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**"DENTRO A LA DANZA DE LE QUATTRO BELLE"  
(PURG. 31.104):  
DANCE IN DANTE'S 'COMMEDIA'**

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Missing from standard reference works on Dante's *Commedia* are separate entries devoted exclusively to dance or dancing. Primary sources for the history of dance in the Italian Trecento derive from tablatures (musical notations), scattered iconographic images, and literary works, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Dante's *Commedia*. Representations of dancing in these works invariably double as a symbolic language or meta-commentary on the surrounding narrative. The interpretation of dance's role in late medieval art and literature depends not only on the context but also on the type of dance depicted. This article focuses on the allegorical roles that dance plays in Dante the Pilgrim's salvific otherworldly experience in Purgatory and Paradise, including not only circular dance movements but also the position of the Pilgrim as the center point within a circle in three distinct episodes: *Purgatorio* 31.104 (with the four nymphs or cardinal virtues) and 31.132 (with the three nymphs or theological virtues) and in *Paradiso* 13.20-21 (with the twenty-four *sapienti* or wise men).

Keywords: Allegory, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Andrea di Bonaiuto, Antonio Cornazzano, *Ballo*, Boccaccio, Cardinal virtues, *Carole*, Circumpunct, Dance, *Danza*, Domenico da Piacenza, Fra Angelico, Giotto, Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro, Harmony of the spheres, Numerology, Nymphs, Theological virtues.

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The earliest extant treatises on dance in Western Europe date from the fifteenth century. Some of the most influential were produced in Italy and include manuscripts by the Italian dancing master Domenico da Piacenza (c. 1395–c. 1465), also known as Domenico da Ferrara, and two of his protégés: Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro (c. 1420–c. 1484), who after his conversion from Judaism to Catholicism was known as Giovanni Ambrogio, and Antonio Cornazzano (c. 1432–1515).<sup>1</sup> These treatises from the Quattrocento provide

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<sup>1</sup> See Ingrid Brainard, "Dancing Master" and "Domenico da Piacenza," in *The International Encyclopedia of Dance*, ed. Selma Jeanne Cohen, 6 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2: 336–41 and 427–29; Guglielmo Ebreo of Pesaro,

helpful clues as to what dancing in the previous century may have been like; however, the primary sources for the history of dance in the Italian Trecento derive from tablatures (musical notations), scattered iconographic images, and literary works, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Dante's *Commedia*. When we scrutinize these latter works of literature and focus specifically on the passages in which dancing occurs or is described, we realize more fully how social or courtly dance was viewed and practiced in the Late Middle Ages. We come to understand the cultural context of such dancing and to know that dancing in the later medieval period constituted a major pastime; it was a much-beloved leisure activity engaged in at all levels of society, from peasants to the mercantile class to aristocrats. At the same time, as this essay will attempt to demonstrate, representations of dancing in literary works of the Trecento invariably double as a symbolic language, even a meta-commentary on the poetic or prose narrative that precedes and surrounds the descriptions of dance.

Before turning to the question of how dance functions in Dante's *opus magnum*, let us consider a well-known and perhaps a better-studied literary example of fourteenth-century dancing; let us reflect on the ubiquity and social context of dance in the *Decameron*.<sup>2</sup> The book's frame establishes the setting as 1348, just over a quarter-century following Dante's death. It is the year of the plague, when seven young women and three young men abandon disease-ridden Florence for the salubriousness and safety of a rural villa near Fiesole. During their two-week sojourn there, they tell stories on each of ten days. The countryside to which the ten young adults retreat represents the medieval version of a classical *locus*

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*De pratica seu arte tripudii: On the Practice or Art of Dancing*, ed. Barbara Sparti, trans. Barbara Sparti and Michael Sullivan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Antonio Cornazano [sic], *The Book on the Art of Dancing*, trans. Madeleine Inglehearn and Peggy Forsyth (London: Dance Books, 1981). Seminal studies of fifteenth-century Italian dance include the following: Alessandro Pontremoli and Patrizia La Rocca, *Il ballare lombardo: Teoria e prassi coreutica nella festa di corte del XV secolo* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1987); and Cecilia Nocilli, *Coreografare l'identità: La danza alla corte aragonese di Napoli (1442-1502)* (Turin: UTET, 2012). A special edition of the journal *La danza italiana*, published in 1985, focused on Italian Renaissance dance; it included, *inter alia*, a review of historical, musical, and literary sources for late medieval and Renaissance dancing. See Maurizio Padovan, "Da Dante a Leonardo: La danza italiana attraverso le fonti storiche," *La danza italiana* 3 (1985), 5–37.

<sup>2</sup> An excellent introduction to dance in relation to music in Boccaccio's era is found in a two-part study: W. Thomas Marrocco, "Music and Dance in Boccaccio's Time: Part I, Fact and Speculation," *Dance Research Journal* 10, no. 2 (1978): 19–22; and Emma Lewis Thomas, "Music and Dance in Boccaccio's Time: Part II, Reconstruction of *Danze* and *Balli* (Including Three Dances with Music and Labanotation)," *Dance Research Journal* 10, no. 2 (1978): 23–42.

*amoenus*, and in that idealized place, order and harmony prevail not only in the highly structured telling of the tales but also in the recreational pursuits in which the ten members of the *onesta brigata* elect to engage. Readers and scholars often focus (and understandably so) on the relationship of each day's theme to the stories told, the dual motifs of love and intelligence that weave through the tales, or the distinguishing characteristics of individual storytellers. But it is significant for our purposes to note that the final activity of each day, no matter the day's theme or who is the designated king or queen, is dancing and that it is the *carole* or round dance that is specifically mentioned.

Here following are ten pertinent passages that describe the situations surrounding the daily dances in Boccaccio's frame narratives.<sup>3</sup> I have intentionally grouped them together in the body (and at the beginning) of this essay in order to highlight the centrality of dancing—and in particular the round dance—to the cultural milieu that flourished in Dante's and Boccaccio's Tuscany in the first half of the fourteenth century. These passages, which in each case come at the conclusion of a day's storytelling, are listed in order of appearance in the *Decameron*:

. . . dopo la qual cena, fatti venir gli strumenti, comandò la reina che una danza fosse presa, e quella menando la Lauretta, Emilia cantasse una canzone dal leuto di Dioneo aiutata. (83)

[After supper, instruments were sent for, and the queen decreed that a dance should begin, which Lauretta was to lead whilst Emilia was to sing a song, accompanied on the lute by Dioneo.] (First Day, Conclusion, 112)

. . . con festa e con piacer cenarono; e da quella levati, come alla reina piacque, menando Emilia la carola, la seguente canzone da Pampinea, rispondendo l'altre, fu cantata. (177)

[They then had supper, in the course of which there was much laughter and merriment, and when they had risen from table, at the queen's request Emilia began to dance {the *carole*}.] (Second Day, Conclusion, 229)

Filostrato, . . . come levate furono le tavole, così comandò che Lauretta una danza prendesse e dicesse una canzone. (252)

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<sup>3</sup> For the Italian text of the Certaldese's major work, see Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Cesare Segre (Milan: Mursia, 1974). For the English version I have quoted the Penguin translation: Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).

[No sooner had the tables been removed than Filostrato . . . called upon Lauretta to dance and sing them a song.] (Third Day, Conclusion, 321)

e da quella [cena] levatisi, come usati erano, al danzare e al cantar si diedono, e menando Filomena la danza (318)

[Then, having risen from table, they devoted themselves to singing and dancing in their customary fashion, with Filomena leading the revels.] (Fourth Day, Conclusion, 402)

. . . la quale [cena] con lieta festa fornita, a cantare e a sonare tutti si diedero. E avendo già, con volere della reina, Emilia una danza presa, a Dioneo fu comandato che cantasse una canzone. (381)

[. . . when the meal was over they proceeded to sing and make music. Emilia having begun to dance, Dioneo was called upon to sing them a song.] (Fifth Day, Conclusion 479)

. . . li tre giovani . . . se ne tornarono a casa, dove trovarono le donne che facevano una carola ad un verso che faceva la Fiammetta, e con loro, fornita la carola, entrati in ragionamenti della Valle delle donne, assai di bene e di lode ne dissero. (415)

[. . . the three young men . . . went straight back home, where they found the ladies dancing a *carole* to an air being sung by Fiammetta. They joined them in the dance, and when it was finished, having taken up the subject of the Valley of the Ladies, they talked at length in praise of its beauty.] (Sixth Day, Conclusion, 518)

Dove con freschissimi vini e con confetti la fatica del picciol cammin cacciata via, intorno della bella fontana di presente furono in sul danzare, quando al suono della cornamusa di Tindaro e quando d'altri suoni carolando. (468)

[. . . they dispelled the fatigue of their brief journey with the coolest of wines and the daintiest of sweetmeats, and in no time at all they were dancing *caroles* beside the beautiful fountain, accompanied sometimes by Tindaro on the cornemuse and sometimes by the music of other instruments.] (Seventh Day, Conclusion, 584)

. . . e dopo la cena al modo usato cantando e ballando un gran pezzo si trastullarono." (549)

[And when supper was over they freely engaged in their usual pastimes of singing and dancing.] [Eighth Day, Conclusion, 679)

Alla quale [cena] con festa venuti, e serviti diligentemente e con ordine, dopo la fine di quella si levarono a' balli costumati. (592)

[at the end of the meal, which was served with meticulous care and formal propriety, they rose from their places and proceeded to dance as usual.] (Ninth Day, Conclusion, 731)

e l'ora della cena venuta, con sommo piacere furono a quella, e dopo quella a cantare e a sonare e a carolare cominciarono; e menando la Lauretta una danza, comandò il re alla Fiammetta che dicesse una canzone, la quale assai piacevolmente così incominciò a cantare. (670)

[When it was time for supper, they disposed of the meal with infinite relish, after which they turned to singing and music and dancing. And while Lauretta was leading a dance, the king called for a song from Fiammetta, who began to sing, most charmingly.] (Tenth Day, Conclusion, 825)

Several aspects of the storytellers' dancing are worthy of note. First, dancing follows their communal evening meal and represents a customary conclusion to each day's events; it is a consistent and practical means of bringing unity and harmony. No matter how sad the day's theme or upsetting an individual tale may have been to one or more of the storytellers, the members of the *brigata* unite and find joy in the dance. Second, it is accompanied by the playing of musical instruments and singing; dancing forms an integral part of the group harmony that includes instrumental and vocal music. Dance and music were widely associated with the classical notion of the harmony of the spheres.<sup>4</sup> Third, both the women and the men participate in singing and dancing, and either gender may take the lead. The Italian bourgeois or mercantile class of the Trecento expected its young men and its young women to participate in singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments. These activities were not limited to courtiers and aristocrats.<sup>5</sup> Fourth, the specific dance that is mentioned is the *carole*, which is a type of round dance, one performed to the singing of dancers arranged in a ring, chain, or linked circle.<sup>6</sup> Circular dancing is an ancient dance form;<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For further study of the Pythagorean and Platonic notion that the planets were connected to musical notes, see *The Harmony of the Spheres: A Sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music*, ed. Joscelyn Godwin (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the tradition of courtiers needing to be able to sing, dance, and play musical instruments continues well into the Italian Cinquecento, as discussed in some detail in Baldassare Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano*.

<sup>6</sup> See Robert Mullally, *The Carole: A Study of a Medieval Dance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Books and articles abound on ancient dance, especially among the Greeks. See, for example, the following two classic studies: Maurice Emmanuel, *The Antique Greek Dance after Sculptured and Painted Figures*, trans. Harriet Jean Beasley (New York: John Lane, 1916); and Lillian Lawler, *The Dance in Ancient Greece* (London: Adam and Black, 1964).

furthermore, the circle dance is one familiar to readers of Dante, who imbues the image of the circle with distinct allegorical significance and which leads us to discuss the various ways dance functions in the *Commedia*.

In standard reference works on Dante's *Commedia*, students and scholars search in vain for separate entries devoted exclusively to dance or dancing, whereas entries focused on dance's sister arts of music and singing invariably find their proper attention. It must be acknowledged, however, that in those latter entries some reference to the role of dancing in Dante can be found. For instance, in Maria Ann Roglieri's insightful article on "Music," written for *The Dante Encyclopedia*, there is a short concluding paragraph that begins with the truism that "heavenly music is characterized by dance," a notion of the intertwined nature of music and dance in Heaven to which we shall return.<sup>8</sup> Another exception to which we shall return is John Freccero's essay on "The Dance of the Stars: *Paradiso X*," which connects what he calls the "command performance" of the dancing theologians in the sphere of the Sun to passages in Plato's *Timaeus*.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding the general dearth of scholarly attention devoted exclusively to the role of dance in the *Commedia*, most scholars will acknowledge that images of *balli* and *danze* and actions of *ballare* and *danzare* appear in all three canticles of the Florentine's Christian epic. It could even be argued that Dante's hendecasyllabic poetry, with its fixed accents on the fourth, seventh or eighth, and tenth syllables or on the sixth and tenth syllables, combined with the poet's *terza rima* convey a rhythmic sense of dancing. Certainly, given the widespread popularity of dance in medieval culture, the presence of dance and dancing—whether poetically or

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<sup>8</sup> Maria Ann Roglieri, "Music," in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000), 633. When I delivered my paper on "Dance in Dante's *Commedia*" at the "Dante and Music" conference held at The University of Pennsylvania, 5–6 November 2015, I had a double surprise after I shared Dr. Roglieri's quote. First, she was present in the audience in Philadelphia. Second, after my talk she graciously reintroduced herself as the Columbia University undergraduate who had attended the "Dante and Ovid" conference I organized on that campus in 1987. She related that three decades prior to our Philadelphia conference, I had taken the time to answer her questions in New York and to encourage her to pursue a doctorate in Italian; now, in a different setting and as colleagues and peers, she wanted to thank me for the encouragement I had given her to pursue her dream. She had received, like me, both a master's and a doctorate from Harvard University and is now a professor of romance languages at St. Thomas Aquinas College. Like the circular dances in Dante's *Commedia*, "what goes around comes around."

<sup>9</sup> John Freccero, "The Dance of the Stars: *Paradiso X*," in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 221–244.

narratively—in a work that endeavored to recreate a *liber naturae* within the context of an allegorical *liber scripturae* should not be surprising.

As acknowledged above, we know of the popularity of dancing in the Trecento through a variety of sources, not just through Giovanni Boccaccio, who also was one of Dante's early commentators. For example, fourteenth-century artistic representations of the alliance of music with dance occur in both secular and religious settings. We need only contemplate Ambrogio Lorenzetti's ten dancing ladies seen in his Sienese fresco *Effects of Good and Bad Government* or Andrea di Bonaiuto's *Allegory of the Dominican Order* in the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. But even prior to those works, Giotto's figure of Justice, painted in 1304 for the Arena Chapel in Padua, included in the space beneath the seated figure of Justice a frieze of three dancing women. In each of these cases—Giotto's, Lorenzetti's, and Bonaiuto's—the women move with stately gestures; they are harmony personified, never engaging in high jumps or appearing unbalanced.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 1. Giotto, *Justice* (1304), Arena Chapel, Padua, showing in the panel below Justice's feet (in the middle scene) three dancers in various poses.

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent analysis of these visual examples of dancing in the Trecento in relation to Boccaccio, see Eleonora M. Beck, "Music in the Cornice of Boccaccio's *Decameron*," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 24 (1997): 33-50. Beck comments, "Trecento representations of music and dance reflected the concern for the tempered enjoyment of music as represented in the harmonious music of the heavens" (37). She then cites Boccaccio's commentary on *Inf.* 2, when he explains the Pythagorean theory of the music of the heavenly spheres.



Likewise, in approximately 1425, a century after Dante's death, Fra Angelico captured the harmonious and stately processional dance thought to exist in heaven in one of his most celebrated paintings of *The Last Judgment*, now in the Museum of San Marco in Florence. We see saved souls led by an angel and joining hands with other angels in what appears to be a chain or round dance; they are in an Eden-like setting at the right hand of Christ and arranged in circular fashion as they are led toward the *Civitas Dei*.



Figure 2. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Effects of Good and Bad Government* (c. 1337–40), Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, fresco detail showing ten ladies holding hands and performing a *carole* (circle or chain dance) while one sings and plays the tambourine.



Figure 3. Andrea di Bonaiuto, *Allegory of the Dominican Order* (1365), Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, fresco detail of young women holding hands and dancing in a chain or circle dance.



Figure 4. Fra Angelico, *The Last Judgment* (c. 1425), fresco detail showing angels accompanying and leading the blessed in a processional (chain) dance into heaven. Museo di San Marco, Florence.

In contrast to such a harmonious *carole*, there also existed in literary and artistic circles the notion of more frenetic types of dancing, such as the *saltarello*, a musical dance form that likewise originated in Italy. The first mention of it is found in a fourteenth-century manuscript probably of Tuscan origin, now in the British Library. Performed in a fast triple meter, it is named for its peculiar leaping step, after the Italian verb *saltare* (“to jump”). Lively dance steps are similarly found in the dance of death—also known as the *danse macabre* in France, the *Totentanz* in Germany, and the *danza de la muerte* in Spain. This line dance increased dramatically in popularity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as the Black Death spread across Europe and as artists portrayed the fact that no one escapes death—neither pope nor peasant, neither king nor subject. Not surprisingly the interpretation of dance’s role in art and literature in the late Middle Ages is highly dependent not only on the *context* but also on the *type* of dance depicted.





Figure 5. Wood engraving of the Dance of death by Michael Wolgemut in Hartmann Schedel, *Weltchronik* (Nuremberg, 1493).

For instance, in *Inf.* 21.53, Dante employs the verb *ballare* negatively and derisively—that is to say, *in malo*—when he equates the secretive act or sin of barratry with the contorted dance movements of sinners hidden under the black pitch that forms part of the barraters' *contrapasso*, or apt punishment. The verb *balli* is uttered collectively by the squad of demons who attack a barrater with their hooked spears and taunt him with these jeering words: “. . . ‘Co-vertò conven che qui balli, / sì che, se puoi, nascosamente accaffi.’” (“Here you’ll have to dance under cover, so grab on [*accaffi*, seize or hook] secretly, if you can.”<sup>11</sup>) The searing heat of the boiling pitch produces the barraters’ spasmodic actions, contortions that are far removed from the usual joy found in dance.<sup>12</sup> As

<sup>11</sup> All quotations from Dante’s *Commedia*, along with their translations, come unless otherwise indicated from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles S. Singleton, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970–75). The various commentaries I cite derive, other than Singleton’s, from the online Dartmouth Dante Project (<https://dante.dartmouth.edu>); any translations of those commentaries are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>12</sup> The other infernal episode that vividly suggests a form of derisive dancing occurs in the episode of the sodomites who wheel about in a tight circle and address the Pilgrim while their feet are turned one way and their heads are twisted in a different

Alessandro Vellutello emphasizes in his commentary, dating from 1544, this reference by Dante to dancing is derisive (“per derisione”) because usually “ballar è segno d’allegrezza” (“dancing is a sign of happiness”) and here the sinner “era in somma tristezza, & miseria” (“was in the greatest sorrow and misery”). This interpretation focusing on the irony of the barrater’s pseudo-dance continues down through the centuries of Dante commentary. Baldassare Lombardi (1791–92) comments, “per derisione appellano que’ demoni *ballo* il dimenarsi di que’ sciaurati pe ’l bruciore” (“for derisiveness those demons call ‘dancing’ the wiggling of those wretches caused by the burning [pitch]”). The symbolic connection of frenetic dancing with derision, darkness, and death was not uncommon in the Middle Ages and was often portrayed in the aforementioned dance of death scenes especially common in Northern Europe. As Gioachino Berthier (1892–97) pointed out in his commentary well over a century ago, any reference to mirthful dance in this context proves highly ironic, “come nel *Todtentanz* dei Tedeschi” (“like that in the dance of death of the Germans”).<sup>13</sup>

Having shown how dance can be portrayed as a means of derision in Dante, we shall now focus on the positive allegorical roles that dance plays in Dante the Pilgrim’s salvific otherworldly experience in Purgatory and Paradise. We shall pay particular attention to what occurs in the Terrestrial Paradise after Matelda baptizes Dante in the river Lethe. For after the Pilgrim emerges from the waters, he is led “dentro a la danza de le quattro belle” (“into the dance of the four fair ones [nymphs]”; *Purg.* 31.104). The circle dance of the four nymphs—who represent the four moral or cardinal virtues—with Dante at the center, parallels the Pilgrim’s subsequent encounter with the three theological virtues. They are also described as “danzando al loro angelico caribo” (“dancing to their angelic roundelay”; *Purg.* 31.132). Nor will this

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direction (*Inf.* 16.25–27): “così rotando, ciascuno il visaggio / drizzava a me, sì che ’n contraro il collo / faceva ai piè continüo viaggio” (“thus each, wheeling, directed his face on me so that his neck kept turning in a direction contrary to his feet”). This highly contorted circling, performed naked and under a fiery hailstorm, also exemplifies dancing *in malo*, as it gives no pleasure either to the performer or the viewer. Such a contorted dance reinforces the imagery of unnaturalness that commences a canto earlier with *Inf.* 15’s opening *rima sdrucchiola*. There the poet rhymes *margini* and *argini* and intermingles those rhyme words, with their tonic accents on the antepenultimate syllables, with *rime aspre* (*aduggia* and *Bruggia*). See *Inf.* 15.1–4.

<sup>13</sup> The classic study of the dance of death in Italy was written well over a century ago. See Pietro Vigo, *Le danze macabre in Italia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni Editore, 1978), which is a reprinting of the edition published in Bergamo in 1901.

be the final time Dante finds himself, somewhat like a fixed Maypole, encircled by dancers.

Specifically, in the fourth heaven of the Sun, the Pilgrim and Beatrice find themselves surrounded not by one but by *two* concentric circles consisting of twenty-four doctors of theology, described as "la doppia danza / che circolava il punto dov' io era" ("the double dance that circled the point where I was" *Par.* 13. 20–21), two verses pregnant with meaning but that Singleton strangely did not deem worthy of commentary. These events in Purgatory and Paradise bring us to the question we shall attempt to answer: What is the significance of the symbolism in the *Commedia* not only of circular dance movement but also of the position of the Pilgrim as the center point in a circle in three distinct episodes (*Purg.* 31.104 [with the four nymphs] and 31.132 [with the three nymphs] and in *Par.* 13.20–21 [with the twenty-four *sapienti* or wise men])?

As is well known, Dante the Poet associates each of the three realms that the Pilgrim visits with an archetypal image. He writes in *Par.* 17.136–38: "Però ti son mostrate in queste *rote*, / nel *monte* e ne la *valle* dolorosa / pur l'anime che son di fama note" ("Therefore only the souls known of fame have been shown to you within these *wheels*, upon the *mountain*, and in the woeful *valley*"; my emphasis). The dark and devouring valley symbolizes the terror of Hell; the stately and sunlit mountain stands for the hope that is found in Purgatory; and the perfect wheel, circle, or sphere represents the harmonious or perfected state of the blessed in Paradise. The circle, which has neither beginning nor end, can symbolize eternity or perfection.<sup>14</sup> Anciently, such as in Egyptian hieroglyphs, the circle with a point in the center represented Ra or the sun. To Greek philosophers and Pythagoreans in particular, a circle with a central point, known as a *circumpunct*, represented God. In late medieval and Renaissance annunciation paintings, the point surrounded by a circle stood for the moment in eternity when the Incarnation took place, when God was made flesh. The point equidistant from all points on the circle symbolized God's intervention in time. Given the venerable tradition relative to the *circumpunct*, it is not surprising that, when the Pilgrim arrives in the Empyrean, God is first seen as the ". . . punto che mi vinse, / parendo inchiuso

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<sup>14</sup> Since the publication of Dan Brown's bestselling novel *The Lost Symbol* in 2009, many popular articles have appeared on the web regarding the meaning of the circle with a dot (i.e., the *circumpunct*). As an example of a more scholarly approach, see J. C. Cooper, "Circle," in *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 36–37.

da quell ch' elli 'nclude" ("the Point which overcame me, seeming enclosed by that which it encloses"; *Par.* 30.11–12).

To reflect on the question regarding the symbolic or allegorical significance of the round dances or *carole*, let us return to when Dante first catches a glimpse of Matelda in the Earthly Paradise. The evocative description of the *donna soletta* focuses initially on the movement of her feet—referred to as “le piante”—as if she were a dancer. Her motion toward the Pilgrim is compared in a beautiful double simile to the slow steps of a dancing lady who is compared to a modest virgin:

Come si volge, con le piante strette  
a terra e intra sé, donna che balli,  
e piede innanzi piede a pena mette,  
volsesi in su i vermigli e in su i gialli  
fioretti verso me, non altrimenti  
che vergine che li occhi onesti avvalli. (*Purg.* 28.52–57)<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, when Dante emerges from Lethe, he finds himself, as noted above, drawn by the dancing Matelda into the center of a circular dance performed by the four ladies representing the four moral, active, or cardinal virtues (*Purg.* 31.103–05): “Indi mi tolse, e bagnato m’offerse / dentro a la danza de le quattro belle; / e ciascuna del braccio mi coperse.” (“Then she [Matelda] drew me forth and led me bathed into the dance of the four fair ones [the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Temperance, Justice, and Fortitude], and each of them covered me with her arm.”) Presumably the covering by the arms symbolizes prudence overcoming foolishness or folly, temperance triumphing over lust, justice winning out over injustice, and fortitude besting fear or timidity. To my knowledge, L’Ottimo Commento (1333) was the first explicitly to equate the four ladies with these “virtù cardinali,” but it is an equation that has remained through seven centuries of commentary and one that I readily accept. See, for example, Johannis de Serravalle (1416–17), who states unequivocally that the “quatuor pulchrarum” (“four beauties”) are the “virtutum cardinalium” (“cardinal virtues”); Bernardino Daniello (1547–68), who refers to them as “four sisters,” to be understood as “the moral virtues” (“quattro sorelle, intese per le virtù morali”); down to Nicola Fosca (2003–2015), who refers to the dancing women as the “virtù cardinali” and

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<sup>15</sup> “As in a dance a lady turns with feet close to the ground and to each other, and hardly sets foot before foot, she [Matelda] turned upon the red and yellow flowerlets toward me, like a virgin that lowers her modest eyes.”

identifies this narrative episode as of extreme importance ("un segmento narrativo di estrema importanza").

Why is this episode of such singular importance? Singleton explains this post-baptismal dance scene allegorically in this manner: "The four maidens have Dante at the center of their dance now, and each reaches her arm over him, all presumably clasping hands over his head as they dance around him, forming as it were a sort of crown over him, so that he can be seen to receive the four infused cardinal virtues as a crown." This moment is significant in part because the four fair ones reveal in the following verse that "nel ciel siamo stelle" ("in heaven we are stars"; *Purg.* 31.106). This revelation provides the definitive interpretation of the four stars in the opening scene of *Purgatorio's* first canto. The Pilgrim's entire journey through Purgatory has been under the guidance of the cardinal virtues, the "quattro stelle" ("four stars"; *Purg.* 1.23) that are also described as the "quattro luci sante" ("four holy lights"; *Purg.* 1.37) that framed the face of the sentinel Cato with light in the canticle's opening scene. The arduous trek up Purgatory's mountain paralleled the Pilgrim's acquisition of the moral virtues needed to return to Eden and ascend through the heavenly spheres to reach the Empyrean.

The Pilgrim at the center of the four dancing cardinal virtues is more than a presentation of dance *in bono*, in contrast to the barraters' dance *in malo* in Hell. It is key to understanding what Dante is meant to acquire through his ascent of the mountain in preparation for his voyage beyond time in Paradise. Virgil crowned and mitered Dante at the end of *Purg.* 27, meaning among other things that Dante had been brought to justice. Singleton convincingly argues that "The crown which Virgil offered was that of the acquired cardinal virtues" while that offered by the four fair ladies after his baptism are "the four infused cardinal virtues." The distinction between "acquired" and "infused" virtue is an intriguing one. It was Edward Moore who first pointed out that the "purple" or "deep red" clothing of Dante's cardinal virtues means that they are "infused" with or partake of charity, whose color is also red: "the *infused* cardinal virtues, as distinguished from the *acquired* cardinal virtues, bear the same names and were known and accessible to the pagans." However, "Infused cardinal virtues, according to Thomas Aquinas . . . cannot be without charity."<sup>16</sup> In other words, love always accompanies the infused cardinal virtues. It truly is ". . . amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle" ("Love which moves the sun and the other stars"; *Par.* 33.145), the *stelle* which include

<sup>16</sup> See Singleton, *The Divine Comedy, Purgatorio: Commentary*, 723.

the four stars otherwise known as the four cardinal virtues as well as the three stars that represent, as we shall see, the theological virtues.

Like the seven dancing nymphs, love is obviously being re-contextualized in the Terrestrial Paradise and, therefore, being re-defined, not as *eros* but as God's love, the love we know as *caritas* or charity. What is noteworthy is that Dante continues the dance motif when he compares the three theological virtues to dancers (*Purg.* 31.131–32): “. . . l'altre tre si fero avanti, / danzando al loro angelico caribo.” (“. . . the other three [Theological Virtues], showing themselves by their bearing to be of a higher order, came forward, dancing to their angelic roundelay.”) Significantly, the musical sound that accompanies their dancing bears the epithet *angelico*. However nymph-like the fair ones appear, the context determines how we read them.

The significance of the number three for Dante is well known. From his three-line *terzine* to the three *cantiche* that make up the *Commedia*, it is the number of the Trinity; three symbolizes the triune Godhead.<sup>17</sup> The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three, but they are also one. For this reason Dante employs a singular verb when the ostensibly plural subject is the Godhead, as in the sculpted writing on the gates of Hell (*Inf.* 3.5–6). He explains his unique approach to grammar when he testifies to St. Peter that either *are* or *is* can be used as a verb when the subject is “three Eternal Persons” who are “one essence” (see *Par.* 24.139–41). Three is also known as a *noumenal* number, pertaining to things heavenly or ethereal, while four is the *phenomenal* number, relating to things earthly or terrestrial. Their combination produces the magical seven, the conjunction of heaven and earth. Seven represents the days of the week of creation, when God came down, made the earth, and then rested from his labors; it also stands for the joining together of the cardinal and theological virtues.

But it is the presentation of the seven virtues as nymph-like dancers in the Terrestrial Paradise that interests us. That joining together presages or foreshadows the presentation of saved souls as dancers in the Heavenly Paradise, where dancing together is equated with the joint means of expressing joy and bliss and where circling—at least in the sphere of the Sun—is even mentioned as occurring three times. It has been suggested by Roglieri that “the triple repetition of the dance [by the theologians] reflects the fact

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<sup>17</sup> Dante's clearest explication of how he views numbers and numerology is found in chapter 19 of his *Vita nova*, where he discourses on the number nine and its relation to the three-in-one or triune Godhead.



that ternary rather than binary rhythm was central to thirteenth-century polyphony."<sup>18</sup> All of these factors suggest that the poet is using dance as more than a tool of the humanization of personifications or incorporeal beings. It may well point to his understanding of contemporary polyphony as well.

In *Par.* 7, the Pilgrim appears first only as an observer of the ecstatic dance. This occurs when the Emperor Justinian at the conclusion of his monologue begins to sing, and he and the other ambitious statesmen move at lightning speed in their revolving, swirling dance:

Così, volgendosi a la nota sua,  
fu viso a me cantare essa sustanza,  
sopra la qual doppio lume s'addua;  
ed essa e l'altre mossero a sua danza,  
e quasi velocissime faville  
mi si velar di sùbita distanza. (*Par.* 7.4–9)<sup>19</sup>

It will be three cantos later, in the sphere of the Sun, when Dante again finds himself, as in the Terrestrial Paradise, at the center of the act of dancing. Along with Beatrice he becomes the center of the circle, the *circumpunct*. This takes place when the *sapienti*, or wise ones, circle around Beatrice and Dante three times and then stop, motionless, waiting in expectation of what will happen next:

Poi, sì cantando, quelli ardenti soli  
si fuor girati intorno a noi tre volte,  
come stelle vicine a' fermi poli,  
donne mi parver, non da ballo sciolte,  
ma che s'arrestin tacite, ascoltando  
fin che le nove note hanno ricolte. (*Par.* 10.76–81)<sup>20</sup>

Alessandro Vellutello (1544) explains what the singing and the starting and stopping of the dance refer to in the case of a circle dance:

. . . la forma del canto che s'usa nel danzar in giro si è, che un solo dà principio a le parole de la canzone, et accordale cantando col mover de la danza, e gli altri poi con lui insieme seguono nel medesimo ordine

<sup>18</sup> Roglieri, "Music," 633.

<sup>19</sup> "—so, revolving to his melody I saw that substance [Justinian] sing, on whom a double light is twinned; and he and the others [ambitious statesmen] moved in their dance, and like swiftest sparks veiled themselves from me by sudden distance."

<sup>20</sup> "When, so singing, those blazing suns [the *sapienti* or wise ones] had circled three times round about us, like stars neighboring the fixed poles, they seemed as ladies not released from the dance, but who stop silent, listening till they have caught the new notes."

in cantar quella, la qual finita, tutti si fermano, e tacendo stanno ad ascoltare, fin a che apprendono et intendono le nuove parole d'un'altra canz[one] che secondamente hanno da seguitar dopo la prima. Così adunque si fermaron questi beati spiriti dopo 'l girar de le tre volte danzando e cantando intorno a loro.<sup>21</sup>

Vincenzo Borghini, writing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, explains in more detail the probable combination of singing and dancing to which Dante is referring (Singleton's translation):

[Dante] represents the customary manner of dancing to a *ballata*, in which the lady who leads the song recites the first stanza [the *ripresa* or *ritornello*], standing still; when she has done this, the entire group of dancers moves in a round dance, repeating the stanza, and when finished, stops; then the lady of the song [i.e., who first began the song], again standing still, sings the next stanza, which ends rhyming with the first whereupon the group again does a round dance, singing again the stanza called *ritornello*.<sup>22</sup>

The phrase "non da ballo sciolte" ("not released from the dance"; *Par.* 10.79) captures the moment when the group, yet in dance formation, pauses to wait for the end of the singer's stanza in order to recommence their circular dancing. This fascinating comparison of male doctors of theology to dancing women is one of the most arresting of the poem. Not only is Dante playing with inverted gender roles; he is also humanizing the lights that these souls have become.<sup>23</sup> But there appears to be much more, as is inevitably the case when we are scrutinizing Dante's text for allegorical meaning.

For one thing, three cantos later Dante adds a second concentric circle of wise men who surround Beatrice and the Pilgrim so that the reader encounters a "doppia danza" ("double dance"), as we see in *Par.* 13.19–21: "e avrà quasi l'ombra de la vera / costellazione e de la doppia danza / che circolava il punto dov' io era."

<sup>21</sup> "... the pattern of singing used in a circle dance is that one person alone begins singing the words of the song and then grants that the singing be accompanied by the movement of dancing; and the others follow in singing in the same order that stanza, which, when finished, they stop and listen until they hear and understand the new words of another song that they must follow after the first. So these blessed spirit stop after three times dancing and singing around them [Dante and Beatrice]."

<sup>22</sup> See Vincenzo Borghini, *Bullettino della Società Dantesca Italiana*, 4 (1897): 180, for the original Italian.

<sup>23</sup> Singleton, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso: Commentary*, 183, first noted that the simile comparing the shining lights (i.e., the wise theologians) to lovely dancing ladies provided a scene "familiar to any contemporary reader of the poem" and thus served "to humanize the imagery of the *Paradiso* in a notable manner: for clearly souls that are only bright lights do not exactly resemble dancing ladies."

("and he [the reader] will have as it were a shadow of the true constellation, and of the double dance [two concentric circles of wise men], which was circling round the point where I was.") In this description Dante mentions clearly that he is at "il punto" (that is, the center of the circular dance). This positioning of the Pilgrim as, or at, "il punto" adumbrates the presentation of the Divine as the *punto* on which everything hangs (see *Par.* 28.16, 25, 41, 95, 101, where God is repeatedly referenced as an intense point of light). Can it be that Dante, who has been a *figura* of Aeneas, founder of Rome, and a *figura* of Paul, the Lord's Chosen Vessel, is also a *figura*—even a prefiguration—of "il punto"? Certainly the timing of his entrance into Limbo (Good Friday) and his arrival on the island of Purgatory (Easter Morning), after spending parts of three days entombed beneath the earth, suggest that the Pilgrim is imitating or following Christ's example and, therefore, may be considered a *figura Christi* or one who engages in an *imitatio Christi*. Similarly Freccero, in the previously cited article, interprets the first group of twelve theologians as paralleling the twelve signs of the Zodiac, which in the carved pavement of Florence's baptistery have the Sun at their center. As the Zodiac signs are to the Sun, so the apostles are to Christ and, we would add, the dozen circling theologians are to Dante the Pilgrim.<sup>24</sup>

The final two passages presenting dance and dancers in the *Commedia* go a long way toward addressing the issue of how Dante the Author is guiding his readers to interpret not only dance but also what Dante the Pilgrim is becoming.

In *Par.* 24, in the eighth heaven, Dante receives the opportunity, not unlike Christ, to associate with apostles and saints and to engage in a dialogue with St. Peter himself. Interestingly enough, these apostles and saints present themselves as circling dancers who, like the springs of a clock, move either faster or slower, according to their position:

E come cerchi in tempra d'oriuoli  
 sì giran sì, che 'l primo a chi pon mente

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<sup>24</sup> See Freccero, "The Dance of the Stars," 227-231. He states that his "comparison of the twelve disciples to the twelve signs of the Zodiac is not simply an inference from an isolated text." He cites Jean Daniélou, who "traced it from Judaeo-Hellenic antiquity . . . to fourth-century Christianity" (230-231). Freccero goes on to argue that Beatrice at the *circumpunct* represents either the moon or the bride of Christ (i.e., the Church), while the Pilgrim stands in for the sun or the bridegroom (i.e., Christ). Yet he seems hesitant to identify Dante explicitly as a *figura Christi*, as I have done, by stating, "It would be foolhardy to generalize this mediation [of Beatrice] into an identification" (236). Nevertheless he does later identify Beatrice, as presented in *Par.* 10, as "a *figura Ecclesiae*" (237).

quieto pare, e l'ultimo che voli;  
 così quelle carole, differente-  
 mente danzando, de la sua ricchezza  
 mi facieno stimar, veloci e lente. (*Par.* 24.13–18)<sup>25</sup>

But the comparison becomes even more significant when, in the following *canto*, St. Peter and St. James are greeted by and reunited with St. John the Evangelist. As in the Terrestrial Paradise when Dante was joined by the three dancing theological virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity), so in Paradise the Pilgrim encounters the three dancing apostles who interrogate him as to his understanding of what else but faith, hope, and charity. Not insignificantly, these are the same three apostles who accompanied Christ to the Mount of Transfiguration and were with him when he was transfigured. Dante, having descended below all things, is preparing to rise above all things and enter shortly into the Celestial Rose and partake of the inebriating presence and vision of the triune Godhead.

Therefore, the culminating passage devoted to dance in the *Commedia* is also located appropriately in what we would call a "stellar context"—that is, in the eighth heaven, which is the sphere of the Fixed Stars. The dance reference emerges in a remarkable simile describing the above-mentioned reunion of the three chief apostles:

E come surge e va ed entra in ballo  
 vergine lieta, sol per fare onore  
 a la novizia, non per alcun fallo,  
 così vid'io lo schiarato splendore  
 venire a' due che si volgieno a nota  
 qual conveniesi al loro ardente amore. (*Par.* 25.103–08)<sup>26</sup>

The image of the maiden and the bride joining in a festive dance is at first glance not unusual, as female couples often danced together in the Middle Ages. But the simile becomes truly striking when the reader realizes that the poet is comparing the bride and her bridesmaid, in a gender reversal, to one male saint (as the bridesmaid) greeting two other male saints (as an amalgamated single bride).

<sup>25</sup> "And as wheels within the fittings of clocks revolve, so that to one who gives heed the first seems quiet and the last to fly, so did those carols [circling dancers of Apostles and Saints], dancing severally fast and slow, make me judge of their riches."

<sup>26</sup> "And as a glad maiden rises and goes and enters into the dance, only to do honor to the bride, not for any failing, so did I see the brightened splendor [St. John the Evangelist] approach the two [St. Peter and St. James] who were wheeling to such a song as befitted their burning love."

In Heaven love is pure; it appears to transcend gender. The description of the heady wheeling about and the reference to flaming love meld or fuse to make a final commentary on the ultimate role of dance in the *Commedia*. In a paradisiacal context, dancing embodies and symbolizes not just the harmony and unity of the spheres; it also prefigures the pure joy and boundless ecstasy to be found only in Heaven, only in contemplating the true *punto*. Having followed the path taken by Christ, having been at the *punto* of more than one circle dance, and having been redeemed through Christ's atoning sacrifice, Dante is being prepared, as a tested and true Christian, to gaze into the "luce eterna" ("Light Eternal"; *Par.* 33.124). There the Pilgrim, as one who engages in an *imitatio Christi*, will see "la nostra effige" ("our image"; *Par.* 33, 131), which is God Incarnate, God made flesh, Christ himself, in three intertwining circles. In Platonic terms, those non-physical (but substantial) circles are the true Form, the most accurate reality, and all the circle dances in which Dante has participated are but an "ombra de la vera / costellazione e de la doppia danza / che circolava il punto dov' io era" ("shadow of the true constellation, and of the double dance, which was circling round the point where I was"; *Par.* 13.19–21).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> This essay is a revised version of the paper I originally delivered on November 6, 2015, at the "Dante and Music" conference, which was organized in commemoration of the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dante's birth and sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. I express my gratitude to the organizers of the conference as well as to the editors of the proceedings for their excellent work in arranging an appropriate tribute to celebrate the birth of Italy's greatest poet.