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Kaleidoscopic Beatrice: Through the Theologians, as a Theologian

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ABSTRACT


In this article, I suggest that the character of Beatrice in Dante's *Commedia* should be understood as a theologian, even though her claim to such status relies not on an established historical authority – on written treatises, sermons, works, or reputation – but rather on the nature of the particular person which Dante constructed over his poetic career. The article accordingly reads Beatrice through two major theologians: Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). As case studies, the two present rich opportunities for understanding Dante's own views about theology, but by seeing them through the prism of Beatrice, we can understand more fully the reasons why neither is sufficient for the pilgrim's salvation. Beatrice both incorporates and departs from their teachings and authority. In her lover/beloved relationship with the pilgrim, theology becomes not personified, as has often been the claim, but personalised, requiring a person-to-person realisation.

KEYWORDS

Dante; *Divine Comedy*; theology; Beatrice; Bernard of Clairvaux; Thomas Aquinas

This essay offers an analysis of the character of Beatrice in Dante's *Commedia* that places her alongside two medieval theologians who themselves appear as characters in the poem. Reading Beatrice in light of Saints Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) – both through the historical figures, whose works, images, and reputations Dante the author must have come into contact with, and through the theologian-characters which Dante then constructed – enables us to see new ways in which Dante's own eclectic 'theology' borrows and departs from what has gone before. Despite the appearance of these two (and many other) theologians in the poem, I suggest that it is Beatrice who offers the best candidacy as theologian for the pilgrim, even though her claim to such status relies not on an established historical authority, but on the nature of the particular person which the author constructed over his poetic career. Others are inadequate to the task of providing the conditions under which the pilgrim can understand his place in God's creation: a task, that is, one might think befitting a theologian.

Beatrice's strange persona is kaleidoscopic in its ability to reflect God's truths.¹ Her character demonstrates a tantalising multivalency which has given rise to a vast literature; as Rachel Jacoff says, Beatrice is 'not reducible to a univocal allegorical correlative'.² My concern in this essay is that Beatrice be re-instated in such a way that we can understand Dante's theology as being available

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¹Peter S. Hawkins describes the pilgrim as seeing a 'light show' after looking into Beatrice's eyes: 'All Smiles: Poetry and Theology in Dante's *Comedy*', in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, ed. by Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 33–59 (p. 38).

²Rachel Jacoff, 'The Tears of Beatrice', *Dante Studies*, 100 (1982), 1–12 (p. 10). The literature has shown how the portrayal of an individual woman can be pressed into the service of a host of functions: literal, symbolic and allegorical. From the earliest commentaries, her rendering in the *Commedia* has been variously equated with Love, Grace, Theology, Christ, the Church, Wisdom, and so on. Works which explore the nature of Beatrice are legion: I highlight here some of the studies not cited elsewhere in the article that bear particularly on my arguments concerning Beatrice as theologian, including Olivia Holmes, *Dante's Two Beloveds: Ethics and Erotics in the 'Divine Comedy'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Victoria Kirkham, 'A Canon of Women in Dante's *Commedia*', *Annali d'Italianistica*, 7 (1989), 16–41; Vittorio Montemaggi, *Reading Dante's 'Commedia' as Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Lino Pertile, 'Does the *Stilnovo* Go to Heaven?', in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini and H. Wayne Storey

through the inter-personal relationships in human language. In Vittorio Montemaggi's words, it is an opportunity to understand how we can 'be the love which God is'.³

Beatrice speaks at length in a theological voice embroidered in scholarly convention, a female voice certainly unheard in the streets of duecento Florence. And yet, at the same time and under a different guise, her personhood as beloved provides for the pilgrim the fullest articulation of what it means to be a human creation. Beatrice first appears at *Purgatorio* xxx, 31, in the Earthly Paradise, but we have known of her intervention in Dante's story since *Inferno* ii, when Virgil tells of his commission. At *Purgatorio* xxx, 55, we hear her words directly, greeting Dante and commanding him not to weep at Virgil's disappearance. She takes up the role of guide and teacher: her explanations of theology are crucial for Dante-personaggio's spiritual development and comprise much of the more explicitly theological passages of the *Commedia*. Her removal at *Paradiso* xxxi, 58, when she returns to her place in the celestial rose, is a necessary part of his learning about the nature of divine love.

It is Beatrice, then, who 'grounds and humanizes a poem that could otherwise fall into silence or abstraction'.⁴ That silence may well be necessary at the last, given Dante's commitment to an ineffable God. Nonetheless, abstraction remains a risk for a theologian creating, as it does, an intellectual gap between experience and understanding. Through the character of Beatrice we can see how Dante's theology avoids that risk, and is brought into focus at a concrete, personal level. He offers up a literary production in Beatrice, 'a radically alien construct' – someone able to up-end expectations about theological authority and about what theological understanding means.⁵ Yet, as I suggest, this is not to say that the theologians are jettisoned altogether by Dante; indeed, as well as appearing as characters in the poem, their presence can be read, in different ways, in Beatrice herself. This article focuses on Bernard of Clairvaux, and Thomas Aquinas – both, of course, greatly important to Dante, but who, even in their heavenly appearances within the poem, cannot deliver the pilgrim to the face of God; cannot endow him with sufficient knowledge; and cannot activate his participation in God's joy.

To include Beatrice as a theologian in this essay I am already pushing at the boundaries of what it means to be one. More basic than that, though, as Zygmunt Barański has helpfully shown, is that to call even Bernard and Thomas theologians, and to categorise their respective works as theology, as though that were a stable term, already trades on assumptions that need to be questioned and spelled out in definition.⁶ In the *Convivio*, Dante calls theology 'la scienza divina', a practice which he characterises in terms of revelation of the divine through scripture.⁷ It is a definition which bases theology's authority on Christ's words in the Gospels, and on the Old Testament, and which has as its subject God. In *Monarchia* III. iii. 13, Dante extends the reach of theological authority to include not merely scripture, but the written works of the Fathers of the Church, naming (only) Augustine as the prime example of an authority divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Thus there is a two-fold distinction in the activity of Dante's theology itself: the first is available to all Christians, as they read and interpret scripture and respond to its affective revelation. The second is the remit of individuals who produce written exegesis upon the Bible: those who engage in scripture's interpretation are theologians, properly understood. Augustine's expertise as an exegete provides not

(New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), pp. 104–14; Lino Pertile, *La Punta del disio: Semantica del desiderio nella 'Commedia'* (Florence: Cadmo, 2005); Regina F. Psaki, 'Dante's Redeemed Eroticism', *Lectura Dantis*, 18–19 (1996), 12–19; Regina F. Psaki, 'Love for Beatrice: Transcending Contradiction in the Paradiso', in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. by Barolini and Storey, pp. 115–30; Marianne Shapiro, *Woman Earthly and Divine in the 'Comedy' of Dante* (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1975); Charles S. Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1943).

³Vittorio Montemaggi, 'In Unknowability as Love: The Theology of Dante's *Commedia*', in *Dante's 'Commedia'*, ed. by Montemaggi and Treherne, pp. 60–94 (p. 62).

⁴Tristan Kay, *Dante's Lyric Redemption: Eros, Salvation, Vernacular Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 80.

⁵I quote Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 366.

⁶Zygmunt G. Barański, 'Dante and Doctrine (and Theology)', in *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, ed. by Claire Honess and Matthew Treherne, 2 vols (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), I, pp. 9–63.

⁷*Convivio* II. xiii. 8: 'Ancora: lo Cielo empireo per la sua pace simiglia la divina scienza, che piena è di tutta pace: la quale non soffera lite alcuna d'opinioni o di sofisticati argomenti, per la eccellentissima certezza del suo subietto, lo quale è Dio.'

only a benchmark towards which other theologians can aim, but also furnishes them with a hugely influential method of *doing* theology by way of his allegorical readings of scripture.

Named, historical theologians appear in their numbers in the *Paradiso*, of course, and represent a wide spectrum of doctrinal points of view. In the Heaven of the Sun, Thomas Aquinas himself introduces a selection of individuals whom we might classify as theologians, including, amongst others, Albert the Great, Peter Lombard, Bede, and Richard of St Victor – this heaven evidently embracing multiplicity and variety. A cursory survey of the theologians brings out the sense of disputation that characterised theology in the late medieval period: Aquinas introduces Siger, for example, a theologian whose views were (ultimately, violently) rejected as heretical by the university in Paris, and condemned by Thomas himself. Critics in the twentieth and twenty-first century have usefully enumerated the ways in which the poet reconciles such antagonisms, for example and most audaciously by bringing the theologians into step with one another and into community – in the image of their dancing (*Par.* x, 78–79), – thus both celebrating and embodying the order of the universe which their learning sought to uncover.⁸

Kenelm Foster draws attention to the unusual focus on peace in Dante's conception of theology, found again in the *Convivio* II. xiv. 19, and underlines the fact that it bears little resemblance to the practice which Aquinas had helped to establish, and which had at its core the role of reason.⁹ Instead, Dante's focus on revelation through scripture, and an idiosyncratic engagement with the notion of peace, downplayed reason and was, according to Barański, 'a sincere effort to mitigate conflict rather than foster it'.¹⁰ Albert Ascoli sees an ambiguity in Dante's use of the word *teologia*.¹¹ Like Barański, he notes Dante's focus on biblical interpretation, but Ascoli gives further emphasis to Dante's question of scriptural authorship, specifically, and of the nature of those 'theologians', the scribes of the Bible.

By understanding how Dante incorporates or rejects aspects of Bernard's and Aquinas's works, reputations, and personhoods, I suggest we can better understand what Dante thinks of theology itself, both as a practice – as a means for understanding truths about God – and those truths themselves. My claim is that Dante will attempt to provide those truths in the person of Beatrice. We shall see how the authority of the theologians congregates in Beatrice – radically alternative, as unlike any theologian as it is possible to be: neither educated, male, nor celebrated as an authority. And yet, I suggest, she retains enough of what is considered to be definitive of a theologian – and crucially, what Dante himself explicitly defines in the *Convivio* – to be considered one too. Beatrice illuminates the truths of the Bible, and thus creates the conditions under which the pilgrim can be redeemed. She delivers a peace to Dante and overcomes the antagonisms inherent in medieval theology, and calms the pilgrim's questioning mind. As well, in her very own personhood, Beatrice embodies and exemplifies for the pilgrim truths about creation and its Creator that only she can, as Dante's beloved.

Something must be said here about the methodological assumptions that are at play in my approach. My aim is not to critically assess any of the particular positions that the theologians might espouse, nor to suggest that Dante endorses or rejects any of these wholesale. Indeed, as has been shown, Dante's 'theology' is eclectic, it is syncretic: the author's compulsion seems always to integrate. In Simon Gilson's words, Dante has a 'strong predilection to harmonise'.¹² So this essay is emphatically not a piece of academic theology, by way of literary criticism. Rather, it is an examination of how Dante the author co-opts the portrayal and the authority of these individual theologians, given what emerges from their works, images, and hagiographies in late-thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century northern Italy, in order to do something very particular in his poem

⁸See Dante's *Commedia*, ed. by Montemaggi and Treherne; *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, ed. by Honess and Treherne.

⁹Kenelm Foster, 'Teologia', in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, ed. by Umberto Bosco, 6 vols (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia italiana, 1970–1978), V, pp. 564–68.

¹⁰Barański, 'Dante and Doctrine', p. 26.

¹¹See Albert Russell Ascoli, 'Poetry and Theology', in *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, ed. by Honess and Treherne, II, pp. 3–42.

¹²Simon A. Gilson, 'Christian Aristotelianism', in *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, ed. by Honess and Treherne, I, pp. 65–110 (p. 105).

with the concept of theology itself. As such, then, my arguments engage tangentially with the historical domain – as the late-medieval context necessarily underpins some of my claims – but its main focus is textual and theoretical.

In the *Commedia*, Barański hears in Beatrice a ‘psychologically complex [...] voice’, which was not present in the *Vita nova*.¹³ That voice is the subject of much discussion in the literature: Teodolinda Barolini’s description of Dante’s heroine as *Beatrix loquax* is important, and I return to it in the discussion below, but Barolini also suggests, in seeming opposition to Barański, that the Beatrice of the *Commedia* is far from a complex character with a recognisable subjectivity.¹⁴ Indeed, she says in Beatrice Dante seems to have ‘failed to create [a cohesive] character’.¹⁵ For Barolini, the symbols which Beatrice embodies undermine the characterisation of any particular personhood. Below I suggest how we can see that Beatrice herself – not merely the emblems that we can read into her, but the person who speaks, and the person who loves and is loved – is necessary, and can for the pilgrim be a theologian. In life, the *Vita nova* says Beatrice withheld her salutation from Dante: a mute refusal which the young Dante-character interprets as the denial of his own salvation (VN XI. 4). In the Earthly Paradise, Beatrice’s greeting at *Purgatorio* xxx, 55, when she calls Dante by name, connects the pilgrim’s past with his future salvation. Beatrice knows Dante, understands what and who he is, and what is required of him; her word is a call to him as a creature of God, to behold her individual presence and to understand what it means.

Beatrice’s back-story as beloved, the desire for her that powers Dante-*personaggio*’s journey, and the desire for *his* salvation that motivates Beatrice’s intervention, shows us that the author of the *Commedia* considers that love for an individual, and erotic love at that, has the capacity to reveal truths about our place in God’s universal order. Regina Psaki urges us to resist the tendency to erase the erotic, the sexual, from the relationship as it is represented, arguing that erotic love is neither replaced by, nor metamorphosed into, divine love. What happens to the pilgrim’s and Beatrice’s relationship after *Purgatorio* xxvii is, according to Psaki, ‘emphatically [...] not [...] a purification or transformation of desire’.¹⁶ Furthermore, as Elena Lombardi has compellingly shown, the character of Beatrice makes sense of her own transtextual evolution, a ‘development in terms of accumulation rather than opposition’.¹⁷ Indeed, for Lombardi, in the *Commedia* Beatrice becomes her own reader, understanding not only her role *within* the poem, but also outwith it, from the construction of the silent lyric lady of the *Vita nova* to the ‘walking and talking extended piece of poetry fathered by God-the-Author himself’.¹⁸

Dante the author may well seek the validation and qualifications of the theologians with whom he is in dialogue, yet it is the character of Beatrice who activates the critical and intellectual conversion of the pilgrim-poet. As I am arguing here, she stands not merely for the personification of theology: rather, she is the instantiation of a person-to-person love relationship which contains within it theological truth. That the character of Beatrice understands this too is, for Lombardi, a move that constitutes the author’s ‘spectacular “postmodern” metatextual twist, having a character become a critic of her own story’.¹⁹

Beatrice Echoing Aquinas: A Theology of Argumentation

Beatrice’s personal yet terrifying greeting of Dante in the Earthly Paradise reverberates throughout the rest of the poem. It is deeply unsettling for the pilgrim and indeed, it is anything but peace-

¹³Zygmunt G. Barański, ‘The “New Life” of “Comedy”: The *Commedia* and the *Vita Nuova*’, *Dante Studies*, 113 (1995), 1–29 (p. 8).

¹⁴Barolini, *Dante and the Origins*, p. 360.

¹⁵Barolini, *Dante and the Origins*, p. 363.

¹⁶Regina F. Psaki, ‘The Sexual Body in Dante’s Celestial Paradise’, in *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. by Jan S. Emerson (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), pp. 47–61 (p. 48).

¹⁷Elena Lombardi, *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 118.

¹⁸Lombardi, p. 117.

¹⁹Lombardi, p. 119.

giving. It inaugurates too her extraordinary theological discourse. Beatrice's words are put in the service of theological explanation until *Paradiso* xxx, 149 and comprise an essential aspect of her kaleidoscopic persona. Both what she says, and the manner in which she says it, invite us, I suggest, to compare her directly with the historical Thomas Aquinas, medieval theologian *par excellence*.

The range of subjects that Beatrice expounds upon is vast and, on the face of it, she deserves the loquacious moniker that Barolini bestowed upon her.²⁰ Her 'infallibile' knowledge (*Par.* vii, 19) is clearly limitless, and her willingness to express it, very nearly the same. It should be unsurprising to us that as an inhabitant of Paradise she should now have an understanding beyond that of her earthly life: souls in Heaven have direct access to God's knowledge and, as she points out to Dante at *Paradiso* xxviii, 135, the ignorance on Earth that is corrected in Heaven is a cause for joy, even laughter.

As the pilgrim's teacher, she corrects points of doctrine and contradicts some of the teaching of those Fathers of the Church who accompany her in Paradise. Joan M. Ferrante suggests that

[p]erhaps because Dante did not agree entirely with any of the theologians he respected enough to place in paradise, perhaps because he wished to emphasize the distance between God's realm and the earthly church, Dante gives the office of major theologian in his heaven to someone whose sex would have shocked virtually all of the doctors of the church there.²¹

Ferrante is right, of course, that it is shocking to have a female voice as an authority on anything at all, not least holy doctrine.²² It is an audacious move by Dante, but my suggestion in this essay is that there is a more fundamental reason for her inclusion than merely the ones that Ferrante suggests. The necessity of Beatrice as theologian requires the pilgrim to hear her words and her teaching in light of the person that she is, a creature of God, whom he knows and loves. This personalisation of theology is crucial on his journey; his understanding of what it means to be a creature of a Divine creator deepens both in response to his inter-personal relationship with Beatrice, and as she conveys to him her own theological understanding. A demonstration of that limitless understanding can be found in her lecture of *Paradiso* ii, which illustrates to Dante-*personaggio* and to the reader, early on in their journey together, just how far her encyclopaedic knowledge extends: the entire cosmology of the universe from the Empyrean downwards is spelled out and its workings explained (*Par.* ii, 112–48). This is a pattern found throughout *Paradiso*, as more thorny problems of contentious theological debate arise.

In addition to her contributions to the finer points of theological argument, Beatrice has words to say about those who engage in the debates themselves, and those who supposedly preach the Word of God, yet fail to engage with scripture. She warns that the theologians in the schools are both believing and unbelieving. That is, they are either ignorant or deliberately misleading in their lessons (*Par.* xxix, 70–84), the latter occasioning more guilt and more shame. Her disapprobation seems to be for a type of intellectual play that does not take seriously the proper task of the theologian, that of illuminating the truths of the Bible. The theologians – the professional university teachers in Paris or Bologna, or indeed, in the Florentine centres of learning – engage in philosophical games and disputations which have little inherent value, but have the power to mislead.

Much has been made of Dante's own report of his exposure to Florentine *scuole*, but whether these comprised much of Dante's theological and philosophical training is less important than the fact that they shaped the more general intellectual climate of his day.²³ The style of academic teaching that flourished in Paris and which filtered through Europe had at its heart the *quaestio* format, wherein masters would set out the question for debate, and interlocutors would, in turn, provide responses and replies. In duecento Florence, this method would be heard daily in the disputations in the classrooms, and twice yearly in the

²⁰Barolini, *Dante and the Origins*, p. 360.

²¹Joan M. Ferrante, *Dante's Beatrice: Priest of an Androgynous God* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992) pp. 195–96.

²²For Aquinas's view on Paul's prohibitions of women teaching or preaching in 1 Corinthians 14. 34 and 1 Timothy 2. 12, see *Summa Theologica*, IIIa Suppl. q. 39, a1: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1911–1925). Available online at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/5039.htm> [last accessed 30 November 2020].

²³Dante records his own learning in *Convivio* II. xii. 7, 'ne le scuole de li religiosi e a le disputazioni de li filosofanti'.

more public spaces of the *quodlibetal* debates, which were open to members of the public before Christmas and Easter. And even though university curricula had been shaped in the *quaestio* format before Thomas Aquinas was in Paris, and before he had written his magisterial *summae*, by the time Dominican devotees such as Remigio de' Girolami (d. 1319) were teaching in Florence's Santa Maria Novella, Thomas had already, through the huge influence of his written works, come to stand for the scholastic method: his oeuvre crystallised its form.²⁴ The articulation of theology, the methods which were employed by the religious orders both in their preaching and in their teaching, subsume characteristics that are to be found throughout Aquinas's written works (which were held in the convent libraries of Florence): a rigorous examination of scripture, of ideas, and of concepts, teasing out at length the ramifications of every particular claim and contrary claim.²⁵

In *Paradiso*, Dante portrays Thomas dancing in harmony with other theologians with whom he disagreed: dancing, no less, like a woman (*Par.* x, 76–81). How the author treats the character of Aquinas himself in the poem is relevant, of course, and adds another layer of complexity to our reading of Beatrice here. This, because at crucial points within the poem Dante's portrayal of Thomas subverts expectations: *Paradiso* xi's encomium to Saint Francis is an obvious example of one such surprise, but there are other ways through which the character within the *Commedia* complicates a one-dimensional engagement with the historical saint and his oeuvre.²⁶

Beatrice's scepticism about the value of the professional practices in the schools extends also to preachers, whom she says are silent about the Gospel, and are more concerned with their own celebrity and inventions (*Par.* xxix, 95–96). In *Paradiso* v, 76–78, Beatrice advises the pilgrim to take more heed of the Bible: 'Avete il novo e 'l vecchio Testamento, | e 'l pastor de la Chiesa che vi guida; | questo vi basti a vostro salvamento'. Later in this canto she warns against leaving the mother's milk of the Bible and even 'warring' with one's self (82–84). Her concern, again, appears to be with the type of theological discourse practised in the *studia*.²⁷ One could make a case that Aquinas's own theological discourse might itself be read as 'warring' in its very structure. In Aquinas's *summae*, at least, the structure of the rhetoric is, on its surface, combative: propositions presented and defeated; objections defended; replies devastating; and these all internal to the text itself. He is warring, in some cases, only with himself. And although the aim of Thomas's arguments may well have been to reach a position of 'rest' – a position from which it is possible to be content in the knowledge that reason has supplied – the discourse which he employs to get there is far from peaceful and harmonising. In fact, it is divisive.²⁸

But I suggest we need not take Beatrice's censure merely at face value. At times in her lectures it is clearly the case that her own rhetoric takes on the character of a Thomas-like argument: we can read

²⁴For a fuller discussion of Aquinas and the *Summa*'s relation to Dominican method, see John Marenbon, 'Method', in *The Cambridge Companion to the 'Summa Theologiae'*, ed. by Philip McCosker and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) pp. 74–84.

²⁵The large-scale research project, 'Dante and Late Medieval Florence: Theology in Poetry, Practice and Society', has provided new contributions to the literature on the educational and religious context of Dante's Florence: funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, the project ran between 2012–2017 at the Universities of Leeds and Warwick. Project Fellow Anna Pegoretti's work builds upon and updates earlier analyses, particularly those of Charles T. Davis and Gabriella Pomaro, and provides a detailed account of the theological manuscripts held by the Florentine convents of Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce; Nicolò Maldina has provided new analyses of preachers circulating in Dante's Florence and their relation to the *Commedia*. See: Anna Pegoretti, "'Nelle scuole delli religiosi': materiali per Santa Croce nell'età di Dante", *L'Alighieri*, 50 (2017), 5–56; Nicolò Maldina, *In pro del mondo. Dante, la predicazione e i generi della letteratura religiosa medievale* (Rome: Salerno, 2017). How to make anything of the contextual archival evidence at our disposal remains a contested issue, however: see, for example, Zygmunt G. Barański, 'On Dante's Trail', *Italian Studies*, 72.1 (2017), 1–15.

²⁶See Abigail Rowson, *Theologians as Persons in Dante's Commedia* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2018. Available at <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/20600/>). I consider examples of an odd-speaking Aquinas at: *Par.* x, 86, 109–14, 139–41; *Par.* xi, 2–3; *Par.* xiii, 97–99. These examples are juxtaposed with a more familiar but cartoonish portrayal at *Par.* xiii, 112–14.

²⁷For an account of Florentine quodlibetal debates and their significance in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, see Matthew Treherne, 'Reading Dante's Heaven of the Fixed Stars (*Paradiso* xxii–xxvii): Declaration, Pleasure and Praise', in *Se mai continga . . . : Exile, Politics and Theology in Dante*, ed. by Claire Honess and Matthew Treherne (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2013), pp. 11–26.

²⁸From another perspective, the format of Aquinas's written discourse might be interpreted as inclusive or even communal in its style – as a consideration of all possible alternatives, including more authoritative voices. Even if we accept that this is the case, I maintain that there is a commanding (male) voice heard throughout the *summae*, one that speaks over dissenting voices. That Dante has Aquinas dancing like a woman is an interesting reply to this gendered question.

traces of the historical saint in the characterisation of her discourse. For example, at *Paradiso* I, 97–98, in reply to Beatrice’s direction, the pilgrim uses a technical, scholastic term for ‘resting content’: ‘Già contento *requievi* | di grande ammirazion’. It is a word choice which should alert us to the fact that Beatrice’s character might not be as straightforwardly anti-theologian as she first appears: on the one hand she rejects the methodologies employed by the theologians in the schools, and yet on the other, as I sketch below, she deploys a series of devastating explanatory missiles herself.

Beatrice’s lengthy lecture on the spots of the Moon in *Paradiso* II causes Dante-*personaggio*’s ignorance to melt like snow under the light of her instruction (106–07); it combines logical, empirical, and experimental reasoning, and demonstrates a methodological approach straight out of classical philosophy and its medieval scholastic heirs. She begins with a *reductio ad absurdum*, attacking Dante-*personaggio*’s reply to her question about the causes of dark spots on the Moon (64–82); she then appeals to empirical evidence supplied by the senses, and goes on to outline an elaborate thought experiment to show why the pilgrim’s explanation cannot be the correct one (83–105). Beatrice’s style of argumentation here echoes that found in the works of medieval philosopher-theologians, Aquinas not least among them. And indeed, in *Paradiso* XIV, the author compares Thomas and Beatrice directly, noting that their explanations share the same lucidity, and so underlining again her heavyweight methodological inheritance.

Dal centro al cerchio, e sì dal cerchio al centro
 movesi l’acqua in un ritondo vaso,
 secondo ch’è percosso fuori o dentro:
 ne la mia mente fé subito caso
 questo ch’io dico, sì come si tacque
 la gloriosa vita di Tommaso,
 per la similitudine che nacque
 del suo parlare e di quel di Beatrice,
 a cui si cominciar, dopo lui, piacque.
 (*Par.* XIV, 1–9)

Her teacherly style continues throughout. *Paradiso* V, again, provides a good example. She instructs Dante-*personaggio* to hold on to the ‘scienza’ that she has revealed to him concerning the nature of vows: ‘Apri la mente a quel ch’io ti paleso | fermalvi entro; ché non fa scienza, | senza lo ritenere, avere inteso’ (40–41). Moving towards her concluding remarks she provides biblical (49–50, 63–68) and classical examples (69–72) to make her points, marshalling the argument – and the pilgrim – along the way (68). Her countenance remains that of a teacher right up until she finishes her lesson at line 84, but by the end of her speech, indeed from as early in the canto as line 55, a shift takes place in her mode of address: she is less the public orator – the philosopher of the quodlibetal trying out her syllogisms – and has become a preacher, explaining the import of her conclusions for the benefit of the erring souls on Earth: ‘Siate, Cristiani, a muovervi più gravi’ (73). She is preaching here to the whole of Christendom, and the sounding of authority, now, to all who might hear her, is absolute.

Beatrice retains a special status here as a powerful mouthpiece for understanding God’s truths, even though all the blessed are endowed with a knowledge that comes directly from the mind of God. Throughout the *cantica*, we can see how Beatrice provides Dante-*personaggio* with the means to understand truths previously beyond his comprehension, and to make sense of the sights and sounds with which he is presented. At *Paradiso* VII, 123, Beatrice clarifies her key point in order that the pilgrim, if he heeds her words, will understand things as well as she does (‘perché tu veggi li così com’io’): in this case, the apparent contradictions of the Incarnation. The overriding tenor of many of her lessons is combative and forceful; they do not admit of ‘lite alcuna d’opinioni o di sofistici argomenti’ (*Cvo* II. xiv. 19); not only are they not tempered or softened by being delivered by a woman, but if anything, her sex only makes the opposite true. And so, as I suggested above, what can be seen throughout Aquinas’s oeuvre, in his style of argumentation and the structure of his discourse, so too with Beatrice: if there is peace to be had here, as Dante claims is definitive of

theology in the *Convivio*, if one can ‘rest content’ in the wake of her argument, it is a peace brought about by the hammer-blow of a single, unyielding voice.

Beatrice Alongside Bernard: A Theology of Desire

The kaleidoscope moves and we see and hear another Beatrice, with a different voice, ‘psychologically complex’ for sure and, perhaps, telling us more about theology than her lectures possibly could.²⁹ Placing this Beatrice alongside the historical Bernard of Clairvaux, we can consider her authority in light of the ways in which Bernard’s theological authority was constructed.

The qualities of personhood that emerge from Bernard’s texts underpin his theological authority.³⁰ Ultimately, it is an authority built upon desire: desire for God is heard in his affective language about his own experience of the divine, in the kind of *raptus* that *De diligendo Deo* (X. 27) and *Sermones super Cantica canticorum* (Sermon 74. 5) describe; and it is heard in the language found in his letters, where his loving attention to individuals, and the desire for their souls, is the hallmark of his communication, one person to another.³¹ Bernard’s outpouring of love for God and for humanity manifests at the level of the personal: his concern is for particular individuals. The lament for his own brother in Sermon 26 is one example of how Bernard’s theology engages at the personal level.³²

That person-to-person embodiment of the love of the Creator can be seen in Bernard’s character in the poem, too. Although there are aspects of the historical saint which had slipped out of focus by the time Dante was writing, or that are perhaps underplayed in the poem – his role as leader of the Cistercians; his role in theological controversies; his role as crusader and as counsellor to popes and kings – there seems to be a close alignment between the historical saint and the character that Dante creates in the poem. Here, unlike in the case of Aquinas, where some of our expectations about the character are confounded, Bernard is indeed recognisable, enough so that early readers, according to Steven Botterill, would have known who he was before he announces his name to the pilgrim at *Paradiso* xxxi, 102.³³

The poet tells us that with Bernard, the pilgrim is in the company of someone who caught the taste of the divine on Earth: ‘contemplando, gustò di quella pace’ (*Par.* xxxi, 111). In Bernard’s sermons on the canticles ‘taste’ is just right: ‘Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth: for thy breasts are better than wine’, writes the author of the Song of Songs.³⁴ For Bernard, more so than for other commentators (who perhaps read the Bride as the Church, or even the Virgin), the Song is a wedding hymn celebrating the marriage of God and the individual soul, and is thus a means for describing the mystical experience of God through the primacy of the Incarnation. It is something made possible through bodies: both through the contemplative himself, who desires the experience, akin to erotic desire, but also through the body of Christ in the Incarnation. The experience is sensual like a kiss, a taste of God, something to be desired, bodily.³⁵ But Christ is also the event of the kiss itself, the mediator between two lovers, man and God. Denys Turner notes that in his sermons, Bernard ‘takes the erotic surface of the Song [...] seriously in its own right as erotic [...]’.³⁶ That is, he shows no fear, as do some commentators, about a kind of ‘hermeneutical adultery’ – a carnal misreading of the Song as purely human consummation.³⁷

²⁹Barański, ‘New Life’, p. 8.

³⁰Steven Botterill’s *Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the Commedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) remains the seminal text for studies of Bernard in the *Commedia*.

³¹Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, ed. by J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, and H. M. Rochais, 8 vols (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–1977).

³²Sermon XXVI. 9, *Bernardi Opera*, I, p. 177.

³³Botterill, p. 16.

³⁴Song of Songs 1. 1.

³⁵Lino Pertile suggests that Dante’s dramatisation of Paradise across thirty-three cantos, creates a distinctly mystical and desirous energy: Lino Pertile, ‘A Desire of Paradise and a Paradise of Desire: Dante and Mysticism’, in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Amilcare A. Iannucci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 148–66 (p.151).

³⁶Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), p. 167 (emphasis original).

³⁷Turner, *Eros and Allegory*, p. 151 (emphasis original).

Thus Bernard and Beatrice are connected by the very first words which announce her arrival in the Earthly Paradise, ‘*Veni, sponsa de Libano!*’ (*Purg.* xxx, 11), and subsequently, ‘*Benedictus qui venis!*’ (19). Beatrice is hailed as ‘both the Bride from the Song of Song and as Christ, the bridegroom’: from the outset, the irreducibility of her character is brought into play.³⁸ Bernard’s wholehearted commitment to the language of *eros* takes on the ambiguities of gender-switching too: in Sermon 74 on the Song he loses himself because he is a beloved penetrated by the Bridegroom. Similar reversals can be read at different moments between the pilgrim and Beatrice. For Olivia Holmes, ‘Beatrice is both bride and bridegroom, both the Church, or the Christian soul, and Christ [...] so, too, is the pilgrim, who marries her’.³⁹

The pilgrim’s eyes are directed by the desire of both Bernard and Beatrice: their ardour for God and for Mary focuses his attention. Through word and gesture, Bernard encourages Dante-*personaggio* to look again at the Virgin enthroned:

Bernardo, come vide li occhi miei
nel caldo suo caler fissi e attenti,
li suoi con tanto affetto volse a lei,
che ’ miei di rimirar fé più ardenti.
(*Par.* xxxi, 139–42)

This passage recalls an early fourteenth-century Florentine *lauda* to Bernard, in which he is called an *aquila contemplativa*.⁴⁰ In the medieval bestiary, eagles are known for their clear-sightedness, for looking directly at the sun and forcing their young to do the same. Dante-*personaggio* certainly has the appearance of a child, even a grandchild, of the venerable *sene*. And this parental relation he shares with Beatrice, the mother bird of *Paradiso* xxiii, 8–9, who ‘con ardente affeto il sole aspetta | fiso guardando’.

At the beginning of the *cantica*, Beatrice’s powers of looking towards the sun in fact exceed the eagle’s: ‘vidi rivolta e riguardar nel sole: | aquila sì non li s’affisse unquanco’ (*Par.* i, 46–48). The effect of Beatrice’s looking is to turn Dante-*personaggio*’s gaze towards the sun too, beyond his usual capacity:

così de l’atto suo, per li occhi infuso
ne l’immagine mia, il mio si fece,
e fissi li occhi al sole oltre nostr’ uso.
(*Par.* i, 52–54)

This early in the *cantica* of heaven he is unable to sustain the sight for long, but instead reverts to looking at Beatrice herself. Thus both Bernard and Beatrice compel Dante-*personaggio* to look; something of their desire transmits to him. This looking is literal: Beatrice turns towards the light, and at *Paradiso* xxiii, 28–29, the pilgrim sees Christ in Triumph as ‘un sol’. Theologians furnish their readers with understanding through scriptural interpretation; they direct their readers and their congregations; they teach them how to see the truth of the Bible (or should do so, according to the *Convivio*). The light of the sun, of Christ, reveals the truth that the theologians help to uncover.

In Beatrice, the maternal aspect (that of the mother bird who looks to the sun and who helps her offspring to do the same) is an important element of her personhood. Earlier, in *Purgatorio* xxx, Dante-*personaggio*’s response to Beatrice’s arrival in the poem reduces him to a boy running to his *mamma*, even though it is to the now-disappeared Virgil that the pilgrim has turned (43); a little later, the pilgrim is still the child, but now Beatrice, after she has delivered her first rebuke, has become like a scolding mother (79). Barolini reorients us to the main theme of the *Commedia*, however, when she says that ‘the dominant register in Dante’s portrayal of Beatrice is erotic’.⁴¹ The

³⁸Carolynn Lund-Mead, ‘Dante and Androgyny’, in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Iannucci, pp. 195–213 (p. 205: emphasis original).

³⁹Olivia Holmes, ‘Sex and the City of God’, *Critica del testo*, 14.2 (2011), 67–108 (p. 70).

⁴⁰Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS Magliabechiano 11. 1. 122 (Banco Rari 18), fol. 110r.

⁴¹Barolini, *Dante and the Origins*, p. 366.

maternal and erotic are forms of human love that can only be understood in each case as *particular*: one cannot be in love with just anyone; not everyone can be one's own child. The integration of theological truth with erotic love within the person of Beatrice has of course been the preoccupation of many of the responses to the *Commedia*, both in the academic sphere and the wider cultural landscape.⁴² We saw above that Beatrice shares with Bernard the same desire for seeing God. But Beatrice's desire is double-sighted: it looks at God, and it looks at Dante-*personaggio* too, and not only because she desires his salvation.

The pilgrim's encounter with Beatrice is remarkable for the complex interplay of looking-at and looking-away-from that goes on between the two characters. They are each intent upon this lovers' dance of the eyes: desiring to look; looking; fainting; turning away from; returning the gaze; commanding the other to look. It is an almost entirely erotic interplay, even though at the same time, Beatrice is teaching the pilgrim to look *beyond* her, by looking *at* her. Only after the pilgrim has seen the light of Christ in triumph approaching, has he, according to Beatrice, gained enough strength to look at her unveiled face and behold her smile, to see what she really is ('riguarda qual son io', *Par.* xxiii, 46). Peter Hawkins notes that, 'it is to the sign of her face that he will continually turn his gaze, as if pulled by her beauty to the mark of his greater desire [...] and therefore to a reality that lies beyond her'.⁴³

The eroticism of the encounter between the two characters – and the whole of the pilgrim's journey is based on encounter, inaugurated as it is by the sound of Beatrice's name in *Inferno* II, and spurred on again in Purgatory on the terrace of lust when Dante-*personaggio* responds again to the sound of her name – can be illuminated by considering the recurring metaphor of the arrow, from a poem full of such imagery, which builds an erotic intensity: the shiver of a sexual spark between the two. Of no greater or lesser importance, this metaphor also stands for the dawning of intellectual insight, and thus we see again, just as we see with Bernard's language of erotic love, that the affective and the intellectual modes of thought are tied together by Dante, integrated into a picture that would otherwise be incomplete.

The image of the arrowshot itself is important, but its arrangement within the poem also deserves attention. In *Paradiso* II, Dante-*personaggio* and Beatrice have moved to a new location, the Heaven of the Moon: 'forse in tanto in quanto un quadrel posa | e vola e da la noce si dischiava' (23–24). The rapid transfer is quickly followed by the pilgrim's new awareness: he reaches a place where he can 'see', and this knowledge dawns only after looking at Beatrice herself (22). Here, then, the looking, and the movement through the heavens, and the new knowledge belonging to the pilgrim, become phases of an integrated action, just as the arrow's hitting the target, its flight, and its release from the bow are part of the same. But this beautiful tercet not only gives a sense of rapid movement, and of knowledge dawning as the target is hit; it simultaneously brings us back to the ways in which Dante-*personaggio* is tethered to Beatrice. The formulation of the flying arrow moreover is here presented to us backwards: we hear of it hitting its target before we hear it has left the bow. In crafting his imagery in this way, the poet achieves something all the more powerful.

By *Paradiso* II the pilgrim might be the originator of the arrow itself, one that ends, teleologically and necessarily, given his location, in knowledge.⁴⁴ And yet there remains an erotic reading of the arrow: it hits a target before one is even aware it has left the bow; it looses its catch as though there is no way of controlling it, like a body directed by *eros*: Eros the Bowman, Dante the Bowman. Beatrice is the target, the locus of a lover's attention. And how are we to understand, from our Earthly perspective, just how the heavens are arranged, how bodies can penetrate bodies, 'se corpo in corpo repe' (*Par.* II, 39)? How can we understand the ways in which God exists? Affective language about Beatrice provides a means, just as Bernard had provided a way to talk about God through his exegesis on the Song of Songs and his sermons, such as *De diligendo Deo* X. 27, where he described his experience of God as being lost in

⁴²For a scholarly discussion beyond the sphere of traditional Dante studies, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 557–77.

⁴³Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments. Essays on Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 141.

⁴⁴For a discussion of the connection between Dante's teleology and his early love poetry, see Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez, *Time and the Crystal. Studies in Dante's Rime Petrose* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 185–91.

Him.⁴⁵ Desire to know, desire to see, desire to experience: Dante-*personaggio* first has to learn that all these desires, begun as they are in Beatrice, must end, necessarily, in God.

The pilgrim's love for Beatrice as a 'unique and unrepeatabe event', contains within it the truth of God's creative power and love.⁴⁶ Once he is able to understand what this means, he is able to see the face of God itself, because his love for her has been transfigured: the truths contained in Beatrice are in fact God's own truths.⁴⁷ Bernard's love manifests itself at an individual level too – love for his community – but although his love is for particular individuals, it is global in its scope, and as such it is not an erotic love. A commitment to a particular person is one of the hallmarks of personhood: erotic love tethers two separate individuals together, the arrowshot pierces and unites two hearts. And in love, from the limited perspective of human personhood and consciousness, one draws closest to understanding the possibility of being Other, of being created otherwise, because the desire for union with the beloved – for their presence, their touch, and the loving preoccupation for their person – only throws into relief the ways in which they are not one's own self, the ways in which they are not *I*.

The 'I Am' of Beatrice

The theologian, then, following Dante's own idiosyncratic definition, will be a conduit of peace. In the *Commedia*, this peace is gained from intellectual insight, in the knowledge that sound argument secures; Beatrice, as we have seen, delivers this type of knowledge to Dante-*personaggio* in her extensive theological discourse which incorporates the trappings and argumentative devices of the academy. But as Hawkins has shown, her insight itself comes from her personal experience of seeing directly the truth of the Empyrean. Thus, as Hawkins says, on the contested matter of the angelic hierarchies, Dionysus gets to agree with her, and not the other way around: 'Dante is contrasting his certain vision of truth with the theologians' mere speculation about it'.⁴⁸

Beatrice's knowledge and the blessedness it endows is based on the act of seeing the truth of God directly, not in an act of love, as she makes explicit:

Quinci si può veder come si fonda
l'esser beato ne l'atto che vede,
non in quel ch'ama, che poscia seconda
(*Par.* xxviii, 109–11)

The questing intellect will see and find rest, and this knowledge will give rise to love. Hence blessedness enacts the eternal return of desire for God; perfectly satisfied in Heaven, yet still perfectly desirous as creatures for the Creator.⁴⁹ Seeing is knowing, and in knowing one can rest: but this rest does not extinguish love and desire, indeed it spurs it on and maintains it in the perpetual praise of the blessed for God, as his limitlessness deserves:⁵⁰

Lume è là sù che visibile face
lo creatore a quella creatura
che solo in lui vedere ha la sua pace.
(*Par.* xxx, 100–02)

Dante-*personaggio* has seen and known *his* beloved before the story of the *Commedia* begins; theirs is a love story of retrieval. Along the way the pilgrim has lost what it was he knew in Beatrice. He lost

⁴⁵Bernardi *Opera*, III, p.142.

⁴⁶Kay, *Dante's Lyric Redemption*, p. 248.

⁴⁷For Robin Kirkpatrick, 'Dante [...] understands very well that, as human beings, we live most truly when we live on a comically small scale, within the limits of our human lineaments': Robin Kirkpatrick, 'Polemics as Praise', in *Dante's 'Commedia'*, ed. by Montemaggi and Treherne, pp. 14–35 (p. 18).

⁴⁸Hawkins, 'All Smiles', p. 43.

⁴⁹Aquinas also 'envisions a certain circularity in the relationship between intellect and will' but even so, Tamara Pollack resists reading Dante as 'Thomist': Tamara Pollack, 'Light, Love and Joy in Dante's Doctrine of Beatitude', in *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, ed. by Honess and Treherne, I, pp. 263–319 (p. 293).

⁵⁰For example, see Psalm 145.

what seeing her as his beloved, and as part of God's creation, really meant. And thus the *Commedia* is also a positive re-writing of the *Aeneid*, because the pilgrim's journey is a divinely-willed mission, but Beatrice, unlike Dido, is absolutely necessary to its fulfilment. Beatrice's knowing Dante, and being known by him, is the foundation stone on which his journey rests. Although the poet claims, 'Io non Enëa, io non Paolo sono' (*Inf.* II, 32), it is indeed Saint Paul, in the first letter to the Corinthians, who provides the template for Dante to construct a way of knowing God 'face-to-face' and, in turn, of being known.⁵¹

And even though, as we have seen, so much of her discourse mimics that of historical theologians, and as such seems to derive an intellectual authority from the same sources as theirs, I suggest that her authority is already established in the poem before she puts those didactic devices into play. Her authority over the pilgrim is fuelled by her very earthly personhood, and the relationship to which their love gave rise. In paradise, she has the additional qualities that other theologians demonstrate on earth: she elucidates; she teaches; she answers and calms a questioning mind. But even though she can only be a theologian in heaven, she authors the pilgrim's journey before we even hear anything of that infallible voice. It is her relationship with Dante-*personaggio*, built, in the fiction, upon years of human love, that forces a reappraisal of what understanding the nature of God consists in.

In being known as a particular, concrete, human individual, a prerequisite for being loved and being known by Beatrice, the pilgrim can come to know himself too, and know what is required of him in his approach to the face of God. In *Paradiso* I, 85, by way almost of an aside, the poet refers to Beatrice as someone who sees right in to him: 'Ond' ella, che vedea me sì com' io . . .'. It is a profoundly intimate moment wherein Beatrice explains to the pilgrim that, even before he has had opportunity to articulate it, he is muddled and confused in his interpretation of the new sights of Heaven that he is witnessing. She is able to inhabit his still limited and error-prone perspective, seeing the pilgrim as he sees himself, and through smiling words ('per le sorrise parolette brevi', 95) is able to help him see the truth. This is the realisation of a divine truth within a face-to-face human encounter, an encounter which remains human despite Beatrice's beatitude and limitless knowledge.

The pilgrim is able at her invitation to see what Beatrice herself is ('qual son io', *Par.*, XXIII, 46), only after his mind experiences a kind of *raptus* upon seeing a vision of Christ: 'la mente mia [. . .] fatta più grande, di se stessa uscìo' (43–44). And so one 'seeing' quickly follows another, but they are punctuated by the pilgrim's experience of an almost dissociative state (he claims a quasi-inability to narrate it) similar to Bernard's description of his taste of the Divine in *De diligendo Deo*. What does this mean? Dante-*personaggio* has known Beatrice since youth, but his retrieval of her actual meaning can only occur now, once he has taken up a perspective beyond only his own. His mind, exiting itself ('di se stessa uscìo'), is able to see what Beatrice really is.

This retrieval of knowing what Beatrice is began in the dark wood, but when he finally meets her again in the Earthly Paradise, he still lacks the capacity for knowing, even though, like Paul, he himself is known.⁵² Beatrice says 'Dante', at *Purgatorio* XXX, 55: and by naming him, as we saw above, she claims him for her own knowledge, and cements the reciprocal erotic relationship. But there is no peace to be found, yet, in the pilgrim's trembling mind or shaking body (47). Her words, which invite him for the first time to see and to know who she is, who she really is (emphasised in the repetition: 'Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice', 73), cannot be met in reply with a truly face-to-face encounter: she remains veiled to him. Dante-*personaggio* can only let his eyes fall downwards and so, shame-filled, literally sees only himself and the limited perspective he occupies, Narcissus-like, in the reflection of a stream (76–78).

Beatrice tells him not to weep at Virgil's disappearance. In doing so the episode mirrors the events in that other garden, in the Gospel of John 20. 15–16, when the risen Christ appears to a weeping Mary Magdalene, who also mourns a disappearance. From the mouth of the empty tomb, she turns her face to Christ but does not know him – he is veiled to her – even though she knew him and loved him in his old life; she does not know who he really is now, or what he means, not until,

⁵¹1 Corinthians 13. 12.

⁵²1 Corinthians 13. 12.

that is, he speaks her name, 'Mary'. With this new knowledge comes the peace that Christ gives: he gives it three times, at John 20. 19, 21, and 26.

The resemblances between these two episodes remind us that Beatrice will also confer a peace: not necessarily because she is a Christ-figure (although she is probably that too), but because, as I am suggesting, she is a theologian, and thus peace-giving is within her purview. She directs the pilgrim towards blessedness, through her theologically rigorous lessons, but also through her very person. She is the embodiment, for Dante, of the power of the Creator and his love. Without these two lessons, of intellect and of love, the pilgrim cannot hope to see the Godhead face-to-face. Early in the final *cantica* the author tells us the pilgrim's gaze is unable to sustain the beauty of Beatrice's face. Dante had claimed this before in his youth, in the *canzone* 'Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore', where he says, 'Voi le vedete Amor pinto nel viso, | là 've non pote alcun mirarla fiso' (55–56). By *Paradiso* XXIII, Dante-*personaggio* beholds her, but the poet is unable to capture her smile in poetry: the resulting leap that his 'sacrate poema' (*Par.* XXIII, 62) must make becomes, according to Vittorio Montemaggi, 'paradigmatic of what writing about paradise in a "sacred poem" is, in fact, all about'.⁵³ That Beatrice herself has become ineffable, that an absence of words, a failure of human language, has come to define her being, foreshadows the silence at the end of the poem, a silence perhaps necessary in contemplating an ineffable God.

Desire for Beatrice ends not in the peaceful consummation of *eros* but in the eternal return of desire and satisfaction in God. This has only been possible through Dante's particular relation to Beatrice: love for her has provided the conditions under which he can see his own place in the universe – see himself as part of God's created order – and see the participation required of him. Truth is found from considering the perspective beyond his own, but it has been a necessarily perspectival, particular journey. The one unrepeatable event of the poem, and the one unrepeatable event of Beatrice – like the 'ontological event' of the second person of the Trinity becoming man⁵⁴ – in an encounter with her person, and her face, has led the way to an encounter with the face of the Trinity itself. The 'I am' of Jesus Christ (John 8. 58), of the Incarnation, becomes visible to the pilgrim once he sees what Beatrice is, what 'I am' truly means.⁵⁵

Beatrice is never completely divested of her role of the beloved: we can continue to read her relationship with Dante-*personaggio* in these terms until well after her removal to the heavenly rose. Dante is at pains to remind of us of Beatrice's role as the one whom he loves. The *Commedia* is replete with reminders that Dante is in the presence of his beloved and that '[m]ille disiri più che fiamma caldi' draw his eyes to her eyes (*Purg.* XXXI, 118). Just the sound of her name causes a reaction in him (*Par.* VII, 13). We cannot take away from Beatrice her historical situatedness: her personhood is never entirely erased, even though there is inevitably a tension between Barolini's 'radically alien construct' of her role as teacher, preacher, and Christ-figure, and the person that the author supposedly saw walking in the streets of Florence.⁵⁶

In conclusion, therefore, I suggest that instead of Beatrice merely standing for theology *personified*, in the relationship with Dante, theology becomes, instead, *personalised*, requiring a person-to-person realisation. Indeed, the importance of human relationships, the face-to-face meetings of the pilgrim with the souls in the afterlife, and his growing understanding about his place in God's universal order as a result of those meetings, is obviously one of the author's primary themes. But in his kaleidoscopic characterisation of Beatrice, Dante enables us to see beyond mere encounters. He draws us closer to an understanding of the nature of human love and createdness, and he voices in Beatrice, and demonstrates in her very personhood, the divine love whose munificence is the ground of all being.

⁵³Vittorio Montemaggi, 'The Theology of Dante's *Commedia* as seen in the light of the cantos of the Heaven of the Fixed Stars', in *Se Mai Continga*, ed. by Honess and Treherne, pp. 45–61 (p. 45).

⁵⁴Robert P. Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 61.

⁵⁵See Janet Martin Soskice on the naming of God in Exodus 3. 13–14 and elsewhere, in *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵⁶Barolini, *Dante and the Origins*, p. 366.

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