
37. This paper owes much to discussions with Diana Wilson, John Kleiner, Renato Rosaldo, Robert Harrison, John Freccero, and Andrea Wilson. I am also very grateful to the Stanford Humanities Center, which gave me the time and the perfect ambiance in which to explore these issues.

**Dante's Sexual Solecisms: Gender and Genre in the Commedia**

JEFFREY T. SCHNAPP

The comic poet dares to show us men and women coming to . . .

*mutual likeness.*

GEORGE MEREDITH, "AN ESSAY ON COMEDY"

Dante's Divine Comedy is without fate and without a genuine struggle, because absolute confidence and assurance of the reality of the Absolute exist in it without opposition, and whatever opposition brings movement into this perfect security and calm is merely opposition without seriousness of inner truth.

G. W. F. HEGEL, NATURAL LAW

**Licit and Illicit Solecism**

In the opening meter of his *De Planctu Natuae*, the twelfth-century poet and theologian, Alan of Lille, denounces the practice of homosexual love through the description of an illicit verbal transference or *translatio* cultivated by certain contemporary grammarians. Choosing to couple *hic* with *hic*, the masculine gender with the masculine gender, these grammarians substitute woman for man and man for woman, thereby upsetting the natural subordination of female to male, predicate to subject, passive to active.

Se negat esse virum Nature, factus in arte

Barbarus. Ars illi non placet, immo tropus.
Non tamen ista tropus poterit translatio dici. In vicium melius ista figura cadit.

[1.21–24]

[Becoming a barbarian in the art of grammar, he [the deviant grammarian] denies the manhood bestowed upon him by Nature. [As a result], the art of grammar does not find favor with him, but rather, finds in him a trope. Yet this transposition cannot truly be referred to as a trope, for [this] figure falls more exactly under the rubric of [grammatical] vices.]

The unnatural conversion of one gender into another, Alan insists, is nonproductive. It yields a trope that is not really a trope, a figure that is not really a figure. What, then, might one call this grammatical nonentity? Alan's response is that it belongs to that null grammatical category known as "verbal vices" or "defects of speech." Yet one is still left wondering which defect or vice. Technically speaking, it cannot truly be referred to as a "barbarism" because it is not a foreign body surreptitiously introduced into the pristine natural body of Latinity. Generated from within that body, it must instead be defined as a "solecism," a "sexual solecism" to be exact. To quote another twelfth century grammarian on the subject (one who, I might add, is not intentionally alluding to the grammar of homosexual love):

Si demonstrando virum dicimus hanc, aut demonstrando mulierem dicimus hunc, fit solecismus . . . Sed solecismus est vicium inexcusabile. Ergo in talibus sermonibus erit vicium inexcusabile, non ergo figura.3

[If in designating a man we say hanc [or her] or if in designating a woman we say hunc [or him], we are committing a solecism . . . But a solecism is an inexcusable error. Therefore an inexcusable error, not a figure of speech, will be evident in all such manners of speaking.]

Harsh as it is, this vilification of the practice of sexual solecism is relatively mild when contrasted with that found in Alan's prosimetrum. For Alan, it is not a mere lapse in verbal decorum that is involved, but rather deceit—the concealment of a monstrous origin: "nulla figura honestate illa constructionis iunctura vicium poterit excusare sed inexcusabili solecismi monstruositate turbabitur" [10.55–57] [this [unnatural] bond and union will not be able to pass off its defect as if it were some sort of honest [or respectable] figure, but will bear the stain of monstrous and impar donable solecism].

Whence the vigor of this exclusion of a "dishonest" figure from literary practice? Whence this language of moral indignation in the sphere of grammar? In responding to such questions, it is not enough to simply rehearse the point that beneath the veil of Alan's grammatical analysis—thin as it is—there lurks the discourse of a homophobic moralist. For the relative ease with which both Alan and his contemporary interweave the moral and the grammatical suggests another answer: that from the beginning morality and grammar were never entirely distinct in the Latin tradition. Even in its late medieval form, Latin rhetorical and poetic theory had remained a resolutely prescriptive and normative system in which all speech acts were defined as embedded in a "natural" ontological and social hierarchy. Committed to conserving this order it had sharply restricted the use of ornamented speech and could only conceive of deviant tropes and figures as vicious and morally defective. Lacking in comeliness or taste and hence bearing the signature of those least empowered to speak—that is, of the lowest social stratum composed of foreigners, women, slaves, and prostitutes—and of their various vernaculars, these grammatical deviants were viewed as a menace to the laws of identity, propriety, and natural property. Like the beautiful maiden joined by a horse's neck to the body of a fish covered with multicolored feathers who presides over the opening of Horace's De Arte Poetica, they were seen as the progeny of licentious and indiscriminate verbal couplings: that is, as literary monsters.4

More than a mere violation of verbal decorum, then, sexual solecism is for Alan "monstrous and impardonable" inasmuch as it attacks one of the fundamental links in Nature's hierarchical chain: the subordination of female to male. It thereby threatens to contaminate not only the grammatical relation of predicate to subject, but also the entire network of parallel relays extending from the base to the exalted, the physical to the metaphysical, the passive to the active, the slave to the master, and, most important of all, man to God. Once male is confused with female and female confused with male, nature's vertical scaffolding must necessarily come tumbling down, leaving nothing but a horizontal ruin: a world of masks, a world of phenomena ungrounded in any noumenon. This is to say that, within the context of Latin rhetorical and poetic theory, the appearance of sexual solecism marks the advent of carnival.

Affirming the bond between solecism and this carnivalesque cosmogony, Alan binds his own Menippean satire to the conservative tradition of such Roman predecessors as Juvenal and Horace,
as well as to such contemporaneous satirical texts as the carmina burana. Yet the extraordinary lavishness of his play in the De Planctu Naturae on the intersection of grammar and sexuality also marks Alan's distance from these traditions, revealing the utter seriousness which he brings to the study of grammar. It is this seriousness that firmly plants him in the midst of the intellectual revolution of his time—the so-called “renaissance” of the twelfth century—with its debates on “natural” and “ethical” grammars, its efforts to build upon Anselm's grammar of God, and to rethink the relation between theology, rhetoric, and grammar.6

Moreover, Alan's poetic engagement with sexual solecism can only remind one of that other great revolution of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: the revolution which, in her influential books Jesus as Mother and Holy Feast and Holy Fast, Caroline Walker Bynum has termed the “feminization of religious language.”7 To a hitherto unprecedented extent, Alan's era had placed both traditionally feminine values and actual women at the center of Christian religious practice. Whether manifesting itself in the form of the canonization of ever-increasing numbers of female saints, an expanding corpus of mystical writings by women, or a growing emphasis among scriptural exegetes on the Song of Songs, this event brought to the theology of the early Middle Ages, with its generally distant and omnipotent God, a new insistence upon the carnal immediacy of Mary and Jesus. It accelerated the development of a highly codified Mariolatry which construed every event in Mary's life as a reenactment of an event in her son's biography, while elaborating in turn a new Christology which emphasized Jesus's so-called “feminine” side: his passivity and suffering, his approachability and affectivity.

To cite one example, the climactic event of the Christ story, the crucifixion, came increasingly to be seen not as a proleptic enthronement of Jesus the eschaton and judge, but rather a precise double of Mary's act of giving birth. Accordingly, Jesus on the cross was a pregnant mother enduring the longest and harshest of labor pains. I quote from the Carthusian prioress Marguerite of Oingt: “for when the hour of your delivery came you were placed on the hard bed of the cross ... and your nerves and all your veins were broken. And truly it is no surprise that your veins burst when in one day you gave birth to the whole world.”7 Considered alone, such views might seem to do little more than expand upon certain well-established patristic topoi dating back at least to the time of Augustine. Yet considered in relation to the Cistercian cult of the abbot as mother and to cults like that of Francis of Assisi, focused on the “feminine” attributes of affectivity and nurturance, they mark a decisive epochal shift. They put forward a new paradigm for the exercise of authority that is at once paternal and maternal.

So, paradox of paradoxes, in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the very grammatical practice that Alan had identified with a “monstrous and impardonable” vice had already become a central attribute of the language of the holy. Indeed, sexual solecism, or the play of gender substitutions, is so abundant in the theological writings of authors such as Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux, Albert the Great, and Bonaventure, that contemporary feminist thought has come to view it (sometimes incorrectly) as the mark of their modernity.8 Although characterized primarily by the feminization of the masculine, this phenomenon may well be modeled after the masculinization of the feminine practiced in an earlier period of medieval piety, but which continued through Dante's era. One may think in this regard of the somewhat obscure Carolingian cult of the bearded Mary, of the many hagiographic and monastic tales in which female cross-dressing is viewed as a sign of spiritual advancement, and of the ongoing celebration of the martial heroism of female martyr-saints such as Perpetua, Catherine, and Joan of Arc.

Now whatever the larger historical meaning of this other revolution, one thing is certain: by insisting on the most radical implications of incarnational theology—namely, that through Christ and Mary the exalted becomes the base and the base becomes exalted—it transforms the entire edifice of Classical metaphysics and offers a powerful alternative to the patriarchal culture of the Romans (reflected in turn in the theology of Byzantine Christendom). Sexual solecism, a scandal within the system of Roman rhetoric, inextricably tied to the debased body, becomes the privileged sign of the sacred body, inaugurating what I should like to call, for reasons of contrast with Alan's carnivalesque cosmogony, a "paradisiac masque."

But to return from this new perspective to the De Planctu Naturae, there arises the question of how it is possible for Alan to reconcile the defense of Latin grammar against the improper translation of gender with God's regular recourse to this “impardonable and monstrous” error. As it turns out, I have been a bit unfair to Alan and to the Latin tradition, for they do have a ready answer: solecism, they assert, does not necessarily have to be a vice. In certain exceptional circumstances it can indeed become a figure or trope, but only when employed by an author of sufficient stature...
who is striving to say something inordinate and striking. The
grammarians Marius Victorinus, for instance, writes: "nunquam
ergo soloeicinus excusari potest: si a nobis per imprudentiam
fit, vitium est; si a poetis vel oratoribus affectate dicatur, figura
locutionis et appellatur graece skema" [solecism can never be
excused [and] if used by us out of ignorance is a defect of speech.
But if employed in ornamented [or affected] speech by poets or ora-
tors, it is a figure of elocution and is referred to in Greek as a
skema].

The point is replicated, but this time in an explicitly theologi-
cal setting, in Alan's rhythmic poem, the De Incarnatione Do-
mini, where the incarnation is figured as the unnatural—which
here means supernatural—grammatical copula that undoes every
grammatical and poetic law:

Novus tropus in figura / Novus fit constructio
Novus color in iunctura / Nova fit translatio.
In hac Verbi copula / Stupet omnis regula.

[A new [strange, uncanny, unforeseeable] trope is created [by
God] in this figure of speech, a new composite. A new rhetor-
cical color appears in this conjoining, a new metaphor. In this
verbal coition, every rule is struck senseless.]

The incarnation is the solecism to beat all other solecisms, an
exercise in poetic license so inordinate and striking that only one
truly possessed with authorial authority, such as God, could get
away with it. Instituting the Son's new law, it abrogates the laws
of the fathers. Converting the exalted into the base, it transforms
the base into the exalted.

I arrive now at the heart of my subject: Dante's role as the heir
to this double tradition. What I should like to propose is that the
astonishingly free play with gender inversions which character-
izes Dante's entire literary opus represents a quantum expansion
and transformation of the conventional polarity between licit and
illicit sexual solecism. Dante explores the infernal carnivalesque
of the Latin satirical tradition. He also explores both the female
to male and male to female vectors of the "paradisiac masque" of
twelfth-century piety, masculinizing such figures as Beatrice and
Mary, while feminizing Virgil and the Commedia's final guide,
Bernard of Clairvaux. But I will argue that in the Commedia he
takes one additional revolutionary step, elaborating a middle
ground between licit and illicit solecism: a place where the
exchange of masculine and feminine attributes serves to redefine

the relation between Latin and vernacular, between the historical
persons of Virgil and Beatrice, and between the literary genres of
epic and lyric, or history and love poetry.

Let it be said from the outset that limitations of space will not
allow me to adequately emphasize the conservative underpin-
nings of Dante's theory of gender. Nor will I be able to offer an
exhaustive account of Dante's play with gender identity. Instead,
my emphasis will be selective. I will begin with a brief
excursus on Dante's contact with the two traditions which I ear-
lier defined. Then, I will shift to an analysis of gender transfer-
cence at the beginning, the midpoint and the end of Beatrice's
career in Dante's writings. This survey will serve, in turn, as an
introduction to what I have just proposed as Dante's central inno-
vation in this area: the elaboration of a middle ground where
issues of secular authority are worked out via recourse to sexual
solecism. Finally, I should like to close with a brief examination
of the matter of genre as it relates to sexual solecism in the Com-
media. What I will be proposing is that Dante's extensive play
with sexual substitutions constitutes a strategy to articulate the
intersection between the "feminine" world of vernacular lyric and
the "masculine" world of Latin epic, the world of Beatrice and the
world of Virgil. Only by approaching, however tentatively, the
figure of the textual androgyne, can Dante come to grips with the
Commedia's status as an impure linguistic artifact and generic
hybrid.

Julius Caesar as Queen

Of Dante's allusions to the "infernal carnivalesque" one exam-
ple shall have to suffice, though it must stand for other episodes
which also involve gender reversals such as that of Paolo and Fran-
cesca. On the seventh terrace of Mount Purgatory where sins of
erotic excess are ritually purged through the exchange of chaste
kisses of peace, souls are seen wheeling about in two contrary
directions, one clockwise and one counterclockwise. The task of
explaining this dual rotation belongs to the vernacular love poet
Guido Guinizelli. Guido states that those who turn in a coun-
terclockwise direction were "hermaphrodites" [or heterosexual] in
their sin. Those who instead follow a clockwise motion were
"sodomites": they "offended in that [sin] for which Caesar in his
triumph once heard "Queen" cried out against him" ["offese / di
cio per che già Cesar, triunfando, / 'Regina' contra sé chainar
s'intese" (Purg. 26.76–78)].
The triumph alluded to is that recorded in Suetonius’s *De Vita Caesarum* (1.49.1–4) which followed Julius’s final victory over the last of the republican forces. During his processional entry into Rome, finally the uncontested ruler of the empire, Julius was said to have been greeted by jeers calling him to task for his having committed sodomy with King Nicomedes of Bithynia. Shouted by his soldiers according to Suetonius, by the populace according to Ugucione of Pisa, the cries that Caesar heard were of ‘*Ave rex et regina!*’ (Open the gates for King Baldy, the Queen of Bithynia!).

*The Crucified As Mother*

If the brief description of Julius’s mock coronation reveals Dante’s proximity to the world of Alan’s illicit solecisms, the presentation of the crucifixion in *Paradiso* v makes clear Dante’s investment in the feminization of the holy. Earlier I have referred to a well-established tradition, linked to the cult of Jesus as mother, which viewed the crucifixion as a scene of childbirth. In the heaven of the sun, Dante’s surrogate, Thomas Aquinas, would seem to echo this tradition. Thomas introduces his lengthy account of the birth of the Franciscan and Dominican orders with the description of a holy matrimony between Christ and the Church. Providence, he tells us, “in order that the Bride of Him [Christ] might go to her delight, secure within herself and also more faithful to Him who with high cries wedded her with His blessed blood, ordained two princes who on this side and that [on the side of Spain and on the side of Italy] might serve as her guides”:

La provedenza...
però che andasse ver’ lo suo diletto
la sposa di colui ch’ad alte grida
dispò lei col sangue benedetto,
in sé sicura e anche a lui più fida,
due principi ordinò in suo favore,
che quinci e quindi le fosser per guida.

(Par. iii.28–36)

What is perhaps most striking about this passage is that, although ostensibly concerned with the consummation on the cross of a blood wedding between Jesus and the Church, it makes use of the phrase “high cries” or “alte grida” in describing Jesus’s final plea: “‘Elia, elia, sabacthani!’” (‘Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?’) [Matt. 27.46]. While “high cries” may appear a close enough transcription of the Vulgate’s “clamavit voce magna” (he cried out with a loud voice), the phrase has a technical valence for Dante that is often overlooked. It is associated with the cries of mothers giving birth, as in Canto 15, its only other appearance in the poem, where Cacciaguida describes how, in the course of his own birth, Mary “‘gave him up,’” (that is, granted him egress into this world), “‘called on with high cries’” by his mother (“Maria mi diè, chiamata in alte grida” [Par. 15.133]).

What Thomas, then, is describing in Canto 11 can only be an act of masculine childbirth, with God the Father playing the part of Mary as the facilitator of the birth. The dying Jesus gives birth not only to the whole world, as Marguerite of Oingt would have it, but also to two princes who, released into this world by the celestial Father, will inherit their progenitor’s kingdom as well as the cure of his ailing widow and wife. While I am willing to admit that this reading verges on the scandalous, it is perhaps worth recalling that in his great essay on Saint Francis in the *Commedia*, Erich Auerbach has argued forcefully that scandal and outrage are central to the poetic strategy of this canto.

The narrative which follows Thomas’s speech would seem to confirm the point, presenting the parallel tales of Francis and Dominic as reenactments of this scene of male parturition. Like Christ on the cross, each of the two princes will wed and then give birth, fathering (and, indeed, mothering) a purely masculine line of descent: the Franciscan order in the case of Francis, the product of his marriage with Lady Poverty; the Dominican order in the case of Dominic, the product of his marriage with Lady Faith. By way of a transition to the analysis of Beatrice, it is also worth noting that this implicit transposition of the genders of Francis and Dominic is consistent with one of the founding principles of Dante’s poetic universe: the principle that guides, as authority figures, are especially subject to gender reversals. This is true, of course, not only of these two princes ordained by Providence to guide *Mater Ecclesia*, but also of Virgil, who is repeatedly figured as the mother, muse, or nursemaid of Dante and Statius; of Beatrice, who appears as an admiral, confessor, and judge; and of Bernard of Clairvaux, who is consistently viewed as a double of Mary.
Beatrice and Sexual Soecism — 1

So much for the polarity of illicit and licit soecism. Let me now focus on the figure of Beatrice, in whom the possibility of a dynamic middle ground is first disclosed. From her very first appearance in Dante's work to her final disappearance, Beatrice is characterized by a generic doubleness which in turn reflects upon her dual identity as the historical flesh and blood Beatrice Portinari, Dante's preteen Florentine sweetheart, and as the Christ-event in his spiritual biography. On the one hand, Beatrice is linked inexorably to the affective world of the vernacular lyric and to a Christian latinity which is inseparable from the "feminized sacred" of the Virgin Mary. On the other hand, she is associated with classical latinity and with masculine authority, in both its sacred and secular forms.

At the moment Beatrice makes her first bow on the stage of world literature—Chapter Two of the Vita Nuova—she is accompanied by an elaborate string of quotations which define her nature as sexually ambivalent. The first of these, presented in Latin (and hence an interruption of the text's vernacular prose), is in the masculine gender and describes her as a conquering masculine god: "Ecce Deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur michi" (Here is a god—deus and not the feminine dea—stronger than me, who has come to master me). The second, also in Latin, identifies her instead with beatitude, a word of feminine gender closely associated with the figure of the Virgin Mary: "Apparuit iam beatitudo vestra" (She who has appeared is your beatitude). The third extension from book twenty-four of the Iliad, familiar to Dante via a Latin translation of Aristotle's Ethics. In the Homeric original, the verse had evoked the memory of the vanquished Hector, son of Priam and hero of the Trojan war, saying of him: "he did not appear the son of mortal man, but of a god" [Iliad 24.258], or in the medieval Latin, "vere hic homo filius dei erat" [Nicomachean Ethics 7.1].

Dante's redaction, however, is not in Latin (as were the two prior epithets), but rather in the vernacular and hence is assimilated into the linguistic body of his text. Even more striking is the fact that Dante inverts the gender of Homer's sentence. Converting Hector into Beatrice, Greek epic into vernacular lyric, he writes: "ella non parea figliuola d'uomo mortale, ma di deo" [she did not appear the daughter of mortal man, but of a [masculine] god].

Thus from the very outset, while Beatrice's principal ties are to the "feminine" value-sphere of stilnovist lyric, she is also marked as "other," as a being who exceeds the boundaries of this world by her affiliation and identification with masculine authority figures from Christian doctrine [God] and classical epic [Hector]. To make matters more complex, the authority of the epic world finds itself transposed into the humble vernacular as well as filtered through the feminized sacred of thirteenth-century Christian piety. In Beatrice, Latin and Greek grammatica crosses over into Tuscan Umgang and Muttersprache.

Beatrice and Sexual Soecism — 2

I suppose that one might be tempted to attribute some of this to inattention on Dante's part, if it were not for the reappearance of the same configuration of gender substitutions in Canto 30 of the Purgatorio. In this unforgettable passage of the Commedia, after a nearly twenty-five-year absence from Dante's writings, Beatrice makes her return on the chariot of the Church. But, unlike Caesar, she is not greeted in her triumph by cries of "Regina." Rather, she is hailed as "Christus Rex" in a succession of events whose beauty and intricacy I can only begin to do full justice to here.

The canto opens with the singing of a verse from the Song of Songs: "Veni, sponsa, de Libano" [Purg. 30.11] ("Come from Lebanon, my bride"). This first anticipation of Beatrice's impending advent seems appropriate because it looks forward to the coming of a woman: a woman who, according to the verse's concluding word, coronaberis, is coming to be crowned. No less appropriate seems the implicit identification of Beatrice with the bride of the Song of Songs, a figure conventionally allegorized as the Church or the soul. So far so good. But the next Latin phrase reverses this implicit allegory, identifying Beatrice not with the bride, but with the bridegroom or, according to the conventional allegoresis, Jesus Christ.1 Shouted out by the blessed throng gathered in the Garden of Eden at the very instant of Beatrice's epiphany, it transforms the ironic cry heard as Christ enters Jerusalem to be crucified, "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini" [Matt. 21.9] ("Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord") into the more direct but no less masculine: "Benedictus qui venis" [Purg. 30.19] ("Blessed are you who come").

This shift from feminine to masculine, from bride to bridegroom, is startling enough. But Dante appends to it a full Latin verse cited from Book Six of Virgil's Aeneid, whose meaning as well as gender it reverses: "Manibus, oh, date lilia plenis" [Purg.
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30.21) (“Oh, let me scatter lilies with full hand”). Pronounced at the moment of greatest pathos in Virgil’s text—the moment at which the tragic price to be paid to found Rome has come most fully into view—the verse had originally referred to the scattering of funerary lilies over the corpse of the young Marcellus, history’s victim and the symbol of Rome’s dashed hopes. Dante has us revisit this Virgilian verse from the perspective of the crucifixion, showing how Christ’s victimage at Golgotha transforms irony into allegory, classical tragedy into Christian comedy, Virgilian despair into Dantean hope. Beatrice returns from the dead, thus, to what were once the funerary flowers of Marcellus, now revealed as the eternal lilies of the Virgin Mary.

The scene is of course a succession scene, and this first juxtaposition of Virgil’s Latin text with the text of the Vulgate gives way to a flurry of vernacular transcriptions of the Aeneid at the very moment at which Virgil has disappeared. Confronted by the imposing spectacle of Beatrice as the Bridegroom, the pilgrim is now seen as the Bride or anima. He feels “the great power of ancient love” [d’antico amor senti la gran potenza [Purg. 30.39]]. He experiences the same “tokens of the ancient flame” [conosco i segni de l’antica fiamma” [Purg. 30.48]] as the tragic lover of Aeneid 4.23 (“agnosco veteris vestigia flammae”), playing Dido to Beatrice’s Aeneas, powerless before the latest onslaught of love’s flame.8 Filled with terror, he is infantilized, turning “to the left with the anxious uncertainty of a little child who runs to its mother when it is afraid or it is afflicted” [volsimi a la sinistra col respietto / col quale il fantolin corre a la mamma / quando ha paura o quando elli è afflitto [Purg. 30.43-45]].

But mother Virgil has already vanished and in her place stands a Beatrice who, throughout the concluding cantos of the Purgatorio, will remain a predominantly masculine presence. She first appears “like an admiral who goes to stern and bow to inspect the men that are serving on other ships, and encourages them to do well” [quasi ammiraglio che in poppa e in prora / viene a veder la gente che ministra / per li altri legni, e a ben far l’incora [Purg. 30.58-60]]. Next she is seen as regal and stern in mien, in the role of judge [Purg. 30.67-75], then as a mother who is harsh to her child, forcing him to taste the stern pietas of the Roman patriarchy: “damaro / sente il sapor de la pietade acerba” [Purg. 30.80-81] (bitter is the flavor of [her] stern piety). In the concluding portion of Canto 30 she will play the part of Dante’s confessor: a role, it is worth remembering, strictly reserved for the male priesthood.

Beatrice and Sexual Solecism — 3

If Beatrice in both the Vita Nuova and the Garden of Eden is, then, like Alan of Lille’s Christ, a new and uncanny trope that strikes every grammatical rule senseless, a solecism that is a trope and figure, the same is no less true of her appearance in the celestial rose. In that high court where Christ is a Roman and Mary reigns as Augusta, Beatrice will complete Dante’s transcendental masque by giving way in the last instance to a masculine guide, Bernard of Clairvaux. And Bernard, in turn, will lead the pilgrim to a final vision of what is, despite its abstractness, a masculine God. Yet this ultimate shift towards the masculine and away from the feminization of the holy does not end Dante’s peculiar play with gender identity, as revealed by the symmetrical seating arrangements in the rose.

Dante’s celestial amphitheater is organized along a number of

The Seating Arrangement of Dante’s Celestial Rose
radial axes extending upward and outward from its center, where there is a pool of light, to its circumference (see Figure 1). A single sex grouping of beatified souls is seated along each of these axes, as, for example, along one of the rose's two central radii, the group made up of Ruth, Judith, Rebekah, Sarah, Rachel, Eve, and finally, Mary (who occupies the highest point at the structure's edge). Facing it across the rose is a group composed of members of the opposite sex: in this case a group including Augustine, Benedict, Francis of Assisi, and, at the outermost/uppermost edge, John the Baptist. This law of symmetrical opposition knows no exception: just as Mary is seated exactly opposite John the Baptist, Adam (who is to Mary's left) sits diagonally across from Lucy, and Peter (who is to Mary's right) sits diagonally across from Anne. No exception, that is, with the exception of Beatrice, who alone is seated in the same grouping of souls as a man, thereby disrupting the entire numerical and structural equilibrium of the rose (at least insofar as it is presented to us). The man in question is none other than the apostle Peter and there can be no doubt that this alignment is strategic, for it places her alongside Rachel, the symbol of the contemplative life, while at the same time identifying her with the authority of Christ and the Church, both vested in Peter.

Genre and Gender

I arrive now at my conclusion by posing a question which has remained implicit throughout much of the present discussion: namely, why is it that Dante feels impelled to extend the field of gender reversal to encompass a dynamic middle zone between the pure and the impure, the sacred and the sacrilegious? What is it that conditions this extension of sexual solecism to such a broad spectrum of figures as Virgil, Statius, the pilgrim-poet himself, Bernard, and Beatrice? Although I cannot here address the issue as fully as I might wish, let me hazard a partial response; Dante is driven to do so by constraints which are no less theological than they are literary and linguistic. The key text in this regard is Virgil's Aeneid, an epic whose male-dominated [and, indeed, male- haunted] world Dante must somehow sublate into the "feminine" value-sphere of stilnovist lyric, if a hybrid genre such as Christian comedy is to become possible. The problem, I repeat, is not that of expelling the Virgilian model, but instead of transforming it through incorporation into the Commedia's poetic world, of rewriting the Aeneid as if it were an epic love story.

Within this framework, sexual solecism becomes a powerful tool:

a. for reconceptualizing the relationship between fathers and sons, ancients and moderns, authorities and subjects, "major" and "minor" literary genres;

b. for figuralizing or sublimating the erotic/corporeal sphere; and

c. for articulating a critique of classical epic values which situates the principle of feminine mediation at the center of the epic world.

I begin with the first of these strategies, whose emblematic gesture is the feminization of the masculine, a "feminization" which involves recourse to maternal language in framing the relation between literary fathers and sons. Such is the case when, in Purgatorio 21, Dante has Statius affirm the Aeneid's maternity with respect to the Thebaid and, by extension, the Commedia: "ma-mma / fummi, e fummi nutrice, poetando" [Purg. 21.97-98] ("it was as a mother and a wetnurse to me in poetry"). Here the Oedipal drama is averted via an imaginary regression to a stage of development which might best be described as "pre-oedipal": a situation of apparent plenitude in which, absorbed into the maternal term, the father is no longer present, leaving the son in sole possession of a mother to whom he is now bound by intensified ties of affection and dependency. By means of this operation [in which, it is worth recalling, Statius and his epic play the role of "front men"], Dante is able to place Virgil, the Aeneid, and its Latin grammatica in a more intimate relation to himself, his Commedia, and its agrammatical vernacular, a relation where metaphors of suckling, nurturing, and corporeal oneness can cover over the underlying reality of difference, rivalry, and conflict. In the process, the ancients' authority is restricted, while, in a simultaneous move, their symbolic distance from their medieval descendants is greatly reduced.

The efficacy of this maternalization of the literary father is ensured by an additional detail which, for the sake of clarity, I have momentarily overlooked. In the above-cited speech, Statius did not conclude his paean to Virgil merely with the proclamation of the Aeneid's maternity with respect to the Thebaid. Rather, he went on to interpose a surrogate mother figure, the wetnurse, into the now dissolved Oedipal triangle, reinvesting in her the authority of the mother: "mamma fummi, e fummi nutrice, poetando." While it is not entirely clear whether Dante intends to differentiate mothers from wetnurses, this semantic and syntac-
tional dédoublement of the mother is, nonetheless, powerfully suggestive. It blocks any simple identification of the literary father with the figure of the mother, suggesting that Virgil’s role is no less akin to that of the mother’s helper, her wetnurse. Figuralizing the mother/child bond in the very act of restating it, it quite emphatically opens up the maternal term to a potentially infinite play of substitutions.

The uncertainty is productive because it structures a complex network of gender reversals in which male epic poets are associated with the figure of the Muse, who is now revealed as the true mother/wetnurse of all poets, irrespective of whether they are ancient or modern. The Muses, accordingly, are described as “our wetnurses’” “[le nutrice nostre” [Purg. 22.105]], a conceit which, I believe, is unique to Dante. They are the “holy virgins” [sacrosante Vergini [Purg. 29.37]] whose Parnassian springs are so confused with the overflowing ubertas of Mary’s breast that they inspire poetic discourse by filling the tongues of bards with only the sweetest of milks: “se mo sonasser tutte quelle lingue / che Polimnia con le suore tiro / del latte lor dolcissimo pit pingue” [Par. 23.55–57]. The bards themselves are but their collaborators and doubles: Homer is “‘that Greek / whom the Muses suckled more than any other”’ [“quel Greco / che le Muse lattar piu chi altri mai” [Purg. 22.102]]; Virgil is “our greatest muse” [nostra maggior musa [Par. 15.26]]; Dante belongs among them [o sante Muse, poi che vostro sono [Purg. 1.8]]; and the epic heroes of the heaven of Mars are of such “‘great fame / that any muse [that is, epic poet] would be rich with them’” [“fuor di gran voce / si ch’ogn’urne ne sarebbe opima” [Par. 18.32–33]].

Implicit throughout this texture of allusions is a portrayal of the entire epic tradition as a matrilinear succession in which surrogate mothers (earlier poets) give suckle to their figurative infant daughters (later poets), all equally under the aegis of the true mother, the lactating Muse. The result is a reconceptualization of literary genealogy that carves out a privileged space for the vernacular epic by recasting literary authority in the image of the Virgin Mary, whose power is manifest in acts of intercession and overflowing charity: acts which mark her not as distant, but as readily available and accessible.

It is as if the burden had now shifted over onto the shoulders of the ancients. It is they who must reach out to embrace their modern followers and not the contrary; they who must intercede in order to resolve the crisis at the opening of the Inferno; they who must light the path, not for themselves, but for those who are to follow. In the course of Dante’s poem, the central icon of Roman pietas will thus find itself inverted, maternalized, and merged with the iconography of the Christian pietà. No longer Aeneas carrying the aged Anchises over his back out of the swirling fires of a vanquished Troy, pietas will now be figured by Virgil, the father of Roman poetry, who bears a Christian poet upon his breast “like a mother who is roused by the noise and sees beside her the raging flames, and seizes up her child and flees, and more concerned for him than for herself, does not pause even to put on a shift” [Inf. 23.38–42].

At this juncture, it is necessary to proceed from Dante’s feminization of the masculine to a brief consideration of the inverse procedure, which is no less pervasive. The two operations are, in my view, largely complementary, because when Dante masculinizes a figure such as Beatrice, he is merely attempting to further collapse the distance between his own literary opus and various forms of secular and sacred authority. The emblematic gesture in this regard is not so much the inscription of Beatrice within the paternal sphere—which in the last instance stands above and beyond the play of gender substitutions—as her inscription within the sphere of the son. More often than not, then, Beatrice figures as the double of Virgil or of Christ, exercising an authority that is best defined as sternly “fraternal,” particularly in the monastic sense of the word.

This is not to deny that, upon occasion, Beatrice is also identified with the power of the father. A case in point would be the extended allusion in Paradiso 21–23 to the story of Semele, where she assumes the part of Jove, while the poet-pilgrim is figured as Semele. When such an identification does take place, however, it is usually provisional. Its function is to extricate Beatrice from a too “lyrical” or overtly erotic relation to the poet-pilgrim: a relation associated with states of paralysis and hypnotic fixation which are always rapidly overcome in the name of narrative and spiritual progress. Yet, even in these special cases, it would seem that paternal attributes—the same is true of Mary—are usually filtered through the relatively ambivalent images of the teacher and authoritative mother. In the process, paternal prohibitions are wont to give way to maternal permissions.

I arrive now at the final part of my tripartite conclusion, which is concerned with how this attempt to escape certain Oedipal dynamics and to sublimate or, at least, displace the erotic, must be viewed as part and parcel of Dante’s critique of classical epic values. In the Paradiso (which will have to stand here for the
whole of Dante's poem), this critique is articulated from two different but complementary perspectives. The first comes from beyond the borders of the Roman tradition and is represented by the vernacular lyric and by its privileging of what I have referred to, for lack of a better term, as "the feminine value-sphere." The second comes from within the Roman tradition and is marked by the regular recurrence of the writings of Ovid at the precise moment at which Virgil has exited from Dante's narrative. Both target the issue of feminine mediation or, to be more exact, its absence as a sign of the marginality of romantic love in the world of Virgil's epic.

I begin with the first. It is striking enough that Dante should have made Beatrice the central figure of his epic of love, but no less so is the fact that the literary genre most closely associated with Beatrice—the lyric—should figure as the telos of his epic. What I mean is that Dante's poem reaches its rhetorical climax in a scene which takes us back to Beatrice's poetic origin in the Vita Nuova: the scene of Bernard's recitation of the prayer to the Virgin in Paradiso 33. Sung by Beatrice's double, the poet-courtier of Commedia's epic cycle inasmuch as it marks the first sustained eruption of the vernacular love lyric—to be sure, an intensified vernacular lyric crossbred with the Latin of the Church.

Heretofore in the Commedia, the vernacular love lyric had either surfaced as a fragmentary tag line cited to link Dante's own biography to that of figures like Bonagiunta da Lucca (Purg. z4.5r1) within the fold of an eminently vernacular and lyric auditorium: given full rein and permitted to take over Dante's poem. And this within the fold of an eminently vernacular and lyric auditorium: a structure which is the icon of sublime erotic love and receptivity adapted from the poetic world of the Roman de la Rose, a structure of feminine gender ruled over by a mother and populated equally by infants, women, and men; a structure where there are no horses, arms, or engines of war; in short, a structure that might be said to reverse both the gender and genre of its classical prototype—Virgil's Elysium.

I arrive now at my second and final point: the resurgence of Ovid in Dante's final canticle. What I have in mind is that the apparent subversiveness with respect to the Aeneid's epic values of Ovid's Metamorphoses (and to an even greater degree, of works such as the Heroides and the Ars Amatoria) may have been important to Dante because of the centrality of feminine mediation in his Christian epic. Ovid's writings, while frequently identifying themselves in rather mocking fashion with the Latin epic tradition, launch a spirited assault on the absolute authority of the Roman patriarch—the origin and end of the key Virgilian virtue of pietas. This they accomplish, first, by rendering the central myths of Rome's historical origins as secular narratives, empty of the preternatural mystery and tragic power they enjoy in Virgil's epic; second, by intermingling them with variegated tales of Greek extraction, so dislodging them from the privileged heights they occupy in Augustan propaganda; third, by overtly debunking them in certain cases, as in Ars Amatoria 1.101–134, where the rape of the Sabines is presented not as a model of the "hard golden age" celebrated by Virgil and Horace, but as a brutal gang rape carefully orchestrated by none other than Rome's founding father, Romulus.

It is not my intention here to trope Ovid's presentation in the Tristia of certain of his works as parricides, the killers of those that fathered them. Such a reading could, I am certain, be grossly reductive. Yet what I do wish to signal is a possible opening in Ovid towards the "feminine." Whether it takes the form of an affirmation of the values of playful self-creation and romantic love over and against the cult of the Roman war machine, or, rather, of an assertion of the superiority of contemporary Roman society, with all of its luxury and frivolity, to the rigors of the golden age, this opening is distinctly non-Virgilian. It is buttressed by the fact that when Ovid has occasion to invoke legitimate spiritual authority, such authority is regularly associated with various female avatars of the Magna Mater (The Great Mother). The Venus of the Fasti is, thus, like the Mary of the celestial rose, the empress of her own Olympian court: "she sways, and well deserves to sway, the world entire; she owns a kingdom second to that of no god, she gives laws to heaven and earth and to her native sea and by her laws keeps every species in being." She is the builder of the civitas, not its disruptor: "she first stripped man of his savage garb" and taught mankind the virtues of cultus; she is the mother of invention and "of one thousand arts." Here in Ovid's spirituality, with its opening towards woman and the world of love, Dante may have perceived a pre-Christian model for his own insistence upon the decisive importance of feminine and, especially, maternal mediation in overcoming the cen-
The key issue for Horace is that poets must make responsible use of language. This means that the exercise of "poetic license," special freedom they are granted to diverge from the ordinary and unornamented use of language. This means that the exercise of "poetic license" in elaborating both fictions and ornate discourses must be moderate and guided at all times by nature's laws. Cf. the later discussion of Alan's De Incarnacione Domini, which suggests how, in the Christian view, God's poetic license is such that he alone can overturn the laws of nature (via the Incarnation) without lapsing into the practice of illicit solecism.

5. On the links between Alan's satirical use of sexual solecism and contemporaneous developments in theology and philosophy see Ziolkowski, Alan of Lille's Grammar of Sex, esp. 77-144.

6. Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), see in particular chapters 4 and 5, 110-263; and Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), the concluding chapter (pp. 277-93), which links up with a number of themes from the earlier study.

7. This passage from Marguerite's writings is quoted by Bynum in Jesus as Mother, 153. Jewish literature had long employed metaphors of childbirth in describing the advent of the messianic kingdom, a practice imitated in such New Testament loci as Matt. 24.8 and John 16.21.

8. For a succinct overview of Bonaventure's positive evaluation of the feminine as contrasted with Thomistic views of gender see Joan M. Ferrante, Woman as Image in Medieval Literature from the Twelfth Century to Dante [New York: Columbia University Press, 1975], 101-8.


10. The extract from Marius Victorinus's grammatical fragments is from Heinrich Lausberg, Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik (Munich: Max Heuber Verlag, 1967), par. 98.

11. This passage from stanza three is also employed by Ziolkowski, 135-36, whose translation I have slightly modified.

12. Dante's views regarding women and their relationship to the views of his contemporaries and predecessors are surveyed in Ferrante, Woman as Image in Medieval Literature, 129-52. Of particular relevance to my argument is her suggestion that Dante makes ambiguous use of his pronouns throughout the Commedia. In the first canto, such confusion of gender boundaries is, according to Ferrante, "the price that souls pay for their sins because they have succumbed to their lower impulses and surrendered to their weaknesses" [142]; in the second, "it serves a different purpose from the shame it carries in Hell" [143]; in the third, "it contributes to the sense of mankind as one, of the union or fusion of male and female" [143].

13. This satirical use of "regina," a bivalent Latin/vernacular word, is unique in Dante's poem. In all its other occurrences, with only three exceptions, the word is the exclusive property of the Virgin Mary, who is addressed in song as "regina" in Purgatorio 7.82 and Paradiso 23.128 and 33.34; and who is described as: "regina del cielo" [Par. 31.100]; "la regina / cui questo regno è suddito e devoto" [Par. 31.116-17], and "la nostra regina"
In illa die licebat cuilibet dicere in personam triumphantis quicquid velut.

Or to Hecate, the queen of the underworld. Inf. 9.441. In the three other usages of the term "regina" refers either to earthly queens violating or upholding their sacred duties (Purg. 17.35, Par. 6.133) or to Hecate, the queen of the underworld (Inf. 9.44).

On such a day anyone could say anything he wished to the person who was having a triumph. Thus the story is told that when Caesar was being led into the city in triumph, someone said: 'Open the gates for King Baldy and the Queen of Bithynia!' This referred to the fact that he was bald and that he had lain with the King of Bithynia. Another, with the same vice in mind, said: 'Hail, King and Queen!'" [from Paget Toynbee, Dante Studies and Researches (London: Methuen, 1902), 113].


16. The passage in the Nichomachean Ethics is particularly suggestive since it introduces a discussion of vice, incontinence, and brutishness by briefly contrasting these moral states with their positive counterparts: superhuman excellence, heroic discipline, and divinity. It is in this context that Aristotle cites Priam's speech from the Ilid (24.2581, arguing that the appearance of this triad of virtues in Hector marks him as that rarest of types which the Spartans called "the godlike man." After this, Aristotle turns to the analysis of the "effeminate" vices, known as incontinence and "softness," which are negatively contrasted with the virile attributes of continence and endurance. Given this feminization of vice and masculinization of virtue, it would appear that Dante's reversal of Hector's gender also implicitly reverses the Aristotelian gendering of moral states.

A more detailed analysis of this entire sequence of events can be found in Charles S. Singleton, Dante's Commedia: Elements of Structure (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 44-60. It is worth noting that Dante's representation of Dido in Inferno 5 as "she . . . who broke faith with Sichaeus's ashes" [coeli che . . . ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo 61-62] suggests a more extended parallelism, since the confession scene of cantos 30 and 31 will focus on Dante's broken vows to his own ancient love: the Beatrice of the Vita Nuova.

19. It might be objected that Dante offers the reader no detailed indications as to the overall seating arrangement of the blessed in the rose. The placement, for instance, of Bernard de Clairvaux is never elucidated; nor is there any explicit indication that the principle of sexual segregation obtains beyond the central axis. Yet what little Dante does describe suggests an attention to structural and numerical symmetries that lends strong credence to the view that every detail of the arrangement is symbolically charged (and especially so the asymmetrical placement of Beatrice). To cite but a single example: the rose's demography. Just as the number of souls saved before the advent of Christ (ancients) is to equal those saved after his advent (moderns), so the number of males and females whom the reader encounters appears equal: there are ten (9 + 1) females [Lucy, Mary, Anne, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Judith, Ruth and Eve, plus a recent arrival, Beatrice]; and ten (9 + 1) males (Bernard, Francis, Benedict, Augustine, John the Evangelist, Peter, John the Baptist, Moses and Adam, plus the most recent arrival, Dante himself). On this general subject see Rachel Jacob's "Models of Literary Influence in the Commedia," in Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers, ed. M. Schichtman and L. Finke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 158-76.


Lo duca mio di subito mi prese, come la madre chal romore è desta e vede presso a sé le fiamme accese, che prende il figlio e fugge e non sà rërsta, avendo più di lui che di sé cura, tanto che solo una camisca vesta, e giù dal collo de la ripa dura supin si diede a la pendente roccia, che l'un de' lati a l'altra bolgia tura. Non corse mai si tosto acqua per doicia a volger ruota di molin terrago, quand' ella più verso le pale approccia, come 'l maestro mio per quel vivagno, portandosene me sovra 'l suo petto, come suo figlio, non come compagno. [Inf. 23.37-51]

Its full implications can only be grasped when contrasted with Aeneid 2.707-743. Virgil's procession out of Troy had, after all, become a celebrated symbol of Roman pietas because of its insistence upon a spatial hierarchy, both vertical and horizontal, which corresponded to the Roman social pyramid. As the genuine pater familias, Anchises occupies the highest position in Virgil's scene. He rides high on Aeneas's shoulders and bears the family gods. As the genealogical link between the Trojan past and the Roman future, Aeneas is the pivotal figure and occupies the middle position in the leading group. He guides his first-born son, Ascanius, by the hand, whose inferior position is marked by the fact that, because of his shorter legs, he somewhat trails his father and grandfather. In the footsteps of the leading group one might expect Creusa, Ascanius's mother and Aeneas's wife, but in her place we find the famuli or household servants. Situated behind them and at the rear of the pack is Creusa, who is twice distanced ("et longe servat vestigia coniunx" [2.711], "ptm: subit cominx" [2.723]), such that, in the end, she will vanish entirely so that she may be rediscovered in Lavinia. My point is that the maternali-
zation of the father figure in Dante's reenactment of this scene reinserts into the Roman concept of pietas that which had been rigorously excluded or projected outward into a distant future: namely, the feminine and the maternal. The result is a transformation of the pious gesture itself. Carrying Ancheses above him and leading Ascanius below him by the hand, Aeneas had affirmed his strict obeisance to the maintenance of a properly hierarchical relation between ancestors and descendants. Carrying Dante "sover 'l suo petto" like a sucking babe, the Virgil of the Commedia instead affirms a less hierarchical version of piety founded in the virtue of compassion, the special province of Mary.

23. In the case of Dante's reenactment of the Semele/Jove story in Paradiso 21, this means that a vision that had initially been the subject of an absolute prohibition ("se non si temperasse, tanto splende, / che 't tuo mortal podere, al suo fulgore, / sarebbe fonda che trono scoscede" [10-12]), becomes permissible only two cantos later ("poscente / se' fatto a sostener / Io rosio mio" [Par. 23.47-48]), through the agency of Christ and Mary, who have appeared in the intervening moments. The pagan injunction that no mortal may gaze upon the father in his full celestial splendor and survive thus gives way to a Christian invitation to look directly into Beatrice's fulgent and transfiguring smile. On this passage, see Kevin Brownlee's seminal essay, "Ovid's Semele and Dante's Metamorphosis: Paradiso 21-23," MLN 101 (1986): 147-56.


25. The major exception would appear to be Arnaut Daniel, who in Purgatorio 26.140-47 identifies himself by reciting eight verses in Provençal. Yet it must be said of Arnaut's song that, far from being a joyous celebration of love or of the lyric voice, it is a lament of his passata folor. As such it appears as an act of literary contrition, retracting the content of Arnaut's earlier writings, and rejecting their cult of stylistic complexity, for here the master of the trobar clus sings (and cries) a lament of the utmost transparency.

26. For a somewhat divergent view of Ovid's relation to Virgil and to the Augustan project, see G. Karl Galinsky [Ovid's Metamorphoses. An Introduction to the Basic Aspects [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975]]: "to construe Ovid's intentions as a deflation or 'undercutting' of Vergil's epic is both unduly narrow and misleading. Rather, Ovid's aim was to present a successful alternative to Vergil's adaptation of myth and to suggest that the narrative possibilities of myth . . . were by no means exhausted. Ovid's playfulness, which is so characteristic of the Metamorphoses, is not only essential to his revivification of myth, but also to preserving his poetic and creative independence vis-à-vis the otherwise inhibiting influence of Vergil's achievement" (247-48).

27. "Tres procul obscura latitantes parte videbis,— / Sic quoque, quod nemo nescit, amare docent. / Hos tu vel fugias, vel, si satis oris habebis, / Oedipodas facito Telemonisque voces. / Deque tribus, moneo, si qua est tibi cura parentis, / Ne quemquam, quamvis ipse docebit, ames" [Thistia, Loeb Classical Library, ed. and trans. A. L. Wheeler [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975] 1.1.131-16]. Ovid is, of course, referring to the sentence of exile that resulted from the celebrity attained by such works as the Amores, Remedia Amoris, and Ars Amatoria.

28. In "Femina Virtus! Some New Thoughts on the Conflict Between Augustus and Ovid," A. W. J. Holleman [Acta Conventus Omnium Gentium Ovidianis Studiis Fovendis [Bucharest: Bucharest University Press, 1976]] adopts a similar stance concerning the representation of the "feminine" in Ovid's art: "while Catullus in his Lesbia and Virgil in his Dido had warned that amor must lead to otium which turns out to be destructive to Roman virtus, Ovid will show that amor as occasioned and conditioned by otium can lead to a new virtus: namely cultus, which for obvious reasons is preeminently a matter of woman's concern" (348).

29. What seems particularly striking about the Dante/Ovid confrontation is that in both authors one senses that the feminine, whether Magna Mater or Vergine Madre, serves as the emblem of consummate artistry. Writing of the Ars Amatoria, Molly Myerowitz [Ovid's Games of Love [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985]] observes: "paradoxically, the female emerges as the inferior amator, the superior cultor, enjoying an artist's otium, perhaps unenviable yet superior in that detachment to which the male artifex only can aspire. She is, in the words of Joyce, totally 'the artist, like the God of Creation, [who] remains within or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails. She may devote herself completely to art, the human disposition of sensible or intelligible matter for an aesthetic end'" (128). In the case of Dante, Bernard's oration to the Virgin in Paradiso 33 makes it clear that she alone is able to create and recreate God, giving him body without subjecting him to the imperfections of matter.

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EDITED BY MARINA S. BROWNLEE,
KEVIN BROWNLEE, AND
STEPHEN G. NICHOLS