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Dante and the “Dead White Dude” Dilemma: Exploring the Complexities of Diversity and Controversy in Medieval Literature

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DANTE AND THE “DEAD WHITE DUDE” DILEMMA:
EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITIES OF DIVERSITY AND CONTROVERSY IN
MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Honors College Graduate Distinction at
Western Kentucky Univeristy

By

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May 2017

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Dedicated to my mother and father, who taught me to never stop reading, never stop learning, never stop growing, and never stop.

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I would first like to acknowledge my wonderful family. Without their support and pep talks, I would not have made it to the end of this project. I would also like to acknowledge my friends who constantly encouraged and supported me, even during my excessive complaining and extensive periods of isolation. Thanks to both of my roommates who endured my neuroses throughout the past two years. Also, many thanks to my church families in Bowling Green and in Memphis. Your prayers and support are not unnoticed or unappreciated.

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And, most of all, thanks be to God through whom all blessings flow and through whom all things are possible.

ABSTRACT

Recently, one of the goals on the English discipline has been diversification. Students and scholars alike call for program requirements that are inclusive instead of imperialistic. They want to read texts written by non-white, non-male authors and to hear voices that are less represented in literature. In short, they want to eliminate the focus on literature written by the “dead white dude.” While literature programs should be more diversified, it is still possible to hear from marginalized voices and discuss current controversial issues through older canonical texts. Dante Alighieri does this exceptionally well in his *Divine Comedy* as he tends to diverge from traditional medieval thinking. In *Inferno* specifically, Dante includes voices from women, same-sex sinners, and cultural Others in order to push back against the oppressive attitudes of his day. Although Dante’s poem does not provide a perfect subversion of medieval attitudes, it does complicate them, giving us space to question not only his characters but also our own society.

Keywords: *medieval literature, diversity, The Divine Comedy, English programs, the canon*

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SECTION ONE

MAJOR ENGLISH POETS AND THE DIVERSITY DRIVE: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DEAD WHITE MEN, LITERATURE PROGRAMS, AND THE MEDIEVAL SOLUTION

On June 10th this past summer, the English Department Chair of Yale University released a statement on the department's webpage. This statement responded to controversy concerning Yale's "Major English Poets," a series of two courses required for every Yale English major. These classes focus on foundational writers such as Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Milton. The recent issue regarding the "Major English Poets" sequence revolves around current levels of diversity in English Literature programs and courses. In response to the controversy, Yale students have created a petition to change the English program, not just to eliminate the one sequence. The petition demands, "It's time for the English major to decolonize—not diversify—its course offerings" (Sewall). Critics do not just want a smattering of non-male, non-white authors. They call for a decrease in texts dominated from white male perspectives in addition to adding pieces written from various perspectives.

These students want real, tangible change that challenges tradition instead of simply including a sprinkling of female authors or writers of different races. Langdon Hammer, the department chair, replied to the recently newsworthy issue:

English 125/6 is a course that introduces students to a particular literary tradition, and the course itself has the status of a tradition. The thing about literary

traditions is, they are always being upended and remade. That is the history of English poetry from Chaucer to Eliot...So it seems fitting for students and faculty to raise questions about the course and its role in the major.

With his diplomatic statement, Hammer tries to provide a concise yet comprehensive and neutral view of this heated conversation. “Major English Poets” is a course that has been part of Yale’s English curriculum for decades, but many students believe the course requirement is inappropriate for modern English majors. Margaret Shultz, class of 2016, believes that the course is too white-centric and has no diversity (Zhao). Dhiksha Balaji, class of 2018, agrees that the class provides necessary skills but worries that the course will not prepare her for advanced studies (Zhao). The primary complaints surrounding “Major English Poets” all ring the same chords: it is too whitewashed and emphasizes the lack of diversity in the English discipline.

The responses from faculty members in Yale’s English department are actually quite complex. Some professors defend the course as a staple of the program. Professor Harold Bloom argues that the canonical writers included in these courses should not be so easily dismissed: “They have been magnificent writers in the Western tradition who happen to have been white men. How do you learn to think clearly and well unless you have read the great works that have formed the world’s heritage?” (Zhao). Faculty like Bloom claim that despite the lack of diversity, the course helps majors develop important skills and could even be a good foundation for students who want to challenge tradition. Other faculty side with the students. Jill Richards is a Yale English professor and the Associate Director of Undergraduate Studies. She says that “it is unacceptable that the two semester requirement for all majors routinely covers the work of eight white, male

poets” (qtd. in Wang). Richards’s response channels one of the main arguments against “Major English Poets”: it is required but includes no diverse authors. Faculty members like Richards see the potential problems associated with not having a diversity requirement in the English curriculum.

Another Yale English professor, Catherine Nicholson, actually teaches “Major English Poets,” but her reaction to the issue reveals the struggle others have with this petition. Nicholson explains, “The question of English 125/126, and its privileged place in the major, is an important one, and I don’t have easy answers—though I am personally eager to participate in a more open conversation about it” (qtd. in Wang). Nicholson provides a different perspective on this issue, suggesting that the course is important to English majors but still warrants discussion. She also explains that when she teaches the course, she emphasizes close reading as an important skill but not a tool of “exclusion or oppression,” and she tries to confront the biases from the period with her students (Wang). Despite the course focusing on white male authors, Nicholson attempts to bring diverse topics into discussion so her students can still consider those elements even if they are left out of the poetry. She tries to make the best of the situation but also understands why students taking the course can feel alienated.

Despite all of this conversation, many people still do not understand why “Major English Poets” is causing so much debate. Some students agree that the courses merely focus on the foundations of literature and literary study; they appreciate the course for its focus on writers’ styles and other basic “English major” skills (Zhao). Others suggest that the Yale English program offers other courses that feature diverse literature, so “Major English Poets” is non-problematic and actually essential. According to *National Review*

Editor Richard Lowry, “the creative stream began with so-called dead white males. It is their genius that their words transcend their time and place and have given us phrases, characters, and stories that are still vital today.” Lowry agrees with those Yale students and professors who focus on the values of studying literary tradition. He even asserts that these “aggrieved petitioners... shouldn’t study English or anything else that might challenge their absurdly small-minded ideological hobbyhorses” (Lowry). This statement, while perhaps harsh, echoes a lot of the sentiment from students, professors, and outsiders who support “Major English Poets.” They argue that the writers covered in the course are essential for English majors to read and study regardless of the level of diversity in the sequence.

Today’s culture of diversity troubles the mere existence of “Major English Poets,” a course that seems to eliminate any semblance of inclusivity. In the Yale debate, many students want a “revolutionary” and “liberating” solution (decolonizing) versus a solution that might “enable and privilege white colonialism” (diversifying) (Sewall). Although these particular dead white men did pave the way for other writers, other non-white and non-male writers have influenced literature just as profoundly. Students have cited Toni Morrison, Junot Diaz, and David Henry Hwang (Philyaw). These students also claim that courses like “Major English Poets” create “a culture that is hostile to students of color” (Soave). Not only does the sequence ignore multicultural authors, but it also can actively offend multicultural students and create an environment of alienation instead of inclusion. These transgressions culminate into a more pressing matter. Yale students argue that although the English Department offers courses focusing on these otherwise “non-traditional” authors, such classes are not required. The petition elaborates on this

oversight: “It is unacceptable that a Yale student considering studying English literature might read only white male authors” (Zhao). Regardless of the course *offerings*, the petition argues that course *requirements* should be examined and altered to reflect our diverse society. Otherwise, literature programs are in danger of being just as undiversified and Eurocentric as ever.

Dead White Men, Diversity, and Literature Programs

In all fairness, the Yalees have a point. Diverse education is extremely valuable to students and is the topic of conversation at almost every level of education, from elementary schools to high schools to universities. Recent research examines the overall value of increasing diversity studies at all levels. One 2011 study analyzed the effects of Multicultural Education (or ME) on high school students’ racial attitudes. By definition, ME is education “for all students [that] challenges all types of prejudice, endorses the unique cultures of all students, and is designed to ensure that all students receive equal educational access and opportunities” (Okoye-Johnson 1255). ME can be completely integrated into school curriculum or can be facilitated inside and outside of the classroom environment. The director of this study, Ogo Okoye-Johnson, suggests the country’s demographic changes demand education that will encourage students to have positive racial attitudes in order to be more peaceful and cooperative (1253). ME attempts to achieve this goal. Other research about ME reveals that it can affect students’ cultural knowledge and awareness in addition to their traditional learning:

...culturally responsive teaching is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory and involves using the “cultural

knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.” (Okoye-Johnson 1259)

According to ME studies, this type of diversity education should be employed by schools because it increases the likelihood of developing culturally-aware, intelligent citizens. Similar to the Yale debaters, these scholars plead for more diverse options because of the potentially transformative effect on students’ lives.

Professionals are also conducting research to examine diversity in higher education. According to a study from 2000 on this topic, 63% of responding institutions had a diversity requirement or were at least in the process of developing one (Laird and Engberg 117). The “diversity requirement” is a university’s version of ME and asks students to take classes that broaden their cultural knowledge and force them to think about current cultural issues. Again, scholars argue for diversity requirements because they prepare students to engage in the changing world around them: “college students who engage in diversity experiences may become more aware of issues of difference, inequality, and/or discrimination...which could then lead to greater importance placed on personal involvement in civic action” (Bowman 35). In other words, diversity-based course offerings give students an environment to think about societal problems and to ask questions about and trouble ideas of “social inequalities” (i.e. race, gender, sexuality, class, religious, etc.).

Scholars are not only examining these ideas in undergraduate education. A. W. Strouse, a current PhD candidate in medieval studies, argues that professional education classes and programs are not properly diversified to reflect the twenty-first century. He

explains, “During the course of my graduate education, academic culture has felt stifling, both in its norms and in the insidious ways it demands obedience to these norms” (Strouse 119). Strouse highlights the need for a shift in professorial language, learning environments, and professionalism standards. Changes in these areas would allow all students to feel comfortable and creative in their learning environments. This diversifying is much more holistic, looking past courses and into the building blocks of programs themselves.

If we simply focus on English departments, emphases on older literature periods are becoming less prevalent. English departments across many universities no longer value classics programs, understandable because they can tend to be more whitewashed. Much of the reasoning for this shift is the new flexibility of English studies. Annette Kolodny argues that “turf wars” over British and American literature are now irrelevant, and that “arguments over the place of theory need to be radically repositioned to accommodate a multilingual and multinational curriculum” (157). Like the Yalees, Kolodny states that the shift in English departments needs to be reflected in curriculum, possibly resulting in privileging scholars in newer, more multicultural literary fields. Gerald Graff agrees, suggesting that “field specialization... isn’t a problem itself... the problem is its by-product, historical isolation, by which we lose sight of the disciplinary forest for the trees of the subfields” (qtd. in Summit 148-9). To break down Graff’s woody metaphor, students’ learning suffers if English departments stick to favoring specializations over more historically and culturally inclusive programs. Focusing on a specific genre or time period of literature might cause isolation from the colorful literary world outside of these boundaries.

An important aspect of what Graff calls “historical isolation” is relevance. In addition to being primarily male-authored, canonical texts that cause isolation are usually older and deemed irrelevant. This conversation has garnered a lot of attention among high school faculty. Teaching these much older texts in a changing world troubles educators, and some do not see the need. Don Gallo, a skeptic of canonical literature, claims that the classics “are about adult issues. Moreover, they were written for educated adults who had the leisure and time to read them. They were incidentally written to be enjoyed—not dissected, not analyzed, and certainly not tested” (qtd. in Porteus 16). Gallo explains the problems with teaching canonical literature in the classroom. Although older texts are useful for their vigor, vocabulary, and cultural literacy, most students dislike them because they cannot connect with them (Porteus 16-17). When students cannot engage with literature, their learning suffers. Some educators suggest replacing the classics with young adult literature to remedy this problem. Santoli and Wagner argue that students relate more to YA literature and react negatively to the classics because they are difficult to understand, “[seem] to be written in a different language,” are confusing, are vague, and do not relate to them (67-68). The consensus seems to be that students cannot read, understand, or embrace the classics alone, so teachers should either replace them or pair them with more diverse pieces of young adult literature. While the canonical texts will maintain that literary tradition, the YA texts will add a contemporary twist on older ideas that will better prepare students to understand and navigate their complex world.

Similar to these high school educators, English scholars argue that canonical literature is outdated and imperialistic, outweighing the benefits it might bring.

Medievalist Myra Seaman argues that the canon limits English majors by providing them with acceptable interpretations of texts:

Students' identity as English majors depends upon their knowing how to talk about (and recognize and quote) Dickens, Swift, Joyce, Hemingway, Woolf, the Romantics, the Modernists, the Beats, Shakespeare. Our curricula continue to encourage students to accumulate authorized interpretations rather than to develop their skills as idiosyncratic interpreters. (215)

According to Seaman, studying canonical literature can encourage students to regurgitate tired interpretations of texts. This exercise does not help students grow into creative literary scholars with fresh perspectives. Instead, it can suppress their natural and individual instincts in favor of learning antiquated analyses of archaic texts. Learning only "authorized interpretations" can also discourage students from bringing in their own experiences with diversity to canonical texts; in this way, the canon emphasizes its own isolation and lack of diversity. It seems as though continuing to study the canon could lead to backsliding into Eurocentric thought in a time where a wider perspective is vital.

All of these concerns about classics are completely legitimate. They summarize the issues with the lack of diversity in literature programs and the continuous teaching of dead white male authors. Truthfully, the idea of continuing to teach canonical literature does seem antiquated; some Yalees would also call it imperialistic or oppressive. The question of the canon itself is definitely one of privilege. After all, someone decides what is canonized, and historically, those someones are white males. If schools are trading canonical literature for more relevant young adult texts, and universities are less

concerned with these time periods in favor of more inclusive programs, then why not sign the Yale petition immediately? Why continue to study texts written by dead white men?

While white-centric classics programs should incorporate more diverse authors, texts, and course offerings, works written by dead white men can still be useful when used as part of a more diverse curriculum. J. M. Coetzee and T. S. Eliot provide an intriguing definition that helps to resolve the canon's subjectivity and supposed irrelevance. They suggest that the canon's function is to support "those voices dominated, displaced, or silenced by the textuality of texts" while also giving the reader a place of literary solace (qtd. in Mukherjee 1037). Eliot and Coetzee proposed that the questions surrounding the identity of canonized literature allowed various twentieth-century writers to bring fresh perspective into the canon and insert voices not traditionally heard in literature.

While Eliot and Coetzee describe the twentieth-century canon, this concept can also be applied to older canonized literature. Texts written by dead white males can actually bring fresh perspective. Katy Waldman graduated from Yale with an English degree in 2010, and in a piece she wrote for *Slate*, she expands on this idea. She says, "I want to gently push back, too, against the idea that the major English poets have nothing to say to students who aren't straight, male, and white" (Waldman). Specifically referencing diverse characters in Shakespeare, Waldman reminds Yalees that reading the canon is necessary and required and can connect with diverse readers. Even so, Waldman praises these students for pushing back against it. As this Yale dilemma suggests, no dead white male text can pretend to adequately portray the experience of diverse readers and populations, and we discredit those populations when we suggest otherwise. However,

we also discredit older, canonical literature when we suggest that it has nothing to offer in conversations about current controversial issues of diversity.

Dante and the Medieval Solution

The Yale debate about “Major English Poets” calls for a compromise—one that somehow blends the tradition and value of older, canonical texts while highlighting modern issues of diversity. Enter medieval literature. Yes, the genre is dominated by a white male perspective, and it does not provide a perfect solution and should not replace study of diverse authors and their work. Yet the issues raised in these texts connect to contemporary issues surrounding diversity. A recent issue of *Pedagogy* explored innovative ways to teach non-canonical (“off-the-grid”) medieval literature. In the introduction to this issue, the two guest editors share the most beautiful and compelling reason to study medieval literature in our contemporary world:

... off-the-grid texts look somewhat different in the medieval literature classroom than they might for later periods... While our contributors certainly embrace these same goals of diversity and inclusivity, that quest can look different in the medieval classroom, in part because of the historical remoteness of the Middle Ages, its tendencies toward low literacy rates for women and laborers, anonymous authorship, and the vagaries of manuscript transmission. (Smith and Brandolino 208)

Smith and Brandolino suggest that diversity in medieval literature is not necessarily measured by the authors or content, although it certainly can be. Rather, much of the diversity comes from examining historical perspectives on controversial issues or

analyzing medieval climates surrounding social justice issues. Additionally, Smith and Brandolino highlight that although authorship might be dominated by one race or one gender, medieval literature introduces a diversity of audience and ideology not necessarily predicated by the author's identity. When we do study medieval texts, we can rely on the diversity present within and outside of the text to challenge our thinking and expand our perspectives—reading works written by diverse authors is not the only way to accomplish that.

As a nod to inclusivity, there have actually been moves to further diversify the medieval canon. Smith and Brandolino expand on this concept in their introduction. They explain that research about lesser-known medieval texts has been more prevalent than including these texts in the classroom. In most medieval classrooms, the texts being taught are “ultracanonical,” rendering the assigned reading lists in medieval literature courses “fairly conservative” (Smith and Brandolino 206-7). Recognizing the monotony of these courses has motivated scholars to include lesser-known works in their classes instead of or in addition to the proverbial *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or anything written by Chaucer. One of the most profound changes is the gradual inclusion of Jewish medieval literature. Medievalist Theodore Steinberg has pioneered this area of scholarship, explaining that the most-frequently studied medieval texts are written by European Christian men. Adding texts by female mystics, Jews, and even Arabs helps historical literacy as well as cultural literacy. Steinberg remarks that “we make a terrible mistake when we ignore that culture in our medieval courses...given the current world situation, the more that Jews, Christians, and Muslims can learn about each other, the better off we will be” (293). This shift in the canon does more than diversify the

traditional pool of medieval literature. There is still value in reading the traditional medieval canon, but reading these different cultural perspectives in conversation with one another can help worldviews and inter-cultural relationships today.

Examining specific medieval texts can help us navigate many modern issues. For instance, gender roles and gender inequality appear to be at the forefront of discussions today. We constantly ask questions about the power struggle between men and women, the perceptions of each gender, and the definitions of femininity and masculinity. Studying Chaucer can provide a space for fleshing out these questions and searching for answers. Chaucer is one of the “major English poets” protested by Yale students, yet his works contain countless conversations about gender. One such conversation focuses on Chaucer’s readership. Some scholars believe that like other medieval writers, Chaucer “sought to affiliate himself with genres of literature that bore strong associations with women readers in the medieval cultural imagination” (Saraceni 405). Even though Chaucer was a man, he still might have written for a female audience. Focusing on this singular aspect of Chaucer’s writing opens up a world of new questions and discussions about the relationship between gender and writing, a modern literary discussion.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath also emerges in conversations about gender. In her prologue, the Wife of Bath comments on the other pilgrims’ perception of her—that she is a loose woman. Upset, she blames the male gender for her tarnished reputation. She asks a famous question: “Who painted the lion, tell me, who?” She claims that men have created her reputation by representing her as promiscuous. The Wife of Bath’s question here again raises questions about authorship but also about perception. If Chaucer is a man writing about women and for women, then won’t his

depictions be biased? What do Chaucer's texts, then, reveal about medieval women or the perception of women? How do these perceptions relate to modern perceptions of women and gender? In these two small instances, Chaucer's text already opens a door to connecting the Middle Ages with contemporary society by using his texts to interact with the subjects of female readership and gender reputation.

Medieval texts reflect other current conversations about gender: defining gender, biology's role in gender, transgender populations, and the societal norms surrounding all of these. *Le Roman de Silence*, a French Romance, greatly contributes to this discussion through its gender-fluid protagonist. *Silence* tells the story of a female who is raised as a male. Nature and Nurture battle for control of her gender, but Silence finds a way to live in both male and female spaces. Medieval scholar Elizabeth Waters suggests that the text depicts gender as performance and as a subversion of gender norms (36). The fluidity and performative nature of gender in *Silence* practically mirrors the conversations surrounding transgender individuals and our shifting concept of gender. In many ways today, gender is no longer viewed as biological. Instead, it can change and fluctuate, just like Silence's gender is flexible throughout the poem. Waters also clarifies that in *Silence*, gender and sexuality are separated, an idea that permeates modern discussions of gender and sexuality. E. Jane Burns claims that Silence as a character is completely outside of binaries (i.e. male and female). Instead, Burns suggests the need for a "third path" that allows Silence to acknowledge her femininity while stepping outside of gender roles (qtd. in Waters 37-38). Again, Silence's gender fluidity and flexibility are merely medieval examples of modern conceptions of gender. She moves beyond the boundaries of both male and female stereotypes, almost rendering them useless.

Medieval texts also discuss contemporary issues such as Islamophobia, or the modern discrimination against Muslims. With more and more people equating Islam with extremism, the Islamic faith has probably been the topic of more conversations than ever before. One medieval text that addresses this type of Othering is *Sir Gowther*, a poem about a warrior who is Othered by his family and his people. While Gowther's Othering does not relate to culture, religion, or race, the text does address these issues through the portrayal of the Saracens (the medieval term for Muslims). In *Sir Gowther*, the warrior fights the enemy Saracens who are Othered because of their dissenting religious beliefs. The text frequently refers to them as "heathen hounds," seen as "a race of dogs" who have "lost their humanity" (Montaño 124-125). Medieval scholar Jesus Montaño examines Muslims in the poem and argues that texts like *Sir Gowther* provide evidence of how race was constructed, calling medieval racial construction "an exhaustive process of associations, using a wide variety of ideas in order to construct the Other" (Montaño 119). Montaño suggests that even in the Middle Ages, race was a culturally constructed phenomenon. Qualities such as religious beliefs, customs, and biological traits strongly influenced perceptions of groups and caused Othering within communities. *Sir Gowther* casts Muslims as an Other, but we as twenty-first century readers can examine it and recognize that social construction of the Other in the text. Seeing their mistake helps us to avoid doing the same thing today.

All of these modern conversations can actually be studied through a single medieval author: Dante Alighieri, perhaps the most influential, important, recognizable, and innovative medieval writer. Dante's work is pervasive in culture even today, as references to *Inferno* in particular appear in novels, music, artwork, and even pop culture

like movies and television shows. Dante's work is inarguably canonical, but few people read his work. Few English majors actually read any part of his *Comedy*, not to mention the whole epic. Dante is known for his style and poetic prowess, but his works are also some of the most complex and modern. Of course, Dante is a dead white male writer, but his work can serve as a litmus test for using medieval literature to explore and navigate our complex world. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, particularly *Inferno*, discusses a plethora of contemporary issues—morality, ethics, class, etc.—within the larger frames of philosophy, politics, history, and, of course, religion. Dante's complicated and nuanced ways of discussing these topics function in the same ways that diverse course offerings do. It is true that Dante's work is old, and Dante himself was a fairly traditional writer. Although he cannot represent them perfectly, Dante still writes about marginalized populations and includes them in *Inferno*, drawing attention to the discrimination against them and stereotypes surrounding them.

Dante repeatedly highlights controversy and tries to make sense of it, using his poem as a vehicle to trouble common ideas about marginalized populations, combat prejudice, and complicate traditional ideas of sin. Studying Dante—a dead white male—gives us an organization through which we can grapple with these problems. His most provocative conversations deal with the same topics that modern diversity course offerings might explore: gender stereotypes, same-sex love, and cultural and religious discrimination. These conversations are so fascinating, though, because they happen in an unorthodox setting: Hell. Because *Inferno*'s characters are already damned, Dante is free to investigate the subtleties and intricacies of each issue. With his complicated female characters, Dante troubles the medieval gender stereotype that women were inherently

weak because of a connection to sexuality. Women like Beatrice, his muse, and Francesca da Rimini simultaneously uphold and subvert these expectations, encouraging us to discuss the stereotypes we have about women today and the subsequent issues that arise from them. *Inferno* also becomes a platform for discussing same-sex love and analyzing our reactions to it. Dante punishes same-sex sinners with the violent in Hell, but there are same-sex lovers with the heterosexual lustful in Purgatory. Digging into the text reveals that the issue for Dante is not necessarily the same-sex aspect of these relationships, providing intriguing comparison with modern values. Additionally, Dante's treatment of Muslims and Jews greatly differs from his own culture in that he refuses to vilify these groups as a whole. Again, we can compare our society with Dante's and see how our own treatment of these marginalized populations either mirrors or diverges from Dante's ideal for treating those with cultural and religious differences. These intertwining conversations create a single work that provides a strong foundation for looking at current cultural diversity, even though they are brought up by a writer who happens to be a "dead white dude."

In the end, the *Divine Comedy* is a venue that helps us think about diversity and prompts us to examine the ways in which these controversial subjects exist and function today. Through Dante, we can examine current gender stereotypes, attitudes towards same-sex relationships, and cultural Othering. Even though the Yalees' argument is well-founded and well-placed, Dante proves that a text written by a dead white man is not inherently racist, prejudiced, or outdated. It is completely possible to embrace medieval literature as a valuable tool and resource. Theodore Steinberg comments on this idea:

The Middle Ages are, after all, another country—customs, beliefs, and perspectives differed from those to which we are accustomed. And yet those customs, beliefs, and perspectives were all reactions to the same human conditions that we face, so they remain relevant to our lives. We may not share them, but we should certainly learn from them. We can only do so, however, if we are able to see beyond the superficial differences that separate us from them so that we can see the more significant differences and similarities. (299)

If we want to look at the world in a nontraditional way, we must be willing to accept nontraditional solutions. Through Dante, this unexpected juxtaposition of the medieval and contemporary provides a great compromise for observing and analyzing diversity in a traditional text. As Steinberg says, we can still learn from medieval literature—it can reconcile the gap between the antiquated and modern, traditional and progressive, old and new. These dichotomies can coexist. But with medieval literature, and with Dante specifically, they do more than coexist. They thrive.

SECTION TWO

“LITTLE PETTY PLACES”: GENDER TRADITIONS AND COMPLICATED WOMEN

Lucille Clifton begins her poem “homage to my hips” with several provocative statements that scrutinize gender stereotypes and empower women:

these hips are big hips
they need space to
move around in.
they don't fit into little
petty places. these hips
are free hips. (ll. 1-6)

Using hips as a symbol for women, the speaker of the poem declares her individuality and independence despite pressure to conform to gender stereotypes. She needs space to move around in. She doesn't fit into little petty places. She is free.

When we look at gender in Dante's day, women were not so free. Women faced scrutiny under popular gender stereotypes, specifically those that connected them with sexuality. Women were thought to be sexual beings and more susceptible to sexual sin, making them weaker and resulting in depictions of women as either perfect courtly ladies or as sexually promiscuous. Despite these oppressive social norms and attitudes, *Inferno* and gender have a much more complex relationship. All of the women throughout Dante's *Inferno* complicate the relationship of women, sexuality, and the inherent

weakness that emerges because of this connection as they both uphold and subvert traditional gender notions. Studying the women of *Inferno* forces us to examine social attitudes toward gender and continue to complicate the same stereotypes and expectations that have so long confined us and our thinking.

Shifting Attitudes?

Conversations about gender today increasingly challenge traditional ideas about men and women, but those traditional ideas defined gender in medieval culture. Around 1318-1320, Florentine poet Francesco da Barberino wrote a conduct code for women that classified women according to religious identity, marital identity, and social class. In writing this code, Francesco “embraced the standard medieval ideology” by following patriarchal writers such as Aristotle, ultimately stating that “given the female’s inherent weakness, the best place for women was the home, under the close tutelage and guardianship of fathers and husbands” (Hurlburt 71). Medieval women were encouraged to stay home, submit to their husbands, and provide for their households. Anything more would be overstepping. Women often were not considered citizens and could not wield political power, and many faced widowhood because they were so much younger than their spouses (Hurlburt 72, 76). Medieval culture upheld and enforced these gender stereotypes and expected both genders to adhere to tradition. Movement across these borders was uncommon and discouraged by society.

While attitudes toward gender stereotypes have shifted dramatically since the 14th century, they are anything but eradicated. A 2010 Pew report found the current outlook for gender equality bleak. On one hand, the majority in 22 countries (including the U.S.)

agree that women should have equal rights. Pew's findings recorded that women should be able to work outside the home; that marriages are more fulfilling when "both spouses share financial and household responsibilities;" and that higher education is not more important for boys than for girls ("Gender Equality"). However, this same report found that in almost all of these 22 countries, the majorities believe that more changes are needed toward equality. In the U.S., about 64% of those surveyed agreed that the country needs to continue making changes (Pew, "Gender Equality"). Additionally, a majority in 10 of these countries (again, including the U.S.) believe that men have a better quality of life (Pew, "Gender Equality"). And, to make this even more interesting, Pew found that women are more likely to perceive these gender inequalities.

It might be surprising to see the dissatisfaction with gender equality in a time when so much change has occurred. Unfortunately, many of the same gender stereotypes from medieval Europe exist today and contribute to inequality between the sexes. Issues of education, work, and responsibility can be traced back to ideas that women were weaker and could not have responsibilities outside of the home. Inequality also persists because women are still believed to be more susceptible to stronger sexual appetites and therefore cannot be trusted with important decisions or leadership roles. Seeing these stereotypes persist is troubling. Even so, we can still make moves to blur these boundaries, and Dante can help.

Language, Audience, and the Importance of Gender

Before we even delve into *Inferno's* content, we can see Dante problematizing gender traditions through his use of the vernacular. Dante chooses to write his *Comedy* in

the Tuscan vernacular instead of in Latin to reach a wider audience that includes female readers. Before writing the *Comedy*, Dante had already revealed his “desire...to enlighten the greatest possible number of persons, without distinction of class or sex...all those hitherto abandoned or ignored by the elitist Latin culture of the age” (Scott 34). Anybody and everybody could understand vernacular poetry, making great works of literature and thought more accessible. However, as Scott suggests, others believed Latin to be superior. In many ways, it was “the universal language” in that all of the political, ecclesiastical, and scholarly elite studied and used Latin (Cherchi 385). It was a mark of education and status across Western and Central Europe. In medieval societies, “Latin enjoyed an unparalleled literary tradition and international presence as the language of law and philosophy, church and state” (Scott 36). This language was universal to the elite of Western society, but it was also divisive. Although some elite women might have been educated, other women did not have that opportunity, and most educated women still would not have been able to read Latin. Anything written in Latin, then, was largely unknowable for women or any lower-class, uneducated men. It enforced social, class, educational, and gender boundaries.

Given the intensely philosophical nature of the *Comedy*, it is surprising that Dante would choose to use the vernacular. At the beginning of his literary career, Dante held Latin in much higher regard than the vernacular. As the “noblest language,” it was reserved for the “noblest themes” (Scott 18, 46). These themes like philosophy and politics were only necessary supposedly for educated men to understand and were reserved for Latin. However, Dante later believed divine love was a crucial concept that both men and women needed to understand. He talks about this subject in the vernacular

even though it was meant for Latin. By writing the *Comedy* in Italian, Dante makes a positive move for gender equality by including women in his audience. Everyone has the ability to read and learn from the *Divine Comedy*, not just men. Dante pushes against gender traditions here because he not only allows women to read about a weighty topic. He invites them.

Dante actually began his vernacular writing with his *Vita Nuova* to reach his primary audience: women. This “literary revolution,” according to Dante, was necessary because of “the need for the female recipient to understand the words addressed to her” (Scott 18). Dante wanted to write in the Tuscan vernacular because he wanted women to read his work. In a way, the *Vita Nuova* is a collection of courtly love poetry, making it more fitting for a traditional medieval female audience. The *Vita Nuova* is a collection of thoughts and poems about Dante’s love for Beatrice, his muse for the *Divine Comedy*. However, it also extends past mere love poetry. Within the *Vita Nuova*, Dante makes emotional and literary discoveries that lead to the *Divine Comedy*, making the *Vita Nuova* a prequel of sorts. It is a treatise on love, believed to be one of the noblest topics in existence. With his earthly love as the muse for his spiritual journey, Dante writes the *Divine Comedy*, an epic that communicates the importance of a deep, spiritual love among people and with God. With this short work, Dante begins to blur the lines of topics that were discussed in the vernacular. Dante follows in his own footsteps with the *Comedy*, writing this divine love epic in the vernacular just as he wrote his courtly love treatise.

Beatrice, the Divine and Courtly Lady

Turning to the text, perhaps the most prominent female figure in the entire *Divine Comedy* is Beatrice because of her role as Dante's muse and unrequited love. In the *Comedy*, Beatrice serves as a guide through the end of Purgatory and throughout Paradise. Dante's literary relationship with Beatrice begins back in the *Vita Nuova*, a mixture of prose and love poetry largely about Beatrice. In this short text, Dante describes how "Beatrice's miraculous influence shaped his life, both as lover and as poet" (Martinez and Durling 11). Beatrice becomes not only Dante's physical love but also his literary muse. Dante's journey to find divine love in the *Comedy* stems from his love for Beatrice, and she guides both Dante the poet and Dante the pilgrim. Beatrice as a character displays surprising complexity in spite of her relative absence in *Inferno*. Despite her representation as the ideal beloved in the *Vita Nuova*—a role that adhered firmly to gender expectations—Beatrice in the *Comedy* troubles this representation. She fits into gender stereotypes as she is the perfect courtly lady, but she also challenges these stereotypes through her overall strength and eloquence.

On the surface, Beatrice seems to support gender expectations as a picture of the perfect courtly woman. When Virgil first encounters Beatrice, his description of her resembles that of a lady in a courtly love poem. He says, "Her eyes were shining brighter than the morning / star; and she began to speak gently and softly, with / angelic voice..." (*Inf.* 2.55-57). Beatrice's appearance epitomizes an ideal medieval woman with shining eyes, soft demeanor, and sweet voice. She is perfection, and her beloved can see himself fulfilled in her. Dante is sometimes called Beatrice's "courtly lover," especially in

relation to the *Vita Nuova*, because of descriptions like this one in *Inferno* (Kirkpatrick 114). Both Dante in the *Vita Nuova* and Virgil in *Inferno* describe Beatrice in unattainable terms, making her the perfect courtly lady. Beatrice is also a figure to pity: “Both the courtly and romantic versions of love...are ‘grants’ that the male concedes out of his total power” (Kirkpatrick 101). The courtly lady may seem as though she holds power, but in reality, she is a pawn of men. She is only allowed to be a lover because the man chooses her. Beatrice, then, not only represents the stereotypical courtly lady but also the belief that women were passive instead of active, weak instead of strong.

Beatrice as a courtly lady inevitably connects Beatrice’s identity with sexual behavior (or, in this case, a lack thereof). Beatrice and Dante never have a physical relationship, and they do not even see each other in the *Comedy* until the end of *Purgatorio*. Dante rehabilitates Beatrice as his divine courtly lady, an intensely spiritual role. She is his muse in the *Vita Nuova* and his guide through the *Comedy*. In a courtly relationship, the man’s love for the woman inspires him to feats of honor. Dante spiritualizes this concept; his love for Beatrice affects his soul, not his worldly works. Beatrice enables Dante to write his Christian epic and inspires him to a love of the Divine. Beatrice’s desexualized relationship with Dante directly opposes the common view that women were directly connected with sexuality. Although the courtly woman is a stereotypical role, she is not full of lust, and she shows little propensity for sexual sin. She is pure and chaste. We see the longevity of this ideal as it corresponds to the Victorian concept of the “Angel in the House,” a figure whose characteristics 19th-century scholar Theodore Martin uses to describe Beatrice. He says she is “a perfect woman, whose influence refine[s] and ennoble[s] the poet’s heart, filling it with those

yearnings after the ideal of beauty and goodness which it is the peculiar office of Woman to inspire” (qtd. in Verduin 226). For Martin, Beatrice is the perfect medieval woman who represents these Victorian concepts: she supports her love and embodies beauty and goodness. Beatrice’s desexualized relationship with Dante allows her to escape stereotypes but also causes her to support them. While she is not stereotypically hypersexual as medieval women were believed to be, she fits in the mold of the courtly woman and is hyper-feminine.

Despite her adherence to gender tradition, Beatrice challenges stereotypes through her strength of influence. Although Virgil guides Dante the pilgrim through Hell and most of Purgatory, the pilgrim he sees his ultimate guide, Beatrice, at the gates of Paradise. Beatrice is the physical manifestation of the divine love Dante explores through the *Comedy*. She is “far from being imaginatively inert...[and] ‘moves’ the whole *Commedia*” (Kirkpatrick 102). She is a vital and central figure. When she is mentioned in *Inferno*, Beatrice is a figure of power and agency. Virgil calls Beatrice a “lady of power,” meaning that he recognizes her status over him (*Inf.* 2.76). Furthermore, Virgil claims that he comes to the pilgrim “as she willed” (*Inf.* 2.118). In the hierarchy of guides, Virgil is on the bottom of the totem pole with three women—including Beatrice—above him. Although she is absent for the rest of *Inferno*, she maintains her power in absentia up through the end of Purgatory. In the representation of the garden of Eden, Dante the pilgrim faces Beatrice for the first time, and she undoubtedly remains a figure of strength. The pilgrim calls her “regal and haughty in bearing” as she speaks to him for the first time (*Purg.* 30.70). In Virgil’s absence, Beatrice immediately seizes the role of guide and guardian, and Dante knows it simply by the way she carries herself. Beatrice is a leader,

not only because she is now Dante's guide but also because she practically exudes this quality.

Along with her presence and assertiveness, Beatrice's eloquence is a non-stereotypical medieval trait for a woman. Before they enter Hell, Virgil tells Dante how he came to be the pilgrim's guide. When Virgil first sees Beatrice, she introduces herself: "I am Beatrice who cause you to go / ... When I shall be before my lord, I will praise you / frequently to him" (*Inf.* 2.70, 73-74). Beatrice causes Virgil to go to Dante, and she has the power to name and praise him in front of her own master. Beatrice also reveals her strength of speech in *Purgatorio*. In Eden, Beatrice essentially reprimands Dante. She says, "Look at us well! Truly I am, truly I am / Beatrice. How have you deigned to approach the / mountain? Did you not know that here mankind is happy?" (*Purg.* 30.73-75). This introduction mimics Virgil's first reference to her in *Inferno* but it introduces a new fierceness not as evident in her conversation with Virgil. She commands Dante to look at her and rebukes him for coming to her in the wrong frame of mind. Just as she holds authority over Virgil in *Inferno*, she holds authority over the pilgrim in *Purgatorio*. Additionally, this first encounter between Dante and Beatrice adds a layer that the encounter between Virgil and Beatrice lacks: swapping gender stereotypes. When the pilgrim first sees Beatrice, his reaction mirrors Dido's when she realizes her love for Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*; likewise, Dante turns to Virgil with Dido's words (Brownlee 4, 5). In this scene, then, the pilgrim is linked with the submissiveness and humility required of femininity while Beatrice is linked with strength and prowess, believed to be inherent to masculinity.

While Beatrice challenges gender stereotypes through her strength and eloquence as a guide and speaker, she still fulfills the traditional roles of a medieval woman. She represents the ideal medieval woman as a courtly lady, but she manages to complicate this role. Since Beatrice's relationship with Dante is primarily spiritual rather than physical, it is desexualized. She is not a typical medieval woman with a strong propensity for sexual sin. This chastity puts her back in stereotypical form, though, as she adheres to the confines of the courtly woman. Beatrice's complexity throughout the *Comedy* sets the stage for understanding the other women in *Inferno*. Like Beatrice, these women break stereotypes but still manage to live within them. These complex women exemplify the blurring of boundaries that we are trying to accomplish.

Dante's Infernal Women

It would be easier to argue that Dante supports gender traditions if he vilified all of the women in Hell for sexual sin or for lust. After all, medieval women were assumed to be sexual beings who could easily fall into sexual sin. It would also be easier to argue that Dante opposes gender traditions if he refrained from linking the women in Hell to sexuality at all and instead focused on their other qualities that might not have been deemed as appropriate or feminine at the time. Dante does not fully support gender traditions in his poem, but he does not fully reject them either. *Inferno's* women are complicated, and like Beatrice, they all comment on stereotypes while they still fulfill some. These overlaps, though, provoke conversation about the ways in which we support gender stereotypes and the ways in which we break them.

The first circle of Limbo is filled with women who trouble stereotypes because they did not commit sexual sin, but they also uphold stereotypes in that they are still tied to sexuality. Like the men in Limbo, these women lived virtuous lives but were not baptized and did not “adore God as was needful” (*Inf.* 4.38). Still, these women were meritorious, strong, and good. Dante does not reduce them only to their sexuality in either their sin or their merit. In fact, Dante reveres them (hence their place in Limbo and not further down in Hell-proper). The female souls here are warriors—such as Camilla, Lavinia, and Penthesilea—and wives of rulers—such as Cornelia, Julia, and Marcia (*Inf.* 4. 124, 128). Dante gives these women credit as strong leaders and as intelligent women. However, these women are also identified by their sexuality. Cornelia, Julia, Marcia, and Lavinia are all known for being wives. Although they are figures of strength and prowess, they are also figures of ideal medieval women. They still support tradition as wives even in their subversion of it. Camilla and Penthesilea complicate these ideas, though, because they are virgins. They are desexualized like Beatrice. These two women are recognized as warriors and virgins, not one or the other. They resist the idea that all women were sexual beings, but they still exist tied to their sexuality, even if it is just the absence of it.

Thaïs is one of the best examples of this complexity in the lower Hell because while her sin is not necessarily sexual, it still refers to sexuality. Dante the pilgrim finds her in the second bolgia of the flatterers in the eighth circle of fraud. Already, Thaïs is separated from sexuality because Dante the poet punishes her for fraud, not lust or promiscuity. When the pilgrim sees Thaïs, Virgil tells him that when her lover asked if he found favor with her, she replied, “Marvelous favor indeed!” (*Inf.* 18.135). Thaïs’s response is typical of flatterers, which is a type of simple fraud. The flatterers are

punished because their empty words seem insignificant but could cause destruction.

Dante the poet punishes Thaïs because of this flattery. However, two tiny words complicate her enormously. Virgil tells Dante he is looking at “Thaïs, the whore” (*Inf.* 18.133). In classical Greece, Thaïs is known for being a prostitute. More specifically, she was an “Athenian courtesan who is said to have caused Alexander the Great to set fire to Persepolis” (“Thaïs”). Thaïs is traditionally known as a flatterer, so it’s not surprising that Dante includes her in the second bolgia. But Thaïs is also known as a prostitute, and again, Dante includes that characteristic. Thaïs is punished for being a flatterer, but she is still connected with her sexual behavior; Dante simultaneously separates Thaïs from her promiscuity and links her with it.

Perhaps the most stereotypical group of female sinners in *Inferno* is the lustful. Within this second circle, Dante seems to fully adopt the medieval tendency to equate women with their sexual behavior. A couple of men (Paris and Tristan) are mentioned, but they are only named. This circle of the lustful seems almost exclusively populated by women. Dante the poet includes figures such as Cleopatra, Dido, and Helen, women known almost exclusively for their sexual behavior (*Inf.* 5.61-64). Cleopatra had an affair with Julius Caesar and had a politically controversial marriage with Marc Antony; Dido committed suicide because of Aeneas; and Helen’s affair with Paris allegedly led to the destruction of Troy. All of these women are punished for their sexual sin, but lust is not necessarily the essence of this problem. Dante cares more about their abuse of sexuality. In these instances specifically, sexual sin causes violation of the social fabric. Cleopatra’s sexual relationships caused major political upsets, as did Helen’s affair with Paris. Both of these women allowed their sexuality to overrule what they knew to be right. As a

result, they caused destruction and chaos. These women are stereotypical because they are hypersexual—they allow sexuality to overcome them.

Dante the poet also *identifies* these women by their sexual sin. For instance, when Virgil sees Dido, he doesn't even call her by name. Instead, he describes her as “she who killed herself for love and / broke faith with the ashes of Sichaeus” (*Inf.* 5. 61-62).

Readers of *Inferno* must know Dido's sexual sin to identify her. She cannot be separated from it. In comparison, Paris and Tristan, the two men mentioned in canto five, are mentioned only by name and not in relation with their sexual sin. It seems, then, that Dante the poet essentially defines the women of the second circle by their sexual relationships and behaviors:

That Dante's circle of the lustful contains the largest group of women to be found in his Hell is emblematic of contemporary concerns about women's alleged propensity to sexual sin. Modesty and chastity, crucial both in the process of attracting a husband and evidence of loyalty, love, and obedience to him thereafter, *defined* a woman's moral existence. (Hurlburt 72, emphasis mine)

Each woman in the second circle is identified by her sexual sin, whether that identification is a few lines (as with Dido) or one word (as with Cleopatra). These women's moral existences are indeed defined by sexuality. Dante's circle of the lustful supports the idea that women had a greater “propensity to sexual sin” precisely because of the way he describes and identifies them. In line with the traditional ideas of the day, these women have no identity outside of their sexual sin.

Favored and Flawed: Francesca da Rimini

As stereotypical as his second circle may seem, Dante attempts to break rigid gender ideas with one woman. Francesca da Rimini is one of the most complex souls in Hell who happens to be in the second circle of the lustful. Francesca is well-known in the literary world among Dante critics, but she was all but fiction historically. The only historical document with her name is her father-in-law's will, which mentions her dowry (Barolini 13). Aside from that, silence. Without Dante, we would not know her at all. Teolinda Barolini suggests that "through the intervention of *Inferno* V, Francesca became a cultural touchstone and reference point, achieving a dignity and a prominence—a celebrity—that in real life she did not possess" (13). Barolini is completely correct—Francesca has a literary fame that has endured far beyond Dante's 14th-century text. What makes this intriguing is that Francesca achieves this "dignity" and "prominence" as a sinner. Like all souls in Hell, Francesca has been damned because of her sin and her unrepentant attitude. She abides in the circle of the lustful, forever tossed by the wind of her passion. She details the specific moment at the end of her second speech: "When we read that the yearned-for smile was / kissed by so great a lover, he [Paolo]... / kissed my mouth all trembling" (*Inf.* 5.133-134, 136). While Francesca describes the adulterous moment, she never calls it adulterous. In fact, Francesca never admits to sinning at all; she does not take responsibility, just like the other sinners in Hell. She "not only yields to illicit sexual passion but also, and more significantly, seeks to give such yielding a natural, indeed rational justification" (Kalkavage 37). Francesca never makes her sin explicit, but Dante still highlights her adherence to traditional gender notions by placing her in the circle of the lustful.

Yet, instead of aligning her only with the sexual sin stereotypical of women, Dante the poet aligns Francesca with the educated—she is a reader and a speaker. Francesca speaking at all in *Inferno* is perhaps the most convincing argument for her success in fighting traditional ideas about gender. Francesca is the first and only woman in *Inferno* allowed to speak (Musa 34). While Virgil recounts his conversation with Beatrice in *Inferno* 2, she does not speak these words herself; they are secondhand. With her two speeches, Francesca introduces herself and tells the story of how she and her lover, Paolo, came to be in this specific circle of Hell. Speaking of reading about Lancelot and Guinevere, she says, “Many times that reading drove our eyes / together and turned our faces pale; but one point / alone was the one that overpowered us” (*Inf.* 5.130-132). Dante the poet gives Francesca the privilege of telling her own story, and Dante the pilgrim gives her the privilege of listening. Francesca here is the actor. She has an identity and a purpose. As we know, “Dante preserved Francesca. He recorded her name and gave her a voice—and, perhaps most significant, through the famous story she tells of how she and Paolo fell in love while reading, he made her a reader rather than a fornicator” (Barolini 13). Francesca has an identity apart from “sexual sinner” that brings her out of the realm of stereotypical medieval women. Paolo’s absence makes this even more intriguing. We cannot say anything about Paolo because he does not say anything. Paolo simply “weeps and is there,” and really, Francesca uses Paolo as a “pawn in...[the] analysis of her own love” (Freccero 42). Not only does Francesca cross into male territory here by speaking, but Paolo crosses into female territory by crying and staying silent. Thus, Dante comments on the confines of gender stereotypes by creating this female character who clearly ignores them.

The fact of Francesca's speech is not the only way she breaks boundaries. Francesca is just as well-known for being a skilled speaker. Her most successful venture is eliciting sympathy from the pilgrim and her larger audience (i.e. readers of *Inferno*). During her first speech, Francesca provides her reasoning for her position in Hell:

Love, which is swiftly kindled in the noble heart,
seized this one for the lovely person that was taken
from me; and the manner still injures me.

Love, which pardons no one loved from loving in
return, seized me for his beauty so strongly that, as
you see, it still does not abandon me.

Love led us on to one death. (*Inf.* 5.100-106)

With these words, Francesca essentially blames her and Paolo's death and subsequent place in the afterlife on personified Love. These lines "confirm the role of Francesca as at once the heroine and the victim of love, from its inception to its death" (Freccero 34). Francesca is a heroine because she is a victim. In her words, Love "seized" her and led her to death—she takes no responsibility for her actions but instead renders her place in Hell as the fault of a powerful cosmic force. Francesca expects her audience to feel pity for her because, in her words, she did not decide to place herself in Hell; Love decided for her. Francesca is definitely successful. After she finishes her speeches, the pilgrim "faint[s] as if [he] were dying, / and [he falls] as a dead body falls" (*Inf.* 5.141-142). Dante the pilgrim is overwhelmed with sympathy for this poor soul, and he faints, feeling pity for Francesca. She persuades the pilgrim to sympathize for her, and likewise persuades her readers to pity her.

While Francesca is skilled with language and is given the ability to use this skill, Dante the poet puts her back in the realm of stereotype as he equates her with uneducated women by highlighting her inability to read critically. When she tells the pilgrim of the incident that led to her and Paolo's death, Francesca mentions that they read from the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. She mentions specifically the point that they succumbed to temptation: "when we read that the yearned-for smile was / kissed by so great a lover" (*Inf.* 5.133). Paolo and Francesca give in to temptation when they read that their literary counterparts do the same. Unfortunately, Francesca fails to continue reading. While she views Lancelot and Guinevere's romance as a wonderful example of courtly love, Dante's readers know their affair had horrible consequences. Had the pair read the tale critically, perhaps their physical and spiritual lives could have been spared. Francesca can obviously read, and she must read quite well to be so skilled in speaking. In fact, "if literature can make readers more morally sensitive, we would expect Francesca to be a fine person. Unfortunately, she has misread every literary work that she cites, and her poor interpretations reflect badly on her character" (Levine 346). We might expect the eloquent and educated Francesca to read flawlessly, but she does not. Instead of being positively impacted by what she reads, Francesca's reading not only influences her sin but also becomes her justification.

Francesca's skilled speech also complicates her appearance as a non-stereotypical woman by linking her to the traditional inherent sinfulness of women. In addition to being the first woman to speak, Francesca is the first sinner to speak in one of *Inferno's* circles. This privilege harms Francesca's image as a woman because it links her to Eve, a woman who is perceived as weak, fickle, and easily influenced:

This “first sinner” must remind us of the first human being to sin in Christianity. Is not Francesca Eve? And not content with having seduced Paolo in the flesh, this *figura Evae* has attempted successfully to seduce the Pilgrim, who is Everyman, into committing not the sin of lust itself but what has been defined as the essence of Lust: the subjection of reason to emotion. (Musa 34-35)

Francesca becomes the figure of the first person to ever sin, the woman whom many blame for sin. Francesca is also the first soul to actually recount the instance of her sin, making her the first to sin in the poem. Furthermore, Francesca also commits literary sin when she uses her rhetorical prowess to indict others—both male poets and her readers—in sin along with her. Francesca lures us in with her sweet and seductive words, making us pity her and perhaps even consider God to be unjust in punishing her. We rationalize and justify sin alongside her. Francesca’s audience is involved in what Musa calls the essence of lust: subjecting reason to emotion. Thus, not only is Francesca connected with Eve and original sin, but she is also connected back with the sexuality and its connected weakness attributed to all women.

Medieval Meets Modern: Addressing the “Woman Question”

Unfortunately, many of these early stereotypes continue today but in somewhat different venues. For instance, current rape culture still emphasizes the idea of women as hypersexual beings. In the seventeenth century, there were actually significant discussions about women and if they were directly responsible for a man’s lust for them. One writer, Ester Sovernam, boldly states that if men will “purge an infected heart and turn away a lascivious eye,” women will not affect them sexually (“Unconstant Women”

565). Sovernam claims that these actions reflect poorly on men, not women. If a man lusts after a woman, it is his fault and not hers. In a modern context, this argument is manifested differently. In fact, we have the opposite reaction. When it comes to sexual crime, rape should reflect badly on the perpetrators, not on the victims. But society still blames women in these instances because of dress, provocative actions, or wayward glances. Liz Roberts, the CEO of a New York City rape crisis center, claims that “we all, women included, have a subconscious belief that if women just did all the right things, like dressing modestly, then we would never be raped” (Costello). Both genders blame women for the violent acts towards them, and according to Roberts, women are mostly blamed for their dress or appearance. Some still believe that like the women in the circle of the lustful, women are more susceptible to allowing sexuality to overrule them and indict men in sexual sin, not the other way around.

Interestingly, Dante pushes back against the idea of women being to blame for seduction. This concept is alluded to back in *Inferno*, when Francesca blames male poets for causing sexual sin. When Francesca tells her story, Dante the pilgrim faints. While this response undoubtedly speaks to Francesca’s rhetorical prowess, it also serves as a commentary on men enticing women to sexual sin. The pilgrim might faint for feeling guilty for writing the same sin-inducing love poetry that Francesca mentions; she indicts male poets like Dante for causing sexual sin. Dante’s physical reaction mimics the emotional reaction that we should have as readers, and we do. For a brief moment, Francesca pulls us in and makes us sympathize with her plight. As a rhetorician and talented speaker, Francesca represents a powerful woman who uses her influence, not a woman who allows others to influence her. Dante the poet calls attention to the male

involvement in sexual sin rather than blaming it only on sexually-minded females. We can see this model and recognize that while women can still be responsible for their sexual behavior, men have responsibilities as well.

American society also seems to reject the idea that femininity can include rhetorical prowess, eloquence, leadership, and influence. Dante includes women, particularly Beatrice and Francesca, in his poem who have these qualities traditionally equated with masculinity. Today, this conversation has in our most recent presidential election. The nomination of Hillary Clinton sparked hot debates about the ability of women to lead. Shana Stull, a 30-year-old Clinton supporter, spoke to the struggle that the nation had with the female nominee. She said, “She happens to be the most qualified person who is woman. When people shame me for that, I get really defensive” (qtd. in Foran). Any women who like Clinton are in the public eye and demonstrate their strength make people uneasy, even though there is a desire and a need for women in government positions.

Stull’s statement pinpoints one of the most important problems with current gender stereotypes: the assumption that women cannot be leaders. Dante helps us to challenge this stereotype, though, and see women as powerful, strong, and capable of leadership. When we look at Beatrice and Francesca, we see similar problems. While these women challenged gender expectations, they also operated within these stereotypes. They were strong speakers and powerful influencers, yet they could not escape the negative qualities associated with their gender. The same goes for the women in *Limbo* who were women of high status yet are still identified by sexuality. Clinton is an example of this same type of prejudice and discrimination. Comparing Clinton with Dante’s

women, we begin to see how these age-old problems still manifest themselves today, reminding us that there are still long strides to take in abolishing harmful gender stereotypes and erasing inequality.

As a writer in the 14th century, Dante moves outside of the black and white ideas about gender and into more of a gray area. In the introduction to her book about the *Comedy*'s ethics and erotics, Olivia Holmes suggests that Dante as a writer is much more inclusive than he is exclusive. She says that Dante is not a "binary thinker" but rather someone who aims for a "Truth in which all differences, including those between male and female, intellect and matter, and the creator and creation, are reconciled" (3). The *Comedy* attempts to close these gaps, and we can begin to see them closing with gender. Like women today, Dante's women constantly struggle for agency and individuality through the words he has written. We look at them and see glimpses of our own women. They are rulers, warriors, and speakers, but they are also complex. Analyzing Dante's successes and shortcomings can give us another way to make sense of our own struggles with gender equality as we continue to break outside of gender stereotypes and celebrate complicated women. Dante's women trouble, but do not eradicate, the traditional notion that women were tied to sexuality and were inherently weak because of this connection. Although Dante the poet does not create perfect progressive women who refuse to conform to traditional gender ideals, he still provides us with some complicated women who push us and pull us as we try to look forward past the "little petty places" in which women have so long lived.

SECTION THREE

THE “DANTEAN LOVE ETHIC”: SODOMY, SAME-SEX DESIRE, AND THE MODERNITY OF THE *COMEDY*

In June of 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States declared same-sex marriage legal in a five-four decision. Many saw this decision as an integral step in regaining basic human rights, reacting with joy and relief at this nod toward acceptance. Others regarded this decision as another step toward immorality and secularization, reacting with frustration and sorrow. We have been talking about same-sex relationships for decades, but the conversation seems to shift slightly in terms of how society defines same-sex desire or why we are concerned with it. Just a few decades ago, the majority opposed same-sex marriage and relationships, citing immorality, illegality, an impracticality. Now, though, society as a whole values tolerance and love which has erased much, but not all, of the existing opposition.

Studying Dante’s same-sex sinners in both Hell and Purgatory reveals parallels between his literary conversation and our conversations today, giving us a space to examine the ways in which we view and treat same-sex desire. Dante the poet includes same-sex sinners in *Inferno* who are punished with the violent, but he also puts them in *Purgatorio* purging their sins alongside the lustful. These different locations imply a complexity involved in identifying and addressing same-sex desire as opposed to a generalization and punishment of all same-sex lovers. Through his complicated and

unexpected treatment of same-sex desire in the *Comedy*, Dante provides us with an example of love, unity, and understanding to implement in our still-divisive society.

Sodomy Versus Same-Sex Desire: The Changing Face of Homosexuality

Medieval Christians saw same-sex desire manifest primarily through sodomy. Coming from the Biblical account of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction, the term "sodomy" in the Middle Ages was generally understood to be any non-reproductive sexual activity; sodomy was "the sin against nature" and typically referred to same-sex intercourse more often than not (Boswell, "Dante" 66). However, the term's meaning varied through medieval Europe, referring to same-sex desire to bestiality to self-love. Sodomy was a sin against nature because it opposed God's natural law which governed the purpose of sexual activity. Sinning in accordance with that law—for example, committing fornication with a partner of the opposite sex—was fundamentally less serious than sinning against that law, rendering same-sex desire worse than any other sexual sin between a man and a woman. In Italy sodomy had more of a double meaning; people viewed it "as both a social practice that created bonds between younger and older men and a shameful sin" (Stowell 157). Sodomy was not just a "shameful sin" against nature (i.e. homosexual). It was also a measure of bonds between men (i.e. homosocial). Most ordinary people, however, equated sodomy primarily with same-sex desire.

Practically all of medieval Europe reacted negatively toward same-sex desire and sodomy. By the fourteenth century, sodomy was "the unmentionable sin" (Boswell, "Dante" 69). The increasing opposition to same-sex relationships grew to influence not just popular opinion but also laws and punishments. States punished medieval sodomy

like they would any violent sin. By Dante's time, "every European state had laws punishing sodomy—in the sense only of homosexual acts—with castration or death" (Boswell, "Dante" 74). England punished sodomites through death by burning, as did France and eventually Spain; Castile punished sodomites through castration and hanging by the legs (Richards 143-144). Same-sex relationships were harshly punished because they were assumed to be violent. In the 11th century, St. Peter Damian wrote of sodomy as "a terrible and heinous sin," and his reasoning reveals how the sin might have been perceived as violent:

Indeed, this vice is the *death* of bodies, the *destruction* of souls. It *pollutes* the flesh; it *extinguishes* the light of the mind... For it is this which *violates* sobriety, *kills* modesty, *strangles* chastity and *butchers* irreparable virginity with the *dagger* of unclean contagion. It *defiles* everything, *staining* everything, *polluting* everything. (qtd. in Richards 139-140, emphasis mine)

Peter's language against sodomy is violent itself, as he accuses the sin of killing, strangling, and butchering among other offenses. Peter claims that sodomy destroys irreparable parts of the body and the soul, such as sobriety, modesty, and chastity. The violence of the sin comes from not just its defiance of God and his set natural order but also from the direct harm it brings, which for Peter is unparalleled.

For the medieval Christians, and for Dante, sodomy was a serious sin. St. Albert declared sodomy the worst of all sins, and St. Bernadino of Siena claimed that sodomy was dangerous because it was passed down through generations (Pequigney 23, Stowell 148). Other theologians went into almost excruciating detail to explain their disapproval of sodomy. One of Dante's main influences, Thomas Aquinas not only believed sodomy a

sin against nature, but he also believed it to be worse than any other sexual vice. He defended his point of view in his *Summa Theologiae*; as Joseph Pequigney explains:

To the objection that unnatural sins that harm no one should be less grave than adultery, seduction, and rape, which do harm others and so more offend against charity, St. Thomas replied that the order of nature derives from God, and so in the sexual sins by which that order is violated (*violatur*), the injury (*injuria*) is done to God Himself, the orderer of nature. (24)

Thomas claimed that participating in a same-sex relationship or giving into same-sex desire was worse than adultery, seduction, even rape and incest. Sexual sins in accordance with nature were less severe than sins against nature, a view that Dante derived from Thomas. This philosophy explained in detail the aversion that most medieval Christians felt toward same-sex desire and sodomy: it was against God's order.

In the midst of all of this opposition, same-sex relationships still existed in medieval Europe. Although many same-sex relationships were not usually legally recognized, some surviving documents exist concerning same-sex relationships. These documents were similar to business contracts, stating equal partnership, division of estate, same living quarters, and an emotional or personal relationship (Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions* 254). These relationships, then, closely resembled legal documentation of marriages without that specific name. Despite the frequency of these relationships, medieval Christians and rulers still opposed same-sex unions and began to stigmatize homosexual behavior (Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions* 248). Byzantine emperor Andronicus II issued a decree against extramarital relationships in the early 1300s, which affected perceptions of same-sex relationships: "If some wish to enter into ceremonies of same-

sex union, we should prohibit them, for they are not recognized by the church” (Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions* 249). The early attitudes toward same-sex relationships reflect previous modern attitudes towards same-sex marriage. Medieval Christians largely viewed same-sex relationships negatively, encouraging more widespread opposition.

Unlike the medieval Christians’ disapproval, support for gay marriage has exponentially increased in the past twenty years, let alone since the fourteenth century. According to previous Gallup polls, only 27% of Americans supported gay marriage twenty years ago (McCarthy). This number has grown immensely. In 2001, a Pew poll indicated that 57% of Americans opposed same-sex marriage while 35% supported it; these numbers have essentially flipped since then, with a 2016 poll showing 55% supporting same-sex marriage and 37% opposing it (Pew, “Changing Attitudes”). Many seem to think this upward trend will continue. Glen Bolger of Republican firm Public Opinion Strategies agrees that “this is an unprecedented shift in public opinion,” adding that “in 20 years it won’t even be an issue” (Cillizza). For many, acceptance of same-sex marriage is imminent. However, some of the medieval attitudes toward same-sex desire persist today, as there is still a sizeable minority who oppose gay marriage. Kim Davis, a Kentucky government County Clerk, received jail time for refusing to sign marriage licenses after the Supreme Court’s decision in June 2015, citing that signing betrayed her conscience (Associated Press). In Davis’s case, her moral opposition to same-sex marriage resulted in legal consequences, but it was a moral opposition nonetheless.

The Supreme Court justices’ dissenting opinions reflect this opposition from a legal standpoint. These judges’ opinions do not make a moral case against same-sex unions. Rather, they disagree with the legal action taken by the Court and the way they

say it interferes with the Constitution and fundamental American rights. For instance, Judge Roberts's dissenting opinion claims that states should not have to change their definition of marriage because "our Constitution does not enact any one theory of marriage" (*Obergefell v. Hodges*). The other dissenting opinions mimic these same ideas, citing qualms with the Court's "constitutional revision" and the prevention of "freedom from government action" (*Obergefell v. Hodges*). Judges Roberts, Scalia, Thomas, and Alito all contend that the Court does not have the power to make a decision about marriage, and that these decisions should remain with the State. For these Supreme Court justices, the main objection to same-sex marriage is not the relationship between two people of the same sex. Rather, they question the right of the government to have any dealings in these relationships, a shift away from the moralized thinking of Andronicus and other medieval governing officials.

Dante's Same-Sex Lovers: A Story of Punishment and Purgation

Dante's treatment of same-sex relationships is neither completely supportive nor oppositional. It is much more complex. Dante uses his *Comedy* to complicate the sin of same-sex desire in order to expose the real dangers to society, which are ethical rather than moral. Although we have been looking primarily at *Inferno*, it is necessary to also consider *Purgatorio* in this conversation. Dante the pilgrim sees same-sex sinners suffering in Hell and same-sex lovers purging their sin in Purgatory. Suddenly, "a sin of violence in *Inferno*... becomes a sin of excessive love in the *Purgatorio*" (Pequigney 22). For Dante, sodomy is a sin of violence instead of simply sexuality and is punished in the seventh circle of Hell, the circle of the violent. It is not just another manifestation of

sexual sin that can be punished with the lustful in circle two. In Purgatory, though, the same-sex lovers are not purging sodomy—they are merely purging excessive love along with the other souls who had sinned sexually. The differences here cause us to think about same-sex desire differently and not just as one blanket sin. When we examine sodomy in Hell and same-sex love in Purgatory, the ways that Dante approaches same-sex desire trouble any notions that Dante unequivocally condemns this sin or morally objects to it.

Sodomy in Hell

Dante the pilgrim finds the sodomites in the third section of the seventh circle of Hell, the circle of the violent, along with usurers and blasphemers. This third section contains all of the souls who sinned against God, nature, or industry. There is actually quite a bit of debate as to whether Dante the poet encounters sexual sinners in this circle. Dante never actually uses the word “sodomite” or “sodomy” when describing these souls; there is one mention of Sodom a few cantos beforehand, when Virgil explains the structure of Hell to Dante the Pilgrim (*Inf.* 11.50). Otherwise, the poet is all but silent on the matter. Even though he refrains from explicitly stating it, Dante still uses the landscape and punishment of the souls in cantos 15 and 16 to imply sodomy. The first thing Dante the pilgrim and Virgil notice as they enter the third subcircle is the ground: “the floor was coarse, dry sand” (*Inf.* 14.13). As we know, medieval philosophers and scholars believed sodomy to be an unnatural sin because it defies God’s original plan in several ways, including reproduction. Same-sex lovers would not have the ability to reproduce, and the sandy ground reflects this aspect of homosexual sin. Sand is unstable

and is also self-sterilizing, which “carries the implication that the sodomites would have deliberately chosen to forgo the fructifying purpose of sexuality conformable to nature” (Pequigney 25). One of the main problems with sodomy as a sin was its definition as a sexual relationship that could not involve reproduction. To many medieval Christians, all non-reproductive sexual relationships, including sodomy, were sinful, and Dante alludes to that notion with the sandy terrain.

Dante also uses an unnatural weather phenomenon to describe the sin of sodomy. The pilgrim and Virgil also see that “over all the sand there rained, with a slow falling / broad flakes of fire, like snow in the mountains / without wind” (*Inf.* 14.28-30). In other words, they see fiery snow. Fire in most instances denotes passion or desire. While this is true here, the fiery snow also serves two other purposes: it hints back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and it mirrors the unnatural conduct of the condemned souls (Pequigney 25). The citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah attempted to take sexual advantage of two foreign men, causing them to be condemned by God. Their sinful behavior was met with destruction by fire. In Hell, this fire rains down on these souls as a symbol of God’s judgment and as a symbol of their own desire as in the Bible, causing them to suffer even more. In terms of the souls’ unnatural sin, their sexual relationship with a member of the same sex goes against those natural laws that Thomas Aquinas explained. Two men in a sexual relationship was unnatural, while a man and woman in a sexual relationship was natural. The fiery snow, then, symbolizes the strangeness of the sin, just as fiery snow would be a strange natural phenomenon.

Dante the poet also implies that these souls are sexual sinners through their *contrapasso*. Apart from the burning sand and raining fire, these sinners must run

constantly in separate groups. When Dante the pilgrim speaks with a condemned sodomite, he learns that “whoever of this flock stands still / for an instant, must then lie for a hundred years / without brushing off the fire that strikes him” (*Inf.* 15.37-39). These souls feel pain running on the burning sand, but if they stop running, they must expose their whole bodies to fire. They are also punished if they try to change groups, although the nature of this punishment is not specified. This continuous movement echoes the continuous movement of the lustful back in the second circle; they are constantly driven by a wind, simulating their succumbing to desire. Likewise, the sodomites must run as a symbol of “the agitation of passion” and “the restlessness imposed on the psyche by erotic desire” (Pequigney 27). This reference back to another circle of sexual sin suggests that these sinners are also sexual sinners but guilty of a more serious sin.

Another aspect to the sodomites’ punishment is the deformation of their bodies.

When the pilgrim encounters a soul, he describes his appearance:

And I, when he stretched out his arm toward me,
penetrated with my eye his baked appearance, so
that his scorched face did not prevent
my intellect from recognizing him. (*Inf.* 15.25-28)

Because of the fire, these souls’ faces are almost unrecognizable. Dante the pilgrim remarks that this soul’s face appears baked and scorched even though he can still look past the deformity and recognize him. It’s possible that because these men were preoccupied with masculine beauty during life, they are forced to look on disfigured forms in death (Pequigney 28). It only makes sense for this punishment to be on the sodomites, not on the usurers or blasphemers. The combination of the emphasis on

physical appearance and physical activity also suggest that Dante the poet refers to sodomy in this circle: the sodomites' punishment is like a game. With the increasing amount of same-sex relationships in cities came an increasing amount of slang, including "the Game" (referring to homosexual activity) and "hunting" (referring to what is now known as cruising) (Richards 137). Both of these slang terms fed stereotypes of same-sex lovers as roving and predatory individuals, pulled strictly by their sexual desire. What Dante the pilgrim sees in Hell supports this idea. The souls in the third subcircle must perform naked, move continually, and stay within their "home group or team" to avoid further punishment. The souls in this circle were likely to have participated in "sexuality sporting with other men" and therefore must "team up in Hell for a punitive game that they are doomed to play forever" (Pequigney 29). This predatory stereotype is typical of same-sex relationships, especially between men, and also touches on the violence associated with sodomy in the Middle Ages.

If this is sodomy, then, why is it not punished with the lustful in the second circle? After all, sodomy is by definition sexual sin against nature, suggesting that these sinners should be punished with the other sexual sinners. If the essence of sodomy were sexual sin, the sodomites would definitely be with the lustful higher up in Hell. However, unlike those souls who simply let their passion overcome them, the sodomites (and other souls down in the lower circles) chose to pursue sin—they were more calculated and malicious (Cogan 8). In short, the sodomites are punished apart from the lustful because they pursued lust instead of simply giving in to it:

[To pursue lust] demanded the perseverance and energy that are characteristic of the irascible appetite, and it is for the disordered operation of that appetite that the

sodomites are distinguished from the lustful in the *Inferno* and punished more severely. (Cogan 59)

What Cogan calls the “irascible appetite” is the hot-tempered sexual appetite of the same-sex sinners. These sinners almost angrily pursue intercourse, not desiring it for its natural purpose. The sodomites chose to act on their sexual desire and target objects of that desire, which is their “disordered operation” of their sexual appetite. The targeting supports the stereotype of homosexuality as predatory as well, and this predatory nature in turn helps explain the violent nature of the sin and its subsequent place in the seventh circle.

Same-Sex Desire in Purgatory

Dante’s ultimate goal with his *Comedy* is a global political system with citizens motivated by love and respect coming together for the common good and creating an effective earthly system that reflects spiritual virtues. Dante is anti-hate, anti-corruption, and anti-division. Unlike the souls in Hell, the souls in Purgatory have repented from their sins which had resulted in division, corruption, and hatred. These sins all relate back to love. The first three terraces of Purgatory house the souls who loved evil and harmed others; the fourth terrace houses those who have no love or don’t have enough love for God or his creation; and the top three terraces have those who loved secondary goods more than or instead of God (Pequigney 34-35). As these souls purge their sins, they learn to love God more. The sexual sinners are in this last group of the incontinent. In fact, they are on the same terrace as the lustful; in *Inferno*, the lustful are in the second circle while the sodomites are lower in the seventh.

Although their placement in Purgatory differs from Hell, the same-sex lovers' purging process has similar characteristics to the sodomites' *contrapasso*. On the seventh terrace, fire blasts from the inner wall while a wind from the outer edge pushes the flames upward. Fire also rises from the floor, as is natural for fire rather than the falling fire of Hell. The shades are burning and singing a hymn asking God "to remove lust from the heart and to cleanse it with his purifying fire" (Ruud 139). Here, fire still hearkens back to ideas of desire and passion, but instead of fire of judgment, this fire purifies and refines. The souls in Purgatory are also running. The pilgrim says, "There on both sides I see each soul make haste, / and each one kiss each other, without stopping, / contented with brief welcomes" (*Purg.* 26.31-33). Like the souls in Hell, these souls run in two distinct groups. Instead of avoiding each other, though, the members of each group kiss each other as they run. Their movement is also different in that these souls run "willingly and penitentially" (Pequigney 31). They run because they want to move closer to God, and they want to purge their sin. They move in a constant state of repentance until they are fully purged of the sin they repented from.

The most important aspect of the same-sex lovers in Purgatory versus the sodomites in Hell comes back to definition. Like the lustful, same-sex lovers in Purgatory are condemned for excessively loving a secondary good. The souls in Purgatory are not purging sexual sin or same-sex desire. Instead, they are purging excessive love. Joseph Pequigney explains the concept this way:

...the love and desire of the purgatorial sodomites cannot have been unnatural. Neither did they seek an evil object but only things good in themselves; and the good they yearned for are among the best of the terrestrial kind, more worthy to

be loved than those sought by any of the repentant souls other than the lustful heterosexuals; and their homosexual love went wrong for no other reason than that they pursued its good object with “too much vigor.” (35)

Dante the poet does not criticize same-sex lovers for loving members of the same sex, just as he does not punish the sodomites for loving members of the same sex. Instead, the souls in Hell sinned, resulting in consequences that are manifestations of the essence of the sin of same-sex desire, such as non-reproduction and a forceful exertion of power. The souls in Purgatory simply loved too much. Their desire was for another person rather than God, regardless of the sex of the person they loved. They pursued a good object with too much vigor. It seems, then, that Dante diverges from medieval thoughts about same-sex desire in that these souls meet their eternal destinies not based on who they loved but how they loved.

Medieval Meets Modern: Love or Marriage?

In reality Dante’s attitude toward same-sex desire is quite tolerant for his time both literally and literarily. When the pilgrim encounters the sodomites in Hell, he is surprised and sorrowful, not disgusted or angry. After speaking with Brunetto Latini, the pilgrim finds three Florentines of high status in the company of the sodomites. He says, “Not scorn, but grief was fixed in / me by your condition, so great that it will long / endure” (*Inf.* 16.52-54). No matter how Dante views sodomy or same-sex desire, he has an attitude of tolerance and respect for those who may be guilty of it. This attitude differs greatly from those of his contemporaries. Pequigney suggests, “If the lenience does not extend to the sin—though even there he judges it less harshly than he and than the moral

theologians of the era did—it extends most definitely to the sinners” (30-31). Just as Dante the poet treats sodomy differently than his peers, the pilgrim reacts differently than might be expected for the time period. Instead of hating these souls or acting disgusted by them, he has empathy towards them.

Dante’s reactions resonate with our current climate. Today, the attitudes toward same-sex desire are changing. In a poll conducted by CBS and the New York Times, thirty percent of previous opposers of same-sex marriage now support it (Dutton, De Pinto, Salvanto, and Backus). Even though the country is still divided on this issue, people are still changing their minds about the subject. Also, many opinions about same-sex marriage today are not necessarily about same-sex desire. In other words, people today do not necessarily support or oppose same-sex marriage because of the “same-sex” aspect, just like Dante does not deal with that aspect in his work. For example, a number of people today view same-sex marriage to be a question of political equality. One supporter claims that “denying gay and lesbian couples the right to marry goes against the basic principles of equality on which our country was founded” (Corey and Campbell). Many agree that gay marriage is about marriage as much as it is about equal rights. In fact, conservative Justice Kennedy wrote in his opinion on the matter that “marriage is a keystone of the Nation’s social order. States have contributed to the fundamental character of marriage by placing at the center of many facets of the legal and social order” (Grenell). As Kennedy and others have stated, marriage is not just a religious commitment—it is a legal contract. It would be wrong, then, to focus on just one aspect of marriage (the religious aspect) at a detriment to the other (the legal aspect). Dante was also extremely concerned with the legal and social order of society; after all, he punishes

the sodomites for their violent sexual behavior that threatens the existence of an incorrupt government and loving social fabric.

However, the primary concern for most people today is the same concern Dante had when he wrote his *Comedy*: love. In a recent piece for *The Atlantic*, sisters Elizabeth Corey and Mary Campbell wrote about their relationship with each other despite their differing views on this matter. Corey, the conservative one of the pair, writes, “It is my deep conviction that the complementarity of gender—man and woman—and the possibility of new life that may result from their union aren’t accidental but essential to the institution of marriage” (Corey and Campbell). She shares the same feelings as other opponents of same-sex marriage, stating her beliefs in the traditional view of a one-man-one-woman marriage. Corey’s sister, Mary Campbell, supports same-sex marriage and is, in fact, a lesbian. But neither Corey nor Campbell want their views on same-sex desire to change their relationship. Campbell says, “Ultimately what I care about is not [Elizabeth’s] view on any particular issue—no matter how personal—but the actual content of our relationship...I choose at once to love my sister and disagree with her on gay marriage” (Corey and Campbell). Her words here reveal something powerful that is at the crux of Dante’s argument in his *Comedy*: love should transcend everything else. Like Dante, both Corey and Campbell are tolerant of the others’ beliefs despite the fact that they differ. This mutual respect and love is the foundation for society according to Dante, and it’s the motivation for his *Comedy*.

At the end of his essay on sodomy in Dante’s *Comedy*, Joseph Pequigney makes a provocative statement: “If only the Dantean love ethic had prevailed, the history of

Western sexuality for the past half millennium would have been quite different” (40). Pequigney refers back to Dante’s treatment of same-sex desire. For Dante, the end goal is love and unity. A recent poetic rendering of the Supreme Court’s ruling describes it this way: “Hark! Love is love, and / love is love is love is love. / It is so ordered” (Lapidous). When we look to Dante’s writings, we see that if love is at the core of all relationships, society can thrive and the world can be a more unified place. Studying Dante does not necessarily help us solve problems or silence arguments, but it does help us explore different viewpoint and challenges us to figure out what we want to get out of controversy. If we let him, Dante can help us move past all of the controversy and embrace the diversity that can make us a more unified society concerned more about others than about self.

SECTION FOUR

RELIGION, RACE, AND THE RACIALIZED “OTHER”: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN *INFERNO*, ISLAMOPHOBIA, AND ANTISEMITISM

The country has been buzzing recently about President Trump’s 14th executive order titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry to the United States,” a new “travel ban” against citizens of certain non-U.S. Muslim countries. The order stalled immigration of citizens of some Arab Muslim-majority countries for at least 90 days and suspended refugee admission into the U.S. for at least 120 days. Three days after the president gave this order, a Washington state federal judge temporarily halted it (Hill, Pearle, and Kelsey). While this was good news to many Americans, President Trump has since confirmed that he is planning to sign a new executive order soon. Understandably, this “travel ban” has upset many people who advocate for hosting refugees and welcoming those from other countries. Verbal and physical attacks against Muslims across the country have increased since the order was announced. Asma Afsaruddin, professor of Islamic studies at Indiana University, said that the order is “tapping into the climate of fear and suspicion since 9/11. It’s a master narrative that pits the Muslim world against the West” (qtd. in Shane, Rosenberg, and Lipton). In other words, the turmoil surrounding the travel ban reflects America’s troubled perception of Islam.

Sadly, Americans’ concern over national security has caused many to discredit entire groups of people and perhaps unknowingly support and encourage hatred and bigotry. Islamophobia runs rampant in our country, but new surges of Antisemitism are

following in its footsteps. Growing numbers of people discriminate against both cultures based on the negative stereotypes propagated about these certain groups. Antagonism toward Muslims and Jews is often traced back to the Middle Ages, but studying Dante reveals a more complicated and nuanced perspective. In *Inferno*, Dante the pilgrim's encounters with Muslims and Jews emphasize the criticism of individual sin, discourage generalizing entire groups, and advocate for mutual respect and understanding among members of different cultures. Dante's treatment of these two communities provides a model for us to use as we work to understand other cultures, speaking against the discrimination and stereotyping we are so prone to fall into today.

Current Conversations and Climates

Recent conversations about Islam have revolved around extremist groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS), causing people to conflate extremism with Islam and discriminate against Arab populations altogether. In fact, President Obama received backlash for *not* calling extremism Islamic (Hellyer "Stupidity"). According to H. A. Hellyer's research, there are over 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide. They are not members of extremist groups and are actually more often their victims ("Stupidity"). This research does not conclude that extremist groups are un-Islamic because they do practice some of the same beliefs and consult the same religious texts. However, the conflation of Islam and extremism is growing in popularity and leading many to discredit members of Islamic communities as violent, divisive, and even uncivilized.

One poignant instance of this discrimination occurred in a Georgia middle school. Right after the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015, seventh-grader Farah Darvesh was met with

ugly words accusing her people—Muslims—of violence. One of three Muslims in her school, Farah said, “When they said Muslim terrorists did it, everyone’s heads turned and all eyes in the room were on me” (qtd. in Irshad). A similar incident occurred at a Chicago middle school, when 12-year-old Lana Alshahrour was judged for wearing a hijab because, in the words of her classmaes, “that’s what terrorists wear” (qtd. in Irshad). These two examples are a small sliver of the incidents that reveal the severity of anti-Muslim sentiment in America. What’s worse is that Arab populations worldwide know that America as a country Others them. An October 2016 poll conducted by the Arab Center in Washington, D.C. asked adults of Arab nations about their attitudes with the United States. About 70% had a positive opinion of the American people, but 75% held a negative view of U.S. foreign policy (2). Muslims in other countries are aware of the increasing negative perceptions of their culture, evidenced by their mistrust of and disappointment in America’s formal dealings with their nations.

Anti-Semitic feelings are also increasing. The Anti-Defamation League says Anti-Semitic speech has reached “levels unseen since the 1930s” (“Donald Trump’s Answer”). This fact is evidenced by recent incidents, such as one in New York City. On a subway car, passengers discovered hateful messages such as “Jews belong in the oven” (Bromwich). They also found swastikas and other Anti-Semitic graffiti. Gregory Locke, a passenger on the train, said the incident was shocking but also not surprising (Bromwich). Today’s climate seems to be increasingly hateful to Jewish communities with other recorded incidents of hate speech, graffiti, and even bomb threats. There are also reports that since the election, hate crimes and “malicious speech” have increased, with Jews being primary targets (“Donald Trump’s Answer”). It is not surprising people

credit the election and new administration for spreading, or at least ignoring, growing hatred. In a recent press conference, an Israeli reporter asked President Trump about the rise of Antisemitism and the “concerns that the new administration was encouraging xenophobia and racism;” the president responded by avoiding the question and talking about his recent victory (“Donald Trump’s Answer”). Of course we cannot say definitively that Trump administration is the cause of increasing Anti-Semitic feelings and actions, but we can say definitively that these feelings and actions *are* increasing. Although prejudice and discrimination against Islamic communities might sometimes be more widely broadcasted, the same feelings towards Jewish communities are growing just as quickly and are just as important.

Muslims in Medieval Europe

Looking at medieval treatment of Muslim and Jewish populations gives an interesting perspective on current issues of Islamophobia and Antisemitism. Similar to modern viewpoints, medieval Christian encounters with Muslims tended to be more negative. In some regions, Christians feared Islam because it was new, and there was an anxiety related to loss of territory, the political and cultural expansion of Islam, and the large number of conversions (Frank 186). Because of this fear, there was some tension between Islamic and Christian communities. Typical medieval Christian beliefs about Islam derived from its reputation as a Christian heresy and pagan religion: “Western Christian responses to Islam...evolved largely from its early perception as a polemical caricature of pagan idolatry and barbaric practices into a theological target of apologetic engagement as a Christological heresy” (Negrón 208). These people believed that Islam

and its adherents were idol-worshippers and deniers of Christ. Medieval literature also depicted members of Islamic communities as devils and as evil; they were also likened to giants, monsters, and even animals (Montaño 122). Medieval Christians maintained a negative view of Islam because of their negative assumptions. It was different, uncivilized, and even “barbaric.” Despite this picture of medieval Christian and Muslim interactions, the relationship between the two was not actually so black and white. Medieval Western culture was much more of a “web of multicultural historical contingencies rather than the march of a manifest destiny” (Chism 631). While the medieval Christians still opposed Islam, their opposition did not completely define the relationship that medieval Christians had with Muslims. It was more complex than a simple East versus West conflict.

Muslims in Dante’s Text

In Dante’s interactions with Muslims in *Inferno*, we begin to see the emphasis on connecting with others and creating peace instead of focusing on differences and creating division. In Limbo, Dante encounters three Muslims, one being military leader Saladdin. Saladdin “outshone his military efforts against the crusaders as a Muslim avatar of chivalric virtue in the Christian imagination” (Negrón 209-210). Saladdin’s involvement in the crusades is his identifying characteristic. Historian P. H. Newby suggests that Saladdin was more of a man of blood than most biographers admit, but his high reputation in the West was still well-deserved (13). Historically, Saladdin’s accomplishments extend beyond these military feats. He united Western Islam under his rule, defeated the Frankish army, and occupied most of Western Jerusalem—in short, he

was an admired Muslim (Hamilton 381). Medieval Christians admired Saladdin because of his tolerance. Saladdin allowed Christians and Jews to live together in Jerusalem along with Muslims, and he upheld the “Christian” code of honor. He was also a patron of knowledge and learning. Dante’s image of Saladdin reflects this praise and respect. When Dante the pilgrim sees Saladdin in Limbo, he is sitting among other important and admired rulers (*Inf.* 4.127-129). Dante the poet shows Saladdin the same honor by putting him in their company. However, Saladdin is separated. The pilgrim mentions that in the company of the rulers, he is “alone, to the side” (*Inf.* 4.128). Although Saladdin is Othered here, it is unclear why Saladdin is alone. Dante the poet separates him from the other rulers, but his reasoning does not keep him from including Saladdin in this impressive group.

Dante the pilgrim also sees Muslim philosophers Avicenna and Averroës in Limbo, but unlike Saladdin, these men are fully included with their company. These two thinkers were known as “intellectual giants” of the Islamic community (Negrón 209). As Dante the pilgrim surveys the noble castle and all of its inhabitants, he has to lift his eyes in order to see where Avicenna and Averroës are sitting (*Inf.* 4. 130). Dante the poet valued philosophy and theology, so he places them a little higher in Limbo to mimic that respect. Both Avicenna and Averroës are sitting with philosophers such as Ptolemy and Hippocrates (*Inf.* 4.143), illustrating how highly Dante respected these two men and their work.

Dante revered these two Muslim philosophers largely for their contributions to his *Comedy* through the influence of their commentaries on Aristotle, one of Dante’s most profound influences. Aristotle’s fame had declined in the West after his death until about

the 12th century. About a hundred or so years before Dante, “the notably rigorous and illuminating commentaries of Avicenna and Averroës interpreted and developed Aristotle’s views in striking ways. These commentaries in turn proved exceedingly influential in the earliest reception of the Aristotelian corpus into the Latin West in the twelfth century” (Shields). Avicenna and Averroës wrote about Aristotle’s works, and because of their contributions, Aristotle’s works spread in popularity. Arabic was more easily translated, making Aristotle’s ancient Greek words and other previously unavailable texts increasingly accessible to Western European thinkers in the 11th and 12th centuries (Spade). Dante actually read Aristotle through Thomas Aquinas, leading Dante the poet to use Thomas’s thoughts on Aristotle as a physical and moral structure for Hell. St. Thomas Aquinas was one of the primary Western commentators on Aristotle, and he combined Christianity and ancient philosophy. Because of Avicenna and Averroës’s work, Aristotle’s texts could reach men like Thomas and, subsequently, Dante. Without the contributions in translation and interpretation from these two Muslim philosophers, Dante would not have had access to his greatest philosophic influences.

It is true that Dante the poet greatly admires Saladdin, Avicenna, and Averroës. A huge marker of this respect is the fact that their names are mentioned in the *Comedy* at all. As he walks through Limbo and marvels at all of the souls, he says he “cannot describe them in full” (*Inf.* 4.145). Despite the need to move on with his journey, Dante the pilgrim still takes time to name Saladdin, Avicenna, and Averroës among the other warriors, rulers, and philosophers whom he honors. But while Dante praises and respects the three Muslims in Limbo, he does not leave them without fault. Saladdin, Avicenna, and Averroës are still condemned by absence of faith. While these three men are

essentially blameless in a worldly sense, they lack “Belief” (Iannucci 70). Dante the poet places these men with the virtuous pagans in Limbo because he greatly respects them but also because they did not believe in the Christian God. Explicit faith is the “exception to the rule of condemnation for virtuous pagans” (Iannucci 71). If these men had merely placed their faith in God, they would have been saved. Dante the poet does not condemn them specifically for being Muslim as these men have the same fate as Greek and Roman pagans, but he does condemn them for weak faith.

In the eighth circle of the fraudulent, Dante the pilgrim’s encounter with Muslims becomes more complex. This particular Muslim meeting is more complicated simply because of the soul that Dante converses with: Mohammed. Similar to Limbo, the poet does not discriminate against Muslims in this *bolgia* which might manifest in a pocket full of schismatic Muslims. Instead, Dante the poet focuses on Mohammed’s sins as an individual. When the pilgrim first enters the ninth *bolgia*, he begins by saying that he cannot even describe what he sees: “Who could ever, even with unbound words, till in / full of the blood and wounds that I now saw... / Every tongue would surely fail” (*Inf.* 28.1-2, 4). The main sin in this canto—schism—results in punishment too gruesome for Dante to describe with words, even if he were not bound by the rules of poetry. Schism is too serious a sin for Dante, so much so that it’s practically unspeakable. The souls themselves are torn from top to bottom, making their intestines and stomachs visible (*Inf.* 28.23-27). These souls tore Christianity and created division in the body of Christ, so their bodies are divided and torn. Their insides are exposed for everyone to see the darkness and mutilation within. The schismatics also experience this punishment repeatedly. Once their wounds heal, a devil is ready to rip them open again (*Inf.* 28.37-

42). Always a reminder of their sin, this process also represents schism in that division usually leads to more division.

Mohammed represents schism as he was believed to have divided the Christian faith to create the new religion of Islam. In medieval times, Mohammed was thought to be a Nestorian Christian—one who denied that Christ was simultaneously human and divine—before he founded Islam; thus, he was believed to be a heretic and schismatic, who drew away a third of the world’s believers from the “true faith” (Martinez and Durling 442). Mohammed’s physical appearance manifests his sin, but his presence and behavior do as well. When the pilgrim sees Mohammed, he is “absorbed in the sight of him” (*Inf.* 28.28). Dante the pilgrim cannot help but stare at the horrendously disfigured founder of Islam, gazing at his gaping wounds. Even in death, Mohammed draws in a Christian and arrests his attention, if only for a brief second. As Dante suggests, it’s Mohammed’s nature to divide souls from their faith. Dante the pilgrim also sees Mohammed’s son-in-law, Ali, whose face is carved open (*Inf.* 28.32). While Mohammed divided Christianity to create Islam, Ali divided Islam. His wounds may refer to this splitting of the religion into Sunni and Shia (Martinez and Durling 442). Echoing the repetition of these souls’ punishments, division begets more division.

Although Mohammed’s sin is closely tied to his religion, Dante the poet does not condemn him specifically for being Muslim. Rather, Mohammed’s true sin is creating division and dissention. Mohammed’s place in Hell is not because of “a theological appreciation of Islam in its own terms” but on the disruption within the “ecclesiastical community” (Negrón 211). Mohammed (and other sowers of discord) divided Christians, causing arguments and corruption as well as souls leaving the Christian faith. Dante does

emphasize the divisive nature of the religion and how dangerous and damaging these belief systems can be both religiously and politically. What we have in *Inferno* 28, then, are “scattered, mostly negative but more complex allusions to Islam as a political force and schismatic movement with a distinctive religious profile within Christian heresiology” (Negrón 209). Dante portrays Islam as a heresy of the true religion, Christianity, but he does not technically punish Mohammed and Ali for being Muslims. Their punishments create a negative tone concerning the religion. Yet even if Dante does disapprove of Islam, his primary concern is the discord and disagreement that Mohammed and other schismatics bring not only to the Christian religion but also to society as a whole. Schism can easily move from one area to another, threatening to tear apart more than just religions. Dante, in trying to protect his society and culture, punishes those who desire to tamper with the unity and peace that could exist.

Medieval Antisemitism in Communities and the *Comedy*

Similar to the relationship between medieval Christians and Muslims, interactions between Jews and Christians were generally negative. Most medieval Christians discriminated against Jews because of religious stereotypes. These negative attitudes grew from a need to differentiate themselves and prove Christianity’s superiority to Judaism (Katz 55). In a way, they felt the need to flaunt their supremacy and almost condescendingly separate themselves from Jewish inferiority. Also, in medieval Europe the word “Jew” was sometimes used for an enemy of Christ because they ignored the salvation he brought (Glick 157). Medieval Christians typically viewed Jews as “Christ-killers” and as “ever blind to the fulfilment of their Messianic hopes and stubbornly

attached to Mosaic law” (Negrón 208). Medieval Christians looked down on Jews because they refused to see the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. The mid- to late-thirteenth century saw public burnings of the Talmud and other anti-Jewish violent acts (Negrón 208). Medieval Christians also continuously tried to convert Jews to Christianity. Their negative feelings toward Jews did not stop them from trying to encourage them to change their religious faith. The Christians cited a New Testament scripture as their reasoning for converting the Jews. Speaking to the Romans, Paul says that “blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved” (Rom. 11.25b-26a, *KJV*). The medieval Christians believed that the full plan of God would not be complete until all Jews were Christians. Thus, medieval antisemitism appeared in these conversions, as the Christians did not care for Jewish souls but instead cared about their own conversion mission.

Jews in Dante’s Text

Because Dante’s time was so much involved in anti-Jewish attitudes and violence, it is surprising that Dante does not entertain these ideas in his *Comedy*. Similar to his treatment of Muslims, Dante’s treatment of Jews in *Inferno* is fairly complex and nuanced. For the most part, Jews are absent from the *Comedy* with the exception of those righteous souls such as Rachel and Moses who are in Paradise, and “hints of their less worthy Old Testament brethren are subtly voiced throughout” (Cox 35-36). Dante the poet hints at some of these souls in *Inferno* 4, when Virgil tells the pilgrim about the Harrowing of Hell—that is, an account of Jesus coming to Hell between his crucifixion and resurrection to preach to the damned and save the souls of the Old Testament

righteous. Dante also uses Jewish teaching in his justice system for *Inferno*. Dante draws from the Old Testament idea of an eye for an eye in his *contrapasso* while the construction of Hell is based on Christian principles via Thomas Aquinas. Dante creates a Judaic system as understood by the Christian (Cox 46). The Jews are not mentioned as a group, though, and there are few Jewish souls punished. In *Paradiso*, Dante's Hebrews speak as orthodox medieval Christians, but his Jews are silent. They are "denied an identity as speaking subjects and relegated to a figurative location of immaterial presence" (Cox 44): they are present without presence. The idea of the Jews hovers over the *Comedy*, but as a group, they aren't physically there. Instead, Dante includes a few Jews as examples, but even then he complicates the idea of using these souls as representations for the entire group.

If any soul were to represent the Jews like Mohammed could represent the Muslims, it would be Judas Iscariot. "Judaism's foremost representative" in *Inferno* comes from the Christian New Testament, not the Judaic Old Testament (Cox 36). Judas is the foremost sinner in Hell apart from Satan. He has the greatest punishment because he committed the greatest sin: betraying Christ. For punishment, Judas's head and upper body are continuously eaten by Satan (*Inf.* 34.63). Judas hangs himself for betraying Christ, so his eternal punishment mimics his death. It also evokes the idea of Satan having complete control over Judas, as he eats the head. If Judas is a symbol of the Jews for any reason, it is because of their betrayal of Christ. On the day of Pentecost, Peter accuses the Jews of crucifying Jesus (Acts 2.36). Whether literally or figuratively, the Jews' collective sin resembles Judas's individual sin. If Judas has to be a symbol of the Jews, he represents their stubbornness and unwillingness to believe in Christ and accept

his teaching. Dante, then, could be harshly commenting on Jewish beliefs and condemning them for those beliefs. Of course, Dante is consistent and does not conflate the Jews with Judas. Judas is punished for his own individual sins.

The other anticipated place for the Jews, then, would be with the usurers. The sin of usury was stereotypically Jewish as Jews were known specifically for being moneylenders. As they reach the end of the seventh circle, Virgil tells the pilgrim to go speak with the usurers while he retrieves Geryon to take them into Malebolge. The pilgrim notices that all of the usurers are sitting, and he does not recognize any of them (*Inf.* 17.45, 53). These souls collected money dishonestly instead of working for it, suggesting that these sinners are lazy and explaining why they are sitting. Usurers were also usually widely known in communities, so here they are unrecognizable. Dante the poet also compares usurers with animals. They are called dogs (*Inf.* 17.49-51), and Vitaliano, the one sinner who speaks, makes animalistic moves and is likened to an ox (*Inf.* 17.74-75). The animal references here connect to the animalistic nature of the sin. Usury focuses on carnal desires, and the ways that usurers treat others are brutish and uncivilized. According to Augustine, Jews are carnal, “relentlessly and indisputably so” because, as Daniel Boyarin claims, the Jews do not recognize that there is both a carnal and spiritual aspect to scripture (qtd. in Cox 70). This connection with carnality makes it easy for Dante to vilify all Jews with the usurers, but he chooses not to. Dante again does not identify any of the usurers in Hell as Jewish, although he could easily dismiss the whole culture as carnal, uncivilized, and greedy, according to medieval Christian stereotypes.

This conversation becomes more interesting when we consider Caiaphas, another Jew in *Inferno*. He, like Mohammed, is down in Malebolge in the depths of Hell. He is in the sixth pocket, that of the hypocrites and, again like Mohammed, is not punished for being a Jew. The souls in this *bolgia* walk slowly, cry, and look defeated. They wear robes with hoods that are “on the outside...dazzlingly gilded, but / within they are all of lead” (*Inf.* 23.64-65). The hypocrites’ robes look beautiful, but they must carry around the weight eternally. The robes here symbolize the sin of hypocrisy and refer back to Jesus’s comment in the Bible about the Pharisees being whitewashed tombs. These souls spoke differently than they acted in life; their outsides looked different than their insides. Caiaphas does not wear a robe, though. Instead, he is stretched out like a cross in the road and acts as a bridge so that he must feel the weight of every soul who walks over him. Virgil also tells us that “his father-in-law is laid out in the same way / in this ditch, and the others of the council that sowed / so ill for the Jews” (*Inf.* 23.121-123). These souls were members of the Sanhedrin council who delivered Jesus to be crucified—Caiaphas was the head of the Sanhedrin. He and the other council members feel a heavier weight because of their hand in sacrificing the son of God.

In this instance, Caiaphas is not condemned for being Jewish. Instead, Dante the poet criticizes his sacrificing Jesus to cover up his own hypocrisy and silence criticism against it (Martinez and Durling 360). Dante the poet does not send Caiaphas to Hell because of his Jewish heritage and belief. According to this particular instance, then, it does not seem that Dante follows the Anti-Semitic tones of his culture. However, one of Dante’s comments could be taken as Jewish vilification. Virgil suggests that Caiaphas and the other Sanhedrin members sowed “ill for the Jews.” Dante and other medieval

Christians believed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish diaspora were direct punishment for their crucifying Jesus (Martinez and Durling 360). Dante blames the Jews as a group for killing Christ, definitely a possible Anti-Semitic opinion. But Dante does not condemn all of the Jews he knows to Hell for the crucifixion, just as he does not include a *bolgia* filled with exclusively Muslim schismatics. Again, he focuses on individual sin, refusing to punish an entire group for one soul's mistakes.

Medieval Meets Modern: A Lesson in Getting Along

Examining Dante's treatment of Muslims and Jews, we see that medieval perceptions about these communities parallel strongly with modern perceptions. An interesting medieval connection appears when we think about the motivation and reasoning behind our fear and our desired outcomes from our interactions with Muslim and Jewish populations: we want conversion. Sociologist Bobby Sayyid claims Islamophobia today causes similar reactions to the medieval Christians' reactions. He says, "[Islamophobia] only wants to spread democracy, not to expropriate resources; it does not want to exterminate ignoble savages, only to domesticate unruly Muslims" (qtd. in Considine). Just like medieval Christians, most people today do not want to destroy the Muslim and Jewish populations. Instead, they want to change the cultures and their behavior to match theirs in order to have "peace of mind." Islamophobia and antisemitism involve fearing another culture because we think it threatens ours. This fear makes some sense, as Muslims are publicly depicted as villains, which produces racist anxiety (Considine). These stereotypes, though, feed Islamophobia, just as stereotypes against Jews feed discrimination.

Connections with Dante and his text are even more relevant. Dante's ideas about Jews and Muslims are still imperfect. He does still want conversion in the sense of a true belief or explicit faith from these souls. In this situation, then, we can look at Dante and discuss the issues with "converting" Muslims and Jews today. With Dante and people today, both are trying to fix another to be more like them to support what is seen as the greater good—a "humanitarian intervention" (Considine). On the other hand, we also can look to Dante's example of peace, understanding, and respect as a model for how we should start talking about other cultures. Although he disagrees with their decision not to believe in God, Dante praises Avicenna, Averroës, and Saladdin by putting them in Limbo with the other virtuous pagans. He does not put them in Hell specifically because of their culture or their belief system. The same goes for Caiaphas and Mohammed. Dante does not revere these two men as evidenced by their place in Malebolge, but their sins have nothing to do with their Jewish or Muslim cultures specifically. Essentially, Dante does not punish souls for being part of a different culture, an example we can learn from today.

With his treatment of Muslims and Jews, Dante provides a model that emphasizes acceptance and finding similarities instead of furthering discrimination and stereotyping. One of the most obvious ways he achieves this end is through his punishment of Muslim and Jewish souls. Dante punishes individuals for their sins against God, but Dante refrains from punishing the entire Islamic and Jewish cultures. Instead of putting all Muslims in the pocket of the schismatics or all Jews with the usurers, he focuses just on individuals. This pattern repeats throughout *Inferno*, as Dante does not punish whole groups but rather specific sinners. While Dante's individual souls can definitely serve as

examples or possibly representative for specific groups, he does not purposefully stereotype entire groups of people in his poem. Additionally, Dante stresses affinities with Islamic and Jewish culture instead of differences. Dante uses Old Testament principles to create the justice system on which *Inferno* is based. Without this Jewish teaching, there is no *Inferno*. We also see this with both Mohammed's and Saladdin's adherence to Western values. Dante recognizes these similarities. They do not save these souls by any means, but they still speak to Dante's willingness to align himself with another culture that differs greatly from his own. Throughout the *Comedy*, Dante emphasizes unity, and his treatment of Muslims and Jews, while imperfect, supports this thread.

A small piece of Dante's vision actually came to fruition at the end of February this year when Muslim and Jewish communities came together in the wake of an Anti-Semitic attack. Jewish cemeteries in Missouri and Pennsylvania were vandalized and over 200 headstones were damaged. In an expression of love and a symbol of community, Muslims rallied to help raise over \$150,000 which was close to eight times the original fundraising goal. Salaam Bhatti, a spokesperson for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, said about the incident, "This attack is not just an attack on our Jewish brothers and sisters, but on our common community. We believe we need to be protecting our fellow humans from this extremism" (qtd. in Yan and Levenson). In the middle of increased violence and hatred, these two communities are banding together to fight injustice. What a beautiful and poignant example of the unity Dante calls for that results from putting aside our differences and focusing on what makes us the same.

SECTION FIVE

THE END OF THE MATTER: READING *INFERNO* IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

Most English students who have heard of Dante's *Comedy* know that it is first and foremost a religious work. It is true that Dante's epic is steeped in religion. Our society is increasingly the opposite. It would seem, then, that Dante's poem has little relevance, or at least little relevance outside of a religious or spiritual context. While I am a Christian, I have never read any part of Dante's *Comedy* in a purely religious way. In fact, I think the *Comedy* has more power when we consider all of its implications: the philosophical, literary, social, political, historical, classical, ethical, moral. Dante's prowess as a poet is revealed through his skillful interweaving of multiple perspectives and disciplines, and because of this complexity, we can and should read his work in our increasingly secular society. While religion is undeniably a part of *Inferno*, the moral and ethical implications of the poem make it resonant in a postmodern world that focuses on creating a more ethical society over a religious one.

When I first read Dante's poem, I read it purely as a piece of literature. I did not read his text in a religious way or in order to gain religious insight. I would argue that few people read his text that way outside of his intended audience in the fourteenth century. Instead, I wanted to study Dante's text as a poem. Of course, any student of literature knows that examining a text only in a literary space is usually not possible or prudent. Once I started to read *Inferno*, I noticed the multiple layers of meaning in the text. I was specifically drawn to Dante's justice system, his idea of ethical behavior, and

how those relate to our society's justice system. For instance, Dante structures Hell based on a hierarchy of sin, with sins of passion being the least punishable and sins of malice being the most punishable. Lust is the least of the sins and treachery is the worst.

Dante's system is founded in religion, with the worst offenses violating the golden rule: love your neighbor as yourself. Today, though, our justice system is based more on a system of general moral transgression, not specific religious tenets. Our opinions and laws about acceptable behavior closely resemble Dante's, but they differ in a few ways. For instance, medieval society valued loyalty and honesty while our society focuses more on safety, privacy, and security. Murderers today are more likely to receive death sentences than traitors are, although they sometimes do. There is a distinction between Dante's view of treachery and our own. While Dante viewed this sin as the most deplorable, our society does not consider the ethical dilemma here as serious.

Endangering the state is more problematic rather than the lack of integrity that these people display. Instead, we place more emphasis on those crimes whose ethical issues endanger personal security or safety. Reading *Inferno* reveals the different ideologies between medieval Europe and postmodern America: a shift from emphasis on community to emphasis on the individual. In Dante's time, more serious crimes (such as shady political dealings) were those that violated the community or the society as a whole; our more serious crimes violate individuals (such as murder or rape). This difference is surprising to me because I see so many other connections with Dante's text. However, these divergences provide a good foundation for discussing the complexities of the connections between *Inferno* and current society. They remind us that the links we do find are not perfect.

The major similarities I see while reading *Inferno* are in Dante's ethical value system and our own, something that has always intrigued me. When we look at the history of the Middle Ages, it appears to contradict our beliefs today. Medieval Christian stereotypes regarding marginalized populations caused them to avoid others and treat them as lesser human beings. What is fascinating, though, is that Dante either complicates these attitudes or completely opposes them. I read Dante's *Inferno*—and the whole *Comedy* really—as a treatise of sorts on the way we treat our fellow man. This perspective also largely influenced this project; I can clearly see the connections between how Dante urges his audience to treat one another and how our society encourages each of us to treat one another. Dante undoubtedly values peace, unity, and love, three of our society's strongest values. These core ideals permeate all of these smaller discussions about diversity and controversy in medieval Europe and postmodern America.

Consider gender. Today, feminism aims for women to be treated equally with men. In Dante's day, this was not possible, but it also was not valued. Does this difference in societies mean we cannot still learn from Dante's work or use it to talk about our own issues? Obviously the answer is no. When we examine *Inferno*'s women, we see a myriad of possibly proto-feminist figures. Francesca da Rimini considerably breaks gender stereotypes, particularly of the female propensity for sexual sin and the perceived weakness related to that idea. She is definitely not a perfect representation of a woman who lives outside of gender confines, but she does make significant movement in challenging those perspectives. But it is in imperfections, complexities, and gray areas that we learn the most. When I read the female characters in *Inferno*, Dante forces me to consider gender equality and stereotypes today. I start analyzing modern opinions and

values about gender and see how they differ from Dante's. I also note the similarities, such as the persisting stereotype of a female tie to sexual sin and the idea of women being weaker, less intelligent, and less powerful. Making connections between past and present is valuable because it asks us to analyze our societal values and see whether or not they are necessary, successful, or useful to continue supporting.

I also see strong connections between Dante's discussion of sexuality and our current discussions. Medieval opinions towards same-sex relationships mirrored our society fifty years ago, maybe even ten or twenty years ago. A culture of opposition dominated the time period. We see that Dante complicates this common attitude, though. In *Inferno*, the primary concern is love. He distinguishes between the violent sin of sodomy punished in Hell and the sin of excessive love eradicated in Purgatory. For Dante, the sin has nothing to do with the genders of the two people in love; what matters are intention and motivation. This idea parallels modern perspectives about same-sex relationships and same-sex love. Proponents of same-sex marriage argue in favor of love over gender, as did Dante. I think it is fascinating to see connections that are this close between societies hundreds of years apart. Out of the three realms of diversity I researched for this project, none aligned so closely as did views on same-sex love. The similarity here is one of my favorite reasons for reading not just Dante but medieval literature in general. These close connections are not merely interesting or novel ways to discuss controversial issues—they are useful, even valuable.

Dante's treatment of Islamic and Jewish populations follows a similar pattern in that his views about how to treat these cultures align so closely with our goals today. Dante encourages unity and understanding instead of division. In the Middle Ages,

Christians almost proudly Othered differing religious groups and cultures. Although their relationship with Muslims involved some mutual respect, the medieval Christians still looked down on them and treated them differently. Their relationship with the Jews was unquestionably negative, hostile at times. Medieval Christian attitudes toward the Jews were harsh and revealed a focus on the negative aspects of the Jewish culture. Instead of encouraging these negative attitudes, Dante deals with individuals in Hell instead of whole groups. He could have easily filled Hell with Muslims and Jews who were all punished for stereotypical sins. But he doesn't. With all of the discrimination against Muslim communities today, I was honestly shocked to find so much resonance with Dante. He gives us such a useful model for talking about our differences with other cultures, again making these connections with his texts more than just interesting. Dante urges us to make judgments based on individuals, not discounting people just because they are members of a certain cultural group. Dante illustrates that we can disagree with others and still treat them well.

Progressively-minded English students and professors will absolutely push back against reading such an old, religious text written by a dead white male author. After all, this was the issue with Yale's "Major English Poets" sequence. And here I am, suggesting a solution involving another dead white dude. Although *Inferno* gives voice to some minority populations, they are still speaking through that majority perspective. So how can we advocate for reading an outdated, white male supremacist text and pretend that it adequately considers the diversity and subsequent controversy that we encounter today? I would actually agree and argue that *Inferno* does not give us this perfect platform. It is not the holy grail or an ideal solution text for fixing the world's problems.

Yet I would also agree that in this imperfection lies the beauty and power of *Inferno*. With this text and with others, these gaps and shortcomings give us space to start conversations. It would be simple if Dante's text aligned completely with our opinions, but then as readers, we would have no challenge. *Inferno*'s failures cause disagreement among readers, compelling us to dig into those conflicts and create real, honest, and constructive dialogue about the matters that are so important to us today. This disagreement also teaches us as readers of literature and as peers to listen to one another and communicate respectfully. Reading *Inferno* to start a dialogue about diversity does not mean we can *only* read *Inferno*. We should be reading other texts by diverse authors with differing viewpoints. These broad perspectives help us grow as people and as a society. But we do not have to dismiss older texts as irrelevant, nor should we. Instead, we should push ourselves to find these relationships and talk about controversial issues alongside older vantage points that may be surprisingly similar to our own.

I want to close with a few lines that stood out to me as I was in the early research stages of this project. In an essay collection about current trends in Dante scholarship, Giuseppe Mazzotta writes a piece about why Dante wrote the *Comedy* and why we read it. In this essay, Mazzotta includes an extremely profound statement. He says, "It has often been said (by Santayana, I believe) that the only value of possessing great works of literature, such as the *Divine Comedy*, lies in what they can help us become, and this is undeniably true" (Mazzotta 64). I wholeheartedly agree. In my experience, reading literature is not just an enjoyable pastime. Authors write because they want their voices to be heard, and they want to impact their readers. What good is literature if it cannot challenge or

change? These “great works of literature” challenge our minds, but they also challenge our being. They force us to look inward and reflect on our own lives. They try to help us become better.

To all of the Yale students and other naysayers, I agree with you. The English discipline should be more diverse, and we should be required to interact with texts from non-white, non-male authors. This does not mean that we cannot find value in the older texts bequeathed to us by dead white men. Yes, Dante was a Christian. And yes, Dante was a dead white dude. Even so, he gives us a fresh way to address our current issues. There will always be controversy, there will always be disagreement, and we will always be different from one another. Dante shows us what we can become when we put aside our differences as well as what we can become when we fail to do so. Looking back at *Inferno* with the present in mind should inspire us to seek out and find those connections between medieval and modern, to bring our current discussions into our conversations about medieval literature. And when we pair Dante with more contemporary authors who discuss the same issues, we can create a thread through time, introducing a fluidity and flexibility that rather imitates the society we are striving so hard to create. The value of possessing Dante’s *Divine Comedy* lies in what it can help us become. And this is undeniably true.

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