

## Matelda: Poetic Image or Archetype?

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As their recurrence in different epochs and cultures shows, archetypal images exercise a powerful influence on imaginative and expressive modes. This essay addresses the problem, encountered by feminist critics and artists, of how to deal with "positive" female archetypal images, of which Matelda (*Purgatory* XXVIII–XXXIII)<sup>1</sup> is an expression. The analysis of the development of this image and of its interaction with an often contrasting social reality is expressive of the tensions and aspirations at play within a nation's culture. As the longevity of these images resides in their dynamism, women artists, rather than dispensing with them, may find it a more fruitful strategy to transform them by giving them new meanings.

Before the question contained in the title can be answered, it is necessary to define its scope and objectives. The title "Matelda: Poetic Image or Archetype?" is not intended to suggest that poetic image and archetype are mutually exclusive. What must be determined is the kind of poetic image that Matelda is, given that she is the only personification in the *Comedy*. All the other characters have historical reality, indeed usually a very recent one; that is, they are real historical characters, most of whom lived in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

There ought to be little difficulty in accepting Matelda as a personification in the *Comedy*, albeit the only one, insofar as the literature of different ages is replete with personifications. It is rather common practice to represent an idea or a virtue in the guise of a young woman, as can be seen with Dante's own gentle Lady Philosophy of the *Convivio* or the many anonymous,

1. The quotations and references to Dante's works are from the F. Chiappelli edition (1978). The English translations of Dante's *Purgatorio* are by T. Oakey, from the Temple Classics edition (London, 1964).

ineffable women sung by medieval vernacular poets. The fact remains that Matelda stands out for her unique function in the poem and the reader is compelled to ask what she represents. She, too, remains anonymous till the very end, and the fact that at the last minute Beatrice unexpectedly calls her by name only adds to the puzzlement of the reader.

Another question underlying the original one is why predominantly female images such as these should be used as personifications. The immediate and all-too-obvious answer is that it is so because the poets responsible are usually male. Yet it is doubtful that women poets would have favored male images. Robert Graves said that while a male poet (a non-Apollonian one) would write in honor of and be inspired by the Muse, a woman would be either a representative of the Muse or, if she were a poet, the Muse herself ([1961] 1984: 447). If history had been written by women, could the Muse have been male? The question is difficult to answer because it is hard to imagine, such is the power of this ancient imagery.

The meaning of "archetype," the second term in the question, is no less contentious. It is outside the scope of this discussion to argue for or against its alleged prelinguistic existence,<sup>2</sup> although it can, of course, be extralinguistic. The premise adopted here is not that archetypes may be viewed as basic universal human truths (although Dante would maintain that this is so) but rather that their universality stems from their being "older" images that seem to hold meaning and to have strong expressive capabilities for different people at different times, as is shown by the presence of similar myths and mythological figures within different cultures and epochs.

An archetype, then, is a profound and complex image, the origins of which go far back in human imagination and whose major characteristic is a permanence within the many expressions it receives through the ages. Although this characteristic lends it a universal quality, it does not make the image static; on the contrary, the fact that some archetypal images are taken up at various points in time and are given new meanings and interpretations consonant with existing interests and needs proves their formidable dynamism. It also provides useful documentation for historical as well as literary criticism. When set within the sociopolitical context, an analysis of both the kind of arche-

2. See Jung (1933: 467, 556, 560), Durand (1979: 27-28) and Levi-Strauss (1953, I: 230-234).

typal images that predominate in the culture of a particular time and the particular expression they receive can disclose much about the ideological and emotive forces present in that culture.

Medieval vernacular poetry is, for the most part, love poetry in which woman represents the "other," unattainable and often incomprehensible, but an "other" who is better and wiser, superior in status, virtue, and knowledge. She becomes then the catalyst in man's cultivation of all that is nobler in his "self," and from this position to her becoming a mediator between earth and heaven, between man and God, is but a small step.

It is common knowledge that women in the Middle Ages had no political or economic rights, let alone power; indeed they were "silent" both as muses and as people. Given the knowledge of the actual social status of women, should all that these poets have said be dismissed as mere lies? It is a fallacy to expect the real to mirror the ideal (or vice versa). Rather, it should be asked how these idealized images interact with such a social reality, what system of tensions and aspirations they reveal. What does it mean, for instance, that extreme expressions of misogyny should be manifest at the same time as the cult of Mary flourishes? The prevalence of the female element in the imagination and ideals of an epoch, after a long history of patriarchal values, points to a need for balance, a restoration of harmony within the individual as well as within society.

The strongest images of woman, transmitted through mythology and literature, are those of the great mother, the young maiden, and the witch or siren. The three are complementary aspects of the primordial image of woman as creator and destroyer; they are, in other words, personifications of the cycle of life. In Graves's words:

As the new moon or spring she was girl; as the full moon or summer she was woman; as the old moon or winter she was hag. ([1961] 1984: 386)

Christianity does not do away with these images, but makes them its own. Mary combines the features of the archetypal mother goddess Cybele, whose cult had spread from Asia Minor to Greece and Rome where she had been associated with local deities, such as Rhea or Demeter. Like the Phrygian Cybele, Mary is worshiped as mother of God and men and queen of heaven. She also is depicted as both powerful mother and young virgin, and, again, she is not the sole instance of such

duality, for ancient mythology and religions abound with the figures of gods or kings who were born of a virgin and then sacrificed to save mankind.

In this category are also Matelda and Beatrice. Matelda is the young maiden who restores Dante to Beatrice (or his capacity for happiness), and the latter, no longer the young maiden of the *Vita Nuova*, becomes the cathartic mother who questions him and rekindles his strength. Dante calls her "mother": "Cosi la madre al figlio par superba" [So doth the mother seem stern to her child] (*Purgatory* XXX, 79). Thus Beatrice becomes an archetypal image in an episode with descriptive elements, as an analysis of the text reveals.

In Canto XXVII of *Purgatory*, having arrived at the Earthly Paradise, Virgil had declared Dante's will "free, upright and whole" ["libero dritto e sano e tuo arbitrio," 1.141] and therefore he was now able to follow his "pleasure": "Io tuo piacer omai prendi per duce" [now take thy pleasure for guide, 1.131] rather than his reason ("ingegno e arte," 1.130). In other words, Dante has reached integrity, his will being one with that of God, and can therefore trust his instincts, for they conform with the divine natural order. The return to paradise is expressed in terms of a return to nature, that is, the restoration of harmony. This state is externalized and expressed through the image of Matelda. In the eternal springtime of the dense forest, alive with the colors and fragrance of the vegetation and the sounds of the foliage and bird songs, on the other side of a stream of most clear waters, there appears a solitary woman who sings as she gathers flowers wherewith her path is painted. Dante calls the beautiful maiden who seems to him to be warmed by love's beams, begging her to come closer so that he may hear her song. She reminds him, he adds, of Persephone at the time her mother lost her and she the spring flowers. There follows what is perhaps the most memorable moment in the description: the slow turning of her body as if in a dance movement. Thus turning, flowers in her hand and at her feet, she slowly moves towards Dante allowing him to hear her song. As she stops at the stream she raises her eyes, which shine with so bright a light as could never be seen in Venus's eyes. The love and joy communicated by this light fill Dante with anguish as he is overwhelmed by the desire to reach her but knows he cannot. Matelda then explains the reason for her rejoicing and the nature of the place given by God to humanity. She adds a corol-

lary: this place had been dreamed by the ancient poets who had sung of the golden age. Still singing as an enamored woman ("cantando come donna innamorata," *Purgatory* XXIX, 1) she moves, like a nymph, upstream. She reappears in Canto XXXI when Dante, regaining consciousness, finds himself immersed by her in the water; following this she leads him into the dance of the four beautiful maidens, usually identified with the four cardinal virtues, who define themselves as nymphs and stars as well as Beatrice's handmaidens.

This summary of the episode draws attention to its main elements, the most notable of which is the following: Matelda is a very strong visual image that the reader immediately recognizes: where has she been depicted before? It is important to note that, while she is a very strong visual image, Dante does not describe her appearance; the reader does not know what she looks like or what she is wearing. Nonetheless she is perceived as a visual reality because she externalizes an internal image that all readers have, and it is this internal personal image that is recognized. Dante also recognizes her yet he does not give her a name. Till the very end she is "la bella donna" [the beautiful woman] (*Purgatory* XXVIII, 43, 100; XXXI, 100; XXXII, 28; XXXIII, 121, 134) to distinguish her from Beatrice who is called "la donna mia" [my woman] (*Purgatory* XXXII, 122). And it is significant that he does not ask her who she is. By being reminded of Persephone, Dante communicates to the reader his awareness of her being a complex memory. For the reader, too, she is a complex literary as well as personal memory.

There are several similar images in medieval poetry, in particular Cavalcanti's "pasturella" [young shepherdess]: she, too, is a solitary young woman wandering in a wood and singing "as if in love." She also brings to mind several paintings, such as the Pompeian Flora; or the young heroines of epic poems down to Milton's depiction of Eve as a young maiden in *Paradise Lost*, or, more recently still, Keats's Belle Dame Sans Merci, who, very much like Cavalcanti's "pasturella," is found wandering in the "meads" and who looks at the poet "as she did love" and sings "a faery's song." Mythology and classical literature are full of beautiful solitary young maidens found in similar settings, who, like Persephone, were pursued by enamored gods. These maidens usually are saved through divine intervention, often that of the lunar goddess, by being transformed into some form of vegetation or water course (for example, Daphne and Arethusa, who

were transformed into a laurel tree and a spring, respectively). The metamorphosis is, however, nothing more than a return to their essential nature, as earth and water traditionally were seen as female elements. The primordial image of woman consistently was associated with the forces and cycles of nature, and as such the women who represented them could be invoked but not possessed. If a man tries to possess them, they elude him. Dante, too, experiences a strong desire to possess Matelda but knows he cannot. He can become one with nature only by restoring harmony within himself. As often happens in myth, images of the mother or young maiden can stand for the benevolent life-giving natural forces that, when called upon, will help to bring about a metamorphosis in man through the death of the old self and the birth of the new. The choice of Persephone serves to point out this apparent duality. Death is necessary for the rebirth of the human spirit just as it is in the cyclic renewal of nature. Matelda administers precisely this rite of passage through the traditional element of water, and Dante's loss of consciousness symbolizes the necessary death before resurrection. It is a restoration of harmony between internal forces and those of nature and therefore divine order. Note how the experience is, in fact, related in naturalistic terms:

Io ritornai dalla santissim'onda  
rifatto sì, come piante novelle  
rinnovellate di novella fronda  
puro e disposto a salire alle stelle.  
(*Purgatory* XXXIII, 142-45)

[I came back from the most holy waves, born again, even as new trees renewed with new foliage, pure and ready to mount to the stars.]

It should be noted also that all the references immediately related to the figure of Matelda are mythological: Persephone, Venus, nymphs; Beatrice herself is likened to Minerva (*Purgatory* XXX, 68). The setting is not only biblical but universal and literary, be it the Parnassus of the golden age or the "locus amoenus," the springtime garden of the more recent vernacular poets. These things point to Dante's belief in the divine order impressed on all created things that can be perceived by all rational human beings, and his belief that it is the same absolute truths that are expressed, with varying degrees of approximation, through equally universal images.

In retaining all the mythical, literary, and biblical references in the image of Matelda, Dante shows that he is aware (and wishes to make the reader aware) of the richness and complexity that this image has acquired through the ages. The function of this image is to form a diachronic system that unifies and resolves the synchronic cluster of conflicts and desires. It is not mere coincidence that the imagery and language used in the description of Matelda are so close to the ones used by Cavalcanti for his "pasturella." These deliberate similarities, like those between Matelda and the many other young maidens and "donne angelicate" of contemporary poetry as well, draw the attention of the reader to Dante's mode of interpreting common tendencies.

In contemporary poetry, concomitant with the image of woman as a superior and ennobling creature, the concept of love undergoes a process of spiritualization, which, however, often appears a forced superimposition on the original erotic theme. At the same time, the beauty of the woman seems to mirror an ideal of beauty to which these poets aspire: a beauty and love that unsettle, that dispense equally life and death, energy and suffering. It is a poetry of turmoil, of the search for the "new," marked by a constant questioning of the meaning of love, nobility, art.

Matelda is clearly in love, yet hers seems a love without object. Instead, her love and joy are her very mode of being. In Matelda the erotic element is perfectly fused with the other elements, not suppressed as the reader often feels it is in Beatrice, in whom there is a progression from the old to the new love, and in these cantos, the two are present at the same time.<sup>3</sup> In Matelda's case there is no such discourse, her love is spontaneous. It is not of the same spontaneity of the soul at birth when it is innocent but unaware; instead, her love has a purity regained through wisdom.

The prevalence of the unsettling female image in this poetry implies a time of incipient and welcome change, and marks the formation of a new human ideal that encompasses social as well as individual factors. In social terms it is equated with the aspiration to justice and peace, expressed through the upholding of artistic values. Historically, these values consistently have

3. There are explicit references to the "old" love: "antico amor" ["ancient love"], "antica fiamma" ["ancient flame"], "antica rete" ["the toils of old"] (*Purgatory* XXX, 39 and 48, and XXXII, 6, respectively).

been imagined as a return of the suppressed female principle. Virgil's words "Iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna" [the Virgin comes back to us, and the rule of Saturn is restored] are interpreted by Dante as the return of Astraea, the star-maiden symbolizing Justice who fled from earth at the end of the golden age (*Monarchia* I, xi: 1).<sup>4</sup> Wisdom, particularly wisdom related to civic affairs, was symbolized by the goddess Minerva (Athena). In the Scriptures, Solomon is said to have chosen Wisdom (Sapientia) as his beautiful bride. Dante's Beatrice assimilates the function of Minerva and, as with the biblical Sapientia, the four virtues are ordained as her handmaidens. Beatrice is also a representative of the mother image; she is greeted by the twenty-four elders with the same words used by the angel at the Annunciation to greet Mary:

Benedetta tûe  
 nelle figlie d'Adamo, e benedette  
 sieno in eterno le bellezze tue.  
 (*Purgatory* XXIX, 85-87)

[Blessed art thou among the daughters of Adam and blessed to all eternity be thy beauties.]

She functions in lieu of Mary as the new Eve, for it is she who sits at the foot of the tree, thus restoring its fruitfulness.

If Beatrice stands for the wisdom that assisted in the creation and regulates and orders all things, Matelda stands for nature: Persephone and her mother, Demeter, are one and the same. She also stands for the ideal of humanity at its best, not only as it was before the Fall but also as it could be now. Persephone-Demeter being both light and darkness, death and rebirth, express a duality that is not contradiction but harmony; so Matelda is simultaneously innocence and knowledge.

Dante discloses the meaning Matelda holds for him through the dialectics of desire and memory, activated at the crucial moment between paradise lost and paradise regained. Matelda's love is one with the rejoicing in the beauty of nature. It is Dante's belief that this aesthetic pleasure in the beauty and order of nature must perforce disclose the divine will and therefore human destiny, and consequently regulate all aspects of human conduct. There is ample evidence for this in the *Convivio* and *Monarchia* as well as in the *Comedy*.<sup>5</sup>

4. For a discussion on this theme see Singleton (1967), chapters XI and XII.

Pagan tradition, with its goddesses and myths, serves for Dante as confirmation, through the universality of images and dreams and aspirations, of Christian truths and values. To the impartial observer it all serves as confirmation of the universal appeal of certain images; their recurrence at particular times can be read as symptomatic of the preoccupations of those times. And it has been observed already that poets and thinkers always have expressed the aspiration of their times to the positive ideals of justice and harmony through images related to a renewal brought about by the intervention of woman, or by the restoration of the female principle. Finally, to the not so impartial observer, these man-made images reveal that the positive female principle charged with the creation of, among other things, art and civilization, has been rendered silent and anonymous. Anonymous and almost entirely silent are the women sung by medieval poets: if they have a name, it is often a name invented by the poet to evoke or represent something of himself or of his poetry. They also look alike: they all have long blond tresses and green eyes; in later compositions, physical descriptions are left out altogether. The female principle has been clearly dispossessed, either by being made a silent muse, an abstraction, or bluntly, as mythology attests, by rape.

It was stated earlier that women, too, find it difficult to resist some of these female images. This is so not only because they are powerful and strongly embedded in our culture; there are other historical reasons as well.

The women's movement has meant above all the identification of women with women, and this makes it all the more difficult to imagine being inspired by a male muse. One may object that men did not identify with the muse, nor did they identify with or indeed even understand the women they sung as superior creatures; to them they were incomprehensible, the "other."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the "other" that, for a woman, is man, is instead too "real," characterized as it is by the many social implications that, historically, have meant mainly aggression and

5. See, in particular, the following themes in the following sections:

the universe as manifestation of God:

*Monarchia* I, viii, 2; II, ii, 8

*Paradise* I, 103-105; XX, 8

beauty as knowledge and persuasion:

*Purgatory* XIX, 61-66; XIV, 149

human destiny:

*Convivio* III, xv, 4; III, xiv, 1-3; III, ii, 7-9

*Monarchia* I, ii.

oppression. Perhaps women do not yet have enough positive male images.' As women artists develop their own expressive means, however, they may choose not to dispense with these female images but instead to give them the life and substance of which they had been deprived by male monotheism.

6. An example of a positive male image is the "wise old man," which is appealing as a form of the inspiring muse, but which has become problematic as a paternal image bestowing approval/disapproval. Not that this image is intrinsically unacceptable but, at this point in time, before it is possible to embrace once more the positive value of the "paternal," it is necessary to divorce it from its negative "patriarchal" aspect.