



FROM TEXT TO HISTORY (TO TEXT): THE WOMEN OF DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

KRISTINA M. OLSON
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
KOLSON4@GMU.EDU

BEATRICE IS A WOMAN



- "androgynous" (Kirkham, 1989; Ferrante, 1992)
- "loquax" (Barolini, 1992)

BEATRICE IS AN ANGEL AND A MIRACLE



"Diceano molti, poi che passata era: 'Questa non è femmina, anzi è uno de li bellissimi angeli del cielo'. E altri diceano: 'Questa è una maraviglia; che benedetto sia lo Signore, che si mirabilmente sae adoperare!'" (*Vita nuova*, xxvi)

"Often people said, when she had passed: 'This is no woman; this is one of the fairest angels of Heaven. And others said: 'She is a miracle; blessed be the Lord who can create such marvels!'" (trans. Reynolds)

BEATRICE IS A CITIZEN OF FLORENCE AND HEAVEN

- "Poi che fue partita da questo secolo, rimase tutta la sopradetta cittade quasi vedova dispogliata da ogni dignitade" (VN, xxx)
 - "After she had departed this life, the city of which I have spoken was left as though widowed, despoiled of all good" (Reynolds, 81)
- "passavano per una via la quale è quasi mezzo de la cittade ove nacque e vivette e morio la gentilissima donna" (xl)
 - "passing along a road which runs almost through the centre of the city where that most gracious lady was born, lived and died" (96)
- "questa donna era fatta de li cittadini di vita eterna" (xxxiv)
 - "my lady had become a citizen of eternal life" (87)

BEATRICE IS NOT INANIMATE

"Thus if we see the ancient poets spoke of inanimate things as if they had sense and reason, and made them talk to each other, and that they did this not only with real things but also with things which are not real, making things which do not exist speak, and making accidents speak as if they were substances and men, then it is appropriate for someone writing in rhyme to do the same [...] This most gracious lady, **of whom I have spoken in words preceding the above**" (trans. Reynolds)

"Dunque, se noi vedemo che li poete hanno parlato a le cose inanimate, sì come se avessero senso e ragione, e fattele parlare insieme; e non solamente cose vere, ma cose non vere, cioè che detto hanno di cose le quali non sono, che parlano, e detto che molti accidenti parlano, sì come se fossero sustanzie e uomini,; degno è lo dicitore per rima di fare lo somigliante, ma non senza ragione alcuna, ma con ragione la quale poi sia possibile d'aprire per prosa [...] Questa gentilissima donna, **di cui ragionato è ne le precedenti parole**" (VN, xxv)



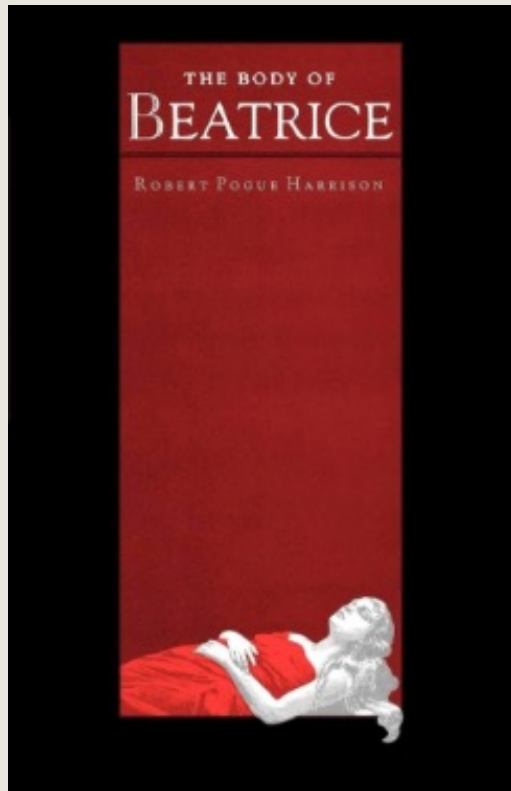
BEATRICE IS A WOMAN WHO SPEAKS

- “I’ son Beatrice, che ti faccio andare” (*Inf.* 2.70)
- "Here is the crucial shift that Dante-poet engineers with respect to Beatrice, whom he now makes a speaker. In the courtly and stilnovist lyric, the lady does not speak. Beatrice, who began her life in Dante’s oeuvre as a silent lyric lady, now enters the *Commedia* characterized as a speaker, one who engages in “parlare”: “amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare” (*Inf.* 11.72).” (Barolini, *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante)
- "The ladies of Dante's early lyrics [...] have in common that they do not speak. By contrast, the Beatrice of the *Commedia* is loquacious; she is a veritable *Beatrice loquax*." (*Dante and the Origins*, p.363)

IN DANTE'S WORDS, BEATRICE IS LIKENED TO...

- An admiral (Aeneas) at the prue of the ship ("quasi ammiraglio che in poppa e in prora / viene a veder la gente che ministra / per li altri legni, e a ben far l'incora," *Purg.* 30.58-60) - from *Aeneid* book 10
- The object of Dido's love (Sychaeus and Aeneas) ("conosco i segni dell'antica fiamma" *Purg.* 30.48)
- A commanding authority («Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice. / Come degnasti d'accedere al monte? / non sapei tu che qui è l'uom felice?» (*Purg.* 30.73-75)

ROBERT HARRISON, *THE BODY OF BEATRICE* (1988)



- “Beatrice [of the *Vita Nuova*] appears far more persuasive, enigmatic, explosive, than the recreated and cantankerous figure [of the *Purgatorio*]”
 - (Robert Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice*, p. 19)

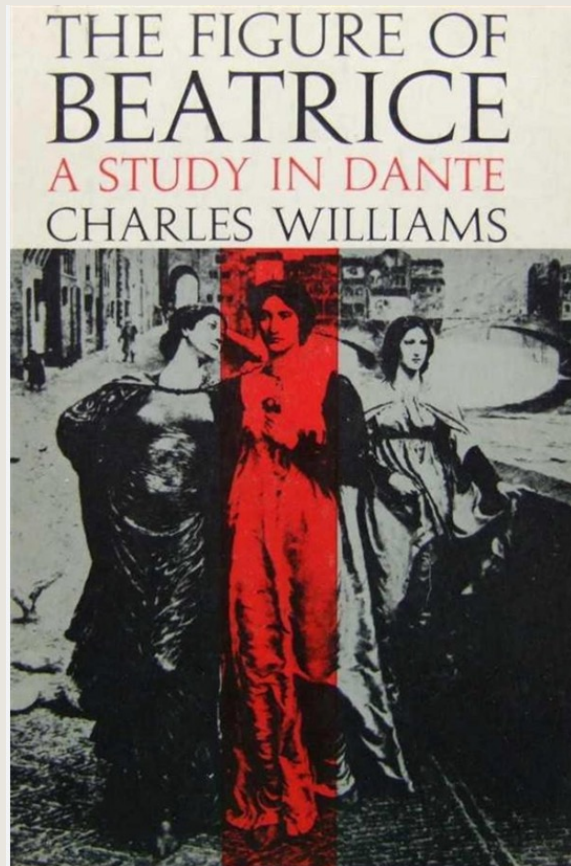
JOAN FERRANTE, "DANTE'S BEATRICE: PRIEST OF AN ANDROGYNOUS GOD" (1992)

- Dante puts her “in a role which is specifically forbidden to women by major theologians, as priest, as confessor and teacher of theology [...] ‘It is a curious anomaly of Dante criticism that Beatrice is accepted as a symbol of theology by most critics, even as a Christ figure by some, and that she is also recognized by most as a real historical woman Dante knew, yet no one has questioned Dante’s use of a real woman, rather than an abstraction, to teach theology, in flagrant defiance of Paul’s injunction, frequently echoed in the thirteenth century, against women teaching’” (Joan Ferrante, "Dante's Beatrice")

BACKWARDS (OR FORWARDS?) INTO THE 1980'S

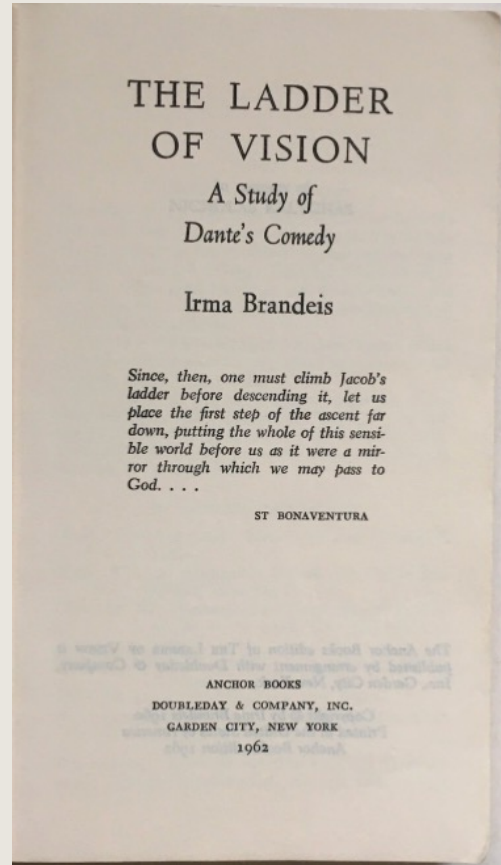
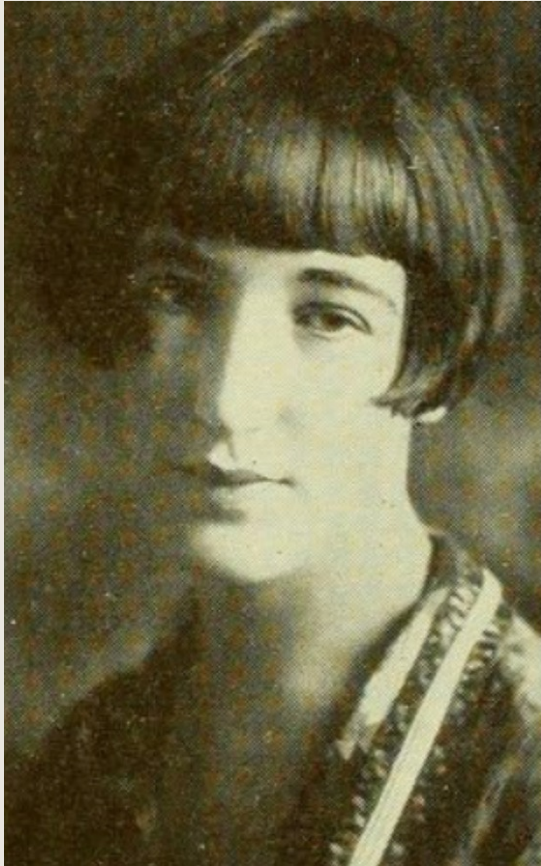
- “the androgyny of Beatrice openly increases her power and enhancing her being,” (Victoria Kirkham, “A Canon of Women,” 1989)
- “there are clear advances over the *Vita Nuova*’s version of Beatrice; Canto II reveals a Beatrice who initiates action and who speaks, unlike the distant figure of Dante’s youthful *libello*,” (Rachel Jacoff and William Stephany, “*Inferno* 2,” 1989)

CHARLES WILLIAMS, *THE FIGURE OF BEATRICE: A STUDY IN DANTE* (1961)



“Beatrice was, in her degree, an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life, and in some sense of Almighty God himself. But she also remained Beatrice right to the end; her derivation was not to obscure her identity any more than her identity should hide her derivation. Just as there is no point in Dante’s thought at which the image of Beatrice in his mind was supposed to exclude the actual objective Beatrice, so there is no point at which the objective Beatrice is to exclude the Power which is expressed through her [...] It is the greatest expression in European literature of the way of approach of the soul to its ordained end through the affirmation of the validity of all those images, beginning with the image of a girl” (Williams, p.8)

IRMA BRANDEIS, THE LADDER OF VISION, 1962



“real things, real persons are his starting point: himself and Beatrice in the *Vita nuova*; and in the *Comedy* these two at a different point of time, together with a large cast of characters modeled from life, and as many places, objects, landscapes, all meticulously observed. Dante resembles Homer in the range and immediacy of his characters; and he reminds one often of Shakespeare in the depth of his quick psychological insights” (Brandeis, 22)

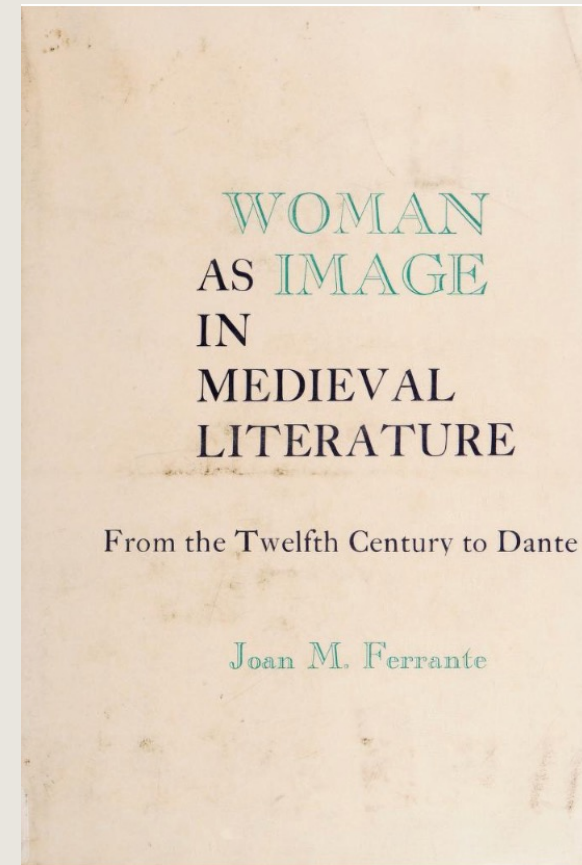


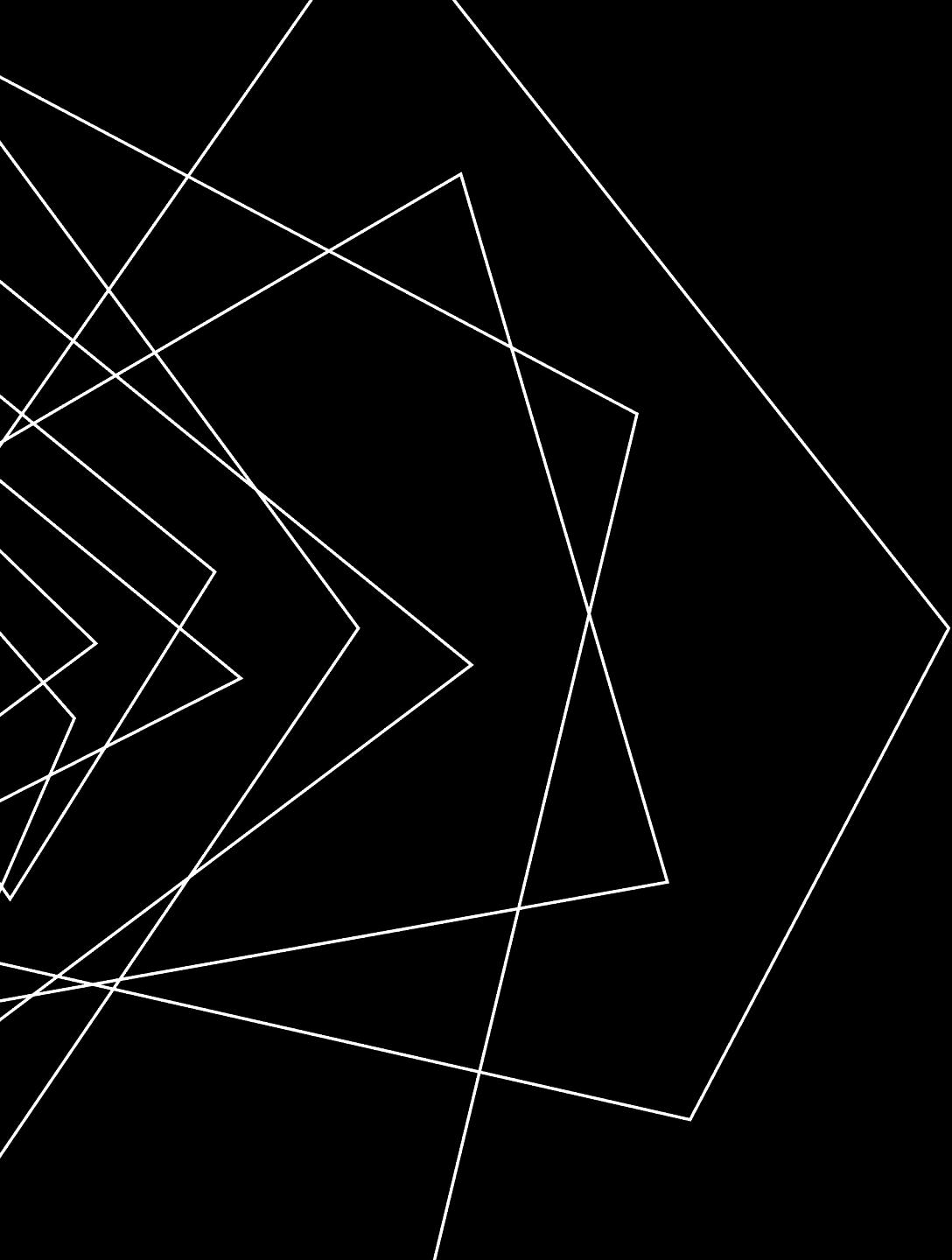
ETIENNE GILSON, *DANTE AND THE PHILOSOPHER* (1955, P.55)

role. As Etienne Gilson says,

If Beatrice is only a symbol, she is a symbol whose body, after its death, was brought to earth, where it resides at the time when Dante was writing these lines (*Purg.* XXXI, 49–51) in expectation of its future glorification. We are assuredly yielding to the most urgent suggestions of Dante himself if we see in Beatrice a human being composed like us of a soul and a body, her soul being in heaven and her body on earth; a being who, since she is actually dead, has actually lived.¹

THE ORIGINS OF THE DEBATE





GRAZIE

Kolson4@gmu.edu