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Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender

By Teodolinda Barolini

While we are accustomed to Dante's appropriations and revisions of history, the case of Francesca da Rimini (*Inf.* 5.73–142) is rather different from the norm, since in her case no trace remains of the historical record that the poet could have appropriated. There is no completely independent documentation of Francesca's story; we are indebted for what we know to Dante and to his commentators. A fourteenth-century chronicler of Rimini, Marco Battagli, alludes in passing to the event, but his history was written in 1352, thus postdating by three decades Dante's death in 1321.¹ Two factors come into play when we assess Battagli's chronicle as an independent verification of Francesca's story: on the one hand, he is an indisputable authority regarding Rimini and the Malatesta;² on the other, he knew Dante's poem.³ Therefore, Battagli's passing and indirect reference (to which we shall return in due course) serves at best as plausibly independent confirmation of an occurrence about which the contemporary historical record is silent. That silence is broken by Dante.⁴ By reintegrating history—including the silence of history—into our reading of canto 5, we restore a context in which to remember that in the case of Francesca da Rimini Dante *is* the historian of record: in effect he saved Francesca from oblivion, giving her a voice and a name.

Technically, we know that Dante is the transmitter of the little that we know

¹ Marco Battagli was born in Rimini in the first decade of the fourteenth century and died before 1376; his chronicle, *Marcha* (the title derives from the author's Christian name), compiles events from creation to 1354 and was written between 1350 and 1354. The last book contains the chapter "On the Origins of the Malatesta" ("De origine dominorum de Malatestis"), written, according to its editor, in 1352; see *Marcha*, ed. Aldo Francesco Massera, *Rerum Italicorum Scriptores* 16/3 (Città di Castello, 1913), p. xxiii. Battagli's sentence on Paolo's death elicits from Massera the following comment: "E' questa la notizia più antica della tragedia che ci rimanga, eccezion fatta dei commentatori dell'*Inferno*, in fonti storiche" (p. 31). I would like to take this opportunity to thank Benjamin Kohl for steering me toward Battagli and for providing valuable feedback as I worked on this essay.

² According to Massera, Battagli's chapter on the Malatesta "costituisce la più antica ed autorevole fonte di storia malatestiana e municipale" (p. xlvii). For more on Battagli, see Massera's lengthy preface.

³ Regarding Battagli's "assai vasta e varia cultura," O. Banti notes that "in essa hanno larga parte (come appare spesso dalle espressioni e dai concetti) la Bibbia e le opere dell'Alighieri"; see *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 7 (Rome, 1965), p. 208.

⁴ Indeed, we might well wonder how we can feel sure that the story as a whole is not Dante's invention. While he obviously invented the material for which only one of the murdered protagonists could have vouched, the bare facts of Francesca's adultery and murder must have occurred, given that the commentators who follow Dante fill in key details—like the protagonists' names—that he omits from *Inferno* 5 and that Francesca's family, well acquainted with Dante and his poetry (Guido Novello da Polenta, Francesca's nephew and Dante's host in Ravenna, even tried his hand at Dante-inspired love lyrics), never denied his account. On Dante and the Polenta family, and for Guido da Polenta's poetry, see Corrado Ricci, *L'ultimo rifugio di Dante* (1891; repr. Ravenna, 1965).

about Francesca da Rimini. Francesco Torraca, whose 1902 essay on *Inferno* 5 has not been surpassed in historical richness, clearly states as much (“Del fatto, nessuna cronaca contemporanea, nessun documento ci ha conservato memoria; primo, e solo narratore contemporaneo, Dante”),⁵ and the point is repeated in the *Enciclopedia dantesca*’s article on Francesca (“Il racconto dantesco resta l’unica testimonianza antica intorno al dramma di adulterio e di morte consumato alla corte malatestiana, ignorato dalle cronache e dai documenti locali coevi o posteriori”).⁶ Similarly, when we begin to wonder about the historicity of Francesca, we discover the existence of a specialized bibliography on the historical Francesca of great erudition. But it rarely intersects with the much larger literary bibliography on *Inferno* 5, and its findings—including the fundamental fact that there is no historical record of the events narrated in the canto—are rarely factored into literary readings. Torraca’s clarity about the silence of the historical record has not informed subsequent readings of the canto.

This essay attempts to recuperate the significance of the fact that Dante is the historian of record with respect to Francesca da Rimini and to integrate the implications of this understanding, as well as the implications of a historicized Francesca, into our critical response to *Inferno* 5. My subtitle outlines the parameters of my reading: realpolitik, because Dante viewed Francesca’s life as politically determined, her death the result of the pragmatic matrimonial politics that governed dynastic alliances;⁷ romance, because Dante injected romance into Francesca’s essentially political story, as a way of highlighting the tension between her

⁵ “Il canto V dell’*Inferno*,” originally published in *Nuova antologia*, 1902, repr. in *Studi danteschi* (Naples, 1912), pp. 383–442, citation p. 409.

⁶ Antonio Enzo Quaglio, “Francesca da Rimini,” in *Enciclopedia dantesca* (henceforth *ED*), 6 vols. (Rome, 1970–78), 3:1. A dramatic account of the lacuna in two major chronicles of the late duecento, by Pietro Cantinelli and Salimbene da Parma, is offered by Nevio Matteini in *Francesca da Rimini: Storia, mito, arte* (Bologna, 1965):

Il *Chronicon* di Pietro Cantinelli? Tace. Il Cantinelli, nato probabilmente a Faenza intorno al 1243 e morto, forse, nel 1306, ci porge l’illustrazione storica più autentica della *Divina Commedia*. “I personaggi danteschi”—scrive il Torraca nella prefazione—“sono qui una folla. . . Per l’ultimo trentennio del secolo XIII Bologna e la Romagna non hanno un’altra cronaca propria altrettanto ampia, abbondante, ordinata ed esatta.” Fra i Polentani vi compaiono: Guido Minore, Bernardino, Lamberto, Ostasio, Guido Riccio, Alberico e Geremia. Fra i Malatesti: il “Mastin vecchio,” Gianciotto, Malatestino, Ramberto e il figlio Giovanni. Di Francesca e Paolo neppure i nomi sono ricordati.

E Salimbene da Parma? Tace anch’egli. Fra’ Salimbene, che visse dal 1221 al 1289, assistette a diversi fatti notevolissimi ed avvicinò personalità della Chiesa e della politica, uomini di toga e di armi. Soggiornò in Romagna, soprattutto a Ravenna, per cinque anni. La prima data che ricorre nella sua *Cronica* è il 21 luglio 1283; l’ultima l’8 settembre 1287. . . . Parla di Guido da Montefeltro e di Tebaldello Zambrasi, di Malatesta da Verucchio e dei Manfredi, dei Traversari e degli Accarisi, di Guido Minore e di Guido Riccio. Di Paolo e Francesca nulla. (Pp. 57–58)

⁷ This point is clearly made by the distinguished Romagnol historian Augusto Vasina in his entry “Malatesta” in the *Enciclopedia dantesca*: “Persino dietro il dramma di Paolo M[alatesta] e di Francesca da Polenta (*If* V 82–138) è ben presente una rigida logica dinastica, tesa, mediante l’unione fra Giovanni (Gianciotto) M[alatesta] e Francesca, a fini di tirannide. In realtà tale politica matrimoniale, senza dubbio all’origine di quella tragedia, era destinata a rassodare un’alleanza familiare fra M[alatesta] e Polentani proprio nel momento più critico della loro ascesa al dominio signorile, rispettivamente su Rimini e su Ravenna” (*ED* 3:782).

role as pawn of the state and her desire for personal fulfillment (romance is the genre, in fact, that makes possible the focus on personal desire); gender, because the choice of romance as the modality for this particular narrative, a narrative founded on dynastic marriage, is a choice that necessarily brings us to gender. Ultimately, I hope to throw light on the ways in which Francesca's story, as told by Dante, is a gendered story, one in which unusual value is placed on the personhood of the dynastic wife.⁸

The key fact of Francesca da Rimini's life is a dynastic—political—fact: Francesca was born into a family that aspired to dominion over Ravenna (and achieved it, in 1275); she married into a family that aspired to dominion over Rimini (they, too, succeeded, twenty years later, in 1295). She thus served a dynastic function, as a link between the two most powerful rising dynasties of Romagna. She was the daughter of Guido Minore da Polenta (so called to distinguish him from his cousin Guido Riccio, he is also referred to as Guido il Vecchio da Polenta), lord of Ravenna. Circa 1275 she married Giovanni (called Gianciotto, “crippled John”) Malatesta, the second son of Malatesta da Verucchio, first lord of Rimini (Gianciotto himself was never lord of Rimini).⁹ She died because of this marriage, between 1283 and 1286.

Early commentators of the *Commedia* show their awareness of the significance of these facts by giving Francesca's story a political frame; they stress the importance of her marriage as a political alliance, as an attempt to bring peace and stability to Romagna by allying the region's two most powerful families. Beginning with a succinct statement about dynastic power—“In Romagna sono due grandi case, in Rimino i Malatesti, in Ravenna quelli da Polenta” (“In Romagna there are two great families, in Rimini the Malatesta, in Ravenna those from Polenta”)—the Florentine writer of the *Ottimo commento* (ca. 1333) explains that these warring dynasties made peace and that Gianciotto married Francesca in order to guarantee, to bring “fermezza” to, their accord:

. . . le quali case per la loro grandezza ebbero guerra insieme, della quale fecero pace; alla cui fermezza Janni Sciancato di Messer Malatesta, uomo de l'abito rustico, e del cuore franco, e armigero, e crudele, tolse per moglie Francesca figliuola di Messer Guido il vecchio da Polenta, donna bellissima del corpo, e gaia ne' sembianti.

(. . . these families on account of their greatness were at war with each other and then made peace; to guarantee the peace Gianni Sciancato of Messer Malatesta, a man of

⁸ Of course, we should expect from Dante the culturally unexpected; see, with respect to the unorthodox role he assigns Beatrice, Joan M. Ferrante, “Dante's Beatrice: Priest of an Androgynous God,” in *CEMERS Occasional Papers*, 2 (Binghamton, N.Y., 1992).

⁹ Most scholars concur in putting the marriage at this time, although Torraca opts for a later date; see “Il canto V dell'*Inferno*,” esp. p. 420. After the death of Malatesta da Verucchio, power went first to Gianciotto's older brother, Malatestino, second lord of Rimini, and then to his half brother, Pandolfo, Malatesta da Verucchio's son by his second wife. The *Enciclopedia dantesca* entries by Vasina on the various members of the Malatesta clan are more helpful in reconstructing Francesca's life than Quaglio's entry on Francesca, whose first paragraph erroneously calls Gianciotto “signore di Rimini” (*ED* 3:1). It is worth noting, however, that this mistake is frequently made, and is perhaps due to the contamination of Boccaccio's account; see, for instance, the commentary of Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, *Commedia*, 1: *Inferno* (Milan, 1991), p. 155.

rustic dress, brave heart, a warrior, and cruel, took as wife Francesca, the daughter of Messer Guido the elder of Polenta, a lady very beautiful of body and lighthearted in demeanor.)¹⁰

The *Ottimo's* comment, while incorrect in its details (there was no war between the Malatesta and the Polentani at that time),¹¹ is correct in its fundamental analysis, which views dynastic “case” of a certain “grandezza” as operating in a framework that is entirely political and that precludes neutrality: they are either enemies or—as was already the case with these two—allies.¹² Boccaccio (ca. 1373) follows the *Ottimo* in recounting that upon the cessation of hostilities between Guido da Polenta and Malatesta of Rimini, the marriage of their offspring was engineered as a way of cementing (“fermeza” again) the new peace:

E' adunque da sapere che costei fu figliuola di messer Guido vecchio da Polenta, signor di Ravenna e di Cervia; ed essendo stata lunga guerra e dannosa tra lui e i signori Malatesti da Rimino, adivenne che per certi mezzani fu trattata e composta la pace tra loro. La quale acciò che più fermeza avesse, piacque a ciascuna delle parti di volerla fortificare per parentado; e 'l parentado trattato fu che 'l detto messer Guido dovesse dare per moglie una sua giovane e bella figliuola, chiamata madonna Francesca, a Gian Ciotto, figliuolo di messer Malatesta.

(You must know that she was the daughter of Guido da Polenta the elder, lord of Ravenna and Cervia. A long, harsh war had raged between him and the Malatesta, lords of Rimini, when through certain intermediaries, peace was treated and concluded. To make it all the more firm, both sides were pleased to cement it with a marriage. Whereupon it was arranged that Messer Guido was to give his beautiful young daughter, called Madonna Francesca, in marriage to Gianciotto, son of Messer Malatesta.)¹³

Benvenuto da Imola, despite being from Romagna, seems to possess no more information than the *Ottimo*, whose descriptions of the protagonists he translates; he does specify that Gianciotto is the son of Malatesta senior, who was the first to seize power over Rimini: “filius Domini Malatestae senioris, qui primus acquisit dominium Arimini” (*DDP*). The commentary of the Anonimo Fiorentino (ca. 1400) follows Boccaccio in every way, including the dynastic frame.¹⁴ Over

¹⁰ *L'Ottimo commento della “Divina Commedia,”* cited from the *Dartmouth Dante Project Database*, <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/> (henceforth *DDP*). Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ Torraca corrects the *Ottimo* on this score: “Di una guerra combattuta in quel periodo tra Riminesi e Ravennati non resta nessuna menzione” (“Il canto V dell’*Inferno*,” p. 412).

¹² In fact, the decree relating to the dowry of Margherita de’ Paltenieri, Malatesta da Verucchio’s second wife, was drawn up in Guido da Polenta’s house, on 25 July 1266; see Aldo Francesco Massèra, “Note malatestiane,” *Archivio storico italiano*, 5th ser., 47 (1911), 3–48, at p. 17.

¹³ *Esposizioni sopra la “Comedia” di Dante*, ed. Giorgio Padoan, vol. 6 of *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan, 1965), p. 315. The translation by Mario Domandi is in the commentary volume of *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, N.J., 1970), p. 87.

¹⁴ “Egli è da sapere che gran tempo fu guerra tra messer Guido da Polenta et messer Malatesta vecchio da Rimino. Ora, perchè era rinresciuta all’una parte et all’altra, di comune concordia feciono pace, et acciò che meglio s’osservasse, feciono parentado insieme” (“It should be known that for a long time there was war between Messer Guido da Polenta and Messer Malatesta of Rimini. Now, since both sides were unhappy about the war, they decided together to make peace, and so that the peace would be better maintained, they arranged a marriage between them” [*DDP*]).

the centuries, however, by the time we reach the commentaries of Daniello (1568) and Castelvetro (ca. 1570), the dynastic and political element of Francesca's story begins to fade, as the reception foregrounds the romance elements of Dante's story and abandons the political framework.

If we were to try to reconstruct the basic biographical data of Francesca's life from the *Commedia*, we would find the task impossible. The text offers only the following facts: Francesca's birthplace ("Siede la terra dove nata fui / su la marina dove 'l Po discende / per aver pace co' seguaci sui" [*Inf.* 5.97–99]), her Christian name ("Francesca, i tuoi martiri" [*Inf.* 5.116]), the fact that she and her lover were killed by a kinsman ("Caina attende chi a vita ci spense" [*Inf.* 5.107]), the fact that the lovers are related by marriage ("i due cognati" [*Inf.* 6.2]).¹⁵ This presentation is remarkably oblique, on a number of counts. First, it omits altogether the names of Francesca's lover and husband. Second, while Francesca's Christian name is registered, her family name must be inferred from her natal city, Ravenna, which in turn is never named but alluded to in a geographical periphrasis that places her land of birth "on the shore where the Po descends to be at peace with its followers," that is, where it reaches the Adriatic. Third, the fact that she and her lover were killed by a brother is presented in one compact and elliptical verse that in itself requires glossing: "Caina awaits him who put out our life" implies that the lovers' murderer is a brother, destined for that part of hell's lowest circle that houses traitors of kin and is named after Cain, the first fratricide. (While readers of the *Inferno* eventually learn that this zone houses all traitors of kin, the word *Caina* causes one to think, in this case correctly, of fratricide.) Fourth, the fact that the murderer is related to both lovers, in other words, the fact that the lovers were themselves linked by "parentado," to use Boccaccio's word, is given to us only after the encounter with Francesca has ended, at the beginning of canto 6 when the narrator refers to them as "i due cognati."

According to the accounts that accreted around the spare nucleus in *Inferno* 5, Francesca entered into an adulterous love affair with Paolo Malatesta, third son of Malatesta da Verucchio, known as Paolo il Bello; she and Paolo were killed by Gianciotto, most likely between 1283 and 1286. The date of death must be inferred circumstantially, like every other event of Francesca's unrecorded life. Paolo, who in 1269 married Orabile Beatrice, countess of Ghiaggiolo (by whom he had two children), was in Florence as *capitano del popolo* in 1282; he tendered his resignation on the first of February 1283 and returned to Rimini.¹⁶ By 1286 Gianciotto had remarried.¹⁷ So the deaths of Paolo and Francesca had to occur between 1283 and 1286.

¹⁵ The text is from *La "Commedia" secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols. (Milan, 1966–67).

¹⁶ See Torraca, "Il canto V dell'*Inferno*," p. 434. Torraca speculates that the seventeen-year-old Dante met Paolo Malatesta when he served as *capitano del popolo* in Florence in 1282 (p. 433).

¹⁷ Torraca reconstructs as follows: "Mori [Francesca] tra il 1283 e il 1286. Dopo il febbraio del 1283, non accade più di trovar nessuna traccia di Paolo; nel febbraio del 1287, a un atto di grande importanza politica, intervengono i suoi fratelli, non lui. Nel 1288, il vecchio Malatesta s'impegna alle future nozze di Malatestino, non suo figlio, quello, 'che vedeva pur con l'uno'; ma un bambino, che Giovanni aveva avuto da Zambrasina, la seconda moglie: se anche il bambino non avesse superato un anno di età, il matrimonio di Zambrasina con Giovanni doveva essere avvenuto due anni innanzi, nel 1286" ("Il canto V dell'*Inferno*," p. 419). The gist of this information was originally put forth by Luigi Tonini in *Della storia civile e sacra riminese*, 3 (Rimini, 1862), pp. 257–58.

Stepping into the information vacuum left by Dante, the earliest commentators begin by offering the crucial data that the *Commedia* omits. Jacopo Alighieri (ca. 1322) gives the names of all the protagonists and a schematic rendering of events:

Essendosi degli antichi infino a qui ragionato, di due modernamente si segue, de' quali l'un fu una donna nominata monna Francesca figliuola di messer Guido da Polenta, cioè Guido vecchio da Polenta di Romagna, e della città di Ravenna, e l'altro Paolo d'i Malatesta da Rimini, la quale essendo del fratello del detto Paulo moglie, il quale ebbe nome Gianni Sciancato, carnalmente con lei usando, cioè col detto suo cognato, alcuna volta insieme, dal marito fur morti. (Jacopo Alighieri, *DDP*)

(Having discoursed of the ancients up to now, what follows regards two moderns, of whom one was a lady named Madonna Francesca, daughter of Messer Guido da Polenta, that is, Guido the elder of Polenta from Romagna, and from the city of Ravenna, and the other Paolo of the Malatesta of Rimini; she was the wife of the brother of said Paolo, whose name was Gianni Sciancato, and having carnal relations with him, that is, with her aforementioned brother-in-law, on a few occasions together, they were killed by the husband.)

Shortly afterwards, Jacopo della Lana (1324–28) adds some color, including the first description of the death scene: “infine trovollì in sul peccato, prese una spada, e conficcollì insieme in tal modo che abbracciati ad uno morirono” (“finally he found them while sinning, took a sword and pierced them at the same time in such a way that locked together in one embrace they died” [*DDP*]). The *Ottimo commento* goes further, adding the dynastic frame, character sketches of the protagonists, and a servant who conveys the news of the adulterous liaison to Gianciotto. It is Boccaccio, the great raconteur, who elaborates Francesca’s story to novella-like proportions and whose imprint on it is most indelible.

We have seen that Dante himself tells us very little. This fact in itself requires critical acknowledgment, as well as recognition of how different our readerly situation is from that of the poem’s early readers, for whom the historical importance of Dante’s intervention would have been explicit. We on the other hand have heard or encountered so many tellings of Francesca’s tale—our cultural imaginary has been for so long overstocked with commentaries, paintings, dramas, tragedies, poems, and musical responses to Francesca—that we only with difficulty clear the cultural underbrush enough to re-create the relative emptiness in which Dante wrote *Inferno* 5.¹⁸ The case of Francesca is only one example—albeit a major one—of a problem that we encounter in any centuries-long critical enterprise: the problem of a reception that to some degree we must unlearn. In the particular case of Francesca da Rimini, unlearning the reception entails keeping clear the boundaries between what Dante tells us and what is added to the story later on and, most importantly, staying focused on the significance of the existence of

¹⁸ For a résumé of Francesca’s fortunes in drama, figurative art, and music, see Matteini, *Francesca da Rimini: Storia, mito, arte*, pp. 96–143.

Dante's telling—without which we would not have heard of Francesca at all, let alone elaborated her into the heroine of all those melodramas.¹⁹

In staging the infernal meeting between himself and Francesca, Dante represents himself as able to identify her on the basis of very little information. She tells him that she is from Ravenna (in an ambiguous fashion, since Ravenna is not the only city that fits her description),²⁰ that love bound her partner to her and her to him, that love led her and her lover to one death, and that *Caina* awaits their murderer. After he has learned this much, the pilgrim is able to address Francesca by her Christian name: “Francesca, i tuoi martiri / a lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio” (“Francesca, your sufferings make me weep for sadness and pity” [*Inf.* 5.116–17]). Dante's staging thus offers us two possibilities: that he considered Francesca's story notorious, despite its absence from the chronicles available during his lifetime; that he wanted to render the story notorious, which he does principally through the immortal verses he dedicates to its protagonist, but also by treating her as already famous. The reality is most likely a combination of both possibilities, namely, that he took a story that was notorious enough for him to have heard it, but that eventually would have been lost, and made it a story that has never been forgotten.

Given that we can infer from Dante's staging both the conferred and the genuine notoriety of Francesca's story, we can further infer that cultural celebrity is part of the point here: Dante is investigating a certain kind of fame and what it signifies about the public imaginary, *and* he is inventing a certain kind of fame, one that resonates still in our own day. *Inferno* 5 testifies that Francesca's story had made her, by the first decade of the fourteenth century in central Italy, a cultural icon whose recognizability is analogous to that of the late Princess of Wales today. It further testifies that Dante, in taking the notorious but forgettable events of the nascent Malatesta dynasty and fashioning them into Francesca's unforgettable story—which happens also to be the story of its dynastically least valuable member—invented a new kind of celebrity. This new—and, I would argue, gendered—celebrity arises from the dynamic collision of two opposed stresses: the realpolitik of dynastic marriage and the wish-fulfillment fantasy of romance. The paradigm that results revolves around the necessary passivity and indeed victimhood of the story's protagonist in one domain and her agency as she refashions her life to her

¹⁹ A perusal of twentieth-century commentaries on *Inferno* 5 will show that neither of the above guidelines is routine critical practice; commentators do not, first of all, explicitly indicate Dante's historical role in relating Francesca's story, nor, secondly, do they keep clear the boundaries between Dante's account and its elaborations. A separate study could be done of issues relating to the commentary tradition, which include the questions raised by Dante's own reticence. For instance, what did Dante think a reader would make of the verse “Caina attende chi a vita ci spense”? While suggestive of fratricide in its allusion to Cain, its precise significance can only be ascertained through a commentary or prior knowledge of the *Inferno*. By the same token, did Dante take for granted that commentators would furnish, in the case of Francesca for instance, at least the necessary names and a skeletal version of events? As it happens, commentators immediately began to fill in the gaps, so that the question of what reading of *Inferno* 5 emerges from an encounter unmediated by notes can be entertained only as a thought experiment.

²⁰ Antonio Enzo Quaglio points out that “altre città, oltre a Ravenna, potrebbero teoricamente ambire, per la loro posizione geografica, compresa nell'allora estuario padano, a tale onore”; see “Francesca da Rimini tra Dante e Boccaccio,” in *Al di là di Francesca e Laura* (Padua, 1973), p. 10.

liking in the other. Moreover, through the pilgrim's behavior, Dante charts the culture's voyeuristic response to such a female protagonist—a response that we have witnessed exponentially multiplied (in the case of Diana, for instance), although not fundamentally altered, in our own time. But the canto's austere biographical minimalism also suggests that Dante, while wanting to engage in a cultural debate whose coordinates are dynastic marriages on the one hand and romance on the other, wanted to set the terms of the debate at a relatively high level. While our compulsion to cultural voyeurism is necessarily part of what needs to be examined in this context, it is not a compulsion to which Dante panders.

Or is it? Here, too, the issue is a complex one, for while Dante does not stoop to the tabloid level of the commentators, one could reasonably claim that he solicits their reactions by setting romance as part of his agenda. He does indeed set romance as part of a broad agenda, one that also includes politics and power and the interplay between those forces. Over centuries of interpretation we have impoverished the canto by reading it primarily in the key of romance, at the most expanding the discourse along the moral axis where (in a reading that has always coexisted with the romantic one and that has dominated for some time) romance is countered by reason. Moreover, it is the nature of the *Commedia's* "living" textuality to be dialectical, to catch the reader in the vice, for example, of loving Vergil and losing him, or, in this instance, in the act of voyeurism that the text both solicits and rebukes.²¹ What happened after Francesca and Paolo ceased to read that day? Where the commentary/tabloid is driven to create fullness at all costs, the *Commedia* gives us the generative openness of life itself: a world of possibilities, not of answers.

Dante places Francesca among the carnal sinners, driven by a relentless wind in hell as they were driven by their passions in life: "a così fatto tormento / enno dannati i peccator carnali, / che la ragion sommettono al talento" ("to such torment are damned the carnal sinners, who subject reason to desire" [*Inf.* 5.37–39]). Vergil identifies Semiramis, Dido, Cleopatra—the presence of three ruling queens here seems relevant to the dynastic considerations that underwrote the union of Francesca with Gianciotto—and then Helen, Achilles, Paris, and Tristan. (He points to and names over a thousand shades, but these are the ones whose names Dante shares with us.) In the course of listing these souls, the narrative register shifts (beginning with Achilles, the first man) from critical and moralistic to pitying and romantic. In semantic terms, we move from "lust" to "love": from *lussuria* and *lussuriosa*, referring to Semiramis's "vice of lust" and Cleopatra "the lustful," we move to the *amore* with which Achilles struggles at the end and the *amor* that has caused more than one thousand souls to depart this life.

Tercet 70–72, which functions as a pivot between the two halves of canto 5, between the half of the canto that builds up to Francesca and the half that she dominates, is tasked with romanticizing the discourse. Here the narrator refers to the previously named "peccator carnali" as "le donne antiche e ' cavalieri" (line

²¹ On loving Vergil and losing him, see Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the "Comedy"* (Princeton, N.J., 1984) chap. 3; on the dialectical and "living" nature of the *Commedia's* textuality, see Barolini, *The Undivine "Comedy": Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), passim.

71)—carnal sinners become ladies of old and knights. The earlier figures are here indiscriminately recast in a romantic glow; they are now ladies and knights, romance heroes and heroines. With a romantic register arrives a romantic agenda, signaled by the issues of complicity and involvement that suddenly surface. When the pilgrim has heard Vergil name the ladies and knights of old, pity overcomes him and he is “almost lost”: “pietà mi giunse, e fui quasi smarrito” (line 72). The narrator’s moral clarity (“to such torment are damned the carnal sinners, who subject reason to desire”) has given way to the pilgrim’s moral confusion.

Under the aegis of this moral confusion the encounter with Francesca takes place, initiated by an expressed attraction on Dante’s part; summoned by the pilgrim, the two approach and Francesca begins to speak. The trecento commentators commonly mark this juncture as a transition from ancients to moderns (see the passage from Jacopo Alighieri cited above: “Essendosi degli antichi infino a qui ragionato, di due modernamente si segue”). This is certainly an important consideration, although it should be noted that the boundary between ancients and moderns is in fact somewhat fuzzier; Tristan, named last in the previous list, is already a modern, and a quintessentially romantic modern at that. As is frequently the case in the dynamic between the *Commedia* and its critics, a transition viewed by critics as absolute is engineered by the poet as a graduated process. So, too, in this particular case, the transition does not occur all at once: stringent precepts slacken gradually, until we reach the pivotal tercet that proclaims the “peccator carnali” to be “donne antiche e ’ cavalieri,” by which point we have entered a new frame of reference. Once accomplished, the transition from ancients to moderns is a subset in the larger transition from the frame of moral responsibility to the frame of romance.

In theologized terms, to enter the frame of romance signifies entering a context in which moral responsibility and personal agency are suspended by an all-consuming sentiment, where passion rules untrammelled by reason. In this context Francesca’s passivity is a function—as also etymologically—of her passion; her passivity reflects her sinful refusal of moral agency, her refusal to fashion herself as a Christian agent. She consistently produces herself as an object, and the critical tradition has responded by reading her story, and even her syntax, as a symptom of the lust for which she is damned. To give a recent example from my own writing, I offer the syntax of the lover in Dante’s erotic canzone “Io son venuto” as a source for Francesca’s syntax, noting that “Francesca, too, uses constructions in which Love is subject and she is the passive object.”²² Specific to my argument is the connection to Dante’s lyric past; the reading of Francesca’s syntactic passivity as inherently sinful is by now a critical topos. Like the lover persona of Dante’s canzone, Francesca experiences love as a compulsive force, as a desire that cannot be withstood, even if it leads to death; unlike the lover in the canzone, she is situated in a moral context in which desire unchecked by free will and reason is sinful.

Such a reading, absolutely not gendered, is not only not wrong; it is canonical

²² See “Dante and Cavalcanti (On Making Distinctions in Matters of Love): *Inferno* 5 in Its Lyric Context,” *Dante Studies* 116 (1998), 31–63, where I note that Francesca’s “Amor . . . non m’abbandona” (*Inf.* 5.103, 105) echoes the “Amor . . . non m’abbandona” of the lover of “Io son venuto,” verses 23–25.

and hermeneutically fundamental, as the canto's reception demonstrates. Nonetheless, I believe that a gendered reading can supplement our understanding of what is at stake for Dante in *Inferno* 5, and that the paradigm of realpolitik versus romance provides the framework for a gendered reading. Against this framework an alternative reading suggests itself, whereby Francesca's syntactic passivity reflects, first, her authentic historical passivity as dynastic pawn in a world where matrimonial alliances were power politics and, second, her ability to create pleasurable passivity for herself as the object of a man's attention. To the degree that Francesca succeeds in obtaining pleasure for herself that would otherwise be denied her, to the degree (I should probably specify) that Dante's Francesca definitely succeeds in obtaining pleasure that may or may not have been obtained by the historical Francesca, it is possible to find agency in her passivity. Thus, by figuring herself as object in a romantic fantasy, as literal syntactic object in a verse like "la bocca *mi* basciò tutto tremante" ("all trembling he kissed *me* on the mouth" [*Inf.* 5.136; italics mine]), Francesca may be seen as asserting her agency and her personhood against a dynastic patriarchy that assigned no value to her pleasure.²³

I am arguing, in other words, that agency is doubly constituted in this canto, both along the moral axis to which we are accustomed and along a gendered—historicized—axis. Although we are not explicitly accustomed to the latter, its latent presence is nonetheless most likely responsible for the sympathy the canto has always elicited for its female protagonist from the mostly male readers who have traditionally written about the experience of reading *Inferno* 5. Sensing the presence of gendered issues in the canto, these readers have expressed their awareness in sympathy for Francesca: thus there have been romantic celebrations of her refined "femininity" that have in turn drawn the scorn of less impressionistic commentators, who have insisted, legitimately enough, on the rubric "carnal sinners."²⁴ Sympathy for Francesca has taken the form of male gallantry, wanting to excuse her simply because of her sex, but without taking into account what her sex actually signifies. Dante, however, I propose, does take into account Francesca's sex and its significance: the issue of agency is complicated precisely by Dante's

²³ In thinking of how Francesca could actively construct her passivity, I found useful Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, N.C., and London, 1984). According to Radway, "To qualify as a romance, the story must chronicle not merely the events of a courtship but *what it feels like* to be the *object* of one" (p. 64). Further on, Radway writes, "Passivity is at the heart of the romance experience in the sense that the final goal of each narrative is the creation of that perfect union where the ideal male, who is masculine and strong yet nurturant too, finally recognizes the intrinsic worth of the heroine. Thereafter, she is required to do nothing more than *exist* as the center of this paragon's attention. Romantic escape is, therefore, a temporary but literal denial of the demands women recognize as an integral part of their roles as nurturing wives and mothers. It is also a figurative journey to a utopian state of total receptiveness where the reader, as a result of her identification with the heroine, feels herself the *object* of someone else's attention and solicitude. Ultimately, the romance permits its reader the experience of feeling cared for and the sense of having been reconstituted affectively, even if both are lived only vicariously" (p. 97).

²⁴ While Francesco De Sanctis is voluble on Francesca's feminine "delicatezza," his romantic sensibility does not lead him to make the ultimate error—for which he castigates Pierre Ginguéné—of holding that she is not damned; see "Francesca da Rimini," orig. 1869, repr. in *Lezioni sulla "Divina Commedia,"* ed. Michele Manfredi (Bari, 1955), pp. 137–47.

desire to engage, along with the nongendered moral issues, also the gendered and historical issues that are implicit in his choice of a female protagonist whom he situates within the coordinates of dynastic marriage and romance.

While it is a critical commonplace to note that Francesca takes no responsibility for her life story, it is not a critical commonplace to historicize her life; as I indicated at the outset, the historicizing framework provided by the early commentators was lost to the tradition by the Renaissance. Only the act of historicizing Francesca, however, allows us to remember that, in real life, responsibility was available to her exclusively in the forms of acceptance and resignation. I will turn later to reconstructing in greater detail the context of the historical Francesca as Dante may have viewed it; for the moment, in returning to the text I would ask the reader to bear in mind that lack of agency in Francesca's language is a complex signifier that cuts across multiple domains and resonates differently in each.

In her famous tercets, each beginning with "Love" as subject, Francesca draws on the fundamental tenets of the established amatory code to tell her story in, precisely, coded form. The chosen code dictates biographical and historical opacity; in place of recognizable humans engaging in recognizable human behavior, the code renders the lovers as particles adrift in a force field governed by powers beyond their control: love, beauty, nobility. When other people are involved, they are rendered as demonized abstractions. Deftly and densely these verses weave a plot that contains no human agency. The first tercet goes to the heart of Francesca's story by placing her and her lover on a matrix of love and violent death, while at the same time evading all responsibility for either that love or that death. Profoundly ahistorical, the tercet yet sketches the lineaments of a history that is initiated with the passions of the man. In this chronology Paolo is the first to love: "Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende, / prese costui de la bella persona / che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende" (lines 100–102). The syntactic density of this language creates a sense of tightly compacted ineluctability, of a destiny that cannot be escaped. Francesca tells us that love, which is quickly kindled in a noble heart, seized Paolo, that the love that seized him was for her beautiful body, the same body that was taken from her, and that the mode (of what? of loving? of being murdered?) still offends her.²⁵ The agents of causality here are love, which the noble-souled are not able to withstand (this precept recapitulates the poet Guido Guinizzelli, implicitly an authority, and thus another agent of causality);²⁶ Francesca's physical beauty, which seizes Paolo; the unnamed agents that take her body from her; and the mysterious *modo*—the way, the modality—that still offends her. The next tercet is only somewhat less dense. She explains that, since reciprocity in love is obligatory (here she draws on *The Art of Courtly Love* by Andreas Capellanus, another implicit authority, hence agent), love caused by his beauty bound her reciprocally—and eternally: "Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona, / mi prese del costui piacer sì forte, / che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona" ("Love, that absolves no beloved from loving, seized me so

²⁵ For a résumé of interpretations of "e 'l modo ancor m'offende," see the Chiavacci Leonardi commentary to the *Inferno*, pp. 168–69.

²⁶ For the allusion to Guido Guinizzelli in this tercet and to Andreas Capellanus in the next, see Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, pp. 5–7.

strongly for his beauty, that, as you see, it has not yet let me go” [lines 103–5]). Francesca’s two-verse conclusion is less syntactically complex, more stark, still opaque, however, and equally devoted to maintaining the role of object: “Amor condusse noi ad una morte. / Caina attende chi a vita ci spense” (“Love led us to one death. *Caina* awaits him who put out our life” [lines 106–7]).

Again, let us take note of the celebrity these verses imply; these abstract and codified declarations manage to reveal the speaker’s identity to her interlocutor. Once he knows her identity, the pilgrim formulates a query that is undeniably voyeuristic: how did love first permit the lovers to recognize their desires? Her response is classically Dantesque, in terms of “poetic yield,” that is, the ratio of goals achieved (very great) to linguistic expenditure (very sparing). It introduces a new subtext, the romance *Lancelot du Lac*, to whose protagonists Francesca compares herself and Paolo. It brings the complicity of writing and literature ever more to the attention of the reader as a main theme of the canto, a theme that culminates in Francesca’s indictment of the *Lancelot* and its author as the “go-betweens” who brought her and Paolo to the point of surrendering to passion. And, most interesting for the present inquiry, Francesca responds to the implicit voyeurism of the pilgrim’s request by providing a more circumstantial and detailed window onto her affair. We could say that, in response to and in exchange for greater sympathy, she relaxes the tightly scripted nature of the interview she has granted, perhaps even that she poses candidly for the cameras.

The window that Francesca opens onto her life is a window onto Francesca as subject, as agent in the pursuit of pleasure. Reading together one day for pleasure, “per diletto,” the couple read of how love seized Lancelot: the reading constrained their eyes to meet and their faces to pale, and finally—but only when they read of how Lancelot kissed Guenevere—Paolo kissed her. This account is brought up short by two densely suggestive consecutive statements. The first, “Galeotto fu ’l libro e chi lo scrisse” (“A Gallehaut was the book and he who wrote it”), states that the Old French romance and its author occupied the same role—the role of go-between—in the lives of Francesca and Paolo that the knight Gallehaut occupied in the lives of Guenevere and Lancelot. Thus, the *Lancelot* romance and its author—“l libro e chi lo scrisse”—are responsible for bringing together Francesca and Paolo, a formula that seems to leave little room for the agency of the text’s readers. And yet Francesca’s next declaration, “quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante” (“that day we read no further in it”), powerfully concludes with their agency—Francesca’s and Paolo’s agency—both as readers, expressed with the active (not passive) “leggemmo,” and as readers who cease to read. The elliptical concluding verse is an assertion of control over the *Commedia*’s readers as well, who are left to grapple with a statement that suggests volumes but tells nothing. Ultimately, Francesca here uses language to impose silence, for, as though mirroring her recollection of reading no more, she now speaks no more. The artful opacity of her two last declarations—from the impressively allusive “Galeotto” to the tantalizing final “avante” that suggests forwardness while denying it—lapses into genuine silence.

These verses are the genial seal to an interview that dynamically juxtaposes two views of the life story: the life story as reduced to abstract principles versus the life story as reflected in circumstance and specificity. The task of assuaging our

collective desire for the latter was assumed first by the *Ottimo commento* but especially by Boccaccio, who focused a floodlight of biographic and romantic detail onto Dante's magisterially wrought obscurity. As I noted earlier, the *Ottimo* adds the dynastic frame, character sketches of the protagonists, and a servant who conveys the news of the adulterous liaison to Gianciotto. The character sketches are intriguing because they create an implicit motivation for Francesca's infidelity on which Boccaccio later builds. The *Ottimo commento* marks the characters in such a way as to suggest the inherent compatibility of one couple versus the equally inherent incompatibility of the other. Gianciotto is uncouth in his appearance, a brave warrior, and cruel ("uomo dell'abito rustico, e del cuore franco, e armigero, e crudele"); Francesca is very beautiful and lighthearted in her demeanor ("donna bellissima del corpo, e gaia ne' sembianti"); Paolo is very beautiful, well mannered, and disposed more to leisure than to work ("uomo molto bello del corpo, e ben costumato, e acconcio più a riposo, che a travaglio"). Francesca and Paolo are congruent, in balance, while Gianciotto is incongruent, out of balance: if Francesca is "bellissima del corpo," Paolo, too, is "molto bello del corpo"; if Francesca is inclined toward gaiety, Paolo, too, is given to leisure pursuits. Gianciotto, on the other hand, is "dell'abito rustico"; he sports not fine manners but arms; he is, finally, "crudele."

Despite this final adjective, it is not clear that the writer of the *Ottimo commento* prefers Paolo to Gianciotto; rather, he codes the brothers as opposites, with Gianciotto the man of action and Paolo the lightweight dandy. Boccaccio maintains the previous commentator's system of coded characters but adjusts the values so that Gianciotto is more repellent and Paolo less flighty. The result, in Boccaccio's arrangement, is a marriage which, because of the perceived discrepancy of the partners, is viewed as potentially explosive even before it occurs. This manifest instability causes one of Guido da Polenta's friends to alert him to the scandal that could arise from such a union, and to warn him that if Francesca sees Gianciotto before the marriage knot is tied, no one will be able to compel her to take him:

Guardate come voi fate, per ciò che, se voi non prendete modo ad alcuna parte, che in questo parentado egli ve ne potrà seguire scandolo. Voi dovete sapere chi è vostra figliuola, e quanto ell'è d'altiero animo; e se ella vede Gian Ciotto avanti che 'l matrimonio sia perfetto, né voi né altri potrà mai fare che ella il voglia per marito. (Boccaccio, *Esposizioni*, p. 315)

(Be careful how you proceed, for if you do not take precautions, this wedding may bring scandal. You know your daughter, and how high-spirited she can be. If she sees Gianciotto before the marriage is concluded, neither you nor anyone else can make her go through with it. [Trans. Domandi, p. 87])

The friend further advises that one of Gianciotto's brothers be sent to Ravenna to marry Francesca as his proxy, "come suo procuratore" (p. 315). Guido da Polenta prefers Gianciotto to his brothers as his future son-in-law, despite his being ugly and crippled ("sozo della persona e sciancato"), because he expects Gianciotto to become the next lord of Rimini:

Era Gian Ciotto uomo di gran sentimento e speravasi dover lui dopo la morte del padre rimanere signore; per la qual cosa, quantunque sozo della persona e sciancato fosse, il

disiderava messer Guido per genero più tosto che alcuno de' suoi fratelli. (Boccaccio, *Esposizioni*, p. 315)

(Gianciotto was a very capable man, and everyone expected that he would become ruler when his father died. For this reason, though he was ugly and deformed, Messer Guido wanted him rather than one of his brothers as a son-in-law. [Trans. Domandi, p. 87])

And so Paolo, whom Boccaccio describes, following the *Ottimo commento*, as “bello e piacevole uomo e costumato molto” (“a handsome, pleasing, very courteous man” [p. 315, trans. p. 87]), comes to Ravenna to marry Francesca. Paolo’s symmetrical beauty makes Francesca, also beautiful, vulnerable to the trap that has been set for her. When a maid points to Paolo through a window, indicating him as Francesca’s future husband, Francesca immediately falls in love.

Having dealt with the issues of moral responsibility raised by the arrangement of the marriage and resolved them resoundingly in Francesca’s favor, Boccaccio turns to the part of the story that can only run its preordained course; here, too, he finds ample opportunity to furnish the details lacking in Dante’s account. Francesca learns that she has been deceived when she awakens the morning after her wedding and finds Gianciotto by her side. She is angry, and continues steadfast in her love for Paolo: “vedendosi ingannata, isdegnasse, né perciò rimovesse dell’animo suo l’amore già postovi verso Polo” (“Whereupon she realized she had been fooled, and, as can well be believed, she became furious. Nor did the love she had conceived for Paolo disappear” [p. 316, trans. p. 88]). Boccaccio’s Francesca is thus the initiator of the romance with her brother-in-law: Boccaccio’s desire to legitimize Francesca’s later behavior by having her fall in love with the man whom she fully expects to be her husband, *before* the marriage has taken place, causes him to reverse Dante’s story on this important point, in a move that secures for Francesca both more agency and less culpability. (The *Ottimo commento* does not need to deviate from Dante in this way, since it is less committed to exculpating Francesca.) While Boccaccio is clear that Francesca is the leader in this pas-de-deux, he leaves undisclosed the manner in which the dance first begins, distancing himself in this regard, too, from the author of the *Ottimo commento*, who devotes nearly half of his commentary to describing the couple’s first erotic encounter:

Finalmente stando l’uno con l’altro senza nulla sospicione siccome cognati, e leggendo nella camera della donna un libro della Tavola Ritonda, nel quale era scritto come Lancilotto innamorò della reina Ginevra, e come per mezzana persona, cioè Galeotto Lo-Bruno, Signore dell’Isole lontane, elli si congiunse insieme a ragionare di loro amore, e come il detto Lancilotto per virtù di quello ragionamento conosciuto l’amoroso fuoco, fu baciato dalla reina; al quale punto pervegnendo la detta Francesca, vinse la forza di questo trattato sì lor due, che posto giù il libro vennero all’atto della lussuria. . . .

(Finally they were together without suspicion as in-laws, reading in the lady’s room a book of the Round Table, in which was written how Lancelot fell in love with queen Guenevere, and how through an intermediary, that is Gallehaut, lord of the Far Islands, they came together to talk of their love, and how Lancelot by virtue of this discourse knew the amorous flame and was kissed by the queen; when Francesca reached this point the force of that story so overcame them that putting down the book they came to the act of lust. . . .)

From the crisply transparent “vennero all’atto della lussuria,” it is only a short distance to the conclusion of the *Ottimo*’s tale: news of the indiscretion leaks, a servant alerts Gianciotto, Gianciotto kills his wife and brother together “nella detta camera”—her room, the room in which they met to read. Boccaccio greatly amplifies the death scene, describing at length how Gianciotto traps the lovers in Francesca’s room, which is bolted from within. Francesca goes to open the door, thinking that Paolo has successfully fled through a trapdoor to a room below, not realizing that the fold of his jacket has caught on a piece of iron. Gianciotto runs at his brother with his rapier, but Francesca literally intervenes, placing herself between the two men. Gianciotto unintentionally kills his wife; he then kills Paolo.

The complex story that Boccaccio invented—beginning with its high-spirited heroine and deformed intended, moving through the decision to deceive her through a proxy marriage and her undeception on being wed, and culminating with the double killing of interposed wife and brother—omits the emotional high-point of the original episode in *Inferno* 5: the moment when the lovers, while reading from the *Lancelot* romance, come to realize that they love each other, the moment that Dante’s Francesca evokes with the greatest candor, the only moment that Dante really portrays.²⁷ Boccaccio omits this scene not clandestinely, but with great fanfare, inserting himself into the story to declare categorically that he cannot comment on this point since he has never heard anything on this subject other than what Dante wrote, and that while Dante’s account may be true, he thinks it more likely to be a fiction constructed on the basis of what might have happened:

Col quale come ella poi si giugnesse, mai non udi’ dire se non quello che l’autore ne scrive; il che possibile è che così fosse: ma io credo quello essere più tosto fizione formata sopra quello che era possibile ad essere avvenuto, ché io non credo che l’autore sapesse che così fosse. (Boccaccio, *Esposizioni*, p. 316)

(I have never heard tell how they then got together, other than what [Dante] writes; and it is possible that it did happen that way. But I believe that it is probably a fiction constructed upon what might possibly have happened; and that the author did not know what really took place. [Trans. Domandi, p. 88])

What is at stake for Boccaccio here? What does his defiant and selective reticence—since on every other point he adds detail and texture to the *Ottimo*’s simple canvas—achieve?

Boccaccio succeeds in an act of multiple distancing, which works to enhance the credibility of his version of Francesca’s story over against those of his rivals, Dante included. He thus creates himself—very successfully, as is attested by the immediate and continuing acceptance of his story, a story that has utterly contaminated the reception of canto 5—as the creator of the canonical romance of Francesca. He distances himself from Dante by excising the climax of Dante’s account, the scene inscribed most vividly into the collective memory; moreover, he castigates Dante for including it and openly impugns its credibility. He distances himself

²⁷ Vittorio Russo points out that Boccaccio’s suppression of this point is part of his creation of a Francesca who is not surprised into loving but chooses to love; see “Nuclei e schemi narrativi nelle *Esposizioni*,” in “*Con le Muse in Parnaso*”: *Tre studi su Boccaccio* (Naples, 1983), pp. 109–65, at p. 160.

from the *Ottimo* and all previous commentators by implying that he learned the story firsthand and orally and not from a prior written source.²⁸ He goes right to the threshold of the crucial scene, specifying that Francesca does not remove her love from Paolo when she realizes that she is married to Gianciotto. But as to how subsequently Francesca was first united with Paolo, Boccaccio refuses to comment. Where the *Ottimo* follows Dante in uniting the lovers through their reading together of Lancelot and Guenevere (and then makes explicit the “atto di lussuria” that Dante leaves unspoken), Boccaccio puts a marker, a red flag, and then picks up with the moment when Gianciotto leaves town.

The scene that Boccaccio omits is powerfully specular, a *mise en abyme* where our passions are engaged as we read of passionate readers reading about passion. Perhaps deciding that Dante’s version of that scene would always be the strongest, Boccaccio harnesses its power indirectly, by refusing to add to the only scene that Dante had previously portrayed. Boccaccio also harnesses the power of Dante’s text by opposing it; by taking his stand against all that reading and textuality—all that “fizione formata”—he casts himself as the scrupulous historian who works from oral sources. The others, the ones who invent, are the writers of romances; he includes nothing in his account that he cannot verify. However, the salutary words that he applies to Dante’s love scene—“non credo che l’autore sapesse che così fosse”—cannot be applied to his own account. The result of Boccaccio’s canny and aggressive move is to emerge as the shaper of the canonical and definitive—and definitively romanticized—Francesca.

Boccaccio betrays a particular emotional investment in Francesca’s story. His use of the word “procuratore” for Paolo points to the talismanic significance that Francesca’s story possessed for a writer who coteduled his great work “prencipe Galeotto,” referring to the same “prince Gallehaut” who served as Lancelot’s agent (*procuratore*) to Guinevere, and with whom Francesca identified the book that joined her to Paolo: “Galeotto fu ’l libro e chi lo scrisse.” As the author of “il libro chiamato Decameron cognominato prencipe Galeotto” (“the book called Decameron also known as Prince Gallehaut”), Boccaccio fashions himself into a *procuratore* of the word and alludes to the liberating power of language—that ultimate go-between—in the lives of the disenfranchised, synecdochically the women to whom he addresses the *Decameron*, viewed as so many Francescas.

²⁸ I agree completely with Torraca’s statement that “Al racconto del Boccaccio si è fatto troppo onore attribuendogli valore storico; è una novella” (“Il canto V dell’*Inferno*,” p. 416). He argues compellingly both for the impossibility of Boccaccio’s story (for instance, that it was impossible for Francesca not to have known who Paolo was, and to whom he was married when “Appunto per la contea di Ghiaggiolo, Paolo aveva avuto una lite con il Capitolo di Ravenna” [p. 414]), and for the evident romance precedents for Boccaccio’s plot (e.g., Tristan, who marries Iseult as Mark’s proxy, while Iseult believes she is genuinely marrying Tristan). Quaglio nonetheless views Boccaccio’s personal intrusion into the account as the caution of a scrupulous historian (“Francesca da Rimini tra Dante e Boccaccio,” pp. 18–19), this despite the fact that Boccaccio’s fictions are replete with similar rhetorical techniques. Both Vittorio Russo and Jonathan Usher speak to the novella-like strategies that Boccaccio carries over from previous fictions to his treatment of Francesca; Russo concentrates on parallels with the *Decameron* (see “Nuclei e schemi narrativi nelle *Esposizioni*,” pp. 154–65), while Usher demonstrates links to the *Filocolo* (see “Paolo and Francesca in the *Filocolo* and the *Esposizioni*,” *Lectura Dantis: A Forum for Dante Research and Interpretation* 10 [1992], 22–33).

The implicit strength of Dante's Francesca, who speaks and does not weep, in marked contrast to her man, who weeps and does not speak, is unpacked by Boccaccio, who bestows on Francesca an "altiero animo" that makes her capable—like his own Ghismonda—of liberating but fatal choices.²⁹ The appeal of such a character for Boccaccio, who created so many women capable of standing their ground in a male world, is evident. His addition to the *Ottimo's* description of Francesca is telling, since it underscores Francesca's identity, her selfhood—"Voi dovete sapere chi è vostra figliuola, e quanto ell'è d'altiero animo"—and lets us know that the strength of this self is such as to withstand any form of coercion: "e se ella vede Gian Ciotto avanti che 'l matrimonio sia perfetto, né voi né altri potrà mai fare che ella il voglia per marito" (*Esposizioni*, p. 315; italics mine). Moreover, Francesca's appeal is now universalized, so that for the first time in the story's transmission we learn that Gianciotto, too, adored his wife: "avvenne quello che egli non arebbe voluto" ("And thus happened what he would not have wanted"), writes Boccaccio of the moment when he accidentally kills her, adding that Gianciotto is "turbato . . . sì come colui che più che se medesimo amava la donna" ("distressed, as one who loved the woman more than his very self" [*Esposizioni*, p. 317]).

With this Francesca's apotheosis as a fully romanticized icon is complete, leaving her only to be accorded the burial in one tomb with Paolo that awaits the *Decameron's* star-crossed lovers. At the same time, however, that Boccaccio heightens the romantic element of the story, he does not neglect its quotient of realpolitik. He takes care to remind us that Gianciotto leaves Rimini for political reasons, writing that he went to a nearby town "per podestà" ("as mayor"). And, as I noted earlier, Boccaccio raises the political stakes of this story by specifying that Francesca's father chose the son-in-law whom he expected to become the next lord of Rimini. In other words, the commentators who most capitalized on the romance elements of *Inferno* 5, Boccaccio and the *Ottimo*, did not do so at the expense of the historical and political realities that undergird Francesca's story. As their versions show, they understood her story as situated at the juncture of two opposed stresses: dynastic realpolitik on the one hand and the desire for romance on the other. A woman who was bartered, deceitfully and without her consent, into a marriage that was a political transaction, and that she considered incapable of giving her personal fulfillment or happiness, desired more; the desire for more—the desire for love—killed her. The fact that her reasons for believing that she could not love Gianciotto, like her reasons for falling in love with Paolo—the ugliness of the former, the beauty of the latter—are superficial by today's standards is not the point; these were culturally sanctioned reasons, coded norms that in themselves reflect a suspect view of women as externalized beings without interiority. Suspect as these norms are, however, they allow the commentators a code in which to express Francesca's legitimate sense of outrage. By the same token, far from downplaying the political aspect of this narrative, Boccaccio underscores it in a bid for sympathy for his heroine, accentuating the brutality of

²⁹ Russo makes the connection to Ghismonda, noting similarities of character that are reflected in identical descriptions: "[Francesca] è 'd'altiero animo' così come Ghismonda è d'animo altiero" ("Nuclei e schemi narrativi nelle *Esposizioni*," p. 163).

Guido da Polenta's political scheming and his conniving indifference to his daughter's welfare. Her romantic inclinations are viewed in a more sympathetic and less self-indulgent light against the backdrop of her father's unvarnished cruelty.

Let us turn now to the latent presence of the historical Francesca in the *Commedia*. *Inferno* 5 reveals its sure grip of political realities through its cast of characters: the group of souls to which Francesca belongs includes three ruling queens. What Semiramis, empress of Assyria, Dido, founder and queen of Carthage, and Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, have in common is that each sooner or later ruled in her own right; each was a wielder of power. They are all, in this sense, masculine women; the name "Dido" was glossed by Servius as meaning "‘virago,’ a woman who has done something masculine."³⁰ Dante calls Semiramis "empress of many tongues" and underlines that she was first Ninus's wife and then became his successor, in which capacity she "held the land that the Sultan now commands": "sucedette a Nino e fu sua sposa: / tenne la terra che 'l Soldan corregge" (*Inf.* 5.59–60). Semiramis is thus doubly manlike, first in being successor to her husband and second in holding the land now held by the sultan. Semiramis and Francesca are textually linked through the word *terra*, which recurs in this canto to describe the land of Francesca's birth, the city whose political fortunes determined her destiny, not because she took power over it but simply because she was born there: "Siede la terra dove nata fui. . . ." These are Francesca's first words, words in which she identifies herself not by name, as so many characters in Dante's poem do, but by the place that defines her. The different status of these two women is fully expressed in their relation to the word *terra*: on the one hand "tenne la terra" speaks of agency, power, and possession; on the other Francesca's sense of self is mediated through her position in a family dynasty that renders her powerless, possessed, and controlled.

Dante was astute in taking the measure of the lords of Romagna, who were known throughout Europe for their murderous and treacherous quarrels.³¹ Among the lowest traitors in hell is Alberigo de' Manfredi of Faenza, the "frate Alberigo" whom Dante calls the "worst spirit of Romagna" ("[il] peggiore spirito

³⁰ Marilyn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval "Aeneid"* (Minneapolis, 1994), p. 83. In her treatment of Dido in *Inferno* 5, Desmond claims that Dante allows Dido agency: "But *Inferno* 5 categorizes the sinners in the second circle for the fact that they allowed their reason to be overcome by desire, a context that assigns Dido the position of subject rather than object of desire" (p. 96). The "intense engagement with Virgil's text and Dido as its female protagonist" (p. 97) that Desmond discerns in canto 5 is a key factor in dictating a female protagonist for the canto. In many respects Francesca, who comes to Dante from "la schiera ov'è Dido" (*Inf.* 5.85), is a modern correlative of Dido, "che s'ancise amorosa" (*Inf.* 5.61): both figure the link between desire and death. The two differ most markedly in their relation to power; in this context Dido comes into play as what Francesca was not.

³¹ See John Larner, *The Lords of Romagna: Romagnol Society and the Origins of the Signorie* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1965), pp. 71–72, who writes: "A French legate of the fourteenth century did not scruple to compare them [the Romagnols] to the English: 'so treacherous and extravagant, are they,' he wrote, 'that in feasting and falsehood they are little different from Englishmen. But they are much more cunning, and with no shadow of doubt more intelligent than the English, so that in reputation and performance, they hold the monarchy of perfidy among other Italians.' 'An old proverb,' wrote Matteo Villani, 'says that the Romagnol bears his faith in his breast. One should not be surprised that the tyrants of Romagna lack faith, since they are both tyrants and Romagnols.' "

di Romagna” [*Inf.* 33.154]); he held the infamous dinner party at which the fruit course was the signal to kill his cousin and other guests. (As we shall see, dinner parties of this sort were a Romagnol trademark.) Another Romagnolo among the traitors is Tebaldello de’ Zambrasi, also of Faenza, who opened the gates of his town to Guelf enemy forces “while it slept” (“ch’apri Faenza quando si dormia” [*Inf.* 32.123]). In *The Lords of Romagna* John Larner points out that Tebaldello “had married his daughter Zanbrasina [*sic*], to Tano di Ugolino di Fantolino, one of the Guelf leaders who entered the town, and his fellow citizens should have realised that his new family interests were hardly likely to be subordinated to abstract ideals of loyalty” (p. 46). Tebaldello’s family interests are relevant to our story, since they eventually coincided with Malatesta interests: Zambrasina, after being widowed, married the recent widower Gianciotto Malatesta, and bore him five children, thus achieving the unique status of being wife of one traitor in Dante’s hell and daughter of another.³²

The Romagnol dynasty most consistently linked by Dante to cruelty and treachery is the Malatesta clan.³³ In *Inferno* 27’s catalogue of Romagnol tyrants Malatesta da Verucchio and his eldest son Malatestino, the first and second lords of Rimini, are mastiffs who “make an auger of their teeth,” who use their teeth, in other words, to pierce their subjects’ flesh as a tool with a screw point might bore through wood. And, while in canto 27 the Malatesta are one of a group of castigated *tiranni*, in canto 28 Dante singles them out, describing at length one of Malatestino’s political murders achieved through the typical means: betrayal. Pier da Medicina³⁴ tells the pilgrim to warn the “two best men of Fano” that they are to be killed “through the treachery of an evil tyrant” (“per tradimento d’un tiranno fello” [*Inf.* 28.81]); the tyrant is further described as “that traitor who sees with but one eye” (“Quel traditor che vede pur con l’uno” [line 85])—a reference to Malatestino, who had only one eye and was therefore known as Malatestino dall’Occhio. The men will be drowned, says Piero, after being summoned to a conference with Malatestino (“farà venirli a parlamento seco” [line 88]); the parley is a particularly telling detail since the Malatesta specialized in traitorous invitations. Also noteworthy is the rhetoric that Dante employs for this crime. He invokes Neptune, who has seen nothing as heinous from one end of the Mediterranean to the other: “Tra l’isola di Cipri e di Maiolica / non vide mai sì gran fallo Nettuno, / non da pirate, non da gente argolica” (“Between the islands of Cyprus

³² Zambrasina’s first husband was Tano (Ottaviano) dei Fantolini, son of the Ugolino de’ Fantolini whom Guido del Duca apostrophizes in *Purgatorio* 14, calling him secure in his good name because of the deaths of his male heirs. He died, along with his father-in-law Tebaldello, in 1282, in the battle of Forlì to which Dante refers in *Inferno* 27.43–44. Thus Tebaldello was no longer pursuing any interests when his daughter married Gianciotto circa 1286. See Torraca, “Le rimembranze di Guido del Duca,” in *Studi danteschi*, pp. 137–71, esp. p. 168.

³³ Ignazio Baldelli comments that “Dante, per altro, insiste spietatamente sui Malatesta (e su chi era con loro connesso) come naturalmente traditori”; see “Dante, i Guidi e i Malatesta,” in *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, Classe di Lettere e Filosofia, series 3, 18/3 (1988), 1067–70; and *Dante e Francesca* (Florence, 1999).

³⁴ Pier da Medicina has not been clearly identified; it is interesting to note that Benvenuto indirectly links him to Francesca. Depicting Piero as a Romagnol troublemaker who used negotiations between the powerful as an opportunity to sow discord, Benvenuto offers an extended narrative of Piero’s warning Malatesta da Verucchio against Guido da Polenta and vice versa.

and Majorca Neptune never saw so great a crime, not by pirates nor by Argolic folk" [*Inf.* 28.82–84]). Neptune's horror here is a kind of infernal pendant to his amazement at the end of the *Paradiso*, in a passage where the earlier "gente argolica" are recalled through the ship, the *Argo*: "la 'mpresa / che fé Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo" ("the enterprise that made Neptune wonder at the shadow of the *Argo*" [*Par.* 33.95–96]). The similarities between these passages confer a striking importance on the treachery of Malatestino, which becomes a retrospective emblem for hell.

The indictment of Romagna as the cradle of Italian tyranny is most comprehensive and historically precise in *Inferno* 27's catalogue of the region's principal towns, offered by the pilgrim as response to Guido da Montefeltro's query "dimmi se Romagnuoli han pace o guerra" ("Tell me if Romagnoles have peace or war" [*Inf.* 27.28]). Romagna is not and has never been free of war in the hearts of its tyrants, Dante says—"Romagna tua non è, e non fu mai, / senza guerra ne' cuor de' suoi tiranni" (lines 37–38)—alluding with the word "tiranni" to the process Larner describes as "the breakdown of the communes through factions, and the first stages in the slow emergence of the *signorie*, or single-person governments."³⁵ P. J. Jones, in *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, calls Romagna "the province most early addicted to despots" and says that "its chronic war [Dante] rightly sees as the feuding of *tiranni*."³⁶ The *Inferno*'s catalogue of Romagnol towns, or despotisms, begins with Francesca's natal Ravenna and then lists the others, not as they follow the Via Emilia running along the Apennine foothills, but rather in the order Forlì, Rimini, Faenza, Imola, and Cesena;³⁷ the last's fragile commune allows Dante to circle back from individual tyrants to tyranny as a generic curse with the verse "tra tirannia si vive e stato franco" ("[Cesena] lives between tyranny and freedom" [line 54]). He conjures the towns through a combination of geographical, historical, dynastic, and heraldic references; the signorial families are figured by predatory animals associated with their coats of arms.

The Polenta are represented by an eagle that broods over Ravenna and covers nearby Cervia, too, with its wings: "l'aguglia da Polenta là si cova, / sì che Cervia ricuopre co' suoi vanni" (*Inf.* 27.41–42). Benvenuto da Imola, who writes with particular authority about his home province, considers the eagle a symbol of the Polenta family's beneficent rule and a compliment to Guido Novello da Polenta (Dante's host during his final years), and it is true that the eagle's wings are less

³⁵ Larner, *The Lords of Romagna*, pp. 1–2. As Larner describes Romagna: "The collapse of imperial power, which had never been strong, the failure of Bologna (1248–78), and then of the papacy, to dominate the province, meant that there was no central authority to bring order in place of anarchy. By the end of the thirteenth century, leaders of the factions had obtained full control of their towns, and had begun to dominate them through their communal machinery. These men can be called 'tyrants'" (p. 77).

³⁶ P. J. Jones, *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State: A Political History* (Cambridge, Eng., 1974), p. 11.

³⁷ Ravenna is the only major town of Romagna not on the Via Emilia, the Roman road that runs from Rimini on the Adriatic along the line of the Apennine foothills toward Bologna. Dante's geographical precision leads him to include three of the five rivers of which Larner writes: "To meet the towns upon the road, five rivers flowed from the mountains: the Marecchia, Savio, Montone, Lamone, and Santerno" (p. 2).

ferocious—if no less restrictive—than the “green claws” of the Ordelauffi of Forlì or the “young lion” who represents the lord of Faenza. It is also true, however, that the Polentani behaved much as the other despots in the region. Thus, Jones’s account of their rise to power: “Politically they rose first as clients of the Traversari, sharing a place by 1215 in the council of the commune with membership of the episcopal *curia*; and with the ‘pars Traversariorum’ they continued to long collaborate after its fall in 1240, in opposition to the Ghibelline counts of Bagnacavallo. But eventually, in the way of all Italian faction, the party divided. In 1274 the Traversari were expelled; and the following year the Polenta, armed with outside help (from the Malatesta), seized power (*dominium*) forcibly in Ravenna, at the same time taking Comacchio” (p. 18). This bit of history is particularly relevant to our story, for the year in which the Polenta, with the help of the Malatesta, seized power in Ravenna was 1275, the same year in which the alliance of the two ambitious dynasties was further reinforced through the marriage of Francesca da Polenta to Gianciotto Malatesta.³⁸

However we read Dante’s image of the Polenta eagle, there can be no doubt that he reserves his most sanguinary and menacing description for the Malatesta: “E ’l mastin vecchio e ’l nuovo da Verrucchio, / che fecer di Montagna il mal governo, / là dove soglion fan d’i denti succhio” (*Inf.* 27.46–48).³⁹ And, while Ravenna is described as politically stable (“Ravenna sta come stata è molt’anni”; “Ravenna is as it has been for many years” [line 40]), a characterization that lends authority to Polenta rule, the tercet on Rimini fixes on the foundational act of treachery through which, in 1295, Malatesta da Verucchio consolidated his family’s power over the city. Essentially, the Malatesta seized dominion by becoming Guelf and defeating the family aligned with the Ghibellines,⁴⁰ the Parcitadi, an old and powerful imperialist clan that Malatesta da Verucchio did not hesitate to crush despite his connection to it through his first wife.⁴¹ The leader of the Parcitadi faction was the Montagna de’ Parcitadi whom Dante’s mastiffs treat so evilly. In

³⁸ “It was probably at this time [1275], as a seal to the alliance of the da Polenta and the Malatesti, that Francesca, daughter of Guido da Polenta, married Giovanni Scianciotto, ‘the Lame,’ son of Malatesta da Verucchio” (Larner, *The Lords of Romagna*, p. 37). For a more detailed account of Guido Minore’s rise to power, see Augusto Torre, *I Polentani fino al tempo di Dante* (Florence, 1966), pp. 73–76.

³⁹ “And the old mastiff and the new of Verucchio, who dealt with Montagna so evilly, make their teeth into augers where they are wont.” The mastiffs alone among the animals in the catalogue seem not to be connected to the family’s coat of arms, making the choice on the part of the poet the more noteworthy.

⁴⁰ One should bear in mind that, in the context of Romagna, “the Tuscan terms ‘Guelf’ and ‘Ghibelline,’ with their ideological undertones, [were] later and adventitious” (Jones, *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, pp. 14–15); “‘Ghibelline’ and ‘Guelf’ were names without political or social significance” (Jones, p. 19).

⁴¹ Malatesta da Verucchio’s first wife (and mother of five of his children, including Malatestino, Gianciotto, and Paolo) was Concordia di Enrichetto, daughter of the imperial *vicecomes* of Romagna. On her mother’s side she was a Parcitade. See Massèra, “Note malatestiane,” esp. pp. 3–20, “Le mogli di Malatesta da Verucchio.” Jones writes that, although “[Concordia’s] marriage with Malatesta da Verucchio [was designed] in order to prevent the defection of Malatesta to the Guelfs,” it was not successful in that regard and that “Concordia’s death about 1265 was soon to remove what frail restraint upon hostility she may have been” (*The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, p. 30).

their quarrel with the Malatesta the Parcitadi appealed for help to the great Ghibelline warlord and leader in Romagna, Guido da Montefeltro, who “had longstanding differences, personal and public,” with the Malatesta.⁴² According to the anonymous fourteenth-century *Cronaca malatestiana*, the followers of both factions were barricaded in the streets of Rimini, while the Parcitadi awaited the arrival of Guido. Taking advantage of a disturbance caused by the attempt of two asses to mate, Malatesta made a false peace with his opponents, so that “miser Parcitado wrote to the Conte Guido thanking him and explaining that peace had been made so that for the present he need not come” (“miser Parcitado rescrisse al conte Guido ringraziandolo e dicendo como aveva facto paxe, sì che al presente la sua venuta non era de bisogno”).⁴³ Malatesta then hid a portion of his troops in his house and left town with the remainder, but he went only three miles, returned that night, and killed his rivals as they sought to flee.

The hybrid nature of what we call history is beautifully exemplified by the presence of Benvenuto’s commentary to *Inferno* 27 in historical reconstructions of the Malatesta takeover of Rimini: thus Jones’s account of the imprisonment and death of Montagna de’ Parcitadi relies on Benvenuto’s gloss to Dante’s verse “che fecer di Montagna il mal governo.”⁴⁴ And, at the same time that the contaminated nature of history comes into focus, we also see the remarkable and unexploited historical density of Dante’s poetry; the drama of Guido da Montefeltro’s false conversion in the latter part of canto 27, for instance, is ripe for a reexamination that reads his story against the canto’s earlier probing of Romagnol history. There is, to my knowledge, no reading of Dante’s Guido da Montefeltro that takes into account his crucial role in a historical process that Dante deplored: of Guido’s impact on Romagna, Jones writes that the “transformation of local into regional *signoria* was mainly the work of one man.”⁴⁵ By the same token, there is no reading that really confronts the fact that when the pilgrim, speaking to Guido da Montefeltro, refers to the “lunga prova” endured by Forlì before it reduced the French to a “sanguinoso mucchio,” he is referring to events in which historians assign that same Guido da Montefeltro the central—indeed epic—role.⁴⁶ But that

⁴² Jones, *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, p. 38.

⁴³ A translation of the chronicle’s account of 13 December 1295 is in Jones, *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, p. 39; the original is in *Cronaca malatestiana*, ed. Aldo Francesco Massera, *Rerum Italicorum Scriptores*, 15/2 (Bologna, 1922), pp. 5–7 (the quoted sentence is on p. 6).

⁴⁴ See Jones, *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, p. 40; see also Larner, *The Lords of Romagna*, p. 53, n. 53.

⁴⁵ Jones, *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, p. 17. For the “long conflict between the Malatesta and Guido da Montefeltro, which was to continue intermittently until the end of the century,” see Jones, pp. 33–34. Even the imagery of canto 27 can be contextualized with respect to contemporary politics: for instance, Jones mentions a Ghibelline poem that “sets out to contrast the two captains, Guido ‘leone’ and Malatesta da Verucchio ‘veltro’” (p. 34); in *Inferno* 27 Malatesta is a mastiff, rather than a *veltro*, while Guido famously says that his deeds “non furon leonine, ma di volpe” (p. 75).

⁴⁶ Forlì is “the city that already stood long trial and made of the French a bloody heap” (“La terra che fè già la lunga prova / e di Franceschi sanguinoso mucchio” [*Inf.* 27.43–44]). I am not suggesting that Dante views Guido da Montefeltro’s leadership at Forlì negatively; rather, the historical context reveals to what degree Guido is a complexly “epic” figure, more like Ulysses, his companion in the *bolgia* of fraudulent counselors, than we realize. The most historically astute reading of canto 27 to

is a different story from the one that I am tracing, albeit connected to it because of the connections between all the tyrants of Romagna: they were either allied, as were the Guelf Polentani with the Guelf Malatesta, or they were enemies, as were Malatesta da Verucchio and Guido da Montefeltro.

This is the cultural backdrop against which Francesca da Polenta played a historically insignificant role. On this brutal stage, she was the smallest of bit players. Of the family from which she emerged Larner writes, “[T]he treacheries among the da Polenta family assume at times the scale and improbability of Victorian melodrama”; of the family into which she married he continues, “The same murderous quarrels were to split the Malatesti family.”⁴⁷ If we follow the fortunes of the Malatesta in the years following Malatesta da Verucchio’s death in 1312, we find a clan riven by rivalries and addicted to the use of treachery for resolving problems of succession. Malatesta da Verucchio’s eldest son, Malatestino dall’Occhio, was second lord of Rimini, followed by his half brother Pandolfo (a son of Malatesta da Verucchio’s second marriage), who was third lord of Rimini. After Malatestino and Pandolfo, sole rule of Rimini was fiercely contested among Malatesta da Verucchio’s grandsons, the cousins Ferrantino (son of Malatestino dall’Occhio), Ramberto (son of Gianciotto), and Malatesta (son of Pandolfo). Following the sinister family etiquette of issuing invitations and then killing the relatives who showed up, ascendancy was ultimately wrested by Pandolfo’s son Malatesta, who was given the name “Guastafamiglia” for his labors.⁴⁸

History could not provide a more appropriate gloss to Francesca’s verse “Caina attende chi a vita ci spense” than the name of Malatesta Guastafamiglia, fifth lord of Rimini, whose ruthless willingness to destroy his family—*guastare la famiglia*—established the supremacy of his line. If Gianciotto is destined for *Caina*, named for the first fratricide, it is because his was a crime not of passion but of betrayal, not hot but cold. Francesca’s indictment of her husband has troubled readers, who have often taken it as an anomalous expression of deplorable vindictiveness on the part of an otherwise refined and “feminine” nature; some have claimed that Dante was unduly harsh toward Gianciotto, noting that the contemporary Italian penal code is sympathetic to wronged husbands and punishes uxoricide much more mildly than Dante.⁴⁹ However, rather than indicating France-

my knowledge is Francesco Torraca’s; see “Il canto XXVII dell’*Inferno*,” in *Studi danteschi*, pp. 305–46, and also “Il sanguinoso mucchio,” in *Studi danteschi*, pp. 109–21. It is not coincidental that the two cantos to which Torraca, a student of Romagna, devotes in-depth readings are *Inferno* 5 and 27; these are, with *Purgatorio* 14 (see n. 32 above), the cantos of Romagna.

⁴⁷ Larner describes the quarrels for succession among the Polentani after Dante’s death, first the ousting of Dante’s patron, Guido Novello, by his cousin Ostasio, and then the fighting among Ostasio’s sons; see *The Lords of Romagna*, pp. 68–69.

⁴⁸ After telling Malatesta Guastafamiglia’s story, Massèra notes of his moniker: “Così era meritamente soprannominato ‘communiter’ Malatesta” (see “Note malatestiane,” p. 48, n. 2).

⁴⁹ Corrado Ricci, writing in 1891, wonders why Gianciotto is not pitied rather than condemned, and notes that he would be absolved by “today’s tribunals”: “Perchè tanta pietà per la coppia d’Arimino e nemmeno una scusa per la giusta vendetta di Gianciotto? Perchè condannare questo disgraziato, che i tribunali d’oggi assolverebbero, con una frase cruda e spietata ad esser fitto nel duro gelo della Caina, mentre al fratello che l’oltraggiò nell’onore si concede anche oltretomba di stare insieme a Francesca?” (*L’ultimo rifugio di Dante*, p. 119). As recently as 1965 Nevio Matteini claims indulgence for betrayed husbands and commends the contemporary Italian penal code, which, he says,

sca's vindictiveness, the statement "Caina attende chi a vita ci spense" can be seen as constituting a lucid and clear-sighted appraisal of entrenched Malatesta practice: this is a family in which family members killed each other with harrowing regularity. Again, *Inferno* 5 is telling us something about history, and the history of Malatesta da Verucchio's grandsons provides the most compelling gloss to Dante's words, for not only did Gianciotto kill Paolo, but Gianciotto's son killed Paolo's son. The struggle for power among the cousins was so fierce, and betrayal so customary, that Gianciotto's son Ramberto would eventually invite Paolo's son Uberto to dinner and there, in concert with other family members, have him killed.⁵⁰

In this cultural context the murder of Francesca da Polenta in Malatesta was not a serious matter. As we have already seen, it did not prevent Gianciotto from remarrying and producing heirs. Francesca's one child, her daughter Concordia, was of no political importance.⁵¹ In fact, Francesca's death incurred fewer political consequences for the Malatesta than Paolo's murder: Paolo's heirs, the counts of Ghiaggiolo, remained politically hostile to the Malatesta of Rimini,⁵² while the Polentani continued to ally and intermarry with the Malatesta.⁵³ In Francesca's

would sentence Gianciotto to four years' imprisonment: "La coscienza umana e le stesse leggi scritte riconoscono una certa indulgenza ai mariti quando, nel cospetto e nell'ira, lavano col sangue la gravissima ingiuria. Il codice italiano di oggi irrogherebbe a Gianciotto la pena della reclusione a quattro anni circa (art. 587 e art. 62 bis)" (*Francesca da Rimini: Storia, mito, arte*, p. 87). Matteini goes on to explain that the church, too, was less severe toward uxoricide than Dante.

⁵⁰ Larner describes the event: "Uberto, Count of Ghiaggiolo, son of Paolo Malatesta, came into conflict with Malatestino dell' Occhio over the possession of Cesena. In 1324, he was treating secretly with his cousin Ramberto, the son of Giancotto Malatesta, on means by which they might deprive Pandolfo of his rule in Rimini. But Uberto was foolish to trust the son of the man who had murdered his own father. On 21 January, Ramberto invited him to his castle at Ciolaradi, near Roncofreddo, and had him murdered as he dined, by three bastards of the family" (*The Lords of Romagna*, pp. 69–70).

⁵¹ Tonini disputes the existence of a son named Francesco (included, however, by Vasina in the *ED* entry for Gianciotto), and in fact only Concordia is named in her grandfather's will; see *Della storia civile e sacra riminese*, 3:256. Tonini also suggests that Concordia's name is in honor of Malatesta da Verucchio's first wife (3:259).

⁵² In 1269 Paolo married Orabile, the daughter and heir of the last count of Ghiaggiolo. As a result Paolo's heirs were the counts of Ghiaggiolo, and, as Jones writes: "His premature death, and the manner of it, were to make his principal legacy to the Malatesta of Rimini the resentment and hostility of the neighbouring counts of Ghiaggiolo" (*The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, p. 37). During the Malatesta battles for succession, Paolo's son Uberto, count of Ghiaggiolo, allied himself with the Ghibellines. As we have seen (n. 50 above), he was killed by the Malatesta in the standard fashion; Jones notes that "he left a son, Ramberto, to carry on the feud" (p. 56).

⁵³ Historians pay lip service to the idea of a rupture between the Polentani and the Malatesta over Francesca's death but offer no proof; one has the impression that they are projecting what they believe *should* have happened. Thus Torre, following the sixteenth-century historian of Ravenna Girolamo Rossi (who adhered, as was common, to the 1289 date of death for Francesca that we now know to be impossible), writes: "All'anno 1289 e precisamente alla seconda metà . . . il Rossi assegna l'uccisione di Francesca da Rimini e quindi la rottura dell'amicizia fra i Polentani e i Malatesti, rottura che non poteva protrarsi molto, data la coincidenza degli interessi politici" (*I Polentani fino al tempo di Dante*, p. 106). Larner, too, assumes the rupture and writes, providing no explanation, "In March 1290 Malatesta made peace with the da Polenta, on the issue of Francesca's murder" (*The Lords of Romagna*, p. 53).

own generation there was a double intermarriage between the Polentani and the Malatesta: her brother Bernardino da Polenta was married to Maddalena Malatesta, a daughter of Malatesta da Verucchio, and was a useful ally to the Malatesta, helping them to subdue the castle of Sogliano in 1312, long after Francesca's death.⁵⁴ Bernardino's son, Ostasio, who took control of Ravenna from his cousin Guido Novello by force (both men were nephews of Francesca), was a strong ally of Malatesta Guastafamiglia; it was with the help of Ostasio da Polenta that Guastafamiglia was able to complete his work against the descendants of Malatestino dall'Occhio, imprisoning Ferrantino and murdering his son and grandson.⁵⁵

My point about the insignificance of Francesca in this history is made indirectly but decisively by the chronicles. The "first and most authoritative chronicler of Rimini" is, as we have seen, the fourteenth-century historian Marco Battagli, who composed "On the Origins of the Malatesta" ("De origine dominorum de Malatestis") in 1352.⁵⁶ Battagli alludes to the event in which Francesca died without naming her, indeed without acknowledging her existence, except as an implicit cause of Paolo's death, which occurred "causa luxurie": "Paulus autem fuit mortuus per fratrem suum Iohannem Zottum causa luxurie" ("Paolo was killed by his brother Giovanni the lame, on account of lust"). Paolo's death is registered because it affects the succession, and the sentence referring to it is sandwiched between other events of Malatesta dynastic succession:

Dominus autem Malatesta vixit annis C et plus; cui successerunt Malatestinus et Pandolfus. Paulus autem fuit mortuus per fratrem suum Iohannem Zottum causa luxurie. Qui Paulus habuit in dotem comitatum Glazoli. Mortuo Malatestino in dominio postea successit Pandulfus. . . .

(Lord Malatesta lived one hundred years and more; to him succeeded Malatestino and Pandolfo. Paolo was killed by his brother Giovanni the lame, on account of lust. The same Paolo received in dowry the county of Ghiaggiolo. On the death of Malatestino Pandolfo succeeded as lord. . . .)⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Jones, *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, p. 48. The grandson of Malatestino dall'Occhio was married to the daughter of Guido Novello. See Massera, "Note malatestiane," p. 30; Jones, p. 56 n; and Lerner, *The Lords of Romagna*, p. 70.

⁵⁵ "At the beginning of June 1334 Malatesta Guastafamiglia, in concert with Ostasio da Polenta, suddenly seized Ferrantino, his son Malatestino and his grandson Guido, and confined them to the castle of Gradara. Ferrantino was later released in January 1336, but the others were removed to Fossombrone and there put to death" (Jones, *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State*, p. 60). For a full and moving description of these events and the ongoing struggle of Ferrantino's surviving grandson, Ferrantino Novello, see Massera, "Note malatestiane," esp. pp. 32–48, "La guerra malatestiana nel contado di Rimini degli anni 1334–1343."

⁵⁶ Massera calls Battagli's "la prima e più autorevole cronaca riminese" in "Note malatestiane," p. 3.

⁵⁷ *Marcha*, p. 31. Benjamin Kohl's assessment, as expressed to me in a letter, that Battagli here is "clearly reporting political anecdotes from the Romagna" seems fully justified. At the same time, one wonders whether Battagli's choice of words, especially the technical reference to *luxuria*, might not be influenced by Dante's placement of Paolo and Francesca in his *Inferno*. This is the passage that elicits Massera's note: "E' questa la notizia più antica della tragedia che ci rimanga, eccezion fatta dei commentatori dell'*Inferno*, in fonti storiche" (p. 31).

Like Battagli, the author of the *Cronaca malatestiana* refers to the killing of Paolo and Francesca in passing; while at least according Francesca a role in the drama, he, too, dispenses with her name, referring to her merely as wife, “la donna sua”:

Fo facto el ditto Malatestino signore d’Arimino, et era tanto amato, che non se poria contare. Acadde caso così facto, ch’el ditto Zanne sancado suo fratello trovò Paulo so fratello con la donna sua et àbelo morto subito, lui e la donna sua.

(The aforementioned Malatestino was made lord of Rimini, and he was more loved than one could recount. It happened that his brother, the aforementioned Gianni the lame, found Paolo his brother with his lady and immediately killed him, him and his lady.)⁵⁸

Francesca, then, was preserved by Dante, who records her name and saves her from consignment to historical oblivion. She became a cultural touchstone and reference point through the intervention of the fifth canto of the *Inferno*, a text that both conjures the history that we have been tracing and inverts it, giving to Francesca a dignity and a prominence—a celebrity—that in real life she did not possess. In real life her death was less important than that of Paolo, who was yet the least important of Malatesta da Verucchio’s sons, prompting Jones to note, “He was less active than the other members of his family,” and to comment thus on the difference between Paolo and his brothers: “The most resourceful and the most consistent allies of Malatesta da Verucchio were his other sons, Malatestino dall’Occhio (the One-eyed) and Gianciotto, both of whom were warriors, ambitious, able and ruthless, as portrayed in the pages of Dante, and one or other of them was always present with him at the critical moments in his rise to power” (p. 37). Dante captures the lesser political profile of the historical Paolo in canto 5’s mute and ineffectual weeper; moreover, his story of lovers ambushed and murdered in a private and presumably safe place—“soli eravamo e senza alcun sospetto” (“alone we were and without suspicion” [*Inf.* 5.129])—is a chilling evocation of the Malatesta habit of familial execution. But the energy and force of Dante’s Francesca are wholly incompatible with the low dynastic status and faint political resonance of the historical Francesca, who is named in family and contemporary documents only once, with respect to her dowry. The dynasty’s founding patriarch Malatesta da Verucchio, who died in 1312 at age one hundred, mentions Francesca’s dowry in his will of 1311, where he enjoins Concordia and her five half siblings (the children of Gianciotto and Zambrasina) to resolve amicably any issues relating to the inheritance of Francesca’s dowry.⁵⁹ This reference to Francesca, in which she exists only in function of her dowry—“pro dotibus olim dominae Franciscae” (“regarding the dowry of the late lady Francesca”)—is the only historical document to record her name.

⁵⁸ The quotation is from page 8. It is worth noting that the author of the *Cronaca malatestiana* certainly knew Dante, whose verses on the treatment of Montagna he approvingly cites on page 7.

⁵⁹ Augusto Vasina cites from Malatesta’s will in the entry “Concordia Malatesta” (*ED* 3:783). The section that names Francesca reads: “pro dotibus olim dominae Franciscae ab eo receptis, uxoris olim Iohannis dicti sui filii et matris dictae dominae Concordiae” (“regarding the dowry of the late lady Francesca, wife of the late aforementioned John his son and mother of the aforementioned lady Concordia, that they have received from him”). The entire will may be found in Tonini, *Della storia civile e sacra riminese*, 4 (Rimini, 1880), appendix pp. 21–35; discussion of the will is on pp. 277–79.

Francesca's name thus becomes the hallmark of Dante's achievement, for the name that is missing from the local chronicles and contemporary histories is the only name connected to this story that *Inferno 5* sees fit to register and preserve, inscribed for all time—all history—into the great poem: “Francesca, i tuoi martiri . . .” It is this disparity between real life and Dante's poem—between absence in the former and presence in the latter—that allows a gendered view of canto 5 to come into focus, not the spuriously gendered reading whereby Francesca's sex takes her off the moral hook, but a true gendered reading based on *her*: her historical existence, her identity, her name. Again, let me make perfectly clear that I am not arguing against the nongendered reading of the episode. Francesca signifies the nexus of desire and death for any reader, male or female. She raises issues of moral agency and responsibility for any reader, male or female. The male pilgrim faints at the canto's end because he is like Francesca, not because he is unlike her. Textually, this identity is reinforced by Francesca's use of language taken from love poetry that was read by—and even written by—Dante. As a representation of the Cavalcantian love that leads to death, as a figure whose “Amor condusse noi ad una morte” echoes Cavalcanti's “Di sua potenza segue spesso morte,” Francesca is not gendered. Rather, she is the avatar of a persona that had been Dante's own.⁶⁰

And yet Francesca is not casually female; her story, as Dante delineates it, is profoundly gendered. The story is that of a woman trapped between the patriarchal constraints of an arranged dynastic marriage in which personal fulfillment is utterly irrelevant and her desires for romantic love, that is, for a love that *she perceives* as taking account of and responding to her unique personhood. The facts that Dante chose to tell Francesca's story at all and that he chose to give it those particular contours are extraordinarily significant, since he thereby raises all the gendered and ideological issues connected to romance. Although Janice Radway, writing about contemporary romance novels, maintains that “all popular romantic fiction originates in the failure of patriarchal culture to satisfy its female members,” she is candid about the difficulty in ascertaining whether “the romance should be considered fundamentally conservative on the one hand or incipiently oppositional on the other.”⁶¹ The Francesca story offers a version of the same dilemma. On the one hand, the medieval romance is more truly oppositional than contemporary popular romances because the female heroine is engaging in an option not sanctioned by society; Francesca's love affair with Paolo is not scripted by the patriarchy, and so reading about it cannot be viewed as a reinforcement of patriarchal ideology. On the other hand, the tragic ending ensures that Francesca is punished; in that she pays for her bid for freedom with her life, and in Dante's text with damnation as well, the story can also be seen as ideologically conservative.

Dante himself seems to be conflicted, and to present us with yet another version of the same dilemma, for on the one hand he gives Francesca (historical) life, and on the other he condemns her to (eternal) death. But damnation and punishment

⁶⁰ On the Cavalcantian issues embedded in *Inferno 5*, see Barolini, “Dante and Cavalcanti.”

⁶¹ *Reading the Romance*, citations from pp. 151 and 209.

must also be historicized and contextualized, and it is important to bear in mind that Dante's treatment of lust is in fact highly unusual: he emphatically does not treat Francesca to the degrading and sexualized punishments that are common in vision literature.⁶² Rather, Dante's treatment of lust is exquisitely psychological, and is centered on a story, the story of one woman and her desire for love. This is the story that attracts the commentators and to which they respond with voyeuristic fascination, enhancing both features of Dante's Francesca, both her vulnerability and her agency. Her vulnerability is inherent in her job description, while her agency transpires from her appropriation of language: she reads, she speaks. It matters little from this perspective if she reads poorly, as critics have held;⁶³ what is important is the agency of those active verbs: "Noi leggiavamo," "leggemmo," "leggemmo." She reads, and by reading she imagines a life for herself different from the one her family assigned her. Nor is she confined to the vicarious pleasure of many female readers of romances, since she acts on what she reads. Whatever his own conflicts may have been, the cultural force of what Dante created was electrifying. For in Francesca, in her combustible mix of vulnerability and agency, Dante establishes a paradigm with a tenacious and enduring hold over our collective imagination: the female figure who is both powerless and strong, and who attracts our attention with her attempts—ultimately deadly—to negotiate that combination.

⁶² Dante's treatment of lust is relatively desexualized in comparison, say, with *Tundale's Vision* (Irish, 1149), where the punishment of both male and female fornicators takes the form of an obscene pregnancy, or *Thurkill's Vision* (English, 1206), where the adulterers must fornicate publicly in an infernal amphitheater; see my "Dante and Cavalcanti" for a fuller discussion of this issue.

⁶³ This commonplace of *dantisti* has been embraced by feminist scholars in other disciplines. Thus Mary-Kay Gamel writes: "Obviously Francesca is not a well-trained student of literature. She doesn't finish the work, she misremembers an important detail (Guinevere kisses Lancelot, not vice versa), she is guilty of the intentional fallacy, and her interpretation is entirely too mimetic" ("This Day We Read No Further": Feminist Interpretation and the Study of Literature," *Pacific Coast Philology* 22 [1987], 7–14). Similarly, Helen Solterer argues: "Women are commonly typed as literalists—unable to pass beyond the letter of a text. From the scores of inscribed female readers in romance to Dante's Francesca, they are presented as reading poorly, prone to misunderstanding" (*The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in French Medieval Culture* [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995], p. 4).

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