

Aristotle's *Mezzo*, Courtly *Misura*, and Dante's Canzone *Le dolci rime*

Humanism, Ethics, and Social Anxiety



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THIS ESSAY EXPLORES THE INTERNALIZATION of Aristotle into vernacular culture, indeed, into that hyper-vernacular outpost of medieval culture that is the high lyric tradition. As my title indicates, I will be looking at Dante's unique mix of Aristotelian learning and vernacular traditions: the ways in which Dante blends classical learning with the courtly roots of his poetic culture to form an ethics that incorporates both frames of reference. As I have done before, but from a somewhat different vantage, I will press the idea of Dante's remarkably hybrid and culturally enriched formulations, showing first the mature expression of these ideas in the *Commedia* and then highlighting the earlier lyric phase in which these ideas are incubated, in particular in the Aristotelian lyric—the label itself is indicative of Dante's pioneering genius—*Le dolci rime*.¹ Finally, I will illuminate the ways in which Dante's hybrid, ethical formulations are enmeshed in social realities, as demonstrated in the canzone on courtliness, *Pocia ch'Amor*. Given that the mean between avarice and prodigality is located by Aristotle in the virtue of liberality, a virtue of enormous resonance for the ethos of knighthood and *cortesìa*, the Aristotelian template allows for an easy pivot on Dante's part from ethics in the moral and philosophical sphere to ethics in the social and historical sphere. In the concluding section, I will tease out the social anxiety that can be glimpsed behind the poet's cultural positioning.

1 See, for instance, T. Barolini, "Medieval Multiculturalism and Dante's Theology of Hell," *Italiana* 9 (2000): 82–102, repr. in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York, 2006), 103–21. On bringing Aristotle into Italian literary contexts, see S. Gentili, *L'uomo aristotelico alle origini della letteratura italiana* (Rome, 2005), further discussed in note 8, below. J. Rosenfeld, *Ethics and Enjoyment in Late Medieval Poetry: Love after Aristotle* (Cambridge, 2011), deals with French and English material.

Merging the Aristotelian Mean and Lyric *Misura* in the Ethical Framework of the *Commedia*

We begin with the ethics of the courtly lyric and how it informs the Aristotelian framework of the *Commedia*. The philosophy of desire that underwrites the courtly lyric can view passion as invincible, not susceptible to the moderating influences of any other force, and in this sense can be understood as a vernacularization of Virgil's "Omnia vincit amor; et nos cedamus amori" (Love conquers all, so let us yield to love; *Eclogues* 10.69). But it can also subscribe to the idea that reason is the force that can and should moderate desire. For Occitan poets, this idea of moderation is embedded in the concept *mezura*, which comes into the Italian lyric tradition as *misura*. By the time we reach Dante, we are dealing with an amateur philosopher who recognizes and utilizes the overlap between Occitan *mezura* and Aristotelian incontinence. I argue that Dante's deliberate merging of Aristotelian ethics with the vernacular ethical tradition is a form of early humanism.

This imbrication is on display in the fifth canto of the *Inferno*, which is devoted to the circle of lust. Here the *contrapasso* is based on the idea of an infernal wind that buffets the "carnal sinners" as, in life, they were buffeted by sexual passion. The metaphor of the "bufera infernal" (*Inf.* 5.31) is a rich, cultural mosaic of Augustine's analysis of desire, with the human *cor inquietum* struggling toward the divine *quies*, and the Bible; the commentator Guido da Pisa suggested as intertext for Dante's *bufera* Isaiah's "Cor impii quasi mare fervens quod quiescere non potest" (The heart of the wicked man is like a troubled sea that cannot rest; Isa. 57:20).² Interestingly, and to my knowledge not previously noted by the commentary tradition, Dante's metaphor of an infernal wind that endlessly compels the souls in its grip—"La bufera infernal, che mai non resta, / mena li spirti con la sua rapina; / voltando e percotendo li molesta" (The hellish wind that never rests sweeps the spirits with its force; hurling and battering it molests them; *Inf.* 5.31–33)³—also draws on Aristotle's discussion of compulsion in *Nicomachean Ethics*. In book 3 of that work, Aristotle illustrates compulsion with the example of a person being carried by a wind: "Those things, then, are thought involuntary, which take place by force or owing to ignorance; and that is compulsory of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts—or, rather, is acted upon, e.g., *if he were to be carried somewhere by a wind, or by men who had him in their power*" (*NE* 3.1; italics mine).⁴ I believe that Aristotle's example contributes to Dante's construction of the *contrapasso* in *Inferno* 5. Moreover, I suggest that this

2 Guido da Pisa, *Expositiones et Glose super "Comediam" Dantis or Commentary on Dante's "Inferno,"* ed. V. Cioffari (Albany, 1974), 101.

3 The text is from *La "Commedia" secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. G. Petrocchi, 4 vols. (Milan, 1966–67). Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

4 I first published this Aristotelian intertext for the *bufera* in "Dante and Cavalcanti (On Making Distinctions in Matters of Love): *Inferno* 5 in Its Lyric and Autobiographical Context," *Dante Studies* 116 (1998): 31–63, repr. in Barolini, *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, 70–101, citation p. 74. The citation is from *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. D. Ross (1925; rev. Oxford, 1990), 48.

passage offers Dante not only imagery that is suitable for Francesca in *Inferno* 5 but also for Piccarda in *Paradiso* 3. While Francesca is analogous to one who is “carried somewhere by a wind,” Piccarda is analogous to a person who is carried somewhere “by men who had [her] in their power.” Francesca, who is now carried by a wind, speaks of her past actions as involuntary and of herself as having been acted upon rather than acting; she is the perfect embodiment of Aristotle’s example of compulsion transplanted to the Christian afterlife.

I raise this Aristotelian intertext to foreground Dante’s use of classical material in his Christian underworld and signal his productive contamination of vastly different cultural systems.⁵ Among the other cultural strands that feed into canto 5, the most important is the early Italian courtly lyric. The ideology and metaphors of the *bufera infernal* draw on lyric language for tempestuous passion that goes back to Giacomo da Lentini and Guido delle Colonne at the beginning of the Italian tradition. Guido delle Colonne’s canzone *Amor, che lungiamente m’hai menato*, for instance, which I have called “a lyric version of *Inferno* 5 without the eschatological context,”⁶ is shaped by the dialectic between *menare* and *posare* (the very verbs used in *Inferno* 5). The *canzone*’s conclusion compares the wind to the force of love, stating that as the wind beats the waves into a frenzy, so love agitates the lover, giving him no peace: “c’Amor mi sbatte e smena, che no abento, / sì come vento smena nave in onda” (for Love shakes me and drives me, so that I have no peace, as the wind drives a ship in the waves; *Amor, che lungiamente*, 63–64).⁷

The ethical scaffolding behind this imagery is spelled out by Dante in verse 39 of *Inferno* 5, where carnal sinners are defined as those “who subordinate reason to desire” (“che la ragione sommettono al talento”). This same ethical scaffolding, whereby desire must be subordinated to reason in order for the human soul to be in alignment and function virtuously, is also present in early Italian lyrics. In other words, Dante was by no means the first poet to conceive of love as potentially “tempered” by reason.⁸ Guido delle Colonne explicitly theorizes that reason, “senno,” is the counterweight to passion:

5 For the classical material as Dante’s signature innovation to the visionary tradition, see A. Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World* (Cambridge, 1990), who notes Dante’s originality in including classical figures, “totally unrepresented in the earlier medieval texts” (p. 57); and Barolini, “Medieval Multiculturalism” (above, n. 1).

6 Barolini, “Dante and Cavalcanti,” 75.

7 Italian lyric poets other than Guittone d’Arezzo, Guido Cavalcanti, and Dante Alighieri are cited from the edition of G. Contini, *Poeti del Duecento*, 2 vols. (Milan and Naples, 1960).

8 This is a common misunderstanding, recently reprised in Gentili, *L’uomo aristotelico* (above, n. 1). Gentili does not recognize *misura* as a lyric value prior to Dante’s adoption of the “dottrina aristotelica della temperanza” (Aristotelian doctrine of temperance; p. 187). Hence, she does not discuss it in the context of earlier love poetry, although she does note the connection between *misura* and Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean in the *Novellino*: “Federico risponde correttamente ‘misura,’ ossia identifica il bene supremo nel giusto mezzo virtuoso” (Frederick correctly replies “misura,” in other words he identifies the supreme good in the just and virtuous mean; p. 177). Her discussion of *ragione* versus *senso* in the lyric tradition pits Dante and the “dottrina aristotelica della temperanza” against Cavalcanti, and posits Dante as the first love poet whose concept of love is informed by the doctrine of temperance, being “di estrazione teologica e di matrice tomasiana, per cui l’amore sensuale può

Forza di **senno** è quella che soverchia
ardir di core, asconde ed incoverchia.

Ben è gran **senno**, chi lo pote fare,
saver celare—ed essere signore
de lo suo core quand'este 'n errore.

(*Amor, che lungiamente m'hai menato*, 48–52; boldface mine)

Force of reason is that which overcomes boldness of heart, hides and covers it. It is great wisdom, for the one who can do it, to know how to hide [love] and to be lord of his heart when it is in error.

Elaborating the troubadour topos of *fol' amor*, Guido delle Colonne writes that love causes even the wisest to stray, and that he who loves most has least judgment—“misura”—and is most “folle”: “Amor fa disviare li più saggi: / e chi più ama men' ha in sé misura, / più folle è quello che più s'innamora” (Love makes the wisest go off the path: he who loves most has least measure in himself; most mad is the one who is most in love; *Amor, che lungiamente*, 53–55]). These verses feature the moderating force of *senno* and *misura*, terms that carry the ideological valence of the Occitan *sen* and *mezura* from which they derive.

Of troubadour *mezura*, Topsfield writes that “*Mesura* is the rational control by which a man can choose to think and act in the way that will bring him happiness,” and that it is “the quality of the man who controls his thoughts in order to be wise and courtly in word and deed.”⁹ Cherchi shows that the *mezura* of the troubadours coincides with the virtue known to classical antiquity as temperance, a virtue whose cultural prominence in medieval France he links to the widespread circulation of Ciceronian ethical values through works like the twelfth-century adaptation of Cicero’s *De officiis* attributed to William of Conches, *Moralium dogma philosophorum*.¹⁰ In that work, Ciceronian *temperantia* is defined as “dominium rationis in libidinem et alios motus importunos” (the absolute rule of reason over passions and any other unfit impulses). As proof of the correspondence between *mezura* and *temperantia*, Cherchi offers the *ensenhamen* on the four cardinal virtues written by the thirteenth-century troubadour Daude de Pradas (1214–1282), in particular the passage on temperance, in which Daude presents the terms “mesura, / Contenenza o atemperanza” (*mezura*, continence, or temperance) as synonyms.

Dante does not use *contenenza* or *incontenenza*, or even *misura* or *dismisura*, in *Inferno* 5. Rather, he defines lust as a “subordination of reason to desire,” and thus as a

essere ‘temperato’ dall’anima razionale in modo da condurre all’amore spirituale, cioè a Dio” (of theological extraction and a Thomistic matrix, so that sensual love can be “tempered” by the rational soul in such a way as to lead to spiritual love, i.e. to God; p. 187). Gentili does not discuss *Le dolci rime* or any of Dante’s moral canzoni.

9 L. T. Topsfield, *Troubadours and Love* (Cambridge, 1975), 83 and 87.

10 See P. Cherchi, *Andreas and the Ambiguity of Courtly Love* (Toronto, 1994), the chapter “*Mezura*.” For the treatise attributed to William of Conches, see pp. 44–47; the definition of *temperantia* from the *Moralium* is on 47. The passage from Daude de Pradas is on 48.

failure to exercise rational control over desire. Lust is a lack of restraint or *misura*; it is therefore excess, incontinence. This is an Aristotelian view, which sees lust as excess; it is not a condemnation of all desire, but a condemnation only and specifically of excess desire. This Aristotelian understanding coincides with the particular vernacular viewpoint whose exponents I have been citing. If, on the one hand, it is not surprising that the definition of lust in canto 5 can be retrofitted to fit under the rubric of incontinence—after all, in *Inferno* 11 Dante will announce that the moral structure of hell derives from Aristotle’s *Ethics*—it is, on the other hand, a definition that Dante criticism knows and acknowledges in taxonomic terms but frequently loses track of in philosophical terms. The taxonomy is clear: in *Inferno* 11 Dante explicitly places circles 2 to 5 (lust, gluttony, avarice/prodigality, and anger) under the Aristotelian rubric of incontinence. The philosophy is less clear: the philosophical implications of defining desire in terms of incontinence are frequently overlooked in a critical tradition that has insisted for centuries on the binary of secular versus divine love. Defining desire in terms of incontinence means that it is not defined dualistically, for the Aristotelian system of virtue as a mean between two sinful extremes is a unitary system, based on a spectrum of behaviors, not a dualistic one.

As part of his dramatic announcement that hell is morally structured according to Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Dante, in *Inferno* 11, twice uses the technical term “incontenenza” in a paired usage that constitutes its only appearance in the *Commedia*:

*Non ti rimembra di quelle parole
con le quai la tua Etica pertratta
le tre disposizion che ’l ciel non vole,
incontenenza, malizia e la matta
bestialitate? e come **incontenenza**
men Dio offende e men biasimo accatta?* (*Inf.* 11.79–84; boldface mine)

Don’t you remember those words with which your *Ethics* treats the three dispositions that heaven does not want: incontinence, malice, and mad bestiality? And how incontinence offends God less and procures less blame?

The Aristotelian term “incontenenza” is featured in a high-profile moment that sends the reader directly back to the *Ethics*, and it does not occur again. How can the condition of incontinence embrace circles 2 to 5 of hell and yet receive so little verbal recognition? The answer is that the concept of incontinence is embedded in glosses, like the definition of lust as the subordination of reason to desire, and it is present in the invocation of the vernacular equivalent of *incontenenza*, namely, *misura*. Dante’s use of the lyric term *misura*, on the one hand, and the philosophical term *incontenenza*, on the other, is a way of demonstrating the convergence of two cultural strands into the same conceptual node.

Thus, if we attend to the presentation of the sins of incontinence as it unfolds, rather than read retrospectively from the didactic explanation of *Inferno* 11, we note that we

meet the word *misura* long before we meet the word *incontinenza*, with the result that we can observe a program of cultural integration as it occurs. This program of mixing the classical and the vernacular is betokened, for instance, by the verse that tells us that the misers and the prodigals are equally without *misura* in their approach to material wealth: “che con misura nullo spendio ferci” (they did no spending with *misura*; *Inf.* 7.42). The Bosco-Reggio commentary offers this cogent gloss: “che non fecero nessuna spesa (*spendio*) con misura, cioè non seppero rimanere nel giusto mezzo tra avarizia e prodigalità” (they undertook no spending with *misura*, in other words they did not remain at the just mean between avarice and prodigality).¹¹ By making explicit that the failure to spend in a measured fashion is synonymous with the inability to remain at the virtuous mean between avarice and prodigality, the Bosco-Reggio commentary effectively lays bare the Aristotelian framework that governs this part of Dante’s hell.

Dante, however, has not yet been so explicit; in *Inferno* 7 he uses language not to declare his reliance on Aristotle, which he will do only in *Inferno* 11, but rather to suggest the synchrony that he sees between the ethics of desire embedded in the vernacular culture of the courtly lyric and that espoused by the Greek *maestro di color che sanno*. Moreover, if we bear in mind that the mean between avarice and prodigality is located by Aristotle in the virtue of liberality, a virtue of enormous resonance for the ethos of knighthood and for Dante’s own theory of what constitutes “true” nobility (whose definition is expounded by him in the canzone *Le dolci rime* and then massively elaborated in book 4 of the *Convivio*), then we can see how the Aristotelian template allows for an easy pivot on Dante’s part from ethics in the moral and philosophical sphere to ethics in the social and historical sphere.

While the commentaries draw attention to the Aristotelian mean when glossing the specific verse “che con misura nullo spendio ferci” (*Inf.* 7.42), there is a critical blind spot vis-à-vis the larger manifestations of Aristotle’s presence in *Inferno* 7: for instance, why are the prodigals here with the misers? Only Aristotle and an ethical system based on a spectrum in which sin is the extreme—in this case avarice is one extreme and prodigality the other—and virtue is the mean can account for the provocative and rarely discussed pairing of prodigals and misers in the fourth circle of Dante’s hell. As Dante says, these souls are gripped by opposing sins, which force them constantly to move “da ogne mano a l’opposito punto” (from each side toward the opposite point; *Inf.* 7.32); they are divided by sins that are contrary to each other: “colpa contraria li dispaia” (contrary sin divides them; *Inf.* 7.45). From the moment that we are shown two groups of opposed sinners in the fourth circle, prodigals as well as misers, we need to be aware that we are not operating in a univocally Christian ethical framework. We should already be able to infer, long before reaching *Inferno* 11, that these first circles of hell are not simply governed, as their order might have induced us to believe, by the system of the seven capital vices, for that system does not include prodigality.

11 *Inferno*, ed. U. Bosco and G. Reggio (Florence, 1979), 109.

We are in a hybrid moral universe, therefore, and more work needs to be done on the implications and expressions of this hybridity. For instance, Aristotle claims that avarice is a greater evil than prodigality, and Dante places the misers on the left-hand side, thus following Aristotle, but at the same time he gives a peculiarly Christian twist to his treatment, pointing out the tonsured heads of his misers, and asking “se tutti fuor cherchi” (if all were clerics; *Inf.* 7.38). Virgil’s reply is a marvel of condensed cultural *contaminatio* in its juxtaposition of the highest ranks of the Catholic hierarchy with the Aristotelian idea of excess (embedded in the word “soperchio”): “Questi fur cherchi, che non han coperchio / piloso al capo, e papi e cardinali, / in cui usa avarizia il suo soperchio” (These were clerics, who do not have a hairy cover to their heads, and popes and cardinals, in whom avarice plies its excess; *Inf.* 7.46–48).

Dante’s hybridity continues to be visible in purgatory. Given that the seven terraces of purgatory are governed by the Christian system of the seven capital vices, the classical/Christian contamination that is Dante’s unique hallmark as an author in the visionary tradition seems at first to have disappeared, but it has not: the treatment of the fifth terrace is problematic, precisely because of the renewed coupling of avarice with its Aristotelian counterpart, prodigality. Why is an Aristotelian formulation of this particular sin so important to Dante that he reiterates it in purgatory? The answer lies, *in malo*, in the importance of *concupiscentia* for Dante’s political thought and, *in bono*, in the importance of liberality—the Aristotelian mean between avarice and prodigality—for aspects of Dante’s culture as disparate as *cortesìa* and Franciscanism. The language used by Stazio regarding vices that are related to each other as opposites, “per dritta opposizione,” echoes “a l’opposito punto” and “contraria colpa” used for avarice and prodigality in *Inferno* 7, and inserts into *Purgatorio* the Aristotelian ethical scheme of opposing vices that flank a virtuous mean: “E sappie che la colpa che rimbecca / per dritta opposizione alcun peccato, / con esso insieme qui suo verde secca” (And know that the fault that counters any sin as its opposite with it here finds its sap dried out; *Purg.* 22.49–51). It is as though Stazio were saying that the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean continues to inform Dante’s thinking, even when it is no longer as visible as it was in hell.

And maybe one reason that Aristotle’s doctrine can continue to inform Dante’s thinking in the realm of the seven capital vices is that it informed the thinking of Occitan and Italian poets who did not know the *Nicomachean Ethics* but who knew the idea of *mezura*; in other words, it informed the courtly culture from which Dante drank in great gulps as a young poet. Stazio, in describing his prodigality, references the idea of the mean with great precision, saying that he was excessively distant from avarice, but yet he does not describe himself as afflicted by *incontenenza*. Instead, Stazio uses the word *dismisura*, beloved of Occitan and later moralists, including Dante himself in the canzone *Doglia mi reca* (a canzone that is effectively an indictment of *dismisura* and an encomium to *misura*).¹² There Dante uses it precisely in the context of avarice:

12 The only use of *misura* in Dante’s lyrics is also from *Doglia mi reca*, in praise of virtue: “O cara ancilla e pura, / colt’ha’ nel ciel misura: / tu sola fai signore, e questo prova / che tu sè possession che

“Come con dismisura si rauna, / così con dismisura si ristringne” (Just as they gather immoderately, so they hoard immoderately; *Doglia mi reca*, 85–86).¹³ Stazio sends us back not to the Aristotelian language of *Inferno* 11 but to the Occitan-inflected language of *Inferno* 7: “Or sappi ch’avarizia fu partita / troppo da me, e questa dismisura / migliaia di lunari hanno punita” (Know now that avarice was much too far removed from me, and this lack of *misura* has been punished by thousands of lunar months; *Purg.* 22.34–36).¹⁴

Moreover, all the sins labeled forms of *incontenza* in hell still reverberate to the idea of incontinence in purgatory. Anger is formulated according to the doctrine of the mean, in other words, according to the idea of a righteous and a nonrighteous wrath, in Giudice Nin’s “dritto zelo / che misuratamente in core avvampa” (righteous anger that burns with *misura* in the heart; *Purg.* 8.83–84) and again in the beatitude that marks the departure from the terrace of wrath: “*Beati / pacifici*, che son sanz’ ira mala!” (*Beati pacifici*, who are without sinful wrath; *Purg.* 17.68–69). As with *Inferno* 7’s “Mal dar e mal tener lo mondo pulcro / ha tolto lor” (Sinful giving and sinful holding have taken the beautiful world from them; *Inf.* 7.58–59), where “mal dar” and “mal tener” refer to the Aristotelian extremes and invoke an implicit and contrasting “buon dar” and “buon tener,” “ira mala” rewrites the beatitude to align with the idea of sinful wrath versus righteous wrath, as previously encountered in Giudice Nin’s “dritto zelo.” The vernacular formulation of incontinence may be found, too, on the terrace of gluttony, where the gluttonous are blamed for having “pursued their appetite beyond *misura*” (per seguitar la gola oltre misura; *Purg.* 23.65). Finally, Dante’s purgatorial treatment of lust also lends itself to an Aristotelian template, in the reclassification of same-sex love so that it is no longer a form of violence against nature but rather a passion susceptible to incontinence, just like heterosexuality, and in the articulation of a spectrum with respect to chastity that puts marriage at the mean, with the extremes held by absolute chastity on one end and bestial excess on the other.¹⁵ We could add that the exempla in *Purgatorio*, which represent not just the sin being punished but the virtue that is its opposite, lead us to think ethically in terms of extremes and means—in an Aristotelian way.

sempre giova” (O precious and pure handmaid, it was in heaven that you found your standard: you alone confer lordship, and this proves you to be a possession that can never fail; *Doglia mi reca*, 39–42).

13 Dante’s lyric poems are cited in the one-volume edition with commentary of D. De Robertis, *Rime* (Florence, 2005). Translations of Dante’s poems are those of K. Foster and P. Boyde, *Dante’s Lyric Poetry*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1967).

14 The only other presence of *dismisura* in the *Commedia* also belongs to the context of “wealth management”: “La gente nuova e i sùbiti guadagni / orgoglio e dismisura han generata, / Fiorenza, in te, sì che tu già ten piagni” (The new folk and their sudden gains have generated in you, Florence, such arrogance and *dismisura* that you already weep of it; *Inf.* 16.73–75).

15 On the spectrum with marriage as the mean, see T. Barolini, “‘Only Historicize’: History, Material Culture (Food, Clothes, Books) and the Future of Dante Studies,” *Dante Studies* 127 (2009): 37–54, esp. 51–53; on Dante and sexuality more broadly, see eadem, “Dante’s Sympathy for the Other, or the Non-Stereotyping Imagination: Sexual and Racialized Others in the *Commedia*,” *Critica del Testo* 14, no. 1 (2011): 177–204.

We are observing Dante's early humanism, his work of cultural commingling. This work causes fascinating slippages, like the Aristotelian coupling of *ira* and *acedia* in hell followed by their Christian uncoupling in purgatory: in hell righteous anger is the mean flanked by the extremes of the pullulating *tristi* and the rabid *iracondi* (*Inferno* 8); these two extremes disaggregate in purgatory to become two of the seven vices, *ira* and *acedia*. The inverse occurs in the case of lust: purgatory combines on the terrace of lust both the normative and same-sex excess desire that had been deeply sundered in hell (*Inferno* 5 for the lustful and *Inferno* 15 for sodomy, viewed not as a form of excess desire but as violence against nature). We are witnessing Dante weave in and out of different cultural value systems. This work is exemplified by the bricolage of the *bufera*, with its overlapping lyric/courtly, biblical, Augustinian, and Aristotelian resonances. An intellectual who is proud of his ability to get his understanding of *contenenza* directly from Aristotle (and from Aristotle in Latin, without the mediation of a bad translator, as he calls Taddeo Alderotti in the *Convivio*), Dante's use of the terms *misura* and *dismisura* in the *Commedia*, in effect, reconnect vernacular courtly poets to the *ur*-source of their ethics, an Aristotle they did not know.

The Aristotelian *Mezzo* Translated and Cited in a Lyric Poem: *Le dolci rime*

The work of mixing the lyric tradition with Aristotle begins very early for Dante. A sonnet to Dante da Maiano from the early 1280s, *Savere e cortesia*, already conjoins courtly values—*cortesia*—to *savere*, and the *savere* in question is Aristotelian scholasticism, as we see from the verse “vertute naturale od accidente” (inborn or accidental virtue; 10). Of the “sphere that turns most widely” in the incipit of the sonnet *Oltra la sfera che più larga gira* (a sonnet that exists in a redaction that predates the *Vita Nuova*), De Robertis writes: “È questa la prima definizione ‘fisica,’ in poesia, del Paradiso” (This is the first “physical” description, in poetry, of paradise).¹⁶ In the *Vita Nuova*'s prose gloss to this sonnet, Dante cites Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, writing “e ciò dice lo Filosofo nel secondo de la Metafisica” (and this is what the Philosopher says in the second book of the *Metaphysics*; VN XLI.6 [30.6]).¹⁷

Most important for the development we are tracing is the canzone *Le dolci rime*, where Dante does something that I believe is unprecedented: he cites—indeed translates—the *Nicomachean Ethics* in a lyric poem. Prior to Dante, Guittone d'Arezzo names Aristotle in his poetry, in this respect, as in so many others, showing himself to be in the cultural vanguard; we cannot discount the importance of Guittone's contribution in a discussion of the vernacular roots of humanism. In the canzone *Vergogna ho*,

¹⁶ The quote is from the commentary of Domenico De Robertis to his edition of the *Vita Nuova* (Milan, 1980), 245. In citing the *Vita Nuova*, I use the traditional (Barbian) chapter divisions adopted by De Robertis; these are in Roman numerals and are followed by Gorni's chapter divisions in Arabic numerals in parentheses. See *Vita Nuova*, ed. G. Gorni (Turin, 1996).

¹⁷ This is the second reference to the Philosopher in the pages of the *libello*; the first is at *Vita Nuova* XXV.2 (16.2).

lasso, ed ho me stesso ad ira,¹⁸ Guittone acknowledges the high ethical standards of pagan philosophers, citing the *onestas* that will eventually be the currency of Dante's limbo ("onesta vita / fu lor gaudio e lor vita"):

*Già filosofi, Dio non conoscendo,
né poi morte sperando guiderdone,
ischifar vizi aver tutta stagione,
seguendo sì virtù, ch'onesta vita
fu lor gaudio e lor vita. (Vergogna ho, lasso, 43–47)*

The philosophers of old, who did not know God, nor hoped for any reward from death, had such contempt for vice at all times, and so followed virtue, for a righteous life was their delight and their commitment.

In the canzone *Degno è che che dice omo el defenda*, Guittone argues that virtue is found not just in fellow Christians but also "in others" (in *altròi*), and offers as examples of the virtuous others the "filosofi orrati" (honored philosophers) of old, who did not pursue enjoyment of the senses but life of the intellect:

*E se dicem, Dio ciò fece nei soi,
trovi all'anche in altròi,
in filosofi orrati e magni manti;
ch'è ben razional seguir ragione
e non sensi gauder, ma intelletto. (Degno è, 46–50)*

And if we say, God made it so in his followers, we find it also in others, in honored philosophers and in many great men; for it is indeed reasonable to follow reason and not to pursue enjoyment for the senses, but for the intellect.

Guittone goes on to cite "l saggio Aristotel" on what makes man happy: "segondo che 'l saggio Aristotel dice / e mostra omo felice / virtù ovrando" (according to what the sage Aristotle says when he shows that man is happy in the operation of virtue; *Degno è*, 54–56). His Aristotelian definition of happiness will be echoed by Dante in *Le dolci rime*: "vertute, dico, che fa l'uom felice / in sua operazione" (meaning by virtue that which makes a man happy in his actions; *Le dolci rime*, 83–84). *Misura* is important to

18 This canzone deploys, in discussing vice and virtue, the *servo/signore* metaphor that Dante adopts in *Doglia mi reca*, and also mentions the need to keep reason "on top" in language very similar to *Inferno* 5.39 ("somette" and "sotto ragione"): "Come poi dunque lo minore e 'l maggio / sommette a vizio corpo ed alma e core? / Ed è servaggio alcun, lasso, peggiore, / od è mai signoria perfettaalcona, / che sua propia persona / tenere l'omo ben sotto ragione?" (How therefore can a lesser or a greater man submit to vice his body, soul, and heart? And is there a worse servitude, alas, or is there a more perfect lordship, than for a man to keep his body well under the control of reason?; *Vergogna ho, lasso*, 25–30). Guittone d'Arezzo is cited from *Le Rime di Guittone d'Arezzo*, ed. F. Egidi (Bari, 1940).

Guittone, as well, his teaching epitomized by these verses: “Donque misura ci convene avere / in tutte cose ch’ave l’omo a fare, / ché tuttor noce fare oltra misura” (Therefore we should have *misura* in all the things that we do, since it is always harmful to act beyond *misura*; *Qual omo si diletta in troppo dire*, 9–11).¹⁹

While I do not believe that Guittone reaches Dante’s understanding of *misura* as the vernacular equivalent to Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean, he certainly offers a new benchmark: he writes lyric poetry that, on the one hand, synthesizes Aristotle’s description of the virtuous life and, on the other, considers *misura* a key component of such a life, a privileged synonym of *ragione* and *senno*.²⁰ Guittone links these two ethical projects—not actively as Dante does, but rather by featuring both in his verse.

The fifth stanza of *Le dolci rime* begins with Aristotle’s definition of happiness, already seen in Guittone’s *Degno è*, and moves on to a translation of the *Ethics*, a work that is explicitly named in the poem (“secondo che l’Etica dice”):

*Dico ch’ogni virtù principalmente
vien da una radice,
vertute, dico, che fa l’uom felice
in sua operazione.
Quest’è, secondo che l’Etica dice,
un abito eligente
lo qual dimora in mezzo solamente,
e tai parole pone.* (*Le dolci rime*, 81–88)

I affirm that every virtue stems ultimately from one root, meaning by virtue that which makes a man happy in his actions. This is, as the *Ethics* states, a “habit of choosing which keeps steadily to the mean”—those are the very words. (trans. Foster and Boyde)

De Robertis points out the significance of Dante’s expression “e tai parole pone”; Dante is saying that these are the very words of the Aristotelian text. He glosses as follows: “Traduce letteralmente (onde ‘e tai parole pone,’ ossia: queste testuali parole) ‘Est . . . habitus electivus in medietate existens’” (He translates literally [hence “e tai parole pone,” or rather: these literal words] “Est . . . habitus electivus in medietate existens”).²¹

19 Interestingly, this sonnet begins by indicting excess speech. Excess spending is indicted in the sonnet on gluttony, one of the cycle of sonnets on the vices: “ispendi oltra misura” (*Vizio di gola*, 4). We are reminded of Dante’s *tenzone* with Forese Donati, in which gluttony is connected to poverty and thievery, and of the gluttonous excess of the *brigata spenderaccia* of *Inferno* 29.

20 For example: “e perché non misura hai, né ragione” from *O tu, de nome Amor, guerra de fatto*, 27; and “In ogni cosa vol senno e misura” (this is the incipit of the sonnet).

21 See De Robertis commentary (above, n. 13), 69. Barbi-Pernicone gloss as follows: “Dante sottolinea che la definizione data nei versi precedenti risponde esattamente al testo dell’*Etica*” (Dante underlines that the definition given in the preceding verses corresponds exactly to the text of the *Ethics*); see *Rime della maturità e dell’esilio*, ed. M. Barbi and V. Pernicone (Florence, 1969), 427.

Le dolci rime was written in the mid-1290s.²² De Robertis places the canzone “probabilmente non a gran distanza della *Vita Nova*” (probably not at great distance from the *Vita Nuova*; 53). Years later, Dante again wrote the title “Etica” into his poetry, in the previously cited passage in *Inferno* 11 in which Virgil directs Dante to his *Ethics*: “Non ti rimembra di quelle parole / con le quai la tua Etica pertratta” (Don’t you remember those words with which your *Ethics* treats; *Inf.* 11.79–80). These verses feature a similar nod to the “parole” of the original Aristotelian text: “quelle parole / con le quai la tua Etica pertratta,” recalls “e tai parole pone” from *Le dolci rime*. In the *Inferno*, the directive to remember Aristotle’s “parole” is shortly followed by an even more precisely material reference to the physical “carte” in which Dante read the *Physics*: “se tu ben la tua Fisica note, / tu troverai, non dopo molte carte” (if you study well in your *Physics*, you will find, after not too many pages; *Inf.* 11.101–2). Dante first began to construct himself as an addressee worthy of the phrases “la tua Etica” and “la tua Fisica” in *Le dolci rime*, where he tackles the topic of true nobility and the virtues that derive from it in Aristotelian terms that explicitly include the doctrine of the mean, the “mezzo”: “un abito eligente / lo qual dimora in mezzo solamente” (a habit of choosing which keeps steadily to the mean; *Le dolci rime*, 87–88).

Le dolci rime is the only one of Dante’s canzoni to be philosophical in the technical sense, adopting the language and syllogistic method of the scholastic *quaestio* to a stanza and rhyme scheme of Guittonian complexity and achieving a unique result, both as a long and difficult text of 146 verses and at the level of its reception: *Le dolci rime* is unique among Dante’s canzoni in occasioning a Latin commentary, the 1355 commentary of the jurist Bartolo da Sassoferrato.²³ At this point of our discussion, we must acknowledge the other contemporary philosophical canzone to receive a Latin commentary, namely, Cavalcanti’s *Donna me prega*, the technical diction and rigorous structure of which may have inspired *Le dolci rime*. *Donna me prega* is still more famous than *Le dolci rime*, partly because of its dark allure as the theoretical exposition of Guido’s turn from light and love, and partly because Dante subsequently placed his canzone in the *Convivio*, where he submerged it in a vast ocean of prose that has drawn attention not to the poem it purportedly glosses but away from it.

Donna me prega contains lots of Aristotle, although not an ostentatious citation of the “Etica” by name. Among his nods to the vernacular tradition, Cavalcanti uses the by this time classic term *misura*, defining love as excess, “oltra misura”: “L’essere è quando—lo voler è tanto / ch’oltra misura—di natura—torna” (Love’s mode of being

22 De Robertis notes in his commentary: “siamo ancora nell’ambito delle ‘nòve rime’; e l’inclusa polemica antiimperiale è della stagione comunale di Dante” (we are still in the environment of the “nòve rime”; and the anti-imperial polemic included in the canzone dates from the period of Dante’s life in the Florentine commune; p. 52).

23 See De Robertis’s commentary: “La canzone, in grazia dell’argomento, ha avuto il privilegio dell’abbastanza precoce (1355), e unico, commento latino del famoso giurista Bartolo da Sassoferrato” (Thanks to its subject matter, the canzone had the privilege of the precocious [1355] and unique Latin commentary of the famous jurist Bartolo da Sassoferrato; p. 54).

is such that desire goes beyond the *misura* of nature; *Donna me prega*, 43–44).²⁴ Clearly there is no doctrine of temperance, whether Aristotelian or vernacular, preached in *Donna me prega*, which famously holds that love pertains to the senses rather than the intellect. Thus, in *Donna me prega* we find the common phrase “*oltra misura*” deployed in an uncommon way: rather than apply “*oltra misura*” to the reckless behavior of a particular lover, as had been done by his Occitan and Italian predecessors, Cavalcanti considers *oltra misura* to be the essence of love itself. He thus breaks with the old courtly ethics that, by exhorting the lover to the practice of *misura*, indicates a belief in the redeeming power of intellect and in the possibility of controlling passion with reason. If love is *oltra misura* in its essence, then human efforts to control it are in vain.

In the first decade of the fourteenth century, most likely in the second half of the decade, circa 1306–8, Dante wrote the unfinished philosophical treatise *Convivio*, and he placed *Le dolci rime* at the opening of its fourth book, an elaborate and magnificently digressive investigation of the core questions posed by the canzone (in imitation of the questions in *Donna me prega*):²⁵ “che cosa è gentilezza, e da che vene, / e dirò i segni che ’l gentil uom tene” (I will say what it is, whence it comes, and the distinctive features that a noble person possesses; *Le dolci rime*, 79–80). Undoubtedly, the prose treatise allows Dante to demonstrate a much greater knowledge of Aristotle than he had thus far been able to demonstrate in lyric form.²⁶ We should not forget, however, that it is in the substantially earlier canzone that Dante first writes philosophy and first really engages Aristotle. Indeed, the germ for the idea of the *Convivio*—a text devoted to the popularizing of philosophy, much of it Aristotelian—comes from the canzone *Le dolci rime*, in which Dante first popularized Aristotelian philosophy by incorporating it in a vernacular lyric poem.

From *Le dolci rime* to *Poscia ch’Amor*, from Philosophy to Social History

Written a decade or so earlier than the treatise, in the mid-1290s, circa 1294–96, *Le dolci rime* belongs to the period of great ferment after the composition of the *Vita Nuova*. During this time, Dante wrote poems as disparate as the love poems that chronicle a love other than Beatrice (poems that the *Convivio* claims are for Lady Philosophy), the *tenzone* with Forese Donati, and the *rime petrose*. He also wrote a moral canzone on courtly virtue, *Poscia ch’Amor*, which unpacks the definition of nobility from *Le dolci*

24 Cavalcanti is cited from the edition of D. De Robertis, *Guido Cavalcanti, Rime, con le rime di Iacopo Cavalcanti* (Turin, 1986).

25 As De Robertis notes in his commentary: “Tre questioni, sullo schema di quelle enunciate nei vv. 10–14 di *Donna me prega*” (Three questions, following the scheme of the questions pronounced in verses 10–14 of *Donna me prega*; p. 67).

26 On the other hand, even in the treatise Dante was still learning: Dante seems not to have known the *Politics* in *Convivio* 4, citing as Frederick’s a definition of nobility that is in fact Aristotle’s and that he will cite as Aristotle’s in the *Monarchia*. A. R. Ascoli, however, thinks he is feigning not to know Aristotle’s definition in *Convivio*; see A. R. Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge, 2008), 105.

rime in ways that move us away from the realm of philosophy and toward the domain of social history. In other words, in the dynamic between *Le dolci rime*, on the one hand, and *Poscia ch'Amor*, on the other, we can see the ways in which, as I noted earlier, the Aristotelian template allows for an easy turn on Dante's part from ethics in the moral and philosophical sphere to ethics in the social and historical sphere.

Devoting three stanzas to refutation of previous faulty definitions of nobility and three stanzas to the construction of a positive definition, *Le dolci rime* follows a tight, logic-driven—indeed, syllogistic—path, leavened by occasional flashes of passion and sarcasm that do not, however, alter the logical course of the argument. By contrast, *Poscia ch'Amor* is, as Foster and Boyde note, “more rhetorical, less logical than *Le dolci rime* . . . the weapon is the rhetorical question, not the syllogism.”²⁷ The change in linguistic and rhetorical texture reflects the move from the stoa of the philosophers to the great hall of the *palazzo*: if *Le dolci rime* is theory of nobility, *Poscia ch'Amor* is praxis, picking up on the practical aspects that are left hanging by the high theoretical discourse of *Le dolci rime*. In other words, to be clear, the questions *Poscia ch'Amor* seeks to answer include what, exactly, are the “reggimenti belli” (good manners) referred to in *Le dolci rime*, verse 24. In other words, how much should a nobleman spend, and how should he dress and speak? *Le dolci rime* posits the existence of outward signs that demonstrate inner nobility—“e dirò i segni che 'l gentil uom tene” (*Le dolci rime*, 80)—but its discussion of these “segni” remains genteel (pun intended) and abstract: a catalogue of the virtues that are appropriate to the noble man or woman at different stages of life. *Poscia ch'Amor*, instead, jumps immediately into the fray, taking us into a world of social anxiety and social one-upmanship.

Social anxiety courses through Dante's poetry from the earliest forays of his correspondence sonnets with Dante da Maiano, which are laced with aggression and barely masked rivalry. The sonnets perform a ritual testing of male *valore* in the poetic agora.²⁸ Susan Noakes has carefully set out the context for the social anxiety that percolates through the *tenzone* with Forese Donati, and Albert Ascoli has illuminated the process whereby Dante, in book 1 of *Convivio*, forges authority by confronting his anxiety about his reputation.²⁹ *Poscia ch'Amor*'s vituperation of those who throw away their wealth, feigning liberality and nobility of character when in actuality they are not liberal but prodigal, is both profoundly Aristotelian (liberality as the virtuous mean between prodigality and avarice) and brimming with social anxiety: we can feel Dante's frustration that these sham nobles can still be thought of as do-gooders by their fellow citizens (similarly, in *Inferno* 6, the great Florentines known for good works turn out to be “among the darkest souls”; 85).³⁰

27 See Foster and Boyde, *Dante's Lyric Poetry* (above, n. 13), 228–29.

28 See my commentary to the sonnets exchanged between Dante Alighieri and Dante da Maiano in *Rime giovanili e della "Vita Nuova"*, ed. T. Barolini, with notes by M. Gragnolati (Milan, 2009).

29 S. Noakes, “Virility, Nobility, and Banking: The Crossing of Discourses in the *Tenzone* with Forese,” in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. T. Barolini and H. W. Storey (New York, 2003), 241–58; A. R. Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, chap. 2.

30 There is a deep connection between *Poscia ch'Amor* and *Inferno* 6: in *Poscia ch'Amor* Dante did a trial run for the indictment of Florentine high society that he later crystallizes in *Inferno* 6's lapidary

The *Inferno*'s meditations on unethical wealth management indicate the continuing depth of Dante's frustration: the prodigals who do not spend their wealth appropriately, in *Inferno* 7; the wastrels who dissipate their wealth, most likely on gaming and whoring, in *Inferno* 13; the "gente nuova" whose sudden wealth is responsible for Florentine "orgoglio e dismisura," in *Inferno* 16.73–74; and the sarcastic reference to the "temperate spese" (*Inf.* 29.126) of the Sieneese gilded youth known as the *brigata spendereccia*, in *Inferno* 29.³¹

While no mechanism may exist that can fully allay Dante's frustration at watching the non-noble *vili* of his city manage to pass themselves off as *gentili* by virtue of their wealth, in *Poscia ch'Amor* he turns to the one mechanism that he has at hand, namely, Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. Not in the clean crisp language of *Le dolci rime*, but in a convoluted expression of his disgust, Dante describes those who throw away their material possessions in the belief that they will automatically be enrolled among the virtuous as a result: "Sono che per gittar via loro avere / credon potere / capere—là dove li boni stanno / che dopo morte fanno / riparo nella mente / a quei cotanti c'hanno conoscenza" (There are those who think that to dissipate their wealth is the way to win a place with the worthy who after death continue to dwell in the minds of such as are wise; *Poscia ch'Amor*, 20–25). Such people may as well keep their money: "Ma lor messione a' bon' non può piacere, / perché tenere / savere—fôra" (But their extravagance cannot meet with good men's approval; so that they would be wiser to keep their cash; *Poscia ch'Amor*, 26–28). In other words, the Aristotelian mean cannot be achieved by cheating; liberality is not the same as prodigality. To be liberal rather than prodigal requires that real virtue be deployed in the giving, not mere reckless abandon.

In the language of *Poscia ch'Amor* on dissipation ("gittar via loro avere"), language that finds its way into the "Mal dar e mal tener" of *Inferno* 7, we see the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean, a paradigm that held a constant place in Dante's thinking from at least the time of *Le dolci rime* in the mid-1290s. After *Poscia ch'Amor*, the paradigm was picked up and revernacularized in the post-exilic canzone *Doglia mi reca*, which resonates with the lyric *misura/dismisura* rather than the Aristotelian *mezzo* of *Le dolci rime*: "Come con dismisura si rauna, / così con dismisura si ristringne" (*Doglia mi reca*, 85–86). The language of *Doglia mi reca* is subsequently picked up and echoed in the prose of *Convivio* 4.

In 1293, the Florentine *Ordinamenti di Giustizia* were passed, which prohibited certain magnate families of great wealth and power, including the Cavalcanti and Donati, from participation in Florentine government. Dante's writings from this period, the *tenzone* with Forese, for instance, show how far from immune he was from worry about his own lower status as a scion of a poor family of minor nobility, a worry that must

"Giusti son due, e non vi sono intesi" (Two men are just, and are not understood there; *Inf.* 6.73). Indeed, *Poscia ch'Amor* concludes with a similarly terse indictment: "Color che vicon fanno tutti contra" (The present generation, without exception, does just the reverse).

31 On the issues around wealth management and masculinity, see my "Sociology of the *Brigata*: Gendered Groups in Dante, Forese, Folgore, Boccaccio—From 'Guido, i' vorrei' to Griselda," *Italian Studies* 67, no. 1 (2012): 4–22.

have been aggravated by his sense of overwhelming intellectual superiority and authentic friendship with men who belonged to the magnate class.³² I believe that the anxiety expressed by the *tenzone* with Forese is contemporaneously expressed, albeit in very different form, by *Le dolci rime*, which is a principled but also anxiety-driven resistance to the definition of nobility as “antica possession d’avere / con reggimenti belli” (long-standing possession of wealth together with pleasing manners; *Le dolci rime*, 23–24). In *Le dolci rime*, Dante deconstructs “antica possession d’avere”; in *Poscia ch’Amor* he tackles “con reggimenti belli”: in both canzoni he uses Aristotelian ethics as a bulwark against the social posturing of men with requisite lineage and wealth but inferior virtue, and as a way to leverage the social position of a man like himself—a superior man with insufficient wealth if not lineage.

The doctrine whereby virtue is “a ‘habit of choosing which keeps steadily to the mean’”—“un abito eligente / lo qual dimora in mezzo solamente” (*Le dolci rime*, 86–87)—like the doctrine of *misura* that precedes it, was never just about theory: as we can see in the Occitan context, as well, it was always connected to the behavior of real people wielding real power, and hence to issues of social status and positioning. Within the Florentine context, the *Ordinamenti di Giustizia* levied real consequences on real families of power and wealth for their nonvirtuous behavior. Dante was consumed with his social standing, as the *tenzone* with Forese shows us; that he aimed to excel in all things cultural goes without saying. The philosophical canzone *Le dolci rime* combines both obsessions. Dante addresses the question of his precarious social standing directly, by destroying the conventional definition of nobility, replacing it with the Aristotelian definition of virtue and then positing that nobility exists wherever virtue is present: “È gentilezza dovunque è vertute” (Nobility is wherever virtue is; *Le dolci rime*, 101). He addresses it indirectly, that is culturally, by showing that he can bring Aristotle into the prestigious lyric tradition better than Guittone.

But can Dante bring Aristotle into the lyric tradition better than Cavalcanti, the dear friend who wrote the Aristotelian, perhaps even Averroist, *Donna me prega* and who, as a magnate, needed no social empowering? The many purposes of *Le dolci rime* come more clearly into focus, its work of social self-promotion in tandem with its authentic concern for the larger social good, when we recall that sometime in this same period, perhaps to shake Dante from depression after the death of Beatrice, Cavalcanti sent his friend the following sonnet:

*I’ vegno ’l giorno a-tte ’nfinite volte
e trovoti pensar troppo vilmente:
molto mi dol della gentil tua mente
e d’assai tue virtù che-tti son tolte.
Solevanti spiacer persone molte,*

32 It is worth noting that both the Cavalcanti and Donati lineages are classified by Carol Lansing in *The Florentine Magnates* (Princeton, 1991) as “older houses of the traditional aristocracy” (183).

*tutor fuggivi la noiosa gente;
 di me parlavi sì coralemente
 che-tutte le tue rime avè ricolte.
 Or non ardisco, per la vil tua vita,
 far mostramento che-ttu' dir mi piaccia,
 né 'n guisa vegno a-tte che-ttu mi veggi.
 Se 'l presente sonetto spesso leggi,
 lo spirito noioso che-tti caccia
 si partirà dall'anima invilita.*

I visit you a thousand times a day
 and find you steeped too much in shameful thoughts.
 It pains me deeply that your noble mind
 and many virtues have been stripped away.

You once would treat crowds with contempt
 and always fled from those who are mundane;
 of me you used to speak so cordially
 that I collected every poem you sent.

I now dare not, since you've demeaned yourself,
 acknowledge that I like your poetry,
 nor will you see me if I visit you.

If you reread this sonnet several times,
 the loathsome spirit persecuting you
 will be dispelled from your degraded soul.³³

Even if considered a salutary intervention, the fact remains that the magnate Cavalcanti indicts his friend for the slide of his “gentil tua mente” into “la vil tua vita,” tarring him repeatedly with a word, *vile*, which in *Convivio* is defined as the opposite of *nobile*. However many times a day Guido drops in on Dante, he finds him thinking “troppo vilmente” (2); he used to collect his friend’s poetry, but now does not dare, on account of Dante’s base life, “per la vil tua vita” (9), to make a show of liking Dante’s verse. He concludes by saying that Dante’s soul has become “invilita”—made *vile*.

For Dante, whose social position was less secure than Cavalcanti’s, and whose status was profoundly enmeshed with his sense of his virtue, this violent demotion, whereby his virtues are literally stripped away from him—“assai tue virtù che-tti son tolte” (4)—cannot have been easy to countenance. Perhaps a need to reclaim his personal *gentilezza* after his friend’s indictment feeds into the passion that pulses through the reasoned syllogisms of *Le dolci rime*. If so, the private motivation in no way limits the reach of a canzone that uses Aristotelian ethics as a lever of social change.

33 The translation is Richard Lansing’s, composed for *Dante’s Lyric Poetry: Poems of Youth and of the “Vita Nuova,”* commentary by T. Barolini with a new verse translation by R. Lansing (Toronto, 2014).

