

Dante's Manhoods: Authorial Masculinities before the *Commedia*

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## ABSTRACT

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This study examines the ways that Dante uses concepts of the masculine in his early work to offer an analysis of the masculine ideals which lie at the basis of Dante's construction of himself as an author in the lyric poems and in his discussions of Latin and Italian. I describe ideals and conceptions of masculinity current in Dante's era, particularly the socially-adjudged behaviors and attitudes that underpin honor-culture, in order to delineate the ways in which Dante uses these conventions in lyric poems to make the poems themselves entries in an honor exchange among men. I also examine the opposed qualities coded as masculine and feminine in the classical literary and philosophical tradition, particularly mutability and constancy, and transmitted as a code of masculine ethical superiority in the Latin pedagogy of Dante's day, to define how masculine ideals determine Dante's initial definition of Latin as the nobler language in *Convivio*, as well as his reversal of that language hierarchy in *De vulgari eloquentia*.

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## INTRODUCTION

In considering gender in Dante's work, scholars have chiefly examined Dante's depiction of women, or his acknowledgement of women readers as ethical actors. This dissertation focuses on men and masculinity to define the specific construction of masculine identity Dante lived with and responded to, revealing a previously undetected dimension of meaning in his early work. Readers and critics often impose their own era's version of normative masculinity onto Dante; this study aims to replace such anachronistic misprisions with the perception of how Dante situates his work and his authorial identity within the ideals of masculinity of his era.

The first chapter defines how honor cultures, such as that of Dante's Florence, constitute masculine prestige: what makes a man entitled to masculine pride and self respect and what compels others to cede respect to him. Armed with this perspective on Dante's engagement with the masculine identity specific to his time and place, we find that poems largely discarded and ignored as immature are more than mere recitations of poetic formulas. The sonnets he contributes to the tenzone with Dante da Maiano constitute a dynamic assertion of preeminence, not a labored attempt to offer absurdly hyperbolic compliments to a stranger. Furthermore, the tenzone with Forese is not an early version of the *Inferno*, but a game of honor in which the two poets parry for masculine prestige. The second chapter builds on this demonstration of Dante's authorial investment in honor codes to examine the implications of his sending poems defined as naked maidens to other men. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the threat of authorial dishonor Dante depicts

in “Tre donne intorno al cor” in the imagery of the canzone as a woman’s body, menaced by a potentially violating male reader.

The third and fourth chapters turn from honor culture to another source of masculine ideals for Dante, the *Aeneid*, and consider the impact of classical *virtus* on Dante’s language theory. The intersection of masculine identity and language has been discussed with relation to *De vulgari eloquentia*, but the centrality of masculine prestige in the other of Dante’s discussions of language has gone unremarked. Not only in *De vulgari eloquentia*, but in *Convivio* as well, Dante’s ranking of Latin and Italian depends on the ways he constructs them as gendered. In *Convivio* Dante iterates the gender associations of the languages as he had received them; Latin, identified with and spoken exclusively by men, is the nobler tongue. *De vulgari eloquentia* depicts the contemptible moral stature of men who speak in an effeminate tongue, before regendering the *vulgare* to create a vernacular consummate with an authoritatively masculine voice. Taken together, chapters three and four demonstrate that Dante’s contradictory rankings of Latin and the vernacular result from his perception of language as gendered.

This study examines Dante’s engagement with masculine identity, both in the behaviors and attitudes that constituted honor in his culture, and in classical literary and philosophical definitions of manliness. The lyrics considered here and his two treatises on language reveal that his early sense of himself as an author and of his relationship to his reader hinges on ideals of masculinity.

## Chapter 1

“Si pò ben canoscere d’un omo”: Challenge and Riposte in the Tenzoni.

“L’uom e uom, il solito impersonale.”

Gianfranco Contini, note to lines 90-91 of “Tre donne intorno al cor mi son venute”, *Rime*, 1946.

Contini’s annotation dates to 1946; no one working at that time could be faulted for treating *uom* as an impersonal subject, male in a way understood as ahistorical, neutral, and universally human. However, I will argue in this essay that both in the particular poem Contini annotates above (“Tre donne intorno al cor”), and in many other lyrics, Dante does not treat *uom* as universal and neutrally male. Particularly in the poems in which he names or categorizes the reader(s) he addresses (the above quote is taken from such a poem), he is painstakingly specific about the gender of his addressee. When he refers to a reader as “uom”, he does so advisedly, and I argue that the “uom” referred to, far from being man-as-human - “il solito impersonale” - possesses a strongly gendered masculinity and exists within a specific social construction of what (proper) men are and how (proper) men interact with one another. In this chapter I propose to sketch an outline of the honor-culture context which structures the relationship between this male reader and the poet, and which Dante exploits in a number of lyric poems.



In order to explore these questions in the context of Dante's lyric corpus, I will first delineate the ways masculinity functions in honor culture. I will use the concept of prestige criteria, borrowed from practice theory, to describe the societal context from which Dante adopts certain ideals of masculinity. Prestige criteria are useful in that they are "encompassing": they provide the largest framework and the ultimate reference point for the organization of almost every aspect of social life."<sup>1</sup> In Ortner's formulation,

the prestige system of any society is the system that defines the ultimate goals and purposes of life for the actors in that society. It defines what men and women are, as well as what they are (or should be) trying to accomplish or to become, and it defines how they can and cannot go about that project...In the Mediterranean a body of anthropological literature identifies the prestige system in numerous different societies as being the system by which men gain and lose honor.<sup>2</sup>

We must be cautious; 'onore' as Dante and his contemporaries use the term does not map precisely onto masculine excellence as this study will construe it. Rather, honor is the word "conveniently used" among Mediterraneanists to describe societies in which "the rank which comes from the performance of roles judged by neighbors, friends, acquaintances, rivals, enemies, is a significant allocator of resources", and where "the roles which are judged include explicitly sexual ones."<sup>3</sup> Honor "situates an individual socially and determines

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<sup>1</sup> Ortner 1996, 62.

<sup>2</sup> 1996, 62.

<sup>3</sup> Davis 1977, 89-90.

his right to precedence.”<sup>4</sup> The performative aspect of honor results from its being both a man’s sense of his rank among men, and the recognition others afford to his claim to men’s respect. “The sentiment of honor is lived out openly before other people. [It] is above all the act of defending, cost what it may, a certain public image of oneself.”<sup>5</sup>

In honor cultures, furthermore, men’s reputation for excellence as men, in their fulfillment of numerous roles and in their (frequently agonistic) interactions with other men, form a kind of “symbolic capital” which belongs to all the men of a lineage.<sup>6</sup> “Social groups possess a collective honor in which their members participate; the dishonorable conduct of one reflects upon the honor of all, while a member shares in the honor of his group.”<sup>7</sup> Women do not possess this symbolic capital; their menfolks’ honor resides in their bodies and their chastity is “constituted as a fetishized measure of masculine reputation.”<sup>8</sup> They can lose honor but cannot gain it. Shame, honor’s obverse principle, results from wounds to an individual’s honor or to that of his lineage, whether from damage to their women’s chastity, or from a man’s failure to act in accordance with the dictates of honor: from failing, that is, to engage in the exchanges of honor that characterize men’s interactions. A man who does not issue a challenge when warranted, or fails to accept a challenge when issued and provide a risposte, remains dishonored.

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<sup>4</sup> Pitt-Rivers 1966, 38.

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu 1966, 208.

<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu 1998, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Pitt-Rivers 1966, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Idem: 45.

Honor has an ethical sense which is distinct from honor as masculine precedence. Pitt-Rivers states that in its ethical guise, “honor and shame are synonymous, since shamelessness is dishonorable; a person of good repute is taken to have both, one of evil repute is credited with neither.”<sup>9</sup> He also defines an ethically-neutral honor, distinct from shame, which is identified with masculinity and includes “the desire for precedence,” the “willingness to defend reputation,” and the “refusal to submit to humiliation.”<sup>10</sup> At the other end of the honor-shame spectrum which he describes lies shame, distinct from honor, identified with femininity and defined by passivity and submission: the “acceptance of humiliation,” and the “failure to defend reputation.”<sup>11</sup> Whereas men must actively engage in exchanges of honor with other men to maintain their status, women are enjoined to exercise a guarded passivity; they can only avoid dishonoring behavior.

The honor of a man and of a woman therefore imply quite different modes of conduct...while certain conduct is honoring for both sexes, honor-shame requires conduct in other spheres, which is exclusively a virtue of one sex or another....Shame, no longer equivalent to honor, as shyness, blushing and timidity, is thought to be proper to women, even though it no longer constitutes virtue, while honor, no longer equivalent to shame, becomes an exclusively male attribute as the concern for precedence and the willingness

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<sup>9</sup> 1966, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, 44.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, 44.

to offend another man. At this point the modes of conduct become dishonoring for the inappropriate sex.<sup>12</sup> (1966, 42)

Campbell, in his ethnography of a Greek pastoral culture echoes the opposition Pitt-Rivers describes between “male enterprise” and “female restraint”: “unlike a woman [a man] cannot remain always in a state of shame, in the sense of guarding against imminent failure by a careful restriction of behavior and bearing.”<sup>13</sup> For a man in an honor culture, simply avoiding failure is as dishonoring as failure itself: it is effeminate and unworthy of a man of honor. He must invest himself in what Bourdieu terms “exchanges of honor” with other men, “a game of challenge and riposte:”

To issue a challenge to someone is to recognize his manliness, an acknowledgement which is the prerequisite of any dialogue as well as of the challenge of honor as the prelude to the dialogue: it is to acknowledge in him the dignity of a man of honor, since challenge, as such, requires a riposte and consequently is addressed to a man thought capable of playing the game of

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<sup>12</sup> The reader who has recently looked at “Le dolci rime d’amor, ch’io solia” will remark on the convergence of terms between Pitt-Rivers’ discussion here and Dante’s definition of shame as proper to ladies and adolescents, and opposed to *vertute* and *vertù* in both their ethical and their etymological senses as moral excellence and adult masculinity:

È gentilezza dovunqu’ è vertute,  
 ma non vertù ov’ella;  
 sì com’è ‘l cielo dovunqu’è la stella,  
 ma ciò non e converso.  
 E noi in donna e in età novella  
 vedem questa salute,  
 in quanto vergognose son tenute,  
 ch’è da vertù diverso.

<sup>13</sup> Campbell 1966 53.

honor, and of playing it well....Recognition of one's adversary as an equal in honor is therefore the basic condition of any challenge. (1966, 197)

For men in honor cultures, the work of maintaining their precedence among men is unremitting, but welcome: "it is the challenge...which gives one the sense of existing fully as a man, which demonstrates one's manliness to others and to oneself."<sup>14</sup> Since manliness in an honor culture requires a desire for precedence and a refusal to submit, challenges, offenses, and ripostes in a "game of honor" comprise simultaneously an attempt to dominate one's adversary and a potential insult to his manliness. "In all situations of challenge a man's honor is what obliges him to respond by resenting the affront...the force of the affront lies in the fact that it is an attempt to establish superiority over the affronted person. If this is not the case then there is no challenge."<sup>15</sup> An attempt to establish dominance in an honor exchange, however, can only redound to a man's honor if he challenges, or responds to the challenge of, an equal:

To issue a challenge to a man incapable of riposte - incapable, that is, of playing the dialogue through to the end - is to dishonor oneself...only a challenge issued (or an offense caused) by one's equal in honor deserves to be taken up;...one only accepts a challenge if one considers the challenger worthy of making it....It is therefore the nature of the riposte which confers upon the challenge (or the offense) its meaning, and even determines the fact

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<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu 1966, 197.

<sup>15</sup> Pitt-Rivers 1966, 57.

that it is a challenge (or offense) and not simply a piece of pure aggression.<sup>16</sup>

Bourdieu frames honor-based interactions as the “playing [of] a set game in conformity with certain rules;”<sup>17</sup> the “set game” of honor exchanges is a spectator sport. “Honor...is only irrevocably committed by attitudes expressed in the presence of witnesses, the representatives of public opinion.”<sup>18</sup> With reference to public opinion in its role as scorekeeper in honor systems, Davis reminds “readers from mass societies” that “honor is local” and adjures them to “realize the small scale of honor ranking systems...rank is based on thorough knowledge of an individual’s family and life-history.”<sup>19</sup> Before the gaze of public opinion, “both words and actions are significant within the code of honor because they are expressions of attitude which claim, accord or deny honor.”<sup>20</sup> In this chapter I consider how, within the word-bound, public realm of lyric exchanges, Dante claims honor, and accords or denies it to his correspondents in the *tenzoni*.

The *tenzone* with Dante da Maiano demonstrates Dante’s engagement with, and conscious mastery of, honor exchanges in poetic form. In the *tenzone* with Forese, Dante uses the prestige system’s definition of an explicitly masculine excellence, not a Christian moral model nor an Aristotelian one, to attack Forese in an exchange in which the reciprocal

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<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu 1966, 197-200

<sup>17</sup> *Idem* 204.

<sup>18</sup> Pitt-Rivers 1966, 27.

<sup>19</sup> 1977, 89.

<sup>20</sup> Pitt-Rivers 1966, 27.

challenges to honor explicitly regard each other's performance of masculinity.<sup>21</sup> Dante exploits a number of tenets of honor culture to insult Forese, among them the intersection of virility with manly prestige, the intersection of the individual's honor with that of his lineage, and the fact that men's honor resides in the bodies of their women.

My goal is to bring to light, not Dante's personal performance of masculinity, but how he constitutes masculine prestige in ways specific to honor culture in the lyrics when he engages other poets *qua* men. The *tenzoni* are explicitly about the poet's relationship with other men, and, I will demonstrate, establish those relationships in terms of honor exchanges. Whether in ostensibly courteous terms, as in the *tenzone* with Dante da Maiano, or in aggressively offensive ones, as in the *tenzone* with Forese Donati, the poems of the *tenzoni* comprise entries in a competition for explicitly masculine precedence.

The five poems which comprise the *tenzone del duol d'amor* exemplify the dynamics of the games of honor, in which "men produce signs and actively exchange them, as partner-adversaries united by an essential relationship of equality in honor, the very condition of an exchange that can produce inequality in honor, or domination."<sup>22</sup> If we regard the poets of the *tenzoni* as "partner-adversaries", we are in a better position to see the work the poems are performing. A poem requesting a response comprises a challenge; challenges are not issued to inferiors in honor, and acceptance of the challenge, and response, constitute an acknowledgement of equality; the challenges of inferiors must be ignored. Each poem in the *tenzone* represents a challenge to its addressee, which "because

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<sup>21</sup> "The *tenzone* tells of a more social than spiritual collapse." Barolini 1978, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Bourdieu 1998, 45.

it honors its recipient, is valid only if addressed to a man, and a man of honor, capable of providing a riposte which, inasmuch as it too contains a recognition, bestows honor.”<sup>23</sup> Barbi alludes to the honor conferred by a riposte in his formulation that “in certi casi il disprezzo poteva parere anche allora ad animi superiori la miglior vendetta,”<sup>24</sup> and cites Passavanti’s *Specchio* to describe nobles’ refusal to respond directly to the challenges of their honor inferiors:

Quando alcuna persona nobile e di stato abbia ricevuta alcuna onta ingiuriosa o oltraggiosa villania da persona vile, non ne prende vendetta onorevole, o con le sue mani, avendo in dispetto la vile condizione, ma faranne vendetta per un suo fante con cosa fastidiosa e abbominevole, come sarebbe uno strofinacciolo o un ventre pieno o simili cose.<sup>25</sup>

When a noble or eminent person has received an injurious insult or outrageous offense from a low person, he does not take an honorable vengeance with his own hands, holding the low condition (of the offender) in contempt, but he instead enacts vengeance by means of a servant, with something disgusting and repugnant, like a rag or a stomach full [of ordure] or something similar.

While Barbi mentions this type of incident to dismiss the possibility that Dante might have

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<sup>23</sup> *Idem* 45.

<sup>24</sup> Barbi 1956, 365.

<sup>25</sup> Iacopo Passavanti 1923, 208, cited in Barbi 1956, 365.



engaged in such undignified behavior, the style of vengeance Passavanti describes conforms to the dynamics of the honor exchange described by Bourdieu and Pitt-Rivers. Direct engagement with an inferior in honor would result in dishonor, even if the nobleman were to best his antagonist. In this snippet of fourteenth-century Florentine life we see the expectations and attitudes engrained by an honor system at work; in this particular anecdote, there is no exchange of honor, since the nobleman doesn't recognize the man who has insulted him as an equal. He does not issue a challenge in response, but simply a humiliating insult.

By contrast with the type of incident recounted by Iacopo, between men who do not recognize each other as equals, in the *tenzone* between Dante and Dante da Maiano, we will see that sending a poem which requests an answer implies a recognition of the correspondent as an equal in honor. It also constitutes a challenge to reply and have one's performance gauged by other men. In the *tenzone*, the stakes of the games of honor for the correspondents are not merely implicit, but comprise nearly the entire content of the poems. The *tenzone* is about men's reputation and men's stature as men, performed for and adjudged by other men. The sonnet which initiates the exchange, Dante da Maiano's "Per pruova di saper", conducts the reader into the arena of men's assessments of other men and, while it concludes with the question of the greatest pain of love, the question is clearly a premise for this visit to the stage on which men compete for masculine prestige.

"Per pruova di saper" circles obsessively around the question of men's assessment of a man's value. The entire *fronte* repeats images of measuring worth and of the act of assessing value.

Per pruova di saper com vale o quanto

lo mastro l'oro, adducelo a lo foco;

e, ciò faccendo, chiara e sa se poco,

amico, di pecunia vale o tanto.

Ed eo, per levar prova del meo canto,

l'adduco a voi, cui paragone voco

di ciascun c'ave in canoscenza loco,

o che di pregio porti loda o vanto. (1-8)

As a test to know how or how much some gold is worth,

the goldsmith introduces it to the flame;

and in so doing, he clarifies and knows if it's worth

but little, my friend, or a great deal of money.

And I, to generate a test of my verse

introduce it to you, whom I call a testing stone

of anyone who has a place in knowledge,

or who bears praise for, or a claim to, prestige.

The first line of the poem establishes its focus immediately: the poet's concern here is worth – how much something is worth, and also how that value is established. The initial image of the first four lines of the poem contains the expert, the object of which the value is to be assessed, and the test. In two lines Dante da Maiano stresses both the judgement of value and the method of assay – “per pruova di saper”, and “chiara e sa”. He presents us, not with value in any absolute sense, but rather with value that is constituted in being tested and

acknowledged. The poem centers on value – of gold, of da Maiano’s poetry, and of da Maiano himself, with a particular emphasis on the question of who is adequate to adjudge and acknowledge that value.

The fronte also introduces us to the two indices of personal value which concern the poet: the gold is assessed in terms of money: “chiara e sa se poco, amico, di pecunia vale o tanto”; but the people whose worth is revealed by the addressee-paragone are judged by praise for (“loda”), or bragging rights (“vanto”) to prestige (“pregio”). The poet reproduces the complicated epistemology of worth delineated in the initial lines, when he treats the worth of people: their value is not absolute, but requires the acknowledgement of others. *Pregio*, or esteem, exists in the opinion of one’s peers. A final complication lies in the fact that the poet presents a moving target for evaluation. As the goldsmith introduces the gold to the flame, Dante da Maiano introduces his poetry to Dante (“per levar prova del meo canto/l’adduco a voi,” 5-6). The addressee is akin to the flame that reveals the nature of the gold; but within the single line introducing him as a test of poetry’s worth, he has morphed into a testing stone (*paragone*) which establishes instead the worth of anyone who claims to be knowledgeable, or who is praised for, or vaunts claims to, esteem. We can note that the test is no longer of the value of the song, but rather of its author. Though the poet asserts he has sent the poem to induce a proof of his song’s worth, he defines Dante as a test, not of the worth of poetry, but rather of the validity of men’s claims to praise or reputation. Dante da Maiano’s sliding focus reveals that the poem’s worth corresponds to that of the poet himself. The sending of the poem, the poet asserts, is a test not of the song’s worth (or only secondarily of its worth) but rather of that of the poet’s claim to knowledge. The poem

comprises an experiment, which will yield data on Dante da Maiano's claim to prestige. We see a crystalline acknowledgement of Dante as an equal in honor (albeit coded in treating him as a superior); and we see that the exchange of poems is understood by its initiator as a game, or test, which will establish where he falls in an honor hierarchy.

The fronte's description of the poem's purpose seems curiously at odds with the question Dante da Maiano poses in the sirma:

E chero a voi col meo canto più saggio  
 che mi deggiate il dol maggior d'Amore  
 qual'è, per vostra scienza, nominare:  
 e ciò non movo per questioneggiare  
 (ché già inver voi so non avria valore),  
 ma per saver ciò ch'eo vaglio e varaggio. (9-14)

And I ask you with my most expert verse  
 that you should name for me which, according to your science,  
 is the worst pain of love:

I don't propose this to debate the point  
 (since I already know I would have no chance against  
 you),

but to know what I am worth and what I will be worth.

The poet sends his poem in order to test the worth of his canto, and thereby of himself; but asks a question about love doctrine. How will the response to the question in the sirma, inform him about the concerns of the fronte (his worth, as assessed by other

men, and the validity of his claims to prestige)? The context he creates, and the intention with which he claims to write, seem utterly disconnected from the question he actually poses. How is Dante da Maiano to interpret the response to his question? How will a definition of the greatest pain of love, show him “what he is worth and what he will be worth”? The discrepancy between the question the poem poses, and what Dante da Maiano expects the answer to reveal, demonstrates that this sonnet exchange presents a space in which men’s status in an honor hierarchy is the subtextual content of, and the point of, the discussion of love doctrine. The apparent disconnect between Dante da Maiano’s question and what he states he hopes the answer will reveal to him - “what I’m worth and will be worth” - results from the *tenzone*’s function, beyond its ostensible content, as an entry in a game of honor.

Dante’s response rehearses in every possible construction the wisdom and knowledge of his correspondent, but his answer to the Maianese’s question in the *sirma* embeds the compliments in a context which implies that while the questioner may be knowledgeable and wise, he is also concerned with ontologically secondary matters, whereas Dante has access to essential truth. The *fronte* insistently iterates forms of the verb “saver” (to know) and the adjective “saggio” (knowledgeable, expert), and Dante unfailingly apportions wisdom and knowledge to his interlocutor, and asserts that he himself does not possess either quality:

Qual che voi siate, amico, vostro manto  
 di scienza parmi tal che non è gioco;  
 sì che, per non saver, d’ira mi coco,

non che laudarvi, sodisfarvi tanto.

Sacciate ben (ch'io mi conosco alquanto)

che di saver ver' voi ho men d'un moco,

né per via saggia come voi non voco,

così parete saggio in ciascun canto. (1-8)

Whoever you may be, friend, your cloak

of knowledge seems to me such that it's no joke;

so that I simmer with frustration since I don't know

how to satisfy your request, let alone praise you fitly.

Know well (for I know myself to this extent)

that compared with you, I have less than a

bean's worth of knowledge,

nor do I speak in a knowledgeable way like you,

so expert do you appear in every poem/place.

The formulaic compliments are so exaggerated (“d’ira mi coco,” “di saver ver voi ho men d’un moco”) that a certain irony seems implicit. These insincere protestations alert us to the fact that there is a challenge implicit in these compliments, so extremely flattering that they could easily be mockery. Dante attributes to his interlocutor “un manto di scienza”, adjures him to know well (“sacciate ben”), states that he follows a “via saggia”, and that he seems knowledgeable everywhere/in every poem (“così parete saggio in ciascun canto”). He insistently compares himself to his correspondent, and in every comparison insists he is less wise and knowledgeable: he sizzles with frustration “per non saver”, and

doesn't have a bean's worth of knowledge, again by comparison: "di saver ver' voi ho men d'un moco." The *fronte* compares Dante with his "amico" over and over, equating the Amico with *saver / saggio* and Dante with *non saver / di saver ho men d'un moco*. The insistent comparison and ranking of the two poets ostensibly elevates the Amico above Dante. However, despite the insistent compliments to his interlocutor's knowledge and wisdom, Dante has collocated himself and the other poet in two exclusive positions, and while on the surface he seems to cover himself with unworthy humility and his correspondent with all worth, he employs the dichotomy he has defined in the *fronte*, to then exclude the Amico from the fundamental truth of the matters they are discussing. Indeed, Dante works an initial reference to the superficiality of the Amico's knowledge into the first lines of the sonnet: his interlocutor has a "manto di scienza", implying that he may be clothed in science but perhaps the knowledge and wisdom go no deeper.

In the *sirma*, Dante asserts that he writes, not from *scienza*, learned knowledge worn like a garment, but from *coscienza*, and that in his writing he reveals what lies within, in his heart:

Poi piacevi saver lo meo coraggio,  
 e io 'l vi mostro di menzogna fore,  
 sì come quei ch'a saggio è 'l suo parlare:  
 certamente a mia coscienza pare,  
 chi non è amato, s'elli è amadore, che'n cor porti dolor senza  
 paragio. (9-14)

Since it pleases you to know my heart,

I'll show it to you without deception,  
 like one who speaks to an expert:  
 certainly to my awareness it seems  
 that he who isn't loved, if he loves,  
 bears incomparable pain in his heart.

Dante asserts his immersion in a more genuine experience and in a type of knowledge which lies closer to essential truth than does that of his Amico. He again associates *saver* with his correspondent, while he possesses, not knowledge, but the contents of his heart, which he reveals without falsehood (“di menzogna fore”). The Amico wants to know and is again labeled with the adjective *saggio*, while Dante locates the truth of the question they seek to answer – what is the worst pain of love – within the heart of the unrequited lover, a truth which he, Dante, knows in his own heart. He advances an epistemology in opposition to the superficial *saver* of the Amico, positing the content of his heart as truth which need only be revealed (*mostrare*) to demonstrate his point. Additionally, since what the unrequited lover carries in his heart, “che’n cor porti”, is the truth the two poets seek, in asserting that he likewise holds his knowledge in his heart, Dante attributes to himself an immediate connection with fundamental truth – a truth which his Amico, his *saggezza* and *saver* notwithstanding, must be shown by Dante. The sonnet creates a dichotomy between *saver/saggio* and *il cor/coraggio*, and the *saver/saggio* pole has only indirect access to the truth.



In his response, Dante da Maiano does not acknowledge the different footing on which Dante places knowledge and truth in “Qual che voi siate, amico, vostro manto”. He has sharpened the challenge which was latent in his first sally.

Lo vostro fermo dir fino ed orrato  
 approva bon ciò c’om di voi parla,  
 ed ancor più, ch’ogni uom fora gravato  
 di vostra loda intera nominarla;  
 ché ‘l vostro pregio in tal loco è poggiato,  
 che propiamente om nol poria contar là:  
 però qual vera loda al vostro stato  
 crede parlando dir, dico disparla. (1-8)

Your solid speech, refined and honored,  
 well confirms what men say about you,  
 and what’s more, any man would be hard pressed  
 to name your praises completely;  
 since your worth is situated in such a place  
 that truly a man could not recount it:  
 so whoever believes he states, in speaking, praise  
 truly fit for your state, I say he misspeaks.

We find ourselves again in the realm of men’s assessments of their fellow men which permeated the Maianese’s first poem in the series. The opening compliments to Dante center on men’s recounting or naming Dante’s worth: “bon ch’om di voi parla”, “ogni uom

fora gravato / di vostra loda intera nominarla”, “om nol poria contar là”. A central concern of this essay is to recognize that “om” and “uom” here are gendered terms; the question is not of Dante’s worth in any generic sense, but of that worth as a man, as it is recognized by men. Each pair of lines in the fronte turns on the question of men’s praise of Dante. Having drawn this background of men’s assessments of each other, Dante da Maiano challenges Dante to step into a relationship, not only with him, the anonymous correspondent, but also with the collective masculine judgement that assesses an individual man’s claim to prestige or honor. Finally, in the sirma, the Maianese demands Dante should display his knowledge of authorities on the subject, and should demonstrate his point in a more methodical fashion.

Dite ch’amare e non essere amato  
 ene lo dol che più d’Amore dole,  
 e manti dicon che più v’ha dol maggio:  
 onde umil prego non vi sia disgrato  
 vostro saver che chiari ancor, se vole,  
 se ‘l vero o no di ciò mi mostra saggio. (9-14)

You say that loving and not being loved  
 is the pain that hurts most in Love,  
 but many say that there’s a greater pain still:  
 so I ask humbly that it not displease you  
 that your knowledge should clarify further, if it wishes,  
 if experience demonstrates this to be true or not.

Despite the hail of compliments, the poem is a pointed challenge to Dante's claim to prestige and to wisdom. It first stages the general assessment of men's performance of manly excellence in the public (male) eye, and then reframes the initial question, as requiring properly-demonstrated clarification not from Dante's heart but from his knowledge and his grasp of tradition. The "conventional, stereotyped"<sup>26</sup> compliments that saturate these poems are, finally, challenges.

Dante's response, "Non canoscendo, amico, vostro nomo" is the centerpiece of my argument. The first stanza of the poem is Dante's marvelously synthesized crystallization of the poetic exchange of honor.

Non canoscendo, amico, vostro nomo,  
 donde che mova chi con meco parla,  
 conosco ben che scienz' à di gran nomo,  
 sì che di quanti saccio nessun par l' à;  
 ché si pò ben canoscere d' un omo,  
 ragionando, se ha senno, che ben par là.

Conven poi voi laudar, sarà for nomo  
 è forte a lingua mia di ciò com parla. (1-8)

Not knowing, friend, your name,  
 wherever he who speaks with me may hail from,  
 I well know that he has reknown for knowledge,  
 such that no one I know seems to possess;

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<sup>26</sup> Foster and Boyde 1967, 1.

because one can know very well from his speech  
 if a man has sense, since it shows clearly there.  
 While I must praise you, praise of one unnamed  
 is hard for my tongue as it speaks about this.

Dante interlaces forms of *conoscere*, to know, throughout the stanza, the object of knowledge always a man's name or his store of expertise. The rhyme words tell the story here: *nomo*, name, is rhymed with *nomo*, reknown, and with *omo*, man, producing an identity between a man, his name, and his stature. The alternating rhymes tell us how men achieve that stature in the lyric realm: *parla* (speaks) rhymed with *par l'ò*, seems to possess (such knowledge), *par là*, is evident there (a man's wisdom shows in his speech), *parla* (speaks), again, but in this line it is the poet's tongue which speaks, *lingua mia*. These lines condense the stakes of the poetic exchange into a single dense stanza. A man, his name, and his prestige, are known here by his "speech": in this context, his verse. Dante depicts the arena of men's assessments of other men's expertise and eloquence in a powerful restatement of the stakes of the game in which they are entries. The compliments are, consistently, the reverse side of a challenge: the addressee's poem-riposte will be read to measure his sagacity, and he will be judged as a man by readers for how well he performs poetically.

After staging, so to speak, the milieu in which the two poets' works circulate – the realm of men's prestige for sagacity and knowledge, as acknowledged by other men – Dante responds to Dante da Maiano's request for a reasoned demonstration of his definition of the greatest pain of love. Dante does not supply the philosophically grounded, or authoritatively

backed-up, argument requested, however. Instead he reasserts his original premise, but he supports his point, not with a demonstration, but by using imagery:

chi ama,  
 se non è amato, lo maggior dol porta  
 che tal dolor ten sotto suo camato  
 tutti altri, e capo di ciascun si chiama:  
 da ciò ven quanta pena Amore porta. (9-14)

whoever loves,  
 if he's not loved, bears the greatest pain  
 because such pain holds under his rod  
 all the others, and is called the lord of each:  
 from this comes the pain that Love brings.

Rather than engage his interlocutor in the terms Dante da Maiano had challenged him to do, by demonstration or with reference to authority, he uses the imagery of domination to argue his point: the pain of unrequited love holds the other pains under his club and is their head. Dante here follows the questions of precedence among men he worked into the fronte, with the question of the precedence among pains of the lovelorn, and makes his point by personifying the pain he maintains is greatest as the man at the top of the heap, a *capo*. Shifting the form of the dispute from learned argumentation to imagery is a second challenge to Dante da Maiano: among poets, moving the argument into imagery is a challenge to an interlocutor's poetic abilities, even as Dante da Maiano's challenges to Dante center on his command of dialectic and knowledge of philosophical authority.

This survey of the honor dynamics in play in the *tenzone del duol d'amore* show us the presence of challenges to each poet's stature in even a polite and refined exchange. The sonnets of the exchange are entries in a game of honor; each comprises a recognition of the interlocutor as an equal, but the numerous compliments comprise as many challenges, in flattering disguise. The poets depict what each gains by engaging in the exchange: the opportunity to display their knowledge and expertise, and to gain prestige or reknown among men. The *tenzone* with Forese also comprises an exchange of honor; here, though, the challenges to each other's honor revolve, not around scholarly prowess, but around the domestic roles of husband, son, and father.

"Chi udisse tossir la malfatata", the poem that inaugurates the *tenzone*, levels a direct attack on the emblematic constituent of Forese's masculinity, his virility.<sup>27</sup> Numerous critics have tried to subtract these indecorous poems from Dante's corpus,<sup>28</sup> and others have attempted to rescript the aggression Dante evinces in the *tenzone* as motivated by moral outrage, meant to correctively criticize vicious behavior.<sup>29</sup> However, most of the attacks these men aim at each other arise not from Christian ethics but from an honor-

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<sup>27</sup> "Manliness, virility, in its ethical aspect, i.e. as the essence of the *vir*, *virtus*, the point of honor [*nif*], the principle of the conservation and increase of honor, remains indissociable, tacitly at least, from physical virility, in particular through the attestations of sexual potency." Bourdieu 1998, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Summarized in Alfie 1998.

<sup>29</sup> "Both [poets] denigrate each other in order to raise issues of societal and cultural import during the last decades of the Duecento, in particular the ascendancy of the merchants and the decadence of the nobility," Alfie 2011, 59; "are [Dante's] sonnets with Forese inconsistent with Dantesque thinking and feeling? Motivated by a moral sense, here is the voice of protest... From what do his rebukes stem, if not from ethical grounds?" Bartlett-Illiano 1967, 285; "L'ingiuria di Dante ha sempre dunque una violenta genesi morale," Russo, 1946, 574.

culture based conception of manliness. Being sexually inadequate and not satisfying your wife are hardly catalogued among Christian failings; Dante insults Forese for an inadequacy of virility, not for his immorality. He attacks Forese as a man, and extends the insult of inadequate virility to his entire male lineage. While the three poems Dante contributes to the *tenzone* do criticize Forese for certain failings that fall under the rubric of immoral behavior, the greatest share of Dante's vituperation of Forese concerns prestige criteria, not ethics. Two of the three poems, "Chi udisse tossir" and "Bicci novel, figliuol di non so cui", center on Forese's virility or that of the other men of his family, drawing the sexuality of their wives into focus, in a point blank attack on the honor of the house.<sup>30</sup>

In "Chi udisse tossir" Dante uses the experience of his wife, and the voice of his mother-in-law, to display Bicci's inadequate virility and wealth, brandishing his mother-in-law's lament and his wife's ill-health to give a feminine critique of his failure to fulfil his role as a husband. The sonnet begins with a reference to the cough of the ill-fated wife of Bicci, and continues

E non le val perché dorma calzata,  
 merzé del copertoio c'ha cortonese.  
 La tosse, 'l freddo e l'altra mala voglia  
 No l'addovien per omor' ch'abbia vecchi,  
 ma per difetto ch'ella sente al nido. (7-11)

it doesn't help her to sleep with her socks on,

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<sup>30</sup> Susan Noakes (2003) alludes to the centrality of the prestige criteria of manliness to these poems in the title of her article "Nobility, Virility, and Banking: the Crossing of Discourses in the *Tenzone* with Forese." The body of the article addresses nobility but disappointingly does not mention virility or banking.

because of the short covering she has,  
 Her cough, coldness, and other indispositions  
 don't occur because of elderly humors,  
 but for a lack she feels in her nest.

Nella's cough is marshalled into the poem to attest to Bicci's sexual inadequacy. Her ill-health results from the unequivocally sexual failings of her husband: the short covering, and the lack she feels in her nest. Whether we understand this nest as her home, her marital bed, or her sex organs, she suffers because Bicci is sexually inadequate. Making Forese's wife's sex life visible by referring to it in public is an attack on Forese's honor; I believe that Forese does not respond in kind, by attacking Dante's sexual prowess, because he could not do so without referring to the sex life of a woman of his own lineage<sup>31</sup>, which would represent a sort of *auto-gol* in the honor system. Forese changes the context of the insult and attacks Dante on different terms, though still terms grounded in honor, in his response. As Barbi states, Forese takes up the theme of Dante's sonnet with reference to his poverty, ignoring the aspersions Dante casts on his virility: "per ricoprire quanto può le faccende del talamo... fa vista di non attendere ciò che Dante vuol dire col suo doppio senso."<sup>32</sup> Forese not only conceals his "marriage-bed doings", in Barbi's words, but also attacks Dante's

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<sup>31</sup> There is no certainty about Forese's relationship to Gemma Donati; "Sestan (1970, 569) calls the degree of family relationship 'impossible to specify'", Noakes 2003, 245, but Forese's abstention from attacking Dante's virility, while implying that he is less than a man in every other way (in his cowardice, poverty, and failure to uphold the honor of his house), is a curious omission; why not use this arrow, if he had it in his quiver? The coincidence of Dante's wife being a Donati, and Forese's refraining from this line of attack, is at least suggestive.

<sup>32</sup> Barbi 1956, 288.



honor, not in his virility, which would comprise a second dishonor for Forese inasmuch as it would entail a reference to the sexuality of one of the women connected to his family, but in his failure to properly defend his own house's honor by avenging his father.

While Dante's use of Nella in "Chi udisse tossir la malfatata" is ungentlemanly (in a way that troubled early 20<sup>th</sup>-century commentators<sup>33</sup>), it is also, when combined with her mother's lament, a fascinating reversal of the status of women in "the social construction of relations of kinship and marriage alliance, which assigns to women their social status as objects of exchange defined in accordance with male interests."<sup>34</sup> Here, Dante humiliates Forese by making him, and his family, a bad bargain and a faulty object. In addition his description of the "difetto" Nella experiences in her marriage, Dante gives her mother a stage on which to criticize Forese and by implication his entire house.

Piange la madre, c'ha più d'una doglia,  
dicendo: "Lasso, che per ficchi secchi  
messa l'avre' 'n casa del conte Guido. (12-14)  
Her mother, who has more than one trouble, cries,  
saying: "Alas, when for dried figs  
I could have placed her in the house of Count Guido.

In addition to Nella's cough, Dante marshals her mother's voice into the chorus of dissatisfaction. She speaks as a mother, certainly, but also from the perspective of a

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<sup>33</sup> "Al Torraca invece è parso che Dante volesse qui non lanciar calunnie con linguaggio triviale verso una gentildonna", in Barbi's summation (1956, 282).

<sup>34</sup> Bourdieu 1998, 43.

business person. She complains over the lousy deal she got for her money: for dried figs I could have placed her in the house of count Guido,<sup>35</sup> whereas in reality I spent more to place her with this poor and inadequate man. Dante uses the voice of Forese's mother in law to introduce a comparison with another house, a comparison which puts Forese's lesser nobility and poverty in high relief, while implying that, by comparison with Forese, a man of the house of conte Guido would not leave Nella to suffer the ill-health resulting from sexual neglect. Critics arrive at different versions of exactly where this insult is meant to wound Forese. For Alfie, it references his poor money management: "Using Nella's mother as a mouthpiece, Dante criticizes Donati for not having taken better care of his finances."<sup>36</sup> Barbi takes up the cudgels on Nella's behalf; he reads these lines as an assertion of Nella's great worth, and only secondarily as an implicit criticism of Forese:

Vuol dire: pensare che non mi sarebbero mancate occasioni ben più onorevoli e vantaggiose per alloggiare la mia figliuola, tanto ella n'era, ed è, degna: e costui, che se ne dovrebbe tenere, e far conto d'aver toccato il cielo con un dito, me la trascura... Insomma, il lamento è sulla sfortuna della figliuola, che era degna della miglior sorte, e invece è così disgraziata.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Barbi notes that "casa de' conte Guido" was a proverbial expression for a wealthy house, but even used proverbially it is identified by reference to a single man, not a family name. The implied comparison condemns, not just Forese's house, but also Forese himself as a husband.

<sup>36</sup> Alfie 2011, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Barbi 1956, 287. "It means: to think that I didn't lack for much more advantageous and honorable opportunities for my daughter, so worthy was she, so worthy is she still: and this guy, who should be kissing her feet, neglects her....The complaint is about the misfortune of her daughter, who deserved a better fate, and instead is so unhappy."

In my opinion, Russo's attention to Nella's mother's emphasis on the cost of placing her daughter in a husband's house is closer to the mark: "La dote portata dalla Nella è andata proprio a finir male, vorrebbe dire il poeta; con meno quattrini, con dei fichi secchi, a paragone, sarebbe potuta entrare in una famiglia di più vera e antica nobiltà."<sup>38</sup> The reference to the dowry, presented as a sum of money paid for a commodity, is what gives this insult its sting: it makes Forese and his house an object of exchange. The mother's lament constitutes men, and their houses, as objects of lesser and greater attractions and advantages, and herself as the trader who bargained for one such object on behalf of her daughter. Rather than men exchanging women to establish alliances, we have a woman trading money for a house and husband for her daughter. Dante does not reverse the dynamic of the marriage exchange, in which women circulate between men and become part of their husband's families, but by giving the mother-in-law a voice and comparing Forese's family unfavorably with that of the conte Guido, he makes Forese and his house objects, and Nella and her mother the subjects of the exchange. Nella has not been traded between two houses here; rather, Forese and his house have been traded for Nella's dowry. By making Forese an object in this context, Dante has subtracted him from his masculine status and depicted him in a humiliating effeminate position.<sup>39</sup> Dante deploys Nella's cough together with her mother's complaint about Forese, in a way that makes women the consumers of men, and men - and their houses - the objects, faulty in this case, of exchange.

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<sup>38</sup> Russo 1946, 563. "The dowry Nella brought has gone to waste, the poet implies; with less money, with dried figs, by comparison, she could have joined a family of more authentic and ancient nobility."

<sup>39</sup> "The worst humiliation for a man is to be turned into a woman," Bourdieu 1998, 22.

Additionally, the mother's reference to the missed opportunity of placing Nella in a better *casa* comprises an attack not solely on Forese, but on his entire house. We have already observed that the insults in this *tenzone* are insults to honor; it is therefore thematic that Dante targets not just Forese, but all the men of his family; honor is the shared property of all the men of a house or lineage.<sup>40</sup> Dante's campaign to damage Forese's honor includes that of the men of his lineage by definition. In "Bicci novel, figliuol di non so cui" Dante reverts to his theme of the sexual dissatisfaction of the wives of the family to depict the men as inadequately virile.

Bicci novel, figliuol di non so cui  
 (s'i' non ne domandasse monna Tessa),  
 giù per la gola tanta roba hai messa  
 ch'a forza ti convien torre l'altrui.  
 E già la gente si guarda da lui,  
 chi ha borsa a lato, là dov'e' s'appressa,  
 dicendo: "Questi c'ha la faccia fessa,  
 è piuvico ladron negli atti sui".  
 E tal giace per lui nel letto tristo,  
 per tema non sia preso a lo 'mbolare,  
 che gli appartien quanto Giosepp'a Cristo.  
 Di Bicci e de' fratei posso contare  
 che, per lo sangue lor, del malacquisto

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<sup>40</sup> Bourdieu 1998, 49.

sanno a lor donne buon' cognati stare.  
 Bicci junior, son of I don't know whom  
 (unless I were to ask monna Tessa about it)  
 you've sent so much wealth down your throat  
 that you're forced to seize that of other people.  
 Already people keep an eye on him,  
 whoever has a purse at his side, when Bicci approaches,  
 saying "This guy with his busted face,  
 is well known to be thief from the way he acts."  
 And one suffers for him in bed,  
 in fear he'll be caught stealing,  
 who belongs to him as much as Joseph does to Christ.  
 Of Bicci and his brothers I can say  
 that, because of their blood, with their loot  
 they know how to be good brothers-in-law to their wives.

The wife and mother of "Chi udisse tossir la malfatata" are echoed here at the outset and the conclusion of the sonnet. Monna Tessa's infidelity to her husband damages the Donati honor, clearly<sup>41</sup>; but in the context of Bicci's indifference or inability in his own marital bed, and Bicci's brothers who are "good brothers-in-law" to their wives, the reader receives the impression that if Monna Tessa had not had a pinch-hitter step in she would have had no sons, rather than illegitimate ones. The reference to "lor donne" in line 14 of "Bicci novel"

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<sup>41</sup> "The honor of a man is involved...in the sexual purity of his mother, wife and daughters, and sisters, not in his own." Pitt-Pivers 1966, 45.

adds more women to the tally of sexually neglected women connected to this house. In three sonnets Dante references Forese's wife, his mother, his mother-in-law, and his sisters-in-law, to display the failures of Forese himself, his putative father, his brothers, and every man of their lineage, *lor sangue*. These attacks hinge on Bicci's lack of virility, his father's like lack, his brother's like lack, and the misery and/or infidelity of their wives, *lor donne*. Critics who attempt to cast these three sonnets as the campaign of a moralist to reprehend errant behavior<sup>42</sup> miss the hallmarks of honor culture which are everywhere in this series of poems. The insults to virility ("coperta... cortonese", "difetto ch'ella sente al nido"), the insult of making women's sex lives the subject of discussion, the insult of implying Forese is a bastard ("figliuol di non so cui"), all derive their power from what Pitt-Rivers terms the "ethically neutral" honor-as-masculinity<sup>43</sup> prestige system, not one of Christian morality or antique ethics. Forese derides Dante in different terms, but his taunts likewise center on failings of honor: Dante has not avenged his family as honor requires (a la vendetta / che facesti di lui sì bella e netta, "Ben so che fosti figliuol d'Alaghieri", 2-3). Most signally, the extension of many of the insults from the individual to his entire bloodline ("sangue lor"), results from their basis in the honor system, in which honor is the shared property of the lineage or house.

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<sup>42</sup> "From what do his rebukes stem, if not from ethical grounds?" Bartlett-Illiano 1967, 285; "l'ingiuria di Dante ha sempre dunque una violenta genesi morale" Russo 1946, 574, "E` Forese che tira in basso la polemica, e Dante soffre dalla vicinanza del suo piccolo avversario" Russo 575; "Both of them vituperate each other in order to raise issues of societal and cultural import" Alfie 2011, 59.

<sup>43</sup> Pitt-Rivers 1966, 44.

The two sonnet exchanges have little besides their form in common: the tone, subject matter, and style of the *tenzone* with Dante da Maiano is radically different from that of the *tenzone* with Forese. Beyond the mere coincidence of their genre, though, they both demonstrate the presence of honor culture at the root of contemporary masculine identity. Bringing into focus Dante's investment in the honor-based interactions which generate masculine prestige yields a more precise sense of how Dante constitutes his relationship to his reader and to his work, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2

### “Esta pulcella nuda”:

#### Exchanges of Honor with the Male Reader

Dante makes the status of women’s bodies, as the seat of the honor of the men on whom they depend, thematic in three poems which I will now discuss, in which the poem itself is depicted as not just feminine but embodied as female. This trope of honor culture is present in “Se Lippo amico se’ tu che mi leggi” and in “Messer Brunetto, questa pulzelletta” in confident and light-hearted terms, and in more somber and vastly more complicated form in “Tre donne intorno al cor mi son venute”. In the latter poem, the dramatic dialogue between Amor and the three ladies depicts the dishonor suffered by even the most intrinsically superior man, Love, when his female family members have been sexually violated. In the poem’s first congedo, Dante embodies his poem as a woman, and raises the possibility of her suffering precisely this kind of violation, in a depiction of the dishonoring reader he is potentially subject to in his exile.

Dante exploits the conflation of men’s honor with the sexual purity of their womenfolk, when he figures certain poems as women, to depict his relationship with his work, as well as the honor dynamic between himself and the reader he builds into the poem. To delineate how Dante constitutes his relationship to these poems, I will examine the



implications within honor culture of Dante's frequent recourse to imagery of clothing and female nudity to indicate two elements of a composition (for example, music and verse, or allegory and meaning). He fuses the antique rhetorical trope of metaphorical or decorative language as "clothing" for content or meaning, with the central tenet of honor culture, that men's honor resides in the bodies of their women<sup>44</sup>, in his depictions of his poems as emphatically embodied women, wearing borrowed clothes, or naked, or potentially denuded. Finally, I will examine how Dante uses honor culture's mapping of the relationship between a man's honor and the sexual integrity of his womenfolk in the canzone of disconsolate and dishonored exile, "Tre donne", to construct himself and his poem as potentially vulnerable to a dishonoring reader.

I will consider the honor culture ramifications of poems/women being naked before a male reader, in both "Se Lippo Amico se' tu che mi leggi", written in sunny times when Dante was entirely secure in his honor stature among other men, and in "Tre Donne intorno al cor mi son venute", written in very different circumstances and containing an allusion to the possibility of a dishonoring reader in its first *congedo*.

My goal is to bring to light not Dante's personal performance of masculinity, but how he constitutes masculine prestige in ways specific to honor culture in the lyrics. When he characterizes certain poems as women, or as women's bodies, he depicts his confidence, or his vulnerability, in his relationship to his reader. The *tenzoni*, as we saw in the last chapter, are explicitly about the poet's relationship with other men, and establish those relationships

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<sup>44</sup> The loss [of women's sexual purity] always implicates the honor of the men of the family, reflecting on the manliness of the husband, and more generally, on the whole social personality of the brothers, and particularly, sons." Campbell 1966, 146.

in terms of honor exchanges; likewise, when in “Se Lippo amico” Dante depicts the poem the sonnet accompanies as a naked handmaid, his representation of the poem as naked, but not vulnerable to dishonor, is a way of characterizing his relationship with Lippo as one of trust between equals in honor. By contrast, the imagery of the desolate ladies in “Tre donne intorno al cor”, echoed in the first congedo which embodies the poem as a woman, figures the possibility of a potentially dominant and dishonoring reader. The figuration in “Tre donne intorno al cor” of the poem’s meaning as a woman’s nudity, and its depiction of the bad reader as a violator of the poem, and of the good reader as a courtly lover of the poem, brings an explicitly male reader into the poem in a way that incorporates Dante’s desolation and dishonor in the fallen world outside that of the ideal virtues seated in his heart.

#### I. “Se Lippo amico se’ tu che mi leggi”

Dante frequently recurs to addressing poems as a ladies or maids. I divide these poems into two sets: there are poems in which the poem is addressed as feminine, but not given a figurative body; there is a second group of poems in which the poem is embodied, either in being addressed as a maiden (“pulzella”, “pulzelletta”) or in a reference to its having a body. In the three cases in which the poem is “embodied” as a maiden or lady, the addressee is explicitly a man. Critics have observed the frequency with which Dante frames a poem as a girl<sup>45</sup>, without recognizing distinctions between different cases in which he uses this imagery, nor paying much mind to it. Barbi notes the frequency with which Dante addresses his poems as ladies or maidens: “Le poesie sono spesso immaginate come fanciulle. In quasi tutti i congedi di canzoni o ballate il poeta si rivolge a loro come a sue

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<sup>45</sup> Barolini 2009, 96, n. 13.

figliuole giovani e modeste.”<sup>46</sup> I agree with Barbi, but only with regard to a certain subset of these poems. In the poems which appear in the *Vita Nuova* and which figure the poem as a girl (“Donne che avete intelletto d’amore”, *Li occhi dolenti*”, “Per pietà del core”, “Parole mie, che per lo mondo siete”, “Ballata, i’ vo che tu ritrovi Amore”), we can easily see the tone in which the poet addresses the poems as fatherly in the sense Barbi outlines. The poems are depicted as each other’s brothers and sisters and often receive paternal advice about how to comport themselves in society. These poems, though they all belong to the subset of lyrics which depict the poem as a maiden, have two other elements in common: the poems are not what I am calling “embodied” as female (in the way that poems we will look at presently are embodied), and they are all addressed to ladies. When Dante addresses a poem to an explicitly male reader, and constitutes the poem as female, a very different dynamic emerges between the poet and the poem, and the poems are not simply addressed as female, with a feminine adjective or two appended, but explicitly depicted as having bodies, and those bodies depicted as clothed or naked. It is difficult to read the naked girl/poem sent to Lippo as belonging among those poems Dante considers as “care figliuole”:

Lo qual ti guido esta pulcella nuda,  
 che ven di dietro a me si vergognosa  
 ch’ a torto gir non osa  
 perch’ ella non ha veste in che si chiuda;

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<sup>46</sup> “The poems are often imagined as young ladies. In almost all the *congedi* of canzoni or ballate the poet addresses them as if they were his young, modest daughters.” Barbi-Maggini 1956, 176, n. to line 13 (my translation).

e priego il gentil cor ch'in te riposa,  
 che la riveste e tegnala per druda,  
 si che sia conosciuda  
 e possa andar la 'vunque è desiderosa. (13-20)

I lead to you this nude maiden,  
 who comes behind me so ashamed  
 that, wrongly, she doesn't dare circulate  
 because she doesn't have a dress in which to enclose herself;  
 and I pray the gentle heart that rests in you,  
 to dress her and keep her as a handmaid,  
 so that she may be known  
 and may go wherever she may desire.

The poem imagined in this sonnet, sent to a male friend as a naked girl, works to establish a relationship between the two men, as gifts have always done<sup>47</sup>, but the gift of a woman is a special category of exchange: “The result of a gift of women is more profound than the result of other gift transactions because the relationship thus established is not just one of reciprocity, but one of kinship.”<sup>48</sup> Of course, the poem is a clever bagatelle, and certainly we have no data to indicate that Dante and Lippo had a particularly close relationship. Within its levity, however, the poem makes central both the bonds men form with each other by trading women, and Dante and Lippo's masculine stature as the subjects,

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<sup>47</sup> Hyde 1983.

<sup>48</sup> Rubin 1975, 173.

not the objects, of such an exchange, making this a poem that flatters both the author's and the recipient's honor. The exchange of honor is a precise fit for the *tenzoni*, which literally comprise an exchange; the poet's stature *vis-a-vis* his reader in an honor exchange is also important to those poems in which Dante depicts the poem itself – the thing exchanged, or sent into circulation – as a young woman. Bourdieu describes honor exchanges as “transform[ing] various raw materials – above all, women, but more generally any object that can be exchanged with formality – into gifts (and not products), that is, communicative signs”<sup>49</sup>; curiously, this poem turns the communicative sign/gift into a woman, in a way that creates roles of emphatically masculine prestige for both the sender and the recipient. Dante creates an implicit exchange which, like the *tenzoni*, focuses on men's relationships and men's stature *vis-a-vis* each other and among men. Furthermore, by figuring the poems as women, and the act of reading and comprehension as a courtship or a seduction, he creates a dynamic between a male reader and female meaning.

In “*Se Lippo amico*”, the poem is a naked girl who will be kept as a handmaid (*druda*); she is powerless and ashamed, but fortunately is in the hands of a kind fellow who will dress her and keep her as part of his household. In “*Messer Brunetto, questa pulzelletta*”, however, the poem/*pulzelletta* is ascendant over her reader. Here the poem/maid is not ashamed and *sottomessa* as in *Se Lippo amico*; she requires to be treated properly and flattered before she will concede to grace him with her meaning.

Messer Brunetto, questa pulzelletta

con esso voi si ven la pasqua a fare:

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<sup>49</sup> Bourdieu 1998, 44.

non intendete pasqua di mangiare,  
 ch'ella non mangia, anzi vuol esser letta.  
 La sua sentenza non richiede fretta,  
 né luogo di romor né da giullare;  
 anzi si vuol più volte lusingare  
 prima che 'n intelletto altrui si metta. (1-8)

Sir Brunetto, this maiden  
 comes to celebrate with you:  
 don't imagine, to celebrate at table,  
 because she doesn't eat, instead she wants to be read.  
 Her meaning abjures haste,  
 noisy places and minstrels;  
 rather she must repeatedly be flattered  
 before she'll place herself in another's intellect.

While we can still perceive elements of the dynamic of women as objects of exchange here, Dante stresses the proper readerly approach to this poem, and the maiden's requirements before she will condescend to enter Brunetto's intellect. This allusion to the reading of the poem as a kind of courtship, in which the male reader must win the poem/maiden's favor, creates the poem as exercising both her "duty of selective refusal" and her "power of attraction...tending to honor the men on whom [she] depends."<sup>50</sup> More important, however, is the way that this depiction of reading as an act of courtship or

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<sup>50</sup> Bourdieu 1998, 29.

seduction, in which a male reader reads/courts a female poem, dovetails perfectly with a trope Dante adopts to discuss metatextual concerns.

In a number of contexts, and in different configurations, Dante recurs to imagery of clothing and nudity to distinguish paired elements when he discusses language and writing.

Its first instance is in the *Vita Nuova*:

Grande vergogna sarebbe a colui che rimasse cose sotto vesta di figura o  
di colore rectorico, e poscia domandato non sapesse denudare le sue parole  
da cotale vesta, in guisa che avessero verace intendimento. (25,10)

It would be shameful if someone composing rhymes clothed in a figure of speech  
or a rhetorical color, once asked, could not denude his words of such clothing so  
as to show the true meaning.<sup>51</sup>

Here we have a simple version of the trope: the true meaning (“verace intendimento”) is revealed by removing the imagery (“vesta”). From this point of origin, Dante will return to this metaphor repeatedly, reconstituting the terms in different contexts, and frequently gendering the essential unornamented term, whether meaning, language, or a poem, as feminine.

Rhetorical tradition supplies the metaphor of figurative language as colored or ornamented; it is a “metafora classica dell’operazione dell’ornamento rettorico,” states De Robertis, who cites Cicero’s *De Oratore*, and explains “‘colore’ è sinonimo di ‘figura’, e come tale è adoperato da trattatisti medioevali, a indicare i vari artefici e applicazioni

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<sup>51</sup> This and following translations of the *Vita Nuova* by Anderson (Dante Aligheri 1964).

dell'ornatus.”<sup>52</sup> Bloch has also traced the metaphor's adoption in both patristic texts and subsequent medieval treatises to designate ornamental language as feminized and in opposition to truth.<sup>53</sup> Dante, however, frequently adopts the trope in a way that runs counter to the traditional construction Bloch describes which opposes inessential and dispersively feminine ornamental language to the masculine essential unity of meaning. Dante often uses this metaphor to designate meaning or content as feminine, clothed in, or denuded of, ornamental and figurative language. Far from feminizing the denigrated term, Dante employs this trope to create an image of the non-spurious, non-decorative, essential, meaningful element of the pair as feminine. In the *Convivio* he uses this imagery to describe the essential beauty of the vernacular which is revealed by stripping it of the ornament of meter and rhyme:

chi vuole ben giudicare d'una donna, guardi quella quando solo sua naturale bellezza si sta con lei, da tutto accidentale adornamento discompagnata; si come sarà questo comento, nel quale si vedrà l'agevolezza de le sue sillabe le proprietadi delle sue costruzioni e le soavi orazioni che di lui si fanno; le quali chi bene agguarderà, vedrà essere piene di dolcissima e d'amabilissima bellezza.

(l.x.13)

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<sup>52</sup> “a classical metaphor for the operation of rhetorical ornamentation...‘color’ is a synonym for ‘figura’, and is adopted with this sense by medieval treatise writers, to indicate the various artifices and applications of the *ornatus* (i.e., elaborate style of composition).” De Robertis in Dante 1980, 177-178.

<sup>53</sup> “[Woman] is, by her secondary nature, associated with artifice and decoration” Bloch 1991, 40; “the feminization of the aesthetic is a topos to be found everywhere” idem, 43; “Together grammar and logic constitute within the medieval language arts (the trivium) the sciences of the true, respectively of rectitude of expression and of correct propositions. Woman [assimilated to rhetoric]...here signifies the opposite of the truth,” idem, 53.



If anyone wishes to judge a woman justly, let him look at her when her natural beauty alone attends her, unaccompanied by any accidental adornment; so it will be with this commentary, in which the smoothness of the flow of its syllables, the appropriateness of its constructions, and the sweet discourses that it makes will be seen, which anyone upon careful consideration will find full of the sweetest and most exquisite beauty.<sup>54</sup>

The vernacular, with the accidental adornments of verse removed, manifests its natural, essential beauty as does a lady. In “Se Lippo amico” the accompanying poem is the naked maiden, and musical accompaniment her clothing: “La poesia non ha il coraggio di andare attorno e farsi conoscere, perché non ha la musica di cui adornarsi.”<sup>55</sup> Likewise, in “Per una ghirlandetta ch’io vidi” the words have taken a different poem’s music for an adornment.<sup>56</sup> Dante reimagines the tradition which feminized rhetorical ornament, to not just feminize, but figuratively embody as female, the essential, unadorned literary term, whose reader he frequently imagines as a man. He reverts to this imagery of meaning as a woman’s body, read by a male reader, in a way that incorporates implications for his own honor, in the case of “Tre donne intorno al cor”, in which the reader is explicitly a man, and a man who may possess more honor than Dante.

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<sup>54</sup> This and all subsequent translations of the *Convivio* are from Lansing 1998.

<sup>55</sup> “The poetry does not have the courage to go about and make itself known, because it doesn’t have music with which to adorn itself.” Barbi-Maggini 1956, 176.

<sup>56</sup> Le parolette mie novelle,/che di fiori fatto han ballata,/per leggiadria ci hanno tolt’elle/una vesta ch’altrui fu data. (18-21) Barbi Maggini p 205, note to line 20: “Per leggiadria: per ornamento.”

## II. “Tre Donne intorno al cor mi son venute”

In this section I will argue that Dante uses certain aspects of honor culture to figure the possibility of his not being an equal in honor to his male reader. The poet’s vulnerability to the reader, formulated using the vulnerability of women’s bodies, is certainly a result of Dante’s painful exile and the dishonor he suffered civically. By constructing the looming possibility of a dominant reader who dishonors the poem as a woman without protectors is vulnerable to violation, Dante depicts his own vulnerability in what are the most humiliating terms possible for a man in honor culture. In “Se Lippo amico”, Dante was certain of the poem’s gentle, polite reception by an equal in honor; in “Tre donne”, he is no longer certain of this and makes explicit reference to the possibility of a violating reader. Dante figures his honor as an author through imagery of women’s bodies.

Critical attention to the canzone has focused on identifying the allegorical figures<sup>57</sup>; scholars also note the poem’s dramatic aspect, describing it as *Commedia*-like in its creation of vital characters in dialogue.<sup>58</sup> But few readers seem to attend to the drama itself: the tensions and emotions of the characters, the telling hesitations and reserves, the moments when the conversation changes direction, have gone unanalyzed.

Amor is related to the ladies who come to pay him a call, and as a result lineage concerns, centered on honor, infuse the poem. Poole’s recent work on this canzone focuses on the family relationships between the four characters; he even includes a family tree and

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<sup>57</sup> Poole 1998; Nardi 1960, pp. 14-20.

<sup>58</sup> “The ‘Tre donne’, with its firmly outlined figures and dialogue, is a dramatic action beyond all other poems of Dante, except the *Comedy*.” Foster 1954, 63.

addresses the question of whether Love's cousins resulted from parthenogenesis or immaculate conception. Poole is unconcerned with the non-philosophical implications of the figures' family structure, but his interest in the missing "fecundating male principle"<sup>59</sup> and emphasis on the relationships between Love and his visiting womenfolk provide a measure of how fundamental family, and consequently honor dynamics, are to the poem.

In the first four stanzas of the canzone, we are introduced to a downtrodden family in a scene that emphasizes the abuse suffered by the women of the house. The three women who come to be received by Love in Dante's heart have come to the house of a friend ("come a casa d'amico", l. 17); but their misery, their poverty, and the disorder of their clothing demonstrate that they have not always been among friends:

ciascuna par dolente e sbigottita,  
 come persona discacciata e stanca,  
 cui tutta gente manca  
 e cui vertute né beltà non vale. (9-12)  
 each appears sorrowful and dismayed,  
 like a tired, hounded person,  
 who has no one left to turn to  
 and whose virtue and beauty are of no use.

The ill-treatment they have suffered comes into more precise focus in the second stanza.

One of the ladies is

discinta e scalza, e sol di se par donna.

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<sup>59</sup> Poole 1980, 131.

Come Amor prima per la rotta gonna  
 la vide in parte che il tacere è bello,  
 egli, pietoso e fello,  
 di lei e del dolor fece dimanda. (26-30)  
 ungirdled, barefoot, she seems a lady only by her bearing.  
 When because of her torn skirt Love first  
 sees her in a place of which it's nicest to not speak,  
 piteous and angry,  
 he asked her about herself and her sorrow.

This poor lady, whom we will presently learn is Drittura (Divine Law), has her pudenda bared by her torn clothes. The intertext here is Lady Philosophy in the *Consolatio Philosophiae*, whose clothes, ripped by violent men, are described when she is introduced in I.1.5: “Eandem tamen uestem uiolentorum quorundam sciderant manus et particulas quas quisque potuit abstulerant” (“This robe, moreover, had been torn by the hands of violent persons, who had each snatched away what he could clutch”<sup>60</sup>). She later describes the abuse she suffered in greater detail. She was dragged away, crying out and resisting, by men:

Cuius hereditatem cum deinceps Epicureum uulgus ac Stoicum ceterique pro  
 sua quisque parte raptum ire molirentur meque reclamantem renitentemque  
 uelut in partem praedae traherent, uestem quam meis texueram manibus

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<sup>60</sup> Boethius 1897, trans. James.

disciderunt abreptisque ab ea panniculis totam me sibi cessisse credentes abiere. (I.iii.7-8)

And when, one after the other, the Epicurean herd, the Stoic, and the rest, each of them as far as in them lay, went about to seize the heritage he left, and were dragging me off protesting and resisting, as their booty, they tore in pieces the garment which I had woven with my own hands, and, clutching the torn pieces, went off, believing that the whole of me had passed into their possession.<sup>61</sup>

Lady Philosophy's sufferings in this violent scene suggest rape. She has been abducted and ravaged, like war booty, and her raptors believe they have possessed her completely. She goes on to describe the army of folly pillaging her stronghold:

Qui si quando contra nos aciem struens valentior incubuerit, nostra quidem dux copias suas in arcem contrahit, illi uero circa diripiendas inutiles sarcinulas occupantur. At nos desuper irridemus vilissima rerum quaeque rapientes securi totius furiosi tumultus eoque uallo muniti quo grassanti stultitiae aspirare fas non sit. (13-14)

And if at times and seasons they set in array against us, and fall on in overwhelming strength, our leader draws off her forces into the citadel while they are busy plundering the useless baggage. But we from our vantage ground, safe from all this wild work, laugh to see them making prize of the

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<sup>61</sup> Idem.

most valueless of things, protected by a bulwark which aggressive folly may not aspire to reach.<sup>62</sup>

The scene she describes reinforces the sexual valence of the violence she suffered at the hands of the foolish philosophers. The besieged city, in which the enemy army rages within the walls, pillaging (“rapientes”, “furiosi”), is a frequent metaphor for rape. While Lady Philosophy watches the marauding forces of folly from within an impregnable citadel now, she has revealed that she was once unprotected from similarly maddened, rampaging attackers. The third prose passage of the *Consolatio Philosophiae* provides a back story for the torn robe detailed in Lady Philosophy’s first appearance. Her clothes were ripped apart in a violent attack, recognizeably rape both in her initial description of it, and in its contextualization within the war in which the forces of folly besiege, rape and pillage the city of Wisdom.

Drittura’s torn clothes echo those of Boethius’s Lady Philosophy; she has been subjected, we can assume, to the same ravaging violation. Even without the intertext, the fact that her pudenda are revealed by her tattered garments – Love sees her “in a place about which it is best to be silent” – presents her as dishonored in precisely a sexual sense: her dignity and rank are stripped away by her nakedness. Her attitude reveals her shame, as she hides her face: “L’altra man tiene ascosa/la faccia lagrimosa” (24-25).

The honor criteria Dante uses to structure the scene emerge in Love’s response to the ladies. He is initially nearly overwhelmed by their beauty and virtue, and cannot speak:

Tanto son belle e di tanta vertute

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<sup>62</sup> Idem.

Che 'l possente signore,  
 dico quel ch'è nel core,  
 a pena del parlar di lor s'aita. (5-8)

So beautiful are they and of such virtue  
 that the powerful lord,  
 I mean the one in my heart,  
 Can barely bring himself to speak to them.

When he sees Drittura's privates he responds compassionately, in pity and anger, and asks what has befallen her: "egli, pietoso e fello, / di lei e del dolor fece dimanda" (29-30) ("piteous and angry, / he asks about her and her sorrow"). His compassion cedes to a different emotion when Drittura reveals that she is his aunt:

nostra natura qui a te ci manda:  
 io, che son la più trista,  
 son suora a la tua madre, e son Drittura;  
 povera, vedi, a panni ed a cintura. (33-36)

our nature sends us here to you:  
 I, the most unhappy,  
 am your mother's sister, and I'm Drittura;  
 poor, as you see, in my clothes and my girdle.

In response to this revelation, Amor feels shame:

Poi che fatta si fu palese e conta  
 doglia e vergogna prese

lo mio signore, e chiese  
 chi fosser l'altre due ch'eran con lei. (37-40)  
 Once she had made herself known and introduced herself,  
 pain and shame possessed  
 my lord, and he asked  
 who were the other two with her.

Whereas he initially felt pity for, and anger on behalf of, the violated woman, he learns that he has been dishonored himself when she reveals that she is his kin. His response, in which shame replaces compassion, makes sense only if parsed within an honor system: the sexual violation this woman has suffered is a mortal wound to his honor. Amor then questions her about the other women with her; Dante depicts the question as cold and hurtful to Drittura, whose pain increases in response:

E questa, ch'era sì di pianger pronta,  
 tosto che lui intese,  
 più nel dolor s'accese,  
 dicendo: "A te non duol de gli occhi miei?" (41-44)  
 And she, who was so ready to cry,  
 as soon as she understood him,  
 was the more kindled in pain,  
 saying: "No pain touches you for my eyes<sup>63</sup>?"

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<sup>63</sup> That is, the tears flowing from them, and consequently her sorrow.



Drittura's presentation of her companions resolves Amor's coldness; he responds with a courteous greeting, his eyes wet with compassionate tears, though Dante reminds us that those eyes had been previously "folli", discourteous or unkind:

Fenno i sospiri Amore un poco tardo;  
 e poi con gli occhi molli,  
 che prima furon folli,  
 salutò le germane sconsolate. (55-58)

Sighs made Love a bit slow;  
 and then with his eyes wet,  
 which before had been rude,  
 he greeted his disconsolate kin.

What has Drittura told him, to restore his gentle manners and compassion toward these destitute women? Let us examine her introduction of her daughter and granddaughter, to see what it contains that releases Amor from the pain and shame that had made him so cold to her in the third stanza.

Drittura's introduction of her sad little family contains two pieces of information: the other women were conceived in Eden, and each was "generated" single-handedly by her mother. Her account of serial parthenogenesis stresses purity:

Poi cominciò: "Sì come saper dei,  
 di fonte nasce il Nilo picciol fiume  
 quivi dove 'l gran lume  
 toglie a la terra del vinco la fronda:

sopra la vergin onda  
 generai io costei che m'è da lato  
 e che s'asciuga con la treccia bionda.  
 Questo mio bel portato,  
 mirando sé ne la chiara fontana,  
 generò questa che m'è più lontana.(45-54)

Then she began: as you must know,  
 the Nile is born as a small river from its source  
 there where the great light  
 subtracts the bough of the willow from the ground:  
 over the virgin wave  
 I gave birth to she who sits at my side  
 and dries herself with her blond braid.  
 This beautiful offspring of mine,  
 looking at herself in the clear font,  
 gave birth to this one who is further from me.

The conception of the daughter of Drittura, Giustizia (or *Ius Gentium*, in Poole's account), happened in Eden, at the source of the river Nile. The river's purity at its source is emphasized by Drittura in line 49, "la vergin onda", and again in 53, "la chiara fontana." The purity of the waters, stressed here, corresponds to the purity of the women's origins. The verb "nascere" used to describe the river creates a parallel between the "birth" of the river

from its spring, doubly pure both in its being the source and also in its location in Eden, and the birth of the women from each other.

Love reverts to sympathy – he is so moved he is slow to speak - once he learns that the “other two” were both created by parthenogenesis; they are his cousins, but are not the result of a dishonoring, extramarital liason or violation. Amor’s response to the ladies reflects how his honor, which is constituted in their chastity, is affected by what they recount. He veers from compassion to shame, with his unfeeling demand that Drittura identify “l’altre due”, and back to compassion once he learns that his aunt has not compounded her dishonor by bearing children as a result of unchaste liasons (consensual or not). Lineage concerns recur in Amor’s consolatory address to his aunt and cousins: “Larghezza e Temperanza e l’altre nate/del nostro sangue mendicando vanno” (“Generosity and temperance and the others born/of our blood go begging”) (63-64). The entire lineage has been reduced to poverty, powerlessness and dishonor.

Dante’s perception of the shame and misery of these noble creatures enables him to define his own exile as an honor:

E io, che ascolto nel parlar divino  
 consolarsi e dolersi  
 così alti dispersi  
 l’essilio che m’è dato, onor mi tengo  
 ché se giudizio o forza di destino  
 vuol pur che il mondo versi  
 i bianchi fiori in persi,

cader coi buoni è pur di lode degno. (73-80)

And I, who listen as in divine speech

such exalted exiles

take comfort and lament

I hold the exile I've been given as an honor

because if divine intent or the workings of destiny

will that the world should turn

white flowers to dark,

to fall with the good is worthy of praise.

The connection Dante establishes between these exalted exiles and himself in these lines is precisely paralleled in the poem's initial *congedo*. As Dante instructs the *canzone* how to respond to different calibers of male readers, he creates a relationship between himself and the *canzone* that echoes that between Amor and Dittura. The first four stanzas of the poem, which depict lord Love at home in Dante's heart, receiving these sad exiles who have been so grievously dishonored, and experiencing the shame of being related to a woman who has been violated and abused, are repeated in the relationship Dante constructs between himself, the *canzone*, and the imaginary readers, wicked and good, of the *canzone*:

Canzone, ai panni tuoi non ponga uom mano,

per veder quel che bella donna chiude:

bastin le parti nude;

lo dolce pome a tutta gente niega,

per cui ciascun man piega.

Ma s'elli avvien che tu alcun mai truovi

amico di virtù, ed e' ti priega,

fatti di color' novi,

poi li ti mostra; e 'l fior, ch'è bel di fori,

fa disiar ne li amorosi cori. (91-100)

Song, let no man put his hand to your robes,

to see that which a beautiful lady conceals:

let the nude parts be enough;

deny the sweet apple, for which

everyone stretches his hand, to all.

But should it happen that you ever find someone

a friend to virtue, and he asks you,

make yourself in new colors,

then show yourself to him; the flower, which is beautiful on the outside,

creates desire in loving hearts.

The congedo's initial focus on the canzone's clothing echoes the emphasis on Drittura's garments in the second stanza. She was "ungirdled and barefoot" ("discinta e scalza"), her "skirt torn" ("la gonna rotta"), and described herself as "poor in my clothes and my girdle" ("povera, vedi, a panni ed a cintura"). The canzone is also dressed in "robes" ("panni"). The description of the poem's embodied meaning as "what a beautiful lady conceals", ("quel che bella donna chiude"), and the characterization of the bad reader as seeking to

see the poem's female nakedness, replays the scene in stanza two in which Love "saw her in a place about which it's nice to be silent" ("la vide in parte che il tacere è bello"). The reference to the poem's "nude parts" ("parti nude") further echoes the description of Drittura in the second stanza: "her naked arm, a column [supporting] sorrow" ("il nudo braccio, di dolor colonna," 22). The bad reader imagined in the warning to the canzone, is a man ("uom," 91) who will repeat to the canzone the violation that Drittura has endured and which her nephew suffers the shame of but cannot avenge. Drittura is additionally like the canzone in that she "laments greatly with words" -- ("dolesi l'una con parole molto," 19), while the canzone is likened to a beautiful lady -- she has "quel che bella donna chiude", ("that which a beautiful lady conceals") (92). Should the canzone ever meet a good reader, again, explicitly a man - "amico di virtù" (97) - she is to show herself to him in new colors, as a "flower, beautiful without, creates desire in loving hearts" ("e 'l fior, ch'è bel di fori, / fa disiar ne li amorosi cori", 99-100). Drittura is also flowerlike: "and on her hand she rests [her head]/like a cut rose" ("e 'n su la man si posa / come succisa rosa", 20-21).

The numerous parallels between the violated "alta dispersa" and the canzone establish an equivalence between Amor and Dante: both endure the shame of being subject to dishonor; both are exposed to the possibility of confronting men in relationships in which they are outmatched, that is, inferior in honor to their counterpart; and their dishonor is painfully realized in other men's violation of their womenfolks' sexual integrity.

I suspect that Italian Dantisti, even of the twentieth century, did not find honor culture alien enough to consider it worth "objectifying" (in Bourdieu's term) and analyzing. Dante's exploitation of elements of honor culture has gone unremarked. The

competitiveness and aggression in the two tenzoni, or the moments in which Dante dispatches a poem to a friend, not as a modest daughter, but as a naked handmaid, are moments that run counter to our preference to see him as a virtuous poet-philosopher. By bringing a sense of how Dante's culture conceived of the workings of manliness to his poems, we see how he exploits the structures and dynamics of honor culture to characterize his relationship to other poets, to his imagined reader, and to his work.

### Chapter 3

#### *Che cavaliere!* Epic and Courtly Masculinities in Dante's Treatment of Latin and the Vernacular in the *Convivio*

In this chapter, I argue that Dante constructs Latin and the *volgare* as gendered in the *Convivio*. He uses two different gender binaries to structure his discussion of the languages: an epic gender scheme, based on the *Aeneid*, which underpins the *Convivio* as a whole, and a courtly gender scheme. Dante writes the *Convivio*, I argue, to assume an *Aeneid*-based version of masculinity and assert his having outgrown his courtly past. Epic *virtù* is privileged in the *Convivio*, and the *Aeneid*'s gender divisions underpin the construction of Latin and the vernacular in Dante's comparison of the languages. However, within this work dedicated to and founded on an *Aeneid*-derived, continent virility, there is a small episode in which Dante returns to the courtly gender scheme of his earlier work. His plan to reveal the beauty of the *volgare*, his demonstration of the worthlessness of its detractors, and his depiction of the obviousness of his love for the Italian vernacular, all depend on a courtly construction of masculine and feminine.

A single word encapsulates the epic masculinity on which the *Convivio* hinges, *virtù*. The term appears in numerous contexts and has a number of senses in the work, but in the passages I will examine, it always includes the manliness inherent in its Latin root. The manly



aspect of *virtù*, as a mature, male, ethical excellence, is central to the *Convivio*'s purpose, as described at the outset of the first *trattato*; to its ethical thesis in the fourth *trattato*; to its author's self-depiction; and to Dante's characterization of its prose. The *virtù* on which these multiple aspects of the *Convivio* center derives from an antique division of masculine and feminine.<sup>64</sup> Dante works with two different gender systems in the *Convivio*: a courtly construction of masculine and feminine, which I will examine below, and this antique one, in which the opposite qualities associated with each gender have classical philosophical pedigrees but were entirely current in Dante's 14<sup>th</sup>-century, Christian conceptual world. I call this an epic masculinity, since Dante recognizeably adopts it from the narratives apportioned to each gender in the allegorical Christian readings of the *Aeneid* that formed the backbone of the grammar curriculum of Dante's era. This antique gender dichotomy, and specifically its realization in the *Aeneid*, lies at the basis of Dante's analysis of the hierarchy of languages in the first treatise of the *Convivio*, in which he makes Latin masculine, dominant, and superior to a feminine vernacular. When Dante analyzes his relationship to the vernacular,

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<sup>64</sup> Bourdieu describes the "principle of division (*nomos*) which founds the difference between male and female" (2001, 2), and borrows Durkheim's definition of 'the 'forms of classification' with which we construct the world" (2001, 5) to state: "In a universe in which...the order of sexuality is not constituted as such and where sexual differences remain immersed in the set of oppositions that organize the whole cosmos....The division of (sexual and other) things and activities according to the opposition between the male and the female, while arbitrary when taken in isolation, receives its objective and subjective necessity from its insertion into a system of homologous oppositions - up/down, above/below, in front/behind, right/left, straight/curved (and twisted), dry/wet, spicy/bland, light/dark, outside (public)/inside (private), etc." 2001, 7. Kirkham defines "the ancient Pythagorean Dyad of non-oneness, which stamped woman as an eternal, irrational, fragmented opposite" 1989, 34. Bynum describes the "misogyny of the later Middle Ages" which was "fully articulated in theological, philosophical and scientific theory that was centuries old. Male and female were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgement/mercy and order/disorder" 1991, 151.

and his intention to reveal the beauty of the vernacular in the prose of the *Convivio*, the *volgare* remains feminine, but Dante shifts from the epic gender binary to one grounded in courtly values. The femininity resulting from this switch to a courtly gender system yields an exalted, rather than lesser, feminine *volgare*. He depicts the proper relationship of Italian authors to the (feminine) vernacular in terms not of antique *virtù*, but of honor: authors who denigrate the *volgare* are vile. Masculinity, whether classical or courtly, structures Dante's authorial self-presentation in the *Convivio*, as well as his construction of his two languages.

The citation from Aristotle that inaugurates the *Convivio* places the work in the context of philosophical tradition and universal precept: “Sì come dice lo Filosofo nel principio de la Prima Filosofia, tutti li uomini naturalmente desiderano di sapere” (I.i.1) (“As the Philosopher says at the beginning of the *First Philosophy*, all men by nature desire to know”). This introduction locates the treatise in a realm exclusive to adult men, while the chapter's conclusion is a self-conscious declaration of a new authorial manhood. Virility, whether implicit in the subject matter or explicit in the author's self-presentation, underpins the *Convivio's* “exercise in imaginative self-definition”.<sup>65</sup> In the concluding *commæ* of the treatise's inaugural chapter, Dante tells us how to read this work, which departs from the autobiography of the *Vita Nuova* in favor of the realm of moral philosophy, discarding the merely personal and the amorous. The *Convivio*, however, is another form of

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<sup>65</sup> Ascoli 1989, 18.

autobiography,<sup>66</sup> as Dante's conclusion to the introductory chapter demonstrates. He directs us to recognize his voice in the *Convivio* as more virile than that in the earlier work:

E se ne la presente opera, la quale è *Convivio* nominata, e vo' che sia, più virilmente si trattasse che ne la *Vita Nuova*, non intendo a quella in alcuna parte derogare, ma maggiormente giovare per questa quella; veggendo si come ragionevolmente quella fervida e passionata, questa temperata e virile esser convene. (l.i.16)

If in the present work, which is called *The Banquet*, as I wish it to be, the subject is treated more maturely than in the *Vita Nuova*, I do not intend by this in any way to disparage that book but rather more greatly to support it with this one, seeing that it understandably suits that one to be fervid and passionate, and this one tempered and mature.

In the early to mid-twentieth century, critics accepted Dante's direction; numerous scholars define the prose of the *Convivio* as manly. Lisio, writing in 1902, describes the author's "animo che combatte virilmente con l'idea"<sup>67</sup>; Segre works back from the *Convivio* to find inklings of Dante's mature prose in that of the *Vita Nuova*, moments which he finds "più virile"<sup>68</sup> with respect to the rest of the *libello*. Vallone individuates numerous manly qualities in the work: "Il trattato, la materia del trattato, l'indole proprio di esso, l'intenzione

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<sup>66</sup> "Dante's very preoccupation with disjoining the *Convivio* from the *Vita Nuova* strengthens one's impression that he was casting about for a way to change his image," Barolini 1984, 26.

<sup>67</sup> 1902, 214.

<sup>68</sup> 1974, 242.

di costruire un'opera entro precisi limiti in rispetto di impegni costantemente presenti, improntano virilmente il *Convivio*.”<sup>69</sup> Mengaldo describes its “prosa virile e autonoma, emancipata completamente dalla sudditanza alla poesia.”<sup>70</sup> This chorus of critical voices has obeyed Dante’s cue, finding manly qualities - combativeness, unity, not being in subjection - in the prose of the treatise. (Curiously, the characteristics they have singled out as manly in the prose of the *Convivio* are among those that Dante uses to characterize Latin when he defines its superiority in l.v.) Some of us may register confusion at the idea that prose can be virile, and may struggle to recognize any inherent manliness in the writing of the treatise.<sup>71</sup> There can be no doubt, however, that Dante intends to be read as a more manly author in the *Convivio*. By adopting a new subject matter, philosophy, and by treating previous love lyrics as essays in philosophy, Dante assumes an authoritatively rational, emotionally continent, and explicitly manly, authorial identity.

There is a precise genealogy for Dante’s definition of this shift in subject matter from love poetry and autobiography of the self-as-lover, to a treatise on impersonal and universal themes, as a shift from emotionally unregulated immaturity to continent manhood. In the

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<sup>69</sup> 1967, 30

<sup>70</sup> 1978, 51.

<sup>71</sup> Barolini suggests that critics are indeed following Dante’s cues: “... the unity of the *Vita nuova* seems to be viewed by Dante’s posterity as more sacrosanct, or more fragile (maybe because poems constitute a much higher proportion of the *Vita nuova*’s textuality than of the *Convivio*’s, maybe because the *Vita nuova* is gendered as “fervida e passionata” while the *Convivio* is “temperata e virile” [Conv. 1.1.16]), so that tampering with that unity is more problematic” 2006, 263.

passage of *Convivio* I.i in which Dante characterizes his voice as more virile than his earlier style, he continues:

...veggendo sì come ragionevolmente quella fervida e passionata, questa temperata e virile esser convene. Ché altro si conviene e dire e operare ad una etade che ad altra; perché certi costumi sono idonei e laudabili ad una etade, che sono sconci e biasimevoli ad altra; sì come di sotto, nel quarto trattato di questo libro, sarà propria ragione mostrata. E io, in quella dinanzi, a l'entrata de la mia gioventute parlai, e in questa dipoi, quella già trapassata. E con ciò sia cosa che la vera intenzione mia fosse altra che quella che di fuori mostrano le canzoni predette, per allegorica esposizione quelle intendo mostrare. (I.i.16-18)

...seeing that it understandably suits that one to be fervid and passionate, and this one tempered and mature. For it is proper to speak and act differently at different ages, because certain manners are fitting and praiseworthy at one age which at another are unbecoming and blameworthy, as will be shown below with appropriate reasoning in the fourth book. I wrote the former work at the threshold of my youth, and this one after I had already passed through it. Since my true meaning was other than what the previously mentioned canzoni outwardly reveal, I intend to explain these canzoni by means of an allegorical exposition.

The progression from a phase of life in which one is *fervida* and *passionata* to one of manly self-containment derives, in precisely these terms, from late antique and medieval moral

allegorizations of the *Aeneid*. Ulrich Leo has suggested that *Convivio*' IVs composition coincided with a period of intense rereading of the *Aeneid*<sup>72</sup>; I am convinced that the epic was on Dante's mind while he wrote the first book as well, based on his claim at its outset that it will establish his newly manly and mature voice in Fulgentian terms. In a number of ways the epic classical masculine ideal, reinforced by the gendered readings of Fulgentian allegory stressed in contemporary pedagogy,<sup>73</sup> permeates the first treatise of the *Convivio* and underlies the authorial persona Dante constructs in it.<sup>74</sup>

The allegorical reading of the epic interprets the *Aeneid* in platonic terms as a soul's growth into wisdom, its progress from youth and passionate indulgence to restraint and mature power. "The narrative of the *Aeneid* [...] essentially presents a process of maturation, a growth in the hero from early heedlessness and sin to understanding, and, implicitly, grace."<sup>75</sup> In Fulgentius, Dido embodies passion; she is pure allegory: "Having been abandoned, Dido dies, and, burned to ashes, she passes away. For abandoned passion ceases and, consumed by the heat of manliness, goes to ashes, that is, to solitary

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<sup>72</sup> 1951, 59.

<sup>73</sup> "The reading of the *Aeneid* – as part of Latin training – has been associated with a class-specific performance of masculinity. As a school text used to instruct male students in the Latin language, Virgil's *Aeneid* was... an important part of the initiation rite schoolboys underwent in the acquisition of a public language basic to their acquisition of a mature masculine identity." Desmond 1994, 7-8.

<sup>74</sup> Kay (2011) describes Dante's structuring of his past and present work in the *Aeneid*-derived senses of *virtù* and *passione* in the *Convivio*, but notes the gendered aspect of these terms only in passing.

<sup>75</sup> Bernardus Silvestris 1979, Translators' Introduction, xi.

thoughts.”<sup>76</sup> As Aeneas’ rejection of Dido and passion in favor of duty is allegorized into an ideal of masculine ethical development, so Dido’s impassioned, unregulated behavior is universalized to femininity in general. Desmond notes that the characterization of the feminine, and of Dido, as ruled by passion and bodily pleasure was emphasized by the pedagogical methods of Dante’s time. “In the homosocial arrangement of medieval academic cultures, the written text of the *Aeneid* came under the scrutiny of schoolboys and learned men”, she notes, and describes a medieval allegorical tradition of interpretation of the *Aeneid* which constructs “Aeneas as rationality and Dido as *libido*.”<sup>77</sup>

We can be certain that Dante has the *Aeneid* in mind when he describes his voice in the *Convivio* as *temperata e virile*, since his example of temperance in IV.xxvi is precisely Aeneas’ rejection of Dido in *Aeneid* IV. Dante defines temperance in Aristotelian terms as reason reining in appetite:

Veramente questo appetito conviene essere cavalcato da la ragione; ché s’i come uno sciolto cavallo...a la ragione obedire conviene, la quale guida quello con freno e con isproni, come buono cavaliere. Lo freno usa quando elli caccia, e chiamasi quello freno temperanza. (IV.xxvi.6-7)

Nevertheless this appetite must be ridden by reason, [...]just as a horse set loose... [it] must obey reason, which guides it with bridle and spurs like a good horseman...It [reason] uses the bridle when appetite is in pursuit, and this bridle is called temperance.

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<sup>76</sup> Idem 27.

<sup>77</sup> 1994, 75.

The figure Dante employs to demonstrate the exercise of temperance in his use of the bridle, or *raffrenare*, is Aeneas, in his abandonment of Dido:

E così infrenato mostra Virgilio, lo maggiore nostro poeta, che fosse Enea, ne la parte de lo Eneida ove questa etade si figura; la quale parte comprende lo quarto, lo quinto e lo sesto libro de lo Eneida. E quanto raffrenare fu quello, quando, avendo ricevuto da Dido tanto di piacere quanto di sotto nel settimo trattato si dicerà, e usando con essa tanto di dilettazone, elli si partio, per seguire onesta e laudabile via a fruttuosa, come nel quarto de l'Eneida scritto è. (IV.xxvi.8)

Vergil, our greatest poet, shows that Aeneas was unrestrained in this way in that part of the *Aeneid* in which this age of life is allegorized, the part comprising the fourth, fifth, and sixth books of the *Aeneid*. How great was his restraint when, having experienced so much pleasure with Dido, as will be recounted below in the seventh book, and having derived from her so much gratification, he took his departure from her to follow an honorable, praiseworthy and profitable path, as is recorded in the fourth book of the *Aeneid*.

Dante's use of Aeneas to typify temperance confirms that he had imbibed the reading of Aeneas' rejection of Dido as an allegory of a necessary stage of moral growth special to men. Aeneas' mature, manly, rational restraint is precisely the virility Dante attributes to himself in l.i.18. His pairing of temperance and virility reflects the presence of the moral *bildungsroman* of the *Aeneid* underlying his self-presentation in the *Convivio*.



Dante's use of *virtù* (or, frequently, *vertù*) reflects this construction of masculine excellence, defined by contrast with a weak and irrational feminine. *Virtù* fuses maleness, strength, and rational moral restraint into a single term. Joan Ferrante notes that the word implied both physical and moral strength for medievals, who considered it to reflect the essential nature of men, as in the "supposedly scientific"<sup>78</sup> etymology in Isidore (*Etymologiae*, XI, ii, 17-19):

Vir noncupatus, quia major in eo est quam in feminis: unde at virtus nomen accepit. ... Mulier vero a mollitie ... ideo virtus maxima viri, mulieris minor. (He is called "man" because there is greater "strength" in him than in women: whence "virtue" takes its name....But "woman" comes from "softness" ... therefore there is greater virtue in man and less in woman).<sup>79</sup>

*Virtù* and its cognates pepper the *Convivio*; Dante's use of the (variously spelled) vernacular cognates of *virtus* (*virtù/vertù; virtute/vertute/virtude; virtuoso*) might seem to imply some separation of this broad connotational field into more precise denotational neighborhoods, in which *virtù* or *vertù* refer to virtue in an ethical sense, or to power in a scientific context, while *virtute/vertute/virtude* mean a specific virtue, as temperance or modesty. But what we face is not a refinement of the mingled concepts into discrete terms; rather, the increase in related words yields further hybridization and complication. *Vertute* can mean the power to influence, as in the *vertute* which descends from the celestial spheres ("li raggi di ciascuno

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<sup>78</sup> Ferrante 1985, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Ferrante 1985, 6.

cielo sono la via per la quale discende la loro vertude in queste cose di qua giù,” (Conv. II.vi.9). “The rays of each heaven are the paths along which their virtue descends upon these things here below”); and Dante also defines it, without reference to a particular gender, as a straightforward term from ethical philosophy: the ingrained habit of electing not to go to excess. *Le dolci rime ch’io solia* contains the terms *vertù* and *vertute*, while the commentary on it in the fourth treatise of *Convivio* mentions *vertute*, *vertude*, *virtude*, and *virtù*. However, within the cloud of spellings and meanings of *virtù* and its cognates that arises in different contexts, one recurring node of meaning - the sense of *virtù/vertù* in the passages of the *Convivio* discussed in this chapter - is the masculine excellence embodied by mature Aeneas.

The indissolubly masculine resonance of *virtù/vertù* underlies the distinction Dante makes between nobility and virtue in *Le dolci rime d’amor, ch’io solia*, in which he demonstrates that *virtù* is unique to mature men; it is an aspect of virility. In the poem Dante defines nobility as a divinely imbued attribute which gives rise to *vertù*. He describes *vertù* as the habit of choosing not to go to extremes, which then gives rise to the fourteen moral *vertudi*; up to this point in the sixth stanza, the quality seems to have no gender-specific aspect. However, the distinction the *canzone* posits between nobility and *vertù* demonstrates that the quality is inseparable from mature masculinity:

È gentilezza dovunque’è vertute,  
 ma non vertute ov’ella;  
 sì com’è ‘l cielo dovunque’è la stella,  
 ma ciò non è converso.

E noi in donna e in età novella  
vedem questa salute,  
in quanto vergognose son tenute,  
ch'è da virtù diverso. (101-108)

Nobility exists wherever virtue is,  
but not virtue, where nobility [is];  
Just as the sky is there, wherever a star is,  
but not vice versa.

And in a lady or a young person  
we see this quality,  
inasmuch as they have shame,  
which is different from virtue.

In the commentary on these lines, the identification of *virtù* with both manliness and moral probity is unmistakable:

Poi quando dice: E noi in donna e in età novella, pruova ciò che dico, mostrando che la nobiltate si stenda in parte dove virtù non sia. E dice poi: vedem questa salute; e tocca nobiltate, che bene è vera salute, essere là dove è vergogna, cioè tema di disnoranza, sì come è ne le donne e ne li giovani, dove la vergogna è buona e laudabile; la qual vergogna non è virtù, ma certa passione buona. (IV.xix.8)

Then when the text says *In women and in those of tender age*, it proves what I say, showing that nobility extends to places where virtue does not reside.

Then it says *we perceive this state of well-being*, referring to nobility, which is indeed a state of true well-being, to be wherever there is shame (that is, fear of dishonor) as it exists in women and in young people, in whom shame is good and praiseworthy, although this shame is not a virtue but a certain kind of good emotion.

The distinction between *nobiltate* and *virtù*, demonstrated by the presence of the former among those humans excluded from the possession of the latter, confirms that *virtù* is the moral restraint of dominant, older men, adhering to its etymological root. The distinction is pushed further in the definition of *vergogna* as “non virtù, ma certa passione buona” (IV, xix, 8). Dante would have encountered the opposition between passion and *virtù*, a pairing which reflects the gendered opposition of Aeneas’ excellence and Dido’s dissipation, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>80</sup> where no narrative supplies a gendered agent for each quality. But passion’s etymological association with passivity, and *virtù*’s meaning of active potency, taken with its link to manhood, place these opposed terms within the classical system of gender division, adjoining and reinforcing passive/active and body/mind. The opposition of *passione* and *virtù* within the individual is an important ethical question for Dante, as we know from *Inferno* V. In the canto, he presents both genders as equally susceptible to passion, but nevertheless identifies the group of sinners with Dido. *Le dolci rime d’amor, ch’io solia* confirms the presence of the *vir* within *virtù*. Likewise, in the first treatise of the *Convivio*, the term *virtù* defines the moral excellence of mature, rational manhood, defined by contrast with feminine weakness, irrationality, and susceptibility to pleasure.

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<sup>80</sup> 11 7 1108a 31 ss; IV 15 1128b 10 ss; IV 15 1128b 15 ss.

The opposition of *passione* and *virtù* undergirds the brief authorial autobiography Dante sketches in the first treatise of the *Convivio*, in which he describes a shift in his literary ethos from a passionate style, and an appearance of personal passion, to restraint and *virtù*, and the moderation of passion and desire. Given the complex of meanings knotted into *virtù/vertù*, fusing maleness, strength, and the restraint of desire by reason, and underpinned by the allegorized readings of the *Aeneid*, the author's choice to write a treatise on moral philosophy suggests enacted biography, a writer's version of leaving Dido behind in Carthage. While, at the outset of the *Convivio*, he allows that the passionate style of his youth was appropriate to that age, he intends to write something more manly, "virile," and to demonstrate that certain of his past poems were precociously written about his mature philosophical and ethical concerns. At the banquet he's preparing for the reader, he intends to serve up fourteen poems about both love and *vertù* ("sì d'amore come di *vertù* materiate," 1.i.14). He confesses to some anxiety, though, about the impression the love poems will make on the reader, and again frames his goal in writing the treatise as retroactively performing a different kind of authorial manhood through the *canzoni*:

Temo la infamia di tanta passione avere seguita, quanta concepe chi legge le sopra nominate canzoni in me avere segnoreggiata; la quale infamia si cessa, per lo presente di me parlare, interamente, lo quale mostra che non passione, ma *vertù* sia stata la movente cagione. (1.ii.16)

I fear the infamy of having yielded myself to the great passion that anyone who reads the *canzoni* mentioned above must realize once ruled me. This

infamy will altogether cease as I speak now about myself and show that my motivation was not passion but virtue.

“Non passione, ma virtù”: Dante intends to recast the poems about love as poems about moral philosophy, so that the fourteen poems about both love and virtue which he stated were on the menu in I.i.14, will be revealed to be a single dish. The new version of himself he scripts here is of mature, authoritative manliness, as defined by the *Aeneid*'s allegorizers and promulgated in Book 4 of the *Convivio*. In the third book of the *Convivio*, Dante mentions another immature quality which readers of the poetry might attribute to him, “levezza”:

e pensai che da molti, di retro da me, forse sarei stato ripreso di levezza d'animo, udendo me essere dal primo amore mutato; per che, a torre via questa riprensione, nullo migliore argomento era che dire quale era quella donna che m'avea mutato. Che, per la sua eccellenza manifesta, avere si può considerazione de la sua virtude; e per lo intendimento de la sua grandissima virtù si può pensare ogni stabilitade d'animo essere a quella mutabile, e però me non giudicare lieve e non stabile. (III.i.11)

I thought that I might perhaps be criticized for inconstancy of mind by many coming after me upon hearing that I had changed from my first love. To dispel this criticism there was no better argument than to tell who that lady was who had brought about this change in me. For by her manifest excellence we can form some idea of her virtue; and by understanding her great virtue we can perceive how any steadfastness of mind is capable of being changed by it, and consequently how I might not be judged inconstant and unsteadfast.

Dante rewrites his previous career to change the characterization of himself he worries his work has created, of *levezza d'animo*, indicative of feminine passivity and inconstancy. The epic, *Aeneid*-defined poles of masculinity and femininity are all present here in the poet's anxieties: dignified reasoning men of Dante's era considered women to be ethically undeveloped and unstable.<sup>81</sup>

Let us turn from this survey of the theme of virility and Dante's *Aeneid*-infused definition of his subject matter and his authorial voice as replacing passionate youth with temperate virility, to consider his discussion of the languages in the first book of the treatise. Dante's construction of Latin and the vernacular reflects the *Convivio*'s fundamental focus on antique manliness, in which the author's change of tone and subject matter are presented to the reader as doubling Aeneas' achievement of manly ethical maturity, understood as rejection of passion in favor of rational restraint, and in terms of subject matter as a turning from love lyric to moral philosophy.

Chapter five of the first treatise of the *Convivio* places the two languages in a hierarchical relationship of domination and subjection, which Dante bases on Latin's inherent superiority and the vernacular's inherent inferiority. Dante uses the classical, *Aeneid*-based gender binary discussed above to construct Latin's excellence as masculine, and presents the vernacular as lesser in particularly feminine ways. Chapter v of *Convivio* I presents the languages enmeshed as agents in human relationships, embedding them in social roles and representing their qualities in human examples. By couching the evaluation

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<sup>81</sup> "Women were notorious among male Latinists for exactly the kind of flightiness and inconstancy that moral-grammatical education was designed to counteract." Gehl 1993, 128.

of the languages in human terms, Dante makes the languages interlocutors with each other, and, in the case of the vernacular in the *trattato*'s later chapters, with himself. The superior, masculine language epitomizes the male excellence constituted in grammar lessons through classical texts and against a feminine other, while the lesser language has the flaws denigrated as feminine in the epic gender system.

Dante's evaluation of the two languages arises in the context of the excuses he offers (I.v) for having elected to use the inferior one for the treatise. The ensuing discussion of the languages, and particularly Dante's use of an analogous human relationship of servitude and dominance to establish that one language is better than the other, has elicited general critical puzzlement. Nardi, for example, observes with bemusement

che in questo primo trattato del *Convivio*, Dante [è] ancora irretito dal pregiudizio della maggiore nobiltà e della maggiore capacità espressiva del Latino sul volgare. Anzi, questo suo pregiudizio egli ribadisce perfino con le ragioni metaforiche le più lambiccate; alle quali si stenta a credere com'egli abbia potuto dar peso.<sup>82</sup>

Although the metaphorical argument seems strained to Nardi, giving rise to his difficulty in believing that Dante could have taken it seriously, Dante's comparison of the languages emerges as entirely consistent and coherent if we read it as resulting from a perception of Latin – the exclusive language of elite men, and taught by adult, professional men - as

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<sup>82</sup> “In this first treatise of the *Convivio*, Dante is still ensnared in the prejudice of the greater nobility and greater expressive capacity of Latin over the vernacular. Indeed, he asserts this prejudice of his with utterly convoluted metaphorical reasons, which one can hardly believe he took seriously.” 1960, 23.



relatively masculine, and of the vernacular - shared with, and indeed transmitted by, women - as relatively feminine. The “ragioni metaforiche le più lambiccate” are not eccentric, but instead thematic to this work which hinges on *virtù*, if we understand them as conforming to Latin’s masculine valence.

The first “ragione metaforica” Dante adduces for his choice to write in the *loquela italica* stems from what he terms “cautela di disconvenevole ordinazione” (l.v.2) (“precaution against creating an inappropriate relationship”). The commentary is a servant to the *canzoni*: “conviene questo comento, che è fatto in vece di servo a le ‘nfrascritte canzoni, esser subietto a quelle” (l.v.6) (“It is fitting that this commentary, which is made to play the part of a servant to the *canzoni* placed below, be subject to them”). Since the *canzoni* are in the *volgare*, writing the commentary in Latin would make Latin a servant to the vernacular. Latin’s greater excellence makes it naturally sovereign over the *volgare*, and consequently using it to comment on the *canzoni* would generate the *disconvenevole ordinazione* Dante wishes to avoid. Critics have seized on the question of the languages’ nobility, because the term is repeated in the *De vulgari eloquentia*; it offers a clear point of contradiction, and an obvious point of comparison, between the two works. Grayson, for example, states “the sole basic difference and contradiction [between the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio*’s ranking of the languages] is in terms of ‘nobiltà’, and this rests on the quality of immutability, and on nothing else.”<sup>83</sup> This interpretation ignores the terms in which Dante analyzes the languages. He is entirely explicit in the *Convivio* that his ranking of Latin and the vernacular rests on domination and subjection. “Non era subietto ma

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<sup>83</sup> 1965, 69.

sovrano, e per nobiltà” (l.v.7) (“it would not have been subject but sovereign, because of its nobility”), is simply not equivalent to the *De vulgari eloquentia*’s “nobilior est” (l.i.4) (“it is nobler”). The *Convivio*’s discussion of the languages is predicated on human social relationships, and *sovrano* in this context is not simply a term for superior; it refers to a lord couched in a distinct relationship. When Dante explicates the qualities of a suitable servant, he states that a servant must know

la natura del signore: onde sono signori di sì asinina natura che comandano lo contrario di quello che vogliono, e altri che senza dire vogliono essere intesi, e altri che non vogliono che ‘l servo si muova a fare quello che è mestiere, se nol comandano. (l.vi.3)

the nature of his master. Now there are masters of so asinine a nature that they order the opposite of what they desire, and others who without uttering a word expect to be understood, and others who do not want a servant to set about doing what is necessary unless they order it.

He describes service here in what cannot be mistaken for abstract terms. The *vernacular*’s essential inferiority, which makes it unfit to assume the lordly role in relation to Latin, must be understood as embodied in the human superior/inferior relationship Dante describes. The *Dve*’s “nobler” language is nobler in abstract and universal terms, without reference to social hierarchy; in the *Convivio*, the languages are each discussed as if they were human, and nobility is a single element of a teleological justification for dominant social standing.

Dominance is a necessary corollary of the *Aeneid*’s version of masculine excellence. The result of Aeneas’ achievement of rational restraint is conquest, and the poem feminizes

the forces he (and the Roman empire) comes to dominate.<sup>84</sup> A defining characteristic of epic *virtù* is domination of an irrational, unruly feminized other. The presentation of the languages as ordered by inherent qualities of superiority and inferiority, proceeds directly from an *Aeneid*-based masculinity's imperative of dominance over the unruly feminine. The *Aeneid*'s depiction of feminine and unhinged forces needing the regulating domination of masculine power arises from what was absolutely reflexively seen as natural order. Aquinas defines a "kind of subjection which is called economic or civil, whereby the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good," and the example of this principle is precisely men's proper dominance over women: "By such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason dominates."<sup>85</sup> Dante's ranking of the two languages according to human submission and sovereignty results directly from his adoption of, and thematic focus on, epic masculinity in the *Convivio*.

In *Convivio* I.v's description of Latin's superiority, the epic gender division underlies all the reasons for which Latin is inherently dominant. As we will see, Latin is the sovereign

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<sup>84</sup> "With Cleopatra the opposition between east and west is explicitly characterized in terms of gender: the otherness of the Easterner becomes the otherness of the second sex. If the Oriental is given to womanizing and effeminacy, here a woman has usurped the command of the eastern forces. Much more than Antony, it is Cleopatra's actions that are followed on the shield. These actions mirror other episodes in the *Aeneid*. Cleopatra's pallor and future suicide verbally recall the suicide of Dido (4.644) and the resemblance between the two African queens is an important element of the poem's set of topical allusions....In Roman religion Juno also represents a universal feminine principle, and she, like Cleopatra, gives the name of woman to the anarchic forces inherent in the east, in the cosmos, and in the human psyche. Woman, like the boat of Cleopatra, is a passive, open vessel, unable to direct her destiny, subject to the ever-changing winds of circumstance....By inference, the womanish easterners cannot rule themselves and require the masculine government of their European masters." Quint 1993, 28-29.

<sup>85</sup> ST I, Q. 92, Art. 1, ad. 2.

language in precisely the ways that the masculine was held to be superior to the feminine in the Fulgentian grammar school readings of the *Aeneid* discussed above. Furthermore, in the imagery of the chapter, Latin emerges embodied as a powerful and high-status man. Dante inaugurates his evaluation of the languages with a reference to human excellence:

Quella cosa che più adorna e commenda l'umana operazione, e che più dirittamente a buon fine la mena, si è l'abito di quelle disposizioni che sono ordinate a lo inteso fine; sì com'è ordinata al fine della cavalleria franchezza d'animo e fortezza del corpo. (I.v.4-5)

What most adorns and commends human actions and what most directly leads them to a good end is the habit of those dispositions which are directed to an intended end, as, for example, boldness of mind and strength of body are directed to the end of chivalry.<sup>86</sup>

Dante's example of teleologically-determined excellence, unsurprisingly in this treatise centered on the masculine ideal exemplified by Aeneas, are the ideal qualities of a warrior. The bold and powerfully-built high-status knight, with his "franchezza d'animo e fortezza di corpo", does not occur casually at this point in the argument; he embodies and reinforces the chapter's theme. As will be examined below, he is markedly not a courtly figure, but a martial one. The knight -- a man who is not only "bold and powerfully-built", but also enjoys

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<sup>86</sup> "Chivalry" is one possible translation of *cavalleria*; but the passage emphasizes bodily strength and courage, not purity of heart or virtue. "Knighthood" might be better, since it conveys both the ideal aspect of *cavalleria* and the fact that, for Dante, this is also simply a division of the Florentine army in which he and his neighbors served.

privileged social stature<sup>87</sup> – inaugurates the discussion of the languages' relationship of sovereignty and subjection. The use of the characteristics that make a man fit to fight as a high-status warrior, to exemplify the possession of qualities suited to a given end, sets up a male ideal which flavors the entire chapter. The definition of ideal knightly qualities is followed immediately by the case of the servant:

...sì com'è ordinata al fine de la cavalleria franchezza d'animo e fortezza del corpo. E così colui che è ordinato a l'altrui servizio dee avere quelle disposizioni che sono a quello fine ordinate, sì come subiezione conoscenza e obediencia, senza le quali è ciascuno disordinato a ben servire. (I.v.4-5)

...as, for example, boldness of mind and strength of body are directed to the end of chivalry. So anyone who is placed into the service of another must have those dispositions which are directed to that end, such as submission, understanding, and obedience, without which a man is not equipped to serve well.

The knight's social stature and fighting-fit attitude and physique present a distinct contrast to the case of "colui che è ordinato a l'altrui servizio;" this knight is certainly not suited to be a servant. The juxtaposition of the qualities of an ideal warrior-knight, with those of one fit

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<sup>87</sup> Carol Lansing has noted that the Florentine cavalry at Campaldino was not composed exclusively of nobles, but she describes a pervasive sense, social reality notwithstanding, that battle was nobles' turf: "Florentine nobles did fight on horse but were joined by men who were distinctly not noble. Defense of the city was not a noble occupation....There was nevertheless some sense that nobles were better at war, that war was their special function." She mentions Dino Compagni's criticism of the "unheroic service" of the popolani at Campaldino, and also his dismissal of the martial ambitions of two priors who wanted to join the military, at whom he sneers "because this was not their job, but that of gentlemen accustomed to warfare." 1991, 154.

to serve a superior, places the knight and the *servo* in a binary, so that the knight, though not explicitly marshaled into the argument to exemplify the figure of the *sovrano*, assumes that quality by his placement. In the ensuing discussion, then, the figure of this bold warrior with his powerful physique who, by his position in the treatise, sits in opposition to the servant, imbues the sovereign language with a masculine embodiment.

*Cavaliere*, of course, could possess both ideal and concrete valences for Dante. In the words of Piero Cudini, “oltre e più che ad una sorta di figura ideale di cavaliere, Dante può richiamarsi ad una precisa categoria sociale, all’interno della nobiltà...al di là di questo, rimane comunque il valore cortese di tale figura.”<sup>88</sup> Knighthood’s *valore cortese* refers to a richly elaborated-on set of romance ideals fundamental to the medieval imaginary, as in the case of the *donne e cavalieri antichi* in Dido’s train (*Inferno* V.71),<sup>89</sup> as well as to a social elite that defined itself with reference to courtly literature, as Francesca recounts having done (*Inferno* V.133-136). Additionally, *cavalleria* refers to a military category of which Dante had lived experience, having fought among the *feditori* at the battle of Campaldino.<sup>90</sup> In the poetry composed before the *Convivio*, however, Dante’s references to *cavalieri* are neither legendary nor military; instead, the *cavaliere* is the consumer-composer of lyric poetry. The entirely warlike knight in *Convivio* I.v, in concert with Dante’s explicit declaration of his new

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<sup>88</sup> “Over and above a kind of ideal figure of a knight, Dante can make reference to a precise social category, part of the nobility...aside from this, however, the courtly aspect of such a figure remains. Dante Alighieri 1979, 140, n. 83.

<sup>89</sup> Barolini 1992, 41.

<sup>90</sup> “Dante’s participation in the battle is generally accepted by most historians who have looked into the matter. Aside from his references in the *Comedy*, a letter, no longer in existence, was cited by Leonardo Bruni in his *Vita di Dante* and in his *Istoria Fiorentina*, and would seem to bear out the general belief.” Oertner 1968, 446, note 46.

theme, recasts masculinity in terms, not of lyric ideals, but of martial epic (and consequently, by way of the Christian allegorical readings of the *Aeneid*, of ethical philosophy). His qualities of strength and boldness are the characteristics that suit a man to fight other men in physical confrontation; no reference is made to service to a leige or a lady, nor to a refined code of conduct meant for an urban elite. The *Convivio*'s knight is free of the values of *fin amors*; he is a knight without a *donna*. He is suited, not to be subject to love, but to dominate a battlefield.

By contrast, *Poscia ch'amor del tutto mi ha lasciato* provides a definition of the ideal courtly characteristic, *leggiadria*, and describes the man who is praised for it as a *cavaliere* (83). In this context, one aspect of this ideal knight's behavior is to court a worthy lady.

Those who lack *leggiadria*

Non sono innamorati  
 mai di donna amorosa;  
 ne' parlamenti lor tengono scede;  
 non moveriano mai il piede  
 per donneare a guisa di leggiadro. (48-52)

They are never in love  
 with a noble lady  
 their conversation is full of foolery  
 they would never make a move  
 to court a lady in a pleasing manner.

In this courtly context, love of a lady, and subjection to her, (or to love), is a sign of masculine excellence. “The courtly value system generally flips the male-female hierarchy on its head...by placing the lady in a superior position.”<sup>91</sup> The division between the *Aeneid*-based masculine ideal of dominance achieved through *virtù* (defined by contrast with feminized *passione*), and this courtly masculine ideal of subjection to love, is especially clearly delineated in *Doglia mi reca ne lo core ardire*'s pairing of *vertù*, not with the denigratory *passione*, but with *biltà*.

Io dico a voi che siete innamorate  
 che, se vertute a noi  
 fu data, e beltà a voi,  
 e a costui di due potere un fare,  
 voi non dovrete amare,  
 ma coprir quanto di biltà v'è dato,  
 poi che non c'è vertù, ch'era suo segno. (11-17).

I say to those of you [ladies] who are in love  
 That, if virtue was given to us,  
 And beauty to you,  
 And to love to make two one,  
 You shouldn't love,  
 But conceal your beauty,  
 Since there is no virtue, which was its object.

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<sup>91</sup> Holmes 2008, 2.



In this gender scheme, the feminine is not lesser, even if the separation according to “sexual division: to women beauty, to men virtue” iterates “the medieval commonplace” that “women are by nature less capable of rational virtue than men.”<sup>92</sup> The feminine term in the pairing *vertù/beltà* is not denigrated; both terms represent ideals. Additionally, while the *Aeneid*’s narrative prescribes rejection of the feminine term in order to achieve masculine excellence and dominance, the lyric “narrative” directs the truly excellent man to aspire to be worthy of *beltà*. The measure of his excellence is his subjection to love. (We need not rely only on these two poems with ethical prescriptions for being an excellent man to find the last point. The association of subjection to love with essential nobility predates Dante in the lyric tradition.)

By contrast with the courtly *cavalieri leggiadri* in these two lyric poems, the entirely martial knight of *Convivio* I.v, in accordance with epic *virtù*, is suited to dominate, not to submit. Dante sets up this ideal of burly power by contrast with the figure of one fit to serve, and proceeds to enumerate the reasons for Latin’s higher rank. He attributes Latin’s proper dominance to its ontological superiority, which he analyzes in terms of three qualities:

Dunque, a fuggire questa disordinazione, conviene questo comento, che è fatto in vece di servo a le ‘nfrascritte canzoni, esser subietto a quelle in ciascuna sua condizione ed essere conoscente del bisogno del suo signore e a lui obediante. Le quali disposizioni tutte li mancavano, se latino e non volgare fosse stato, poi che le canzoni sono volgari. Ché primamente, non era subietto ma sovrano, e per nobiltà e per vertù e per bellezza. Per nobiltà, perché lo

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<sup>92</sup> Dante Alighieri 1967 Volume 2, 298, note to lines 12-13.

latino è perpetuo e non corruttibile, e lo volgare è non stabile e corruttibile. Onde vedemo ne le scritture antiche de le comedie e tragedie latine, che non si possono trasmutare, quello medesimo che oggi avemo; che non avviene del volgare, lo quale a piacimento artificiato si trasmuta. (I.v.6-8)

Hence, to avoid this inappropriate relationship, it is fitting that this commentary, which is made to play the part of a servant to the canzoni placed below, be subject to them in all of its functions and be understanding of the needs of its master and obedient to him. All of these dispositions would be lacking if it had been in Latin and not in the vernacular, since the canzoni are in the vernacular. For in the first place it would not have been subject but sovereign, because of its nobility, its virtue, and its beauty. Because of its nobility, for Latin is eternal and incorruptible, while the vernacular is unstable and corruptible. Thus in the ancient Latin comedies and tragedies, which cannot undergo change, we find the same Latin as we have today; this is not the case with the vernacular, which, being fashioned according to one's own preference, undergoes change.

The first quality underpinning Latin's superiority, *nobiltà*, refers to its constancy: "lo latino è perpetuo e non corruttibile." By contrast, "lo volgare è non stabile e corruttibile", and "a piacimento artificiato si trasmuta." At the beginning of the *Convivio*, Dante identifies the two poles of human behavior, *passione* and *virtù* (I.ii.16, "non passione, ma virtù"), which he considers his oeuvre to reflect; we also noted his fear of being perceived as *lieve* or *instabile*, a quality implicitly contrasted with the virility the *Convivio* demonstrates him to have

mastered. We have examined how the *passione/virtù* opposition is embodied in the contrast between Dido and Aeneas in the Christian allegorical tradition Dante inherited. Here, the opposition of feminine weakness, passivity, and instability summed up in the term *passione*, to the mature male rational stability encompassed in the term *virtù*, recurs to structure the discussion of the languages. These two characterizations apportion the languages each to a pole of feminine mutation or masculine constancy. Dante identifies Latin's fixity with the ethical lessons inherent in Latin pedagogy of his time, fusing the language and the evaluation of human character taught through it: as Aeneas and reason are superior to Dido and passion, as men and constancy properly rule women and instability, so Latin inherently rules the vernacular. The *Aeneid* offers a neat summation of this trope of the nature of the feminine in Mercury's recommendation to Aeneas to remove himself from the possibility of treachery and attack from Dido. He voices the ancient and medieval doctrine on the essentially unreliable, shifty nature of women in a single line: "An ever/uncertain and unconstant thing is woman" (4.786-787). The definition of Latin as constant and stable, and the *loquela italica* as unstable and corruptible, perfectly dovetails with both the essential nature of masculine and feminine in the epic gender system, and the resulting moral excellence or moral failing of each.

The moral aspect of the gender scheme Dante has applied to the languages is extended in the next lines, in his ruminations on change in language. Dante states that the *volgare* "a piacimento artificiato si trasmuta." His inclusion of *a piacimento* reflects

Aristotelian language theory (available to Dante in Boethius' translation).<sup>93</sup> In the original, Aristotelian context, Dante's *piacimento* referred not to pleasure but to consensus, akin to what we would call a structuralist perspective on how words are imbued with their meaning: "vox significans ad placitum." In this context, *placitum*, Boethius' translation of the greek 'syntheke', means arbitrarily:<sup>94</sup> "ad placitum è la formula tecnica, di origine aristotelica, con cui il medio evo, e anche Dante nel *De vulgari*, indica il rapporto convenzionale (in linguaggio strutturalistico moderno, 'arbitrario') tra il significante e il significato."<sup>95</sup> In the *Convivio* passage, Dante has used the concept not to express the conventional nature of the link between sensory sign and mental concept, but to explain language's change over time, altering the original Aristotelian sense of *ad placitum* to base the change in language on the inclination, or literally, in Dante's term, pleasure, of its speakers.<sup>96</sup> This pleasure-based

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<sup>93</sup> "The crucial passage is *De interpretatione* I, 2, where Aristotle seeks to define the noun, the first part of the logical proposition:

Nomen ergo est vox significativa secundum placitum sine tempore, cuius nulla pars est significativa separate.

[Therefore the noun is a vox [a linguistic item] which signifies according to convention and without time, and no part of which is significant on its own.]

Boethius' translation and subsequent commentaries on this sentence shaped thought on semantics and the origin of language for centuries. The crucial phrase is *vox significativa secundum placitum* ('a vox which signifies according to convention')." Reynolds 1996, 47

<sup>94</sup> Minio-Paluello 1980, 74.

<sup>95</sup> "*ad placitum* is the technical formula, from Aristotle, with which the Middle Ages, and Dante in the *De vulgari*, indicate the conventional relationship (in modern structuralist language, 'arbitrary') between the signifier and the signified." Contini 1970, 366.

<sup>96</sup> "Dante may have known the *De Interpretatione*, but he would have found the relevant phrases in any elementary text of logic....It is, however, clear that he had read, directly or

change, which will be depicted more positively in the *De vulgari eloquentia* and redeemed entirely in *Paradiso* XXVI, is here absolutely negative. Dante attributes to *piacimento*, not the conventional nature of the particular sounds used to mean certain things, as in the original context, but change and instability. This emphasis on pleasure as the root of the instability which makes the vernacular inferior to Latin, sets up the two languages in a relation which mirrors that of masculine excellence (rational constancy, continence) and feminine faults (susceptibility to pleasure, ruled by sensation, not reason) according to the *Aeneid*-based gender system Dante has adopted in the *Convivio*.

Pleasure-based mutation of language figures prominently in *Inferno* V. The canto sets up an opposition between pleasure and reason - the sinners “sottomettono la ragion al talento” - and identifies pleasure-led passion with constant change in the form of the sinners’ punishment<sup>97</sup>, to be without even a moment’s repose:

così quel fiato li spiriti male  
 di qua, di là, di giù, di su li mena;  
 nulla speranza li conforta mai,  
 non che di posa, ma di minor pena. (42-45).

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indirectly, absorbed, and repeated in *Paradiso* xxvi those notions from a short passage in Giles of Rome’s *De Regimine Principum*. After referring explicitly to the *De Interpretatione* and to the *Politics*, Giles draws the inference that ‘loqui est naturale’, but (‘autem’) speaking in this or that way (‘sic vel sic’) is ‘secundum placitum’. Dante translates literally from Giles’s text: ‘naturale è che uom favella, - ma, così o così, secondo che v’abbella’...But neither Aristotle, nor Boethius in his translation and commentaries, nor Giles in his treatise had added, in connection with ‘pleasure’, the concept of mutability, historical transformation, of language.” Minio-Paluello 1980, 73.

<sup>97</sup> “The lustful are tossed by the hell-storm as in life they were buffeted by their passions,” Barolini 1998, 34.

so does that blast bear on the guilty spirits:  
 now here, now there, now down, now up, it drives them.  
 There is no hope that ever comforts them-  
 no hope for rest and none for lesser pain.<sup>98</sup>

Furthermore, in *Inferno* V, the instability of those guided by passion, not reason - who act *a piacimento* - is figured specifically in language. Semiramis' alteration of the law to accommodate her lust has been glossed by Joan Ferrante as an example of sinners' abuse of rhetoric: "they twist words to justify themselves. Semiramis, empress of many tongues, changes one letter and makes lust legal in her law: 'libito fè licito in sua legge' (*Inferno*. V.56)."<sup>99</sup> This is not just an example of the unreliable language use of the damned, however. The line captures the mutability of the unreasoning and pleasure-led, and the impact their irrationality has on language. Semiramis' pursuit of pleasure leads to linguistic flux. Most importantly, the canto typifies the instability and change, linguistic and legal, caused by this reason-opposed pleasure, in feminine figures: the entire group of sinners is identified with Dido. Iannucci has noted the emblematic value of the placement of Aeneas and Dido in the *Commedia*: "In the person of Aeneas, reason overcomes passion...This abstract allegory is given figural depth in the *Commedia*. Aeneas is housed in the noble castle of Limbo....Dido is in the circle of the lustful."<sup>100</sup> The slippage from one word to another, the change in language (and violation of the coded realization of reason, the law) figured in the line, is

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<sup>98</sup> This and all following translations of the *Commedia* by Mandelbaum (Dante Alighieri 1980).

<sup>99</sup> Ferrante 1969, 42.

<sup>100</sup> Iannucci 1997, 101

driven by Semiramis' *libito* itself in a figuration of precisely the intersection of the feminine, pleasure, inconstancy, and language, that we find in *Convivio* I.v.

By contrast with the unstable *volgare*, Latin's greater nobility is due to its constancy, "incorruptible perpetual-ness", a masculine quality, as we have seen. It is moreover superior in its greater *virtù*. Dante instructs us that "lo latino molte cose manifesta concepute ne la mente che lo volgare far non può", and hence "più è la virtù sua che quella del volgare" (I.v.12) ("Since Latin expresses many things conceived in the mind which the vernacular cannot,...its virtue is greater than that of the vernacular"). Latin's greater power to convey concepts genders it, and reminds us of Isidore's etymology of *virtù*: physical strength and moral strength, virtue, are both identified with manliness. Additionally, the more powerful language is the repository of moral philosophy, reflecting the identity of maleness, virtue, and power, which comprises the cornerstone of the authority Dante works to assume in the course of the *Convivio*.<sup>101</sup>

Dante reinforces the masculinity present in the etymology of *virtù* in his explanation of its meaning:

Ancora: non era subietto ma sovrano per vertù. Ciascuna cosa è virtuosa in sua natura che fa quello a che ella è ordinata; e quanto meglio lo fa tanto è più virtuosa. Onde dicemo uomo virtuoso che vive in vita contemplativa o attiva, a le quali è ordinato naturalmente; dicemo del cavallo virtuoso che corre forte e molto, a la qual cosa è ordinato; dicemo una spada virtuosa che ben taglia le dure cose, a che essa è ordinata. Così lo sermone, che è ordinato a

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<sup>101</sup> Ascoli 1989.

manifestare lo concetto umano, è virtuoso quando quello fa, e più virtuoso quello che più lo fa; onde, con ciò sia cosa che lo latino molte cose manifesta concepute ne la mente che lo volgare non può, sì come sanno quelli che hanno l'uno e l'altro sermone, più è la vertu sua che quella del volgare. (l.v.11-12)

Moreover, Latin would not have been subject but sovereign because of its virtue. Everything is virtuous in its nature which fulfills the purpose toward which it is directed; and the better it does this, the more virtuous it is. Therefore we call a man virtuous who lives a contemplative or an active life, which he is by nature constituted to do; we call a horse virtuous which runs fast and far, which it is constituted to do; we call a sword virtuous which cuts through hard objects easily, which it is constituted to do. Thus language, which is constituted to express human thought, is virtuous when it does this, and the more completely it does this, the more virtuous it is; therefore, since Latin expresses many things conceived in the mind which the vernacular cannot, as those who speak both languages know, its virtue is greater than that of the vernacular.

The progress of the examples, from *l'uomo virtuoso* to the *cavallo virtuoso* to the *spada virtuosa*, generates anew the image of a warrior: a man with a horse and a sword. The knight who first emerged to exemplify the possession of characteristics suited to a given end/rank, recurs here to demonstrate the meaning of *virtù*. While Dante initially posits the case of a man who lives a contemplative, not active life, the presence of the horse and the



sword in the sentence leaves us with a sense of *virtù* grounded in not just active manliness, but martial manliness. That a warrior should come into focus as the exemplar of *virtù* reinforces the concept's association with an ideally powerful, dominant masculinity, that of the bold, physically powerful, mounted and armed warrior. The *più virtuoso sermone*, then, not only emerges as excellent at expressing human ideas; it also possesses the markedly masculine power of the mounted and armed, and consequently socially dominant, warrior described in the paragraph's outset.

Finally, Latin's superiority stems from its greater beauty. This may not seem to be a quality that reinforces its collocation at the masculine pole of the language pair, but when Dante demonstrates his definition of beauty, we see from his example that the beauty he apportions to Latin is not a feminine attribute:

Ancora: non era sobietto ma sovrano per bellezza. Quella cosa dice l'uomo essere bella cui le parti debitamente si rispondono, per che de la loro armonia resulta piacimento. Onde pare l'uomo essere bello, quando le sue membra debitamente si rispondono; e dicemo bello lo canto, quando le voci di quello, secondo debito de l'arte, sono intra sè rispondenti. Dunque quello sermone è più bello ne lo quale più debitamente si rispondono [le parole; e più debitamente si rispondono] in latino che in volgare, pero ché lo volgare seguita uso, e lo latino arte; onde concedesi esser più bello, più virtuoso e più nobile. Per che si conchiude lo principale intendimento, cioè che non sarebbe stato sobietto a le canzoni, ma sovrano. (l.v.14-15)

Furthermore, Latin would not have been the subject but the sovereign because of its beauty. One calls a thing beautiful when its parts correspond properly, because pleasure results from their harmony. Thus a man appears beautiful when his limbs correspond properly; and we call a song beautiful when its voices are harmonized according to the rules of the art. Therefore that language is the most beautiful in which the words correspond most properly; and they correspond more properly in Latin than in the vernacular, because the vernacular follows custom, while Latin follows art; consequently it is granted that Latin is the more beautiful, the more virtuous, and the more noble. And this concludes my main point: that is, that Latin would not have been the subject of the canzoni but their sovereign.<sup>102</sup>

Having defined beauty as a harmonious relationship of parts, Dante then employs the image of a man to explicate it. The definition of beauty Dante uses here, that of *proportio*, was “the most widespread aesthetic concept in the whole of antiquity and the Middle Ages. It was the only one to be accepted universally and understood in a univocal sense.”<sup>103</sup> It was familiar to Dante from Boethius, as we see in his example of the harmonious voices in music, and can be found in Aquinas as well, who states that “beauty consists in due proportion.”<sup>104</sup> The concept of proportion privileges a kind of reasoned perception; it is beauty that lies in measure and arises from a rational assessment of parts and whole, rather than a sensual

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<sup>102</sup> Lansing 1998.

<sup>103</sup> Eco 1988, 71.

<sup>104</sup> *Summa Teologica* 1.5,4 ad 1, cited in Eco 1988, 71.

appreciation. Beauty in *Convivio* I.v is a rationally-perceived quality, defined by philosophical authorities, and is embodied in a man in the primary example of just such proportionate beauty.

In the course of his argument for Latin's sovereignty over the *volgare*, Latin is repeatedly exemplified in the image of an individual man, who is twice characterized as a knight. Its properly dominant position arises in concert with its embodiment as a physically-gifted (evident in his *bellezza*), strong, courageous, mounted and armed warrior, who possesses *virtù*. In its inherent fitness to rule over a lesser other; in its greater nobility, which is defined as greater stability (defined by contrast with a mutable and pleasure-lead other); in its greater *virtù*; and even in its greater beauty, Latin emerges at every turn in I.v with epic masculine qualities, and embodied in masculine images.

The *volgare* is a nearly invisible, feminine inferior to this splendid, excellently male, dominant language in *Convivio* I.v. But in later chapters of book I of the *Convivio*, Dante makes the vernacular his subject and devotes many pages to an exploration of its detractors' lowliness, and to his own relationship with it. Dante develops the *volgare* into a figure which remains feminine but which is coded in a conceptual scheme which gives it a very different stature from the subject, pleasure-led, and mutable antique feminine of chapter v. In two important passages of *Convivio* I.x-xiii, the *volgare* shares numerous characteristics with a lyric beloved. In his discussion of the vernacular, Dante reverts to a courtly, idealized gender division, in which the feminine is not chaotic and requiring domination, but rather exalted and worthy of service.

Let us begin by comparing Dante's comments on the beauty of Latin and that of the *volgare*. As we saw above, Latin's beauty is akin to that of a well-built man. In *Convivio* I.x, Dante explains that his natural love for the language leads him to compose his treatise in it, to reveal the vernacular's beauty. He writes:

per questo comento la gran bontade del volgare di sì [si vedrà]; però che si vedrà la sua virtù, si com'è per esso altissimi e novissimi concetti convenevolmente, sufficientemente e acconciamente, quasi come per esso latino, manifestare [...] chi vuole ben giudicare d'una donna, guardi quella quando solo sua naturale bellezza si sta con lei, da tutto accidentale adornamento discompagnata; si come sarà questo comento, nel quale si vedrà l'agevolezza de le sue sillabe le proprietadi delle sue costruzioni e le soavi orazioni che di lui si fanno; le quali chi bene agguarderà, vedrà essere piene di dolcissima e d'amabilissima bellezza. (I.x.11-13)

For by means of this commentary the great goodness of the vernacular of si will be seen, because its virtue will be made evident, namely how it expresses the loftiest and the most unusual conceptions almost as aptly, fully, and gracefully as Latin, something that could not be expressed perfectly in verse, because of the accidental adornments that are tied to it, that is, rhyme and meter, just as the beauty of a woman cannot be perfectly expressed when the adornment of her preparation and apparel do more to make her admired than she does herself. Therefore, if anyone wishes to judge a woman justly, let him look at her when her natural beauty alone attends her, unaccompanied by any

accidental adornment; so it will be with this commentary, in which the smoothness of the flow of its syllables, the appropriateness of its constructions, and the sweet discourses that it makes will be seen, which anyone upon careful consideration will find full of the sweetest and most exquisite beauty.

While a strong man's body typified the beauty of Latin in l.v, the example adopted to depict the beauty of the vernacular is a lady. Additionally, the language in the concluding comma of the treatise surges into a stil-novist register, describing the *soavità* and *dolcissima, amabilissima bellezza* of Italian. These lyrical adjectives and superlatives, accompanying the image of the lady, give the *volgare* a feminine aspect and indeed make the commentary seem to share the same goal as the lyric praise poetry, of exalting and demonstrating the beauty and excellence of the beloved. As we noted above, the aesthetic basis of Dante's description of the beauty of Latin, and likewise of a beautiful man, in l.v.5, reflects Boethius' pythagoreanization<sup>105</sup> of the antique concept of beauty, *proportio*; the beauty of a man, and accordingly of Latin, is defined by an analysis of the relation of parts to the whole. The vocabulary employed in the discussion of the beauty of the *volgare*, by contrast, compasses sensual appreciation - *soave, dolce* - and reflects courtly ideals. The reader's recognition of its beauty occurs by revelation, as Dante promises to unveil it - from under the ornament of meter and rhyme - in its essence. This revelation of the true beauty of the *volgare*, with its every accidental quality stripped away, is akin to the struggle to conceive of and to represent the phenomenon of the beloved that many of the lyrics record. The *volgare*

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<sup>105</sup> Eco 1988, 76.

possesses the qualities of a lyric lady – “soave,” “dolce”, and “amabile” - and Dante describes its beauty in *Vita Nuova*-esque superlatives: “dolcissima ed amabilissima.” In this declaration of his intention to reveal the beauty of the *volgare*, heretofore unrecognized, Dante reverts to the “fervid and passionate” style of the earlier work. The *volgare* enjoys a corresponding elevation of its stature. When contrasted to Latin, it was inferior and contemptibly female; but in I.x, it has become a *donna*, not a mere *femina*, one of “coloro che sono gentili e non sono pure femine,” (VN 10.12) (“those who are noble and are not just women”).

If we contrast the passage from *Convivio* I.x above, with the *Vita Nuova*'s account of Dante's expansion of the purpose of the *stile de la loda*, from simply praising the lady to publicizing the nature of the *gentilissima* to those who have never seen her, a number of parallels emerge:

Io dico che ella si mostrava sì gentile e sì piena di tutti li piaceri, che quelli che la miravano comprendeano in loro una dolcezza onesta e soave tanto, che ridire no.llo sapeano; né alcuno era lo quale potesse mirare lei, che nel principio nol convenisse sospirare. Queste e più mirabili cose da.llei procedeano virtuosamente. Onde io pensando a.cciò, volendo ripigliare lo stilo della sua loda, propuosi di dicere parole nelle quali io desse ad intendere delle sue mirabili ed eccellenti operazioni, acciò che non pur coloro che la poteano sensibilmente vedere, ma gli altri sappiano di lei quello che le parole ne possono fare intendere. (26.3-4)

She behaved so gently and with such grace that all who saw her experienced in themselves a warm and modest charm which they could never describe afterwards. No one could look at her without sighing deeply. These and even more remarkable things proceeded from her power. Reflecting on this and wishing to return to her praises, I determined to write something describing her miraculous and excellent works, not only for those who were able to see her with their own eyes, but so that others might know of her as much as can be conveyed in words.

Dante tasks both the praise poetry and the prose of the *Convivio* with the same operation, that of revealing the true nature and powers of a lovely lady's beauty. Those who saw Beatrice experienced "remarkable things [that] proceeded from her power" ("mirabili cose che da.llei procedeano virtuosamente"); those who read the praise poems come to know (*sappiano*) her "miraculous and excellent works" by virtue of the poem. In precise parallel to the praise poetry, which reveals the effects of the *gentilissima*, the *Convivio's* prose commentary shows the reader a lady with her accidental adornments stripped away, in order to reveal her true beauty and her power ("però che si vedrà la sua vertù," l.x.11). The prose becomes the vehicle for the revelation of the "sweetest and most exquisite beauty" ("dolcissima and amabilissima bellezza") of the vernacular, as the poetry was for the revelation of Beatrice's marvelous effect. While the *Convivio* passage begins with the intention of showing how Latin-like the *volgare* can be, it moves to the question of the beauty of language/ladies and discusses qualities entirely different from those prized in Latin. This declaration of authorial intention defines a superlatively lyric beauty for the

vernacular. Dante intends to create a kind of revelatory prose for the *volgare* as he had defined a revelatory praise poetry for Beatrice.

In the earlier chapter's comparison of the languages, Dante imbues Latin with the excellent epic masculinity he intends the *Convivio* to generate for himself. *Convivio* I.v comprises a small treatise on Latin's proper dominance, constructing it as a masculine language in its inherent dominance, in its greater *virtù* and nobility, and in its rationally appreciated, well-proportioned beauty; furthermore, Dante embodies Latin as a burly warrior in the examples he supplies to support his definitions. These qualities are all defined in contrast to an inconstant, weaker, pleasure-led feminine *volgare*. The vernacular remains feminine in I.x-xiii, but Dante uses a courtly gender scheme to define its femininity; whereas Latin was the masculine element in the gender pairing in the epic scheme of I.v, here the author assumes the masculine role in the courtly gender pairing. Just as Dante has used human relationships and social status to rank and assess the two languages, and has imposed a human relationship on them allegorically (as when he states that Latin doesn't know the *volgare's* friends), so he projects himself in a relationship with this feminine *volgare* in which he is its champion and defender.

Dante concludes chapter xi of Book I with a summation of “li abominevoli cattivi d’Italia che hanno a vile questo prezioso volgare, lo quale, s’è vile in alcuna [cosa], non è se non in quanto elli suona nella bocca meretrice di questi adulteri” (“the detestable wretches of Italy who despise this precious vernacular, which, if it is base in anything, is base only insofar as it issues from the meretricious lips of these adulterers”); he posits a relationship of these *litterati* to the language, as of husband to wife; and the comportment of the male



*litterato* to the *volgare* implicates the *litterato*'s honor. Dante, by contrast, as a writer who, far from defaming the vernacular, defends and exalts it, assumes the role of guardian of its honor. He depicts himself as a champion of the *volgare*, taking on and besting the vernacular's detractors by revealing the vileness of their motives:

A perpetuale infamia a depressione de li malvagi uomini d'Italia, che commendano lo volgare altrui e lo loro proprio dispregiano, dico che la loro mossa viene da cinque abominevoli cagioni. La prima è cecitade di discrezione; la seconda, maliziata escusazione; la terza, cupidità di vanagloria; la quarta, argomento d'invidia; la quinta e ultima, viltà d'animo, cioè pusillanimità. (1.xi.1-2)

To the perpetual disgrace and humiliation of those contemptible men of Italy who praise the vernacular of others and disparage their own, I say that their impulse arises from five detestable causes. The first is blindness in discernment; the second, disingenuous excusing; the third, desire for glory; the fourth, reasoning prompted by envy; the fifth and last, baseness of mind, that is, pusillanimity.

I.xi is a miniature linguistic *Inferno*, in which Dante catalogues the offenders who do not love the vernacular properly and shames them. In the remaining chapters of the first treatise, xii and xiii, following his dismissal of the adulterers who despise Italian speech, Dante uses his *auctores*' definitions of friendship ("Tullio in quello De Amicitia, non discordando da la sentenza del Filosofo aperta ne l'ottavo e nel nono de l'Etica", I.xii.3), to describe his love for the *volgare*. The bulk of the two chapters discusses love in Ciceronian

terms, treating the friendship between men, and does not include what we would term romantic love. Dante's exploration of his past and his present with the *volgare* is imagined and discussed as a love of friends, not a lyric love, in the rest of the chapter.

But at the outset of the chapter, in I.xii.1-2, Dante uses imagery which suggests that his love for the vernacular is just the kind of passionate fervor he associated with his youth in I.i.18. In these commae, the *volgare* is invariably referred to in the feminine: "la mia loquela", "quella", "lei". The initial commae of the chapter, in which Dante embarks on a demonstration of the perfection of his love for the vernacular, treat his past work, i.e., his lyric poems, as manifest evidence of that love, and use lyric imagery which encodes romantic passion to indicate the self-evidence of his love for the vernacular. In this image, the love for the vernacular cannot be absorbed by the reader as the genial bond enjoyed by Aristotle or Cicero's benefactor and benefactee. Rather, the imagery in which the love for the language is indicated to be self-evident, is the same imagery that demonstrates love in the poems, leaving the reader of the *Convivio* - whom Dante clearly expects to be familiar with the *Vita Nuova* - with the impression that the love he feels for the language approaches lyric passion or adoration.

Se manifestamente per le finestre d'una casa uscisse fiamma di fuoco, e alcuno dimandasse se là dentro fosse il fuoco, e un altro rispondesse a lui di sì, non saprei bene giudicare qual di costoro fosse da schernire di più. E non altrimenti sarebbe fatta la dimanda e la risposta di colui e di me, che mi domandasse se amore a la mia loquela propria è in me e io li rispondessi di sì, appresso le sue proposte ragioni. (I.xii.1)

If flames of fire were seen issuing from the windows of a house, and someone asked if there were a fire within, and another answered in the affirmative, I would not be able to judge easily which of the two was more deserving of ridicule. No different would be the question and answer if someone asked me whether love for my native tongue resides in me and I replied in the affirmative, for the reasons set forth above.

What is the utterly self-evident proof of Dante's love of the vernacular? He can only be talking about his lyrics. On one level, the image functions to demonstrate that self-evident truths require no further explanation in language. On a second level, Dante has figured his past work in imagery drawn from love lyric, the extremely common image of fire. With insistent frequency flames figure erotic passion in the lyric tradition, as the flames on the terrace of the lustful in *Purgatory XXV* testify, where "il fuoco della passione d'amore che bruciò in vita queste anime è ora la loro pena."<sup>106</sup> *Foco* figures regularly in Dante's lyrics, as does *fiamma*, *ardor* and the verbs *infiammare* and *ardere*. Flame imagery occurs in both formulaic and intricate, original constructions in poems that precede the *Convivio* ("Deh, Violetta, che in ombra d'Amore;" "Lo doloroso amor che mi conduce;" "Al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d'ombra;" "Tre donne intorno al cor mi sono venute;" "Amor, da che convien pur ch'io mi doglia"). These poems all contain images of fire to describe the experience of desire, and Dante uses the imagery in *Purgatory*, as noted above, and even in *Paradiso XXVI*:

Io dissi: "Al suo piacer e tosto e tardo  
vegna rimedio a li occhi, che fuor porte

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<sup>106</sup> Dante Alighieri 1994, 756.

quand'ella entrò col foco ond'io sempre ardo." (13-15)

I said: "As pleases her, may solace-sooner  
or later-reach these eyes, her gates when she  
brought me the fire with which I always burn.

Dante relies on this imagery to compass the nature of passionate love throughout his career. The flames, then, visibly emerging from the windows of the house, demonstrate the obviousness of Dante's love for his language; they also, and not coincidentally, present that evidence in the imagery that is such an obvious depiction of the sensations of passionate love that it is the emblematic contrapasso for lustful love poets in *Purgatory XXVI*.

The burning house is a triple metaphor: the flames represent the obviousness of observable phenomena; they also correspond to Dante's love for his language; and the flaming house altogether, inasmuch as it is the obvious evidence of that love, seems to stand for Dante's earlier body of work, written in his fervid and passionate salad days. In this particular version of the familiar experience of surveying Dante's past work with him, and receiving instruction on how to interpret it, he tells the reader quite sharply that he or she is an idiot if she reads his work and yet requires confirmation of his love for the vernacular.

The reader, hoping to avoid being scorned by her prickly author, accepts the image of the flames emerging from the house as akin to unquestionable evidence of Dante's *perfettissimo amore* for the vernacular. Let us look more closely at this particular flame-based image of passion. Both elements – flames and house – figure in images that condense love doctrine into metaphor in the early lyrics. In "Amor e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa," Dante defines the heart as love's house: "Falli natura quand'è amorosa/Amore per sire e 'l cor per

sua magione”(5-6). Likewise, in “A ciascun’alma presa e gentil core” Dante’s flaming heart appears in the hand of cheerful Love, who feeds it to his lady. In this image of the self-evident nature of Dante’s love for his language, he constructs an image of that love using lyric materials. The image of the flaming house inaugurates the chapter in a lyric register of passion. This is not just any house in flames; it is love’s house, the heart.

The *Convivio*’s collocation of Latin over the vernacular in a language hierarchy results from Dante’s having placed the languages within an *Aeneid*-based gender binary. He constructs a Latin which reflects the epic masculinity he writes the treatise to attain. This continent, dominant vision of masculinity defines itself against an unstable, weaker, and irrational subject feminine, in an opposition we can summarize as *virtù* and *passione*. Without an appreciation for the gender opposition that structures the language hierarchy in the *Convivio*, critics have struggled to evaluate and understand Dante’s ranking Latin above the *volgare*, and especially his postulation of a relationship of dominance and subjection between the languages. Gender is fundamental to the relationship Dante posits between the languages, and between himself and the *volgare*. In discussing the vernacular and his feelings for it, Dante resumes the courtly gender scheme of his earlier poetry, in which the masculine is defined against, not an inferior feminine, but an exalted one. When Dante discusses his relationship with the vernacular in *Convivio* I.x, he no longer evaluates the language in comparison with a masculine Latin. While he retains the language/gender binary as he had set it up in I.v, so that the vernacular remains feminine, he leaves behind the classical construction of the feminine, by which the vernacular is lesser, unstable, and ignoble. Dante adopts a *stil novo* vocabulary to construct the vernacular as a lyric beloved:

exalted, inspiring, and possessed of a beauty which Dante works to reveal in its essential form. He promises the reader a revelation by which he or she will know the fundamental beauty of the *volgare*, echoing the dynamics of the *stile de la loda*. Likewise, in his description of his love for the vernacular, Dante assumes not the temperate *Aeneid*-based masculinity of I.i.18, but a courtly masculinity, marked by subjection to love, rather than the rejection of passion. The *De vulgari eloquentia*'s reversal of the language hierarchy found in the *Convivio* requires Dante to regender the vernacular as masculine, a purpose he writes the work to achieve, I will argue in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

### A Masculine Vernacular: the *Vulgare Illustre* and its Poets

The ranking of the vernacular as nobler than Latin in the *De vulgare eloquentia* has generated much puzzlement, and a number of critical approaches to understanding Dante's reversal of his hierarchy of the languages in the *Convivio*. In this chapter I use my conception of Dante's construction of language as gendered to offer a reading of the *De vulgari eloquentia* in which I argue that his reversal of the ranking of the two languages occurs in a gendered context resulting from the reader he creates and addresses. The "presence" of a high-status male reader who perceives work in the vernacular as less ideally masculine than work in the *gramatica* places Dante's authorial prestige at risk. In consequence, to construct an ideal masculinity for poets in the vernacular, he reverses the feminine gender he had previously constructed for the vernacular. I argue that in inventing and defining a nobler vernacular, he makes it a masculine language, reversing his reader's gender associations with the *gramatica* and the *vulgare*. The treatise creates a relationship between the author and reader of shared, exclusive masculine language-based privilege, constituted by contrast with lesser and effeminate speakers; at the treatise's beginning this relationship is based on the author and reader's knowledge of Latin; but as it

progresses the language that constitutes the masculine superiority they share switches from Latin to the excellent vernacular.

In this chapter I present a reading of the *De vulgari eloquentia* that hinges on the reader Dante constructs, and his relationship to that reader. Dante twice apostrophizes his *lector* in the first book of the *De vulgari eloquentia*; by fleshing out the picture of the reader he creates<sup>107</sup> and addresses, I argue, we can more clearly see the attitudes he is writing against, and the strategies he employs to counter them. We have a record of the attitudes of a later reader of Dante, Giovanni del Virgilio, who provides us with a profile of the reader Dante likely had in mind in writing the treatise: a member of the Bolognese university milieu.<sup>108</sup> Men who had received an extensive education were, paradoxically, both the only readers who would be able to read and follow the treatise, and those who would be least inclined to accept Dante's evaluation of the vernacular as the nobler language. Giovanni del Virgilio's scorn for the *vulgare* is representative of widespread, axiomatic attitudes about the intersection of language, masculine prestige, and self-identity, and his criticisms of poetry in the vernacular permit us to draw a number of conclusions about Dante's fictional reader in the *De vulgari eloquentia*. With these insights

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<sup>107</sup> "The writer's audience is always a fiction. The historian, the scholar or scientist, and the simple letter writer all fictionalize their audiences, casting them in a made-up role, and calling on them to play the role assigned." Walter J. Ong, quoted in Lansing 17.

<sup>108</sup> "Tuttavia, poiche è postulabile un rapporto, verosimilmente non labile e proprio di quegli anni, con la cultura universitaria bolognese, sembra legittimo pensare che tra le molle che hanno spinto l'Alighieri alla composizione del *De vulgari* ci sia stata l'intenzione agonistica di presentarsi e misurarsi ad essa sul suo terreno favorito, la retorica, e con le carte in regola per quell'ambiente: dunque in gramatica, ciò che poteva rendere più penetrante, e non esposta all'accusa di ignoranza professionale, la battaglia per il volgare..." Mengaldo 64.



into the *lector's* assumptions, we can see how the gaze of the reader dictates and conditions the arguments mustered in the *De vulgari eloquentia*.

The treatise creates the figures of two men, the author and the *lector*, and establishes a relationship of shared exclusive linguistic prestige between them. Together they contemplate the nature of language and pass on to consider different dialects and the speakers of them, assessing their linguistic and moral stature from a standpoint of shared privilege. A final category of male language users emerges in Dante's frequent references to poets in the vernacular, who use the language considered less prestigious in the linguistic hierarchy that the treatise works to overturn. The poet in the vernacular does not share the author's and *lector's* privilege; his work in the less prestigious tongue places his writing at risk of being seen as lesser by the *lector*, as we see in Giovanni del Virgilio's first missive to Dante:

Pieridium vox alma, novis qui cantibus orbem / mulces letifluum...

(1-2)

tanta quid heu semper jactabis seria vulgo  
 et nos pallentes nihil ex te vate legemus?  
 Ante quidem cythara pandum delphina movebis,  
 Davus et ambiguae Sphingos probemata solvet,  
 Tartareum praeceps quam gens idiota figuret  
 et secreta poli vix exspherata Platoni:  
 quae tamen in triviis nunquam digesta coaxat  
 comicomus nebulo qui Flaccum pelleret orbe.  
 'Non loquor his, immo studio callentibus,' inquis.  
 Carmine sed laico! clerus vulgaria temnit  
 etsi non varient, quum sint idiomata mille;  
 praeterea nullus quos inter es agmine sextus  
 nec quem consequeris caelo sermone forensi  
 descripsit...

(6-19)

Nec margaritas profliga prodigus apris  
 nec preme castalias indigna veste sorores;  
 at precor ora cie quae te distinguere possint,  
 carmine vatisono sorti communis utrique.

(21-24)

(Auspicious voice singing from Helicon,  
 that with new songs enchant the mortal sphere,  
 ...Alas, why should you, like a prodigal,  
 lavish your wisdom on the multitude,  
 while meager scholars pine without a taste from your prophetic store?  
 A common man will draw the curving dolphins to his lyre,  
 A simpleton resolve the riddling sphinx,  
 before untutored minds will comprehend  
 the wisdom latent in tartarean steeps  
 or realms of heaven exceeding Plato's guess.  
 Of these the harlequin sometimes will prate  
 at village fairs before the gaping hinds - a fool to banish Horace from the  
 world -  
 yet never understood. you will reply,  
 "My song is not for them, but those who can  
 explore the depths of life." - In vulgar speech!  
 The wise would turn from babble of the squares,  
 though all the thousand dialects were one.  
 That company, of whom you are the sixth,  
 he whom you joined in his ascent to heaven,  
 sang not in language of the market place.  
 [...]  
 Then, noblest judge of poets, I would plead,  
 if you allow brief audience for my plea:  
 scatter not heedlessly your pearls to swine,  
 nor clothe the Muses in unworthy rags;  
 but sing, in numbers that may bring you fame,  
 prophetic verse - a poet for the world.)<sup>109</sup>

These opening lines of del Virgilio's first epistle to Dante set forth the disdainful attitude of a Latinate reader toward writing in the vernacular. Such works reach a vast, uncultivated audience, "vulgo", "gens idiota" (l. 10) who cannot grasp elevated concepts. The unfitness of such an audience, or of such a reciter (the *nebulo* who croaks on the corners) for elevated themes, is rehearsed in subsequent images of the epistle: the pearls offered to swine, the rags unworthy of the muses. Giovanni del Virgilio's epistle begins by defining

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<sup>109</sup> This and subsequent translations of the Eclogues by Brewer in Dante Alighieri 1927.

two opposed classes of reader, the foolish and unworthy common people, “vulgo”, and the dignified, intellectually sophisticated, and most importantly, Latinate, scholars, “nos pallentes”. The commoners cannot understand serious themes or literary images, yet they have been given access to them by the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*; now these themes are made ridiculous by being repeated by buffoons such as the “paltry fellow” of line 13. Giovanni del Virgilio, following this portrait of the idiots who have access to Dante’s work, courteously assumes, for the sake of Dante’s dignity, that Dante doesn’t intend to address such ignorant people; he assigns him an evasive response: “non loquor his,’ inquis” (l. 14) (“My song is not for them”). His indignation at the work’s having been written in the vernacular emerges in his exclamation in the following line: “Carmines sed laico!” Del Virgilio describes the vernaculars as inherently contemptible, even if they weren’t various and non-universal: “clerus vulgaria temnit/etsi non varient, quum sunt idiomata mille.” Finally, he reminds Dante that none of his authors, the great poets of antiquity, wrote in the language “of the market place”: “praeterea nullus quos inter es agmine sextus/nec quem consequeris caelo sermone forensi.”

While the letter is meant to be humorous, the conviction that only the *gramatica* is a worthy language for ambitious poetry, and that work in a vernacular is degraded by the language it is composed in, is a summation of the attitude that the younger Dante, writing the *De vulgari eloquentia*, expected to find in his lector. In his response to del Virgilio, written some fifteen years after the composition of the *De vulgari eloquentia*, we see that Dante has renegotiated his relationship to the vernacular and to the authoritative cultural figures of his time. No longer vulnerable to criticism of his work based on the language he

has elected to use, Dante summarizes this set of assumptions in a way that captures the attitudes he was battling in his earlier project of valorizing the *vulgare* to a Latinate elite:

‘Comica nonne vides ipsum reprehendere verba,  
 tum quia femineo resonant ut trita labello  
 tum quia Castalias pudet acceptare sorores?’ (First Eclogue, ll. 52-53).

Look here, how he contemns the native speech

As trite chatter of women in the square,

Dress which the sacred muses would despise.

Dante restates here the association of the vernacular with women; the *locus comunis* of the triviality of women’s speech; and the consequent unfitness of the vernacular for poetry. His use of *pudet* (“it makes [them] ashamed”) to describe vernacular verse’s affect on the Muses compounds the shameful, feminine nature of the vernacular in this gentle lampoon of the attitudes of learned and honorable men toward the *vulgare*.

The ridiculousness of women’s speech, its unworthiness to be acknowledged by grave and intelligent men, recurs frequently in medieval rhetorical treatises. We can cite Brunetto Latini’s identification of lowly speech with women in his *Tresor*: “la comune parleur des homes ki sont sans art et sans mestrie, et ce soit loins de nous et remaigne a la nichete des femes et du menu peuple” (III.iv.2) (“the common way of speaking of men, which is without art and without instruction; let this stay far from us, appropriate only for the silliness of women and unimportant people”).<sup>110</sup> Boccaccio gives his reader the

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<sup>110</sup> Trans. Barrette and Baldwin 284.

measure of Dante's immoderate political passion by describing him as taking seriously even the statements of women and children:

E quello di che io più mi vergogno, in servizio della sua memoria, è, che pubblicissima cosa è, in Romagna ogni femminella ogni picciol fanciullo ragionando di parte, e dannante la ghibellina, l'arebbe a tanta insania mosso che a gittare le pietre l'arebbe condotto, non avendo taciuto; e con questa animosità si visse insino alla morte sua. Certo io mi vergogno di dovere con alcuno difetto maculare la fama di cotanto uomo.<sup>111</sup>

And what I feel most ashamed about, in the service of his memory, is, that it is very widely known that in Romagna every humble woman every small child speaking of political parties, and condemning the Ghibellines, would move him to such madness that they would have brought him to the point of throwing stones if they had continued speaking; and with such animosity he lived until death. Most assuredly I am ashamed to have to sully the renown of such a man with a single defect.

While Boccaccio's focus is the unfitness of fervent party loyalty to the character of a great man, his account derives its rhetorical force from the fact that Dante's interlocutors are humble women and small children. Dante's impassioned adherence to his party appears ridiculous here precisely because he will even stoop to get upset over what lower class women have to say on the subject. So unworthy is this behavior of the honor of a great man that Boccaccio tells us twice over he is ashamed to record it. The consensus among

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<sup>111</sup> Boccaccio stresses the paltry stature of these interlocutors, not just *femmine* but *femminelle*.

learned men, a category to which the reader Dante creates in the *De vulgari eloquentia* belongs, is clear: women's<sup>112</sup> speech is beneath our notice. In this rhetorical division of honor and shame, men can lose honor by responding to women's speech, or by talking like women.<sup>113</sup> A poet who wants authoritative status and writes in the feminized of the two languages at his command faces a grave problem. How can a writer working in the language associated with women avoid the contempt of elite, Latinate men?

That Dante's intention is to address only such men in the *De vulgari eloquentia* is clear from his language choice. To read the *De vulgari eloquentia* as simply an exploration of Dante's theory of language, without recognizing that the choice to write it in Latin meant also a choice to address a certain group of men, means we miss the centrality of gender to this consideration of language. The treatise works to establish a specifically masculine prestige for the figure of the man who uses the vernacular. Dante manipulates the vernacular's association with women, and its consequent degraded status in the eyes of his Latinate reader, in order to redeem both poetry and poets in the *vulgare* from the taint of addressing lowly people and using the tongue feminized by its speakers, its variable dispersivity, and its lesser claim to stability and reason. A number of strategies underlie the project of redeeming the vernacular poet from the denigration of the *lector*; this chapter will examine them.

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<sup>112</sup> Women's speech; not that of ladies.

<sup>113</sup> "they [women] are excluded a priori, so to speak, in the name of the (tacit) principle of equality in honor, according to which the challenge, because it honors the recipient, is valid only if it is addressed to a man (as opposed to a woman), and a man of honor, capable of providing a riposte which, inasmuch as it too contains a recognition, bestows honor." Bourdieu 49.

The work of the *De vulgari eloquentia* is to establish that the language of illiterates, children, and women, is nobler than the language of reasoning adult men. In Dante's time grammar instruction was bundled with moral precepts meant to generate morally regulated men. His reader perceives the vernacular as lesser in prestige, not only because it was less exclusive, but also because those who did not know grammar had not been taught the ethos of classical masculine continence that was incorporated into grammar lessons; while those who did know Latin, had been taught to look down on the moral weakness of those who did not.<sup>114</sup>

In order to compel the *lector's* respect for the poet in the vernacular, Dante redefines the *vulgare* to have a masculine, not a feminine, resonance; creates numerous parallels between the figure of Adam, and Adam's language use, and the figure of the poet, to give the poet an ideally masculine stature; and creates feminized and degraded users of the *vulgare* as foils which both ennoble and make markedly masculine the ideal vernacular speech of Adam and the poet. Dante recreates the division of prestige/masculinity and triviality/femininity between the *gramatica* and the *vulgare*; he does so with respect to the *vulgare*, in a way that has consequences not only for the vernacular poet's language use, but also for his moral stature, since "nella cultura medievale, lingua, letteratura, etica facevano tutt'uno"<sup>115</sup> ("In medieval culture, language, literature, and ethics were one"). Instead of the standing pair of *gramatica* and *vulgare*, in which prestige, reason, and masculinity are greater in the *gramatica*, he creates a binary of

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<sup>114</sup> cf Desmond 1996, Gehl 1993.

<sup>115</sup> Baranski 1996, 45

excellent vernacular use opposed to degraded vernacular use, in which prestige, reason, and masculinity are rooted in the excellent term; while he defines the degraded vernacular use, as not only aesthetically and morally lesser, but also as feminine.

Before proceeding to look at Dante's strategies for regendering the vernacular, let us first consider the *De vulgari eloquentia's* representation of the disastrous consequences, for the male speaker, of using the wrong kind of language. In *De vulgari eloquentia* I.xiv Dante describes two Italian dialects with reference to the impact they have on listeners. The listener to whom he recounts the utterances of the two speakers is not an unmarked anonymous person, but rather his *lector*, a Latin literate, elite male reader.

Romandiolam igitur ingredientes, dicimus nos duo in Latio invenisse vulgaria quibusdam convenientis contrariis alternata. Quorum unum in tantum muliebre videtur propter vocabulorum et prolationis mollitiem quod virum, etiam si viriliter sonet, feminam tamen facit esse credendum (I xiv 2)....Est et aliud, sicut dictum est, adeo vocabulis accentibusque yrsutum et yspidum quod propter sui rudem asperitatem mulierem loquentem non solum disternat, sed esse virum dubitares, lector. (I.xiv.4)

Entering the Romagna, I note that I have found two dialects in Italy with perfectly contrary features. One of them seems so feminine because of softness in vocabulary and pronunciation, that a man, even with a masculine voice, is mistaken for a woman when he speaks it....And there is another dialect, as I have said, which is so harsh and hairy in words and accents that by



its roughness it not only disfigures a woman's speech, but, reader, you would think her a man.<sup>116</sup>

In this passage of the *De vulgari eloquentia*, we see that gender undergirds Dante's conception of language, and not solely inasmuch as the elite, demarcated by gender, bestow prestige on their language and scorn on that of lower-ranking people. Rather, language itself has gender. These two dialects are depicted as male and female, with secondary sex characteristics: one dialect is womanly and soft (*muliebre...mollitiem*), the other is hairy and rough (*yrsutum, yspidum*).<sup>117</sup> And not only do these dialects have gender themselves, they possess a gendering force which overrides biological sex. In Dante's scheme, male language imposes maleness, and female language, femaleness, on the speaker, whatever his or her sex.

The author draws his reader into particularly close rapport to consider these speakers who are cross-gendered by the language they use. Here we find one of only two direct apostrophes to the *lector* in Book I.<sup>118</sup> In the shift from describing the speakers, to defining his *lector's* response, the author steps out of his descriptive and analytical role

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<sup>116</sup> This and all following translations of the *De vulgari eloquentia* from Shapiro 1990.

<sup>117</sup> In *De vulgari eloquentia* II. vii the masculine and urban words include these two categories, there listed as *yrsuta* and *reburra*. In this chapter of the second book the gendered quality of language is again under scrutiny with reference to phonetic qualities: infantile words are simple and feminine words are soft; while manly words have less-essentialized scope: they are defined by social status, belonging either to the rustic or urban categories. Cestaro, in his clever reading of this passage, notes that the words worth putting in poetry possess a linear adult masculinity.

<sup>118</sup> I follow Mengaldo's construction of this sentence as *dubitares, lector* rather than *dubitaret doctor*; it is not clear why a woman who speaks with "masculine" roughness would sound like a man to a well-instructed man, but not to other people.

into a direct rapport of shared Latinate masculine privilege. The men rendered female, and the women rendered male, by their speech present a moment which the author exploits to engineer a heightened moment of mutual and exclusive honorable manhood with his reader. From their honored and honorable language and gender privilege - from the standpoint of being the right kind of men - they contemplate speakers who are at the exact other end of the language/honor spectrum. In constructing these contemptible others, Dante also creates a foil by contrast with which he affirms himself and his reader as ideally masculine and possessing an ideally masculine language.

These cross-gendering dialects present the intersection of language and gender in a way that reveals precisely what is at stake for Dante in composing philosophical and ethical verse in the vernacular. The men of the Romagna are not only rendered virtually female by their speech; they are also morally debased by their emasculating dialect. Let us look more closely at the case of the men who are feminized by their speech, and the *lector's* and author's shared contempt for them. I will later argue that this Romagnole fop offers an extreme, worst case of how the figure of the vernacular poet - the man who writes in the feminine language - is viewed by the Latin-literate, elite *lector*.

In considering the two vernaculars with "perfectly contrary features" (*convenientiis contrariis*), Dante assesses their accents and the sound of their words (*prolatio, vocabulum, accentus*). Romagnole, because of its softness (*mollitia*), makes a man speaking it seem like a woman, and Brescian/Veronese/Vicentine, because of its rough harshness (*rudis asperitas*), makes a woman seem to be a man. At first glance, it would seem that the gendering force of these dialects arises from their phonetic qualities, and

that Dante's concern here is simply spoken language and its sounds, the sensory signs (*signum et sensuale*) he defined in I.iii. When he considers specific examples of the expressions typical of the Romagnole dialect, however, his selections suggest that the gendering power of the languages extends beyond their sounds to affect the moral quality of their speakers. Of the effeminate dialect (*unum in tantum muliebre*) of the Romagnoles, he writes "Flattering, they say 'my eye' and 'my heart'" (I.xiv.3) "*oclo meo et corada mea proferunt blandientes*". The feminine aspect of this dialect extends beyond its soft sounds into the content of men's speech; it conditions the character of its male speakers.<sup>119</sup> Dante supplies the men of Forli and the Romagna a degrading motivation for their effeminate utterances. They are ingratiating flatterers, and they address those they flatter with endearments, as if enamored. Note as well that they are sexualized; they are speaking as if in love. The Romagnole men's speech degrades them doubly, since it not only makes them seem like women, but the feminine softness with which they speak also extends to their character: the effeminacy of their speech imposes a moral effeminacy. Medieval rhetoric connects morality and language; this is not unique to Dante; but it is significant that he depicts these men as being not simply morally frail, but specifically as being flatterers.

Flattery had a feminine flavor for Dante and his peers; Dante's use of Thaïs as the emblematic case of it in *Inferno XVIII* recapitulates a medieval tradition in which she

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<sup>119</sup> Mengaldo notes the "parallelismo tra bassezza o limitatezza intellettuale e morale, e turpitudine o grossolanità linguistica" which he finds to be "chiaramente formulato nel caso dei romani e direi anche dei romagnoli," 95.

represented all flatterers “per antonomasia”.<sup>120</sup> Thaïs, and Dante’s depiction of her in *Inferno*, is significant to our case. The Romagnole men flatter in just her register, pretending to affection they do not feel. Additionally, the presentation of Thaïs parallels that of the *romagnoli*. She does not herself speak in the canto; her contemptibly false, flattering lie is recounted by the classical author Virgil to his former reader and current interlocutor, Dante. This moment of two men united by shared privilege, contemplating an outsider to that privilege, echoes perfectly the relationship between author and *lector* that frames the description of the cross-gendered speakers in the *De vulgari eloquentia*. In the treatise the men are united by masculine language privilege; in *Inferno* they enjoy the privilege of observers who stand outside the damnation and punishments they contemplate. The two observers affirm their exclusive stature in a relationship of shared prestige set up by contrast with the outsider they look at and define. The reader and author of the *De vulgari eloquentia* are constructed as properly male in the treatise’s conflated language/gender scheme; the direct address to the reader cements the shared privilege which the treatise constructs against the grotesquely cross-gendered speakers. Virgil and Dante’s moment of contemplating Thaïs’ foul punishment and her fraudulent, degraded language use generates the same relationship, of men united in exclusive prestige by contrast with a lesser outsider to that prestige. Virgil translates the brief lines of Terence (familiar to Dante and his Latinate readers from the *De amicitia*’s description of adulation), into the vernacular, reproducing the *De vulgari eloquentia*’s switch of the language underlying shared exclusive masculine prestige from the *gramatica* to the

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<sup>120</sup> Padoan 88.

*vulgare*. Virgil and Dante's moment in Hell echoes that in which schoolboys, newly introduced to the Latin language and encountering their first Latin author, would read with disdain the ingratiating lies of Thaïs. Virgil recounts Thaïs' false vow of love in a dialogue which is recognizably taken from Cicero's *De Amicitia*, but is undoubtedly also informed by the story "Thaïs and the Youth" in the widely diffused *Liber Esopi* used as an introductory grammar text. Dante most likely had contemplated Thaïs as a schoolboy.<sup>121</sup> Paul F. Gehl has summarized her emblematic role in the grammar curriculum, describing her as "a universal figure of woman's idle and evil speech."<sup>122</sup> He describes a number of ways in which Thaïs was important to the young Latin student's absorption of the ethos of masculine excellence and morality through the medium of grammar instruction. The Aesop figured at the outset of the curriculum, where it "could symbolize the break with the merely female and merely popular culture in an initiatory sense for young boys." He adds that "the widely diffused story 'Thaïs and the Youth' is virtually the only one [in the *Liber Esopi*] to include a woman in anything approaching a speaking role."<sup>123</sup> In characterizing the men of the Romagna as flatterers, then, Dante connects them, on the basis of the schoolboy experiences he and his *lector* share, to the false and immoral character attributed to women's speech in the Latin curriculum.

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<sup>121</sup> "Dante probabilmente imparò a scrivere e a legger latino anche su questo testo; certamente lo ebbe familiare: queste favole sono infatti citate ben due volte, nel *Convivio* e nell'*Inferno*." Padoan 86.

<sup>122</sup> Gehl 129.

<sup>123</sup> Idem.

The moral debasement of flatterers in *Inferno* XVIII, since they are associated with Thaïs, the flattering prostitute, has a feminine and sexualized valence. Thaïs' punishment in *Inferno*, so especially foul, is considered to be derived from scripture on prostitutes and fornicating women.<sup>124</sup> Her flattery and her sexual incontinence seem to be equated in the canto, into a single shame; commentators describe the frequent linking of adulation and prostitution in both classical and biblical sources.<sup>125</sup> The ordure in which she is sunk and with which she is smeared reflects, as commentators have noted,<sup>126</sup> classical equation of the slippery rhetoric of flattery, figured as oil (“oleum”), with excrement (“stercor”); but the emphasis on her body invites us to also contemplate her shameful sexual incontinence.<sup>127</sup> The lines that describe her depict her entire body.

Appresso ciò lo duca “Fa che pinghe”

mi disse “il viso un poco più avante,

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<sup>124</sup> Pietro di Dante: “Ac etiam in meretricibus in quibus talle vicium adulandi valde viget, ideo sub eodem sensu dicitur in Ecclesiastico capitulo VIII sic: omnis mulier que fornicaria est quasi stercus in via conculcabitur; ut conculcat hic author sua fictione in dicto stercore umbram istius Taide meretricis.” 2002, 208.

<sup>125</sup> “Di per se, l’affiancare nella stessa bolgia, cioè nello stesso disprezzo, adulatori e meretrici, accanto a ruffiani e seduttori, non è atto mentale così peregrino e alieno dal comune sentire dell’uomo, antico e moderno, da rendere necessaria l’ipotesi di suggestioni esterne alla fantasia del poeta: basti dire che per Quintiliano (II 15, 11) meretrices adultores corruptores fomano tutt’uno, e che i menzogneri sono affiancati ai fornicatori in più testi medievali, mentre adulazione e lussuria son assai vicine in più luoghi delle Scritture che ci risparmierebbero di addurre.” Barchiesi 165.

<sup>126</sup> For what Padoan terms “l’insistenza sul tema dell’adulazione rapportata all’oleum ed al fetor che è nel Policraticus,” v. Pezard.

<sup>127</sup> Caretti notes “l’infimo aspetto della degradazione nei gesti immondi (“...si graffia con l’ unghie merdose”) e nell’atteggiamento inverecondo (“s’accoscia”),” 605.

sì che la faccia ben con l'occhio attinghe

di quella sozza e scapigliata fante

che la si graffia con l'unghie merdose,

E or s'accoscia, e ora è in piedi stante.

Taidè è, la puttana che rispose

al drudo suo quando disse "Ho io grazie

grandi appo te?": "Anzi meravigliose!" (127-135)

At which my guide advised me: "See you thrust  
your head a little farther to the front,

so that your eyes can clearly glimpse the face

of that besmirched, bedraggled harridan

who scratches at herself with shit-filled nails,

and now she crouches, now she stands upright.

That is Thaïs, the harlot who returned

her lover's question, 'Are you very grateful

to me?' by saying, 'Yes, enormously.'"

Thaïs' agitated activity gives the reader a distinct picture of a naked, shit-smearred woman; this shaming of Thaïs is heightened by the contrast with her fellow classically-sourced sinner in the canto, Iason, whose appearance is described by Virgil in honorific terms: he is great ("grande") and has a royal appearance ("aspetto reale"). The naked, debased, discomposed, and low-class woman's body is the strongest image Dante gives the reader of the bolgia of flatterers. Thaïs' postures and gestures are indecorous to say the least;

squatting and scratching were no more a part of a refined woman's behavior in Dante's time than they are now. This visible physicality of thighs and haunches is precisely what women's conduct literature of the era urges women to avoid, prescribing small steps and forbidding sudden movements.<sup>128</sup> The degraded and sexual nature of her sin is evident, indeed, is emphasized, by the punishment. Numerous readers have noted the shaming and/or sexual associations the visibility of Thaïs' body gives rise to: Padoan suggests that her squatting and rising mimics her professional activities,<sup>129</sup> while others suggest that the sinners are themselves the source of the ordure in which they are sunk. These responses give us the measure of *Inferno* XVIII's melding of flattery with the extreme of shameful feminine behavior, prostitution. The emphasis on Thaïs as the exemplary case of flattery, and the slippage of her punishment in a sexualized direction, demonstrates flattery's degraded, sexual, and feminine resonance in the medieval moral imaginary.

That Dante uses this "universal figure of women's idle and evil speech" to represent flattery does not mean he depicts it as a sin committed only by women; Alessio Interminelli is also described as one of the sinners in the *bolgia*. But Thaïs' emblematic role in medieval morality is affirmed in *Inferno* XVIII, as Dante makes her the concluding sinner of the *bolgia*. Moreover, her sinning utterance is repeated in dialogue, giving it a powerful dramatic impact; Alessio Interminelli's flattery is referred to but not represented. Thaïs, and her shamed, fornicating, female body, is the representative case of flattery in Dante's *Commedia*.

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<sup>128</sup> Barberino 45.

<sup>129</sup> "come già nel suo turpe mestiere, ora si accoscia ora si alza," Padoan 89.



If we return from this perusal of Dante's later depiction of a flattering female, to his address to his *lector* on the men of the Romagna, we can more clearly see how the softness of their speech, and their consequent moral softness, degrades them. He invites his *lector*, in a moment of shared elite privilege, to consider these effeminate men and their degraded moral stature. These flattering men who proffer endearments indiscriminately assume not just the indignity we find later in the male flatterer Alessio Interminelli, but also the shameful sexual/romantic theme of the female flatterer, Thaïs. Speaking like a woman not only makes them sound like women; it makes them act like women, evincing morally lesser comportment of a particularly shameful, sexualized kind, and deprives them of the masculine moral probity the *lector* absorbed along with his grammar lessons. Dante's depiction of these contemptible Romagnoli demonstrates the disastrous potential consequences of the vernacular poet's sounding and seeming effeminate to the most culturally influential men of his day, a possibility inherent in writing in common speech which at the outset of the treatise, as we will see below, is defined for author and *lector* by its associations with the feminine.

We have seen the response of Giovanni del Virgilio to the *Commedia* and his conviction that a great author should write in the language of adult, reasoning, powerful men, and address himself exclusively to such men. In the *De vulgari eloquentia* we see the anxiety of a writer who intends to write in the vernacular, anticipating the disdain the prestigious men of his day feel in response to a man who writes in the language of commoners, illiterates, children, and, most signally, women. Men who speak an effeminate language, the Romagnole dialect, give their listeners the impression that they are women,

and speak with amorous flattery, echoing the archetype of women's false and calculating speech. In the next section I will look at Dante's strategies for regendering the vernacular in the *De vulgari eloquentia* in order to give poets in the vernacular a masculine tongue in which to write.

In the *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante overturns the linguistic hierarchy<sup>130</sup> which was rooted in the social hierarchies of his culture. Latin was more prestigious than the *vulgare*, and the distinction between those who could participate in high culture and the most prestigious professions, and those who could not, was embodied in gender difference: the vast majority of women had no Latin. As we have seen, the exclusion from Latin literacy had moral implications; in Dante's Florence, "moral instruction was not incidental to grammar. Grammar *included* morality"<sup>131</sup>, so women and children were not simply ignorant; they were morally unregulated. In his ambition to write poetry not just about love but also about virtue in the common and feminine tongue, rather than the exclusively masculine, regulated, universal, and prestigious language, Dante risks losing the respect of the elite Latinate reader. *De vulgari eloquentia* I.xiv presents, on the reduced scale of the discussion of the dialect of the Romagna, the looming possibility of being feminized by using the relatively feminine language, along with the consequent loss of moral stature for the relatively feminized male speaker. The men of Forli and the Romagna are clearly contemptible, and their loss of honor in the eyes of the elite author and *lector* shows us

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<sup>130</sup> I have borrowed the term from Gehl, pp. 202 and following.

<sup>131</sup> Gehl 103.

the worst case of what a poet risks in writing a philosophically or morally ambitious work in the *vulgare*.

In this section, I examine the strategies Dante employs to neutralize the stigma of writing in the relatively “feminine” language rather than the tongue of masculine prestige and cultural influence. We have already described how Dante genders his two languages in the *Convivio*: he characterizes Latin as masculine, following its general cultural resonance as the regulated language of elite males, and accords it the greater prestige. In the *De vulgari eloquentia*, he valorizes the language which he had previously treated as – and which his culture at large saw as – the feminine term in the binary. To fortify the *vulgare*’s claim to greater nobility, in addressing an audience of inevitably male Latin users, he resorts to regendering it.

Dante’s lyric poetry and the *Convivio* were both intended for mixed-gender audiences, if we accept Dante’s genealogy for vernacular poetry in *Vita Nuova* XXV.6: “E lo primo che cominciò a dire sì come poeta volgare, si mosse però che volle fare intendere le sue parole a donna, a la quale era malagevole d’intendere li versi latini”. In the *Vita Nuova*, the imagined lady reader is construed as necessary to the poetry, which is inappropriate and deviates from its instituting principle if it concerns anything besides love (“E questo è contra coloro che rimano sopra altra materia che amorosa, con ciò sia cosa che cotale modo di parlare fosse dal principio trovato per dire d’amore,” XXV.6). At that stage of his career, Dante saw an imagined lady-reader, and a lady-centric subject matter as inseparable from poetry in the vernacular. When he works to expand the proper domain of vernacular poetry in the *Convivio* to ethical and philosophical matters, he explicitly includes

female readers in his description of his intended audience: “non solamente maschi ma femmine, che sono molti e molte in questa lingua, volgari e non litterati” (l.ix.5) (“and many other noble people, not only men but women, of which there are many in this language who know only the vernacular and are not learned”). In the *De vulgari eloquentia*, by contrast, Dante has elected to address a learned male reader.

This imagined *lector*, perhaps a scholar in Bologna, determines many elements in the examination of the two languages that follows. Dante’s chosen reader imposes on him the necessity of speaking his language to him, that is, of addressing him with the appropriate attitude of shared privilege and exclusivity, lest he should be dismissed or disdained. In defining his subject, Dante establishes the polarized positions occupied by the two languages in his reader’s mind:

vulgarem locutionem appellamus eam qua infantes assuefiunt ab assistentibus cum primitis distinguere voces incipiunt; vel, quod brevius dici potest, vulgarem locutionem asserimus quam sine omni regula nutricem imitantes accipimus. Est et inde alia locutio secundaria nobis, quam Romani gramaticam vocaverunt. Hanc quidem secundariam Greci habent et alii, sed non omnes: ad habitum vero huius pauci perveniunt, quia non nisi per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatem regulamur et doctrinamur in illa.  
(l.i.2-3)

I will proceed immediately to define the vernacular as the language which children gather from those around them when they first begin to articulate words; or more briefly, that which we learn without any rules at all by

imitating our nurses. From this we have another, secondary language which the Romans called grammar. This secondary language is also possessed by the Greeks and others, but not by all; and indeed few attain it because it is only in course of time and by assiduous study that we become schooled in its rules and art.

The opposition between the two languages is neatly set out here, and the paragraph's progress from the mother tongue to the exclusive grammar (*gramatica*) confirms the hierarchy of the languages according to his elite *lector's* conception. The *vulgare* is defined as the language learned by babies, from those dubious moral agents, nurses, and without rules, in moral and linguistic anarchy.

This definition may seem to be simply an empirical description of language acquisition: childhood absorption without rules. But the circumstances of language acquisition were not morally neutral in the Latinate culture of Dante's era. Language learning, using rules, texts, and the instruction of a professional male teacher, was privileged over language acquisition as the conduit to adult male power and probity; childhood acquisition was stigmatized for its association with women, who were not initiated into the moral standing of the Latinate. The Latin literate enjoyed higher stature precisely because Latin was taught by men, learned by rules, and taught together with the ethos of *virtus*. Grammar classes instilled the imperative to subject passion to reason, the keystone of the elite man's sense of himself as removed from and superior to those who

are lesser in reason and subject to passion, namely the feminine or childish.<sup>132</sup> The language “which we learn without any rules at all by imitating our nurses” would have a familiar and contemptible ring in the ear of Dante’s *lector*.

The subsequent characterization of Latin includes its prestige, in its classical associations with both the Romans and the Greeks, as well as its exclusivity. The few who arrive at familiarity with the *gramatica* (*ad habitum vero huius pauci perveniunt*) form a special group, and Dante’s *lector* is one of them. Author and *lector* have the shared experience of spending expanses of time (*spatium temporis*) to become, with careful, focused study, regulated and learned in the *gramatica*. This description of an experience which author and reader have in common, and which sets them apart from most of their contemporaries, reinforces the exclusive prestige of Latin while summarizing the moral superiority which supplied one element of the elite status of the Latin-literate: they have been regulated in the language, and morally regulated by the process of learning the language. In this description, Dante and his projected reader both have a privileged relationship to the two languages: they have moved beyond the language learned from nurses to the exclusive high-status language learned by rules, which regulates its learners, which requires sacrifice to acquire, and which enjoys association with high classical culture - that of Roman and Greek heroes and philosophers - rather than with nurses and children. The *lector* will comfortably recognize his sense of the hierarchy between the languages; the author has drawn his reader into a relationship of shared linguistic privilege.

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<sup>132</sup> Desmond describes the “homosocial paradigm that structures the reading experience around a normative masculinity” (84) constructed by contrast with Dido in medieval grammar classrooms.

Immediately following this passage is Dante's assertion of the greater nobility of the *vulgare*, which overturns the previous paragraph's description of the languages in terms which confirm the usual hierarchy between them. Mengaldo notes the abrupt reversal of the conventional associations with the vernacular, which usually work to make it the lesser language, in the closure of the comma with an "immediata dichiarazione, come in epigrafe, di nobiltà, una quasi preliminare risposta all'obiezione sulla natura spuria e insomma corrotta di ogni lingua materna."<sup>133</sup> Dante introduces the languages with their conventional rankings and gender associations intact, beginning the treatise by affirming the privilege he and his *lector* share. He must first establish that he is an elite man who writes from the same position of cultural hegemony as his *lector*, to be able to begin to rework the *lector's* conception of the *vulgare* as "spurious", "corrupt", and feminine, to borrow Mengaldo's handy formulation.

In the *Convivio*, in which Dante treats the *vulgare* as feminine, and leaves to the more masculine language the higher status, he discusses at great length his feelings for the *vulgare*, dwelling on the love he feels for it. In the *De vulgari eloquentia*, in which he denigrates one of the elements constituting elite men's prestige by ranking the unregulated language, learned from women and spoken by women and children along with illiterate men, above the other, he hews to an unemotive, authoritative tone and does not touch on his love for the language. He has assumed the impersonal privilege of the rational philosopher; his argument hinges on reason alone and makes no reference to his

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<sup>133</sup> "An immediate declaration, like an epigraph, of nobility, almost a preliminary response to the objection of the spurious and basically corrupt nature of all mother tongues." Mengaldo 31.

feelings. Indeed, it seems that where the languages are concerned, he has left Dido behind in Carthage, and has subjected passion to reason: as in the *Convivio* Dante reframes his lyric poems as philosophical essays, dispelling readers' belief that they were composed out of passion rather than virtue, here in the *De vulgari eloquentia* he elects to discuss the language with the emotional neutrality of scholastic argument, dismissing his previous method of describing the *vulgare* with reference to his own feelings for it, his fulfillment of its desires, and the history of his relationship with it.

This first chapter of the *Dve*, then, establishes the tensions that will structure Dante's discussion of the *vulgare*. He is writing for an elite, Latin-literate, male reader with the ultimate intention of establishing a prestigious stature for poets in the vernacular. The fact that these poets work in the *vulgare* taints them, in the eyes of the *lector*, with relative effeminacy in comparison to those who write in the universal, law-bound language of reasoning adult men. To procure the prestige of the authors in *gramatica* for poets in the vernacular, Dante must construct a new gender association for the *vulgare*. Using a number of different strategies, not least among them discussing an imaginary language, one not spoken anywhere, and making the illustrious vernacular a regulated language, like the *gramatica*, Dante dispels the feminine aspect he constructed for the *vulgare* in the *Convivio*, and its feminine resonance in medieval culture, and characterizes it as a masculine language, which shares the characteristics of the most powerful men of Dante's culture.

Let us look at how Dante redefines the *vulgare* as a masculine language following the introduction in which its non-elite community of speakers, including men of all ranks,



as well as women and children has been presented to the *lector*: “ad eam [eloquentiam] non tantum viri sed etiam mulieres et parvuli nitantur” (l.i.1) (“not only men, but also women and children strive to acquire it”). Additionally, Dante’s definition of the vernacular, as noted above, affirms its lesser stature in the language hierarchy and emphasizes its association with women.

Dante’s first sally in the treatise’s campaign to give the vernacular a masculine quality and override his *lector*’s feminine associations with it, is to create a figure of absolute masculine moral perfection, the pre-lapsarian Adam, who inaugurates vernacular speech. Just as he had seconded his reader’s association of the vernacular with unlettered women only to abruptly overturn it by declaring that the *vulgare* is nobler than Latin, Dante first proposes Eve, female and morally weak, as the initial speaker in the vernacular. Having set up this defining moment to confirm the vernacular’s association with women, he can then upend it:

Secundum quidem quod in principio Genesis loquitur, ubi de primordio mundi Sacratissima Scriptura pertractat, mulierem invenitur ante omnes fuisse locutam, scilicet presumptuosissimam Evam, cum dyabolo sciscitanti respondit: “De fructu lignorum que sunt in paradiso vescimur; de fructu vero ligni quod est in medio paradisi precepit nobis Deus ne comederemus nec tangeremus, ne forte moriamur.” Sed quanquam mulier in scriptis prius inveniatur locuta, rationabilius tamen est ut hominem prius locutum fuisse credamus, et inconvenienter putatur tam egregium humani generis actum non prius a viro quam a femina profluxisse. Rationabiliter ergo credimus ipsi

Ade prius datum fuisse loqui ab eo qui statim plasmaverat. Quid autem prius vox primi loquentis sonaverit, viro sane mentis in promptu esse non titubo ipsum fuisse quod “Deus” est, scilicet El, vel per modum interrogationis vel per modum responsionis. (l.iv.2-3)

According to the beginning of Genesis, where Holy Scripture treats of the origin of the world, a woman was the first to speak, the presumptuous Eve, when she answered the Devil’s question thus: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.” Yet although we find in Scripture that a woman spoke first, it is still more reasonable to believe that it was a man. It is improper to think that so noble a human action did not originate from a man rather than a woman. Therefore I believe rationally that speech was first given to Adam by the One who had just created him. What it was that resounded in the voice of the first speaker I do not hesitate to affirm: it must be clear immediately to anyone of sane mind that it was the word for “God,” that is, El, either as a question or as an answer.

In this passage Dante again provisionally characterizes the vernacular according to his *lector’s* sense of it as feminine, before proceeding to overturn that sense. Numerous readers and critics have noted that Dante seems to have made a mistake here; in Genesis Eve does not speak first. Cestaro’s work on this passage has described Dante’s pains to alter scripture to edit the threat to a male unitary identity of the first speech in Genesis,

Adam's "flesh of my flesh" statement, out of it.<sup>134</sup> My interest in this passage, however, is not in what deep-seated psychic anxieties may have led Dante to characterize vernacular speech in ways that elide its feminine associations, but rather on the ways that gender and language intersected in Dante and his reader's culture, the ways that Dante conceives of language itself as having gender, and the strategies that Dante adopts to rework his reader's gender associations with the languages. As in the paragraph defining the vernacular, he leads with the feminine associations his reader has with the *vulgare* as a mother tongue, so that he can capsize them. He scripts a charter speech for his excellent *vulgare* which will make it, not a feminine, lawless mother tongue, but rather a masculine language like the *gramatica*.

In composing these lines and juxtaposing them, Dante places female speech and male speech side by side, not only assigning primacy to Adam but also using Eve as a feminine and lesser foil, in order to set off Adam's perfect and primary speech act as masculine. Eve's speech here is characterized as not only spoken by a woman, but also feminine in that it is passive (*respondit*, "she answered"). Her moral weakness is stressed, since she speaks in a conversation with the devil ("cum dyabolo sciscitanti"). Finally, Dante characterizes her with a single damning adjective: she is extremely presumptuous (*presumptiosissima*). Additionally, repeating the lines from scripture (rather than simply

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<sup>134</sup> Cestaro defines two voices at work in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, that of the poet and that of the grammarian; he assigns to the grammarian an effort of "locating himself and subsequently his new language in a space...not contaminated by the maternal body," 59.

stating that Eve is supposed to be the first to speak) foregrounds Eve's moral frailty and inferiority: she repeats the divine command she is about to break.<sup>135</sup>

Dante uses the foil he has created, of passive, morally compromised, and feminine speech, to define his excellent vernacular's origin against that foil. The *lector's* sense of the *vulgare* as a feminine language by contrast with Latin is demolished here in Dante's new myth of origin for human language; the morally questionable feminine vernacular speech has been supplanted in the defining, originating moment of human speaking by a man addressing God, morally perfect and properly directed.

Dante perfects this scene of manly, morally unquestionable speaking by adding, in l.v.1, that Adam did not initially speak in response to God, but rather erupted in speech spontaneously. Dante uses this detail to characterize Adam's speech as active, rather than passive:

Nam in homine sentire humanius credimus quam sentire, dummodo sentiatur et sentiat tanquam homo. Si ergo Faber ille atque Perfectionis Principium et Amator afflando primum nostrum omni perfectione complevit, rationabile nobis apparet nobilissimum animal non ante sentire quam sentiri cepisse.

(l.v.1)

I consider, in fact, that it is more human in man to make himself heard than to hear, provided he is heard and hears as a man. Therefore, if the Artificer and

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<sup>135</sup> Dino Castaldo notes the various ways in which Dante depicts Eve's response to the serpent as morally degraded; he does not, however, bring into focus the fact that Eve's gender is central to the *De vulgari eloquentia's* delineation of morally excellent and morally debased speech.

Creator and Lover of Perfection breathed into our progenitor every perfection, it seems reasonable that this most noble of animals did not begin to hear before he was heard.

The grammatical categories of active/passive here intersect with a keystone of masculine excellence in Aristotelian and Scholastic thought.<sup>136</sup> Dante's emphasis on the active nature of Adam's inaugural speech lends it another element of virile excellence. From the initial introduction to the two languages in book I which reinforced their typical gender associations, Dante has reclaimed the *vulgare* from its feminine associations and given it a genealogy that makes it a prerogative of men, addressing God in moral rectitude, and using language in virile activity.

Following his dismissal of the possibility that Eve inaugurated human speech, we find in the subsequent chapters on language use in Eden that she has disappeared. The vernacular has become Adam's language, and Adam's use of it defines its nature. Dante establishes another element of his newly scripted prestigious tongue: not only was it first spoken by a man, it was also instilled in Adam by God, directly. Instead of learning as a baby by imitating his nurse, Adam received his language intact from God. Indeed, he never was anything but a fully grown and malely perfect person, as Dante is careful to assert: "de ydiomate illo venari nos decet quo vir sine matre, vir sine lacte, qui nec pupillarem etatem nec vidit adultam, creditur usus" (I.vi.1) ("It behooves us to hunt for the language believed to have been used by the man who never had a mother nor drank her milk, the man who never saw either childhood or maturity"). The vernacular, then, from being the

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<sup>136</sup> Cadden 23.

feminine of the two languages, a mother tongue, has now been redefined as the divinely-created language of the most perfect of men in Paradise: “dicimus certam formam locutionis a Deo cum anima prima concreatam fuisse” (I.vi.4) (“A certain form of language was created by God along with the first soul”). Adam’s peculiar life history is emphasized by Dante for precisely the elements which reverse the normal circumstances of natural language acquisition. Those are the elements - learning without rules, among women - that render the vernacular less masculine and excellent, lending it its essential quality as a mother tongue. In electing to focus on Adam’s missed phase of language acquisition, Dante removes the aspects of the vernacular that elicited the scorn of the Latin-literate. It is instead a language instituted by a man born into adulthood, and who spoke the first words in “natural” language before woman was even created.

In addition to scripting an origin for the vernacular which gives it a new gender association, Dante also genders the vernacular itself, as possessing the powerful and prestigious attributes of hegemonic manhood. From the biblical genealogy he creates for the *vulgare* in I.iv., Dante turns to defining the contemporary illustrious vernacular, and he defines it using masculine categories of prestige. In Book I.xvi.6, the author lists the four qualities that define the excellent vernacular, in terms that echo and reinforce the ideal masculinity of its speakers: “dicimus illustre, cardinale, aulicum et curiale vulgare in Latio quod omnis latie civitatis est” (We can define the illustrious, cardinal, aulic, and curial vernacular in Italy as that which belongs to every Italian city yet seems to belong to none). Let us look at Dante’s expansion of the first of the terms with which he defines the *vulgare illustre*.

Primum igitur quid intendemus cum illustre adicimus, et quare illustre dicimus, denudemus. Per hoc quoque quod illustre dicimus, intelligimus quid illuminans at illuminatum prefulgens: et hoc modo viros appellamus illustres, vel quia potestate illuminati alios et iustitia et karitate illuminant, vel quia excellenter magistrati excellenter magistrant, ut Seneca et Numa Pompilius. Et vulgare de quo loquimur et sublimatum est magistratu et potestate, et suos honore sublimat et gloria. (I.xvii.2)

Let me first reveal what I mean by illustrious, and why I say illustrious. By this word I mean precisely something brilliant, whose brilliance reflects its splendor. And in this sense we call men illustrious either because, illuminated by power they illuminate others with justice and charity; or because ruled excellently, they in turn rule excellently, like Numa Pompilius and Seneca. And the vernacular of which I speak is both exalted by mastery and power and exalts its own with honor and glory.

The excellent vernacular appears here as an honorable and powerful man. It is not only exalted by its use by the finest men; it itself possesses the characteristics of the most honored men: power and knowledge. Indeed, the explanation for the vernacular's being illustrious is predicated on the model of an illustrious man ("in this sense we call men illustrious"). In the subsequent expansion of its characteristics, the *vulgare illustre* acquires a hegemonic masculinity of its own. The equivalence between the illustrious vernacular and powerful and prestigious male figures continues in I.xviii.1, in the explanation for its being "cardinal":

Nam sicut totum hostium cardinem sequitur ut, quo cardo vertitur, versetur et ipsum, seu introrsum seu extrorsum flectatur, sic et universus municipalium grex vulgarium vertitur et revertitur, movetur et pausat secundum quod istud, quod quidem vere paterfamilias esse videtur.

In the same way that a door rests on the hinge, so that, if the hinge turns, the door turns as well, opening to the outside or the inside, so the entire herd of local dialects turns and turns again, moves and stops according to what the illustrious vernacular does, so that it truly seems to be the head of their family.

The *paterfamilias* of the Italian dialects -- a term which emphasizes not only the illustrious vernacular's masculinity, but also specifically its power over lesser, effeminate beings -- controls the other dialects. The series of passive verbs describing the *vulgare illustre's* control emphasizes its power and active virile quality, while affirming the feminine or childish nature of the other, lesser dialects under its control. The excellent vernacular, previously defined by the negative qualities of the lesser vernaculars which it does not possess, such as municipal (I.xiii.1-2) and maternal (I.xiv.7), has here conferred on it its positive qualities, all of which define it as an honored and powerful man: it is exalted by expertise and power ("sublimatu magistrato et potestate"); it is a *paterfamilias* who controls the motion of all its subject dialects.

When Dante discusses poets in the *vulgare*, he reproduces the opposition between Eve's speech and Adam's, and Eve's moral stature and the (pre-lapsarian) Adam's, in the distinction he draws between the experts (*doctores*) who have used the excellent vernacular, and the unworthy poets who should not attempt to do so. Remarkably, they



share with Eve her signal characteristic, presumption.<sup>137</sup> As we will see in the next section, Dante describes them in terms that echo his description of Eve, establishing them as feminine foils who thereby give his experts and poets in the vernacular an exalted and specifically masculine stature.

The poets who write excellent poetry in the vernacular are present in the book from I.x, where Italian is distinguished from the other two languages of the tripartite language in that those who have written poems most sweetly and profoundly in the vernacular are its friends and ministers. Noting that Italian is prized for the qualities of the work of its poets, rather than for its own intrinsic qualities, Mengaldo finds that “con ciò risulta fortemente sottolineato, nel caso dell’italiano, il momento costruttivo, demiurgico dell’attività poetica.”<sup>138</sup> From its first mention in the treatise, Italian is characterized by those who have best written poetry; not, we note, by the poetry itself. The man who composes in the language, the men who speak the dialects, are as much the subject of the treatise as its ostensible theme, language. The figure of the language user, and the question of his moral stature, recurs over and over: Adam in Eden; the extremely presumptuous Eve; the individuals from different regions and cities; the excellent and the unworthy poets; Petrus, the composer (as opposed to the performer) of the canzone. The first book of the treatise, having defined natural language and the illustrious vernacular, closes with the author’s promise to define those who are worthy to use it. In this section I will examine how the *De vulgari eloquentia* defines those “worthy of using” the illustrious

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<sup>137</sup> Barolini 116.

<sup>138</sup> “This strongly underlines, in the case of Italian, the constructive, demiurgic moment of poetic activity.” Mengaldo 77.

vernacular, that is, the excellent poets, and how it militates to make them explicitly and ideally masculine.

Numerous critics have observed not only the centrality of poets to the treatise, but also its emphasis on their moral excellence. As Vinay puts it: “La vecchia retorica insegna come si può scrivere di cose grandi, medie e minime. Dante risale dal precetto all’uomo che deve applicarlo: bisogna essere grandi per scrivere di cose grandi: prima delle norme c’è il poeta, prima del poeta c’è l’uomo.”<sup>139</sup> Vinay’s formulation foregrounds precisely the question that I argue underpins the *De vulgari eloquentia*: in the eyes of elite men, what kind of a man is the poet in the vernacular? Working in the vernacular makes the man who is a poet potentially lesser than other men, and even, as we saw in the discussion of the Romagnoles, effeminate. The treatise operates to establish that the illustrious poets are the right kind - indeed, the best kind - of men: learned, rational, virile, and morally elevated. These assertions are explicit in the author’s descriptions of the vernacular poets; they are also implicit in the parallels that the work sets up between the poets and the figure of prelapsarian Adam of *Dve* I.iv.

Let us first look at how the vernacular poets are explicitly defined as both manly and honorable. From the initial reference to those who have most sweetly and profoundly written poetry, through the search for the illustrious vernacular, poets are presented in honorific terms, as experts (*doctores*, I.ix.2,3; I.xii.2), splendid (*prefulgentes*, I.xii.8), men of high honor (*virī prehonorati*, I.xiii.5), a very eloquent man (*tantus eloquentie vir*, I.xv.2), and

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<sup>139</sup> “Ancient rhetoric teaches how one can write of great, average and small matters. Dante works back from this precept to the man who applies it: he must be great to write of great things: before the rules there’s the poet, before the poet there’s the man.” Vinay 41.

illustrious experts (*doctores illustres*, I.xv.6; I.xix.1). The treatise's classification of the best poets as experts, as men (using the markedly manly *vir* rather than the less-strongly-gendered term *homo*), and especially its qualification of them as distinguished and honored (*illustres, prefulgentes, prehonorati*), all converge to give us the figure of the poet as knowledgeable, honorable, and virile. As we saw in the case of the Romagnoles, in the *De vulgari eloquentia* the quality of the language and the moral quality of the speaker are equivalent, in a system that seems to have no beginning or ending point, nor any clear direction of cause and effect. These pre-eminent, honorable men speak a language that is proper to them; the excellent vernacular sounds in the mouths only of speakers who are themselves pre-eminent.

The poets in the vernacular, we recall, can be dismissed by the learned *lector* for working in the less prestigious language. The vernacular, as the feminine term in the language pair, renders its users relatively effeminate and consequently lesser in reason and moral stature. The work of the *De vulgari eloquentia*, which seeks to create an exalted stature for the vernacular poets, hinges on making them not just excellent, learned, and prestigious, but also explicitly masculine. In order to create this masculine prestige for the vernacular poets, Dante sets up numerous parallels between the excellent poets and the figure of Adam. Adam, the “man who never nursed, who had no mother” initiated speech in the vernacular with a number of characteristics that conferred on his language and his use of it a particularly masculine excellence. Adam's language, like the vernacular, may seem to the superficial observer to be a feminine language, a mother tongue, having originated with the speech of a woman; but it is in fact male in its origins, and elevated

above that acquired by children from women. Likewise, the *De vulgari eloquentia* begins by defining the vernacular as the language acquired by children from nurses, but proceeds to create an illustrious vernacular which is crafted by splendid experts and is the exclusive province of highly honored men. In I.xiv.7, the single excellent poet from the Veneto turns away from his mother tongue to write in the excellent *vulgare*: “Inter quos (the Venetians) omnes unum audivimus nitentem divertere a materno et ad curiale vulgare intendere, videlicet Ildebrandinum Paduanum.” (I.xiv.7) (“Of whom only one individual who tried to break free of his mother-tongue and aspire to a vernacular worthy of the court.”) The excellent, curial vernacular is here explicitly defined by contrast with a mother tongue.<sup>140</sup>

A second parallel between Adam and the poet in the illustrious vernacular affirms the virility of both figures. Dante is at pains in Book I to establish that Adam’s initiatory speech was active, not passive: the first words spoken in the vernacular were not a response, that is, more specifically, Adam first “made himself heard” rather than listened (“nobilissimum animal non ante sentire quam sentiri cepisse”). This same preoccupation with defining excellent language use according to principles of masculine excellence emerges in book II’s definition of the canzone in chapter viii. The canzone, the most excellent manner (*modus excellentissimus*, II.iii.3), is defined thus in II.viii:

Fascis iste igitur, si bene comminiscimur omnia prelibata, cantio est. Quapropter quid sit cantio videamus, et quid intellegimus cum dicimus cantionem. Est enim cantio, secundum verum nominis significatum, ipse canendi actus vel passio, sicut lectio passio vel actus legendi. Sed

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<sup>140</sup> Plebani notes that this use of *vulgare maternum* “sottolineava ancor più” the association of spoken language with female figures and a female origin, 27.

divaricemus quod dictum est, utrum videlicet hec sit cantio prout est actus, vel prout est passio. Et circa hoc considerandum est quod cantio dupliciter accipi potest: uno modo secundum quod fabricatur ab autore suo, et sic est actio - et secundum istum modum Virgilius primo Eneidorum dicit “arma virumque cano” -; alio modo secundum quod fabricata profertur vel ab autore vel ab alio quicumque sit, sive cum soni modulatione proferatur, sive non: et sic est passio. Nam tunc agitur, modo vero agere videtur in alium et sic tunc alicuius actio, modo quoque passio alicuius videtur. Et quia prius agitur ipsa quam agat, magis, immo prorsus denominari videtur ab eo quod agitur, et est actio alicuius, quam ab eo quod agit in alios. Signum autem huius est quod nunquam dicimus “Hec est cantio Petri” eo quod ipsam proferat, sed eo quod fabricaverit illam.

This fascicle (if we recall everything that has been said) is the canzone. Let us see, therefore, what a canzone is, and what we mean when we say canzone. Now cantio, according to the true meaning of the noun, is the action or passion of singing, just as lectio is the action or passion of reading. But let us expand what has been said, to ask whether cantio in the sense of a canzone is such in virtue of being an action or a passion. And here it must be kept in mind that canzone may be understood in two ways, one way insofar as it is made by its author, and in this it is action – accordingly Virgil says at the beginning of the Aeneid, “Arma virumque cano” -- another way when, having been made by its author, it is performed either by the author or by someone else, either

with or without musical accompaniment, and in this sense it is passion. For in the first instance it is acted, in the second it acts upon others, therefore in the first instance it appears as the action of someone, and in the second as someone's passion. And since before acting it is itself acted upon, it seems rightly indeed to take its name from its being acted upon and from being someone's action, rather than from its acting upon others. A sign of proof of this in fact is that we never say "This is Peter's song" to refer to the performer, but rather to refer to the composer.

Dante's careful examination of the passive and active senses of *cantio* brings us back to his determination in I.v.1 that "in homine sentiri humanius credimus quam sentire....rationabile nobis apparet nobilissimum animal non ante sentire quam sentiri cepisse" ("I consider, in fact, that it is more human in man to make himself heard than to hear... it seems reasonable that this most noble of animals did not begin to hear before he was heard").<sup>141</sup> The active male principle which Dante used to make Adam's inaugural speech in the vernacular an entirely and excellently masculine deed returns here in his definition of *cantio*, which characteristically hinges on the figure of the poet, not the nature of the poem. The exacting analysis here, in which Dante first takes care to open *cantio* to the possibility of being understood as active or passive, serves to align the poet with Adam and with the masculine active principle. We can note that Dante subdivides the act of singing into active

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<sup>141</sup> While *homo* has the same universal sense as the English 'man,' it also, as in English, uses male humans as the normative measure of human existence. In any case, Dante uses it in I.iv.3 to mean 'a male person', not 'mankind': "Sed quanquam mulier in scriptis prius inveniatur locuta, rationabilius tamen est ut hominem prius locutum fuisse credamus." Mulier and homo are paired here as representing the two genders.

and passive senses, and then also subdivides the canzone into having an active and passive role, with the result that the canzone is acted upon in being composed but then proceeds to act on others. His chief concern seems to be to define the work of the author as active; but he then proceeds to make the canzone itself a force which acts upon its reciters. The canzone is first acted upon (*agitur*), and subsequently acts on others (*agat*); by giving the canzone the power to act, Dante has in a sense made the author an agent twice over. The final line of the comma, “*signum autem huius est quod nunquam dicimus “Hec est cantio Petri” eo quod ipsam proferat, sed eo quod fabricaverit illam*” (II.viii.4), sums up the treatise’s theme: the defining element of any act of “eloquence” in the vernacular is the man who deploys that eloquence, here as elsewhere depicted as akin to Adam, and using the vernacular in noble, virile ways that establish him as ideally male.

An additional equivalence the treatise constructs between Adam and the vernacular poets lies in the illustrious vernacular’s equivalence to the Hebrew spoken by Adam. Adam’s language, created by God and so enjoying exemption from the change and subjection to human caprice found in the other vernaculars, has a divinely-established connection between *res* and *signum*. Corti and Rizzo both read the illustrious vernacular as being similarly transcendent and unchanging.

We can recall from our examination of the scene of primal speech in Eden that Eve is extremely high-handed, *presumptuosissima*. Certainly the reader knows Eve as presumptuous for flouting God’s directive and attempting to achieve his power; but under the gaze of the two linguistically and morally elite men the treatise creates, author and reader, she also seems to merit the epithet for having (according to Dante) received the

credit for speaking first and having thereby defined so noble a human action act with her feminine and lesser qualities. In II.iv.9-11, having defined the poets worthy of working in the excellent vernacular, and the topics worthy of being treated in it, Dante concludes with an encouragement and subsequent warning:

Caveat ergo quilibet et discernat ea qua dicimus, et quando pure hec tria cantare intendit, vel que ad ea directe ac pure secuntur, prius Elicone potatus, tensis fidibus ad supremum, secure plectrum tum movere incipiat. Sed cautionem atque discretionem hanc accipere, sicut decet, hic opus et labor est, quoniam numquam sine strenuitate ingenii et artis assiduitate scientiarumque habitu fieri potest. Et hii sunt quos Poeta Eneidorum sexto Dei dilectos et ab ardente virtute sublimatos ad ethera deorumque filios vocat, quanquam figurate loquatur. Et ideo confertur illorum stultitia qui, arte scientiaque immunes, de solo ingenio confidentes, ad summa summe canenda prorumpunt; et a tanta presumptuositate desistant, et si anseres natura vel desidia sunt, nolint astripetam aquilam imitari. (II.iv.9-11)

Therefore beware and judge well what I say. Anyone intending to sing of these three things, either in themselves or in their direct and simple consequences, must first drink of the spring of Helicon and tune the strings of his lyre to the highest perfection; then may he confidently begin to move the plectrum. But in learning how to exercise caution and judgement as is necessary – here is the real, hard work, for this can never come about without great effort of mind and art and assiduous habit of study. And such



are those whom the poet in Aeneid VI calls dear to God, and sons of the gods (although he is speaking figuratively), who were raised to heaven by their own ardent virtue. And thus is exposed and confounded the stupidity of those who, immune to art and knowledge and trusting only in their own wit, break into song about the highest things; let them cease in their presumption, and if they are geese by natural inclination or habitual apathy, let them not dare to imitate the star-seeking eagle.

The unworthy who would use the *vulgare illustre* are presumptuous, assuming a stature not proper to them, exactly as Eve did. Not only are these foolish poets tarred with the same brush as Eve, as presumptuous<sup>142</sup>; they are also characterized as geese, *anser*. In Latin, geese are an animal for which the collective name is the feminine term; as in English, a different term is used to designate a male of the species: *anser masculinus*. The image of the two birds presents us with the opposition of the domestic, feminine animal to the martial, masculine imperial eagle. The unworthy poets thus characterized have an effeminate aspect, by contrast with the soaring eagle, symbol of the Roman empire. The unworthy poets' effort to appropriate the illustrious vernacular to themselves is a violation of the proper order of things, like Eve's usurpation of Adam's primacy in the language, or the *determinare* of the women of Forlì. These geese who try to imitate eagles are a third iteration of the unworthy and effeminate language user who creates by contrast the excellent masculinity of the excellent poet.

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<sup>142</sup> Barolini describes this as an early form of the Ulyssean theme of transgression she has identified in the *Commedia*, 116.

In reviewing the qualities of the language used by the poets, then, those eloquent, expert men, and the circumstances surrounding their language use, we find that the active nature of their “speech”, that is, their canzoni, and the presence of unworthy, effeminate speakers who presumptuously go beyond their proper bounds in assuming their language, all mirror the circumstances of Adam’s language use. A final parallel between Adam and the poets in the illustrious vernacular lies in the way Dante sets their languages apart from ordinary speech, acquired by children from nurses and mothers. Adam’s language is instilled in him, complete and correct, by God; there is no language acquisition, and the language does not change. If we look at the close of Book I of the treatise, we find an iteration of the illustrious vernacular’s exaltation above ordinary speech that stresses the domestic, and therefore feminine, nature of the lesser vernaculars:

ab ipso tanquam ab excellentissimo incipientes, quos putamus ipso dignos  
 uti, et propter quid, et quomodo, nec non ubi, et quando, et ad quos  
 dirigendum sit, in immediatis libris tractabimus. Quibus illuminatis, inferiora  
 vulgaria illuminare curabimus, gradatim descendentes ad illud quod unius  
 solius familie proprium est. (I.xix.2-3)

And since I intend, as promised at the beginning of this work, to provide teaching on eloquence in the vernacular, beginning with the most excellent language, I will discuss in the books that follow those whom I think most worthy to use it; and for what content, in what fashion; and where; and when; and to whom it is to be addressed. Having clarified these things, I will

attend to the explanation of the lesser vernaculars, descending by degrees to the language of one united family.

The catalogue of Boethian *circumstantiae* here (“those whom I think most worthy to use it; and for what content, in what fashion; and where; and when; and to whom”) echoes precisely the catalogue of questions used to preface Adam’s speech in I.iv, establishing a final parallel between Adam and the vernacular poets. This rhetorical parallel between natural language in the absolute, paired with its defining speaker, and the finest vernacular, paired with its defining speakers, iterates the equivalency of the vernacular poets to Adam. From the illustrious vernacular and those worthy to work in it, the author intends to descend to the level of the vernacular spoken in individual families. The return, from the heights of the illustrious vernacular, to the language of mothers and children at the close of book I is a reversal of the trajectory at the beginning of the book, where the author begins from the language learned from nurses to ascend to the god-created language spoken in Eden. At the close of the book we redescend to the level of the language spoken in families, to the association of the vernacular with children and mothers, and with trivial household matters.

## CONCLUSION

Dante has been read as the most hegemonic of writers for centuries; each successive generation of readers and critics imposes their own version of hegemonic masculinity onto Dante, to afford him the impersonal authority of Universal Manhood. Dante is more complex than Universal Man; an examination of the relationships between men within which masculinity was constituted in Dante's era reveals the poet's engagement with an honor-based masculine identity specific to his time and place. Likewise, in Dante's essays on language, we find him wrestling with Universal Man's ahistorical authority, working to situate himself and his work within the purlieu of impersonal masculine privilege. Dante's efforts in his early work to assume an explicitly masculine authorial identity demonstrate that masculinity mattered to him. Once we appreciate the strategies he adopts to create a manly voice in the first stages of his career, we can then begin to perceive how he interrogates and destabilizes both honor-based masculine ideals and the ideal of impersonally masculine authoritative language in the *Commedia*.

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