

WITHIN REASON'S GARDEN: DANTE ALIGHIERI AND THE REDEFINITION OF COURTLY LOVE

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ABSTRACT & INTRODUCTION

Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* constitutes one of the most famous disavowals of courtly romance and courtly love in Western literary history. Although the entirety of Dante's *Divine Comedy* can be read as a commentary on the nature of love, he prefigures later writers with the creation of the so-called *anti-roman*, a deliberately stereotypical and critical presentation of common tropes of courtly love in the narrative of the damned Francesca da Rimini in *Inferno* 5. It is in this canto, as well as *Purgatorio* 18, that he most clearly rebukes the contemporary notion of courtly love and redefines it in his own terms. Whereas courtly literature presents love as an overpowering storm that eclipses reason, Dante proposes that true love exists in harmony with free will and rational thought. He critiques the genre of courtly romance as a whole, while simultaneously reconceptualizing and offering his own definition of 'love' that aligns with Christian morality.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Francesca and her lover, Paolo, are situated in the second circle of Hell, home to carnal sinners doomed to be whipped about uncontrollably on the winds of desire for all eternity. Just as they were overcome with desire in life, so too are they unable to exert self-control in the afterlife. When Dante asks about the sinners he sees, Virgil begins to obligingly list the famous lovers that make up the cloud of souls. There are famous ancient lovers, such as Semiramis, as well as literary ones, such as Tristram and Isolt. He separates the historical and romantic lovers from the mundane ones, creating a "pantheon of the literature of love."²⁸³ This list of famous lovers—who were oft the subject of the romances with which Dante would have been familiar—prefigures the introduction of the contemporary couple. They are summoned "per quell'amor che i mena,"^{284 285} by the desire that drove them in life and that which still drives them in Hell. Momentarily released from the driving wind, Francesca, accompanied by the silent Paolo, tells Dante the abridged story of their love:

Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende,
prese costui della bella persona
che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende.

Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,
mi prese del costui piacer si forte,
che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona.

Amor condusse noi ad una morte.²⁸⁶

Francesca situates herself as a passive agent totally at the mercy of love, framing her narrative in the typical plots and allegorical language of courtly literature.²⁸⁷ Their love mirrors the rules enumerated by Andreas Capellanus in *The Art of Courtly Love* almost exactly. For instance, Francesca's love for Paolo only comes about after he expresses his love for her "bella persona." He loved her first and his love caused hers. To use Capellanus'

²⁸³ John Freccero, "The Portrait of Francesca: Inferno 5," *Fifty Years with Dante and Italian Literature*, special issue of *MLN* 124, no. 5 (2005): 15.

²⁸⁴ Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia* (Milano: Casa Editrice Hoepli, 1907), *Inf.* 5:77-78.

²⁸⁵ "By the love that drives them." Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 112. All forthcoming translations of *The Divine Comedy* into English come from Musa unless otherwise stated.

²⁸⁶ Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, *Inf.* 5:100-108. "Love, that is quickly kindled in the noble heart, seized this one [Paolo] for the beauty of my body, torn from me: how it happened still offends me. Love, that excuses no one from loving, seized me so strongly with delight in him that, as you see, he never leaves my side. Love led us to one death" (Musa 112).

²⁸⁷ Donald Maddox, "The Arthurian Intertexts of Inferno 5," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 114 (1996): 114.

words, “no one can love unless [she] is impelled by the persuasion of love.”²⁸⁸ This specific rule, number nine, is also one of those that can be more broadly applied to the narrative as a whole and Francesca’s portrayal of love as an overwhelming force.

Francesca continues in this vein, emphasizing her inability to control her reactions in the face of love. This response is represented most prominently by Capellanus’ first rule: “marriage is no real excuse for not loving.”²⁸⁹ At its core, Paolo and Francesca’s relationship is an adulterous one, and that is at the root of their condemnation. As all courtly lovers must be, Francesca is careful to say that she was seized by “amor, ch’a nullo amato amar perdona,” presenting herself as unable to resist. So possessed, she abandons her marriage vows and begins an affair with Paolo. This line can be directly associated with Capellanus’ twenty-sixth rule for lovers—“love can deny nothing to love”²⁹⁰—and is significant because it is here that Francesca implicitly denies that their sin is a sin.²⁹¹ If they are subject to the whims of love and if she, specifically, is a passive object, then she is not responsible for her actions.

Dante, however, believes neither in the spontaneity of love, nor that one can be thus at its mercy.²⁹² One of the most salient examples of this is love’s anaphora, the repetition of the word “amore,” which shows the linear progression from the first feelings kindled in Paolo (“Amor, ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende, prese costui...”) to their sin and, finally, to their tragic death (“Amor condusse noi ad una morte”).²⁹³ The fact that there was a progression at all contradicts the idea that love arose spontaneously. Furthermore, Francesca later reveals that their love took root while reading the story of Lancelot and Guinevere, one of the most famous and popular examples of a courtly romance. Francesca casts both the book and its author as the instigator of their affair. Francesca’s speech and the actions described thus belie the idea of a spontaneous love. Their sin was premeditated, enabled by their reading and took for granted the fact that desire cannot be controlled.²⁹⁴

Critically, however, the couple does not finish the book. They stop at the moment Lancelot and Guinevere kiss—“quando leggemmo il disiato riso / Esser baciato da cotanto

²⁸⁸ Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. John Jay Perry (New York: Columbia University, 1941), 185.

²⁸⁹ Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, 184.

²⁹⁰ Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, 185.

²⁹¹ Freccero, “The Portrait,” 23.

²⁹² Teodolina Barolini, “Dante and Cavalcanti (On Making Distinctions in Matters of Love): Inferno 5 in Its Lyric and Autobiographical Context,” in *Dante and the Origins of Literary Culture*, ed. Teodolinda Barolini (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 89. Barolini cites a letter (c. 1304-05) from Dante to fellow poet Cino da Pistoia containing a response to an earlier letter, *Epistola 3* (c. 1303). In the first letter and accompanying poem (“Io sono stato”), Dante maintains that we are under the dominion of love, a belief which is in line with the general themes of courtly literature. The second, however, contains a reversal of that opinion in the form of a poem, “Io mi credea del tutto esser partito,” and a rebuke of Cino for his adherence to the precepts of courtly love. Though Barolini quotes *Epistola 3* and “Io sono stato” in her article, she merely makes note of the second letter’s existence and general content. Thus, I have chosen to cite her, rather than the letter itself, in support of my argument.

²⁹³ Freccero, “The Portrait,” 27.

²⁹⁴ Manuele Gagnolati and Heather Webb, “Dubiosi Desiri: Mimetic Processes in Dante’s Comedy,” in *Mimesis, Desire, and the Novel: Rene Girard and Literary Criticism*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello and Heather Webb (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 125.

amante”²⁹⁵ —after having been brought together by Galehot, a knight who arranged their meeting. In Francesca’s own words, “Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse.”²⁹⁶ In casting the book as Galehot, Francesca implies that she fancies herself and Paolo as Guinevere and Lancelot. Moreover, this mimesis and romanticization of an incomplete story allows her to justify her adulterous feelings towards Paolo. Just as Galehot implicitly absolves the fictitious couple of the sin of lust and permits them their love, so too does the book for Paolo and Francesca. Thus, her desire is not so much spontaneous as it is a mimicry of Guinevere’s desire.²⁹⁷ Francesca creates a self-perpetuating delusion that enshrines her as a literalization of the courtly heroine while simultaneously absolving her of sinful urges.²⁹⁸ Guinevere and Lancelot, enabled by Galehot, were able to kiss, to lust, and to commit adultery without retribution. Why should she and Paolo be any different? In short, the two couples claim to be so enthralled by love that “every act of [the] lover ends in the thought of [their] beloved.”²⁹⁹ Herein lies the importance of Paolo and Francesca’s interrupted reading. Had they continued, they would have seen the moment where Lancelot regrets the adulterous affair, repents, and takes religious vows. The romance itself would have guided Paolo and Francesca to understand their sin and the inevitable consequences of their actions. In highlighting this moment and by presenting the book as the source of their love, however, Dante frames Lancelot and Guinevere—and, by extension, Paolo and Francesca—as negative *exempla*.³⁰⁰

Dante does not limit his discussion of compulsion versus free will, or his redefinition of love, to this single refutation of Francesca’s claim to innocence. Before Francesca even began to speak, he had already made his first judgement of her and the others in the second circle of Hell by identifying them as those “che la ragion sommettono al talento.”³⁰¹ Regardless of any assertions that love “mi prese del costui piacer si forte,”³⁰² the poet has already said that the carnal sinners, among whom Francesca is counted, subordinate their reason to their *desire*, not love.³⁰³ This distinction becomes important when one considers Dante’s condemnation of carnal sinners in the wider context of the *Commedia*, as well as within contemporary literary tradition. The significance lies in the fact that he does not classify love itself as a sin, rather deliberately identifying desire—a lustful desire—as the sinful element. In fact, the *Commedia* defends the idea of a pure love. There is no “blanket indictment” as there is in the poetry of Dante’s youth or that of his contemporaries, such as Guido Cavalcanti. Dante proposes that what is *called* love might not

²⁹⁵ Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, *Inf.* 5:133-134. “It was when we read about those longed-for lips [Guinevere] now being kissed by such a famous lover [Lancelot]...” (Musa 113).

²⁹⁶ Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, *Inf.* 5:137. “Galehot was the book and he who wrote it” (Musa 113).

²⁹⁷ Maddox, “Arthurian Intertexts,” 117-8.

²⁹⁸ Gragnolati and Webb, “Dubbioli Desiri,” 119.

²⁹⁹ Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, 185.

³⁰⁰ Freccero, “The Portrait,” 36.

³⁰¹ Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, *Inf.* 5:39. “Those who subordinate reason to desire” (Musa 110).

³⁰² “...seized me so strongly with delight in him...”

³⁰³ Barolini, “Dante and Cavalcanti,” 73.

actually *be* love. This is exemplified in the fact that Francesca's love, or the thing that she calls 'love,' is more properly defined as 'desire' ("talento").³⁰⁴

As previously noted, Francesca presents herself as a passive agent upon which love acts. She was, however, certainly not the first to do so. The genre of courtly romance had many adherents. In due- and trecento Italy, the *dolce stil novo* subgenre of courtly literature had taken up the themes of omnipotent love and passive lovers. Dante himself was a former *stilnovista*, and these poets were his contemporaries.³⁰⁵ Therefore, it is also against them and the style, as well as the concept of courtly love in general, that Dante is reacting. Among his many allusions to various *stilnovisti* in *Inferno* 5, Dante includes an indirect, though no less important, reference to Guido Cavalcanti's "Donna mi prega," a poem which epitomizes the central theme of a lover dominated by love. Dante's characterization of carnal sinners ("che la ragion sommettono al talento") parallels Cavalcanti's characterization of lovers in general ("ché la 'ntenzione—per ragione—vale") (33).³⁰⁶ Though Dante is not directly quoting Cavalcanti in this instance (though he does in *Inferno* 10), these two lines offer the same information in regard to the damaging effect of unchecked passion, which takes control of a lover's thoughts and actions, thus permitting desire to overpower reason.³⁰⁷ The difference lies in how each author defines this desire—"intenzione," for Cavalcanti, and "talento," for Dante. In short, to quote Teodolinda Barolini, "what [Cavalcanti] says about love, Dante says about lust," which harkens back to Dante's desire to reimagine the courtly genre's definition of love and to distinguish between love and lust/desire.³⁰⁸ In referencing "Donna mi prega" in connection with carnal sinners, Dante equates the love about which Cavalcanti—along with countless others, including Capellanus—writes to that of Francesca, which has already been defined as both inherently corrupted and a misidentification of lust.

Unsurprisingly, Dante does not completely absolve himself of blame when it comes to perpetuating this flawed concept of love. Through various quotations, direct and indirect, he acknowledges his own youthful embrace of the *dolce stil novo* and the courtly idea of an all-encompassing, overpowering love. For instance, the "bufera infernal, che mai non resta,"³⁰⁹ in which the damned souls are caught in the beginning of *Inferno* 5, recalls the beginning of Dante's own "Io sono venuto" where "[l]evasi...lo vento peregrin che l'aere turba" (14-15).³¹⁰ The canto and the canzone both characterize passion as a windstorm into which lovers are inexorably pulled. Moreover, the latter goes on to cast the narrator of the poem as the passive object in the sentence where love, carried by "lo vento peregrin," is the subject:

³⁰⁴ Barolini, "Dante and Cavalcanti," 82.

³⁰⁵ Laura Ingallinella, ITAS 263: Dante (in English) (class lecture, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, September 13, 2019).

³⁰⁶ "That the intention—as it should be—is valid" (trans. Emma Iadanza). Original Italian as qtd. in Barolini, "Dante and Cavalcanti," 78.

³⁰⁷ Barolini, "Dante and Cavalcanti," 78.

³⁰⁸ Barolini, "Dante and Cavalcanti," 81.

³⁰⁹ Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia, Inf.* 5:31. "...infernal storm, that never rests..." (Musa 110).

³¹⁰ "Rises up.... The wandering wind that unsettles the air..." Original Italian and translation as qtd. in Barolini, "Dante and Cavalcanti," 88.

“Amor, che sue range ritira in alto pel vento che poggia, non m’abbandona” (23-25).³¹¹ This structure and sentiment is echoed in Francesca’s description of herself (“Amor...non m’abbandona”) to the same effect.³¹² Love is depicted as the active subject while the lover—the narrator and Francesca—is the passive object. Dante’s direct quotation of his early work links the love described in “Io sono venuto” to that of the carnal sinners and Francesca in *Inferno* 5. It is the same, corrupted concept against which he pushes throughout the *Commedia*. He does not excuse himself from criticism, nor does he appear to balk at so blatantly redefining his conception of love.

Despite his early embrace of the *dolce stil novo*, and even before he began writing the *Commedia*, there is a distinct shift in Dante’s canzoni that shows a change in his view of love. Dante most closely prefigures his refutation of courtly love in *Inferno* 5 in his “Doglia mi reca,” likely composed a year or so before he began the *Commedia*, in which he links carnal desire to desire for wealth (avarice). Dante maintains that it all comes back to the same concupiscence and that it is the responsibility of the individual to differentiate true love from carnal desire. By making this connection, he refutes the courtly idea that privileges love over all else, proving that “love is [not] always a stranger in the home of avarice.”^{313 314} Dante arrives at this point by setting up a scene reminiscent of Francesca—a gentlewoman who succumbs to an all-powerful love—and arguing that such women “crede amor fuor d’orto ragione” (147).³¹⁵ The poet’s use of *credere* is important because it emphasizes that she *believes* her emotion to be outside reason’s garden, not that it is actually outside of it. That is to say, much like Francesca engages in deliberate self-delusion, so does the anonymous gentlewoman in “Doglia mi reca.” She has the power of reason, and yet does not use it to discern that the thing which she calls ‘love’ is in fact lust because, to Dante, “love, properly understood, is inseparable from virtue,” and cannot exist without reason.³¹⁶ Thus, we return to the issue at the center of *Inferno* 5: the necessity of distinguishing between carnal lust and true love.

Building upon the discussions of love in “Doglia mi reca” and *Inferno* 5, Dante’s strongest statement in favor of free will and his most explicit disavowal of the idea that love is all-powerful comes after the canto in question. In *Purgatorio* 18, one can find a reworking of Francesca’s assertion that “nullo amato amar perdona [l’amore].” This rebuttal comes when Dante and Virgil have reached the penultimate tier of Mount Purgatory. Just as the second circle of Hell holds carnal sinners, so too does the second-to-last tier of Purgatory

³¹¹ “...Love, who pulls his nets on high with the wind that blows, does not let me go.” Original Italian and translation as qtd. in Barolini, “Dante and Cavalcanti,” 88.

³¹² Barolini, “Dante and Cavalcanti,” 87.

³¹³ Capellanus, *The Art of Courty Love*, 185.

³¹⁴ Barolini, “Dante and Cavalcanti,” 93.

³¹⁵ “[she] believes love to be outside reason’s garden.” Original Italian and translation as qtd. in Barolini, “Dante and Cavalcanti,” 95.

³¹⁶ Teodolinda Barolini, “Guittone’s Ora parrà, Dante’s Doglia mi reca, and the *Commedia*’s Anatomy of Desire,” in *Dante and the Origins of Literary Culture*, ed. Teodolinda Barolini (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 64.

house those repentant of that very sin. Virgil linguistically and conceptually flips Francesca's "Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende,"³¹⁷ saying,

Onde, pognam che di necessitate
Surga ogni *amor che dentro a voi s'accende*;
Di ritenerlo è in voi potestate...³¹⁸

He asserts that even if one must love by necessity ("pognam che di necessitate surga ogni amor che dentro a voi s'accende"), there is always free will that allows one to choose how one reacts to said love or desire ("di ritenerlo è in voi potestate"). In doing so, Dante uses language that, through Francesca, had come to be associated with carnal desire, to show that proper love aligns with reason.³¹⁹ Furthermore, he counters her passivity with the notion that free will and reason prevail, and that no one is truly helpless in the face of love.³²⁰

Therefore, although the entirety of Dante's *Divine Comedy* can be read as a commentary on the nature of love, it is in *Inferno* 5 and *Purgatorio* 18 that he most clearly rebukes the contemporary notion of courtly love and redefines it in his own terms. Whereas courtly literature presents love as an overpowering storm that eclipses reason, Dante proposes that true love exists in harmony with free will and rational thought. The love about which authors such as Andreas Capellanus and Guido Cavalcanti speak is more properly defined as desire or lust, emotions that the lover then calls love in an attempt to justify their sinful nature.

³¹⁷ "Love, that is quickly kindled in the noble heart..."

³¹⁸ "Therefore, supposing that every love kindled in you arises by necessity, in you is the power to restrain it..." Original Italian and translation as qtd. in Gragnolati and Webb, "Dubbiosi Desiri," 125. In-text emphasis is mine.

³¹⁹ Barolini, "Dante and Cavalcanti," 92.

³²⁰ Gragnolati and Webb, "Dubbiosi Desiri," 125. Though it is outside the current scope of this paper, there is room for expansion upon this point.

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