

## CONCLUSION

### CONTEMPORARIES WHO FOUND HETERODOXY IN DANTE, FEATURING (BUT NOT EXCLUSIVELY) CECCO D'ASCOLI

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In concluding this volume, the fruit of Maria Luisa Ardiszone's passionate curiosity and intrepid quest for understanding, I offer these personal reflections, intending to engage less with the technical élan demonstrated so compellingly in the preceding pages and more with the underlying question posed by the title of the volume: my goal in this Conclusion is to suggest that there are many ways and many paths by which to approach the question of Dante and radical thought. There is Radical Thought, with a capital "R" and a capital "T", referring to the technical philosophical discussions that originated in the thirteenth century and that were received and discussed in the fourteenth, by many including Dante, and there is radical thought, with a small "r" and a small "t", which to my mind would include the many aspects of Dante's literary production in which he evinces non-normative positions, going beyond the conventional social parameters of his time and place.

The title of the volume that I am herewith concluding is *Dante and Heterodoxy: The Temptations of 13<sup>th</sup> Century Radical Thought*, and I begin by stating, as a matter of intellectual biography, that Dante certainly experienced the "temptations of thirteenth century radical thought". Therefore, it is right that we continue to explore and to nuance, with ever greater historical precision, the contours of those temptations, as the essays in this volume variously do. We can also acknowledge that the search for Dantean heterodoxy has led to some moments of critical exuberance, which are to be applauded since they have stimulated the quest for understanding, but which also with the passing of time and the accrual of new information and knowledge, need to be corrected. Scholarship is not

unlike the stock market: exuberance and corrections are the dialectic by which we proceed and learn. Thus, an essay of great historical importance in this volume, one that marks the pendulum shift of new knowledge, is Costantino Marmo's "Had the *Modistae* any Influence on Dante? Thirty Years after Maria Corti's Proposal". Here the distinguished scholar of medieval semiotics corrects and realigns Maria Corti's profoundly influential and exuberant singling out of the *modistae* as key influencers of Dante's thought. The pursuit of knowledge wherever it leads is inspiringly in evidence here, given that Maria Corti shared close intellectual ties with Maria Luisa Ardizzone, the originator and convener of the conference that led to this volume and to Marmo's contribution.

But we must also guard against excessive correction, which in my view would be the position, put forward in this volume by Zygmunt Barański, that Dante and radical thought are incompatible. Again, my point has less bearing on the technical arena—though I will show that Dante prompted his contemporaries to believe that he at least occasionally wandered onto dangerous turf in a technical philosophical fashion—than on the wider playing fields of life, in which Dante so often and so consistently shows a penchant for thinking radically. The question as to whether Dante is technically heterodox keeps us at times from focusing profitably on what to me is the overarching issue, which is the way in which he disrupted the complacencies and challenged the expectations of readers in his own day. As we bring a wider and deeper historical context to bear on our reading of Dante's literary production, we are enabled to see the ways in which he was culturally far from mainstream.

Because Dante's thought and practice are so consistently heterodox in the sense of being socially non-conformist and non-normative, it is less necessary to manufacture his radical thought, as Corti effectively did, than to manifest it: for Dante's radical thought has been absorbed, defused, and ultimately effaced by the centuries of normalizing effected in the cultural sphere by the mechanisms of acculturation deployed by both Church and nascent State, and in the textual sphere by the *Commedia*'s reception as tracked in the *secolare commento*. Of course, Dante is unusual only in the *degree* to which this destiny of acculturation awaited his masterpiece. The destiny of *all* successful and compelling radical thought is to be absorbed, defused, and ultimately effaced by Time: the destiny of truly immense cultural statements that meet with societal approval is to come to seem natural. Our students respond to Dante's choice of Virgilio to be his guide as obvious, natural, and discounted, when in fact in Dante's time it was anything but discounted: it was an unusual choice, an avant-garde choice. Because of the movement we call humanism, a movement that Dante's

choice of Virgilio heralded, his decision has come to seem obvious. Similarly, readers do not respond with amazement to Dante's claim in *Inferno* 11 that the structure of his hell derives from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: time has drained all shock value from the spectacle of a Christian author claiming a pagan philosopher as his authority on sin.

Ironically, therefore, great cultural success results in radical thought that becomes invisible, either because it has been accepted and absorbed or because uncomfortable ideology in culturally sanctioned canonical texts tends to be reconfigured or ignored. The reception of the *Commedia* resulted in both kinds of invisibility: the selection of a classical pagan guide through the afterlife and of a classical pagan template for hell has been accepted to the point of no longer manifesting the ideological significance that it had in Dante's time; conversely, Dante's progressive treatment of sodomy was for centuries ignored by the commentary tradition and effectively elided from the poem. In the areas where the culture at large was not prepared to sanction or truly wrestle with Dante's vision, areas that include his most important and original ideological choices—for instance, that of a young female avatar of the divine—his choices are papered over or reconfigured ideologically (generally through allegory).

Before moving to a case study of a verse in the *Commedia* judged potentially heterodox by contemporaries, let me give a few examples of mainstream, indeed canonical, topics that harbour heterodox thought. *Inferno* 4 is profoundly radical, as Giorgio Padoan showed in a 1969 article that details Dante's conscious and deliberate flouting of theological thought on Limbo.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Padoan's masterly historical contextualization of the canto has still to be fully integrated into the commentary tradition. Theologians placed only unbaptized infants in Limbo. The Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs who predeceased Christ were once there, according to theologians, but were rescued and raised to heaven by Christ's harrowing of hell. In this context, the very idea of placing adults of any sort in Limbo, as Limbo was imagined to be in Dante's time, long after Christ's resurrection, is non-orthodox. How much more non-orthodox is it to imagine that Limbo is the dwelling-place of adult non-believers? Dante makes his own theology when he places adult virtuous pagans in Limbo, in a move that, if not technically heterodox, is at the very least

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Padoan, "Il Limbo dantesco," orig. 1969, repr. in *Il pio Enea, l'empio Ulisse* (Ravenna: Longo, 1977), pp. 103-124.

remarkable and anomalous.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he does not limit himself to speculating as to whether virtuous pagans can be saved, as Aquinas does; he actually saves specific pagans: Cato, Trajan, Statius, and Ripheus the Trojan. All of this is non-conventional thinking, as is Dante's extraordinary challenge regarding the justice of condemning a perfectly virtuous man who happens to be born on the banks of the river Indus (*Par.* 19.70-77).

I have tried to show that Dante's thinking does not tend toward the cultural stereotypes that were prevalent in his society, either in the context of gender and sexuality or in the context of race and religion: for instance, he gives us only Christian usurers in *Inferno* 17, thus running counter to cultural and societal norms that associated usury with Jews and that used the visual iconography of money bags to depict someone as Jewish.<sup>3</sup> He honours Muslims, placing Saladin, the renowned twelfth century Muslim general and reconqueror of Jerusalem in the special part of Limbo that he creates for virtuous pagans, along with the great Muslim philosophers Avicenna (980-1037) and Averroes (1126-1198), who are alongside the great sages of classical antiquity. In his philosophical treatise *Convivio*, Dante also treats Muslim philosophers with the respect that he shows the classical philosophers (a respect not shown, for instance, by Petrarch).<sup>4</sup> Avicenna and Algazel are named repeatedly in the *Convivio*, always in excellent company.<sup>5</sup> Averroes in the *Convivio* is simply "the Commentator" ("E chi intende lo Comentatore nel terzo dell'Anima, questo intende da lui [And he who understands the Commentator on the third book of *De Anima*, understands this from him]") (*Conv.* 4.13.8), a label that

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<sup>2</sup> There is no sign of the components of Dante's Limbo in, for instance, Attilio Carpin, *Il limbo nella teologia medievale* (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, "Dante's Sympathy for the Other, or the Non-Stereotyping Imagination: Sexual and Racialized Others in the *Commedia*," *Critica del Testo* 14.1 (2011): 177-204.

<sup>4</sup> I disagree with Edward Said's characterization of Dante, which would be better applied to Petrarch. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pp. 69-70. His lumping together of "Mohammed, Saladin, Averroës, and Avicenna" is based on an unhistoricized reading of the *Commedia*, and especially of Limbo. See also Nancy Bisaha, "Petrarch's Vision of the Muslim and Byzantine East," *Speculum* 76 (2001): 284-314: "In many ways Petrarch employs the discourse of 'Orientalist' writers, as described by Edward Said, centuries before the age of colonialism" (286).

<sup>5</sup> Avicenna is named in the *Convivio* on four occasions: in 2.13.5 (with Algazel); in 2.14.7 (with Aristotle and Ptolemy); in 3.14.5; and in 4.21.2 (in the company of Algazel again).

anticipates *Inferno* 4, where he is “Averois che ’l gran comento feo [Averroes who made the great commentary]” (*Inf.* 4.144).

Moving to the area of sexuality, throughout human history the bastion of normative and repressive thought, the pioneering work of the historian John Boswell (author of the 1980 book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*) on *Purgatorio* 26, in his posthumous essay “Dante and the Sodomites”, has drawn young scholars into a whole new arena of investigation regarding Dante’s views on sexuality and gender-construction, in an ongoing discussion that again illuminates his radical thought.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the commentary tradition does not do nearly enough to help readers understand that Dante’s inclusion of sodomites among those purging their lust in his *Purgatorio* is truly progressive and unconventional. Thankfully, Chiavacci Leonardi is clear, as many commentators still are not, that one group of souls on the final terrace of the mountain is heterosexual and the other homosexual: “La seconda schiera è dunque composta da sodomiti, che a differenza dell’*Inferno*, dove stanno tra i violenti contro natura, sono qui posti tra i lussuriosi, data la diversa suddivisione delle colpe (i vizi capitali) propria del secondo regno [The second line of souls is therefore composed of sodomites, who, in a difference from *Inferno*, where the sodomites are among the violent against nature, are here placed among the lustful, given the divergent subdivision of sin (here based on the capital vices) proper to the second realm]”.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is not possible to grasp Dante’s progressive stance if we only state what he does, and fail to contextualize in such a way as to make visible how what he does often diverges markedly from what his contemporaries do. In the same way that the progressiveness of Dante’s attitude toward a dynastic pawn like Francesca da Rimini is occluded by the failure to mention—in any commentary—that Dante is her historian of record, the one who told her story, which otherwise would have been lost to history altogether,<sup>8</sup> so in the case of the purging lustful of the second realm it is essential to communicate explicitly the huge implications of

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<sup>6</sup> John Boswell, “Dante and the Sodomites,” in *Dante Studies*, 112 (1994): 63-75. Recent work in this vein includes Sara E. Díaz, “Contested Virilities: Constructing Masculinity in Dante’s *Tenzone* with Forese,” *Italian Culture*, 32, no. 1 (2014): 1-19.

<sup>7</sup> Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, commentator, Dante Alighieri, *Commedia*, vol. 2, *Purgatorio* (Milano: Mondadori, 1994), p. 772. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>8</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, “Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender,” *Speculum* 75 (2000): 1-28.

allowing homosexuality to be classified as a form of lust, alongside heterosexuality.

The inclusion of saved sodomites in his purgatory is a *decision* on Dante's part, one that commentaries have traditionally ignored. Although it is technically correct to say, as Chiavacci Leonardi does, that the group of sodomites is placed among the lustful because of the organizational template of Dante's *Purgatorio*, which is based on the seven capital vices, Chiavacci Leonardi's syntax, which suggests that the presence of the sodomites is a passive result of the change in organizational template from *Inferno* to *Purgatorio*, is misleading. Just as no one would have been up in arms had Dante not put saved pagans of classical antiquity in his *Paradiso*, or Muslim sages in his classicized Limbo, there would have been no outcry had he not put saved sodomites on the terrace of lust in his *Purgatorio*. In fact, no one among Dante's contemporaries would have noticed the omission of homosexuals from the saved space of purgatory. The challenge of *Purgatorio* 26 is what it includes, not what it excludes: the inclusion of a second group of souls that is identified with Caesar hearing himself called "Regina" as he paraded in triumph through Rome (*Purg.* 26.77-78), a group that in penance calls out "Sòddoma" as its members move through the purging flames of the terrace of lust (*Purg.* 26.79).

Dante went *counter* to his culture in all the ideological choices I have been discussing: the choice of putting adult virtuous pagans in Limbo, the choice of putting saved pagans in *Paradiso*, and the choice of exploiting the organizational template of *Purgatorio* to showcase the idea that homosexuals can be saved. Contemporary treatments of the sin of *lussuria* encompass only the idea of heterosexual lust as a *lussuria* that can be regulated so that the soul can be saved; I know of no other treatment, written or visual, that opens itself to the idea and indeed the "reality" (in the fiction of the *Commedia*) of saved sodomites. Dante could have precluded any discussion of saved homosexuals by simply ignoring homosexuality outside of *Inferno*. His decision not to do so has far-reaching implications. As Joseph Pequigney wrote in the first sentence of his important 1991 essay on sodomy in the *Commedia* (it is worth noting that the two essays that spearheaded re-evaluation of Dante's handling of non-normative sexuality both came from scholars outside the field): "The representation of sodomy in the *Divine Comedy* is fuller, more complicated, less consistent, more heterodox, profounder, and more important than the commentary has yet made known".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Pequigney, "Sodomy in Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*," *Representations*, 36 (1991): 22-42.

The presence of a second group of souls on *Purgatorio*'s terrace of lust, and the textual confirmations that the second group is composed of homosexuals, tells the attentive reader that lust—excess desire—is the impulse underlying any form of sexuality, normative or non-normative. The point of the inclusion is that the same impulse underlies heterosexual lust and homosexual lust: this is an unconventional thought, not even in the twenty-first century fully absorbed by human societies. Moreover, if we tease out the logic of the Aristotelian idea of incontinence, we can see that Dante's commitment to placing sodomy in purgatory leads him to accept a dangerous symmetry. Lust is by definition for Dante a sin of incontinence, meaning that the impulse that leads to *lussuria* is not sinful when it is controlled and moderated. Extending this logic to homosexual lust would imply not just that one can repent of homosexual lust and be saved, but also that limited and moderated homosexual behaviour is not sinful, just as limited and moderated heterosexual behaviour is not sinful.

Dante makes conventional thinkers uncomfortable, as we can see him doing to the poet Dante da Maiano, who in the wake of Alighieri's sonnet *A ciascun'alma* belittles him—by casting him as not masculine and hence not authoritative—in his response sonnet, *Di ciò che stato sè dimandatore*. Dante da Maiano refuses to engage in interpretation of the baroquely visionary *A ciascun'alma*, in which Love feeds the poet's heart to his beloved. Rather, Dante da Maiano claims that Dante Alighieri is here engaging in a speech act of a fabulous type (“favoleggiar loquendo”), one moreover that he seems to experience as violating gender boundaries. He seems to feel that Dante Alighieri's sonnet is not manly and he essentially advises him to regain his manhood, suggesting to Dante Alighieri that he wash his testicles, a highly gendered cure for his proclivity to *favoleggiar*: “che lavi la tua collia largamente/a ciò che stinga e passi lo vapore/lo qual ti fa favoleggiar loquendo [you should give your balls a thorough wash/so as to quench and dissipate the fumes/that make you fantasize when you converse]” (*Di ciò che stato sè dimandatore*, 7–9). Having offensively gendered Dante's *favoleggiar* as female, Dante da Maiano reaches the conclusion that the vision related in *A ciascun'alma* is a form of hysteria, nothing but *farneticare*: “sol c'hai farneticato, sappie, intendo [I only mean, please know, you were delirious]” (*Di ciò che stato sè dimandatore*, 11).

Dante da Maiano was not altogether wrong: Dante Alighieri engaged in thought-experiments that flouted normative gender-construction. For instance, in the sonnets on mourning that Dante placed in the *Vita Nuova*, *Voi che portate la sembianza umile* and *Se' tu colui c'hai trattato sovente*, he conducts the thought experiment of what it would be to weep and

mourn as a woman, taking part in rituals reserved for females by his society. In these sonnets, Dante imagines being able to cross over the social boundary that separates women from men in the rigid context of the funeral *corrotto*: he wants to participate in the women's work of weeping. The very existence of this imaginary dialogue is proof of Dante's wish to trespass an established boundary—or rather, of his wish to test a boundary that he then ends up reaffirming. This reaffirmation comes by means of the imagined response of the women, who do not show themselves as even slightly open to the role-change implicitly suggested by the poet. Rather, they strongly reconfirm the division of tasks established by the social structure: “E perché piangi tu sì coralmente,/che fai di te pietà venire altrui?/Vedestù pianger lei, che tu non pui/punto celar la dolorosa mente? [Why do you weep so inconsolably/that you make others want to pity you?/Is it because you saw her weep that you/cannot conceal the sorrow that you feel?]” (*Se' tu colui*, 5–8).<sup>10</sup>

Dante's experiment is no less fascinating because he has the female characters in *Se' tu colui* reaffirm gender-appropriate behaviour. In these poems he is consciously imagining what it would be to live outside the gender norms established by his society. In other words, he understands that a society has norms that are constructed, and that do not have to be absorbed acritically as though an essential component of our natures. Dante's attitude toward ritualized codes of male honor from which society does not permit a man to exempt himself is another example of his ability to query and deconstruct his society's essentializing pressures. His attitude evolves into a painfully acquired ability to reject such codes, as we see in the *Geri del Bello* episode of *Inferno* 29, where Dante rejects the obligation to participate in *vendetta* that is laid on a man's kin. Dante proclaims his hard-won freedom from social codes through participation in a higher code of ethics and justice in the canzone *Tre donne*, where he reconstructs the social shame and dishonour of exile into his own personal justice-affiliated honour: “l'essilio che m'è dato onor mi tegno [the exile that is given me I hold as honour]” (*Tre donne*, 76).

The flouting of gender roles is also implicit in the very idea of Beatrice as *Beatrix*: the idea that the medium of salvation is a young, embodied, and historically existent female is already problematic, without

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<sup>10</sup> For Dante da Maiano's attack on Dante Alighieri, and for Dante Alighieri's gender-bending sonnets on mourning, see Teodolinda Barolini, ed. *Rime giovanili e della "Vita Nuova"* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2009), translated and expanded in *Dante's Lyric Poetry: Poems of Youth and of the "Vita Nuova"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014). I cite the new verse translations of Dante's lyric poems prepared for the Toronto edition by Richard Lansing.

even factoring in the unconventional behaviour in which she engages, behaviour that has prompted me to label her *Beatrix loquax*.<sup>11</sup> Pequigney is acute on this topic; his ability to see what he calls, correctly, Dante's "exceptionally tolerant" attitude toward homoeroticism (23) leads him to note as well what many *Dantisti* fail to note with respect to the construction of the figure of Beatrice: "Theology makes no more provision for a ladylove in such a role [as Beatrice's] than it does for a natural and moral homoeroticism. Dante then would appear to be heterosexually unorthodox, too" (39). Singleton pointed out as long ago as 1949's *Essay on the Vita Nuova* that Dante used language in the *libello* that was censored and rewritten in Counter-Reformation Italy: "The word *gloriosa* was changed to *graziosa*, *beatitudine* to *felicità*; the word *beata* was avoided, and the word *salute* was changed to *quiete*".<sup>12</sup> The censoring occurred because of a perceived heterodox quotient in the use, in a non-devotional and non-religious work, of a religious lexicon to characterize an experience involving a man and a woman and to describe a female who was not the Virgin Mary. An even more relevant cultural witness with respect to the unique status of the Virgin Mary, and what could be perceived as Dante's inappropriate appropriations of that status, is Cecco d'Ascoli, Dante's contemporary, an astrologer and professor at the University of Bologna who was burned at the stake for heresy in Florence in 1327.

In the wider cultural domain that I have been discussing, Cecco shows us incontrovertibly that the idea of a guide to the Transcendent who is a young and beautiful and historically embodied female is vastly problematic, far beyond his culture's horizon of expectation. Cecco's appropriation in *Acerba* of the label that Dante uses for women in the canzone *Doglia mi reca* ("sotto benda") is a case in point: "Rare fiare, come disse Dante, / S'intende sottile cosa sotto benna [Rarely, as Dante says, are subtle thoughts understood by those under the veil]" (*Acerba*, 4.9.4397-4398).<sup>13</sup> Dante used the label "sotto benda" in *Doglia mi reca* in the context of

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<sup>11</sup> See Teodolinda Barolini, "Notes toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature, with a Discussion of Dante's *Beatrix Loquax*" (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 360-378, and "Toward a Dantean Theology of Eros: From Dante's Lyrics to the *Paradiso*," in *Discourse Boundary Creation: A Festschrift in Honor of Paolo Valesio on his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, ed. Peter Carravetta (New York: Bordighera Press, 2013), pp. 1-18.

<sup>12</sup> Charles S. Singleton, *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*, orig. 1949 (rpt. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> The edition cited is: Cecco d'Ascoli, *L'Acerba*, ed. Achille Crespi, orig. 1927 (rpt. Milano: La Vita Felice, 2011). Translations are mine.

justifying his transition to clearer language in order to reach women readers with the moral message of his canzone. He goes out of his way in *Doglia mi reca* to construct the category of female interlocutors who can learn from his message and who can discern right from wrong, an ability that requires them to possess intellect.<sup>14</sup> Cecco reacts negatively to Dante's classification of women as capable of taking moral instruction, and deliberately redeploys Dante's phrase "sotto benda" in a misogynist context, where he attacks Dante for his progressive view of women's intellect, depicting Dante as a foolish naif whose belief that women possess intellect is the equivalent of looking for the Virgin Mary in the streets of Ravenna: "Maria si va cercando per Ravenna/Chi in donna crede che sia intelletto [He who believes that there is intellect in women is searching for Mary in Ravenna]" (*Acerba* 4.9.4401-4402).

A further gloss of the idea of "searching for Mary in Ravenna" is provided by the immediately preceding verses in *Acerba*, where Cecco states clearly that intellect was never possessed by women, with the exception of the Virgin Mary:

In donna non fu mai virtù perfetta,  
Salvo in Colei che, innanzi il cominciare,  
Creato fu ed in eterno eletta (*Acerba*, 4.9.4394-4396).

[In woman there was never perfect virtue, except for in Her who was, before the beginning, created and elected to eternity.]

As Seth Fabian notes in his pathbreaking dissertation on *Acerba*: since "only a miracle could create a woman with a fully formed intellect, and since such a miracle only happened in the case of the Virgin", Cecco is claiming that searching Ravenna for Mary is "trying to find the one woman in all of history with a fully developed intellect among the women of everyday life".<sup>15</sup> Fabian's analysis of *Acerba* shows that for Cecco "Dante's use of Beatrice as intellectual and spiritual guide is intellectually absurd and spiritually borders on heretical". His larger point is that Cecco considers himself the champion of orthodoxy and that he intends much of *Acerba* as "an orthodox correction of what Cecco perceived as Dante's heterodoxy".

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<sup>14</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, "Sotto benda: Gender in the Lyrics of Dante and Guittone d'Arezzo (With a Brief Excursus on Cecco d'Ascoli)," *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, pp. 333-359.

<sup>15</sup> See Seth Boniface Fabian, *Cecco versus Dante: Correcting the Comedy with Applied Astrology*, Columbia University dissertation, 2014. All citations of Fabian are from this work.

I will now focus on one specific example of a Dantean idea that Cecco and other contemporaries perceived as heterodox, involving Dante's treatment of Fortuna in *Inferno* 7. The reception of this passage indicates that Dante was capable of stepping on the toes of his contemporaries not only in the cultural and social domains that I have been highlighting but also in the more technical philosophical domain that is the topic of this volume. The debate that I will briefly present makes clear that Dante exposed himself to suspicion of heterodoxy in the treatment on Fortuna in *Inferno* 7, and in particular in verse 89, the middle verse of the following *terzina*:

Le sue permutazion non hanno triegue;  
 necessità la fa esser veloce;  
 sì spesso vien chi vicenda consegue (*Inf.* 7.88-90).

Here Dante writes of Fortuna, personified as a female goddess: "The changes that she brings are without respite; necessity causes her to be swift; and for this reason, men change state so often".

Cecco d'Ascoli inveighed against this passage in his *capitolo* "Della Fortuna", specifically censuring Dante for "sinning" in his linkage of Fortuna with "necessità", and accusing him of not sufficiently championing free will:

Non fa *necessità* ciascuno movendo,  
 Ma ben dispone creatura umana  
 Per qualità, cui l'anima, seguendo  
 L'arbitrio, abbandona e fassi  
 E serva e ladra e, di virtute estrana,  
 Da sé dispoglia l'abito gentile.

In ciò peccasti, fiorentin poeta,  
 Ponendo che li ben della fortuna  
*Necessitati* sieno con lor meta.  
 Non è fortuna cui ragion non vinca.  
 Or pensa, Dante, se prova nessuna  
 Si può più fare che questa convinca.

Fortuna non è altro che disposto  
 Del cielo che dispon cosa animata  
 Qual, disponendo, si trova all'opposto.  
 Non vien *necessitato* il ben felice.  
 Essendo in libertà l'alma creata,  
 Fortuna in lei non può, che contraddice (*Acerba*, 2.1.719-736; italics mine).

[Each heaven does not determine the soul by necessity as it moves, but only impresses a certain disposition on the human creature. The soul, following its free will, abandons its heavenly disposition and makes itself vile, a slave and thief, estranged from virtue; it strips itself of its noble habits.

In this you sinned, Florentine poet, positing that the goods of fortune are assigned by necessity. There is no fortune that reason does not conquer. Think now, Dante if there is a proof that can be adduced more convincing than this one.

Fortune is nothing but the disposition of the heavens that dispose the living thing, which then changes to its opposite (from passive to active). Happiness is not brought about by necessity. The soul having been created in liberty, fortune has no power over it that could contradict its will.]

As Cecco's critique makes clear, in the Fortuna passage, and especially in *Inferno* 7.89 ("necessità la fa esser veloce"), Dante seems to accord too much influence to astral determinism (code word: "necessità") and to insufficiently buttress the role of free will in human life. In his critique of Dante's views on Fortuna, Cecco repeats forms of the damning *necessità* in stanza after stanza, five times in all: "Non fa necessità ciascun movendo" (719), "Necessitati sieno con loro meta" (727), "Non vien necessitato il ben felice" (734), "Né può necessitate in lui cadere" (745), "Ma chiunque aspetta la necessitate" (752). Of course, the charge of having accorded too much influence to the heavens is exactly the charge that the inquisitors levied against Cecco (the word *necessità* is featured conspicuously in Villani's account of Cecco's trial, presented in Fabian's dissertation), although, as Fabian shows, Cecco emphatically always preserves the absolute freedom of the will.

This story reminds us that there are many factors beyond the theological and philosophical that go into charges of heterodoxy and, ultimately, of heresy: factors that include political and cultural protection and lack thereof. In Dante's case, his fictions, in particular his use of figures from classical antiquity, were, as I have previously argued in *The Undivine Comedy*, the prophylaxis that allowed his supporters to claim him a *poeta* rather than a *teologus* and protect him from the adverse reactions of inquisitors. As we will see, in the case of the passage on Fortuna, Dante's protectors resorted precisely to calling him *poeta*.

Maybe it will be objected that Cecco, a somewhat unstable character with a checkered history, is not a reliable witness to Dante's orthodoxy or heterodoxy. Perhaps some think that Cecco's repeated castigations of "il falso Averroisse" (*Acerba* 1.2.120) are merely smokescreens. Certainly,

whether Dante was inclined toward Averroism during his *Convivio* period or not, he never, even after his putative turn toward orthodoxy in the *Commedia*, lashes out against Averroes, as Cecco does. There are three assaults on Averroes by name in *Acerba* and a sustained attack in Book 5, which begins in 4722, “Ma ciò negava al mondo Averroisse”, and which includes the following incisive rebuke:

O Averroisse, con la setta sciocca,  
 Che verso il Ben chiudesti gli occhi tuoi,  
 Questa ragione li tuoi detti sbrocca (*Acerba*, 5.1.4740-4742).

[O Avverroes, with your foolish sect, who closed your eyes to the Good,  
 this demonstration will lop off your arguments.]

By contrast, Dante praises Averroes for his commentary on Aristotle in *Inferno* 4, having honoured him by putting him with Aristotle and the other virtuous pagans in a special zone in his already special Limbo. Later in the poem he refers, mildly in comparison to Cecco, to Averroes as a wise man who went astray: “più savio di te fé già errante” (*Purg.* 25.63). It is worth noting that the context and syntax of the purgatorial passage link the pilgrim himself to Averroes. Statius is completing his explanation of the creation of the human being, body and soul, and when he reaches the critical point of how the animal becomes a speaker (“fante”), he notes that this node is such that it caused one wiser than Dante to err: “Ma come d’animal divegna fante,/non vedi tu ancor: quest’è tal punto,/che più savio di te fé già errante [But how the animal becomes a speaker, you do not yet see; this point is such that it caused a wiser one than you to err]” (*Purg.* 25.61-63). Dante makes clear that he distances himself from Averroes on the making of human intellect in a syntactic construction in which he also pays tribute to the great Arab philosopher as one wiser than he is. This is hardly the harsh and acrimonious distancing practiced by Cecco in *Acerba*. But then again, Cecco was writing straight philosophy in verse, without the cover provided by monsters from classical antiquity and charismatic characters who converse and interact with a voyaging first-person narrator: his need for protective cover was very great.

Averroes is also named by Dante in the *Monarchia*, again as the commentator of Aristotle’s *De Anima*: “Et huic sententie concordat Averrois in comento super hiis que *De anima* [And Averroes is in agreement with this opinion in his commentary on the *De anima*]” (*Monarchia* 1.3.9). In his commentary on the *Monarchia*, Bruno Nardi reminds us that this passage inflamed the ire of Guido Vernani, who treated it as an opportunity

to suggest that Dante embraced Averroes's heterodox view of the possible intellect:

Il richiamo ad Averroè, “super hiis que *De anima*”, ha fornito un'ottima occasione al saccente teologo di Rimini, frate Guido Vernani, fautore della teocrazia papale, per sferrare uno dei suoi più velenosi attacchi contro questo luogo della *Monarchia*, quasi che l'autore di essa, citando Averroè, ne avesse fatta sua la dottrina certamente averroistica dell'unicità numerica dell'*intelletto possibile* per tutti gli uomini (N. Matteini, *Guido Vernani da Rimini: Testo critico del 'De reprobatione Monarchiae'*, Padova, CEDAM, 1958, p. 97).<sup>16</sup>

[This recall of Averroes furnished an excellent opportunity for the learned theologian of Rimini, friar Guido Vernani, supporter of papal theocracy, to launch one of his most poisonous attacks against this passage of the *Monarchia*, as though the author of the passage, in citing Averroes, had personally embraced the Averroist doctrine of the unicity of possible intellect in all humans (N. Matteini, *Guido Vernani da Rimini: Testo critico del 'De reprobatione Monarchiae'*, Padova, CEDAM, 1958, p. 97)].

Vernani's attack cannot be brushed aside because it is focused on the *Monarchia*. Vernani assails Dante's use of a text, Averroes's commentary to the *De Anima*, which Dante often draws upon in his other writings. We cannot cordon off the *Monarchia* references to the *De Anima*, as though unconnected to Dante's other work. Even if inaccurate—especially if inaccurate—Vernani's response to the *Monarchia*'s reference to Averroes as commentator of the *De Anima* contains valuable historical information, reminding us that politics and philosophy were deeply and dangerously commingled.

Returning to the case of Dante's *Fortuna*, it turns out that Cecco is not our only contemporary witness. In this instance, there are more respectable “mainstream” witnesses to the problem posed by *Inferno* 7.89, for both Boccaccio and Benvenuto flag the verse with evident concern.<sup>17</sup> Boccaccio in his *Esposizioni* writes that the words of verse 89, if not well understood, could generate “error”:

*Le sue permutazion*, che questa ministra fa nei beni temporali, *non hanno triegue*, cioè intermissione alcuna, sì come coloro che guerreggiano hanno

<sup>16</sup> *Monarchia*, ed. Bruno Nardi, in Dante Alighieri, *Opere minori*, tomo 2 (Milano: Ricciardi, 1979). The citation, with the reference to Vernani in Matteini's edition, is on p. 301.

<sup>17</sup> My thanks to Seth Fabian for alerting me to the responses of Benvenuto and Boccaccio.

ne' tempi delle triegue; e, per ciò che nelle sue permutazioni non è alcun riposo, può apparire che *Necessità la fa esser veloce*. E in queste parole vuole intendere l'autore i movimenti di questa ministra continui essere di necessità: le quali parole, non bene intese, potrebbon generare errore, il quale con la grazia di Dio si torrà via qui appresso, dove, esplicato il testo a questa ministra pertinente, dimosterrò quello che intendo essere questa Fortuna (*Esposizioni*, Canto VII, *Esposizione litterale*, §73).<sup>18</sup>

[*The changes that she brings*, which this minister brings about in temporal goods, *are without respite*, that is without any intermission, as in the interludes that those at war have during times of truce; and, since in her permutations there is no repose, it may appear that *Necessity makes her swift*. And in these words the author intends that the continuous movements of this minister occur by necessity: which words, if not well understood, could generate error, which with the grace of God will be removed here where, having explicated the text pertaining to this minister, I will show what is intended by this Fortuna.]

Boccaccio removes the sting from *necessità* by transferring the concept from Fortuna herself to her movements, which are by necessity continuous and without interruption. All trace of the problem posed by verse 89 has by now long disappeared from the commentary tradition. Chiavacci Leonardi picks up Boccaccio's gloss on *necessità*:

*veloce*: perché il suo compito è di permutare *a tempo li ben vani*, ed essi dunque non possono durare a lungo presso la stessa persona. La *necessità*, che qui corrisponde al volere di Dio, accompagna sempre la Fortuna nei testi dei classici.<sup>19</sup>

[*swift*: because her task is to shift *at the decreed time the temporal goods*, and those goods therefore cannot remain long the possession of the same person. *Necessity*, which here corresponds to the will of God, always accompanies Fortuna in classical texts.]

In a lacuna that I point out not to fault Chiavacci Leonardi, but because it is typical of the essentializing and dehistoricized approach of the *secolare commento*, the commentary fails to note that the gloss offered is not transparent but the product of work and thought, and that in its un glossed state the verse had raised concern lest it “generate error”.

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<sup>18</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante*, ed. Giorgio Padoan, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, general editor Vittore Branca (Verona: Mondadori, 1965), p. 197.

<sup>19</sup> Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, commentator, Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* (Milano: Mondadori, 1991), p. 227.

Indeed, Chiavacci Leonardi removes all possibility for error, and removes all ambiguity from Dante's text, by writing that "necessity here corresponds to the will of God".

Fascinatingly, Benvenuto explicitly refers to a contemporary debate provoked by "necessità la fa esser veloce". He writes that many had much to say on the subject, that there were those who defended Dante and those who attacked him, and he invokes Cecco d'Ascoli by name in the latter category:

Et hic nota lector quod circa literam istam est toto animo insistendum, quia istud dictum non videtur bene sanum; ideo multi multa dixerunt, alii pro autore, alii contra autorem, sicut Cechus de Esculo qui satis improvide damnat dictum autoris exclamans: *In ciò fallasti* [sic: Cecco wrote *peccasti*], *fiorentin poeta*.<sup>20</sup>

[And here, reader, note that about this passage one must insist with all one's spirit, for this word might seem to be not quite sound. Therefore many have said many things, some on behalf of the author, others against the author, like Cecco d'Ascoli who quite recklessly condemns the author's word exclaiming: *In ciò fallasti* [sic] *fiorentin poeta*.]

He goes on to classify Cecco as an astrologer who doesn't understand poetry, for if Cecco were as accomplished a poet as he was an astrologer, he would not have so attacked Dante. He further defends Dante by pointing to the passage in *Purgatorio* 16 in which Dante explicitly states that humans have reason and that reason trumps the movements of the heavens and astral determinism:

Sed parcat mihi reverentia sua, si fuisset tam bonus poeta ut astrologus erat, non invexisset ita temere contra autorem. Debebat enim imaginari quod autor non contradixisset expresse sibi ipsi, qui dicit *Purgatorii* cap. XVI: *El cielo i vostri movimenti initia, Non dico tutti, ma posto ch'io 'l dica, Dato v'è lume a bene et a malitia*.

[But may his reverence spare me, if he were as good a poet as he was an astrologer, he would not have inveighed so boldly against the author. For he ought to imagine that the author clearly did not contradict himself, who says in chapter XVI of *Purgatorio*: *The heavens initiate your movements; I don't say all of them, but, were I to say it, you have been given light to discern good and evil*.]

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<sup>20</sup> Benvenuto da Imola, *Benevenuti de Rambaldis de Imola Comentum super Dantis Aldigherij Comoediam*, ed. J. P. Lacaïta (Firenze: Barbèra, 1887).

Although Benvenuto defends Dante initially by referring to his status of *poeta*, as compared to *astrologus*, in citing *Purgatorio* 16 he moves to the realm of ideas, and he vindicates the internal coherence of the *Commedia* on the topic of free will. Boccaccio, on the other hand, is more defensive, and in ways that again testify to the perceived heterodoxy of Dante's text. Boccaccio claims that Dante is "speaking poetically and according to the ancient customs of the Gentiles" ("poeticamente parlando e secondo l'antico costume de' Gentili"), who were accustomed to deify everything they saw in the world around them. Most interestingly, he concludes his commentary on Fortuna with a demurral: whatever he has had to say on this topic can be put aside if it should not conform to truth, for his intention is that truth always be given its place in his writings ("sempre sia alla verità riservato il luogo suo"). Giorgio Padoan, the editor of the *Esposizioni*, calls Boccaccio's statement a "declaration of submission to Catholic orthodoxy [dichiarazione di sottomissione all'ortodossia cattolica]".<sup>21</sup> I would add that the concluding remark is a clear indication that Boccaccio felt that commenting Dante's Fortuna had led him onto dangerous territory.

My point here is not to say who was right and who was wrong in the fourteenth century debate about Dante's meaning in the verse "necessità la fa esser veloce" (*Inf.* 7.89). My point is that such a debate took place, and that therefore we have proof positive that Dante's contemporary readers were not closed off to finding heterodox opinions in the *Commedia*. The discussion of *Inferno* 7.89 is part of the historical record, and as such it needs to be factored into our understanding of what the *Commedia* is and how it was perceived. I have no doubt that Cecco d'Ascoli can give us further insights into areas in which Dante's philosophical positions were—or were perceived to be—less orthodox than we now assume. I am pleased to think that the recovery of Cecco's work will lead to twenty-first century variants of the long-ago debates sparked by the controversial author of *Acerba*. But, even with all this, it is still on balance my opinion that Dante's most significant contributions to radical thought belong to the small "r" and small "t" variety: they are the forms of tolerance and openness toward the non-normative and the non-conventional that water his writings like rivers of grace.

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<sup>21</sup> *Esposizioni*, canto VII, *Esposizione Litterale*, §91, p. 402 in Padoan's edition; Padoan's note is on p. 892.