

DANSE MACABRE DES FEMMES

women are summoned to join the Dance of Death, starting with the queen, who is followed by over thirty women, presented according to the social hierarchy of the period.

The text survives in five manuscripts (B.N. [Bibliothèque nationale] f. f. 1186; N. A. f. f. 10032; B. N. f. f. 25434; B. N. f. f. 995; Arsenal 3637) and two printed editions. Both printings and one manuscript (B. N. f. f. 995) are extensively illustrated, with one woodcut or illumination for each role. The earliest manuscript, B. N. f. f. 1186, dated 1482, contains thirty roles; the latest and most elaborate, B. N. f. f. 995, undated, presents thirty-six.

In form and purpose, the *Danse Macabre des Femmes* (*DMF*) mirrors the *Danse Macabre des Hommes* (*DMH*), and in all manuscripts and printed editions the two poems appear together, the Men's Dance always presented first. Historically, the first occurrence of the *DMH* precedes the earliest *DMF* by nearly sixty years: the *DMH* is first attested to in 1424, attributed to Jean Gerson, and it was supposedly painted on the walls of the Cimetière des Innocents (Cemetery of the Innocents) in Paris.

The verses for each individual called by Death contain brief comments about her activities and interests, which elaborate the role name (or occupation) heading each response strophe and the woodcut or illumination. Thus the *Women's Danse Macabre* provides glimpses into daily life at the turn of the sixteenth century. The following roles are found in *La Grant Danse Macabre des Femmes* (B. N. f. f. 995): queen, duchess, regent, knight's lady, abbess, squire's lady, prioress, young lady, townswoman, widow, merchant, bailiff's lady, virgin, theologian, newlywed, pregnant woman, old maid, Franciscan, friendly woman, wet-nurse, shepherdess, woman on crutches, village woman, old woman, saleswoman, prostitute, bathhouse attendant, girl, nun, witch, bride, darling wife, chambermaid, hosteller, hypocrite, and fool.

Although the text is traditionally attributed to Martial d'Auvergne, who is cited as author only in B. N. f. f. 25434, he is not named in the earliest extant version of the poem (B. N. f. f. 1186, dated 1482) and there is no reference to him in any other manuscript or printing.

Guyot Marchant, a Parisian printer and friend of Martial d'Auvergne, published both printed editions of the *DMH* and *DMF* (1486 and 1491).

The content of the poem, its language (Parisian Middle French), and several individual figures indicate Parisian connections for the work, but only the printed texts can be accurately and precisely identified as having been made in Paris.

ANN T. HARRISON

References and Further Reading

The Danse Macabre of Women: MS. Fr. 995 of the Bibliothèque Nationale, edited by Ann T. Harrison. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994.

See also **Devotional Literature**; **Gerson, Jean**; **Literacy and Reading**; **Vernacular**; **Literature, Old French**

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Women were central to Dante, from his earliest love poetry until the end of the *Commedia*. Dante began his poetic journey as a lyric love poet. In the tradition of courtly love, his poetry projects his own fears and desires, without exploring the subjectivity of the lady. In the theologized variant of courtly love Dante calls *stil novo* poetry (most of Dante's *stil novo* poems are gathered in the book that tells the story of his love for Beatrice, the *Vita nuova*), the poet learns to ask no reward of the lady and to find the act of praising her its own reward. Nevertheless, there is no exploration of her subjectivity or assignment to her of moral agency. The ladies of Dante's early lyrics—whose names include Violetta, Fioretta, Lisetta, and the stony cold *donna petra* as well as Beatrice—have in common the fact that they do not speak.

Beatrice

By contrast, the Beatrice of the *Commedia* is loquacious; she is a veritable *Beatrix loquax*. Starting with this anomaly—a lyric lady (not a shepherdess, as in the Occitan *pastorela*) who speaks—we can see the Beatrice of the *Commedia* as a hybrid figure. On the one hand, she conserves many of the erotic markers of the lady in the courtly lyric; her poetic existence is predicated on the needs of her lover-poet. Beatrice's behavior in the *Commedia* is always centered on Dante. Although the poet's use of a young Florentine woman as his vehicle to God may reflect positively on the female sex, fundamental limitations are built into the representation of Beatrice. The limitations imposed on Beatrice are those imposed on the courtly lady; they are culturally derived from the same matrix, the courtly ideology that exalts the lady as a Platonic ideal, rather than viewing her as a human agent with her own inner life and subjectivity. She is supreme, but within a context in which the frame of reference is entirely determined by the needs of the lover-poet.

On the other hand—and this is why Dante's Beatrice is an anomalous hybrid—within the *Commedia* she possesses an absolutely unprecedented and masculine authority. Most importantly, she exerts this

authority in language, in speech: she develops from the silent icon of stilnovist verse and the *Vita nuova* to the talkative *Beatrix loquax* of the *Commedia*. Her hybridity is such that, in the space of two verses, Dante can move from a courtly topos to describe Beatrice's smile to characterizing her speech as infallible: she can both ray her lover with a smile "such that it would make a man happy in the flames," and then use that same mouth to say "according to my infallible judgment" (*Par.* 7.18–19). The use of the word *infallible* for female speech is itself stunning, given the long and documented tradition of female speech as the special focus and target of misogyny. Dante's Beatrice is a radically new construct: while the traditions he inherits boast female abstractions like Boethius's Lady Philosophy who speak authoritatively, in a voice that is coded as not gender-specific, that is, masculine, and female non-abstractions who either do not speak or speak within the province of the gender-specific, in Beatrice Dante creates a historicized object of desire—not a personification—who yet speaks. Indeed, in the *Paradiso*, she speaks like a man, free from the content or modality normatively assigned to female discourse.

Francesca da Rimini

As one of only three characters in the *Commedia*, along with Virgil and Dante himself, to develop over a long textual span, Beatrice is a singular case, created in a mold used only for her. On the whole, the women of the *Commedia*, like the men, are represented in brief encounters with the pilgrim; they include classical figures, mainly literary (for example, Dido, Thais), biblical figures (for example, the Virgin to whom St. Bernard prays at the poem's end), and contemporary ones. The most celebrated encounter with a woman in Dante's poem is certainly in *Inferno* 5, where the pilgrim meets Francesca da Rimini, condemned to the second circle of hell for her adulterous lust.

Critical reaction to the *Commedia* is governed by theologized hermeneutic guidelines that Dante structured into his poem, guidelines that postulate interpretive categories not significantly more complex than "Dante places Francesca in hell, so his view of her is negative." In recent times criticism has noted Dante's association of female characters with lust and added a typical medieval misogyny to his assessment of Francesca. But a historicist reconstruction of *Inferno* 5 uncovers a submerged "feminist" agenda embedded in Dante's Francesca da Rimini, a historically obscure and marginal figure to whom Dante grants prominence, celebrity, and agency.

If we look at Dante's handling of Francesca outside of the poem's theologized guidelines, if we historicize Francesca and our reading of *Inferno* 5, a picture emerges in which Dante writes a gendered story that places unusual value on the personhood of the dynastic wife. Dynastically unimportant, Francesca was forgotten by contemporary chroniclers. The first and most authoritative chronicler of Rimini was Marco Battagli, whose history *Marcha* contains a section called "On the Origins of the Malatesta" (1352). Battagli alludes to the event in which Francesca died without naming her, indeed without acknowledging her existence, except as an implicit cause of her lover Paolo's death, which occurred *causa luxuriae*: "Paolo was killed by his brother Giovanni the Lame on account of lust." One son of Malatesta da Verucchio, the founding patriarch of the Malatesta dynasty, killed the other; this fact is of interest because it affects the history of the dynasty. Francesca matters not at all as herself. And, in fact, the only historical document that records her name is the will of her father-in-law, in which he refers to "the dowry of the late lady Francesca." Otherwise, silence.

Dante preserved Francesca, recording her name, giving her a voice, and saving her from consignment to historical oblivion. He broke the silence of the historical record. And, as though to make this point crystal clear, Francesca's is the only contemporary name registered in *Inferno* 5: Paolo's name is absent, as is Gianciotto's. In canto 5, she is the protagonist, she is the agent, and she is the one who speaks, while Paolo stands by weeping. Through the intervention of *Inferno* 5, Francesca became a cultural touchstone and reference point, achieving a dignity and a prominence—a celebrity—that in real life she did not possess. The woman who in real life was merely a dynastic pawn, whose brutal death did not even cause a serious rupture between the Malatesta of Rimini and the Polentani of Ravenna, emerges in Dante's version as the canto's unchallenged protagonist. The woman who in real history had no voice and no name emerges in the poem's history as the only voice and only name.

Dante acted as the historian of record for Francesca da Rimini—and for many other women as well. Moreover, in sharp contrast to the courtly poetry of his youth, Dante's portraits of women in the *Commedia* explore their subjectivity and assign moral agency. He seems particularly drawn to cases of marital and family abuse: we think of Pia in *Purgatorio* 3 and Piccarda in *Paradiso* 3. While there are famous women in the *Commedia*, such as Clare of Assisi and the Empress Constance, the text engages more fully with women otherwise consigned to historical oblivion; indeed, even Beatrice Portinari falls into this category. Any serious assessment of Dante's role in the

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history of women will have to take the measure of this achievement.

TEODOLINDA BAROLINI

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See also Beatrice; Clare of Assisi; Constance of Sicily; Courtly Love; Italy; Literature, Italian; Mary, Virgin; in Literature; Misogyny; Personifications Visualized as Women

DATINI, MARGHERITA

Margherita Bandini Datini (1357–1423) is known through her correspondence with her husband Francesco Datini (1335–1410). Margherita, of a dispossessed but elite Florentine family, married the rich, self-made "merchant of Prato" in Avignon when she was nineteen and he forty-one. After returning to Italy, their relationship deteriorated, and they often preferred to be apart, moving separately between Prato and nearby Florence, the cities where Francesco had his principal businesses. Margherita and Francesco's core problem was a failure to have children, Margherita's "fault," since Francesco had two illegitimate children during the marriage (which did not help the relationship). Margherita's failure to conceive was linked to the debilitating pains she

suffered before her menstrual periods, probably the condition now called endometriosis, and although the couple searched for remedies until Margherita was in her late thirties, she remained childless.

Margherita compensated for infertility through acting as loving stepmother to Francesco's illegitimate daughter and a niece, through religious devotion, and, except during periods of poor health, by striving to be the model of a competent woman. She managed a large household, its personnel, and, in Prato, the related agricultural, building, business, and political activities. She contributed to Francesco's business by overseeing apprentices, assisting in debt collection, and sewing and cooking saleable objects, and she contributed to Francesco's social ambitions by acting as a well-mannered hostess. She also contributed to the marriage by reporting regularly to Francesco by letter. Margherita could read and write at an elementary level throughout her marriage, but her poor skills long made her dependent on scribes. Nonetheless, she prided herself on oral composition; nor did she let scribes prevent her from giving vent to her sharp tongue. Then, in her mid-thirties, she worked to improve her reading and letter writing and in 1399 she produced a spate of twenty-one substantial autograph letters. After 1399, she returned to using scribes. She had, however, more than proven her facility in letter writing.

ANN CRABB

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See also Household Management; Infertility; Italy; Letter Writing; Literacy and Reading; Vernacular; Merchant Families, Women of; Strozzi, Alessandra

DAWN SONG (ALBA)

The dawn song (or *alba*) is a lyric monologue or dialogue staging the moment when lovers see that their night together is about to end. As dawn songs appear in many cultures and are often connected to either religious festivals or wedding rituals, one of the key debates concerns their identification as a genre on