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“Florentino Ariza Sat Bedazzled”: Initiating an Exploration of Literary Texts with Dante in the Undergraduate Seminar

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Abstract: Dante’s *Commedia* provides a useful context or “frame” for a discussion of love in literature from the Middle Ages to the present day in the undergraduate seminar. Selected cantos of the *Commedia* can initiate an examination of love—lust, romantic love, *caritas*—and provide ways to analyze depictions of love by important authors. For example, *Inferno* Cantos I and III introduce the concept of the “journey”—Dante’s through the three realms of the afterlife, and our “journey” through a series of texts to be read over one semester. Dante’s education in *Inferno* constitutes an understanding of sin and of hell as the farthest place from God and His love. Moreover, in Canto I of *Paradiso*, Dante reiterates that God and His love can be found throughout creation “in some places more and in others less” (I: 3), and he concludes his poem with a vision of God and of the entire universe as moved by His love. Six great authors—Francis of Assisi, Vittoria Colonna, William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Flannery O’Connor, and Gabriel García Márquez—articulate in their own words this very human experience of love, of loving something or loving someone. In the process, they illuminate both Dante’s experience in the afterlife and ours in the modern world.

Keywords: Dante; *Divine Comedy*; pedagogy; interdisciplinarity; literary studies; undergraduate seminar; great books; love; *caritas*

In our two-semester freshman seminar program at Villanova University, professors and students lead each other through close readings of ancient and medieval literature in the fall, and Renaissance literature to the present day in the spring. Augustine’s *Confessions* serves as a guide or “lens” through which we read the other “great books” over the course of the year. At the end of the fall semester 2017, my students and I still had some questions and uncertainties regarding love in three texts: the Gospel of Mark, Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, and Dante’s *Commedia*. In particular we wondered exactly how to define lust, romantic love, and *caritas* and how they are connected?¹ What does it mean to love one’s “neighbor,” as Jesus commands us to do in Mark 12:31: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”? We can try to follow His example in the Gospels, but how exactly do we do this as sinful, imperfect human beings? What exactly do we mean when we say we love our family? A spouse or significant other? A friend? A stranger or a “neighbor”?

These texts became the foundation for an exploration of love in literature from the Middle Ages to the present day during the spring semester. In particular, Dante’s experience in certain moments of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* prepared our reading of six authors over the course of that semester: Francis of Assisi, Vittoria Colonna, William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Flannery O’Connor, and Gabriel García

¹ *Caritas* is particularly important in the Augustine mission of Villanova University, where the first-year experience is centered on the Augustinian themes of *Unitas*, *Veritas*, *Caritas* (the motto of the university) and how they interact with real world values.

Márquez. These authors articulate in their own words this very human experience of love, of loving something or loving someone, thereby illuminating Dante's experience in the afterlife, and ours in this lonely, individualistic, modern-day world.

Indeed, we use the word "love" so much that it can become meaningless, for example in phrases expressing an interest or pleasure in something such as pizza, football, or a new hairdo or sweater. The abundant use of the word "love" can be an unconscious palliative against loneliness, a prayer in our cult of individualism. At the same time, we know we should "love our neighbor," but what exactly would that look like? What would that feel like? How do these authors help us to understand what Dante means at the beginning of *Paradiso* where he observes that God's divine glory—which we can also translate as God's goodness, light, and love—can be found throughout His creation in some parts more than in others?² Similarly, what does he mean at the end of *Paradiso* and of the *Commedia* as a whole when he concludes that divine love moves the universe and now also his will and desire?³

What follows is a synopsis of the many discussions I had with my undergraduate students over the course of the spring semester. Our conclusions regarding love in the literary works we read will not only aid in clarifying a significant part of our human experience—specifically the elucidation of the three types of love mentioned above (lust, romantic love, *caritas*)—but will also, I hope, lead to a greater understanding of what it means to live in a community and the creation of a more inclusive society.

1. Defining Love in Dante's *Commedia*: From Lust to *Caritas*

Inferno Cantos I and III introduce the concept of the "journey"—Dante's through the three realms of the afterlife, and our "journey" through a series of texts to be read over one semester. Dante's education in Canto V constitutes a definition of sin and of hell as the farthest place from God and divine love. In *Inferno* V, the monster at the beginning contrasts with the descriptions of the lustful couples in the second half. Dante describes Minòs as "terrible" and "snarling" ("Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia"), with a tail he coils snake-like around his body marking the number of circles of hell the sinner before him must descend.⁴ Dante soon understands that this circle contains the souls of the lustful "who put rational thought below carnal desire."⁵ These lascivious souls include among them beautiful passionate lovers such as Dido, Cleopatra, Helen, and Paolo and Francesca, among others. Dante refers to them collectively as "these fair ladies of old and their champions."⁶ When Francesca tells her story, she describes how Paolo fell in love with her "beautiful form."⁷ She recounts how they fell in love while reading together of the moment Lancelot kissed the smiling Guinevere: "When we read how the longed-for smile was kissed,/the smile of Guinevere, by her great lover—/this man, with whom I keep eternal tryst,/Trembling all over, placed his lips on mine" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 133–135). Here, we recall the "snarling" Minòs at the beginning of the same canto, whose image

² "The glory of Him who moves all things/penetrates the universe, and its splendor/reflects more in one part and in another less" (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* I: 1–3).

³ "Here my high phantasy's power declined;/but, like a wheel whose motion never jars,/my will and desire now were turned in kind/By the Love that moves the sun and other stars" (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* XXXIII: 144–45).

⁴ "There stands Minòs the Terrible, snarling,/He judges each sinner at the entrance/and sentences him by coiling his tail" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 4–6). In the notes to Lombardo's translation, Dante's Minòs is described as a "grotesque medieval hybrid, half-man, half-beast" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* p. 350 n. 4). According to Singleton, the word choice, "ringhia" ("snarling"), suggests animal-like teeth as well: "The word is often used of dogs and implies a show of fangs" (Singleton 1970, *Inferno* Vol. 1 Part 2, p. 75, n. 4). In his annotations of 1724 on Boccaccio's commentary on the *Divina Commedia* (Boccaccio 1724), Anton Maria Salvini suggests that Minòs' "snarling" ("ringhia") should be interpreted as more of a "grimace" ("ghignare"), or even a "bitter smile" ("un riso amaro") (see Boccaccio 1724, p. 350). This last point helps us to connect his expression to Guinevere's smile ("il disiato riso," Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 133), which I will discuss below.

⁵ "I came to understand that those condemned/to this torment were the souls of the lustful/who put rational thought below carnal desire" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 37–39).

⁶ "After I had listened to my teacher name/these fair ladies of old and their champions,/I was seized with pity, bewildered, and lost" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 70–72).

⁷ "Love, which kindles quickly in the gentle heart,/impassioned this man with my beautiful form,/taken from me in a way that still wounds" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 100–102).

contrasts sharply with this beautiful smiling lady and the other beautiful lustful souls in *Inferno* V.⁸ At the end of the canto, Dante recognizes himself as having committed the same lustful sin and faints, describing, “My body fell like a corpse to the ground” (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* V: 142).

Dante’s important message for our introduction to *Inferno* appears to be: do not let appearances deceive you here, for even love—lustful, corporeal, superficial love—can turn you into a monster. We can compare this scene with the moment at the end of *Purgatorio* XXXI and at the beginning of *Purgatorio* XXXII in which Beatrice reveals her smile, and thus her “deeper beauty” to Dante: the nymphs implore Beatrice to show her smile, “For grace’s sake do us the grace to unveil/your mouth to him [Dante], that he may discern/the deeper beauty that you conceal” (Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio* XXXI: 133–38). Dante then describes the experience of gazing upon her as “satisfying a ten-year thirst”; the attraction of her “sacred smile” is so strong that he loses all his senses.⁹ We can interpret this particular beauty as a deeper love like that of *caritas* or divine love.

2. Francis’ Praise of God’s Creation

Keeping in mind Dante’s experience in the afterlife in the *Commedia*, we commence a close reading of six great authors, beginning with Francis of Assisi (2013). In his spiritual poem, the *Cantic of the Creatures* (*Laudes Creaturarum*), Francis praises God’s creation, which God fashioned for humans out of love. This poem encourages us to recall God’s loving gesture in the creation of the world in Genesis, when God describes over and over each part as “good.” On the last day of creation, God creates humans and gives the creation to them, commanding them: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28). Evidence of God’s generosity, kindness, and love continue to appear throughout the first three chapters of Genesis: for example, God creates Eve as a companion and helper for Adam so that the first man would not be alone; after the fall, God kindly clothes the couple before banishing them from the Garden of Eden.¹⁰

Here, in his poem, Francis requites God’s love like Dante learns to do in *Paradiso*. Francis praises God through His creation: “Praised be you, O my Lord and God, with all your creatures,/and especially our Brother Sun,/who brings us the day and who brings us the light” (Lines 3–5). Each part of the creation that Francis praises serves as an indication or a symbol of God; for example, Francis finishes his praise of the sun by saying, “He is fair and shines with a very great splendor: O Lord, he signifies you to us!” (Lines 6–7). The parts of creation that Francis praises—Sun, Moon, Stars, Wind, Water, Fire, Mother Earth—recall not only Genesis but also the first and last lines of Dante’s *Paradiso*, which I quoted above, where Dante describes divine love as the mover of all things.¹¹ In contrast to the lustful in *Inferno* Canto V, who are moved only by their earthly desire, Dante in *Paradiso* and Francis in his cantic are requiting God’s love.

⁸ Barolini notes the contrast as well: “Francesca’s speech to the pilgrim, then, the honeyed discourse that has seduced so many generations of readers, is at the least her second speech since she entered hell. She has spoken at least once before—to Minòs. We will never know what she said on that prior occasion: did she favor Minòs with echoes of Guido Guinizzelli and Andreas Capellanus, as she does us, or did she offer him a starker version of her tale?” (Barolini 2006, p. 150). Musa also comments on the contrasting figures of Minòs and Francesca, asserting that her speech may have been less elegant and more truthful: “Later, when the Pilgrim meets the sweet Francesca, he should have remembered Minòs and he should have imagined her standing before the monster as he passed judgment on her with his tail. Her poignant confession of her love might have reminded him that she had confessed the same love, the same sin, before the monster—probably with a lesser display of rhetoric and surely with a greater degree of veracity. In fact, her confession to Minòs may have begun where her confession to the Pilgrim left off: “quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante” (Musa 1974, p. 10).

⁹ “My eyes remained fixed on her, and so intent/on satisfying a ten-year thirst that all my other senses were lost, Enclosed on every side with walls of sheer indifference, as her sacred smile/pulled them to herself with their net of old” (Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio* XXXII: 1–6).

¹⁰ See Genesis 2:18 and 3:21.

¹¹ “The glory of Him who moves all things” (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* I: 1) and “By the Love that moves the sun and other stars” (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* XXXIII: 145).

Dante's description of his vision of God and divine love in *Paradiso* XXXIII is also a prayer in praise of God and the creation like Francis': Dante recounts how his gaze fell upon the "Infinite Goodness" and saw "that it contained within its depths,/bound by love into one volume, all that is/scattered in pages through the universe" (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* XXXIII: 85–87). In the last lines of *Paradiso*, Dante says that God's love now moves his will and desire.¹² Like Dante, Francis acknowledges, at the end of his poem, that those who "walk" with or follow God's desires are blessed: "Woe to those who die in mortal sin, but blessed are they who are found walking by your most holy will" (Lines 35–37). He concludes with a line of praise similar to the beginning of the canticle, giving thanks and emphasizing his humble service to God, saying, "Praise to you, O my Lord, and all blessing. We give you thanks and serve you with great humility" (Lines 40–42).

3. Vittoria Colonna's Desire to Know God and His Love

Some important recent studies (in Italian and in English) are dedicated to the life and poetry of Vittoria Colonna (1490–1547), the most famous Italian Renaissance woman poet.¹³ Like Dante in the *Vita Nova*, Colonna dedicates many love poems to her beloved, her husband, and after his death he leads her to salvation in her spiritual poetry, much like Beatrice leads Dante into Paradise in the *Commedia*. Her spiritual poems "Since my chaste love for many years" ("Poi che 'l mio casto amor gran tempo tenne") and "I long to stride behind my Lord" ("Con la croce a gran passi ir vorrei dietro") constitute the first two sonnets in her 1540 gift manuscript of 103 spiritual sonnets for her good friend, the artist and poet Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564).¹⁴ He considered Colonna his spiritual guide, for she was well-educated and connected with the most important religious leaders and reformers of the period.¹⁵

In the collection's opening sonnet, "Since my chaste love for many years," Colonna recounts how for a long time she sought sinful fame through her love poetry, but now she turns to God who alone can relieve the pain this sin has brought upon her:

Since my chaste love for many years
 kept my soul aflame with the desire for fame, and it nourished
 a serpent in my breast so that now my heart languishes
 in pain turned towards God, who alone can help me,
 let the holy nails from now on be my quills,
 and the precious blood my pure ink,
 my lined paper the sacred lifeless body,
 so that I may write down for others all that he suffered.
 It is not right here to invoke Parnassus or Delos,
 for I aspire to cross other waters, to ascend
 other mountains that human feet cannot climb unaided.

¹² "my will and desire now were turned in kind/By the Love that moves the sun and other stars," (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* XXXIII: 144–45).

¹³ These include (Targoff 2018; Brundin et al. 2016; Sapegno 2016; Cox 2008; Robin 2007; Colonna 2005).

¹⁴ Brundin has translated and edited the entire manuscript (see Colonna 2005, *Sonnets for Michelangelo*).

¹⁵ "Well read, with a certain knowledge of Latin and possibly of some classical sources as well as a close understanding of the scriptures and of a variety of interpretations thereof (through her contact with the *spirituali* Colonna had access to imported works by prominent reformers from abroad, including works by Luther in translation), Colonna had also benefited from close contact with some of the major religious thinkers of her period in Italy through correspondence and friendships forged in Naples and Rome. She was thus probably in a position of some authority over Michelangelo regarding questions of faith, as well of course as commanding a far higher social status than he did and being already well-known for her skill in poetry, and thus she assumed the role of spiritual guide and source for religious and poetic inspiration in the verses that Michelangelo addressed to her" (Colonna 2005, pp. 27–28).

I pray to the sun, which lights up the earth and the
 heavens, that letting forth his shining spring
 he pours down upon me a draught equal to my great thirst. (Colonna 2005, pp. 56–57)

In this poem, Colonna seeks to write down all that Christ suffered; as she says in the second part of the octave, “let the holy nails from now on be my quills/and the precious blood my pure ink, my lined paper the sacred lifeless body [of Christ].” In the first tercet, she seeks “to cross other waters,” just as Dante seeks to do with the metaphor of the *pelago* (“sea” or “waters”) at the beginning of each canticle of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.¹⁶ Moreover, like Dante, she aspires to undertake a journey up “other mountains,” such as the purifying climb up the mountain of Dante’s *Purgatorio*. However, she is ready to spiritually cleanse herself in this life, not the next, and she records the experience of purifying herself in this collection of poetry. She concludes the sonnet with the hope that Christ will quench her “great thirst.” Here, students can recall Dante’s “ten-year thirst” (Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio* XXXII: 2) that Beatrice satisfies at the top of Purgatory with her “sacred smile” (Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio* XXXII: 5). Like Dante in the *Commedia*, Colonna, at the beginning of this collection of spiritual sonnets, has a desire to know God and his divine love.

In the following sonnet, “I long to stride behind my Lord,” she expresses her aspiration to follow Christ, “bearing his cross” in order to perceive the “one true light”:

I long to stride behind my Lord
 bearing his cross along the steep and narrow path,
 and thus make out in part the one true light,
 which opened more than just the eyes of faithful Peter;
 and if I am not now granted so great a reward
 it is not because God is ungenerous or insincere,
 but because I fail to understand completely
 that all human hope is as fragile as glass.
 If I were to present my humble heart
 in purest supplication before the divine table,
 where with sweet and orderly constitution
 the angel of God, our trusted friend,
 offers himself through his love to be our food,
 one day my appetite may perhaps be forever satiated. (Colonna 2005, pp. 56–59)

Colonna has initiated a spiritual journey that echoes Dante’s own journey in his epic poem. Her desire “to stride” behind Jesus brings to mind the “journey of our life” in the first verse that begins the entire *Commedia*; however, the connection is clearer in the original Italian, where “journey” literally means “walk” (“cammin”): “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita” (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* I: 1). In the second part of the octave, she says that if she fails in her task, it is her fault, not Christ’s, because, she explains, “I fail to understand completely/that all human hope is as fragile as glass.”

¹⁶ On the “pelago” or “sea” at the beginning of all three canticles of the *Commedia*, see Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* I: 22–27: “And as a man who, gasping for breath,/has escaped the sea and wades to shore,/then turns back and stares at the perilous waves,/So too my mind, still racing in flight,/turned back to wonder at the narrow gorge/that had never left any traveler alive”; Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio* I: 1–3: “Now the little boat of my native wit/hoists its sail to run through milder waters,/leaving behind that sea so merciless”; Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* II: 1–7: “O you, who in your desire to listen,/have followed in your little bark/my vessel as it sails away in song,/Turn around to catch sight of your shores again./Do not put out on the deep, for should you/lose sight of me you might well become lost.”

Her conclusion is similar to the last lines of the first sonnet, ending with the humble hope that Christ will some day satisfy her “appetite”—compare to “thirst” above—to know Him and His love. Thus, the first two poems in Colonna’s collection, while meritorious in their own right, connect well to Dante, providing students another example of a pilgrim who is moved by love for something or someone, and in being so moved thirsts for the greatest of all loves.

4. Romantic Love in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare composed 154 sonnets, not including the sonnets that appear in his plays. With these poems he connected himself to an ancient Christian tradition that we can trace back to Dante in the *Vita nova* in his love sonnets dedicated to Beatrice, and to Petrarch in his 366 poems dedicated to Laura in the *Canzoniere*. This tradition was continued by Renaissance poets such as Colonna and links Shakespeare’s work closely to the theme of romantic love.¹⁷ In fact, many of Shakespeare’s plays concern the theme of romantic love and, not surprisingly, some include love sonnets. In my course, I teach one comedy—*Much Ado About Nothing*—and parts of the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* that highlight and explain *Much Ado About Nothing*. Both plays encourage students to think more deeply about questions of romantic love and to compare Shakespeare’s insights to those we find in Dante.

Much Ado About Nothing centers on two types of romantic love: (1) the traditional, Romeo-and-Juliet kind evinced in the quick courtship of the beautiful young characters Hero and Claudio, and (2) the unlikely match of the two other protagonists, Beatrice and Benedick, who both share a considerable dislike of each other (and of the opposite sex in general), as well as a cynical view of romantic love. The plot thickens when a villain attempts to ruin the first couple’s wedding and friends take on the enormous task of getting Benedick and Beatrice together. Convinced by their friends that one loves the other, Beatrice and Benedick each write love poems addressed to the other. Only at the very end of the play do their friends exchange the poems, proving in front of everyone the true feelings of this second couple: as Benedick declares after reading Beatrice’s poem, “A miracle! Here’s our own hands against our hearts, Come, I will have thee” (Shakespeare 2017, Act 5, Scene 4: 91–92).

Although the characters in *Much Ado About Nothing* never read their poems out loud, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare innovatively has the two young lovers craft an Elizabethan sonnet in their dialogue when they first meet, kiss, and fall in love.¹⁸ Romeo commences the first quatrain:

If I profane with my unworhiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss. (Shakespeare 2016, Act 1, Scene 5: 94–97)

Juliet supplies the next quatrain:

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss. (Shakespeare 2016, Act 1, Scene 5: 98–101)

They share the remaining six lines between the two of them:

¹⁷ On sonnets in Shakespeare’s plays, see the section entitled “The Sonnets” in (Dickson and Staines 2016, pp. 535–45.)

¹⁸ “Laid out on the page—and possible to detect in performance through its rhyme-scheme—Shakespeare’s lovers speak, in interweaving union and with apparent artlessness, a form known as a Shakespearian sonnet. The fourteen-line pentameter pattern is elegant: the first twelve lines rhyme across each other (“hand/stand,” “this/kiss”) before concluding in a two-line couplet in which the rhymes are identical (“sake/take”)” (Dickson and Staines 2016, p. 537).

ROMEO

Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET

Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

ROMEO

O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do!

They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET

Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

ROMEO

Then move not while my prayer's effect I take. (Shakespeare 2016, Act 1, Scene 5: 102–107)

In the line immediately following this love sonnet, Romeo continues the metaphor of the pilgrim (himself) visiting the holy shrine (Juliet) established in the sonnet's first quatrain. In this line, he says that by kissing the holy shrine, he purges himself of sin: "Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged" (Shakespeare 2016, Act 1, Scene 5: 108). He then kisses Juliet, concluding the lovers' first dialogue and strengthening the connection Shakespeare is establishing between romantic love and a religious experience.

Many consider *Romeo and Juliet* the greatest love story ever written and Shakespeare's descriptions of romantic love in this play depict a force that is powerful, "organic," and "ever-growing" (Dickson and Staines 2016, p. 392). As Juliet explains in Act 2, Scene 2, her love and generosity for Romeo are equally deep and infinite: "My bounty is as boundless as the sea,/My love as deep. The more I give to thee/The more I have, for both are infinite" (Shakespeare 2016, Act 2, Scene 2: 133–135). These lines once again bring to mind for students Beatrice's "deeper beauty" that quenches Dante's "ten-year thirst" when she smiles at him at the top of Purgatory.¹⁹ Romeo and Juliet's love does indeed have characteristics of *caritas*: it is infinite and generous—as we see above—and it appears true and sincere.

Students are quick to make the connection between Shakespeare's doomed lovers and the differently doomed lovers they encounter in *Inferno V*. For Romeo and Juliet and Paolo and Francesca, love leads both couples to death: Romeo and Juliet belong to two rival families of Verona, and Paolo is Francesca's lover and the brother of her spouse (who finds them together and promptly murders them in vengeance—Francesca tells Dante that Caïna awaits her husband further down).²⁰ Francesca points out love's role in their demise in the three tercets blaming love (not themselves) for their actions. As she states in her most famous line: "Love led us both to share in one death" ("Amor condusse noi ad una morte"—"una morte," "one death," also contains the word love, "amor") (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno V*: 106). Romeo and Juliet are not meant to be with each other on earth—it is impossible in the hostile society in which they live—but they succeed in ending up together for eternity. Paolo and Francesca will also spend eternity together, but in hell. For Shakespeare, the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* comprises the powerful social forces of the violent Veronese society they live in, which does not permit a love such as theirs.²¹ However, when they die, we cannot help but feel that romantic love in a way has triumphed over death.²² Unlike Paolo and Francesca, Romeo and Juliet experience the "deeper beauty" of true love and not simply passion.

¹⁹ Alighieri 2016, *Purgatorio XXXI*: 138 and *XXXII*: 2.

²⁰ "Caïna awaits him who snuffed out our life" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno V*: 107.)

²¹ Dickson and Staines describe the violence in the northern Italian city: "Aggression is total in Verona: the city's streets are war zones" (Dickson and Staines 2016, p. 390).

²² Tanner says the play is only a tragedy for "earth-bound critics," because Romeo and Juliet succeed in the end at escaping their troubled world: "But Verona is just exactly where Romeo and Juliet no longer wanted to be, and they have made a 'triumphant' and lightning/enlightening escape. From the stellar perspective it is a form of 'comedy'" (Tanner 2012, p. 114.)

Hero and Claudio's courtship in *Much Ado About Nothing* is similar to Romeo and Juliet's.²³ Like Romeo and Juliet, Hero and Claudio are young and fall in love quickly. Unlike the young Veronese lovers, there are no impediments to their union (political, financial, or otherwise), until Don John attempts to spread false rumors about Hero's fidelity and chastity. This makes Claudio question her honesty and whether she is a suitable partner for him. Beatrice and Benedick provide a contrast in that they appear entirely unsuited for each other. Yet in their mutual cynicism and distrust of love and of the other sex, perhaps, my students ask, they are meant to be together? Beatrice and Benedick seem like two of a kind and their constant bickering makes us suspicious of certain hidden feelings they are too embarrassed to reveal.

The play ends with the restoration of order and of the rule of romantic love, albeit of two kinds. Hero is vindicated and therefore able to marry Claudio, and Beatrice and Benedick initiate a life together in which they will stop their constant bickering: Benedick indicates this when he finally calls for peace and stops her mouth with a kiss ("Peace! I will stop your mouth") (Shakespeare 2017, Act 5, Scene 4: 97). His advice to "sad" Don Pedro, the only single man remaining, is "Get thee a wife," which Benedick repeats twice (Shakespeare 2017, Act 5, Scene 4: 120). Marriage appears to have a number of benefits according to Shakespeare—love, happiness, and bringing order to chaos—and students understand how the playwright is directing romantic love, with all of its passions, into its acceptable social form. The several references to infidelity in the play's final lines ("double dealer" and "horn," this was one of Benedick's greatest fears about marriage, that of becoming a cuckold), recall Francesca's infidelity and its tragic results as she recounts in *Inferno* V. Shakespeare's comedy, however, ends on a high note with two couples moving toward the altar: all impediments have been removed and we, the spectators, are left with the promise of not just one future wedding but two.

5. Romance and *Caritas* in *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* also centers on romantic love, and, as we saw in Shakespeare, Austen explores human emotions and different types of love. She provides examples of both an immature kind, which we can equate to lust (such as Lydia and Mr. Wickham's feelings for each other), and *caritas*, which Elizabeth unexpectedly discovers while analyzing her feelings for Mr. Darcy.

Over the course of the novel, the protagonists, Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, move past their initial feelings of "pride" and "prejudice," which, my students tell me, are common feelings, especially around people we have just met and know little about. Freshmen who have just arrived on campus at the start of their university career frequently encounter these feelings. And, as we discover over the course of the first year in the freshman seminar, we must learn to move past our pride and prejudices in order to have fruitful class discussions.

Regarding pride in particular, students know that excessive pride is not just a sin but the root of all seven deadly sins. They recall how Dante organizes his *Purgatorio* with the proud at the bottom, closer to hell, followed by the envious, the wrathful, the slothful, the avaricious and prodigal, the gluttonous, and the lustful at the very top closer to heaven. By beginning with pride, Dante acknowledges its presence in all sins, in other words, as the foundation for all of them or as a kind of prerequisite for committing any sin, emphasizing our human tendency to be prideful.

As Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy get to know each other, they must move beyond pride. When they do so, they discover what is really going on behind the facades of their respective families, unique economic situations, and particular social statuses. Their understanding leads to respect and esteem and, most importantly, empathy and concern for each other's welfare. When Elizabeth finally realizes she is in love with Mr. Darcy, her feelings resemble *caritas*: she feels "good will" and "gratitude"

²³ Both plays were written around the same time and derive from *novelle* composed in the spirit of Boccaccio's *Decameron* by the Italian writer and monk Matteo Bandello (1485–1561). Bandello's short stories were translated into English in the 1560s–70s.

toward him. This is clear when Elizabeth examines her changed feelings months after she has rejected Darcy's proposal:

The respect created by the conviction of his valuable qualities, though at first unwillingly admitted, had for some time ceased to be repugnant to her feelings; and it was now heightened into somewhat of a friendlier nature, by the testimony so highly in his favour, and bringing forward his disposition in so amiable a light, which yesterday had produced. But above all, above respect and esteem, there was a motive within her of good will which could not be overlooked. It was gratitude. –Gratitude, not merely for having once loved her, but for loving her still well enough, to forgive all the petulance and acrimony of her manner in rejecting him, and all the unjust accusations accompanying her rejection. (Austen 2016, p. 180)

Austen's novel leaves my students wondering if perhaps these feelings—good will and gratitude—are specifically the feelings Jesus was referring to when he commanded us to love our neighbors? Perhaps this is essentially what true love is: concentrated and intense between two lovers, two friends, a parent and child; less concentrated but still present between ourselves and our “neighbors”—i.e., fellow citizens and strangers?

6. Sin and Grace in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”

Perhaps a society in which good will and gratitude are lacking produces a ruthless murderer such as The Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find”? O'Connor recounts a family's journey across country. They take a wrong turn and end up in woods that are “tall and dark and deep”: the similarity to the deadly *selva oscura*—“Death itself is hardly more bitter”—cannot be missed.²⁴ There, they meet an escaped convict who murders the entire family.

Like the *Commedia*, O'Connor's story explores sin, faith, and moments of grace. The second protagonist, the grandmother, is superficial and racist. She considers herself a Christian and a “good” woman. She seems especially preoccupied with the Misfit's criminal behavior: she and the owner of the barbecue restaurant both agree that times have worsened and “A good man is hard to find.”²⁵ Naturally, the escaped convict is exactly the person she must confront later in the story. But she only does the right thing—reaches out to The Misfit—when he points a gun at her. O'Connor writes:

[The grandmother] saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, ‘Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!’ She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. (O'Connor 1976, p. 22)

This moment of redemption brings her an innocence and peace in death that she never found in life:

Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky. (O'Connor 1976, p. 22)

²⁴ Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* I: 7. O'Connor read Dante and considered him “about as great as you can get” (see letter “To ‘A’” in O'Connor 1979, pp. 115–17). One reviewer even referred to Dante as O'Connor's “classical mentor” (see Moran 2016, p. 77).

²⁵ “‘A good man is hard to find,’ Red Sammy said. ‘Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more’” (O'Connor 1976, p. 8).

In truth, both protagonists are suffering, sinful souls. As my students observe, however, The Misfit has a better understanding of good and evil than the grandmother. The Misfit observes about her: “‘She would have been a good woman, [. . .] if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life’” (O'Connor 1976, p. 23).²⁶ Is this what we need in order to do the “right thing”? A gun pointed at us? Or perhaps an education in sin and redemption, which is what O'Connor's short story and Dante's *Commedia* provide us? Even in the first few lines of *Inferno* I, Dante declares that he found “good” in the bitter, deadly wood:

Ah, how hard it is to describe that wood,
a wilderness so gnarled and rough
the very thought of it brings back my fear.
Death itself is hardly more bitter;
but to tell of the good that I found there
I will speak of the other things I saw. (*Inferno* I: 4–9)

It seems impossible that there could be “good” in the “dark wood,” but as the well-known saying goes, “Sometimes you have to go through hell in order to get to heaven.” Where is the “good” in O'Connor's wood in “A Good Man is Hard to Find?” The question makes one cringe. There does not appear to be any good since an entire family—including children—ends up finding only death.

As we often see in O'Connor's stories, however, there is goodness, grace, and redemption in a sinful, evil world. Perhaps the “good” is the grandmother's final realization that The Misfit is another suffering human being she should love? Or perhaps it is in The Misfit's awareness that he could do the “right thing” even though he chooses not to? There is no pleasure in Dante's hell, just as there is no pleasure in The Misfit's life of crime and murder. O'Connor ends her story with a telling exchange between The Misfit and one of his accomplices who is less troubled by killing: “‘Some fun!’ Bobby Lee said. ‘Shut up, Bobby Lee,’ The Misfit said. ‘It's no real pleasure in life.’” (O'Connor 1976, p. 23). Perhaps there is hope at the end that The Misfit will change his ways and encounter his moment of redemption? Perhaps he will educate his accomplices and they will change too? My students are skeptical, but they agree that there is a little more hope for him in O'Connor's story than for the souls in Dante's Hell.

7. Suffering and Loneliness in *Love in the Time of Cholera*

Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* also examines the operations of grace in an imperfect, even hellish world, and connections to Dante abound. For instance, the inscription over the entrance to a cemetery dedicated to cholera victims comes from the Gate of Hell at the beginning of *Inferno* III: “Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate” (“Abandon all hope, you who enter”) (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* III: 9). Less evident is the reference to Dante in the name of the novel's protagonist lover-poet, Florentino, and in the description of his beloved crossing the plaza, a crossing that clearly echoes Dante's famous sonnet from the *Vita Nova*, his collection of love poetry pre-dating the *Commedia*. Márquez writes:

Florentino Ariza sat bedazzled until the child of his vision had crossed the plaza, looking to neither the left nor the right. But then the same irresistible power that had paralyzed him

²⁶ Di Renzo has already analyzed this scene with Dante's *Commedia* in mind, comparing the heroism of The Misfit to that of the damned in Dante's *Inferno*: “Far from celebrating the Misfit's dark heroism, O'Connor mocks it—just as Dante in the *Inferno* mocks the “heroism” of the damned [. . .] They are forever lost in their own heroic self-image, a self-image they maintained in life by destroying others less heroic than they” (Di Renzo 1993, p. 154). On the final confrontation between the grandmother and The Misfit, Di Renzo writes: “So the Misfit shoots the grandmother because he cannot abide the touch of her ordinary humanity; but it is that ordinary humanity, vulgar and self-indulgent, that the story values above heroism” (Di Renzo 1993, p. 155).

obliged him to hurry after her when she turned the corner of the Cathedral and was lost in the deafening noise of the market's rough cobblestones.

He followed her without letting himself be seen, watching the ordinary gestures, the grace, the premature maturity of the being he loved most in the world and whom he was seeing for the first time in her natural state. He was amazed by the fluidity with which she made her way through the crowd [...] she navigated the disorder of the street in her own time and space, not colliding with anyone, like a bat in the darkness. (Márquez 2003, pp. 98–99)

Similarities to Dante's poem include not only Florentino's powerful emotional reaction—his bedazzlement—when he sees his beloved (“the being he loved most in the world”) in the marketplace, but also his beloved's graceful gestures and movements as she walks (“He was amazed by the fluidity with which she made her way through the crowd”). These characteristics recall the gentle and pleasant nature of Beatrice as Dante observes her walk about in his famous sonnet, “Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare”:

So open and so self-possessed appears
my lady when she's greeting everyone,
that every tongue, in trembling, falters dumb,
and eyes don't dare to watch her as she nears.

She senses all the praising of her worth,
and passes by benevolently dressed
in humbleness, appearing manifest
from heaven to show a miracle on earth.

She shows herself so pleasing to the one
who sees her, sweetness passes through the eye
to the heart—as he who's missed it never knows.

So from her face it then appears there blows
a loving spirit, as if spring's begun,
which breathes upon the soul and tells it: Sigh.²⁷

To Dante, Beatrice is a miracle arrived from heaven to earth (“appearing manifest from heaven to show a miracle on earth” lines 7–8), “pleasing” (“She shows herself so pleasing to the one,” line 9), and filled with a “loving spirit” (“a loving spirit, as if spring's begun,” line 13). Unlike Dante's description of Beatrice, Márquez ends the description of Florentino's beloved, calling her “a bat in the darkness” (Márquez 2003, p. 99). Bats are delicate animals that move between heaven and earth,

²⁷ (Alighieri 2012, p. 39). Here is the poem in the original Italian:

Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
la donna mia, quand'ella altrui salute
ch'ogne lingua deven, tremando, muta,
e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.
Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,
benignamente e d'umiltà vestuta,
e par che sia una cosa venuta
da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.
Mostrasi sì piacente a chi la mira
che dà per li occhi una dolcezza al core,
che 'ntender no la può chi no la prova;
e par che de la sua labbia si mova
un spirto soave pien d'amore,
che va dicendo a l'anima: Sospira (Alighieri 1999, pp. 142–44).

but usually in the dark and at night. Perhaps the darkness emphasizes the fact that Márquez's novel depicts an earthly, imperfect, even in many respects, infernal world—a time of cholera. We only find redemption in the final pages.

Like the *Commedia*, Márquez's novel is also a study of love, which he describes in all its possible manifestations and shades. In her review of *Love in the Time of Cholera* for the *New York Times*, "Books of the Times; Garcia Marquez Novel Covers Love and Time," Michiko Kakutani's defines the novel "an anatomy of love in all its forms":

[...] the gushy, irrational love of adolescents and the mature love of people who have suffered loss and grief; the high-flown love, immortalized by poets, and the love without love found in bordellos and motels; marital love and adulterous love, spiritual love, physical love, even love that resembles cholera in its symptoms and its pain. (Kakutani 1988)

The most challenging part of reading and teaching this novel is that most of it depicts unhappy characters leading unhappy lives. The lowest point occurs when Florentino, in his seventies, successfully seduces his fourteen-year-old niece. She later commits suicide. The burden of this, which he must carry with him for the rest of his life, contrasts with the euphoria and grace of living the last years of his life with his beloved. Only in the final pages do we see the world back in order and justice restored, to an extent: Florentino still lives with the grief of his niece's suicide and both protagonists are shadowed by their long unhappy lives. Nevertheless, here, at the end, there is love: love as the absence of loneliness. Florentino asks his beloved Fermina if she would like to be alone and she answers: "If I did, I would not have told you to come in" (Márquez 2003, p. 329). Márquez describes:

Then [Florentino] reached out with two icy fingers in the darkness, felt for the other hand in the darkness, and found it waiting for him. Both were lucid enough to realize, at the same fleeting instant, that the hands made of old bones were not the hands they had imagined before touching. (Márquez 2003, p. 329).

Florentino's experience also appears to be a law of love, that is, we experience love (true love) in the presence of another—a friend, a family member, a stranger, or God. My students and I recall Augustine in the *Confessions*, who writes for God and for his congregation, and note that friends were also a significant part of his journey toward conversion. We recall God as the loving creator of everything Francis sees and the friar's grateful recognition of this in his song of praise for God's generosity. We recall Dante's three guides and teachers on his journey in the *Commedia*: Virgil, Beatrice, and Bernard of Clairvaux. We recall that all of Shakespeare's comedies end with protagonists happily coupled up, ready to start a new part of their lives as husbands and wives. And when Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy finally decide to marry, we remember that they are not standing face-to-face but walking together, united in a common goal: love and happiness.²⁸

8. Love in the Modern-Day World

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy would not have held hands or embraced, although many film adaptations would have us believe otherwise (for example, the 2005 film version is a good contrast to the more faithful and culturally-attentive 1995 TV series). It would not have been considered proper behavior in the society in which they lived. However, Colonna's husband takes her hand in one of her poems to give her a vision of paradise.²⁹ Colonna was clearly inspired by the three instances in the *Divina*

²⁸ See *Pride and Prejudice* Volume III, Chapter XVI.

²⁹ In her "Triumph of the Cross" (145 lines long in *terzarima* like the *Commedia* and modeled on Petrarch's *trionfi*), Colonna recounts a vision she had at dawn (another reference to Dante, who tells us that dreams at dawn are true in *Inferno* XXVI line 7) in which she left earthly cares and rose to the contemplation of divine things. Midway through the triumph, her husband reaches out his hand to pull her up so that she can see and experience paradise.

Commedia when Virgil, Dante's guide and mentor, takes Dante's hand. The first of these instances occurs after Dante reads the terrifying inscription over the Gate of Hell at the beginning of *Inferno* III and Virgil places his hand on Dante's to reassure and comfort him, then takes him to see "hidden things": "And when he had placed his hand on mine/with a cheerful look from which I took comfort,/he led me among the things that are hidden."³⁰ The "hidden things" include Hell itself, and, as the reader knows quite well, eventually Purgatory and finally Heaven, the "good" that Dante says he found on his otherworldly journey, as we read in the first lines of *Inferno* I.³¹

Lovers frequently hold hands, as Romeo and Juliet do in their sonnet, then have their lips imitate their hands, "do what hands do," that is, press each other in a kiss.³² But we also ask friends, colleagues, mentors, and even strangers to "lend a hand" with a project, a personal difficulty, and so on. Perhaps, in this way, love really does and should move the universe, as Dante says, even in the lonely society of the modern-day world that is much more for the individual than for the community.

Dante's poetic journey is a search for an understanding of love, but also of identity and community. Exiled from Florence, the city of his birth, in 1302, he would never see it again. Like Romeo and Juliet's Verona, Dante's city was frequently torn apart by violence, conflicts, and unrest. At the beginning of *Paradiso* XXV, Dante reveals his hope that the Florentines will welcome him back one day as "bard" of the vernacular language and that his poem will heal their "cruel" hearts:

If it ever happens that the sacred poem,
to which Heaven and earth have set their hand,
so as to make me lean for many years,
Overcomes the cruelty that bars me from
the lovely sheepfold where I slept as a lamb,
foe of the wolves that make war on it,
With another voice then, with another fleece,
I shall return as a poet, and at the font
where I was baptized take the laurel crown. (Alighieri 2017, *Paradiso* XXV: 1–9)

He would only succeed in the few years after his death when his son Iacopo transformed the *Commedia* into "the most famous and most widely read vernacular book of its time" (Santagata 2018, p. 340). Did it bring peace to Florence? Not right away, but it did inspire quickly other Tuscan authors such as Petrarch and Boccaccio, spark many discussions and community forums (such as the *Lectura Dantis*), and convince the Florentines to acknowledge Dante as one of their own (although Ravenna would never give up his body—it lies there still). Dante's works would continue to be a source of inspiration for many authors over the centuries. And, as we have seen in this paper, their analyses and descriptions of love—in particular lust, romantic love, and *caritas*—help to illuminate not only Dante's experience in the afterlife but ours as well in this world. Not only that, these authors also offer possibilities for the way we understand ourselves and choose to construct our future.

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³⁰ See (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* III: 19–21). Virgil is the only one of the three guides to take Dante's hand. Virgil will take Dante's hand two more times in *Inferno*: in the forest of the suicides in *Inferno* XIII, "My guide and escort then took me by the hand/and led me beside the shattered bush/that wept in vain through its bleeding stumps" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* XIII: 130–132, and in *Inferno* XXXI to sooth Dante after reprimanding him for wanting to listen to a vulgar quarrel between damned souls: "Then he took me affectionately by the hand/and said, "Before we go any farther now,/so that the reality might seem less uncanny, [...]" (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* XXXI: 28).

³¹ See (Alighieri 2009, *Inferno* I: 8–9): "but to tell of the good that I found there/I will speak of the other things I saw."

³² "O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do!" (Shakespeare 2016, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1, Scene 5, line 104).

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