

Dante and the cult of mary



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Next to Beatrice, Mary is probably the most important female character in Dante's *Comedy*. Mary's symbolism in relation to the souls of purgatory appears relatively simple at first: her examples of virtue both reprove the penitent sinners for their sins and encourage them in their purgation. However, Mary's exact nature is more complex because she is presented as both divine and human, and the juxtaposition of her two natures provides her with a multifaceted relationship to the souls and to Dante. She is at once the exemplum of human perfection and of female perfection, the divine mother of Christ and the bride of the Holy Spirit, and finally a corporeal mother not only to Christ but to us all. As Marianne Shapiro points out in *Woman Earthly and Divine in the Comedy of Dante*, Mary is, above all, presented as the epitome of a good mother who satisfies the needs of her child, including his spiritual appetites. As a good mother, Mary leads a pilgrim, who is her spiritual child, to goodness, to the child's father, to God (Shapiro 119). Referenced throughout Purgatory, the Virgin Mary is a much more palpable presence in the second realm of the afterlife than in the first. In *Inferno*, Mary is referred to only once when Virgil tells Dante that Mary was the one who originally took pity on Dante and willed his journey through the three realms: "In Heaven there's a gentle lady - one/who weeps for the distress toward which I send you" (*Inf.* II, 94-5). Thus, Mary's importance to Dante's journey is underscored by the very fact that she was the one who initiated it. However, her name is never explicitly stated in the *Inferno*, just as Christ's name is also never stated, because the mention of their holy names would be inappropriate in hell. However, Mary's name is directly stated throughout purgatory, often by the souls undergoing their purgation when

they either offer prayers to her or when they voice her examples of virtue. Therefore, the mention of Mary's name by the souls is appropriate because she aids them in the absolution of their sins, which is the goal of all the souls in purgatory. While Mary's seven virtues are catalogued on each step of purgatory, only two of her virtues - her humility that is portrayed in a statue in canto 10 and her meekness that is visualized by Dante in a vision in canto 15 - are not vocalized in any manner. Furthermore, the fact that Mary is often directly quoted from scripture in Purgatory presents her as a more physical being than she was presented in Inferno, and the references to her throughout purgatory prefigure her actual appearance in Paradiso. Mary is perhaps given a special, even a divine, status in Dante's Purgatory because Marian worship became increasingly important to Catholic theology and piety in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Hilda Graef points out that popular devotion to Mary around the twelfth century evoked new hymns, like the *Salve Regina*, as well as new prayers, like *Hail Mary*, at approximately the same time (Graef 229-230). *Salve Regina* expresses man's confidence in Mary's power as their advocate with God as she serves as a mediator between man and Christ. Furthermore, *Hail Mary* presents Mary as the epitome of the virtuous woman because she is the mother of Christ: *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, because thou didst conceive the Redeemer of our souls* (Graef 230). Dante's presentation of Mary in purgatory can, therefore, be seen in relation to these two liturgies. In canto 7, the souls in Ante-Purgatory sing *Salve, Regina*, a hymn addressed to the Virgin Mary, asking for her pity. In canto 3, the

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Envy also cry out, "Mary, pray for us" (50). In canto 5, Buonconte da Montefeltro dies just after he had finished uttering the name of Mary and is saved (101). Therefore, Steven Botterill states, "Throughout Purgatorio, Mary is seen as intimately and actively concerned with the work of salvation in the individual human soul" (Botterill 156). However, Mary is most clearly defined in purgatory by her virtuous nature and her human perfection, which are underscored by seven scenes of her life that exemplify her seven virtues. Mary's virtues are used to reproach the penitent sinners and encourage them through their purgation as well as to provide corrective examples of how others on earth should live. Mary's seven virtues - humility, charity, meekness, zeal, poverty, temperance, and chastity - counter the seven deadly sins of Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust, and her divinity provides a contrast to human frailty. Several scholars, including Steven Botterill, suggest that Dante may have borrowed from earlier examples, such as Conrad of Saxony's *Speculum Beatae Mariae Virginis*, in order to present the Virgin Mary as an exemplar of the seven virtues (Botterill 157). As the first presentation of her seven virtues, the Annunciation illustrates Mary's humility through her humble acceptance of becoming the mother of Christ (Purg. 10, 43-5). Next, the wedding at Cana illustrates her generosity through her attentiveness and consideration of others when she remarks to Christ that the hosts have no wine (Purg. 13, 28-30). Then, Mary's reaction to finding Christ in a temple exemplifies her gentle meekness because she does not choose to scold her son as a reproachful mother would have (Purg. 15, 85-93). Mary's haste to visit her cousin Elisabeth after Gabriel spoke to her further exemplifies her zeal (Purg. 15,

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100). Then, Mary's birth of Christ in a stable demonstrates her acceptance of poverty (Purg. 20, 19-24). Then, the wedding at Cana is again referenced to illustrate her temperance because she was interested only in the proper ceremony of the wedding feast, rather than in her own appetite (Purg. 22, 142-4). Finally, the Annunciation is also again referenced to depict Mary's chastity because she conceived Christ when she was still a virgin. Marianne Shapiro points out that the divine Mary offers a contrast not only to human imperfection but also more specifically to female imperfection by noting that Mary's virtues are often followed by contrasting vices of other women (Shapiro 39). For example, Mary's example of humility at the Annunciation is immediately followed by the image of King David's humility before God's ark and his wife Michal's arrogance:

Michal watched as would a woman full of scorn and suffering? (Purg. 10, 68-9). Therefore, Shapiro states that the image of the haughty daughter of Saul contrasts vividly with that of Mary's humility in accepting God's will? (Shapiro 39). Furthermore, Shapiro also notes that Mary's meekness when she finds Christ in the temple among the doctors is again immediately followed by another portrait of a wife's arrogance when the wife of Pistratus says, Revenge yourself on the presumptuous/ arms that embraced our daughter, O Pistratus? (Purg. 15, 100-101). However, Shapiro could have provided further examples of how the virtues of Mary contrast with the sins of other women in the same circle of Purgatory, even if they do not immediately follow one another. In canto 13, the generosity of Mary at the Wedding of Cana contrasts with the envy of Sapia, the first soul exemplifying Envy that Dante meets. The image of Mary's temperance at the Wedding of Cana in canto 22 is also greatly

distinguished from the vivid image of Mary of Jerusalem's gruesome cannibalism, which follows shortly behind in the next canto (Purg. 23, 28). Finally, Mary's chastity at the Annunciation in canto 25 is immediately reinforced by Diana's chastity but contrasted by Venus's lasciviousness, or Venus's poison? (Purg. 25, 132). In fact, Mary's virtues are often the only examples of female virtues that are presented in the series of goads on each terrace of purgatory, reinforcing the idea that Mary exists not only as an exemplum of general human perfection but also as an exemplum of female perfection. In Cantos 10, 13, 15, 18, and 20, the virtues of Mary are reinforced only by the virtues of males, which come from saints, biblical figures such as David, classical figures such as Orestes, and powerful leaders of antiquity such as Caesar. Only the last two examples of Mary's virtues, her temperance and her chastity, are reinforced by examples of the virtues of other women, perhaps because Dante thought that women exemplified those virtues better than men. However, Mary's temperance is reinforced by the general female population of ancient Rome while her chastity is reinforced by the mythological Diana, so Mary provides the only particular, mortal female example of virtue in purgatory's system of goads. While Dante may have taken particular scenes of Mary's life to represent her virtues because he knew and associated with certain scenes of the life of Mary better than others, he may have also perhaps taken certain scenes of Mary's life in order to further imply certain theological issues or themes related to Mary or Christ. As Hilda Graef references in *Mary: a History of Doctrine and Devotion*, the idea of Mary's Immaculate Conception became a deep theological debate in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,

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and Thomas Aquinas's rejection of the Immaculate Conception was well known (Graef 250, 279). Thus, Dante may have presented Mary's Annunciation twice in order to underscore his own belief and acceptance of the idea of the Immaculate Conception. The wedding feast in Cana is also referenced twice in the catalogue of Mary's virtues, so the scene also seems to suggest an important symbolic episode. When Mary tells Jesus that the wedding hosts have no wine, Christ performs his first miracle when he turns water from a well into wine. Christopher Kleinhenz remarks that Christ's miracle of changing water into wine is appropriately suited to Purgatory because the miracle has deeper theological implications: In the exegetical tradition the miracle of changing water into wine is interpreted as a sign of Jesus's conversion of people from the ways of vice to those of virtue. This essential idea of transformation and renewal has its precise and immediate correlative here in the Purgatorio: it is an apt and effective description of the purgation process which occurs on each terrace of the Mountain. Thus, in addition to its primary function - to signal the virtue of charity - the citation "Vinum non habent" serves to introduce the larger context of the biblical passage and its interpretative tradition, which further enriches our understanding of the episode in Dante's poem (78). However, Christ's miracle at Cana further references the Last Supper where Christ transforms wine into his blood, which is reinforced by the fact that the journey up the Mountain also occurs over the Easter weekend. Thus, Mary's virtues seem to also recall greater episodes of the bible. While Mary's virtues always provide the first example of the virtue contrary to the sin being punished at the beginning of each terrace of purgatory, the scenes from the life of Mary are not presented entirely in any unified or

chronological manner. In fact, while she is always referenced, Mary's name is not always provided by Dante. While her name is explicitly stated in cantos 10, 18, 20, and 22, Mary's name is not provided in cantos 13, 15, and 25. However, Mary is instead alluded to in cantos 13, 15, and 25 by the fact that she is quoted through passages that are taken directly from the bible. The presentations of the virtues of Mary also vary in length. For example, canto 13 sums up Mary's virtue of generosity in one line: *Vinum non habent* (29). On the other hand, canto 15 provides a longer presentation of Mary's meekness: There I seemed, suddenly, to be caught up in an ecstatic vision and to see some people in a temple; and a woman just at the threshold, in the gentle manner that mothers use, was saying: *O my son, why have you done this to us? You can see how we have sought you - sorrowing, your father and I. ?* And at this point, as she fell still, what had appeared at first now disappeared. {Purg. 15, 85-93}. Canto 15 also departs from the other presentations of Mary perhaps because it contextually heightens her meekness by the fact that her name is not mentioned as well as by the fact that she speaks in Italian, rather than in Latin like she does in other cantos: canto 10 (*Ecce ancilla Dei* ?), canto 13 (*Vinum non habent* ?), and canto 25 (*Virum non cognosco* ?). However, all of the scenes of Mary's life distill not only the essence of her human perfection but also present her, above all else, as a mother. After all, the references to Mary's Annunciation in cantos 10 and 25, her haste to tell Elisabeth that she is pregnant in canto 18, her birth of Christ in canto 20, and her spoken words to Christ in the temple in canto 15 and, later, at the wedding of Cana in cantos 13 and 22, all reference Mary in relation to Christ. Mary is, therefore, defined by her status as a mother

while few women in Inferno or Purgatory, on the other hand, seem to be defined by their motherhood. As a mother, therefore, Mary is presented not just as a divine being but as a physical, mortal being that possesses a maternal body. In *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, Steven Botterill notes, "The Mary of Purgatorio is a living being, seen constantly in action, literally an incarnation of the virtues, not merely an ethereal or impossibly idealized perfection" (Botterill 157). Botterill points out that Dante's language frequently uses physical action verbs and concrete imagery to present Mary in terms of physical action or human situation, emphasizing the fact that Mary is always human (Botterill 158). Through Dante's physical language, Mary runs (she has a *corse*), possesses a *grembo* and a *bocca*, and even (at least in *Paradiso*) *fatta . . . pregna* (Botterill, 157). Furthermore, Mary is presented as a physical being because she often speaks in purgatory, or at least is quoted directly from the biblical text. However, perhaps the most physical presentation of Mary evokes the image of her giving birth when a shade cries out in Purgatory 20: "...Sweet Mary, as a woman would outcry in labor pains. And he continued : In that hostel where you had set down your holy burden, there one can discover just how poor you were (20-24). Furthermore, Botterill notes that Mary is often presented in human actions. In canto 10, she turns the key that had unlocked / the highest love by becoming the mother of Christ (42-43). In canto 18, she zealously runs up a mountain to meet Elisabeth. However, the presentation of Mary as a physical being not only emphasizes her own human nature but also the human nature of her son, who is mortal through her. Finally, as Botterill also points out, the references to Mary's own earthly life

provide her with a deeper understanding of and a deeper connection to man's human condition. However, the worship of Mary that arose in the centuries preceding Dante's lifetime elevated her because she was seen as more divine than ordinary man. The evocation of Mary in purgatory, therefore, underscores her virtue and her perfection, and the fact that Dante always takes the first virtue in a series from the life of Mary underscores her perfection above all other men - and women. Works Cited and Works

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