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**“MOLTI E MOLTE:” WOMEN READERS AND LADY
PHILOSOPHY IN DANTE’S ‘CONVIVIO’**

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In the first Book of the *Convivio*, Dante names women among the readers of his text, which include “non solamente maschi ma femmine.” However, the poet’s exhortations to women in the canzone *Amor che ne la mente* suggest that female readers may have a unique relationship to knowledge. Juxtaposing Dante’s interpretation with the language of the poem, this article analyzes how the *Convivio* articulates the pursuit of philosophical knowledge as one which is at once gendered and universal. Considering Dante’s woman reader raises questions such as: To what extent are women invited to participate in knowledge-seeking? How do women undertake an amorous pursuit of philosophical knowledge? The author concludes that Dante’s work ultimately proposes that women are capable of engaging in philosophical inquiry, and that this unique vision of women in the *Convivio* represents a significant step from the female figures of the *Vita Nuova* to those of the *Commedia*, revealing that Dante’s portrayals of women are intimately linked to the evolution of his thought.

Keywords: Dante, Philosophy, Women, Convivio, Vernacular

Introduction

In the *Convivio*’s opening pages, Dante specifies that he writes for “principi, baroni, cavalieri, e molt’altra nobile gente, *non solamente maschi ma femmine*, che sono *molti e molte* in questa lingua, volgari, non litterati” (Conv. 1.9.5, emphasis added).¹ The unusual presence of women among the intended audience for a didactic, philosophical treatise like the *Convivio* is accentuated by the extraneous “molte” since, grammatically, “molti” would suffice.² Despite these deliberate references to women (“femmine”

¹ All *Convivio* quotations are from Dante Alighieri, *Opere*, ed. Gianfranco Fioravanti et al., vol. 2, 3 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 2014).

² Elena Lombardi, *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11-12.

For another perspective on this passage, see Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language & Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965). He reads it as evidence of an educated readership in

"molte"), the *Convivio* remains on the margins of critical discussions about gender in Dante. Only recently has Elena Lombardi acknowledged and examined this inclusion of a female audience to analyze the broader "cultural reality" of the woman reader on the cusp of the Trecento.³ Most research concerning Dante's treatment of women remains centered on Beatrice or other individual female figures like Francesca da Rimini, the *pietra* of the *rime petrose*, or even the *donna gentile* or Lady Philosophy.⁴ Furthermore, interpretations of the *Convivio* tend to concentrate on its philosophical debates or its place within Dante's intellectual development without considering its potential female readership.⁵

This article takes "molte," a collective of women readers, as the starting point for its analysis of the *Convivio*. Building on Lombardi's call to see women "as agents of poetry," I begin by asking what the *Convivio* says *to* and *about* women—not as individuals but as a group based on sex.⁶ I further reflect on the implications of this

the vernacular. Kristina Olson reads the same passage in light of Boccaccio's assessments of Dante's use of the vernacular in "The Language of Women as Written by Men: Boccaccio, Dante and Gendered Histories of the Vernacular," *Heliotropia*, no. 8-9 (2011-2012).

³ Lombardi, *Imagining*, 13.

⁴ On Dante's women, historical and literary alike, see Marco Santagata, *Le donne di Dante* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021). For a discussion of gender in Dante's *rime* as well as the *Commedia*, see Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 281-378. On Beatrice and figures from the *Commedia* see: Joan M. Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature, from the Twelfth Century to Dante* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), Marianne Shapiro, *Woman, Earthly and Divine, in the Comedy of Dante* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975), Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), Rachel Jacoff, "Transgression and Transcendence: Figures of Female Desire in Dante's *Commedia*," *Romanic Review; New York* 79, no. 1 (1988): 129-42. Charles H. Grandgent offers one of the earliest studies of women across Dante's works in *The Ladies of Dante's Lyrics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917). On the stony woman of Dante's *petrose*, see, for instance, Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, *Time and the Crystal: Studies in Dante's Rime Petrose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Chiara Ferrari, "Gender Reversals: Inversions and Conversions in Dante's Rime Petrose," *Italica* 90, no. 2 (2013): 153.

⁵On the *Convivio* and the evolution of Dante's *auctoritas*, see Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For treatment of philosophical concepts in the *Convivio* see Maria Luisa Arduzzone in *Reading as the Angels Read: Speculation and Politics in Dante's Banquet* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), Paolo Falzone, *Desiderio della scienza e desiderio di Dio nel Convivio di Dante* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010), Francesco Galina, *Sotto bella menzogna: Influenze eterodosse e catare nel Convivio e nella Commedia di Dante Alighieri* (Arezzo: Edizioni Helicon, 2017), Bruno Nardi, *Dal Convivio alla Commedia (Sei saggi danteschi)*, Studi Storici 35-9 (Roma: Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 1960), Mario Trovato, "Against Aristotle: Cosmological Vision in Dante's Convivio," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 20, no. 1 (2003): 31-46.

⁶ Lombardi, *Imagining*, 42.

readership for Dante's philosophy, reinforcing and expanding arguments that have identified the fluid and lyric nature of Dante's knowledge production.⁷ First, a close reading of Book 1 demonstrates that Dante's representation of a female audience is not merely convention; it is part and parcel of a broader cultural and literary shift, and integral to pushing the vernacular closer to a universal language. Women emerge from Book 1 as moral and intellectual agents, capable of interpreting Dante's text, and of participating in a quest for knowledge. Next, I turn to *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*, read from the perspective of the "molte," in order to uncover a distinctly gendered experience embedded in the text. Particular instructions to women in the poem raise questions about whether or not female readers can participate in Dante's amorous relationship with Lady Philosophy.⁸ A tension arises between Dante's addresses to women readers and the male poet's expression of his love.

How, then, can Dante's "molte" approach the philosophical, didactic project of the *Convivio*, both literally and allegorically? And what is at stake for Dante's philosophy? To answer these questions, I analyze how Dante portrays women as readers and interpreters in Book 1, given his explicit mention of women and his choice to write in the vernacular. Next, I examine the addresses to women in the canzone *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona* and its corresponding commentary in Book 3, showing how Dante features women's particularity. Finally, I explore how the allegorical commentary recasts the actions assigned to women as a universal experience. In sum, placing Dante's female public at the center of an analysis of the *Convivio* brings to light the gendered dynamics of the text and illustrates that Dante's vision of philosophy is not aligned with men reading Scholastic texts in Latin, but rather women reading and interpreting vernacular poetry.

⁷ Manuele Gragnolati and Elena Lombardi, "Volgarizzazione lirica e piacere linguistico in Dante" in *Toscana bilingue (1260 ca.–1430 ca.): Per una storia sociale del tradurre medievale* ed. Sara Bischetti, Michele Lodone, Cristiano Lorenzi and Antonio Montefusco (Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 281-96. Andrea Aldo Robiglio, "Dante 'Filosofo Romanzo'," *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica*, CXIII (2021): 79-95.

⁸ This assumes that Dante writes within a heterosexual matrix of desire. Evidence for the amorous nature of the *Convivio* also comes from some sixteenth-century print editions which were titled *L'amoroso Convivio* (for example, the 1531 version printed in Venice by M. Sessa). While the scope of this essay is limited to the *Convivio*, it is also worth noting that Dante calls *Amor che ne la mente* an "amoroso canto" in *Purgatorio* 2.106-108.

Writing (for) Women in the Vernacular

In Book 1, Dante outlines the *Convivio*'s aims and its intended audience. He laments that many men with Latin education "hanno fatto di donna meretrice," that is, have exploited knowledge for money, status, or personal gain. The *Convivio*, conversely, is not intended for those who already know Latin but for anyone with "la bontà dell'animo," who wishes to pursue wisdom for its own sake, including "principi, baroni, cavalieri, e molt'altra nobile gente, non solamente maschi ma femmine, che sono molti e molte in questa lingua, volgari, non litterati." As scholars have shown, this description creates a public defined not by social class but by an aspiration to learn.⁹ That female readers are a key part of this expansion of the vernacular deserves further attention.

Given the "female accented lay literacy" at the turn of the fourteenth century, Dante's choice to compose the *Convivio* in Italian is already a gendered one.¹⁰ Since "women are often the pretext not only for *volgarizzamenti* but for vernacular literature in general," writing in Italian implies, at a minimum, the possibility of a female readership.¹¹ But women readers were also more than pretexts. They were interlocutors around which authors constructed their works. An obvious example is Guido Cavalcanti's scientific and philosophical poem, *Donna me prega*, which offers a response to a woman, or Dante's own *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*, which addresses ladies who have knowledge of love.¹² Moreover, in *Vita Nuova* 25, Dante identifies the *volgare* as a language which originally allowed men to communicate more clearly with women: "E lo primo che cominciò a dire sì come poeta volgare, si mosse però che volle fare intendere le sue parole a donna, a la quale era malagevole d'intendere li versi latini." While this claim may be understood as historically inaccurate or merely a topos, Joan Ferrante has shown that it still reflects women's active participation in the development of vernacular literatures.¹³

⁹ Paolo Falzone, "Il *Convivio* di Dante" in *La Filosofia in Italia al tempo di Dante*, ed. Carla Casagrande and Gianfranco Fioravanti, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016). Richard Lansing, "Dante's Intended Audience in the *Convivio*," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 110 (1992): 17-24.

¹⁰ Lombardi, 13.

¹¹ Alison Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy: Illiterate Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27.

¹² Cornish, "A Lady Asks: The Gender of Vulgarization in Late Medieval Italy," *PMLA* 115, no. 2 (2000): 166-180. Lombardi, 45-49.

¹³ Joan Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1997), 107.

In delineating its intended audience, the *Convivio* evokes longstanding critical debates about the status of women in vernacular literature. On the one hand, Dante's works have been interpreted as limiting women's agency because they depart from the courtly love tradition and sterilize sexual desire.¹⁴ On the other, as Teodolinda Barolini has argued, Dante belongs to a tradition of early Italian literature which speaks to women and whose "hallmark is a stress on the utility of discourse."¹⁵ These two interpretations converge in the *Convivio*. In its sublimation (or sterilization) of love poetry into philosophy, the *Convivio* creates a new textual role for women. No longer are they simply the desired or desiring courtly ladies, they are now readers and interpreters. Not only can they enjoy the literal aspects love poems, they can also grasp their philosophical meanings.

This female audience which reads and interprets figures prominently in Dante's expansion of the vernacular. In his *Vita Nuova*, after explaining that the first man to write in vernacular did so to communicate with a woman, Dante concludes, "onde, se alcuna figura o colore rettorico è conceduto a li poete, conceduto è a li rimatori" (*VN* 25). Whatever is permitted to poets in Latin, Dante asserts, is also permitted to poets in the vernacular. Through this parallel, Dante justifies his own linguistic techniques and increases the prestige of Tuscan by placing its origins not in the mercantile or legal worlds, but in the lyric past with the classical poets.¹⁶ This claim also lays the groundwork for Dante to treat topics other than love in his poetry (although the *Vita Nuova* remains primarily concerned with love and praise)—topics which demand the kind of commentary typically associated with classical texts. In the

¹⁴ Joan Kelly-Godal, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), 189-92.

¹⁵ Barolini, 376. Ilaria Tufano notes a similar shift away from the "donna angelicata" of the duecento in *Imago Mulieris: Figure femminili del trecento letterario italiano* (Manziana: Vecchiarelli, 2009). Suzanne C. Hagedorn argues that authors such as Dante and Boccaccio were "important precursors [to modern feminist thought] who articulated a coherent vision of women in history" in *Abandoned Women: Rewriting the Classics in Dante, Boccaccio, & Chaucer* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 12. Laura Banella identifies a 'woman intellectual' in the later work of Boccaccio, "Fiammetta and Héloïse: Boccaccio's Female *Auctor* and Women Intellectuals," *Mediaevalia* 42 (2021): 227-67. In the French tradition, Helen Solterer points to representations of competent women readers: Helen Solterer, *The Master and Minerva* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Lombardi, "Il pensiero linguistico nella *Vita Nuova*," in *Vita nova. Fiore. Epistola XIII*, ed. Manuele Gragnolati, Luca Carlo Rossi, Paola Allegretti, Natascia Tonelli, Alberto Casadei (Firenze, SISMEL – Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2018), 116-17.

Convivio, Dante provides this critical apparatus, asserting the sophistication of his texts and welcoming women into the erudite audience that reads them.

A comparison between Dante's audience in the *Convivio* and Boccaccio's in the *Decameron* highlights both the presence of female readers and the problem of interpretation. As Sonia Gentili proposes, "Nulla di sostanzialmente diverso dice Boccaccio giustificando il *Decameron* con il medesimo sentimento da cui è guidato il Dante del *Convivio*, cioè dalla compassione degli infelici, qui oppressi dalla passione, là dall'ignoranza."¹⁷ Since the *Decameron* itself is surnamed "Galeotto," a reference to Francesca and Paolo's act of reading in *Inferno* V, this parallel underscores that the content of both books is, in a way, ultimately determined by their readers. This pairing also calls attention to the *Convivio*'s treatment of women as a group, rather than singular readers, contrasting with Dante's focus on individual women elsewhere – for instance, Beatrice in the *Commedia* or the stony woman of the *rime petrose*. A continuity, however, emerges between the *Vita Nuova*, which creates a community of women through poems like *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*, the "molte" of the *Convivio* who wish to learn, and Boccaccio's collective of lovesick women in the *Decameron*.¹⁸

Dante's interest in an audience that can interpret a variety of topics in the vernacular is further established by his metaphor of the woman and the whore, which he uses to represent the exploitation of Latin knowledge by educated men. Similar metaphors appear in two works Dante likely knew well: Boethius' Latin *De consolazione philosophiae* and a novella from the thirteenth-century *Novellino*, a collection of stories. Analyzing how Dante's metaphor repurposes the image from these two texts reveals the unique stress he places on the vernacular's nobility and his readers' interpretive skills in the *Convivio*.

Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae* and Dante's *Convivio* share several similarities, including form–prosimetrum–and content–philosophical guidance. Still, the relationship between poetry and prose in these texts differs, once again shedding light on

¹⁷ Sonia Gentili, "La filosofia dal latino al volgare" in *La Filosofia in Italia al tempo di Dante*, ed. Carla Casagrande and Gianfranco Fioravanti (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016), 197.

¹⁸ On the community of women in *Vita Nuova*, Lombardi, *Imagining*, 60–77. On the question of women readers from a historical point of view, see Joan Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1997) and D. H. (Dennis Howard) Green, *Women Readers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Dante's efforts to ennoble the vernacular. Dante's prose is supplementary to the poetry; in Boethius, conversely, the poetry requires no explanation. Like the erudite commentators who used Latin to comment on classical texts, Dante employs the vernacular in order to illuminate the significance of his poems and therefore raises the status of love poetry to that of philosophical texts. Boethius' poems, on the other hand, do not require exposition; their philosophical nature is already manifest.

Both texts aim to provide readers with a guide to knowledge and moral good. *De consolazione* recounts the teachings of Lady Philosophy, arguably a precursor to Dante's own *donna gentile*.¹⁹ Boethius' woman/whore imagery, however, shows where the authors' concerns diverge. At the beginning of *De consolazione* Lady Philosophy appears to Boethius and dismisses the Muses of poetry as "meretriculas," whores.²⁰ These "meretriculas" represent a misuse of poetry that allows Boethius to wallow in his sorrow, while Philosophy and her Muses will guide him out of despair through the right kind of literature. Boethius' metaphor pits a certain type of poetry against philosophy (poetry does appear, after all, in *De consolazione*). In other words, Boethius poses a question of genre: what type of text will lead him, and by extension his reader, on a journey to reach the truth?

Dante, alternatively, concerns himself with how learned men use (or abuse) the texts available to them. Thus, while Boethius suggests that readers need the right kind of text to live ethically, Dante does not believe that access is enough. In fact, he censures those who have such material but exploit it. In contrast to *De consolazione*, the *Convivio* is aware of readers and their power as interpreters. Dante desires to welcome new readers, not just the Latinate, to the pursuit of knowledge. He implies that men who know Latin are not *necessarily* good interpreters; they are no more equipped to seek the moral good than women (and men) who read in the vernacular. In rewriting the woman/whore metaphor, Dante poses questions about who can read these texts and how they might understand them, anticipating the concerns latent in the reading scene of Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno* 5.

Dante's transformation of the woman and whore imagery also intervenes in discourses about the dangers of increasing the

¹⁹ Angelo Gualtieri, "Lady Philosophy in Boethius and Dante," *Comparative Literature* 23 (1971): 141-50. Margherita De Bonfils Templer, "La 'donna gentile' del *Convivio* e il boeziano mito d'Orfeo," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* (1983): 123-44.

²⁰ Boethius, "The Consolation of Philosophy," in *Boethius*, trans. S.J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 1.1.29.

availability of knowledge. In the *Novellino*, a tale describes how a philosopher performed *volgarizzamento*, the practice of translating Latin texts into vernacular languages. One night, in a dream, the philosopher gazed upon the goddesses of knowledge; although they were dressed as beautiful ladies, they found themselves in a brothel.²¹ Realizing that his work decreased the divinity and nobility of philosophy, the protagonist abandoned his translations and refrained from vulgarizing any more Latin texts.

In contrast to the *Novellino*, Dante's metaphor never intimates that corruption of knowledge comes from rendering a text accessible via the vernacular or from the vernacular itself. Instead, the person who has knowledge makes it a "meretrice" because he abuses it for selfish motives. Crucially, in repurposing this metaphor, Dante does not degrade the Florentine dialect, or those who can read it, to the status of "meretrice." Rather, he insists that nobility, or lack thereof, derives from one's own interpretation of such knowledge. Again, Dante places the burden on readers to determine how to use the wisdom garnered from texts in an ethical way. And, as we have seen, he identifies these readers as all people willing to learn – not just men but women – who read in the vernacular rather than Latin. Dante widens his audience to acknowledge women not only as readers but also interpreters of his text; he gives them the chance to prove themselves as intellectual and moral agents from the *Convivio*'s very opening pages.

Pursuing Philosophy in 'Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona'

As established above, Dante invites women to the *Convivio*'s pursuit of philosophy in Book 1. This is reinforced in Book 3, when Dante again invokes women; speaking to them directly this time, he creates a gendered division in the text.²² Of course, any reader, regardless of gender, could empathize with *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*, with which Dante begins Book 3. Its expression of the poet's love for the so-called *donna gentile* has been described as "un fatto insieme personalissimo e paradigmatico," a unique sentiment that provides a paradigm for others.²³ However, it is worth underscoring that the poem and its literal commentary suggest that women have a different purpose than the male poet. They largely remain observers, never fully becoming lovers themselves. Yet in

²¹ Cornish, in her study of *voglarizzamenti*, cites the *Novellino* as a text that explicitly engages with the problem of making information accessible to the masses through the use of the vernacular. Cornish, *Vernacular*, 33.

²² Addresses to women can also be found in *Conv.* 4.19.8, 4.22.15, and 4.25.7.

²³ Gianfranco Fioravanti, "Introduzione" in Dante, *Opere*.

the allegorical commentary, this experience of viewing and imitating is recast as a necessary one shared by all souls. Dante thus integrates the female reading experience of *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona* into the universal quest for knowledge.

Analyzing the first two stanzas of *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona* illustrates its appeal to sentiments both personal and communal. The third stanza introduces Dante's distinct calls to women, which create a dissonance between the male poet/lover and the female reader. Finally, the commentaries, both literal and allegorical, grapple with, and offer explanations for, this divergence. Just as Dante recognizes the vernacular as a language for women and strives to render it a universal form of communication, so the female readers of Book 3 are caught between a specifically female experience and an allegorical commentary that universalizes their particularity.

A brief summary of *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona* will be illustrative before moving to a close reading. In the first stanza, Love speaks to the poet in his mind, describing a noble and virtuous woman. The poet explains that he wishes to repeat what Love has told him in order to praise this woman. Her qualities are lauded in the following stanzas, and the poet rebuffs any potentially skeptical readers, although he is so overwhelmed by the woman's virtue that he can hardly communicate it fully. The final stanza recalls an image of the same woman from another poem, which called her "fera e disdegnosa."²⁴ The poet rejects this description and ends by reiterating that this woman, the *donna gentile*, ought to be praised.

On the surface, *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona* is a love poem. According to Dante's own method in the *Convivio*, its meaning should be unveiled carefully: first, with a literal commentary, then, with an allegorical one. Yet at the end of the preceding Book, Dante preemptively reveals allegorical information. He discloses that the lady of his poems is actually philosophy: "dico e affermo che la donna di cu' io innamorai appresso lo primo amore fu la bellissima e onestissima figlia dello Imperadore dell'universo, alla quale Pittagora puose nome filosofia" (*Conv.* 2.15.12). This declaration fuses the *donna gentile* and Lady Philosophy together in a single figure, enmeshing the literal and allegorical meanings of the poem. While the link between the literal woman of *Amor che ne la mente* and Lady Philosophy has been the topic of some scholarly debate, as has the question of whether the poems were originally intended as love poems or as allegorical pieces, it is Dante

²⁴ *Voi che savete ragionar d'amore.*

himself who blurs the lines that he has drawn between the two.²⁵ In doing so, he carves out the space for a female readership to engage with the poem, not only as experts in matters of love, but also as individual intellectuals capable of digesting philosophical knowledge, thereby complicating a heterosexual matrix of desire and knowledge-seeking.

In the poem's first stanza, Dante explains his love for the *donna gentile* and his desire to praise her:

Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona
 de la mia donna disiosamente,
 move cose di lei meco sovente,
 che lo 'ntelletto sovr'esse disvia.
 Lo suo parlar sì dolcemente sona,
 che l'anima ch'ascolta e che lo sente
 dice: "Oh me lassa! ch'io non son possente
 di dir quel ch'odo de la donna mia!"
 E certo e' mi convien lasciare in pria,
 s'io vo' trattar di quel ch'odo di lei,
 ciò che lo mio intelletto non comprende;
 e di quel che s'intende
 gran parte, perché dirlo non savrei.
 Però se le mie rime avran difetto
 ch'entreran ne la loda di costei,
 di ciò si biasmi il debole intelletto
 e 'l parlar nostro, che non ha valore
 di ritrar tutto ciò che dice Amore.

While the only speaking subjects at the beginning of the poem are Love and the poet, the reader is a necessary participant, since the poem revolves around the poet's wish to repeat what Love has told him. The centrality of the audience as seen in Book 1 persists, as *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona* doesn't speak to the *donna gentile*, but tells others about her. This communal aspect of the poem has been noted by Maria Luisa Ardizzone, who argues that "the love for the *donna gentile* was lived as a form of

²⁵ On the *donna gentile* and Lady Philosophy see: Martin Eisner, *Dante's New Life of the Book: A Philology of World Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 171-91; Giuliana Carugati, "Retorica amorosa e verità in Dante: Il *De causis* e l'idea della donna nel *Convivio*," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 112 (1994): 161-75; De Robertis and Vasoli in *Opere Minori* (Milano: Ricciardi, 1988). Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1997); Peter Dronke, *Dante's Second Love: The Originality and the Contexts of the Convivio* (Exeter: The Society for Italian Studies, 1997). The two images could also be understood through Auerbach's concept of "figura," see Eric Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, vol. 9, 9 vols., Theory and History of Literature (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1984).

contemplation by the mind of the character who says ‘I’ but is shared by the human beings conceived as a community.”²⁶ The sentiment expressed by the poet is uniquely his, while, at the same time, he invites a wider community of readers to indulge in it.

This personal and communal aspect of the poem is particularly visible in the first stanza’s use of possessives. The poet describes his experience through words that emphasize the personal: “mi” “meco” “me” “io.” When the poet recognizes his inability to repeat what Love has said: “*ch’io non son possente di dir qual ch’odo de la donna mia*” he places the burden on himself (emphasis added). Dante underscores the poet’s centrality not only through the possessive “*donna mia*” but also “*lo mio intelletto*” and “*le mie rime.*” However, in the final three lines of the stanza, Dante blames any lack in the poetry not on the lady, but rather on “*il debole intelletto/ e parlar nostro che non ha valore.*” Dante’s shift from the singular possessives to the plural possessive “*nostro parlar*” in this final line again involves the reader in his project of praise. The reader now belongs to a “*noi*” with the poet. This shift from the first to third person suggests the fallibility of our collective speech, rather than the poet’s alone—the singular experience is thus a shared one.

The “*nostro*” at the end of the first stanza foreshadows the second, which continues to juxtapose personal and communal experiences. In this stanza, the poet describes how beings both from above and on the earth contemplate the *donna gentile*:

Non vede il sol, che tutto ’l mondo gira,
 cosa tanto gentil, quanto in quell’ora
 che luce ne la parte ove dimora
 la donna, di cui dire Amor mi face.
 Ogni Intelletto di là su la mira,
 e quella gente che qui s’innamora
 ne lor pensieri la truovano ancora
 quando Amor fa sentir de la sua pace.
 Suo esser tanto a Quei che lel dà piace,
 che ’nfonde sempre in lei la sua vertute
 oltre ’l dimando di nostra natura.
 La sua anima pura,
 che riceve da Lui questa salute,
 lo manifesta in quel ch’ella conduce:
 ché ’n sue bellezze son cose vedute
 che li occhi di color dov’ella luce
 ne mandan messi al cor pien di desiri,
 che prendon aire e diventan sospiri.

²⁶ Ardizzone, 182.

The poet speaks about the woman because Love has made him: "la donna di cui dire Amor mi face." Love is the acting subject—"Amor face"—who wields power over the narrating poet—"mi." In the following lines, however, the poet addresses "quella gente che qui s'innamora / ne' lor pensieri la truovano ancora / quand Amor fa sentir de la sua pace." This verse discloses that anyone who loves, not just the poet, also contemplates the *donna gentile*. The same syntactical structure appears with love as the subject—"Amor fa"—who now acts upon all enamored souls, once again creating a collective experience. As in stanza one, Dante employs the plural possessive to emphasize the virtue of the *donna gentile*, which extends beyond "nostra natura." In this formulation, women are not yet excluded from the "quella gente che qui s'innamora." Any person who loves participates in Dante's praise and contemplation. These stanzas have no gender discrepancies and the 'molti' and 'molte' of Book 1 are equally at play in the readership envisioned by the poem.

In the literal exposition of the first stanza, Dante says that love "non è altro che unimento spirituale dell'anima e della cosa amata" where the "cosa amata" is a return to God since the human soul naturally yearns to return to its maker (*Conv.* 3.2.3). Thus, the Love in Dante's mind, "amor che ne la mente," is the union of his soul with the lady. As if anticipating accusations of carnal or lascivious love, Dante insists on his love's purity as expressed in *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*. He explains that his love for the *donna gentile* is most righteous since it tends toward truth and virtue, and gives birth to friendship: "amore alla veritade e alla vertude; e da questo amore nasce la vera e perfetta amistà" (*Conv.* 3.2.3). At the same time, these repeated attempts at erasing eroticism remind the reader of the possibility that one might, in fact, interpret the poem as erotic. The literal exposition opens up the space for male and female readers alike to desire the *donna gentile* and, in its denial of eroticism, actually hints at its potentiality.

Similarly, in his literal exposition of the second stanza, Dante reaffirms this reasonable and virtuous love by articulating a desirous relationship between people in love and the lady, but again one that is guided by virtue: "E però che questa è veramente quella perfezione, dico che quella gente che qua giù maggiore diletto riceve quando più hanno di pace, allora rimane questa ne' loro pensieri, per questa, dico, tanto essere perfetta quanto sommamente essere puote l'umana essenza" (*Conv.* 3.6.8). According to Dante, beings desire their own perfection and hence thinking of the *donna*

gentile, who is the most perfect human essence, brings them peace. Dante makes no gender distinction in the poem or in the commentary up to this point. If women are capable of loving, then they are also capable of seeking perfection. Like the poet, they could virtuously desire the *donna gentile*.

The openness suggested by these lines of the poem and the subsequent commentary, however, fades, as the following stanzas outline a more precise course for women that does not involve loving or desiring. Rather the third stanza presents a new relationship between women and the *donna gentile*. The female reader of the ‘molte’ of Book 1 finds herself caught between the specificity of her gendered experience and one that should be communal – the virtuous love for the *donna gentile*:

In lei discende la virtù divina
 sì come face in angelo che 'l vede;
 e qual donna gentil questo non crede,
 vada con lei e miri li atti sui.
 Quivi dov'ella parla si dichina
 un spirito da ciel, che reca fede
 come l'alto valor ch'ella possiede
 è oltre quel che si conviene a nui.
 Li atti soavi ch'ella mostra altrui
 vanno chiamando Amor ciascuno a prova
 in quella voce che lo fa sentire.
 Di costei si può dire:
 gentile è in donna ciò che in lei si trova,
 e bello è tanto quanto lei simiglia.
 E puossi dir che 'l suo aspetto giova
 a consentir ciò che par meraviglia;
 onde la nostra fede è aiutata:
 però fu tal da eterno ordinata.

The first mention of women comes when the poet speaks to an unbelieving gentlewoman, exhorting her to go with the *donna gentile* and observe her: “e qual donna gentil questo non crede / vada con lei e miri li atti suoi.” Dante implies that the unbelieving woman, by accompanying the *donna gentile*, learns from and imitates her, so that the two women come to resemble each other. In this moment, the female reader no longer follows the poet’s path. Rather, the poem urges her to make herself into a *donna gentile*, a praised and desired woman.

Similarly, in the following verses, introduced by the impersonal “si può dire,” the poet emphasizes the *donna gentile*’s similarity to other women “gentile è in donna ciò che in lei si trova / bello è tanto quanto lei simiglia.” While Dante stresses the

exceptionality of the *donna gentile*, these verses also demonstrate how other women might become a mirror image of her—women can *simigliare* the image that the *donna gentile* provides. Consequently, the third stanza excludes women from the literal action of the poem—the desire for the *donna gentile*, the act of being in love—which is representative of the allegorical pursuit of philosophy.

The verb *mirare* across the third and fourth stanzas gives insight into the diverging paths of male and female readers. The poet cannot do what he instructs women to do: *mirare*. While Dante invites the unbelieving woman to watch the *donna gentile's* acts with the imperative "miri," the poet himself cannot look at her in the following verse: "e perch'io non le posso mirar fiso." The repetition of the same verb draws a connection between the behavior of the unbelieving woman and the narrating poet and emphasizes their different interactions with the *donna gentile*. The verb *mirare* also connects back to the second stanza, where "ogni intelletto di là su la mira"; that is, every intellect from above looks on the woman. Ardizzone interprets "intelletto" as something that both Angels and humans share. This parallel aligns women who turn their attention to the *donna gentile* with the "intelletti" above, and, if we accept Ardizzone's analysis, with something closer to God, rather than with the poet. Once again, the text emphasizes the distinct interaction women have with the *donna gentile*, such that they may even supersede the earthly desire of the poet.²⁷

An analogous instruction to women appears in the fourth stanza:

Cose appariscon ne lo suo aspetto,
 che mostran de' piacer di Paradiso,
 dico ne li occhi e nel suo dolce riso,
 che le vi reca Amor com'a suo loco.
 Elle soverchian lo nostro intelletto
 come raggio di sole un frale viso:
 e perch'io non le posso mirar fiso,
 mi convien contentar di dirne poco.
 Sua bieltà piove fiammelle di foco,
 animate d'un spirito gentile
 ch'è creatore d'ogni pensier bono;
 e rompon come trono
 l'innati vizii che fanno altrui vile.
 Però qual donna sente sua bieltate
 biasmar per non parer queta e umile,
 miri costei ch'è essempro d'umiltate!
 Questa è colei ch'umilia ogni perverso:

²⁷ Ardizzone, 6-7.

costei pensò Chi mosse l'universo.

The poet addresses another woman, one who hears that the *donna gentile* is not what he claims she is. Again, he instructs her to look to the *donna gentile* as an “esempio d'umiltate.” Dante repeats the verb *mirare* once more, linking the earlier actions as well: the women who look at the *donna gentile*, the poet's inability to look at the *donna gentile*, and the final woman who is encouraged, again, to look at the *donna gentile*. Women in the poem are urged to consider the *donna gentile* as an exemplum while the poet praises her. Dante's female reader, addressed implicitly rather than explicitly through these references to generic women, interacts with the *donna gentile* in the very way the poet cannot – to gaze upon her. As with the previous instructions of “vada” and “miri” the female reader finds herself torn between following the path laid out by the poet that would encourage her to desire the *donna gentile*, as he does, and another that would encourage her to contemplate the *donna gentile* as a role model. The female reader is presented with two distinct, and conflicting, paradigms: she can follow the poet's example and become a desiring subject, or she can imitate the *donna gentile* as a desired object.

The literal commentary on stanza three reemphasizes these gender divisions and exposes the inherent paradoxes in the text. By claiming that women can have a different relationship with the *donna gentile* than men in *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*, Dante places his assertion of reasonable, virtuous love in doubt. In the literal exposition of stanza three, he elaborates on the idea that the *donna gentile* provides a model for women but not for men: “Dico che ‘qual donna gentile non crede quello ch'io dico, che vada con lei, e miri li suoi atti’ – non dico quale uomo però che più onestamente per le donne [di donna] si prende esperienza che per l'uomo” (*Conv.* 3.7.11). The exposition underscores and intensifies the female-specific experience by insisting that the rapport between women and the *donna gentile* is “più onestamente.” While “più onestamente” is typically translated in English as either “in a more decorous way” or “more fitting,” Paolo Cherchi's study of the Ciceronian roots of “onesto” and “onestade” provide us with a more nuanced definition. When Petrarch adopts “onestade” to speak of Laura, it contains a connotation of ‘chaste’ – a valence potentially already present in Dante.²⁸ Although Dante provides varying definitions for the word in Book 2 of the *Convivio*, where he argues

²⁸ Paolo Cherchi, *L'onestade e l'onesto raccontare del Decameron* (Firenze: Cadmo, 2004), 174.

"Cortesia e onestade è tutt'uno," and in Book 4, where he engages with its longer philosophical history, here in Book 3, "onestamente" evidently defines how women, as a group distinct from men, interact with the *donna gentile* (*Conv.* 2.10.8).

This also has consequences for Dante's earlier assertion about the reasonable nature of his desire for the *donna gentile*.²⁹ The poet's suggestion that women's access to the *donna gentile* is somehow more "onesto," insinuates that an amorous desire lurks behind Dante's chaste praise. Why is it that women can learn "più onestamente" from the *donna gentile* if the poet's love for her is truly a virtuous one? If, as Dante says in the literal exposition of the first stanza, the love of *Amor che ne la mente* leads to a perfect friendship and a union with God, why do women have a particular rapport with the *donna gentile* on account of their gender? Are they excluded from this desirous relationship in their search for a higher truth? These tensions reveal the challenges of wedding love poetry and philosophical objectives. In her analysis of the relationship between the *donna gentile* and Lady Philosophy, Lombardi points out "[t]he trouble with this double-edged character is that the biographical-lyrical claims cannot coexist with the allegorical-philosophical."³⁰ Approaching the text from the perspective of the woman reader brings these fault lines into the light.

Both the nature of Dante's love and the split role of the female reader are largely resolved by his allegorical exposition of the poem. First, Dante (re)declares that the lady in the poem is Philosophy: "Sì come l'ordine vuole ancora dal principio ritornando, dico che questa donna è quella donna de lo 'ntelletto che Filosofia si chiama," reaffirming his assertion from the end of Book 2 and laying the groundwork for further allegorical exposition (*Conv.* 3.11.1). Significantly, the allegorical commentary removes the gendered discrepancies of both the poem and the literal explanation. In particular, Dante's exhortations to any woman are recast as instructions to any soul: "Però dice: «qual donna», cioè qual anima, sente sua bieltate biasimare per non parere quale parere si conviene, miri in questo esemplo" (*Conv.* 3.15.13). All souls may now learn from Philosophy by desiring her and looking upon her as an example. Women, thus, are no longer divided between the roles of desiring and imitating. In this allegorical explanation, Dante also

²⁹ Later in the literal exposition Dante again refers to the *donna gentile* as an exemplum for women: "E prima, com'ella è utile all'altre donne, dicendo: *gentile è in donna ciò che in lei si trova*: dove manifesto esemplo rendo alle donne, nel quale mirando possano [sè] fare parere gentili, quello seguitando" (*Conv.* 3.7.14).

³⁰ Lombardi, *Imagining*, 125; see also 119–25.

repeats the verb *mirare* once more, evoking the text's gendered language. Yet here every soul is invited to *mirare* the donna gentile's example.

Presumably, Dante's female readers, those with "la bontà dell'animo" from Book 1 are also included in this final exhortation. Ultimately, the universalizing that follows the gendered language of the literal exposition invites women to participate in the pursuit of knowledge, but it does not entirely erase the gendered divisions which reveal some of the paradoxes and difficulties of incorporating women into a paradigm that presents heterosexual desire of a man for a woman as a parallel for philosophical knowledge. We might then view the *Convivio* as a step toward a philosophy which is not based on the Scholasticism of men but the reading of women.

Conclusion

Dante's choice to use the female experience to represent the path of all souls is a radical one that eschews any misogynist notions of women's lack of interpretive skills as readers. This move does not erase the gendered actions from earlier, but universalizes them, reaffirming that the pursuit of philosophy is open to both men and women. And just as Dante takes the vernacular, a language used to write to women, and pushes its boundaries in order to speak to an audience of men and women, here he recasts a female experience as one shared by both sexes. Despite the tension in the literal commentary, Dante's work ultimately proposes that women are capable of engaging with philosophical knowledge, whether by desiring Lady Philosophy or imitating her.

This unique representation of women in the *Convivio* also represents a significant stage between the female figures of the *Vita Nuova* and those of the *Commedia*, demonstrating that Dante's portrayals of women are intimately linked to the evolution of his thought. Poems directed to ladies in the *Vita Nuova* give way to the community of women in the *Convivio* who not only read such poems but interpret their philosophical meaning; in the *Commedia* we find Beatrice as a moral and spiritual guide, as well as individual women who are capable of making reasoned, ethical choices. Certainly, the women found in *Paradiso* could even be the "molte" of the *Convivio*'s introduction: women who partake in a new vision of philosophy in the vernacular by seeking wisdom not for personal gain but for the sake of knowledge itself.