

“Women and Words in Virgil and Dante”

By  
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## Abstract:

This thesis concerns the role that women play as inspirers and interpreters for male heroes in poetry. The classical poet Virgil uniquely and deliberately highlights the presence and words of two women, Cyrene and Deiphobe, and their necessity as interpreters for the male heroes in Book IV of the *Georgics* and Book VI of the *Aeneid*. This elevation of the role of the female did not escape the notice of Virgil's medieval devotee, Dante. The Florentine stands on the shoulders of his Mantuan predecessor by also portraying the male hero's success as dependent upon the interpretive presence of female guides in the *Divina Commedia*. Unlike Virgil's, however, Dante's female guides do not merely desire completion of the quest for the male protagonist—they desire transcendence of the quest itself in a new, Christian cosmology.

## Introduction

Poets, as artists, seem to understand the necessity of inspiration better than anyone. Many see the creative power of the intellect, as manifested in poetry, as a seed sparked by external experience. For the fruition of expression, there must be a leading, a guiding, a *causing* of some sort. This is demonstrated in classical poetry by the *invocatio* to Muses and other deities of inspiration. Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and others who write epics begin with this trope. Virgil, however, holds a unique position in this regard, at least as he came to be viewed by poets and learned readers in the Middle Ages. Believed to have heralded the coming of Christ in Eclogue IV, he had become a figure who held a special sort of knowledge, divinely revealed and inspired by the Christian God. E.R. Curtius notes that, “When we speak of the ‘Ancients’, we mean the pagan writers. In our view Paganism and Christianity are two separate realms, for which there is no common denominator. The Middle Ages thinks differently. ‘*Veteres*’ is applied to both the Christian and pagan authors of the past” (254). Thus it seems natural that Dante, a Medieval poet and an heir to the language and culture of classical poetry, and an epic poet influenced by his own spiritual experience, would revere and reinterpret Virgil.

This thesis will focus on how both Dante and Virgil perceive the function of women in their poems, specifically women that influence the success of male epic heroes—in Virgil’s poems, Aristaeus and Aeneas, and in Dante’s, Dante himself. I will first argue that Virgil is unique among other classical poets, because he makes the continued presence of women necessary to the success of the quest, as they crucially interpret for, guide, and inspire the male heroes. The trope of women as guides, of course, is not wholly unique to Virgil: female characters such as Circe, Calypso, Nausicaa, Medea and Ariadne, among others, all serve in some capacity to aid the heroes in the epics in which they appear. However, Virgil uniquely

stresses the words his heroines speak to the heroes, and the necessity of this form of guidance for the hero to succeed in his journey. The second part will explain how Dante recognized and repeated this tendency of Virgil to highlight the importance of the role of women as interpreters. Virgil, as Dante's own authorial "Muse", has a very feminized role as guide in the *Divina Commedia*. Virgil's guidance and interpretation is then assumed by Beatrice, an enigmatic character in Dante's own life, capable of representing in his writings both an actual woman, and the embodiment of the transcendence of human reason. Both Dante and Virgil recognized the importance of female inspiration for themselves as poets, and for the heroes in their poetry.

## I.

### Virgil's Portrayal of Women as Guides and Interpreters

#### The New Cyrene

Though Virgil draws heavily from traditional descriptions of prophets, his exclusions and additions are intriguing. By comparing Virgil's depictions of the Trojan seer Helenus with Deiphobe the Sibyl in the *Aeneid*, and Proteus the 'Old Man of the Sea' with Cyrene, mother of Aristaeus in Book IV of the *Georgics*, it is arguable that for Virgil, the presence and interpretive guidance of women is necessary for the heroes to achieve the task at hand. In Book IV of the *Georgics*, presumably written just prior to his undertaking the *Aeneid*, Virgil utilizes Homer's telling of the Proteus/Menelaus episode in Book IV of the *Odyssey*. In Homer's version, Eidothea, daughter of Proteus, guides Menelaus but leaves him to carry out the task of overcoming the prophet on his own. Virgil's episode differs from Homer's in that the woman, Cyrene, must stay with Aristaeus during the finding of Proteus, not just in order to ensure the mastering of Proteus but in order to interpret Proteus' words. In Virgil's episode, Proteus' prophetic function has been assumed by Cyrene, whose connections to the vatic Apollo are more

than coincidental. Likewise, Virgil's depiction of the Sibyl Deiphobe in Book VI of the *Aeneid* seems to reveal the necessity of her accompanying and in a sense, translating, for Aeneas.

Virgil's depiction of Cyrene in the *Georgics* influences his characterization of the Sibyl in the *Aeneid*. Compared with male prophetic figures in the *Aeneid*, such as Helenus in book three and Anchises in the underworld of *Aeneid* VI, Deiphobe stands out uniquely as one with a heightened sense of prophetic authority, whose role functions mainly to guide Aeneas. Aeneas will not succeed in his under-worldly endeavor without the authoritative presence and interpretation of a woman, Deiphobe.

The Homeric Proteus episode occurs in *Odyssey* IV, at the end of the Telemachy. Telemachus has gone to seek news of his father in Sparta, and before he departs, is speaking with Menelaus about the precarious situation with the suitors back in Ithaca, causing Menelaus to begin the tale of his experience with Proteus. The point of the over-200-line long episode, from Menelaus' point of view, seems to be to encourage the budding virility of Telemachus with the news of another potentially successful avenging son, Orestes. However, Orestes is only mentioned towards the very end of the tale, almost as an afterthought (*Od.* 4.575). The bulk of the story consists of a description of Eidothea, daughter of Proteus, who is moved by Menelaus and wants to help him (*Od.* 4.389-391), as well as the actual words of the seer, Proteus. It is possible that Homer placed the tale in the overall narrative of the *Odyssey* to stress the similarities between Orestes' and Telemachus' situations, as well as to remind the audience of the trope of aid from female divinities. Menelaus spends relatively similar amounts of time describing Eidothea and the seer Proteus, and it is difficult not to think of the role Athena plays in aiding both Odysseus and Telemachus. However, though Eidothea's character saves Menelaus

at a crucial moment, gives him the necessary information and even leads him to Proteus' lair<sup>1</sup>, after this she is not mentioned again. Menelaus successfully subdues the seer and after Proteus' final discussion of Odysseus and address to Menelaus, he "dives off into the surging sea" (*Od.* 4.600), ending the episode. Menelaus has no difficulty understanding Proteus' words and is able to heap up a burial mound for Agamemnon, as he had learned of his death from Proteus (*Od.* 4.615). There is a nice ring composition to the tale, as Menelaus' difficult situation is the result of a failure to offer the gods sacrifice (*Od.* 4.376), and Proteus' words are all the more useful to him for expiation.

Herein lies the crucial difference between Homer's and Virgil's episodes: Virgil's version stresses the continuing presence and interpretation of the assisting female deity. Though Eidothea undoubtedly helps the Homeric hero, she leaves presumably before the task is achieved and there is no need for her to act as any sort of intermediary or translator for Menelaus to know what he must now do. In *Georgics* IV, Virgil creates his own rendition of the Proteus episode, only this time the hero is Aristaeus and the assisting female divinity is his mother, Cyrene. Virgil's version of this story is located in a place of prominence at the end of the epic, as an explanation of the occurrence of *Bugonia*, the "the way in which the putrid blood of slain bulls bore forth bees; *quoque modo caesis iam saepe iuvencis / insincerus apes tulerit cruor*" (*Ge.* 4.284-285). In Virgil's tale Aristaeus' bees are lost through "sickness and hunger; *amissis, ut fama, apibus morboque famaue*" (*Ge.* 4.318) and the saddened hero laments his fate to his mother, claiming that she should destroy all his crops if "such a weariness of [his] praise has seized [her]; *tanta meae si te ceperunt taedia laudis*" (*Ge.* 4.332). Aristaeus is invited into Cyrene's watery domain, where she listens to her son's woes, prays to Ocean, is heartened by an omen, and begins her

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<sup>1</sup> Eidothea says "I will take you there myself, *entha s'egon agagousa*" (*Od.* 4.407).

description of Proteus (*Ge.* 4.360-373). She stresses his prophetic powers, just as Eidothea does, and informs Aristaeus that Proteus will lay open the cause of the bees' sickness and prescribe a remedy (*expediat morbi causam eventusque secundet*) (*Ge.* 4.396). However, she stresses that he will not do it for prayers alone: he must be overcome. Like Eidothea to Menelaus, Cyrene tells Aristaeus that "I myself will guide you; *ipsa ego te...ducam*" (*Ge.* 4.401-3) and that Proteus will shape-shift in order not to be caught. At this point in Homer's tale, Eidothea leaves to retrieve seal skins in which Menelaus may hide, but Virgil's narrative diverges in that Cyrene immerses her son in ambrosia to invigorate him (*Ge.* 4.418). In *Odyssey* 4.414, Homer has Eidothea bring ambrosial unguent to Menelaus and his men to combat the foul odor of the seals, a detail not specifically mentioned by Virgil. It seems that Cyrene's function is more directly related to the strengthening of Aristaeus' body to overpower Proteus, not merely to enable him to hide under smelly skins. Cyrene's aid, when compared with Eidothea's, is more direct and active.

The most important divergence, however, is the fact that Cyrene stays for the actual overpowering of Proteus. Aristaeus does not have to hide out under skins, but is "stationed in a hiding place; *collocat iuvenem in latebris*" (*Ge.* 4.423) by Cyrene and she herself *resistit*, remains or stands out of the way, enveloped in cloud. After the initial tussle, Proteus relents and his words, as Thomas notes in his commentary, are beautiful and poetic (4.453-480 *ad loc.*), some even prefiguring Virgil's description of the souls in *Aeneid* VI. However, he does not actually tell Aristaeus what he must now do. He offers no solutions, but merely sings the song, which, after the opening lines, is concerned solely with Orpheus' recovery and second loss of Eurydice. Aristaeus learns that the anger of Orpheus is causing his problem (4.452), but Proteus does not give any remedy, as Cyrene implies in her framing speech at 532, (*haec omnis causa morbi*). She herself lays out the way of entreating the god specifically (*sed modus orandi qui sit*



*prius ordine dicam* 4.537). Andrew Wallace, in his discussion of female placement in *Georgics* IV, has a number of important observations on this passage. He notes that the force of the word *resistit* in revealing Cyrene's "placement in relation to Aristaeus is crucial, as in Homer, man and god understand each other without need for interpretation, but in Virgil there is a 'hermeneutic gap' between Proteus' utterances and its potential as a spur to action" (385), thus necessitating an interpreter and an encourager of sorts for Aristaeus—and what better person for this than his mother. In fact, Wallace goes on to note that "Cyrene's intercession bridges this [hermeneutic] gap", even implying a sort of "shared language to which Aristaeus has no access" (385). Virgil is unique in this position, because in the person of Cyrene, "practical knowledge—which ancient Greece and Rome constructed as 'masculine'—is envisioned as the product of maternal solicitude" (Wallace 387). Thomas and Wallace note also here that the motif both of mother helping son, and of being enveloped in cloud are tropes Virgil will later use in the *Aeneid*, specifically with Venus and Aeneas.<sup>2</sup> As Wallace points out, even at the very end of Aristaeus' story, when he goes back to the grove, it is a third person plural verb (*aspiciunt* 4.555) that suggests Cyrene has accompanied Aristaeus back to the grove, once more reminding the reader of her presence and power over the whole event.<sup>3</sup>

### The Function of Virgil's Sybil

Virgil's omissions and additions to the Proteus narrative, specifically in relation to his development of Cyrene's character, resonate strongly with his later depiction of Deiphobe the Sibyl. The connections between the Sibyl and Cyrene seem to be first their physical proximity to the heroes, then an emphasis on their words and speech, specifically with a view to exhorting

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<sup>2</sup> Aeneas and his men are made invisible by Venus at 1.411-12

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in his commentary Horsfall notes that in book 6 of the *Aeneid*, the reader is reminded of the presence of both Aeneas and the silent Sibyl by the word *mirantibus* in 854.

Aristaeus and Aeneas to action. A few of the connections would seem to be just coincidences, but Virgil clearly carries themes over from characters in the *Georgics* to characters in the *Aeneid*, possibly to connect their purposes. One such connection is that Cyrene and her nymphs guard over a hundred forests and a hundred streams (*Ge.* 4.383), much like Deiphobe and the “hundred cavernous mouths, gaping orifices, that roar the sibyl’s oracular responses”<sup>4</sup> (*Ae.* 6.43-44). Even from the description of their abodes, Virgil seems to want to connect the persons of Cyrene and Deiphobe, and it is significant that the Sibyl’s hundred mouths pour forth prophetic words that will guide Aeneas, just as Cyrene’s words guided Aristaeus. Another connection lies in their prescription of sacrifice: Cyrene instructs Aristaeus to choose four bulls and a black ewe for sacrifice (*Ge.* 4.537-547), similar to what Deiphobe tells Aeneas to do: “Now is not the time for looking at images. Now is the time to sacrifice seven bulls, and as many ewes” (*Aen.* 6.37-39).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Thomas notes that Cyrene’s warning to Aristaeus about Proteus, that he will not be able to “bend [the seer] with prayer; *neque illum/ orando flectes*” (*Ge.* 4.398-399), closely echoes the words the Sibyl says to the shade of Palinurus, “cease hoping to turn the fates of the gods with prayer; *fata deum flecti sperare precando*” (*Aen.* 6.376). Cyrene’s words again spur action, as Proteus cannot be swayed merely by Aristaeus’ words—he must be overpowered.

Just as in Cyrene’s relationship with Aristaeus, Deiphobe’s words are meant to spur action in the wandering Aeneas. Wallace notes of Cyrene, that she “proves capable not only of uttering commands and seeing them executed, but of carrying out the far more nebulous and challenging task of putting to use a poetic utterance, and of locating in highly enigmatic and emotive poetry a path to human action” (382). This statement can be aptly applied to the person of the Sibyl as well, for not only does she utter commands to Aeneas, she sees them executed.

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<sup>4</sup> “*Quo lati ducunt aditus centum, ostia centum/ unde runt totidem voces, responsa Sibyllae*”

<sup>5</sup> “*Non hoc ista sibi tempus spectacula poscit:/ nunc grege de intacto septem mactare iuencos/ praesterit, totidem lectas de more bidentis*”.

However, she does so specifically using her words, namely the poetry of her oracles, and demands words in the form of prayer from him in advance. When Aeneas first meets the Sibyl in book six, her first words are an exhortation to stop looking at the depictions on the doors of Trivia, and to act, to sacrifice the seven bulls and ewes. Her next demand is that he pray, warning, “Are you slow in vows and prayers, Aeneas? Are you slow? For not before will the great mouths of this inspired house split open; ‘*Cessas in vota precesque, / Tros’ ait, ‘Aenea? Cessas? Neque enim ante / dehiscent/ attonitae magna ora domus’*” (*Aen.* 6.50-53). In order to receive words, Aeneas must give words: the mouths of the hall will not open until he does. In this respect, Deiphobe functions, just as Cyrene before her, as an inciting force to get Aeneas to act for himself.<sup>6</sup> The text also stresses a necessity of speech with the repetition of words that signify lips and mouths. After Aeneas prays, he “made an end of speaking with his mouth; *finem dedit ore loquendi*” (*Aen.* 6.76) and likewise the Sibyl after she speaks, closes her mouth (*dixit pressoque obmutit ore Aen.* 6.155). The Sibyl herself, before entering the underworld with Aeneas and during the sacrifice at Avernus, must call on Hecate with her voice, (*voce vocans Hecaten caeloque Ereboque potentem* 6.247).<sup>7</sup> Also, each time the Sibyl grows silent, her mouth closed, Virgil is quick to express Aeneas’ fear and gloom. After her first demand for prayer, she “falls silent” (*contincuit*) and a “chilly tremor runs through the sturdy bones of the Teucrians; *gelidus Teucris per dura cucurrit/ ossa tremor*” (*Aen.* 6.54-5), and after she tells Aeneas how he must bury his dead comrade Misenus, Aeneas goes away “with a sad face and downcast eyes; *maesto defixus lumina voltu*” (*Aen.* 6.156). The fear of the Sibyl’s hearers probably results from

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting, in this sense, to recall that Homer’s Proteus episode occurred in the Telemachy, four books chiefly concerned with Telemachus’ journey to become a man, to overcome the enervation of fear and to act. Virgil, through the connection he makes between Cyrene and Deiphobe, seems to pick up this same idea with the Sibyl and Aeneas.

<sup>7</sup> Hecate gave the Sibyl her charge: VI.118. However, as O’Hara points out, of all the seers, the Sibyl is one of only a few who does not claim for herself divine authority—Virgil does that for her. All the others, the Penates (3.154), Celaeno (3.250), Helenus (3.375), Anchises (5.726), Allecto (7.428) and Cymodocea (10.234), claim divine authority for themselves (O’Hara 54-55).

the frightening nature of her words, but many scholars have noted that this only adds to their potential veracity, to which we will now turn.

The emphasis on mouths and words in Aeneas' meeting of the Sibyl seems to emphasize the fact that her function is not only words but also their interpretation—this is how Deiphobe helps Aeneas accomplish his goal. It is also an explanation for why Aeneas shifts his prayer from Apollo to the Sibyl in 6.65-76. Aeneas promises “a great shrine, an inner sanctum where I will deposit your prophecies and the mystic sayings told to my people and ordain your priests. Only do not entrust your verses to leaves, playthings swirling when the wind gusts, but chant them out loud.”<sup>8</sup> This harkens back to the information Aeneas received from the male seer Helenus in book 3 concerning Deiphobe and how she prophecies. In Helenus' description, the necessary component of a successful visit to the Sibyl is words, more specifically her words. Helenus speaks of those who come to her cave seeking prophecy, only to open the door and scatter the precious leaves, losing the opportunity to get what they came for:

“A prophetess who in her frenzy chants the future and commits it to leaves with marks and signs. Whatever verses the virgin priestess scratches on leaves she arranges in order and stores in her cave. There they remain in their numbered ranks. But if the door is opened and a light breeze disturbs the soft leaves and scatters them, she does not bother to gather them up as they fly through the cave, does not care to arrange them again and order the verse, and so those who inquired receive no advice and learn to hate the Sibyl and her shrine.... You must visit her and plead with her to open her lips and prophesy in person.” (*Aen.* 3.445-457 H.R. Fairclough's translation)

What may be the only extant example of Sibylline oracles from the collection that was assembled by the senate of republican Rome (destroyed by the fire that burned the temple of Capitoline Jupiter in 83 BC), is preserved by Phlegon and the description of the Sibyl closely resembles that employed by Virgil in the description of Helenus:

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<sup>8</sup> “*Te quoque magna manent regnis penetralia nostris./ his ego namque tuas sortis arcanaque fata/ dicta meae genti ponam, lectosque sacrabo/ alma, viros. Foliis tantum ne carmina manda, ne turbata volent rapidis ludibria ventis: ipsa canas oro*”.

“Then, envious of my prophetic gift, the son of famous Leto, filling his destructive heart with passion, will loose my spirit, chained in its miserable body...and straightaway, my spirit, having flown through the air, sends to the ears of mortals audible omens mingled with the breeze and wrapped in complex riddles.”<sup>9</sup>

As Virgil’s depiction may draw from the actual Sibylline Oracles, it is interesting that he chooses to make a clear distinction between speaking, versus writing, the oracles. Helenus makes sure to warn Aeneas that he must “beg with prayers that the Sibyl herself chant the oracles, and willingly may loosen her voice in speech; *vatem precibusque oracular poscas / ipsa canat vocemque volens atque ora resolvat*” (*Aen.* 3.456-457). Even though Helenus can prophesy, and does inform Aeneas of what he is going to see, as O’Hara notes, “He must begin his prophecy, however, by warning Aeneas that he cannot tell him everything: (3.377, 379-80) and he ends with a similar disclaimer: 3.461 (“these are the warnings that I am allowed to give to you”), following after the injunction to seek more information from the Sibyl” (26-27). Helenus is limited in what he can tell Aeneas, because he has been forbidden to speak by Juno (*vetat Saturnia Iuno Aen.* 3.380). Helenus is cognizant of his prophetic limitations, and words will be crucial when Aeneas goes to visit Deiphobe.

Aeneas’ speech when he first meets Helenus is significant: “Come, tell me—for with fair words has Heaven declared to me all my journey, and all the gods in their oracles have counseled me to make for Italy and explore lands remote; only Celaeno the Harpy prophesies a startling portent, horrible to tell of, and threatens baleful wrath and foul famine!” (*Aen.* 3.362-370 H.R. Fairclough’s translation). Aeneas, a wandering refugee from a sacked city, understandably desires good news. But it is significant that he describes specifically the fair words, or “prosperous rites” that have been told to him (*namque omnem cursum mihi prospera dicit/ religio Aen.* 3.362-363). As noted by Urania Molyviati-Toptsis, “Servius [the late 4<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>9</sup> Potter 71

grammarian and commentator on Virgil] states that words which are extremely ornate and rhetorical can be deceptive” (645). Aeneas seeks fair words from the seer Helenus, who speaks with “friendly lips” (*ore amico* 3.453), but is limited in his prophetic capacity. Thus, Aeneas must seek true words, though potentially harder to hear, from the Sibyl. Horsfall comments that in lines 84, 95, and 100 of *Aeneid* VI the Sibyl “offers a view of coming events a good deal blacker than what will eventually emerge from Virgil’s narrative.” This does not derail the force of the argument at hand, namely that the Sibyl’s words to Aeneas, though bleak, are what he needs to achieve his task. Many other seers, as noted by O’Hara, have “suppress[ed] material that would be disturbing or discouraging,” presumably to encourage Aeneas to continue in his destiny (3). The Sibyl is unique in the fact that her words, though more negative than the others, are more complete. In a manner similar to Cyrene, she tempers the difficult tasks with inspiring words, helping him forward.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Aeneid* VI, where Aeneas must, in epic hero fashion, complete a *katabasis* to speak with his father Anchises and obtain the prophecy. The Sibyl is quite honest about the difficulties of the trip, saying that it is easy to go down into Dis—the labor will be getting back out.<sup>10</sup> Deiphobe encourages Aeneas, that, bleak though the outlook is, he should face the impending dangers bravely, and Aeneas acquiesces.<sup>11</sup> When they encounter the large Elm to which False Dreams cling, Aeneas grabs for his sword to slash at the shades, but the Sibyl tells him they are not real, preventing him from rushing at the false images.<sup>12</sup> This is one of the first things that occurs once Aeneas plunges after the frenzied sibyl, and the foregrounding of this scene casts a shadow of doubt over the entire Underworld episode. Aeneas

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<sup>10</sup> “*Tros Anchisiade, facilis descensus Averno/ noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis/ sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras/ hoc opus, hic labor est*” 6.126-129.

<sup>11</sup> “*Nunc animis opus, Aenea, nunc pectore firmo*” 6.261.

<sup>12</sup> “*ni docta comes tenuis sine corpore vitas/ admoneat volitare ava sub imagine formae*” 6.292-293.

is warned, by his “learned companion” (*docta comes* as Virgil points out), that the frightening things he encounters here are not real, are not to be believed. By extension, this casts doubt not only on what Aeneas sees, but what he hears from his father Anchises as well.<sup>13</sup> Molyviati-Toptsis discusses the prophecy revealed to Aeneas by Anchises in the Underworld, and concludes that, “Virgil wishes Aeneas and the authorial audience to perceive Anchises as a *uates*, an altera Sibyl. But, why did Virgil prefer to have Anchises proclaiming Sibylline oracles instead of the Sibyl? Because, Helenus tells us, whatever the Sibyl predicts is unalterable (*illa manent immota locis neque ab ordine cedunt*, 3.447)” (645). Horsfall also notes Virgil’s skilled use of the idiom of oracles with the word ‘*Romane*’ Anchises utters at 6.851: “the strongly marked *Sibylline* allusion binds Anchises to the Sibyl and lends oracular authority to Anchises’ words.” Anchises, who was not a seer in life, somehow has vatic abilities in death but these powers are not as potent as Deiphobe’s: her oracles are “unalterable” whereas his apparently are. The fact that Anchises does have prophetic abilities here in the shadowy, false Underworld is suspect.<sup>14</sup> The Sibyl is silent while Anchises speaks, perhaps because she knows his words to be untrue. Thus it is possible that Virgil, utilizing the true words of the female prophet, is warning Aeneas and the reader, upon entrance to the Underworld, that true words will come from a woman—namely, the Sibyl.

Virgil changes Homer’s Proteus episode by placing a woman, Cyrene, into the position of prophet and guide, instead of the man Proteus. Likewise the Sibyl’s presence and words are more necessary for Aeneas to achieve his task in the Underworld than knowledge procured from male prophetic figures such as Helenus and Anchises. In both examples, Virgil demonstrates the idea

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<sup>13</sup> See O’Hara for a discussion of the deceptive nature of Anchises’ speech to Aeneas in the Underworld (92).

<sup>14</sup> Molyviati-Toptsis 643.

that women are uniquely suited for the role of guide, and specifically, interpreter, for male heroes.

## II.

### Dante and the “Beatrific” Vision

For both Virgil and for Dante as authors, it seems that there is something unique about the presence and function of women: something that aids in the attaining of the Divine, whether that be the completion of a task, the beatific vision, or the writing of poetry itself. As we have seen, Virgil gives women a prominent role as interpreters and guides in his writings. Aeneas’ journey to the underworld is only possible through the guidance and explanation of the Sibyl, and without the unique interpretation of Cyrene, Aristaeus would not have understood Proteus’ message in Virgil’s telling of the tale. In the *Aeneid*, the Sibyl’s function is more closely aligned with accessing the Divine, as Aeneas is instructed by the gods to go to her, and she herself is a divinely inspired figure.

Dante, who revered and loved Virgil, chooses to model much of his *Commedia* on Virgil’s writing. It is no wonder then, that Dante chooses women as the conduits for guidance and interpretation. It should also be less surprising that in addition to Beatrice as a female guide *par excellence*, Virgil himself is portrayed as a very feminine guide for the wanderer Dante in the *Commedia*. Though in the *Commedia* Virgil is Dante’s “Father” and “Lord”, he is repeatedly the metaphorical “mother” at whose breast Dante is comforted and fed. Additionally, Dante derives much of his characterization of the guide Virgil from the author Virgil’s characterization of the Sibyl in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*. The female Sibyl and the male Virgil possess character traits of both genders: The Sibyl, regularly enthused by the god Apollo, is a force to be reckoned with and a strong leader, making difficult any solid gender characterization. Likewise, Virgil is



Dante's guide because they understand each other as poets, and poetry, it may be reasonably claimed, transcends gender. Thus, Virgil is the perfect guide for Dante, a poet who recognized and repeated the unique place of guide and interpreter held by women in Virgil's poems. In this way, what might seem like a divergence from his *alma mater's* treatment of women is really a fulfillment: in Dante's *Commedia*, Virgil is the embodiment and fullness of reason, but only Beatrice, a true woman, has the power to take Dante beyond reason, to the attainment of the Beatific Vision and a true fulfillment of his task. As E.R. Curtius points out, "The 'hero' of the Comedy is a student. His teachers are Virgil and Beatrice: Reason and Grace, Knowledge and Love, Imperial Rome and Christian Rome" (326). From the first lines of the *Iliad* to the first lines of the *Aeneid*, a meta-gendered nature of Classical poetry appears: soft and flowing or martial and heroic, governed by female Muses and the male Apollo, accessible to and concerning both men and women alike.<sup>15</sup> Dante, an heir to both Classical poetry and the chivalric love poetry of the Middle Ages, found an extremely accessible foundation in this latter genre for the *Commedia*, a work both in praise of a woman and concerning a male hero who relies on the unique guidance of a woman to transcend human reason in the pursuit of divine Love. Diana Glenn notes that, "Dante's representations of women in the Comedy fulfill a positive function that not only pertains to his mission as both pilgrim *in via* and redemptive poet exploring salvation history, but also signals women's special role in the recovery of spiritual values through mediation and the embodiment of community-oriented values" (145). Dante builds from Virgil's poetry, recognizing that the ancient author wove his words with tenderness and skill, looking to him for inspiration and encouragement.

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<sup>15</sup> As Tara Welch points out, "Elegy, a soft genre, looks to Apollo the male, while Epic looks to the female muses."

### Virgil as a new Sibyl and the Embodiment of Human Reason

From the first canto of the *Inferno*, Virgil tells Dante that he will be leaving him when they ascend into Paradise, and that Beatrice, “a spirit worthier”<sup>16</sup> than he will take over for him. Just as Aeneas and Aristaeus were inspired by female guides in Virgil’s writing, in Dante’s story, Virgil himself as a guide is aided and exhorted by the female Beatrice. The fact that he is inspired by Beatrice, Dante’s perfect woman, infuses Virgil’s role as guide with a more feminine aspect. In Virgil’s words in the first Canto, Beatrice says to him,

“Go now, and with your fair speech and with whatever is needful for his deliverance, assist him so that it may console me. I am Beatrice who sends you. I come from a place to which I long to return. Love moved me and makes me speak. When I am before my Lord I will often praise you to him.” (*Inf.* II.67-74)<sup>17</sup>

Virgil responds,

“O Lady of virtue, through whom alone mankind rises beyond all that is contained by the heaven that circles least, your command so pleases me, that had I obeyed already it would be late. You have only to declare your will to me” (*Inf.* II.76-81).

Already, from the beginning of the first Cantic, the emphasis is on the motivating power of feminine speech. Virgil, Dante’s model, is delighted to obey Beatrice’s commands, as if they have more of an effect on him because they come from a woman, and such a woman as Beatrice. The nature of her command to him, however, is the most interesting aspect, as Beatrice knows that the best way Virgil can assist the floundering Dante is “by his eloquent tongue.” Beatrice inspires Virgil with her words, reminding him of, and in a sense equipping him with, the power to aid Dante with his words. Beatrice is sure to mention the motivating force for her words, however: Love. This probably means her own love for Dante, and yet she is also speaking of

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<sup>16</sup> *Inf.* II.122

<sup>17</sup> All quotations from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* are taken from C.S. Singleton’s translation.

Love as a more active, personified force. Divine Love motivates her actions, and more specifically “prompts her speech”, which in turn prompts Virgil’s speech, which in turn aids the pilgrim Dante in self-realization and fulfillment.

When Dante first meets Virgil in Canto I of the *Inferno* as he is lost in the dark woods, beset on all sides by monsters and his own fear, Virgil appears to Dante “one who seemed faint through long silence.”<sup>18</sup> It is interesting that the first characteristic of his authorial hero Dante chooses to point out is the fact that he has not spoken for a long time. Perhaps this is because Virgil has lacked opportunities to speak, opportunities to guide with purpose and with power. Dante’s time of personal darkness is an ideal opportunity for Virgil. Once Dante recognizes Virgil, he calls out to him “You are my master and my guide. You alone are he from whom I took the fair style that has done me honor” (*Inf.* I.85-87). Dante knows he needs to be saved, and it is possible that Virgil needs to be counted on as a savior. Virgil is another man whose sense of purpose is increased by the words of a woman, but also by the words of Dante himself, an admirer and student who needs his master to step up to the task of leading once again.

Virgil’s similarities to the Sibyl, especially in the first few cantos of the *Inferno*, are striking. He points out Dante’s weakness, namely his fear, and exhorts him to gird himself with courage for the trials ahead. He says at the beginning of Canto II, “Your spirit is beset by cowardice, which oftentimes encumbers a man, turning him from honorable endeavor, as false seeing turns a beast that shies” (*Inf.* II.45-48) and again at the end of Canto II, “Why do you harbor such cowardice in your heart? Why are you not bold and free, when in Heaven’s court three such blessed ladies are mindful of you, and my words pledge you so great a good?” (*Inf.* II.121-126). Here in the *Inferno*, Virgil’s words mimic the Sibyl’s words of instruction and

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<sup>18</sup> *Inf.* I.63

encouragement in *Aeneid* VI. She reminds Aeneas that he is fated to be in the underworld, that it is his destiny, and that he must be brave and put his fear behind him. Even the ending of the *Inferno*'s Canto II is similar to the end of *Aeneid* VI, wherein the Sibyl speaks and her words inspire Aeneas to follow her, plunging into the depths of the underworld. Likewise, Dante listens to Virgil and responds, "You are my guide, my master, and lord." After which he says he "entered on the deep and woody way." Just as the Sibyl does not soften the reality of the dire situation for Aeneas, Virgil says to Dante,

"Now it behooves you thus to cast off sloth, for not on downy plumes, nor under shade of canopy reposing, fame is won; [...] therefore rise: vanquish your weariness by the mind's effort, in each struggle formed to vanquish, if she suffer not the weight of her corporeal frame to crush her down. A longer ladder must be climbed. It is not enough to have left these spirits. If you understand me, act that it may profit you" (*Inf.* XXIV.46-57).

As an author, Dante has gleaned from Virgil's characterization of the Sibyl that there is an element of tough love in female guidance. Occasionally, especially in the instances of extreme danger, the hero responds best to challenging encouragement. Because of Virgil's feminine gift of inspiring words, Dante is motivated to act, despite his fear. As Virgil points out, his words, though they could be construed as disheartening, are meant to be medicine, a profit to Dante.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*. Virgil, as he promised at the beginning of the *Commedia*, has led Dante through Hell and Purgatory, and silently phased himself out so that he may shift the role of guidance to Beatrice. And yet instead of a warm, gentle, stereotypically feminine meeting, the first metaphor Dante gives for Beatrice is that of a man, an admiral used to commanding his crew. As she speaks to Dante,

"ever stern in her mien, she continued, like one who speaks and keeps back the hottest words till the last...my eyes fell down to the clear fount, but, seeing myself in it, I drew them back to the grass, so great shame weighed on my brow; so does the mother seem harsh to her child as she seemed to me, for bitter tasted the savor of stern pity" (*Pur.* XXX.69-81).

Diana Glenn notes that, “In the initial encounter with Dante in the Terrestrial Paradise, Beatrice combines traditional masculine traits of authority and military command with a stern royal bearing inspiring respect and obedience” (140). In canto XXXI, Beatrice explains to Dante how her death ought to have spurred him on towards that which exists above nature, and her harsh words make him, “after drawing a bitter sigh, barely have the voice to make answer, and [his] lips shaped it with difficulty. Weeping [he] said “The present things, with their false pleasure, turned my steps aside, as soon as your countenance was hidden”” (*Pur.*XXXI.31-36). As Virgil shows Dante his own fear to encourage him, Beatrice shows him his error in reaction to her death for the purpose of better explaining the nature of the Divine, which she will do at length in the *Paradiso*.

Dante’s transition from Virgil to Beatrice at the end of the *Purgatorio* is the moment at which the reader can most clearly discern the parallels between the two guides, and the complementary nature of their guidance for Dante. Both can use harsh words at times, and yet both are “mother” figures, guiding, protecting and comforting. In *Inferno* XXIII, as Dante and Virgil are fleeing the pursuing demons, Dante says:

“My leader instantly took me up, like a mother who is awakened by the noise and sees beside her the kindled flames, and caught up her child and flies, and, more concerned for him than for herself, does not stay even to put on a shift[...thus] my master went down the bank, carrying me along upon his breast, not as his companion but as his child.” (*Inf.* XXIII.37-51).

Thus it is no surprise that Dante uses a similar metaphor for Beatrice, as a mother bird, in the *Paradiso* Canto XXIII:

“As the bird, among the beloved leaves, having sat on the nest of her sweet brood through the night which hides things from us, who, in order to look upon their longed-for aspect and to find the food wherewith to feed them, wherein her heavy toils are pleasing to her, foreruns the time, upon the open bough, and with glowing love awaits the sun, fixedly gazing for the dawn to break; so was my lady standing, erect and eager, turned toward the

region beneath which the sun shows less haste. I therefore, seeing her in suspense and longing, became as he who in desire would fain have something else, and in hope is satisfied" (*Par.* XXIII.1-15).

Both are mothers, and yet Virgil's task is the immediate physical protection of Dante, while Beatrice's mothering sets an example to Dante which awakens desire in him, and fills him with delight and hope of what is to come. "With like emotion, Beatrice awaits the divine aspect of Christ in order to give spiritual nourishment to the beloved one in her care...The unique quality identified by Dante as pertinent to both the Virgin Mary and Beatrice is their accessibility within the context of their roles as heavenly mediators on behalf of the living" (Glenn 124). When Dante moves from the guidance of Virgil to the guidance of Beatrice in Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*, he says :

"I turned to the left with the confidence of a little child that runs to his mother when he is frightened or in distress, to say to Virgil, 'Not a drop of blood is left in me that does not tremble: I know the tokens of the ancient flame' but Virgil had left us bereft of himself, Virgil sweetest father, Virgil to whom I gave myself for my salvation; not did all that our ancient mother lost keep my dew-washed cheeks from turning dark again with tears" (*Pur.* XXX.43-54).

In this quote, Dante is also reestablishing his poetic link to Virgil with an allusion to Dido's speech to her sister when she recognizes the love pangs she once had for her former husband Sychaeus, now burning for Aeneas. A.S. Kline notes that these words translate *Aeneid* IV.23, '*Agnosco veteris vestigia flammae.*' Dante seems to be reinforcing the physical manifestation of his love for Beatrice and wants to mention this to Virgil who represents reason. However, because Virgil is not there, Dante will be turned over to Beatrice herself for guidance, Beatrice who represents the transcendence of the physical. It also heightens the link between the feminine and the transcendence of reason. Peter Hawkins notes that

Because of the mediatorial status that allows Beatrice to be both herself and a revelation that transcends her, Dante will take the stock romance convention of the lover's rapturous gaze and use it throughout the *Paradiso* as the means by which the pilgrim is transfigured

from glory to glory. When at first he is blinded by her fire, Beatrice says by way of comfort that if she flames on him with flames of love beyond what he has known on earth, the “kindling” of her love is none other than the eternal light of heaven. Every other fire that draws him away has been a seduction from that primal source. In a poem that develops its symmetries so carefully, it is probably not by chance that here we should have a woman flaming in the heat of love, talking about the vestige of love, and in the midst of an extended discussion of free will and broken vows—all in the fifth canto of the *Paradiso*, a universe away from *Inferno* 5, where Francesca, Dido, and the like whirl in a vortex of passion, and go nowhere (124).

There are consistent “breastfeeding” metaphors throughout the *Commedia* which illustrate Dante’s perception of his own relationship to Virgil. This occurs again in the *Purgatorio* Canto XXI as Statius describes Virgil’s as “the breast I hung at; that the nurse, from whom my veins drank inspiration: whose authority was ever sacred with me” (XXI.97-99). Dante’s natural instinct is to run to the feminine comfort of his guide, but part of Dante’s quest is to learn to grow beyond mere comfort, into the ability to perceive on his own, a role uniquely suited to Beatrice. She will succor and comfort him as Virgil did, but she will be able to teach him about Divine wisdom, something Virgil could not do. Canto XXII of the *Paradiso* begins with Dante turning to Beatrice,

“Overwhelmed with amazement [...] like a little child who always runs back to where it has most confidence; and she, like a mother who quickly comforts her pale and gasping son with her voice which is wont to reassure him, said to me, “Do you not know that you are in heaven? [...] Turn now to the others, for you shall see many illustrious spirits, if you direct your sight as I say” (*Par.*XXII.1-21).

Not only can Beatrice give Dante the emotional and intellectual reassurance Virgil did, she causes him to have the confidence to see and perceive for himself. As Beatrice begins her guidance of Dante in the *Paradiso*, amidst an explanation of the matter and motion of heavenly bodies, she admonishes him “Observe well now how I advance through this pass to the truth which you seek, so that hereafter you may know how to take the ford alone” (*Par.* II.124-126).

Beatrice equips Dante with both the knowledge and the courage to cross over intellectual barriers, in preparation for what Dante will see in the ninth circle of heaven.

### The Language of Virgil and Beatrice as Interpreters

Another connection between Virgil and Beatrice as guides is that each seems to have a clairvoyant understanding of Dante's fears and questions. As pointed out earlier, Virgil knows just what is troubling Dante at the beginning of the *Commedia*, and it seems clear that Dante recognizes this. In Canto I of the *Inferno*, Dante says to Virgil, "You are wise, and know my meaning better than I can speak."<sup>19</sup> Likewise, in order to demonstrate the continuity between Virgil and Beatrice as guides, in the first Canto of the *Paradiso* Dante narrates, "Whereupon, she who saw me as I saw myself, to quiet my perturbed mind, opened her lips before I opened mine to ask."<sup>20</sup> This omniscience of the guide emphasizes how words in general, but specifically Dante's words, are much less useful in these spiritual realms. Later on in *Paradiso* IV, Dante says "I was silent, but my desire was depicted on my face, and my questioning with it, in warmer colors far than by distinct speech."<sup>21</sup> Additionally, it seems that Dante has acquired the ability to express and perceive meaning without the use of words from his guides. Just after this in the *Paradiso*, Beatrice says "I see well how one and another desire so draw you on that your eagerness entangles its own self and therefore breathes not forth."<sup>22</sup> In this way Dante has learned from his guides that silences are just as significant as speech. Virgil instructs Dante in the importance of clear, direct speech, while Beatrice seems to take Dante beyond this, into the knowledge of not only *how* to speak, but when such speech is necessary. The point for Beatrice

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<sup>19</sup> *Inf.* II.36

<sup>20</sup> *Par.* I.85-88

<sup>21</sup> *Par.* IV.9-12

<sup>22</sup> *Par.* IV.16-19



is to encourage Dante to take ownership of his task with both humility and curiosity. Dante speaks to this in the *Paradiso*, when he thinks to himself,

“I clearly perceive the love which you are signaling to me. But she from whom I await the how and the when of speech and of silence pauses, and thus I, counter to desire, do well not to ask” (*Par.* XXI.45-48) whereupon Beatrice, “who saw [his] silence in His sight who sees all, said “Loose your warm desire”. And [he] began [to speak]” (*Par.* XXI.49-52).

Beatrice, the one who makes “order” of Dante’s silence and speech helps him to see that this is a time he can ask for explanation.

Virgil and Beatrice both also function as interpreters for Dante, in the same way Virgil’s Cyrene explained the meaning of Proteus’ instruction for Aristaeus in Book four of the *Georgics*. And yet, as fits in Dante’s portrayal of feminine guidance, Beatrice’s interpretation is always with a view to exhorting Dante beyond reason itself. Virgil acts as interpreter for Dante on several occasions, yet this interpretation is more to help Dante better understand and to comfort him. The first such experience occurs in *Inferno* III as the pair approaches the gates of hell. Dante reads the inscription on the gates, that “Justice moved my high maker: the divine power made me, the supreme wisdom and the primal love” (*Inf.*III.1-10). After seeing these words of “obscure color” he says to Virgil, “Master, their meaning is hard for me”, and Virgil explains that they will journey through realms in which Dante will see “wretched people who have lost the good of intellect.” Virgil then comforts him and spurs him on, with his hand outstretched, and with a “cheerful look from which [Dante] derives comfort” (*Inf.*III.12-21). Dante, in one masterful stroke, deals with the problem of the existence of Hell clashing with a deity of “Love” and highlights the limitations of reason alone. For God, Virgil explains, Divine Justice is Love and Divine Love is Justice. The existence of Hell is the summation of a Love, and an incomplete, a “good”-less intellect is the very thing that has placed sinners there. It is fitting that Virgil, one

who himself relied on reason alone in life, is Dante's guide through this place and will be the conduit through whom Dante can reach Beatrice, the one that can help move Dante towards the "good" of the intellect and beyond. Virgil seems to understand that this is a difficult concept for the human intellect, and after explaining what the inscription means, relies on the added motivation of smiles and gestures to coax Dante forward.

As Dante and Virgil continue their journey through hell, they come upon Nimrod in *Inferno* XXXI, and hearing his cries Virgil responds "Stupid soul, keep to your horn and with that vent yourself when rage or other passion takes you. Search at your neck and you will find the belt that holds it tied, O soul confused: see how it lies across your great chest." Then Virgil says to Dante, "He is his own accuser: this is Nimrod, through whose ill thought one sole language is not used in the world. Let us leave him alone and not speak in vain, for every language is to him as his is to others, which is known to none." (*Inf.*XXXI.69-81). Though Virgil here does not interpret the gibberish spoken by Nimrod,<sup>23</sup> he does know that it is useless to try. It is ironic that through this instance, Virgil can show Nimrod as well as Dante the importance of words: for destroying the possibility of communication through one language, Nimrod is doomed to speak meaninglessly. The only avenue left to truly express himself is his horn which will successfully communicate rage and other passions, but never the nuances and subtleties of creative imagination.

Virgil, who was for Dante the master of nuances, subtleties and the creative imagination, affirms here and elsewhere the importance of one's manner of speech. Several times throughout the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, he gently admonishes Dante not to be deceived by base argument and rhetoric, but to seek for truth in words of love that are clear and direct. When the pair are traveling through one of the final circles of hell in *Inferno* XXX, they come upon Sinon and

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<sup>23</sup> "*Raphel mai amecche zabi almi!*" (XXXI.67)

Adamo quarelling concerning the Trojan War, and Dante is “standing, all intent to listen to them, when the master said to [him], ‘Now just you keep on looking a little more and I will quarrel with you! [...] for the wish to hear that is a base wish’” (*Inf.XXX.128-148*). The thought of appearing a “base mind” before his master shames Dante so greatly that he says, “it circles through [his] memory even yet.” (*Inf.XXX.135*). The stuff of Sinon and Adamo’s wrangling has been mostly taunts and abuses; low blows of reality show ilk. As an author, Dante is showing here how even lovers of quality speech and poetry can be easily seduced by inane words, and it occasionally takes the censure and accountability of a much-respected mentor to quell that desire. Virgil, though he was angry with Dante, demonstrates his grace and understanding, however, precisely because of Dante’s shame and says, “Less shame washes away a greater fault than yours has been, therefore disburden yourself of all sadness and do not forget that I am always at your side, should it again fall out that fortune find you where people are in a similar dispute” (*Inf.XXX.142-147*). Virgil reminds Dante of his continued presence both as a comfort and as a warning: Virgil knows Dante is human and susceptible to error, but he must remember that Virgil is watching and will cast a reproving word should Dante let his baser instincts take hold of him once more.

In addition to quality of speech, Virgil stresses the importance of efficacy in speech. In Canto X of the *Inferno*, Virgil, again demonstrating the clairvoyance of the guide, says to Dante, “Therefore, to the question which you ask me you shall soon have satisfaction here within, and also to the wish which you hold from me,” (*Inf.X.16-18*) to which Dante replies “Good Leader, I do not keep my heart hidden from you except in order to speak little, and to this you have before now disposed me.” (*Inf.X.19-21*). As he has done before and will do again, Virgil discerns one of Dante’s unexpressed wishes, but Dante explains his silence by telling Virgil that he got the art of

tacit expression from Virgil himself, probably both in their experience together in the underworld, and also from Virgil's poetry. In his study of Virgil's art, Dante learned that length of words is unimportant—it is their subtlety of meaning, and appropriate expression of truth that Virgil taught to Dante. A few lines after this, in the same Canto, Dante describes how Virgil, “Rose upright with chest and brow thrown back as if he had great scorn of Hell; and the bold and ready hands of my leader pushed me between the tombs to him, and said, Let your words be fitting” (*Inf.*X.34-39). Dante's admiration for his guide is clear, both in the contempt for Hell he communicates bodily, but also in the clarity of words he demands from Dante. Virgil's incites Dante to direct, concise, and lucid speech, and Dante, eager to obey, “concealed nothing, but made all plain” (*Inf.*X.43-44). This admonition towards direct speech, again, is reminiscent of the Sibyl and heightens the characterization of Virgil as female.

In hell, Dante learns the value and importance of words, but in heaven he learns of their limitations through Beatrice, who also interprets for Dante. In hell, Dante's words fail him because of fear so Virgil speaks instead. In the final Canto of the *Inferno*, Dante narrates “How frozen and faint I then became, ask it not, reader, for I do not write it, because all words fail. I did not die and I did not remain alive” (*Inf.* XXXIV.22-24). Likewise when he is in Paradise, he explains to Cacciaguida, “While I was in Virgil's company, up the mountain that heals the souls, and while descending through the dead world, heavy words were said to me about my future life” (*Par.* XVII.19-22). In heaven, Dante's words still fail him, but Beatrice is able to communicate much more to him with looks, smiles, and pointed words that incite him to his own action. She knows her words must be lucid and direct as Virgil's were. Entering heaven with Dante, Beatrice tells him, “henceforth, my words shall be as simple as may be needful to make them plain to your rude sight” (*Pur.* XXXIII.100-102). The goal, in the blessed realm especially,

is understanding and Beatrice's guidance aims toward that end. Beatrice encourages Dante to "Take, that which I tell you, if you would be satisfied, and sharpen your wits about it" (*Par.* XXVIII.61-63). Beatrice's words are spoken with a view to self-enlightenment, to equip Dante to do his own reasoning. She is the means through which understanding occurs. Just after her explanation of this heavenly sphere, Dante describes how "after [his] lady had provided [him] with her clear answer, like a star in heaven the truth was seen."

Sibylline imagery is evoked in this last canticle of the *Commedia* in several ways: Beatrice's actions are reminiscent of the Sibyl, and yet the Sibyl herself and the obscurity of her words are revealed as folly or untruth, thereby highlighting Dante's end goal of transportation "beyond reason." It is clear that Beatrice's words are meant to incite Dante to words, as she tells him "Put forth the flame of your desire, [...] not in order that our knowledge may increase through your speech, but that you may learn to tell your thirst, so that one may pour out drink for you" (*Par.* XVII.7-12). As discussed in Part I, this reminder that action will not occur until speech occurs is reminiscent of the Sibyl to Aeneas in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, where she asks "Are you slow in vows and prayers, Aeneas? Are you slow? For not before will the great mouths of this inspired house split open."<sup>24</sup> Indeed there is a constant injunction from Beatrice and others Dante meets in Paradise to speak his words, and later to write what he sees. In *Paradiso* XVII, Cacciaguida predicts to the Poet his own exile, and the calamities he will have to endure, and lastly exhorts him to write the *Commedia* itself. Dante says that Cacciaguida speaks "In no dark sayings, such as those in which the foolish folk of old once ensnared themselves, before the Lamb of God who takes away sins was slain, but in clear words and with precise discourse" (*Par.* XVII.31-35). The word here, used for "dark sayings", *ambage*, has oracular connotations.

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<sup>24</sup> ("Cessas in vota precesque, /Tros" ait, "Aenea? Cessas? Neque enim ante/ dehiscent/ attonitae magna ora domus" *Aen.* 6.50-53).

If Beatrice's similarity to the Sibyl Deiphobe was not clear enough, several lines later Dante the author will subtly reference and reprove the ambiguity of sibylline speech, utilizing Cacciaguida's clarity, a harbinger of true speech, as a foil. Dante is emphasizing the point that Truth and Love speak clearly, never in riddles. This is why Cacciaguida tells Dante the bittersweet news that he will be exiled and will "come to know how salty is the taste of another's bread, and how hard the path to descent and mount by another man's stairs" (*Par.* XVII. 58-60). A little later, he charges Dante:

"all falsehood set aside, make manifest all that you have seen. For if at first taste your voice be grievous, yet shall it leave thereafter vital nourishment when digested[...] for the mind of him who hears rests not nor confirms its faith by an example that has its roots unknown or hidden, nor for other proof that is not manifest" (*Par.* XVII.127-142).

True words, spoken in Love, are still sometimes hard to hear and Cacciaguida, as well as Beatrice, encourages Dante to be transparent about his experience in these spiritual realms. Beatrice, when she first meets Dante in the end of *Purgatorio*, says to him, "For the profit of the world that lives ill, hold your eyes now on the chariot, and what you see, mind that you write it when you have returned yonder" (*Pur.* XXXII.103-105). Mention of the Sibyl occurs once again in the very end of *Paradiso* XXXIII, as Dante's "vision becomes greater than speech can show, which fails at such a sight, and at such excess memory fails.[...] Thus is the snow unsealed by the sun; thus in the wind, on the light leaves, the Sibyl's oracle was lost" (*Par.* XXXIII.55-66). This is the point of Virgil, and finally Beatrice's, guidance: the Sibyl led Aeneas to the attainment of his goal, but even at the end of his meeting with Anchises, Aeneas has no real understanding of what he has seen or heard, though he is "moved to wonder and joy by the image of things he could not fathom."<sup>25</sup> In contrast, Dante's guides desire to move him beyond

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<sup>25</sup> (*miratur rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet/ attollens umero famamque et fata nepotum* (*Aen.* 8.841-844 Lombardo Translation)

mere words, beyond even reason to a sort of understanding that transcends purely human capabilities.

### Beatrice as the Transcendence of Human Reason

Beatrice is always represented as the consummate guide and counsel, and the one who will infuse understanding into minds quagmired in the pitfalls of reason. Virgil speaks of her in *Purgatorio* VI, as Dante asks about the efficacy of prayers for souls in Purgatory. Virgil answers that his “writing is plain and the hope of these souls is not fallacious” but exhorts Dante not to “rest in so profound a doubt, except she tell you who shall be a light between the truth and the intellect. I know not if you understand: I speak of Beatrice. You will see her above, smiling and happy, on the summit of this mountain” (*Pur.* Canto VI.34-48). This description of Beatrice as one who shines light between truth and intellect demonstrates the necessity of her presence in Dante’s journey: without her, he is left only with Virgil, and thus only with reason. Diana Glenn cites Anna Leonardi in *Lettura del Paradiso dantesco*, saying, “[Beatrice’s] mediating role is crucial to Dante’s growing apprehension and understanding: ‘Beatrice e il punto di raccordo fra Dante e il suo oltremondo celeste [...] in lei si offre a Dante la possibilita di veder riflesso in un volto umano la sua esperienza piu che umana’ ... For his experience of divine glory, the pilgrim is carefully prepared and his human apprehension purified and strengthened in order to perceive with his spiritual eye rather than his sensory faculties” (135). Virgil himself knows that Beatrice’s presence is crucial as the intercessor for Dante between reason and truth. Even Dante seems to know this. Speaking with a crowd of spirits who are intrigued by the living Dante in their midst, Dante says “I go up hence in order to be blind no longer. A lady is above who wins grace for me, whereby I bring my mortal part through your world” (*Pur.* XXVI.58-60). Dante knows that his existence heretofore, both on earth, in the *Inferno*, and in the *Purgatorio*, has been subject to

a “blindness”, and it is through Beatrice’s grace that he can even make the journey to attempt something bigger than himself and his own reasoning capacity. Beatrice herself sets a model for looking upward to inspiration—in *Paradiso* II, Dante narrates,

“Beatrice was gazing upward, and I on her; and perhaps in that time that a bolt strikes, flies, and from the catch is released, I saw myself arrived where a wondrous thing drew my sight to it. She, therefore, from whom my thoughts could not be hidden, turned toward me, as glad as she was fair, and ‘Direct your mind to God in gratitude’ she said, ‘who has united us with the first star’” (*Par.* II.22-30).

In this selection, Dante gazes upward at Beatrice who is herself looking upward, a hint that Beatrice, even as the observer of things transcending reason, is still limited in her understanding. She points to the entity beyond herself, God, as the being which has transported them where there are, and encourages Dante to direct his mind, *mente*, towards God with gratitude as she herself does.

Two cantos later in the *Paradiso*, Dante exclaims to Beatrice,

“O beloved of the First Lover, O divine one whose speech overflows me and warms me so that it quickens me more and more, not all the depth of my affection is sufficient to render to you grace for grace, but may He who sees and can answer thereto. Well do I see that never can our intellect be wholly satisfied unless that Truth shine on it, beyond which no truth has range” (*Par.* IV.118-126).

In this passage, we see again the quickening, motivating power of Beatrice’s speech. More importantly, we see that Beatrice’s speech has helped Dante see that Revelation is of utmost importance for understanding, and even then the implication is that God is the one who “sees and can answer.” G.E. Baldwin notes that in the *Commedia*, Beatrice “manifested herself by her counseling power; and [Dante’s] gain in clearness of vision and firmness of purpose, as she led him from glory unto glory, was plainly the effect of her exalted teaching” (29).

Beatrice’s transcendence of reason is continually emphasized in repeated descriptions of her eyes, which are usually shining, bright, and beaming. This emphasis upon Beatrice’s eyes,



begins even in the *Inferno*, as Virgil explains to Dante's Beatrice's agency in their quest. He says, "I was among those who are suspended, and a lady called me, so blessed and so fair that I prayed her to command me. Her eyes were more resplendent than the stars and she began to speak to me" (*Inf.* II.52-56). Once she has given her charge of guidance to Virgil, "she turned her eyes, which shone with tears, making [him] all the more eager to come" (*Inf.* II.115-117). In his first description of Beatrice, Virgil notes the brilliancy of Beatrice's eyes before she speaks to him, then a hundred lines after that, speaks of how her tears compel him even more. If Beatrice's transcendence of reason is exemplified in her eyes, it is possible that her tears are not just for Dante's plight. More deeply, Beatrice's tears represent the sadness that occurs when divine truth and complete understanding empathizes with human ignorance and the pain therein. At the beginning of *Purgatorio* XXVII, Dante is reluctant to pass through fire on their way, and Virgil speaks of Beatrice to encourage him, saying "Already I seem to behold her eyes" (*Pur.* XXVII.54). Virgil knows that through fire is the path beyond reason. As they approach the meeting with Beatrice and the entrance to Paradise, Virgil fixes his eyes on Dante and says

"The temporal fire and the eternal you have seen, my son, and are come to a part where I of myself discern no farther onward. I have brought you here with understanding and with art. Take henceforth your own pleasure for your guide. [...] till the beautiful eyes come rejoicing which weeping made me come to you, you may go as you please" (*Pur.* Canto XXVII.127-138).

Here Virgil echoes his sentiments expressed in the *Inferno* about the power of Beatrice's tears: they incited Virgil to action, much as they will incite Dante. Beatrice's tears come from her eyes—if her eyes represent a transcendence of reason itself, then her tears are an even more poignant motivator, representing the sadness Beatrice feels at the prison of reason's limitation. Virgil also demonstrates here that his discernment and guidance, the manifestation of human reason, are no longer sufficient for the task at hand, though he has led Dante through the

underworld and Purgatory with “understanding and art.” The brilliant, beautiful, transcendent eyes of Beatrice are what he needs now. G.E. Baldwin notes, “Virgil’s parting instructions mark the peak of reasoned knowledge [...] No further can reason see. But already in Dante’s intellect falls a gleam of the eternal light. Even reason hears Beatrice’s voice; and another who had already seen the light tells him ‘though free, he is subject to a higher nature.’ His soul enters into desire” (51).

References to Beatrice’s eyes seem often to go hand in hand with a downplaying of reason itself. At the beginning of the *Paradiso*, Dante turns his eyes “forward again, straight into the light of the sweet guide, whose holy eyes were glowing as she smiled. ‘Do not wonder,’ she said to me, ‘that I smile at your childish thought, since it does not yet trust itself upon the truth, but turns you, after its wont, to vacancy’” (*Par.* III.20-28). Beatrice tries to explain to Dante that in heaven the rules of reason no longer apply—what seemed concrete logic on earth is now reduced to “childish thought,” unable to believe in substantive truth. Earthly reason, Beatrice says, produces a void unless infused with divine revelation. G.E. Baldwin describes that

When through contrition he again is started on the way to salvation, it is Beatrice that calls him by his name, which of necessity, he tells us, is registered here, the only time it occurs in all his work. At the sound of his name he turns to Virgil; but Virgil, his ‘more than father,’ has vanished. Reason can no longer be a refuge to man when he takes up the profession of his faith. It has guided him to its portal; but passing within, he comes under a new law. It is a religion of liberty and a life of grace (73).

This is beautifully described in Canto X of the *Paradiso*, as Beatrice exclaims, “Give thanks, give thanks to the Sun of the Angels who of His grace has raised you to this visible one” (*Par.* X.52-54). As soon as she says this, Dante is enraptured, and says

“Never was heart of mortal so disposed unto devotion and so ready, as I became at those words. And all my love was so set on Him that it eclipsed Beatrice in oblivion; nor did this displease her, but she so smiled thereat that the splendor of her smiling eyes divided upon many things my mind intent on one” (*Par.* X.55-63).

Again, looking to Beatrice as his model, he is overcome by her expression of gratitude towards God and it is this that propels him towards thankfulness for divine grace. His joy in gratitude is so great that Beatrice's splendor is nearly invisible to him in light of divine glory. And yet her agency in this enlightenment is still present, as her radiant smile scatters the rationality of Dante's collected mind. At this instance, Glenn notes, "when Dante declares himself at one with God's love, Beatrice's momentary 'eclipse' marks a personal triumph for the pilgrim, which her beatific [smiling eyes] acknowledge" (144). Beatrice's eyes are the avenue through which Dante has come to the heavenly realm. Speaking to Cacciaguida, Dante says, "Down in the world endlessly bitter, and upon the mountain from whose fair summit my lady's eyes uplifted me, and after, through the heavens from light to light, I have learned that which, if I tell again, will have for many a savor of great bitterness" (*Par.* XVII.112-120). The transcendent intellect made manifest in Beatrice's eyes is the power through which Dante has come on this journey. His understanding is now changed, enlightened, and many on earth will not understand as he does. Nevertheless the constant injunction from Beatrice, Virgil and Cacciaguida is the same—to write clearly what he sees, now that his sight is infused with heavenly discernment. In the very next canto Dante tempers the bitter revelation with the sweet, and as he turns toward the "lady who is leading [him] to God," he says,

"What love I then saw in the holy eyes I leave here untold; not only because I distrust my own speech, but because of memory, which cannot return on itself so far unless Another guide it. This much of that moment can I retell, that as I gazed upon her my affection as freed from every other desire so long as the Eternal Joy that shone direct on Beatrice satisfied me from the fair eyes with its reflected aspect" (*Par.* XVIII.3-18).

Once again, Dante is simultaneously freed, swept away from reason, and focused intently on the manifold aspects of Eternal Joy reflected in the brilliances of Beatrice's eyes. And yet her job is to show him that Power and Love are present in Beatrice by reflection—Dante must turn from

his first glimpse of the Divine in Beatrice's eyes to the essence of the thing itself. It is no wonder that Beatrice, seeing Dante's wonderment and smiling, tells him to "Turn and listen, for not only in my eyes is Paradise" (*Par.* XVIII.20-21).

In this way, through the reflection of Divine glory in Beatrice's eyes, Dante begins to perceive the difference between human rationality and divine wisdom. Beatrice's example and guidance have led Dante upward, but she admits and submits joyfully to the superiority of the divine intellect. In *Paradiso* VII, Beatrice explains aspects of the mystery in the person of Christ, and says to him,

"You say 'I follow clearly what I hear, but why God willed this sole way for our redemption is hidden from me.' This decree, brother, is buried from the eyes of everyone whose understanding is not matured within love's flame. But inasmuch as at this mark there is much aiming and little discernment, I shall tell why that way was the most fitting'" (*Par.* VII.58-63).

Divine wisdom has been revealed to Beatrice herself, as she is revealing it to Dante. Dante exclaims in *Paradiso* XXX, "O prime enlightener! You who gave me the strength to see the high triumph of the true kingdom, give to me power to tell how I beheld it! A light is thereabove which makes the Creator visible to every creature that has his peace only in beholding Him" (*Par.* XXX.97-102). God is the supreme enlightener, and yet does not enlighten with words or doctrine those closest to him, only the vision of his essence. And this vision is the only thing that brings peace to God's creatures. As Dante and Beatrice journey through heaven, many people they meet mention that they are fully satisfied where they are, with the knowledge of God revealed to them—they do not seek to move further in towards the Beatific vision. They are completely satisfied in their respective places, and in their joy and pleasure in God. This is exemplified in the Eagle that comes to Dante in *Paradiso* XX, who, in his attempt to explain the doctrine of predestination, exclaims,

“O predestination, how remote is thy root from the vision of those who see not the First Cause entire! And you mortals, keep yourselves restrained in judging; for we, who see God, know not yet all the elect. And to us such defect is sweet, because our good in this good is refined, that what God wills we also will” (*Par.* XX.130-138).

When they have reached the *Primum Mobile*, Beatrice slips away from Dante silently, even as Virgil faded into the background at the end of *Purgatorio*. Each does this in order to help Dante make the transition, first from Virgil to Beatrice, then from Beatrice to the beatific vision.

In this place, at the end of the *Commedia*, Dante achieves the ultimate goal of his quest: Through divine aid and the aid of a woman, he sees beyond himself and beyond reason, into the heart of the Divine, and his soul is infused with divine Love. Dante’s “dark wood” was a void of true understanding, a prison of human intellectual pursuit. Beatrice’s purpose as a female guide, is poignant and fitting, as the *Commedia* is not only a love poem to a woman, but the revelation that a woman aids in the fulfillment of Love—not human love, but Divine Love which represents the fulfillment of understanding. Indeed, the very last thing Dante beholds in *Paradiso* XXXIII at the end of the poem, before gazing into the Divine essence, is Mary, the queen of heaven, and Beatrice (*Par.* XXXI.65-69). One of Mary’s vital roles is that of intercessor, and fittingly, it is towards her that Dante directs his final direct speech in the *Commedia*. Dante points out a quality belonging to Mary that he has highlighted first in Virgil, and then in Beatrice, namely, that Mary’s “Loving-kindness not only succors him who asks, but oftentimes freely foreruns the asking” (*Par.* XXXIII.16-18). Here, in his prayer for intercession and aid to Mary, Dante drives home the point that both speech and guidance are connected with the Female. The *Commedia* ends with Dante’s release from the power of his own intellect, into the power of the Divine, which has been made possible only by the guidance and interpretation of a woman. His last words are:

“As the Geometer who wholly applies himself to measure the circle, and finds not, in

pondering, the principle of which he is in need, such was I at that new sight. I wished to see how the image conformed to the circle and how it has its place therein; but my own wings were not sufficient for that, save that my mind was smitten by a flash wherein its wish came to it. Here power failed the lofty fantasy; but already my desire and my will were revolved, like a wheel that is evenly moved, by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.” (*Par.* XXXIII.133-146).

Dante ends his *Divina Commedia* with a flash of understanding, and what occurs thereafter is left un-communicated to the reader. Words have long ago been rendered useless to communicate his experience, so Dante falls back on sensory images. Dante feels Love motivating the music and motion of the spheres. This Love is imbued with a female significance, choosing women as the primary avenues through which it draws its beings to itself. Because of the prominence given to females and feminine characteristics in the poem, and the place of honor women hold just before Dante beholds the Divine, it is clear that Dante views women almost as gatekeepers of the Divine. In this way Dante resembles his poetic predecessor Virgil by placing a unique significance on the function of women as guides. However, Dante’s women, unlike Virgil’s, lead wanderers to a place above and outside human understanding, a place they would never be able to access on their own.

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