his eros in God, Beatrice will prove to be a more difficult case. In fact, Dante’s eros towards Beatrice is a key motivation for his progress through the first two canticles. In canto II of *Inferno*, Dante summons the necessary vigor for his journey only upon hearing that it was Beatrice who arranged his pilgrimage. Virgil’s words dispose Dante’s heart to the journey by invoking the name of “she, compassionate, who has helped me” (133). In a similar situation at the end of their journey through Purgatory, Virgil, after failing to move Dante to pass through the fires by appealing to God’s closeness, coaxes Dante’s stubborn heart to complete the journey by reminding Dante that “this/ wall stands between you and your Beatrice” (*Purgatorio* XXVII, 35-36). Dante’s desire for Beatrice moves him through Hell and Purgatory, but

⁵ Ibid.

this merely erotic love for Beatrice must develop once he reaches the earthly paradise.

II. BEATRICE'S MATERNITY

Given Dante's deep desire for Beatrice prior to her arrival in *Purgatorio* XXX, the reader would reasonably expect some version of the troubadour tradition to find expression. Indeed, Dante's desire for Beatrice is frequently expressed throughout the remaining cantos of the *Commedia*. However, as in the pilgrim's encounter with Matilda, the poet deviates from the reader's expectations. Most strikingly, Dante casts Beatrice's relationship with him not as the beloved being praised by the lover, but rather "as a mother seems/ harsh to her child, so did she seem to me" (*Purgatorio* XXX, 79-80). One would think that since Dante successfully journeyed through Hell and Purgatory and endured the purging fires for her sake, Beatrice's reaction would be that of the proud beloved adoring her lover who had overcome so much to see her. Instead, Beatrice looks like, as McMenamin describes, "a mother... [expressing] 'harsh pity' as tough love."⁶

The poet again invokes mother-child imagery in the next canto. First, Beatrice compares Dante to a fledgling bird that should have followed her out of the nest, immediately after which Dante again resorts to the image of an ashamed child in *Purgatorio* XXXI. The poet writes:

As children, when ashamed, will stand, their eyes
Upon the ground—they listen, silently,
Acknowledging their fault repentantly
So did I stand... (64-67)

McMenamin explains, "Beatrice criticizes Dante's immaturity and, ironically, he behaves in a childlike way since the narrator approximates his reaction to the silent shame expressed by sorrowful children who recognize their own guilt by staring at the ground" (237). These images show that something is insufficient within the pilgrim's love towards Beatrice and that his love for her must mature beyond its current childish state if he is to regain her as a beloved. The pilgrim recognizes as much through his shame, summoned forth by Beatrice's maternal love. This love

⁶ McMenamin, 236.

brings Dante to reorient his relationship with Beatrice; Dante, the fledgling who needed to follow his mother bird out of the nest, is no longer just the lover striving for the beloved, but he must also contend with Beatrice loving him as a mother loves a child. Much like the pilgrim's encounter with Matilda, the poet writes contrary to the troubadour tradition.

The pilgrim, in the last lines of *Purgatorio*, is "remade, as new trees are/ renewed when they bring forth new boughs" and is, through the removal of his sins and their effects on his soul, "pure and prepared to climb unto the stars" (*Purgatorio* XXXIII, 143-145). Concurrently, when he appears again in *Paradiso*, the poet ceases using mother-child images that illustrate shame. In the last canticle's first canto, Beatrice "settled her eyes on [Dante] with the same look/ a mother casts upon a raving child," (101-102), and, in the third canto, Beatrice tells the pilgrim, "Because you reason like a child/ your steps do not yet rest upon the truth" (26-27). Dante has learned from his initial episodes with Beatrice's chastisement, because instead of reacting with shame at Beatrice's rebukes or finding great difficulty in Beatrice not merely being an object of desire, Dante acts with humility and learns from her words without any internal consternation. In the first instance, Dante the poet makes no mention of the pilgrim's interior attitude in receiving Beatrice's look. Then, in the third canto, the pilgrim turns towards the shade to whom Beatrice asks him to listen "as would a man/ bewildered by desire too intense," not a child ashamed of being reprimanded (*Paradiso* III, 35-36). Dante has humbly accepted Beatrice's maternity; he is no longer shamed by her gaze or words, but receives them wholeheartedly.

III. DANTE'S TRANSFORMATION OF THE TROUBADOUR TRADITION

While the pilgrim encounters Beatrice's maternity at the end of *Purgatorio* and accepts it at the beginning of *Paradiso*, he does not try to reconcile her maternity with his eros through the first two thirds of *Paradiso*. The maternal imagery recedes while Dante's continuous gaze at Beatrice, as well as Beatrice's beauty, increases. Only upon entering the last sphere, the fixed stars, does the poet begin to pair the exultations of Beatrice fitting for her as a beloved with his maternal metaphors and images of her, but he struggles to properly integrate them. The poet begins canto XXIII by returning to the simile of fledgling birds and their mother with which Beatrice chastised him in *Purgatorio*. This time, the fledgling responds

appropriately to his mother's initiation, being "satisfied with hope" (15) that Beatrice will "find the food with which to feed [him]" (6). Then, about forty lines later, the poet begins to describe the pilgrim's experience of Beatrice's beauty, but Beatrice quickly reprimands the pilgrim for being "so enraptured by my face/ as to deny your eyes the sight of that/ fair garden blossoming beneath Christ's rays" (70-72). Dante attempts to unite Beatrice's maternal love which guides him to God with his love for Beatrice as his beloved, but he succumbs to his erotic attachment to Beatrice.

Dante the poet progressively reveals the tension in the pilgrim between Beatrice as beloved and Beatrice as maternal guide to God as he nears the end of the *Commedia*. In canto XXVII, Dante brings Beatrice the beloved and Beatrice the mother directly into contact. In line 88, the poet recounts, "My mind, enraptured, always longing for/ my lady gallantly, was burning more/ than ever for my eyes' return to her." Immediately after ending his ode to his beloved, Dante employs another nest metaphor: "The powers that her gaze now granted me/ drew me out of the lovely nest of Leda/ and thrust me into heaven's swiftest sphere" (96-98).⁷ Dante again brings his erotic love for Beatrice and Beatrice's maternal love for him together as Beatrice leaves him in canto XXX. Dante gives his last exultation of his beloved, beginning, "If that which has been said of her so far/ were all contained within a single praise/ it would be much too scant to serve me now" (16-18). Charles Williams comments, "She is given the whole poem absolutely to herself. Dante, in this single moment, will have nothing else distract his or our eyes. The perfect Image reaches its perfect height."⁸ Dante the lover, having sung his best of his beloved, leaves her "to/ a herald that is greater than my trumpet" (34-35). Then, Dante the poet makes Beatrice's final command into another maternal metaphor, comparing the pilgrim's urgency to obey Beatrice's command to drink with his eyes of the "light that took a river's form—/ light flashing,

⁷ This particular maternal reference is strange, given it refers to the nest of Leda in particular. Here, Beatrice is acting in her role as guide to God, and therefore as mother, while Dante is the offspring being led out of the nest. The reference to Leda suggests that Beatrice, as the motherly figure, is Leda drawing Dante out of the nest. God might be the Zeus of this scenario, father to Dante through Beatrice's motherhood, but Dante does not give much detail by which to understand any nuances in the reference.

⁸ Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (New York, NY: Octagon Books, 1972), 218.

reddish-gold, between two banks" (61-62) with the desire of a hungry infant seeking its mother's milk (82-85). If Dante is the infant, then Beatrice is implicitly the mother offering the milk.⁹ In both cantos XXVII and XXX, the poet presents her almost simultaneously as beloved and maternal guide.

Nevertheless, while uniting far more closely the images of Beatrice as beloved and Beatrice as maternal guide to God, Dante the poet still has not entirely resolved the tension between the two. In cantos XXVII and XXX, he alternates between the images but cannot find the capacity to unite them. However, upon recognizing that Beatrice has returned to her place in Paradise, Dante begins to overcome this tension by uniting the two Beatrician roles in his prayer to her. Dante both sings of Beatrice as his lady and asks for her guidance and "generosity, so that my soul/ which you have healed, when it is set loose from/ my body, be a soul that you will welcome" (88-90). The troubadour's tension would be resolved by singing of his lady, thus honoring his allegiance to her, but also asking for her intercessory prayer, and therefore her maternal love, to lead him back to God. However, his prayer is still too focused on her, not union with God, for Dante asserts that his soul was healed by Beatrice, with no mention of the grace of God, and asks that he be a soul that Beatrice, not the Holy Trinity, will welcome. The pilgrim sees Beatrice as she is, as both beloved and guide simultaneously, but he still carries something of an either/or conception of his love of Beatrice and God, and hence maintains the standard troubadour tension between lady and God.

To fully effect the transformation of the troubadour tradition and the pilgrim's heart, Dante the poet provides St. Bernard as the pilgrim's final guide. Just as the pilgrim sung of Beatrice's honor and to her in petitionary prayer, so also Bernard will sing of his lady, the Blessed Mother of God, while asking for her intercession on the pilgrim's behalf. Bernard assures Dante that "the Queen of Heaven, for whom I am all/ aflame with love, will grant us every grace:/ I am her faithful Bernard" (31, 100-102). Bernard's devotion to his lady is far more fervent as Dante's devotion to Beatrice. The pilgrim, seeing the affection with which Bernard gazes at the Blessed Mother, is brought to gaze all the more ardently with

⁹ One could argue that God is the one providing the "milk," not Beatrice, but Beatrice is still the mediator by which Dante comes to drink from the stream, and therefore the proximate source of the stream.

Bernard at her. Bernard then begins his prayer to the Blessed Mother, praising her highly as “the one who gave human nature so much nobility that its Creator did not disdain being made its creature” (33, 4-6). Bernard also requests from her as Queen and guide with whom Dante “now pleads... through grace... that the Highest Joy be his to see” (33: 24, 25, 33). In his prayer, Bernard unites Mary as his lady with Mary as the Queen and guide to God of all mankind. Bernard does so by seeing her not on her own terms, as Dante had done in his prayer with Beatrice, but by seeing her loveliness from the perspective of her being the Mother of God and her Queenly qualities as serving the role of leading souls to the Divine King. Bernard honors the Blessed Mother by ardently going through her to God.

At this point, one may wonder whether the troubadour tradition’s tension is not so much resolved as dissolved in favor of God. If Bernard’s ultimate end is God and is not Mary, and the pilgrim’s is likewise, is Beatrice simply passed over or passed through for God? I think Dante the poet suggests otherwise. Both Beatrice and the Blessed Mother, upon receiving the prayer of their supplicants, turn their gazes from God to Dante and Bernard, show their love and joy in receiving these requests, and then turn their eyes back toward God. They are not completely lost in God, but instead turn to the men who long for their aid and affirm both their praise of them and their petition to them. Then, the two heavenly ladies invite the men to gaze *with them* at the Eternal Light. Bernard’s prayer and the affirmations of Beatrice and Mary of the petitions show Dante that his beloved is not his final end, that he is to go through Beatrice to reach God, but not in such a way as to merely use Beatrice as one shining rung on Jacob’s ladder towards the Beatific vision. Bernard is with his lady for all eternity, and the pilgrim is still with Beatrice at the end of the *Comedy*. While Beatrice’s maternity is to lead Dante through her to God, Dante’s *eros* towards Beatrice finds its fulfillment in gazing upon God *with* Beatrice. Dante’s heaven is not merely a reunion with his beloved, lost in her to the neglect of God, nor a solipsistic absorption in God that forgets all that Beatrice had meant to him up to that point. Instead, Dante gets lost, with Beatrice, in their shared gaze upon God.

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