

Olivia Holmes. *Dante's Two Beloveds: Ethics and Erotics in the Divine Comedy*.

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The duality set forth in the title of Olivia Holmes's meticulous study of Dante Alighieri's treatment of the figure of Beatrice and the "other woman" (1) in the *Commedia* and in his other works does not adequately capture the kaleidoscopic vision she presents in the book. In treating Dante as a pilgrim meandering between ethics and erotics represented by these two feminine archetypes, Holmes dives into the seemingly infinite pool of scriptural, classical, medieval Latin, and romance personifications that Dante evokes. Thus, in this world reside the shadows of Eve, Mary, Wisdom, Lady Philosophy, Fortune, Folly, Nature, the Harlot, Minerva, Astrea, Justice, Sapientia, Venus, Minerva, and many other types from Dante's encyclopedic repertoire. This palimpsest of references that surface in this study attest to the range of Holmes's scholarship. Different from her previous book, *Assembling the Lyric Self* (Minnesota [2000]), in which she methodically investigated the development of the *canzoniere* in the Duecento and Trecento, in this study she locates Dante at the crossroads of diverse intellectual and literary traditions.

Holmes's claim is that her study "provide(s) a new thematic framework for interpreting the *Commedia*" (2). Only time will tell if this is the case; but I think she has accomplished something else. In the first chapter, Holmes quickly moves beyond the titular dyad of Beatrice and the other woman by figuring these women as an allegory of Dante's choice between the two natures of the one object, or as a three-fold historical progression from presence, absence, and return. Her implementation of a triune interpretive mode that allows for dichotomies while remaining open to a third choice seemingly derives from Dante's own epistemology: "That one, and two, and three, who always lives/ And always reigns in three, and in two, and in one" ("Quell'uno e due e tre che sempre vive / e regna sempre in tre e 'n due e 'n uno": *Par.* XIV.28–29). At the center of her investigation is the figure of Beatrice, who, like a mirage, is a distant and always changing reflection of Dante's desire.

In the early chapters Holmes examines in detail some of the more conventional associations for Beatrice and the "other women" of Dante's poetry. In chapter two, Holmes uses medieval philosophical and medical texts to show how Dante first utilizes and then subverts the Boethian dichotomy between Lady Philosophy and the Muses by offering other valences (Fortune, Wisdom, Venus, etc.) for both women. In the third chapter she shifts the register from philosophical texts to the vernacular poetic tradition (Provençal, French, and Italian) in looking at the interaction between Dante, Beatrice, and Matelda in the return to Eden in *Purgatorio*. For the newly purified Dante, the two women no longer represent a good or bad choice, but he sees the transformation of one desire (Matelda) to another (Beatrice).

After an interlude from the theme of Dante's women in a brief chapter on Dante's choice between knowledge and virtue in the classical figures of Aeneas and Ulysses, in chapters 5 and 6 she returns to the central theme of Beatrice and the other women. In the fifth chapter, which returns again to the final *canti* of *Purgatorio*, Holmes interprets Beatrice's advent as the historical conflict between New Jerusalem and Babylon. Holmes argues that Dante recasts this drama as imperial Rome vanquishing the corruption of the papal capitals Rome and Avignon by employing contemporary Franciscan debates. In the final chapter, Holmes continues this Franciscan reading of Beatrice by looking at *Paradiso* 11 and Francis's marriage to Lady Poverty. She extends the historical understanding of Beatrice as New Jerusalem from the previous chapter into an eschatological vision of a new spiritual age for Dante, a unified Italy, and the restoration of the Roman Empire.

Holmes's study of Dante's Beatrice and his many other women reflects the complexity of Dante's thought. She interprets, reinterprets, and then doubles back on specific moments in the *Commedia*, thus revealing the complex, and often paradoxical, nature of Dante's moral and aesthetic vision. This is the greatest strength of her work and what *dantisti* will most admire about this book. Holmes perseveres in evaluating Dante's thought not on the basis of a single perspective, but open to Dante's wonderful polysemy, she engages the elaborate and varied nature of Dante's many beloveds.

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