

Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman. Heather Webb.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. xiv + 224 pp. \$85.

This lovely, slender volume takes its beginning from a single word, *persona*, and its apparently multiple meanings in the *Divine Comedy*. As readers of the *Inferno* will recall, Francesca laments the violent loss of her *bella persona*, which had ignited the gentle heart of her lover (2). What this clearly means, since Francesca still exists, is that her *persona* was her body, taken from her by murder. In the subsequent canto, Dante and his guide tread over the supine bodies of the gluttons, or rather their “emptiness” that looks like bodies (“vanità che par persona” [4]). That “person” means “body” is quite evident also in Dante’s lyric predecessors. When the inventor of the sonnet, Giacomo Lentini, wonders how “so great a lady” might enter into his eyes, he concludes rather charmingly that it is not her *persona*, her body, that does so, but only her *figura*, her image (“no la persona ma la sua figura” [3]). The dark and pessimistic “first friend” of Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, claims that love has destroyed his person, that is, his body (“distrutta già la mia persona” [3]). Yet the souls without bodies in the afterlife are also referred to as persons and, most significantly, the Trinity is comprised, explicitly, of three persons, even though only one of them can be said to have a body. One etymology of the word is *per se una*, that is, whatever it is that makes an individual thing what it is. For Aristotelians it is matter that individuates, hence in a particular human being it is his particular flesh. Thomas Aquinas helpfully defines *persona* as “what is distinct in that nature: thus in human nature it signifies this flesh, these bones, and this soul, which are the individuating principles of a man” (6). In the Christian conception then, it is also soul that individuates, not just body, and a person is made up of both body and soul, even if the soul can survive the death of the body.

In purgatory Dante imagines that the soul’s natural tendency to inform matter can irradiate the air around it to create an illusory body that can undergo punishment, perform gestures, express what the soul is feeling, and, most importantly, make itself known to other souls, other persons. The term *persona*, for which the author declines to give a comprehensive history, informs, rather loosely in places, a series of meditations on the *Divine Comedy*. The meaning of *persona* as “body” informs the chapters after the introduction, on gesture and recognition of suffering. Since *persona* also means “mask” (in an interesting Boethian etymology, the actor “sounds through” [*persona*] the mask [164]), it becomes the motivation for a chapter on faces. But the category of *persona* is really meant to elicit a sincerity of feeling, what Webb calls “attention.” True attention to one’s neighbor ought in fact to be ardent. She makes a rather poetic observation about the lustful: that the storm that buffets them about has actually extinguished their flame of ardor (127). At times what is admired as a Dantesque insight—for example, that “each human soul is the product of God’s loving attention”—would seem to be a simple tenet of mere Christianity (124). Webb’s main thesis is that personhood, which is a goal, not an attribute of all people, requires interpersonal relationality. The

problem with the damned is that they are closed in on themselves and have in fact become unrecognizable to others. The problem with sodomy is not “homoeotericism,” which is positive, as can be seen on the Terrace of Lust, but abuse (147). It is not, evidently, a problem of lust at all, even on the terrace of the same name.

The volume’s forays into philosophy are enriched by quotations garnered from a wide variety of thinkers, from Kierkegaard to Ricoeur. It begins by acknowledging the question of personhood in the modern abortion debate, as well as in the animal-rights movement. This is a sincere and heartfelt reading of the *Commedia*, not as a distant historical document, but as a guide for life, a guide to interpersonal relations, a guide to recognizing the personhood of the other.

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A Companion to Vittoria Colonna. Abigail Brundin, Tatiana Crivelli, and Maria Serena Sapegno, eds.

The Renaissance Society of America Texts and Studies Series 5. Leiden: Brill, 2016. xxi + 562 pp. \$259.

In the sizable companion dedicated to her, Vittoria Colonna remains a shadowy figure with biographical information shoehorned into a timeline. It is true that Colonna’s complex personality, eluding a clear-cut profile, complicates a simple portrayal: torn between the anti-intellectual spirituality of Valdéz and a rationalist Renaissance humanism, she is both a saint (Burckhardt) and “la Marchesa de Pescara” (her signature), cherishing power and self-fashioning her myth.

Part 1 of *A Companion to Vittoria Colonna* integrates Colonna’s *carteggio* into the epistolary culture of the Cinquecento, focusing on her letters with men of prominence. Three *Litere della divina Colonna* were singled out for solitary print and immediately reprinted in Venice in 1545, suggesting public interest in Colonna’s feminist remakes of Catherine and Magdalene and her euphoric deification of the Holy Virgin. Part 2, “Poetry,” however, does not deliver on its promise. Neither intrinsic nor Petrarchist elements of her sonnets are analyzed, nor is there a thematic summary of her oeuvre. But Maria Serena Sapegno steps into the breach. Tiding Vittoria’s *rime* “a textual conundrum,” she admits to dispensing with clarification and conclusion, though she provides knowledgeable insights into various themes and singles out sonnets to reach a profound understanding of them.

Excellent textual scholarship, laying the groundwork for the imperative critical edition of Colonna’s poetic corpus, is joined by studies of the dissemination of manuscripts (Abigail Brundin), print publication (Tatiana Crivelli), and overdue linguistic analysis of Colonna’s Italian (Helena Sanson), which will guarantee this companion a place on the reference shelf, more so as Colonna’s sonnets are itemized by Robin in the ten Giolito anthologies. Colonna’s exemplariness rounds off part 2. While Virginia Cox