

'Che son la Pia': Liminal Female Figures of Intercession in Blake's illustrations of the *Commedia*

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Abstract

While female icons are neither scant nor marginal in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with Francesca and Beatrice at the centre of the story, other women in the *Commedia* justify their presence as figures that enact and enable transitions, but not necessarily change: Pia in *Purgatorio*, Canto V, and her plea to Dante to be remembered among the living; Lucia carrying Dante in his sleep up to the threshold of purgatory (Canto IX); or Matilde waiting for Dante on the banks of the river Lethe in *Purgatorio* (Canto XXIX). Liminality, conceived not only as a space-between, physically and emotionally, is also a state of intercession, of anagnorisis and of renouncing the lower for the higher: a space for religious intervention, salvation and resurrection. By looking at key women characters in the *Commedia*, particularly in *Purgatorio*, the following pages will survey the significance of intercession as a point of arrival in Dante's *Commedia* and Blake's depiction of it, in which female figures, endowed with roles that often imply transition and mediation, coalesce the joint vision of both artist and poet: the transmutation of Pagan into Christian values that can only happen in the realms of the self upon overcoming duality.

Key Words: Blake; *Commedia*; Women; Intercession; Liminality; Salvation.

Riassunto

Mentre le icone femminili non sono né scarse né marginali nella *Divina Commedia* dantesca, con Francesca e Beatrice al centro della storia, altre donne della *Commedia* giustificano la loro presenza come figure che mettono in atto e permettono transizioni, ma non necessariamente cambiano: Pia in *Purgatorio* (Canto V), e la sua supplica a Dante di essere ricordata tra i vivi; Lucia che porta Dante nel sonno fino alla soglia del purgatorio (Canto IX); o Matilde che aspetta Dante sulle rive del fiume Lete in *Purgatorio* (Canto XXIX). La liminalità, concepita non solo come uno spazio intermedio, fisico ed emotivo, è anche uno stato di intercessione, di anagnorisis e di rinuncia al più basso per il più alto: uno spazio di intervento religioso, di salvezza e di risurrezione. Osservando i personaggi femminili chiave della *Commedia*, in particolare del *Purgatorio*, le pagine che seguono indagheranno il significato dell'intercessione come punto di arrivo nella *Commedia* di Dante e nella rappresentazione di Blake, in cui le figure femminili, dotate di ruoli che spesso implicano transizione e mediazione, uniscono la visione comune dell'artista e del poeta: la trasmutazione del pagano in valori cristiani che può avvenire solo nel regno dell'io al superamento della dualità.

Parole chiave: Blake; *Commedia*; donne; intercezione; liminalità; salvezza.

I. DANTE AND BLAKE: 'CITIZENS OF ETERNITY'

The English engraver and landscape painter John Linnell, who met an elderly William Blake in 1818 when Linnell was a young promise, became one of the closest friends and more generous patrons of the artist and poet. Around 1824, when Blake was going through severe financial hardship, Linnell commissioned him to produce a collection of drawings on the biblical Book of Job, a series of twenty-two engraved prints published in 1826 under the title of *Illustrations of the Book of Job*. This was not his first encounter with Job, as Blake had already produced two earlier sets of watercolours on the same subject matter between 1806 and 1821, and as early as 1785 he had sketched some drafts in ink based on the same motif. Linnell's commission reveals not only that he was an honest benefactor, paying £150 for the Job series, but more importantly, that he was aware of Blake's innermost interests and character as an artist. Beyond Linnell's association with 'The Ancients', a small group of young artists from the Royal Academy of Arts such as Edward Thomas Daniell or Samuel Palmer who were admirers of William Blake and shared with him a dismissal of 'modern art' as well as a return to the spiritual vision of the Church Fathers, Linnell knew how to complete the full circle of the creative energies of his elderly master. While Blake was still engaged in his *Job*, Linnell entrusted him with the design of a series of drawings from Dante's *Commedia* to be engraved later on. Alexander Gilchrist, in his *Life of William Blake*, writes that Linnell thought of Blake to be "the very man and the only to illustrate the great medieval master of supernatural awe and terror" (Gilchrist, 1863, p. 351). But there was much more than a pictorial representation of sensation and gore that Linnell was looking for in Blake. It was bound to be a rendering of Dante through Blake or even the other way round. Gilchrist describes it as "a conception not always such as most students of Dante will be willing to admit as Dantesque", as a sort of synergy of geniuses: "the highly creative mind of Dante filtered through the highly creative sympathetic mind of Blake" (1863, p. 352). If Gilchrist is right, then, the necessary connection between the meaning of the text and its visual incarnation is not one of mimesis but of exegesis. In 1826, one year before his death in 1827 and confined to bed in his London home, Blake set to work on his Dante designs with intense energy, populating the one-hundred pages of a folio volume which Linnell had given him for the drawings. Blake taught himself some Italian in order to read Dante in the original, which he did in a 1544 edition with commentary or 'esposizione' by the Lucchese poet and writer Alessandro Vellutello, whose annotation favoured a subordination to the literality of the text while defying the prevailing allegorist tendencies of Cristoforo Landino's version of 1481. Vellutello's style was also considered unconventional and even 'rebellious' by

the literary establishment of Venice at that time, under the influence of cardinal Pietro Bembo. But Vellutello's version might have been a more significant choice for its detailed illustrations, which were faithful to Dante's original text and enjoyed wider success. According to the obituary from the *London Literary Gazette* from 18 August 1827, we also know that Blake consulted the second edition of the first complete English translation by Henry Francis Cary, entitled *The Vision, or, Hell, Purgatory and Paradise of Dante Alighieri* (1819). Both Cary's translation and Vellutello's commentary rested on a "rickety table holding his copper-plates in progress", together with his sketches and manuscripts (*LLG*, cf. Braidia, 2004, p. 160). In a letter to John Linnell from June 1825 Blake says he is "going on with Dante" and pleasing itself with it, while on the next day he writes another note to Linnell telling him he had just sent out the first two plates of *Job*. One year later, in July 1826, while recovering from his latest health crisis, he declared before a witness, the print dealer and Linnell's son-in-law Edward Chance, that Linnell had "purchased of me the Plates & Copy-right of Job & the same is his sole Property" (Keynes, 1972, pp. 873-875). It was the final destination of a precious set for the artist upon one of his favourite biblical episodes, one "brooded over by Blake for many years" (Wicksteed, 1910, p. 33). Added to this, upon his death in August 1827, Blake left one-hundred and two incomplete drawings and seven engravings of Linnell's commission on Dante. Sixty-nine of the drawings belong to the *Inferno*, twenty on the *Purgatorio* and only ten to the *Paradiso*.

This conscientious and frantic activity by a mature, isolated and ailing Blake may be interpreted, judging for his correspondence with Linnell, as a willingness to please his successful benefactor but also, more importantly, as an artistic and intellectual exercise of coming full circle. Wicksteed notes in his classic study of the *Job* illustrations that these were permeated with many of the artist's deepest thoughts and imaginations, stretching the rendering of the story in ways in which Blake departs "radically" from his original, even though "these do not make as fundamental a change in the conception of the story as would at first appear" (Wicksteed 1910, p. 33). This may also be said of his work on Dante, although in no way, according to David Fuller, should we interpret the Dante designs by reference to Blake's own poetical and pictorial symbolism (1988, p. 349). For W.B. Yeats, Blake represented the "shapes of beauty held by most of the frailest of ephemera" from authors who are "citizens of eternity appearing and reappearing in the minds of artists and poets" (Yeats, 1896, p. 42). In spite of Blake's reluctance towards the abstract—Yeats continues in another essay on the *Commedia* illustrations—it was his deep understanding of and sympathy with lost souls, made "possible in their extreme intensity by his revolt against corporeal law and corporeal reason", which turned Blake into the perfect illustrator for the *Inferno* and the *Purga-*

torio (Finneran, 2007, p. 107). Meaning is to be found in the border and the perennial instant: in the marginal notes, in the unfinished state of the artist's work, in the contours of figures, in the elusiveness of representing sense and even in its symbolic order.

This essay is concerned with a tradition of Romantic liminality that chimes with the illustration of Blake's *Commedia*. While Blake's penchant for representing the elision of any pair of opposites in art and literature has been widely registered with regard to Blake's own work—from the extreme symbolic interpretations from Frye and the prophetism of Albert S. Roe to different approaches to Blake's literalism in form or content as suggested by Fuller—such indeterminacy has rested on similar grounds and objects: Blake's own theology, his metaphysical outlook of life, his status as an artist both at the centre and the periphery, his social and political views, or the symbolic transcendence of his idiosyncratic characterizations.

Little attention has been paid to Blake's representation of women as purveyors of liminality. Whereas female icons are neither scant nor marginal in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with Francesca and Beatrice at the centre of the story, other women in the *Commedia* justify their presence as figures that enact and enable transitions, but not necessarily change: Pia in *Purgatorio*, Canto V, and her plea to Dante to be remembered among the living; Lucia carrying Dante in his sleep up to the threshold of purgatory (Canto IX); or Matilda waiting for Dante on the banks of the river Lethe in *Purgatorio*, Canto XXIX. While a tradition of feminist scholarship has taken good care in studying the representation of women in Dante from a myriad of perspectives emphasizing the poet's take on femininity and his more or less comfortable relation to it, Blake's choice and portrayal of female figures in his *Commedia* has been informed by a bunch of excellent studies, significantly by Shapiro, that map them out in the story and their larger correspondence with Blake's own iconography. And yet, as this paper will try to show, liminality remains at the centre point of both Dante's and Blake's *Commedias*. For the Mantuan poet, in the constant movement from one geographical and spiritual state to another; for Blake, in his unmarked visual clues of femininity that nevertheless result in discernible women characters. Liminality, conceived not only as a space-between, physically and emotionally, is also a state of intercession, of anagnorisis and of renouncing the lower for the higher: a space for religious intervention, salvation and resurrection. By looking at some women characters in the *Commedia*, particularly in *Purgatorio*, the following pages will survey the significance of intercession as a point of arrival in Dante's *Commedia* and Blake's depiction of it, in which female figures, endowed with roles that often imply transition and mediation, coalesce the joint vision of both artist and poet: the transmutation of Pagan into Christian values that can only

happen in the realms of the self upon overcoming duality. Blake's *lectio divina* of Dante would thus not be geared towards reproducing the literality of what the painter envisions graphically in the eye of his imagination through his immersive reading and study of the *Commedia*. Neither would he impose his own theology nor imitate the artwork of his friends John Flaxman and Henry Fuseli in their earlier illustrations of the *Commedia*. Blake's famous line on Milton, where "everything would appear to man as it is, infinite" if the "doors of perception" were cleansed, may define as well Blake's interest in Dante's work: the coincidence in their vision of the eternal struggle of the soul, which led to two different conceptions of spiritual reform. Blake considered Dante an "atheist" for seeking to rejuvenate Christianity through its church, while in his view this could only take place within the individual. Braidida captures the ambivalence of Blake's attitudes towards Dante in similar terms: "Blake always retained this ambiguous approach to Dante, characterized by forceful condemnation but also by perceptive understanding of the Italian poet" (2004, p. 154). However, such an interpretation betrays a dualistic conception that Blake may well have eluded, determined as he was in his indeterminacy to choose good over evil, and even more so upon recognizing the human dimension of evil in Dante's work.

2. A TAXONOMY OF THE DANTESQUE FEMALE

As figures of intercession in the *Commedia*, women are most pertinent in Blake's and Dante's joint vision. It would be tempting to begin the discussion with the representation of women in their respective works and mental frameworks, but this would defeat the poet's and artist's points of coincidence, spurring once again the yet unresolved debate about the scope of Blake's literalness about the *Divine Comedy*. In the first place, Blake the poet and painter did not promote a straightaway translation of poetry into painting, and Braidida aptly remind us he believed these were independent modes of expression that could find themselves in a reciprocal relation (2003, p. 92). But being methodologically and conceptually autonomous as two creative forms does not mean that text and image must be read separately from one another. In this regard, Thomas Mitchell asked, "in what precise sense Blake's poems 'need' their illustrations and vice versa" in his "composite art", to use Northrop Frye's terminology applied to Blake's successful blending of image and word that nevertheless retains its separateness. For Suzanne Langer, though, a "composite" is an impossible creation as works belong to only "one order or art" which cannot be conjoined, as "every work has its primary apparition, to which all other virtual dimensions are secondary. There are no happy marriages in art, only successful rape" (Langer, 1957, pp. 85-86).

It might be misleading, therefore, to look at Blake's and Dante's ideas about women –no doubt influenced by the prevailing misogynous notions of women at the time– and see in what ways each one imposed itself in the 'composite' version of the *Divine Comedy*. It would also imply matching the Medieval cultural milieu of fourteenth-century Florentine with nineteenth-century English attitudes towards women, as well as Blake's and Dante's particular departure and coincidence from the mainstream. Women's place in the *Commedia* may be contingent upon the religious and moral standards of Medieval culture. "What she is philosophically determines where she is poetically", Kirkham contends (1989, p. 36). But Blake is not, and could not possibly be interested in the construing of systems of thought. It would most likely alter their shared artistry, as Blake for one, in this case entrusted with the task of having to interpret Dante (and not the other way round) believed that a work of art retains its unity in its parts and as a whole, and that "unity and morality are secondary considerations, & belong to Philosophy & not to Poetry" (Damon, 2013, p. 188). Any attempt to match morality and mores about women in Blake and Dante would cast an interpretative filter. However, this does not mean that conceptions of women did not transpire in the *Divine Comedy* and its illustrated version by Blake, or that both artists did not have anything to say about women in the order of things. Blake, for one, was not too keen on a strict separation of male and female, and rejected a conception of femininity as intrinsically sinful or dependent on moral codes. Duality is an illusion, and the social discrimination of women by dint of their sex is the result of an ill understanding of the interrelation between body and soul, between carnality and the metaphysical dimension of the human being. Blake would not feel comfortable with virginal representations of women that extolled and perpetuated their submission to the roles associated with their sex. As we shall see, he would not render consistently eroticised versions of women, either. Transcending the limitations of duality, of body and soul, would imply an integration of both, something that Blake disliked of Dante's women in the *Commedia*: their gradual beautification towards a virginal figure, the epitome of an eradication of the body through sublimation and not through natural sexuality. Still, Dante's beatific figures, less maternal than feminine, more present than loquacious, inspire in Blake the sort of asexual representation of Virgil and Dante and the delicate glittering of Beatrice in the Eight Sphere of Paradise in the painter's watercolours.

A taxonomy of women figures in the *Commedia*, such as the one Kirkham drew in addition to their numerical significance, may help us locate the liminal spaces in the illustrated text. Dante meets or sees forty-one women in the otherworld (Kirkham 1989, p. 17). Eight in Limbo, that he does not speak to, and nine others in Inferno V, where we find Francesca in the circle of the

lustful. She is the first woman to speak to Dante, and the last in the typology of lustful and unrepented women. As far as the English reception of Dante in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century is concerned, one of the most popular episodes of the *Commedia* and second only to the Ugolino story was, precisely, Paolo's and Francesca's episode. It would spur innumerable theatrical and operatic adaptations since the eighteenth century onwards, as well as inspire hundreds of academic articles that attest to the vigorous nature of two of the most universal couples in our collective imagery. Still, Francesca retains a halo of elusiveness in its poetical omnipresence: readily appropriated by thinkers and creators, her presence as an unrepented lover places her firmly in the circle of the lustful. Still, her moving story situates her at the borderline between morality and humanity. Her liminality consists in blurring for the reader-seer the contours of what is socially acceptable and humanly understandable. Dante the poet leaves her in Limbo, while Dante the protagonist faints. Such a blurring of opposites, of social good over evil, of condemned passion over regulated sexuality must have been irresistible for Blake, who depicts the famous episode in plate 10 of *Inferno V: 88-138* (Fig. 1): a fainting Dante stays flat on the ground, while a snippet of the naked couple appears in the left half of Blake's image, just on top of Virgil's head near the river Acheron. Blake depicts the couple twice in the plate, as they also appear rushing to catch up with the swirling mainstream of passion.

Dante wishes to learn about what drew these people together and why they are suffering now. However, this is a suffering perceived by Dante, but not acknowledged by Francesca. Her pain relates to the inability to go back to the time where she and Paolo came together, to having been murdered, but not to a remorse about the loving act. It is the impossibility of capturing an instant of happiness in the past what moves her to join the mainstream in the hope to stop the passing of time or to regain life. "There is no greater sorrow", she begins, "than to think backwards to a happy time/when one is miserable" (*Inferno V:121-123*). Her touching story of how their reading of Lancelot spurred their desire is, of course, a hint to the perils of romance, amply noted by most readings and critical assessments of the episode. Francesca's love is liminal in her movement from past and present, from reality and literature, from her willingness to continue loving and her impossibility to celebrate it in life. Her speech is a meditation on her state, an intercession that does not seek salvation but vindication: an acknowledgement of the state of one's soul, which is as much attached to its object of desire as it is unwilling to recant. Dante might see it as a limited state of being, the reason why Francesca and Paolo inhabit hell. Francesca is, too, according to Shapiro, "a warning to all who would transform the Lady into a Woman, and she is as such the embodiment and summary rejection of courtly love" (1975, p. 86).

Blake would not operate in terms of condemning or defending courtly love, but he might have chimed with Francesca as a faithful and true lover condemned by a moral system. Dante movingly describes Francesca's state but sends her back to her own labyrinth of passions. His notion of atonement begins with a *contrapasso*, the process of abiding by the sin itself, while moving ahead in the path to salvation, which Francesca cannot possibly take. Such a punishment, however graceful in its cruelty, may have clashed with Blake's belief in atonement and his rejection to a merciless god. He does not betray Dante's punishment (the couple's eternal flight). But while the canto ends with Dante's fainting ("And fell down, as a dead body falls") Blake's image leaves us contemplating a dynamic trail of bodies which, in the crudeness of their state, arouse compassion.

For Both Dante and Blake, the liminality of Francesca's state drives their creative vision, and her knock-down speech transitions from the unrepentant to the soon-to come penitent Pia in Canto V of the *Purgatory*. In there, Dante and Virgil meet penitent souls at the time of their sudden deaths, among them those who did not have the chance to receive the last rites. Blake illustrated the first sequence of the canto where, again, a swirling movement of spirits approach Dante and Virgil in a rush and back:

I never saw meteors fall so fast
From the clear sky in a summer night,
Nor lightning from the August clouds at sunset,

So fast as they turned back and went uphill;
And, having reached the others, swept back with them
Like a troop of cavalry riding without rein (*Purgatory*, Canto V, 37-42).

De Santis and Kirkham noted the structural coincidence of this episode, located in Canto V of *Purgatorio*, with the story of Francesca also located in a Canto V albeit in *Inferno*. The similarity concerns not only the architecture of the *Commedia*, as both episodes speak of the violent death of the female protagonists who tell their story. De Santis rightly suggests that Blake reinforced this symmetry between the two cantos by invoking again the theme of the swirling or 'vortex' he had already depicted in *Inferno* V (2017: 5.4.). A vortex of souls who sing *A Miserere* in unison and must wait until they get admittance to purgatory, "stabbed" as they are with the desire of seeing God. As semi-physical figures, almost translucent in Blake's drawing, they approach Virgil and Dante, who stay upright on top of a hillside, and wonder about the robust appearance of the poets, as their bodies "did not yield a passage to the rays of the sun". One of the souls, speaking on behalf of the group, demands that the poet "speaks kindly" ("adorations duly be put up" in Cary's translation) so as to purge their offences. Readers might have identified the third

spirit to address Dante, "La Pia", who briefly tells the story of her murder, as the historical Pia dei Tolomei from Siena, killed by her husband, Nella della Pietra. She asks for remembrance once Dante goes back to the world: "Remember me then, who am La Pia" (V:133), as it would provide her with the salvation she is looking for. The canto finishes with Pia's plea in the ante-purgatory. However, Blake does not depict this specific moment in the canto, but the previous one when two souls approach the poets in a rush –but not in a swirl as in Blake's version. Their dim and incorporeal drawings in watercolour, with figures distinguishable as male and female, may not be a literal representation of Pia's exchange with Dante, but there is a feminine shape in place. Her plea is, as with the two previous spirits, succinct and needy of intercession. The awareness of her position in-between hell and salvation marks her as an ephemeral presence in both the text and in Blake's rendering. As opposed to Francesca, who speaks about herself and on behalf of the group, Pia's voice is comparatively subdued by her two preceding spirits. If Blake had depicted her in isolation, even by way of contrast with Francesca in Canto V of hell, he would have been transgressing the liminal effect of the whole composition. Pia is thus textually corporeal and visually prescient in Blake's illustrated *Commedia*. (Fig. 2)

3. THE COLOR AND ARCHITECTURE OF SOUL GUIDES

Still in purgatory, and accompanied by Virgil and the Latin poet Statius, Dante arrives in Eden or 'earthly paradise' in *Purgatorio* XXVIII. There he finds himself wandering in a forest until he reaches the river Lethe, where he sees a young girl picking flowers on the opposite riverbank. The gesture is redolent of his proleptic dream in *Purgatorio* XXVII in which Leah is also picking flowers, thus anticipating the young Matilda, who will not be called by her name until *Purgatorio* XXXIII, when Beatrice directs Dante to her in order to learn more about Lethe, a request to which she reacts in a tone of gentle reprimand: "This matter as well as others/I have told him; and I am quite sure/ That the water of Lethe has not hidden them from him" (XXXIII:121-123). "Matilda", writes Kirkham, "the enigmatic maid he meets in Eden, can't be so easily dismissed but neither can she be comfortably counted" (1989: p. 17). She is literally a mediator, Beatrice's aide and a soul guide. Her liminality is geographical but not existential, she mediates between the repented sinners and their salvation while facilitating and describing the process to do so. She is "sweet", feminine, a pastoral 'Flora', but firm and key in preparing Dante for his further journey to paradise, effectively taking over Virgil in his role as mentor, who won't be able to enter paradise. "For I came so that I could answer any questions" she hints at the poet (XXXIII: 84).

Dante and Matilda walk up the river until they see a wonderful apparition, profusely described by the poet and depicted by Blake. Matilda's preamble as a mediator between purgatory and paradise is shown here in full corporeal but colourless form, their transient and liminal presence made noticeable textually, and not in the least, graphically. Matilda is situated in a central position in Blake's Plate 90, *Matilda and Dante on the Banks of the Lethe*, reinforcing her role as facilitator of Beatrice's arrival in her triumphal chariot. We can't hear her speak, but Blake's depiction captures the core content of what she recounts.

Dante, who is struck at first sight by Matilda's outer beauty, a reflection of her inner goodness, does not have to wait for long before she hears her recount of the genesis of Eden as a place of goodness, its fall and the nature of river Lethe: "On this side it flows down with the virtue/Of taking from men the recollection of sin/On the other side it brings all good deeds to mind (Purgatory XXVIII:127-129). Before receiving these instructions, though, Dante's rapport with Matilda has been one of proximity in separation. Dante captures nicely the nuances of their relation as a gradual approach. Separated by the river, Matilda comes as close as she can get to the rim of the riverbank "where the grass was bathed/Already by the waves of the lovely stream/She graciously raised her eyes to meet mine" (Purgatory XXVIII:61). Matilda would not trespass her mediator mission and establishes visual and spiritual contact with Dante –as the eyes are the windows of the soul– through a geographical and liminal divide: pure water, so crystalline that reflects the image of animals, and spiritual rejuvenation. Blake captures the simplicity and transcendence of this gesture in plate 90, situating Matilda and Dante establishing visual contact at an equidistant centre in the foreground, while subtly displacing the other centre of attention –Beatrice's chariot– slightly in the background (fig. 3). Architecture is more important here than colour, as Blake does not eroticize Matilda, whose translucent tunic hardly reveals the protuberance of her breasts. The attendants on both sides of the Lethe (Virgil, Statius on one side, on the other a line of aged men behind a seven-branched candelabra and the attendants in the triumphal chariot) bear witness to the exchange between Matilda and Dante, who are raising their palms. Leaving aside the symbolism of the objects in this episode and their reminiscence of Medieval cults, let's zoom in the dynamism of the scene that Dante conveyed and Blake depicted: in spite of its apparent ritualism, this is above all a moment of intimacy and a turning point in the story. Virgil will leave, Matilda will give way to Beatrice, and her intercessory role will happily come to an end.

In Canto XXX of *Purgatorio*, the first close encounter between Beatrice and Dante takes place. Blake illustrates it in Plate 91, *Beatrice addressing Dante from the chariot* (fig. 4). The fact that he does not choose cantos XXVII or

XXXII, for instance, strong in political content, reveals for Braida the artist's interest in Beatrice as an object of representation rather than Dante's ideology (2005, p. 170). Blake might have considered that national history and pagan myth added very little to both the artist's and the poet's joint vision. Eric Pyle's commentary and study of Blake's engravings of the *Commedia* encapsulates exactly this point shared by different generations of Blake scholars: his reticence towards Greco-Roman culture is based on his view that these are "offshoots of the early, unenlightened peoples, who could only create through theft from a superior culture". Blake's history would start with Adam and Eve—hence his interest in Edenic and prelapsarian stories—"continues through the early biblical patriarchs identified with the Druids, and finds a true moral code only with the later prophets and with Christ (Pyle, 2015, p. 15).

Blake's portrayal of Dante's muse, Beatrice, would thus be devoid of classical elements. However, as Braida and Shapiro noted, it became the locus for a synergic version of femininity that would satisfy both. Critical assessments gravitate from considering Beatrice as Blake's *Vala*, one of the four Zoas, a goddess of nature, suffused with the poet's own emanations, and a whole cosmology of prophetic undertones that Blake left unfinished; or else, consider Beatrice as a *Luvah*, another of the Zoas who represents passion. Proponents of Blake's symbolism in the interpretation of his illustration of the *Commedia*, such as Roe, Klonsky or Tinkler-Villani, have seen in Beatrice a *Vala* or even a *Luvah* in her more sensualized version. The literalist school of Fuller would tend to accommodate Blake's representation of Beatrice as a 'minerva', as Dante calls her in Canto XXX of *Purgatorio*, by dint of her "foliage" to use Cary's translation, that Blake transforms into a crown—as Raphael does in the Room of the "Segnatura" in the frescoes of the Apostolic palace in the Vatican (Braida, 2004, p. 173).

Beatrice's presence in the last cantos of *Purgatorio* and in *Paradiso* is far from subdued in either its textual and visual manifestations. Despite her firmness, her commanding presence, she is also a mediator, an intercessor of the heavenly realms that instils a new sense of responsibility and mission in Dante. She takes over the guidance from Virgil—being a pagan, he could not enter paradise—and, above all, it is Beatrice who leads Dante into a beatific vision. Her visual and narrative focus in the story, as well as her speech, would not seem to qualify her as liminal. And yet, her talk is often mysterious and requires an understanding beyond the rational faculties of the mind. Her mediation leads to wisdom and illumination outside of time and space. But she is also sensual in her transparent green garment decorated with flowers. Dante is overwhelmed before her beautiful virtue, the poet's particular blend of desire and the longing of the soul for absolute love and communion with God:

Without knowing her any more, with my eyes
 But through the secret virtue which went out from her,
 Felt the great power of the ancient love. (Purgatory XXX: 37)

Beatrice's embodiment of love turns her into a liminal figure for its ambivalent nature. While Dante does not sexualize it, Blake does, as he was reluctant to consider that asexual love is the highest expression of this feeling. Whereas in Dante's theology spiritual love entails the sublimation of carnality, Blake does not supplant one or the other but they coexist in natural harmony and expression for both men and women. Braida has noticed Blake's tendency in *Paradiso* to resort to his own symbology and iconography displayed, for instance, in *Jerusalem* or *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but this might not be the case here. If Blake was intent on showing the synergies between sensual desire and the aspiration towards God, it would have been a fundamental error to visually emphasize one over the other. However, Blake is actually literal in sensualizing Beatrice judging from the content in the text:

As soon as I was upon the threshold
 Of my second age and changed my life, he took himself
 From me, and gave himself to others (Purgatory XXX: 124)

A reader may be tempted to interpret these lines as a reproach for having been abandoned after a sentimental relationship in Dante's youth; but it may also be read as a reproof for having diverted from the spiritual path. In either case, a woman can be spiritualized (Dante's turn) as much as a virgin can be sexualized (Blake's). In the confluence of these two both poet and artist convene in their eternal vision.

Any attempt to transform Beatrice into a motherly figure does not yield a satisfying artistic result either. The poet looks upon Beatrice as a mother sometimes, a firm presence that "seems stern to her child/so she appeared to me; because it is a bitter/ taste that is left by sharpness in pity" (Purgatory XXX: 79-81). Any fleeting identification of Dante with a motherly Beatrice gets quickly superseded by her presence before the Queen of Heaven in her glory in Paradise, when Beatrice gives way to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux as Dante's guide. In the last of Blake's illustrations on the *Commedia* set, left unfinished, the Queen of Heaven is enthroned, and immediately below are Eve, Rachel and Beatrice herself. The sinuous physicality and beauty of the female body, an obvious feature of Blake's last draft, plate 102, is the closest one can get to a women's fest, where the redeemed are sketched inside a rose with Beatrice sitting in the centre below the Virgin Mary (fig.5). Beatrice's participation in this ceremony of intercession, in an act of salvation for the redeemed, is witnessed by Eve, Beatrice and Rachel and the cohort of Jewish women (Sarah, Rebecca, Judith and Ruth). Dante himself cannot help but

respond in the language of one who has been transformed and made wiser by the magnificence of pure love. He literally prays to her:

Oh lady in whom my hope always springs,
And who for my salvation have submitted
To leave the print of your feet in hell (Paradise XXXI: 79-81)

From then on, Dante is to fend for himself, and the acts of intercession, of advancing through spaces and people in-between spheres and orders, are completed. Now he is the mediator, the poet who, as a response to Beatrice's instruction and imbued with love, is able to write about what he has seen in heaven and earthly paradise. (Purgatorio XXXIII: 52)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Critical discussions about the nature of Blake's method of interpretation in the *Commedia* has led to two basic conceptualizations. On the one hand, the 'interpretative' school of N. Frye and A. Roe, among others, who read the *Commedia* as a superposition of Blake's theology and symbolism into Dante's work, particularly that deriving from *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or *Jerusalem*; and the 'literalists', mainly by D. Fuller, who see Blake adapting to Dante's own message. The more versatile approaches of A. Braidà or S. de Santis seek to capture Blake's representation of Dante's vision in its various points of contact.

The latter approach has animated my analysis of femininity in this article, as feminist approaches to Blake's illustrated *Commedia*, still too scarce but nevertheless fruitful, have focused on the respective cultural milieu of the poet and the artist separately, inhabiting different conceptions of femininity in time and space. Whereas such disparities undoubtedly exist and condition the portrayal of women in Blake's illustrated *Commedia*, this article suggests that femininity is precisely a point of contact, and not of departure, between Blake and Dante. One which coalesces literality and allegory regardless of the differences in theology. By looking at the liminal nature of key women in the *Commedia*—liminality being an underlying concept for Blake and Dante—we have identified several layers of mediation and intercession, ranging from the purely representational of Francesca, speaking on behalf of a group, towards more complex relations of emotional and spiritual mediation. Leading, at the end, to spiritual salvation. As we have seen, textual liminality finds correspondence in Blake's plates, and defines the narrative and metaphysical dimensions of women as characters in the story beyond the intersection of their cultural identities. Obviously, a more extensive and thorough analysis of each character, integrating other female figures and their specific role in the story

as elements of evolution and change, would lead to a more complete picture of the importance of femininity in the configuration of love and salvation in the *Commedia*.

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Fig. 1. The Circle of the Lustful: Francesca da Rimini (Plate 10).

Fig. 2. The souls of those who only repented at the point of death (Plate 78).

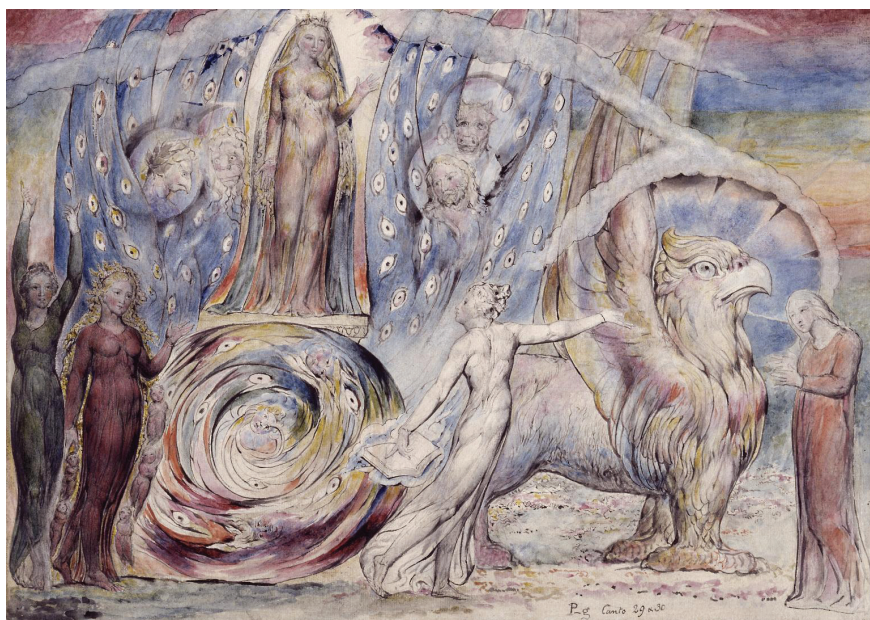


Fig. 3. Matilde and Dante on the Banks of the Lethe (Plate 90).

Fig. 4. Beatrice addressing Dante from the chariot (Plate 91).



Fig. 5. The Queen of Heaven in Glory (Plate 102):