Beyond the Forgotten:
Cultural Memory and the Poetics of Gender in Dante's *Commedia*
Unutulanın Ötesinde: Dante'nin *İlahi Komedya*'sında Kültürel Bellek ve Cinsiyetin Poetikası

Oğuzhan Ayrım 🔗 0000-0002-2601-1416
Bitlis Eren University

ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this article is to investigate the *(in)visible* gendered constructs within Dante's *Commedia*. The article argues that due to the special emphasis on vice and virtue, *Commedia* lends itself to the archival purposes of cultural memory. The article explores how the cultural memory within the poem takes on a phallocentric perspective in its mechanics of socio-political affirmations doubled by Dante's poetic chiasm. Since the meticulous visibility of such a concept by itself reallocates our focus towards the imperatives of *silences* and *gaps*, the poem introduces a nuanced gendered interpretation far beyond the visible space. Therefore, this article employs a critical and deconstructive method to scrutinise the phallocentric dynamism of the poem's memory-dependent derivatives and its invisible underside by taking a gendered approach. Within this framework, this article aims to contribute to the literature on Dante's *Commedia* with an introduction of a new feminist lens that might enrich various readings of Dante's "poema sacro."

Introduction

In the playful waltz of perception, there is a peculiar paradox: the closer one gazes into the eccentricities of a painting, the more elusive its idea becomes. Now take a step back and broaden the lens of scrutiny. Unexpectedly, the essence shows itself in the midst of confusion; the peripherical harmony of colours starts to gather in the bearer of the vision, and the overlooked figures at the edge of the canvas unite with the centre, making it a whole. Imagine, if you may, a reader immersed in the subsequent flow of words, leaning closer and closer, striving to decipher every stroke of the author's pen. Likewise, the intended meaning is lost and faded. Sometimes, to truly see and understand, one must take a step back to see the bigger picture. Such is the enigmatic story of vision, where proximity blurs and distance reveals.

In Virgil's counsel to our pilgrim in Canto 9 of *Inferno*, the caution against looking at Medusa's mesmerising gaze similarly serves as a poignant allegory for the perils of *close* reading. To James C. Kriesel, this striking scene, with the deployment of ocular remarks, connotes "the warning [that] implies we need to look carefully to avoid being blinded by the literal sense of a text" (2019, pp. 122–3). While staring closely at the mythical creature's mesmerising eyes turns the beholder to

stone, so does fixating surely on the surface of the meaning of a text risk petrifying one's understanding. In this article, I intend to explore *Commedia* by stepping back from the immediate text and widening the scope of analysis, through which I pay particular attention to the cultural memory, memory-dependent derivatives of the poem, and voices of gender by adopting a deconstructive method. I seek to shed new light on *Commedia*'s significance as not only a literary marvel but also as a reflection of societal perceptions towards gender dynamics immersed in cultural memory, where even the most seemingly random points in the poem could contribute to its metanarrative on gender. Within this framework, this article aims to contribute to the literature on Dante's *Commedia* with an introduction of a new critical lens associated with cultural memory that might enrich various readings of Dante's *poema sacro*.

Dante's *Commedia* intricately weaves a tapestry of contrasts, where vice contends with virtue and evil opposes good within the framework of distinct expressions of Hell and Heaven. Beyond these dichotomies lies an overarching context that I uphold to be associated with gendered dichotomies. In line with Simone de Beauvoir's observation in *The Second Sex*, what I am proposing is that the contextual framework of these dichotomies also extends to the cultural problem of the rigidly constructed cross-categorization of the female association with bad principles and, subversively, the male association with good principles (1956, p. 74), each of which has grown into the different expressions of Hell (bad principle) and Heaven (good principle). This ideological concern with gender superiority is not only manifested in social codes of virtue and vice but is also maintained through canonised and textualized validations of these practices in the symbolic space (p. 127). Although de Beauvoir's observations are centuries apart, they are still at home in discussions of traditional patriarchal contexts, which interestingly manifests this trope in Dante's contrasting depictions of hell and heaven. Charon, for instance, mistakes Dante and Virgil for sinners and thus articulates: "Never hope to see the sky: I come to lead you to the other shore, to the eternal shadows, to heat and freezing" (*Inferno,* 3.85–7).

Thus, Charon refers to a realm of chaos and darkness where light does not interfere. Heaven, on the other hand, is described as "the eternal light" (*Paradiso,* 33.124), which Dante's generous pen uses innumerably and falls into repetition in defining Heaven.[1] Beyond Dante's stylometric patterns, these catoptric descriptions of two distinct principles serve a deeper purpose, which is to consolidate dichotomic contexts beneath the veneer of moral propaganda inherent in medievalist supremacism.

As Laurence Hooper notes, the internal logic behind the poem's privileged gendered iconography could be explained by what might be termed an "ideological commitment to poetic subjectivity" (2019, p. 44). It is where the poem's semiotic space comes to the forefront and introduces us to the hitherto overlooked side of Dante's otherworldly journey. Dante's vision and the mediaeval mind come on par and feed off one another because, as Frances Yates observes, "the Middle Ages might think of figures of virtues and vices as memory images, formed according to the classical rules, or of the divisions of Dante's Hell as memory places" (1999, p. xii). Yet, the cultural memory of the mediaeval gaze at that time was highly maimed at the disfavour of women:

> Perhaps most obviously, *manhed* simply refers to the human condition, or the qualities of humanity writ large. As a signifier of that which counts as human, the term issues ethical demands, only some of which are gendered according to a recognizable binary logic. As a borrowing from the Latin tradition of *virtus*, *manhed* signifies masculine virtues, including strength, loyalty, and bravery. (Crocker, 2007, p. 10)

---

[1] The phrase recurs in Cantos 5, 10, 11, 24, and 33, and it is noteworthy that the significance of the word "light" transcends a mere literal interpretation.

Virtue, in this context, equates to sufficient manliness,[2] And conversely, transgressions are linked to a lack of such manliness. This filter of virtue and vice, notably misogynistic, is embedded in the visible memory of the culture, reflecting an ideological bias that shapes and filters societal perceptions.

Willingly or unwillingly, we hereby acknowledge the sexual imbalance of mediaeval culture, designating females as potential sinners.[3] This recognition invites a nuanced exploration of cultural memory and Dante's conception of vice and virtue within the realms of hell and heaven through the lens of gender. Notably, Dante's pen does not overtly emphasise this aspect upon initial scrutiny. I aim to display this nuanced scrutiny in two distinct phases. In the first section, I will discuss how Dante's subjective filter lends itself to ideological attachment to cultural memory and forms a platform for the hearing of supremacist consciousness. In the second section, I will trace the semiotic space of the poem and unveil the subtle locations within Dante's vision where the feminine emphasis, despite being omitted from the visible sites of cultural memory, is located.

Commedia as an Archive: Dante and Cultural Memory

Before discussing the subject matter that will be handled in this section, I would like to emphasise the subjective narrativization of Dante's. In the introduction part of his work, *Singular Pasts: The I in Historiography*, Enzo Traverso gives Dante's *Commedia* as an example of subjectivity in narrativization to illuminate the same degree of subjectivity in archival historiography. The invasive idea of history as fiction, he says, wins out the refutation of historical objectivity in the process of *recollection* by the author. On a modest scale, the methodology here encompasses the interface between the individual and collective memory, which presupposes the prism of "the subjectivity of the author" or the poet (2022, p. 2) in their transmission of the "dominant order and its way of life" (p. 150). It is my conviction that we can expect no less from Dante, who is neither dreaming about the journey nor working with fictitious bodies; on the other hand, he engages with cultural and mythological references in life and works in a way a historian or an author of historiography does. Moreover, in the historiographical reflection of the social order, *Commedia*, with its iconographic dichotomy of punitive and rewarding codes within mediaeval *modus vivendi*, manifests a "socially constructed" archival observatory that "directs [Dante's] gaze [and] decision-making autonomy" (p. 150). Traverso's sceptical viewpoint not only inverts our focus into the solid influence of the mediaeval order on Dante's subjective perspective but also underscores Richard Kearney's claim that "[n]arrative memory is never innocent" (1999, p. 27), thus prompting us to re-evaluate Dante's poem from a different perspective that includes both personal and collective memories.

As the timeless Latin adage, *Verba volant scripta manent*,[4] encapsulates the enduring essence of written words, it also infers that the profound power of writing transcends temporal boundaries through which the textual material occupies a certain amount of memory places for archival purposes. It does not take a genius to deduce that *Commedia* seems to excel in it, not only in its literary merit but also in its archival function for the politics of societal and political norms. This assertion finds validation in Romberch's sixteenth-century treatise, where he praises the

---

[2] The word "virtue" is derived from the Latin word *vir*, which means a man imbued with all masculine qualities.
[3] Dyan Elliott (2010) explores the close affiliation of societal corruption, witchcraft, and innate contamination within the female menstruation cycle, arguing that the mediaeval mind considered female menstruation as an inescapable ritual of active sinfulness (p. 16). For further misogynistic theology steeped in mediaeval cultural bias, the lines in Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale" in the *Canterbury Tales* are another epitome in this regard: "O Satan, ever envious since the day / On which they chased you out of Paradise, / Our heritage! How soon you found the way / Through Eve to woman! [...] Of woman you have made / The instrument by which we are betrayed" (lines 365–371).
[4] "The palest ink is stronger than the sharpest memory."

ingenious contributions of *Commedia* in etching the nature of sins and their punishments on the collective memory: "For this (that is for remembering the places of Hell) the ingenious invention of Virgil and Dante will help us much. That is for distinguishing the punishments according to the nature of the sins. Exactly." (as cited in Yates, 1999, p. 94). The cosmic order of the poem, with shocking images of sinful and virtuous experiences in order, gains archival status by appealing to the dictations of societal preferences set by orthodox beliefs. Romberch's words in *Congestorium Artificiose Memorie* in 1533 help us configure concurrence between *Commedia* and its archival content of the dominant ideology of the zeitgeist:

> And since the orthodox religion holds that the punishments of sins are in accordance with the nature of the crimes, here the Proud are crucified [...] there the Greedy, the Avaricious, the Angry, the Slothful, the Envious, the Luxurious (are punished) with sulphur, fire, pitch, and that kind of punishments. (as cited in Yates, 1999, p. 94)

The sins, each paired with various types of concomitant punishments in *Inferno*, and their counter-positivity in *Paradiso* unveil the memory system that maps out the extremities of mediaeval values, discourse, and society. The reason is that Dante, just like any individual, had a receptacle of memory that he drew his substance from. Using Maurice Halbwachs' comment, then, Dante's individual memory as a poet "is connected with thoughts that come from the social value" (1992, p. 57).

The interplay between the poet and the societal discourse is bound to a stiff causality, in which the literary material becomes the result of the memory system since, as Züleyha Çetiner-Öktem notes, the "individual memory of the poet and the collective memory of society pour into this receptacle we name literature where it brews and becomes an aspect of cultural heritage" (2022, p. 57). In other words, as much as writing enhances what one remembers, what one remembers also influences what one writes, and Dante's individual memory sustained by collective memory is no exception. In his retrospective narration, after having fulfilled his so-called otherworldly journey, Dante appeals to his personal memory: "O muses, O high wit, now help me; O memory that wrote down what I saw, here will your nobility appear" (*Inferno,* 2.7–9). The apparent invocation of the muses for retrospective narration turns out to be Dante's willingness to immerse himself in the realm of selective memory, which is a form of power imposition in a way that when the memory is at the stage, remembrance becomes the recreation of the past and the present.

Commedia, in this respect, becomes a cultural repository linked to cultural heritage by providing equilibrium to the trajectory of social identity. Through Dante's appraisal and management duty like an archivist, *Commedia* finds a stake in the role of appraisal and management, asserting control over what is included or excluded, and deemed superior or vice, thereby becoming a mechanism for management and control through Dante as a conduit. As Gülden Hatipoğlu (2023) also quotes from Joan M. Schwartz's observation:

> Certain stories are privileged, and others are marginalized. And archivists are an integral part of this storytelling [...] This represents enormous power over memory and identity, over the fundamental ways in which society seeks evidence of what its core values are and have been, where it has come from, and where it is going. (2006, p. 3)

Dante's narrativization and, thus, textualization of the discoursal elements incite *Commedia* as a metaphorical archive, such that Dante, in performing the duties of an archivist, not only captures cultural nuances but also actively participates in defining and shaping the very basis of the culmination of cultural values and experiences.

The archival authority bestowed on Dante to curate the past also renders a subjective gaze overlapped with his authorial privilege because Dante misleadingly refers to the objective line of

mnemonic narration. The manner and content of his storytelling are inherently subjective, so much so that "Dante inserts warnings to the reader, observations on the story's development, and comments on his own states of mind at the time of the narrative" (Pertile, 2019, p. 3). In this capacity, Dante controls and manipulates the past by using the *arcana imperii*, the unseen space of power (Wolfgand, 2004, p. 47) that confers societal consciousness. It is a qualitative attachment, for it enables personal memory, self-reference, and perhaps the socialised creativity at play; but most importantly, it makes room for *intentionality* and *perspectivism* because it is not a *camera obscura* situation; Dante himself is the true vehicle of the story as both narrator and protagonist.

Under this circumstance, Dante's poem finds its place within the prominent grand narratives through the dialogism between the reader and the Dante-narrator, who "has a didactic role in the poem" (Pertile, 2019, p. 5). The reader, caught in the oscillation between the roles of Dante-narrator and Dante-character, is abruptly confronted by the materiality of the poem; this encounter is coupled with Dante's deliberate interruptions of the subjective narrative operation designed to "involve the reader in the character's experiences" (p. 5). Following this, the reader is separated from the fictionality of the poem, negating the enjoyment of the experience while elevating them to the state of a vacuum that absorbs the narrator's *commandments* as Dante experiences and unfolds at the same time.

This narratological structure recalls parallels with the biblical tradition of *experiential dictation* through retrospective narrativization of occasions, which eventually codifies two alternatives of world orders based on virtue and vice. Therefore, I could argue that *Commedia* ranks among other cultural grand narratives following in the footsteps of the Bible in terms of the effective force of dictation. If this *poema sacro* was created by the very image of the Bible, then Dante-narrator was also created by the image of God. It is undeniably true insofar as we uphold the close association of the word author being derived from the word authority with the encompassing politics of authorship of any acts of narration and narrativization; then, the narrator Dante becomes a subset of the Author(ity) of God, both sharing an overlapped consensus of mindset regarding and hence *dictating* how life is understood and should be experienced within the *written material*, be they biblical or fictional (Benfell, 2011, p. 34). The dictates, unfortunately, subsist in only one perspective to the extent that Dante's "credibility, or interpretation of an event, sight, or statement is at stake" (Pertile, 2019, p. 5).

What is at stake actually leads to a nuanced gendered reading of Dante's *Commedia*, particularly in its resonance with the Bible and classical decorum, both of which have historically framed discussions around male privilege over women. To clarify this, Dante's journey begins with the maxim that life is a narrative, as implied by the opening words of the poem that dovetail the narrativization of *Commedia* and the organic life of humanity:

> In the middle of the journey of our life,
> I came to myself in a dark wood,
> for the straightway was lost. (*Inferno*, 1.1–3)

Yet, in the cultural consciousness, the narrative journey of life, too, falls into the hands of the sexual imbalance of culture. In the Biblical context, for instance, Eve is banished from the domain of knowledge and thus its practical vehicles, like writing and claiming the authority of life as a narrative. If not, then the Lilithian label comes to the forefront and goes as far as etching demonic attributes on female identity for transgression.[5] From a logical perspective, it becomes apparent

---

[5] Here I follow my own deduction about the palimpsestic inability of females based on the biblical discourse associated with the white whale in *Moby Dick*: "First, that Eve has been banished from the domain of knowledge in the first place, thus rendering her deficient in knowledge's suggestive practices as well, i.e., writing, or claiming the author(ity) in her autonomy; secondly, backing on this biblical discourse, that the voiceless white

that God, too, employs a dialectical tone in delineating what is deemed suitable for the archival mindset. At this point, I interpret the inscription on the gates of hell, "ABANDON EVERY HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER" (*Inferno* 3.9), as an abstract representation of a robust lock. This lock, in essence, functions as an insurance policy safeguarding the meticulously organised archival phallocentric ideology. It symbolises a deliberate exclusionary mechanism that provides entry to those who challenge or deviate from the prevailing norms without an escape, reinforcing the patriarchal narrative that has historically marginalised the feminine perspective within cultural and religious discourse.

As for the androcentric meta-discourse in the poem, Dante's poetic vision is doubly maimed due to the image of antiquity that comes with the full baggage of proper images of manly virtues. No sooner has Dante started his journey, he positions himself in a compromised state by venerating Virgil as his guide and conferring heavily on Virgil's magnum opus, *Aeneid*:

> You are my master and my author, you alone are
> he from whom I have taken the pleasing style that
> has won me honor. (*Inferno*, 1.85–87)

The gist behind this veneration, however, extends beyond homage; it deeply pertains to a form of indoctrination. Much to our dismay, at the beginning of the journey in the Dark Wood, Dante exhibits himself as an impressionable person rather than an independent poet whose name would transgress centuries, opting for a humble and non-competitive demeanour. His admiration, furthermore, comes with the impression of his poetic identity; in other words, if Dante looks up to Virgil alongside the androcentric egotism of masculine principles as the main concern of Virgil's poem, then we could justify the fact that Dante is also indoctrinated in that way, influencing the poet's logic and verses.

The further explanation is highly irrelevant since the mediaeval era was characterised by the consolidation of classical and religious decorum of virtuous ideals through not only Jesus Christ himself with the influence of scholasticism but also Virgilian heroes renowned for showing excellence but not beyond the divine power (Rosenberg, 1999, p. 158). Therefore, in this master-apprentice relationship bound to "cultural patrimony" (Botterill, 2001, p. 309), Dante seems to be careful enough to strategically adopt the image of manhood with the appraisal of religious ethics appealing to the societal taste put in order by the Western Church in the fourteenth century. Therefore, Dante's *peoma sacro* recounts

> Dante's view of sin, judgement, damnation, purgation, redemption, and beatitude [...] through closely reasoned arguments based on a theological tradition and through penetrating psychological examination of the working-out of theological ideas in the course of human lives. (p. 303)

Such a statement speaks to the patriarchal line of universality that is "distended to encompass memory and knowledge" together (Çetiner-Öktem, 2022, p. 73), and construes ideal male sovereignty both in ecclesiological and civilised memory.

As revealing as these cultural insights embedded in both personal and collective memory are, up until this point, my aim has been to illustrate how the systematic structure of Dante's *Commedia*

---

whale with the baggage of Eve's incarnated aspects represents just as much deficiency for women in author(ity) in an altruistic gesture as in paper in its relation to pen; lastly, that knowledge has pertained to masculinity since then and hence manoeuvred into a Foucauldian insight of hegemonic power when utilized manipulatively. In this quasi-equality, when all cards seem to be laid out, feminine freedom in self-knowledge is confined to a deck of cards counting on the fingers of one hand, while the rest is preserved for manipulative tricks up the opponent's sleeve" (2024, p. 134–35).

might reflect the societal constructs of cultural and collective memory. Although the cultural positive disclosure related to Heaven and accordingly pejorative attachment to Hell may be referring to male / female dyad based on the artificial hierarchy of the civilization, with a logical rumination on masculine egotism infected to praise the theologically virtuous *vir*,[6] There exists a broader peripheral inheritance that debases the role of females in *Commedia*. Lynn MacKenzie (2013) has recently revealed that Dante does not call out to the general audience or man-as-human (*il solito impersonale*) but rather addresses strong masculine implications as society's *hows* and *whats* (Paradiso) in relation to its *nots* (Inferno) (p. 3). If Dante's ideological commitment is as robust as claimed by MacKenzie, Dante's personal memory takes up mainstream memory sites, relegating females to a position of degradation, even exile, to the extent that Dante actively "exploits" this stance (p. 3). In this methodological instrument conceived as identity-in-difference, in the following section, I intend to display how *Inferno*, as a symbolic space, embodies the aspects of *nots*—the societal leftovers made secondary and forgotten, echoing de Beauvoir's statement, specifically with regard to women.

Gender Semiotics Relocated in *Inferno*

Social construction has another relative in *Commedia*: the embodiment of morality at its best. While some may argue that Commedia delves into vices and virtues, the masculine perspective intricately interweaves the reality that Dante archives with the theological promises and cultural doctrines governing social orders within visible memory realms. Still, any kind of memory cannot be taken out of the *comfort of forgetting* with all the connotations of exclusion or omission, hiding through the repository of the unconscious but seeking a way to reverberate itself in the semiotic space, which certainly deserves a close interrogation of cultural omissions due to the poem's close affiliation with cultural memory and archival authority.

Culture, more optimistically, is a mechanism of exclusion. Drawing from Kristeva's perspective, the evolution of cultural discourse, intertwined with social practices, orbits around the privilege of abjection—a privilege that denotes discomfort and disgust related to the unfitting symbolic codes. "[B]y way of abjection," writes Kristeva, "primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism" (1982, pp. 12–3). Kristeva's explanation lands on an umbrella term in the binary opposition of culture / nature dating back to the archaic memory of civilization, which contextually refers to the male / female dichotomies as mutually exclusive entities. For this very reason, "[i]n her thought," notes McAfee, "the reader can find a way to bring together biological and the cultural world we inhabit" (2004, p. 76). Thereby, as much as abjection is a "state of abjecting or rejecting what is other to oneself" (p. 45) which Kristeva conditions as the first principle of culture, then women are abjected as the "negative of men" within the memory places, "conjur[ing] up images of sexist classification of women as possible inferior to men" (p. 77).

While Dante's conceptualization of hell as an ideological repository for sinners addresses the human condition through fidelity to certain ethical principles, it also provides a domain to scrutinise societal standards, including those pertaining to women. In this construct of passing judgement both in the text and within the broader context it reflects, Dante, who works in a single way, becomes an arbiter of morality since "Dante's response to these situations, as both poet and *personaggio*, is likewise individually judged and enacted" (Botterill, 2001, p. 303).

Inferno, in this regard, discloses a gendered lens in interpreting the poem with a misogynistic imagination of women related to Dante's object of desire: Beatrice. Beatrice, beyond Dante's autobiographical acquaintance, pays respect to the sexist criteria of womanhood, embodying a familiar angel-in-the-house demeanour that is rewarded within Dante's poem. In a cultural sense,

---

[6] See the introduction part.

the main topic is the infringement on female freedom with no retarding element but perpetual assent in collective activities expressed as female submission and loyalty to the paterfamilias. Dante becomes another pillar of that supremacist strength, thus granting Beatrice a place in the abode of God in the Empyrean in Heaven, alongside nine other female figures, with Eve positioned prominently at the front (*Paradiso*, 31). While Saint Bernard takes over the role of guiding Dante for the following last cantos, we are left with an image of a woman waiting for her prince charming,[7] A vision that ascends to his Maker in a privileged manner without her active presence.

As I mentioned earlier, God's dictations and Dante find a common ground of dichotomic contour; Eve has a countertype imbued with negative aspects known as Lilith, and Dante's proper image of womanhood operates in the same way through the tragic figure of Francesca, who represents the denial of feminine mystique and hence is located in the second circle of hell associated with lust and sex. Francesca's story revolves around adultery with poignant causality. In the second circle, as Dante approaches Francesca and Paolo, who are swept away by the violent blows of winds in a similar way to how they were swept away by their passions, Francesca takes hold of storytelling and unfolds her tragedy of lust:

> Love, which is swiftly kindled in the noble heart,
> seized this one for the lovely person that was taken
> from me; and the manner still injures me.
>
> Love, which pardons no one loved from loving in
> return, seized me for his beauty so strongly that, as
> you see, it still does not abandon me. (*Inferno*, 5.100–5)

While Freccero's interpretation attributes Dante's condemnation of Francesca to her reflexive portrayal as a passive victim of love (2009, p. 3), like Dido in Virgil's memorable epic poem, *Aeneid*: "Love led us on to one death" (*Inferno*, 5.106), it is crucial to recognise Francesca's emphasis on the aestheticized, or perhaps obsessively fetishized body related to virile sexuality coming with the anaphora on "Love." Although this depiction stands in stark contrast to Dante's love for Beatrice, Dante shows affectionate empathy for the couple, the corollary of which results in his sudden blackout towards the end of the canto.

I am of the opinion that Dante's instant blackout is misleading because it is not only sympathy present in the canto but also rectification. In this thought, Dante's faint becomes a symbolic death, a kind of rectification since Francesca "is the avatar of a persona that had been Dante's own" (Barolini, 2000, p. 27). For this very reason, we can say that Dante may have considered himself identical to Francesca's adulterous love affair and immersed himself in deep empathy. Yet, the obligatory self-tribute does not tarnish Dante but grants him dignity for a fresh start in such a way that Dante panders to societal whims and confronts himself to regain his proper sense by "chart[ing] the culture's voyeuristic response to such a female protagonist [Francesca]" (p. 8) and, without contrition, concedes her doom alongside her attitudes that could "disturb identity, system, and order" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).

Dante's innocent way of exclusive system gains a deeper level of memory cooperation when I bring forth another layer of information so as to understand the underpinning incentive of patriarchal maintenance of the poem. I propose to look into the archaic memory of civilization and a futile quest for immortality, which is misogynistic and has so much to do with Dante's poem as will be shown. At around the neat archaic time of self-knowledge, the daunting image of death swarmed

---

[7] Dante's love for Beatrice is often read as another type of courtly love; similarly, Beatrice, as a figurative body, is usually considered to be a courtly lady. See Frisardi, A. (2012). *The young Dante and the one love*. Temenos Academy.

to a place innately reserved for men, whereas women were physiologically safe from it. Prehistoric men grappled with a sense of incompleteness and deficiency in comparison to female reproductive abilities. More specifically, men realised that they did not share the same trait of glamoured sensibility of menstruation, which is identified as a logical marker of immortality, as the doctrinal heavy and sudden bleeding leaves out dying. This realisation culminated in male jealousy towards females, becoming the deepest wellspring of male dominance and female passivity in the historical and social context: "Not only did she constantly recover from her bouts with bleeding, but more significantly, she constantly reproduced herself—she had the key to immortality and he did not" (Donovan, 2000, p. 197). Deprived of this magical phenomenon dwelling in the archaic memory of haunting mortality, as also reflected in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the desire for masculine mastery was juxtaposed with self-inadequacy. Subduing the female, however, could not erase the unexpressed "fear and denial of the feminine" (p. 198) from the unconscious. Nor does the unconscious rhetoric work in that way; rather, the unconscious operates at the level of uncanny familiarity based on the unconscious repository of suppressed images and actions, promising a way out for the forgotten, suppressed, and abject eventually.

For this matter, our key greeting is the spatial quality of cold in *Inferno* because the symptomatic images of suppression or omission from the conscious memory highlight female references. I argue that the quality of coldness in *Inferno* is reserved for certain circles with subtle and (un)familiar feminine qualities. With respect to the archaic memory mentioned above, the coldness speaks volumes for male defence against the threat of female mysticism, for "[a]s a defence against annihilation, the traumatic memories remain frozen and inaccessible" buried in the unconscious (Amir, 2016, p. 620). On a material level, Dante resorts to glaciation in *Inferno* as a way of torture in definite circles; on a deeper level, those circles are cultural receptions of how cultural memory tries to forget those memories but can only push them to the unconscious repository, being *frozen* and immobile yet to remain there.

While not as widely acknowledged as the torment through flames, Dante introduces the concept of freezing cold as an alternative form of punishment in his depiction of Hell. As conveyed by Charon, the torments in *Inferno* are rooted in the dual elements of "heat and freezing" (*Inferno*, 3.85–86). Intriguingly, the nominal representation of heat and freezing carries gendered implications with symbolic significance. Drawing from the perspectives of late Roman intellectuals influenced by Aristotle's hierarchical views on gender in his *Politics*, the male embryo was believed to accumulate an excess of *heat* in the womb, and the degree of masculine identity was thought to be determined by this accumulation in men's bodies. This mindset, influenced by Aristotle's ideas, considered fertilisation through men's *warm* semen as a suitable explanation. (Brown, 1988, p. 10). Adhering to Aristotle's supremacism, women were deemed to naturally lack this heat and were associated with a sense of coldness, rendering them immobilised and paralysed.

It is here worth mentioning that the second circle's spatial quality of cold through whip-like winds in an unending cease could be referred to as Dante's supremacist memory-dependent derivative. This icy quality confluents with Francesca's presence and reinforces the association of coldness with the female identity, strategically positioned in the repository of cultural consciousness. It is significant to observe that the Circle of Lust is predominantly characterized by female figures, including Cleopatra and Helen of Troy. However, Francesca occupies a distinguished position within this realm, as she delivers one of the most extended monologues attributed to a female character in *Inferno*. In this context, while her punishment remains intertwined with a male counterpart, the prominence of the female voice within this circle emerges as particularly noteworthy.

Besides the second circle, there are two other circles in which Dante uses the biting cold to punish vile sinners and somewhat encourages a gendered contemplation through the spatial

representative of cold. On one hand, we have the third circle reserved for the gluttons constrained by a rubbishy slush generated by an unceasing cold rain:

> I am in the third circle, with the eternal, cursed,
> cold, and heavy rain; its rule and quality never
> change. (*Inferno*, 6.7–9)

In this circle, Dante happens to speak to a character known as Clacco the Pig, a representative body of a crapulous mass of overindulgence in the worldly pleasures of the damnable sin of the gullet (*Inferno*, 6.53). Clacco's pejorative characterization gains kinship with the freezing torture, and it obscures his individual narrative and leads us to explore the mediaeval perception of gluttony instead. The general reception of mediaeval denouncement recalls Chaucer's treatment of the Monk in the *Canterbury Tales*, portrayed as bald and excessively voracious due to worldly overindulgence. Both Chaucer and Dante's ignominy here "sounds like a formidable corrective of […] male microcosmos of pleasure-seeking activity" since gluttony in the mediaeval mind "is virtually always feminine […] and frequently errant part of God's creation" (Lindeboom, 2008, p. 348). Dante's poetic chiasmus between the glaciation and femininity through the gluttony in the third circle, in this regard, is not aleatory; it is wrapped up in an unconscious presumption of the *frozen* female threat instead.

On the other hand, we have another circle, perhaps more memorable than the third, that has grown into the aspect of glaciation. The readers of *Inferno* will remember the neatly designed and awe-inspiring moment when Dante has at last achieved to see Lucifer, saluting the most disgraceful sinners "stuck in ice," frozen to the extremities, and eventually courting testimonies to "the cold" (*Inferno*, 32.35, 38). Albeit the female association with this circle would remain in obscurity at first glance, I suggest taking Lucifer etymologically to reveal an intriguing perspective. Considering the PIE root (Proto-Indo-European morpheme) for the word Lucifer, in old English, Lucifer literally translates to "light-bringing" from the roots of *leuk- and *ferre*. Notably, the "bringing" aspect in this phrase derives from the verb *ferre*, which was also used to signify "to bear children." This is the reason why Lucifer was used as "an epithet or name of Diana."[8] In this condensed exploration of Lucifer, entrenched in female undertones by the depiction of being "issued from the ice at the mid-point of his breast" (*Inferno*, 34.28–29), two universal approaches come to the fore: (1) females have been seen as a threat due to their reproductive abilities; (2) females are seen as the originators of sin, starting with figures like Lilith. In either interpretation, the strong link between *Inferno* and primordial femininity emerges, a facet of cultural memory often relegated to the periphery.

Before concluding the article, it is essential to highlight one more aspect. Kristeva introduces the term "abject" with a distinctive quality of confrontation as if suggesting a sense of remembrance: "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1982, p. 1). Kristeva's somewhat cryptic portrayal of abjection blurs the distinction between the subject and the abject. It signifies the moment of merging culture and primal repression, propelling cultural consciousness to be "powerless" against the abject (p. 2). The confrontation with the abject in the *Inferno* is reflected in the following quotation coming from our pilgrim as a mouthpiece:

> How then I became frozen and feeble, do not ask,
> reader, for I do not write it, and all speech would be
> insufficient.

---

[8] Lucifer. (2023). In *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved from https://www.etymonline.com/word/Lucifer.

> I did not die and I did not remain alive: think
> now for yourself, if you have wit at all, what I
> became, deprived of both. (*Inferno*, 34.22–27)

In stark contrast to a moment earlier when our pilgrim was trying to forcefully take the name of a shade, Bocca, by grabbing a handful of the sinner's hair (*Inferno*, 32), he now feels insignificant and utterly crushed against Lucifer. The most striking element of this occurrence is Dante's inability to articulate his experience, reminiscent of a momentary tongue-tie, so much so that we could argue the abjection "draws [Dante] towards the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). In this instance, I daresay that Dante's phallocentric cultural assumptions are shattered in a momentary compression of uncanny remembrance. In the aftermath, our pilgrim sees the light again, setting the way for his Maker, but with a crucial realisation: perhaps all that is *frozen* may not have melted into the air, but eventually it will.

Conclusion

Through this deconstructive exploration, Dante's *Commedia* unfolds as a metaphorical archive, creating a dialogic intersection between Dante's individual memory and the collective memory of mediaeval society. Memory, as could be seen in this article, is treated as a hermeneutical tool for power with its oscillation between "remembrance" and "forgetting". As the initial part of this discourse indicates, *Commedia* does not merely serve as an intellectual exercise in the poetic landscape; it emerges as a tangible memory site profoundly shaped by theological promises and cultural doctrines, acting as focal points within the phallocentric cultural consciousness. This dynamic collides with Dante's authoritative gaze as he evaluates sins and rewards. Hence, this visible part of the poem connotes the "remembrance" part.

However, as anticipated, the dual composition of memory coexists with a concealed realm of the forgotten, omitted, or even annihilated, introducing a tension between the visible and invisible, symbolic and semiotic spaces within Dante's *poema sacro*. This aspect takes centre stage in the second section of this article, where female rhetoric is posited as an excluded principle from cultural memory due to the female-nature association against the male-civilization dyad. *Inferno*'s genuinely reserved spatial aspect of coldness for the specific circles, based on the Aristotelian label of heat as the male principle, is interpreted as the "forgotten" female energy in memory places. Just as what is frozen eventually melts and unravels what is inside, Dante's poem, however culturally compliant and common sensical, finds a way to relocate (m)otherness in his poem, reflecting the so-called strictly sealed cultural pillar that is built on a slippery ground of disillusionment.

References

Alighieri, D. (1996). *Inferno: The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. Trans. Robert M. Durling. Oxford University Press.

Alighieri, D. (2001). *Paradiso: The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. Trans. Robert M. Durling. Oxford University Press.

Amir, D. (2016). When Language Meets Traumatic Lacuna: The Metaphoric, the Metonymic, and the Psychotic Modes of Testimony. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, *36* (8), 620–632.

Ayrım, O. (2024). American Adam Myth and Ahab: Sartre's Masculine Principles in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. *International Journal of Media Culture and Literature*, *8* (2), 119–141.

Barolini, T. (2000). Dante and Francesca Da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender. *Speculum*, *75* (1), 1–28.

Benfell, S. (2011). *The Biblical Dante*. University of Toronto Press.

Botterill, S. (2001). Ideals of the Institutional Church in Dante and Bernard of Clairvaux. *Italica*, *78* (3), 297–313.

Brown, P. (1988). The Body and Society. Columbia University Press.

Çetiner-Öktem, Z. (2022). *Memory and Men*. Ege University Publishing.

Crocker, H. (2007). *Chaucer's Vision of Manhood*. Palgrave MacMillan.

de Beauvoir, S. (1956). *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshlay. Jonathan Cape.

Donovan, J. (2000). *Feminist Theory*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Elliott, D. (2010). *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, And Demonology in The Medieval Ages*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Freccero, J. (2009). The Portrait of Francesca. Inferno V. *MLN*, *124* (5), 7–38.

Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*. Trans. Lewis A. Coser. University of Chicago Press.

Hatipoğlu, G. (2023). The Archival Suspicion and Authorial Desire in The Dalkey Archive. *IDEAS: Journal of English Literary Studies*, *3* (1), 31–43.

Hooper, L. (2019). Characterization. In Z. G. Barański (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's Commedia* (pp. 43–60). Cambridge University Press.

Kearney, R. (1999). Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance. In Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (Eds.), Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy (pp. 18–32). Routledge.

Kriesel, J. (2019). Allegories of the Corpus. In Z. G. Barański (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's Commedia* (110–126). Cambridge University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. Columbia University Press.

Lindeboom, B. W. (2008). Chaucer's Monk Illuminated: Zenobia as Role Model. *Neophilologus*, *92* (1), 339–350.

MacKenzie, L. (2013). *Dante's Manhood: Authorial Masculinities before the Commedia* [Doctoral Thesis, Columbia University].

McAfee, N. (2004). *Julia Kristeva*. Routledge.

Pertile, L. (2019). Narrative Structure. In Z. G. Barański (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's Commedia* (pp. 4–27). Cambridge University Press.

Rosenberg, D. (1999). *World Mythology: An Anthology of the Great Myths and Epics*. NTC.

Schwartz, J. M. (2006). "Having New Eyes": Spaces of Archives, Landscapes of Power. *Arcivaria: The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists*, *61*, 1–25.

Traverso, E. (2022). *Singular Pasts: The "I" in Historiography*. Trans. Adam Schoene. Columbia University Press.

Wolfgand, E. (2004). The Archive as a Metaphor: From Archival Space to Archival Time. *Open*, *7* (1), 46–53.

Yates, F. A. (1999). *The Art of Memory*. Routledge.

Disclosure Statement