

understand; for seldom under a veil do obscure words reach the intellect, hence with you one must speak openly. But this I want in recompense (for your own good, certainly not for mine) that you hold every man as vile and as object of scorn . . .”]²

There is an interesting insecurity in the commentary tradition regarding “sotto benda” in verse 57: does Dante refer to the literal article of clothing (*benda* is the “strip of cloth or silk with which married women wrapped their cheeks, temples, and forehead for ornamentation and to hold their hair”) and therefore, by synecdoche, to those who wear it—namely women—or does he refer to an allegorical veil, a veil of language?³ The allegorical reading has taken precedence in the twentieth-century commentary tradition over the literal. While the Barbi-Pernicone commentary takes a no-nonsense literal approach, glossing “sotto benda” as “in cervello di donna,”⁴ Contini gives primacy to the allegorical: “La *benda* è la stessa imagine che *il velame de li versi strani* (*Inf.* IX 63) e *il velo* di *Purg.* VIII 20. Attraente tuttavia la dichiarazione, di piú studiosi, che *benda* sia l’ornamento femminile, e s’abbia dunque allusione a una necessità di chiarezza maggiore con donne.”⁵ Foster and Boyde follow Contini, starting with the allegorical and adding that “the other interpretation”—i.e., the literal interpretation—“is also attractive: this takes *benda* as the wimple worn by women.”⁶

I believe that it is important to restore as primary the literal meaning of “sotto benda” in this passage in “Doglia mi reca” and, along with the literal meaning, to recuperate the gendered nature of Dante’s intervention. Indeed, the result of focusing on the allegorical reading of “sotto benda” is to elide out of the text the gendered aspect of what Dante says. Contemporary evidence, in the form of lexical usage and responses to Dante’s verses by other poets, indicates that the literal meaning should be taken as primary.

If we look at the entries for *benda* and *velo* in the *Grande dizionario italiano* we see that *benda* is much less given to metaphorical extrapolation than *velo*.⁷ Thus, Contini’s intermingling of “benda” with *Inferno* 9’s overtly metatextual “velame de li versi strani” and *Purgatorio* 8’s similarly metatextual “velo” (“La *benda* è la stessa imagine che *il velame de li versi strani* (*Inf.* IX 63) e *il velo* di *Purg.* VIII 20”) may not be appropriate. Dante’s usage corresponds to the perception of greater metaphorical license given to *velo*: the noun *velo* and the verb *velare* are used frequently

across the gamut of Dante's works (*Rime*, *Fiore*, *Vita Nuova*, *Convivio*, *Commedia*) and across a semantic range from literal to metaphorical. Moreover, even the literal *velo* has a more poetic quality than *benda*, so that the *Vita Nuova*—a text that creates a social context but makes sure to keep it highly stylized—offers two uses of *velo* as covering (what is being covered is Beatrice's dead body, so these uses belong to the context of mourning practices), but never the more socially attuned *benda*.⁸

Dante uses *benda* infrequently but cogently (all his uses are cited under "benda" by *TLIO*, the *Tesoro della lingua italiana delle origini*, indicating that they are considered linguistically formative): he uses *benda* first in our passage in "Doglia mi reca," and then three times in the *Commedia*, where it is always a signifier of a woman's marital status, either in the secular sphere (never married or widowed and remarried) or in the monastic. Thus, the remarriage of Beatrice d'Este is signified through the change in the color of her *bende* ("che trasmutò le bianche bende" [*Purg.* 8.74])⁹; the nubile young lady of Bonagiunta's prophecy "non porta ancor benda" (*Purg.* 24.43)¹⁰; and "sacre bende" (*Par.* 3.114) signify that Costanza is the bride of Christ.¹¹ *Benda* is a word deployed by Dante univocally to refer to socially mandated and regulated female covering.

The verses in "Doglia mi reca" indicating women through the synecdoche "sotto benda" elicited responses from two important contemporaries, the doctor and astrologer Cecco d'Ascoli (1269–1327) and Petrarch (1304–1374). Both interpret "sotto benda" literally as referring to women. (In fact, *TLIO* glosses "sotto benda" as meaning "donna" and gives the examples of "Doglia mi reca" and the responses from Cecco and Petrarch;¹² the allegorical significance is considered "less probable" and is probably only mentioned in deference to the already discussed commentary tradition.) In the conclusion to the political canzone "O aspectata in ciel," Petrarch writes that love resides not only "sotto bende," "under veils" (*Canzoniere* 28.113), in order to make the point that a canzone inspired by a non-erotic form of love can nonetheless take its place with pride among its fellows. In his commentary to Petrarch's canzone, Santagata cites "Doglia mi reca" as the source for "sotto bende" and notes that Petrarch evidently interprets the debated verses from Dante's canzone in the same manner as Cecco d'Ascoli in *Acerba*.¹³ Cecco d'Ascoli cites the verses from "Doglia mi reca" in his encyclopedic *Acerba*, in the context of a misogynist *capitolo* dedicated to his negative views of women. Here Dante is used as an *auctoritas* on female intellectual limitations. Cecco

notes that rarely are subtle thoughts understood by those who are “sotto benna”—i.e., by women: “Rare fiate, como disse Dante, / s’intende sottil cosa sotto benna” (*Acerba* 4.9.4397–4398).¹⁴

Cecco’s response to Dante’s passage regarding women in “Doglia mi reca” is extremely interesting, for he both appropriates and changes the canzone’s “sotto benda” passage. Thus, while it is true, as the Barbi-Pernicone commentary points out, that Cecco understands Dante correctly, in that he takes “sotto benda” as a reference to women, it is also true that Cecco works considerable changes on Dante’s passage, which he appropriates to his own misogynist ends. Because Dante *wants* to communicate with women, he voices his concerns that rarely will an obscure word (“parola oscura”) reach the intellect of one under the veil and that difficult language will make communication with women difficult to achieve, and he uses this concern as a platform from which to announce a shift toward a more accessible style. (The ideological importance of this passage is, if anything, heightened by its being misleading: the style of the canzone is *not* noticeably lightened—in the sense of simplified—after the poet’s declaration. It is, however, more dramatic, especially in the stanza that immediately follows.)

Cecco, on the other hand, changes “parola oscura” to “sottil cosa”—a “subtle thought”—and uses the passage from “Doglia mi reca” as a platform from which to launch a savage invective against women, who are beings without intellect and “fruit of all evil”: “La femmina ha men fede che una fiera, / Radice, ramo e frutto d’ogni male, / Superba, avara, sciocca, matta e austera, / Veleno che avvelena il cuor del corpo, / Iniqua strada alla porta infernale” (*Acerba* 4.9.4403–4407). Moreover, Cecco takes the citation from “Doglia mi reca” as an opportunity to pen one of his sardonic indictments of Dante (most of which are focused on the *Commedia*). Here he paints Dante as a foolish naïf whose belief that women possess intellect is the equivalent of looking for the Virgin Mary in the streets of Ravenna: “Maria va cercando per Ravenna / chi crede che in donna sia intellecto” (*Acerba* 4.9.4401–4402).

Cecco’s misogynist diatribe and passing dig at Dante offer us a valuable perspective from which to gauge the force and direction of Dante’s gendered intervention in “Doglia mi reca.” We remember that Dante interrupts his canzone to address the ladies. Because he desires his speech to be of use to them, he writes, he will descend from the general to the particular, and to a lighter form of expression, so that it will be less difficult

to understand. Seldom, Dante explains, does obscure language reach the intellect of a woman; hence with a woman it behooves him to speak openly. No doubt the patronizing tone of this passage is annoying. At the same time we do well to keep in mind that these verses testify to Dante's genuine concern that the women to whom he writes understand him, and that they be authentic comprehenders and recipients of his message—maybe even authentic interlocutors, given that this poem's *congedo* explicitly sends it to a woman. Most of all, as Cecco's response helps us to see, Dante's intervention is founded in a belief in women's intellect—an intellect whose existence is taken for granted and that he seeks to reach. In order to reach it, in order to communicate with women, he says he will change his discourse, lowering it to the level of their comprehension. Cecco, who dismisses as foolish the belief that women possess any intellect at all, gives us the vantage from which to see that Dante's paternalism is an affirmation: women possess intellect, he is saying, and it is up to me as poet to figure out how to reach it.

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NOTES

1. I believe there is some merit in bringing this note, a historically contextualized gloss on two words in one of Dante's *canzoni*, to the attention of a specialized audience of Dante scholars. I have elaborated the linguistic evidence in this note, which is part of a broader discussion in my “Lifting the Veil? Notes toward a Gendered History of Early Italian Literature,” in *Medieval Constructions in Gender and Identity: Essays in Honor of Joan M. Ferrante*, ed. Teodolinda Barolini (Tempe, Arizona: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 2005), 169–90.

2. The text of the canzone is cited from *Rime della maturità e dell'esilio*, eds. Michele Barbi and Vincenzo Pernicone (Florence: Le Monnier, 1969). Translations are mine throughout.

3. The definition is from Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, *Guardaroba medievale: Vesti e società dal XIII al XVI secolo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999), whose Glossary defines *benda* thus: “striscia di tela o di seta con cui le donne sposate si avvolgevano guance, tempie e fronte per ornamento e per trattenerne i capelli” (353).

4. *Rime della maturità e dell'esilio*, 613. Barbi's material was published posthumously by Pernicone; hence, despite the 1969 date, it is of earlier vintage.

5. *Rime*, ed. Gianfranco Contini (Milan: Einaudi: 1946; 2nd ed. 1965), 186.

6. *Dante's Lyric Poetry*, eds. Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 2.304–05.

7. Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, vols. 2 and 21 (Turin: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese: [1961]–2002).

8. In the second canzone of the *Vita Nuova*, “Donna pietosa e di novella etate,” Dante imagines that Beatrice is dead and that attending ladies cover her with a veil: “Lo imaginar fallace / mi condusse a veder madonna morta; / e quand'io l'avea scorta, / vedea che donne la covrian d'un velo”

(65–68). The preceding prose specifies what part of her body is covered and the color of the veil: “e pareami che donne la covrissero, cioè la testa, con uno bianco velo” (23.8). As we can see from the difference between these two passages, the prose offers greater historical and sociological precision. The text is cited from the edition of Domenico De Robertis, *Vita Nuova* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1980).

9. *TLIO*, *Tesoro della lingua italiana delle origini* (<http://tlio.ovi.cnr.it/TLIO/ricindex.html>, s.v. “benda”), cites these verses as the first of two examples (the second is from Boccaccio’s *Corbaccio*) under heading 1.1.1 [Di colore bianco come segno di vedovanza].

10. *TLIO* cites these verses as the second of two examples (the first is from Cecco Angiolieri) under heading 1.1.2 Fras. Portare benda: essere maritata.

11. *TLIO* cites these verses as the first of six examples under heading 1.3 Velo monacale o sacerdotale.

12. *TLIO* cites Dante and his illustrious respondents under heading 1.2 Estens. Donna (in quanto indumento femminile per eccellenza). Locuz. avv. Sotto benda: in donna:

[1] Dante, *Rime*, a. 1321, 49.57, pag. 186: Ma perché lo meo dire util vi sia, / discenderò del tutto / in parte ed in costruito / più lieve, sí che men grave s’intenda: / ché rado sotto benda / parola oscura giugne ad intelletto; / per che parlar con voi si vole aperto . . . || Meno prob. il signif. di ‘significato allegorico’, come in *Inf.* IX 63 «il velame de li versi strani».

[2] Cecco d’Ascoli, *Acerba*, a. 1327 (tosc./ascol.), L. 4, cap. 9.4398, pag. 382: Rare fiata, come disse Dante, / S’intende sottil cosa sotto benna: / Dunque, con lor perché tanto millante?

[3] Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, a. 1374, 28.113, pag. 39: Or movi, non smarrir l’altre compagne, / ché non pur sotto bende / alberga Amor, per cui si ride et piagne.

13. *Canzoniere*, ed. Marco Santagata (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), 154.

14. Cecco d’Ascoli (Francesco Stabili), *L’Acerba*, ed. Achille Crespi (Ascoli Piceno: Cesari, 1927).