

# Discipline and Redemption: the Dance of Penitence in Dante's *Purgatorio*

Kathryn Dickason  
Stanford University  
dickason@stanford.edu



## Abstract

In the context of Christian penitence, medieval preachers, confessors, and philosophers aligned dancing with lust, pride, and sacrilege. These negative attitudes toward dance colored medieval depictions of Purgatory and damnation. However, Dante's *Purgatorio* offers a decidedly different representation of purgatorial bodies. This article shows how dance in the *Purgatorio* was not associated with punishment, but rather moral discipline, self-transformation, and spiritual redemption. In conclusion, I address some of the deeper implications that Dantesque dancing may have on critical theory and performance in modern and contemporary times.

**Keywords:** Middle Ages / medieval; Christianity; dance; discipline; Purgatory; penitence; confession; redemption; trance; transformation.

## Riassunto

Nel contesto della penitenza cristiana, predicatori medievali, confessori e filosofi affiancano la danza alla lussuria, all'orgoglio e al sacrilegio. Questi atteggiamenti negativi verso la danza denotano l'immaginazione medievale del Purgatorio e della dannazione. Comunque, il *Purgatorio* di Dante offre una rappresentazione decisamente diversa dei corpi penitenti. Questo articolo mostra come la danza nel *Purgatorio* non fosse associata alla punizione, ma piuttosto alla disciplina morale, all'auto-trasformazione e alla redenzione spirituale. Per concludere, mi occuperò di alcune delle risonanze più profonde che la danza dantesca può avere sulla teoria critica e sulle performances in epoca moderna e contemporanea.

**Parole chiave:** Medioevo / medievale; cristianesimo; danza; disciplina; Purgatorio; penitenza; confessione; redenzione; trance; trasformazione.

Despite the diversity of western dance genres (ballet, modern, competitive ballroom, etc.), dancers exude effortlessness. But anyone who observes professional dancers in rehearsal or performance – as did painter Edgar Degas and numerous photographers and filmmakers – realizes that grit underlies grace. Although agile bodies give the illusion of freedom, dance, in the Euro-American tradition and beyond, is a highly disciplined form of bodily movement. In acquiring proper technique, dancers submit to a corporeal regime.

On a fundamental level, the regimental deployment of dance parallels Michel Foucault's theorization of discipline. For Foucault, discipline in modern society entails a correctional approach to human conduct. The penitentiary system, with its production of "docile bodies," operates to police aberrancy into conformity (Foucault 1995: 138). Indeed, Foucault locates modern subjectivity within the birth of the prison:

The scaffold, where the body of the tortured criminal had been exposed to the ritually manifested force of the sovereign, the punitive theatre in which the representation of punishment was permanently available to the social body, was replaced by a great enclosed, complex and hierarchized structure that was integrated into the very body of the state apparatus. A quite different materiality, a quite different physics of power, a quite different way of investing men's bodies had emerged.  
(Foucault 1995: 115-16)

It is after this penitentiary system, Foucault contends, that all other institutions – educational, religious, political, and legal – model themselves. "By means of a carceral continuum," he writes, "the authority that sentences infiltrates all those other authorities that supervise, transform, correct, improve" (Foucault 1995: 302-303).

Logically, then, such mechanisms of power inscribe their effects on the dancing body. The dancing body à la Foucault endures the gaze of the dancing master, laboring toward aesthetic perfection. Mark Franko asserts that "for dance scholars influenced by Foucault, choreography (and, to a lesser degree, technique), is the prototype of that inscription" (Franko 2011: 99). Dance pedagogue Jill Green elaborates further on the repressive manipulation of the training process: "Dance bodies are docile bodies created to produce. . . a normalization and standardization of behavior. [The implementation of choreography is] a disciplinary power that trains students to be. . . subjects." In Green's view, this corrective atmosphere affects dancers' artistic, personal, and political lives (Green 2002: 3-4).<sup>1</sup>

1. For other Foucauldian approaches to dance studies, see Foster 1997; Burt 2004; Lakes 2005; Ross 2008; Ritenburg 2010; Ness 2011; Lepecki 2013; Wright 2014.

Although Foucault located discipline within the modern state, his theories share some affinities with the Middle Ages. Consider the Church's institutionalization of penitence, confession, and Purgatory. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 (canon 21) mandated annual confession for all Christians (Schroeder 1937: 259-60). Moralizing literature provided guidelines on how to prevent purgatorial torments. Accordingly, late medieval penitential materials preoccupied themselves with the laity's spiritual welfare. Designed to promote moral discipline, these texts encouraged and regulated repentance and confession.

Negative attitudes toward dance abound in medieval pastoral and penitential sources. Historian Alessandro Arcangeli examined the relationship between dance and punishment in medieval preaching (Arcangeli 1992: 30-42).<sup>2</sup> In Arcangeli's assessment, the use of dance in pastoral texts typically evoked a "theater of the punishment of God" (Arcangeli, 2000: 211). Preachers shared riveting anecdotes of sinful dancers: lightning struck dancers who disrupted the Mass; the dance leader, a demon in the guise of a beautiful woman, deceived dancers; the devil himself promptly escorted unfortunate dancers to hell. For many preachers, dancing distracted Christians from hearing the sermon, thus impeding worship. With their exaggerated rhetoric, preachers exposed the diabolical underpinnings of dance and warned that dancing incites demonic intervention and transports perpetrators to hell. In sum, this textual evidence equates dance to sin, satanic machination, and the wrath of God.

However, Dante's *Purgatorio* offers a strikingly different representation of dance and penitence. On the terrace of the prideful and in the Earthly Paradise, dance mapped itself onto a medieval moral psychology of discipline, intention, and redemption. In doing so, Dante's text dismantled the interchangeability between dance and sin. Through an analysis of key moments in the *Purgatorio*, this article reveals how medieval dance – or at least the poeticization of it – performed penitence. Dante's inversion of the normative pastoral paradigm redefined dance as a remedy for, rather than a precursor to, moral errancy.

The first part of this article contextualizes the relationship between dance and Purgatory in medieval moralizing literature. The second part turns to Dante's *Purgatorio*, delivering an in-depth analysis of dance and pride (canto X). The third part examines the Earthly Paradise (canti XXVIII-XXXIII), probing the ethical ramifications of ritualized dancing bodies. In the con-

2. See also Arcangeli 1994: 127-55; idem 2000: ch. 3; idem 1996: 271-82; idem 1997: 109-17; Page 1989: ch. 5; Zimmermann 2008: 49-50, 66, 69-75, 77-91, 118-19; Wagner 1997: 3-5, 7-11, 13-15; Böhme 1886: I.7; McIntosh 1977: 196; Kemmler 1984: 230-31; Koal 2007: 19-38; Crane 1883: 68-69, 74; Jungmann, 2003: 105-114.

clusion, I reflect on how Dante's choreography of penitence might resonate with dance, society, and the human condition today. Ultimately, I hope to show how Dante's reassessment of medieval dance modifies Foucault's paradigm by highlighting the generative, as opposed to punitive, modalities of bodily discipline.

### DANCING IN PURGATORY

In Dante's vision, Purgatory is a realm of hope, progress, and community. Unlike the damned in hell, here penitents have moral accountability. Their self-motivation facilitates and sustains inter-personal relations, contributing to a positive and productive image of humanity. However, as this section of my article reveals, the Dantesque model of purgatorial discipline diverged from mainstream depictions of penitence and Purgatory in medieval theology, literature, and art.

Late antique and early medieval authorities accentuated the mortification and guilt entailed in the penitential regime (e.g. Tertullian 1984; Gregory the Great 2015; Pseudo-Gregory 1971; Largier 2007). As historian Jacques Le Goff has shown, Purgatory did not become doctrinal until the late twelfth century (Le Goff 1981). Yet throughout the Early and High Middle Ages, legends of knights and monks traveling through the underworlds infiltrated the Celtic imaginary. Famous literary accounts of Purgatory, such as the *Visio Tnugdali* (*Vision of Tundale*) and *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii* (*Saint Patrick's Purgatory*), epitomized the *via purgativa* (the path to purgation) through physical pain and torture (Mearns 1985; Easton 1991; Le Goff 1981: 40-41; Gardiner 1988; cf. Corbett 2014: 271-72, n. 39). Penitentials also contributed to the criminalization of penitents, focusing on the flaws, transgressions, and appropriate punishments for sinners.<sup>3</sup> In medieval art, visual depictions of Purgatory resembled the iconography of hell. The crucial difference was that inhabitants of Purgatory clasped their hands in prayer, a gesture signifying hope and the possibility for salvation.<sup>4</sup>

When dance did occur in medieval accounts of Purgatory, it alluded to demonic or punitive activity. For example, in a twelfth-century Irish poem, *Sir Owain*, a devil greeted a knight in Purgatory with these words:

3. The influential work *De Poenitentia*, by the Dominican inquisitor Raymond de Peñafort, employs extensive criminal language. Following St. Augustine's writings on original sin, the Latin term *crimen* often signified guilt.
4. E.g. Limbourg Brothers, *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, Chantilly, Musée Condé, ms. 65, fol. 113v, French, c. 1410. In contrast, Dante's *Inferno* inscribes the gates of Hell with the absence of hope: "*Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*" [abandon all hope, ye who enter here], *If*: III 9.

You have come to suffer torture in order to nullify your heinous sins, but it will gain you nothing! You shall be given harsh, agonizing and barely endurable pain for the deadly sins that you have committed. You will never have suffered a greater misfortune than when you begin to dance with us and we begin to play our game with you [*Than thou schal have in our daunce, / When we schal play biginne!*]  
(Foster 2004: 132)

The horrific image of purgatorial dancing continued into the Late Middle Ages. In his compilation addressed to preachers entitled *Scala Coeli* (*The Ladder of Heaven*), the fourteenth-century Dominican Jean Gobi the Younger warned that “the dance leads us toward many evil things” (*corea multa mala inducit in nobis*). Gobi supported his claim with the following (abridged) tale about St. Patrick’s Purgatory:

A certain young monk crossed the Purgatory of Saint Patrick, and there he observed horrible and terrible torments. . . . he saw there an iron circle, full of the sharpest nails, on which they (i.e. the penitents) danced [*corisantes incedere*]. Over them was a rain of relentless flame and sulfur and dragons, who (i.e. the dragons) were standing in the middle of the dance [*in medio coree stabant*].  
(Gobi 1991: 310-11; translation mine; cf. Coulton 1953: 543)<sup>5</sup>

For Gobi and like-minded theologians, the correlation between dance and punishment was retributive. Nicholas de Bayard, a Dominican at Oxford, recounted a story about a woman who indulged in a dance-song (*cantilena*). She received eighteen extra days in Purgatory because she never confessed this offense (BL Add. MS. 37670 fol. 149; Page 1989: 126).<sup>6</sup>

The criminalization of medieval dance percolated into Italy as well. Illustrious Italian clerics and artists preached and painted penitential motifs. In one of his sermons, the Franciscan Giacomo della Marca (James of the Marches) supplied six main reasons to flee from dancing (*multe sunt rationes que docent nos coreas fugere*). For Giacomo, dance was a form of deception, it aroused lust throughout the body and the senses, it ejected otherwise holy men from paradise, it constituted sacrilege in holy places, it countered the sacraments, and it generated other kinds of sin (Iacobus de Marchia 1978: 307-308). In an *exemplum*, or moralizing tale, by San Bernardino of Siena (d. 1444), the dancing partner of a cardinal’s servant became mute for three years (San Bernardino 1868: 58-59; Tubach 1981: 114).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, *La Chiesa Militante e Trionfante* (Triumph of the Church) fresco by Andrea di Bonai-

5. Another related work by Gobi, *Dialogue with the Spirit of Gui*, involves Purgatory and the soul’s suffering, see Polo de Beaulieu 1994: 69; idem, 1999: 10-11.

6. In some accounts, the dead girl is identified as Peter Damian’s sister.

7. For a discussion of Italian penitential works and *exempla*, see Delcorno 1998: 149-62; Dessi 1998: 309-24.

uto (c. 1365-1367) seems to suggest that earthly dancing obstructs Christians' entry into heaven (Figg. 1a and 1b). Taking inspiration from Jacopo Passavanti's *Specchio di Vera Penitencia* (The Mirror of True Penitence), this imagery bolstered the Dominican Order's defense of orthodoxy. (Notably, the artist included Dante and Beatrice among the pious laypeople in the foreground). In the center, St. Dominic leads penitents to the gates of paradise, while members of the Order preach to the laity and the dogs – symbolic of the *domini canes* who combat heresy. The figures on the upper left comprise the blessed, seemingly set against the dancers and musicians on the right.<sup>8</sup> The bisected imagery may imply that dancing is a frivolous pursuit that deflects penitence and, ultimately, bars one from paradise.

Elsewhere dance became conflated with earthly imprisonment, to grotesque effect. Consider the so-called “prison literature” of the Franciscan friar Jacopone da Todi (d. 1306). In this third *lauda*, Jacopone construed his time in prison as a kind of penance, in which the body waged a battle with the soul:

Sozzo, malvascio corpo, lussurioso e 'ngordo,  
ad onne mea salute sempre te trovo sordo;  
sostene lo fragello d'esto nodoso cordo,  
emprend' esto descordo, cà 'n t'è ci òpo a danzare!

[Filthy, evil body, master of gluttony!  
Is this your answer in my hour of need?  
Here, feel the lashes on this knotted cord!  
They may sound like jarring rhythms to you,  
But you will have to master them  
And learn to dance to this music!]<sup>9</sup>  
(Jacopone da Todi: 2010: 22; idem 1982: 71-72)

In counterpoint to these examples, Dante's *Purgatorio* portrayed otherworldly dance as an antidote to sin. Dance was an instrument of penitence that purged the faithful of their moral failure. The subsequent two sections demonstrate how Dante upset traditional conceptions of penitence. For Dante, dance facilitated, rather than impaired, the purgatorial process.

8. Funded by Mico da Lapo Guidalotti, a wealthy Florentine merchant who lost his wife to the plague, this chapel in Santa Maria Novalla served as the meeting place for Florentine Dominicans before it was renamed the Spanish Chapel (*Capellone degli Spagnoli*) in the sixteenth century. Passavanti was a distinguished member and appears in the fresco blessing the donor. Musicologist Eleonora Beck suggests that the dancers and musicians represent activities that Cathar heretics would condemn, and therefore the pictured performers represent orthodoxy and virtue, see Beck 1995: 123-27, 136.
9. Jacopone was imprisoned by Pope Boniface VIII, due to his critiques of papal corruption. Incidentally, Jacopone's own conversion involved dance. Vanna, his noble wife, died when a dance floor collapsed beneath her. Upon discovering that his wife wore a hair shift under her clothes to atone for her husband's sins, Jacopone promptly converted, see Vettori 2007: 221-48.

### KING DAVID IN *PURGATORIO*: FROM *SALTATOR* TO *REDEMPTOR*

*Purgatorio* is a totalizing realm of discipline. Indeed, it suggests a penal colony in which penitents are “doing time.” Contrary to the eternal punishments filling the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* ushers in the resurgence of linear temporality, and thus the return of hope (Schnapp 2007: 94-96).<sup>10</sup> Segregated in customized terraces (one for each of the seven deadly sins), the shades / *ombre* enact a repetitive program of compulsory punishment. Domenico di Michelino’s depiction of Mount Purgatory exudes factory-like rhythms of exertion (Figg. 2a and 2b). Sword-bearing angels survey the penitents’ progress. In Dante’s text, one of the guardian angels inscribes Dante’s forehead with seven P’s (for *peccatum*, or sin, see *Pg.* IX 112-14).<sup>11</sup> All the while, penitents labor under the panoptical divine gaze. To an extent, these components call to mind Foucault’s own commentary on the *Commedia*, in which he described Dante’s vision as the punitive process put into laws, as well as the spectacular excess of physical violence (Foucault 1995: 34).

However, *Purgatorio* effectively departs from the dark image of Foucauldian incarceration. Dante’s shades labor self-consciously toward moral advancement; body and soul work synergistically in productive ways. Physical exertion revitalizes the spiritual psyche. As Dantisti Jeremy Tambling, Peter Armour, and others have explained, Dante’s technique of purgation is dialectical; it negotiates between the interiority of the *penitus* and the physicality of the *poena*. With its insistence on contritionism, *Purgatorio* may be the most affective part of the *Commedia* (Tambling 2010; Armour 1983: 10).<sup>12</sup> Yet psycho-somatic renewal is not hermetically sealed; it radiates outwardly, with centrifugal force. While the seven deadly sins unspool discord and dystopia, penitence, as Dante prescribes it, repairs the rift between the self and society. Through their spectacle of organized labor and corporal subjection, penitents co-cultivate a moral education.

Dante’s vision offers a mature model for understanding the relationship between dance and penitence. Nestled between the agonizing *Inferno* and the blissful *Paradiso*, *Purgatorio* presents a community *in media res* – in the middle of things. As such, it is the most human realm of the *Commedia*. *Purgatorio*’s inhabitants have acknowledged the ethical shortcomings of their past lives. Voluntarily, they submit to corporal and psychological correctives. More im-

10. For more on the history and historiography of prison in the Middle Ages, see Bale 2016: esp. 3-6.

11. Dante’s marked flesh may recall Ash Wednesday, or even the tattooed slaves and criminals of ancient Rome.

12. In these respects, Dante’s penitential regime departs from earlier authorities, such as Augustine and Gregory the Great. For them, *disciplina* was not only the maintenance of a certain lifestyle (as it was for the Romans), but entailed an active, and institutionally embedded, process of correction, see Asad 1993: 34-35, 136-37.

portantly, they are on a quest to recover their moral conscience. This realm is far less concerned with punishment and guilt than it is with recovery and repair. The ethos of renewal manifests itself in the first canto of this canticle, when Dante invokes Calliope to resurrect dead poetry (*Pg.* I 4-9). The resurgence of redemptive possibilities for the body, society, and the human condition permeate *Purgatorio's esprit du corps*. Within this text, dance functions as a purgatorial discipline, transporting sinners from a condition of penitence to a state of redemption. In canto X, the biblical King David, as both dancer and penitent, authorizes and exemplifies the purgatorial reframing of dance.

*Purgatorio's* first explicit dance scene occurs on the terrace of pride (*superbia*). For the prideful shades, the dance of King David is the model of humility to emulate.<sup>13</sup> Dante and Virgil encounter the sacred dancer in the form of a marble relief:

Li precedeva al benedetto vaso,  
trecando alzato, l'umile salmista,  
e più e men che re era in quel caso.

[There, proceeding the holy vessel, leaping with his robes girt up, was the humble Psalmist, and he was both more and less than king on that occasion.]<sup>14</sup>  
(*Pg.* X, 64-66)

Nestled between the Virgin Mary and the Emperor Trajan, the image of David edifies the souls guilty of pride. David's humble gestures display the devotional purpose of bodily movement (Fig. 3). The penitents respond to the image of David. Bent under the burden of heavy stones, their aerial bodies perform corrective gestures to counteract their inclination to pride. As Dante described, they morph into living caryatids, nearly buckling over with their burden.<sup>15</sup> From contrition and purification, they gain strength to move boulders up the mountain. Channeling the spirit of David, their conscious labor paves a path toward moral responsibility.

Placing the dance of David in Purgatory, Dante conflated David's identity as dancer and penitent. Medieval Christians believed that David composed the Psalms, and notably the seven Penitential Psalms (Vulgate 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, and 142) as personal expressions of atonement for his sins of adultery and murder. Repeating the language of turning (from the Latin *vertere*, to

13. Jennifer Homans notes that, incidentally, Gustave Doré's illustrations for the *Divine Comedy* inspired nineteenth-century ballet, specifically the aesthetic program of Act II of *La Bayadère*, i.e. the Kingdom of the Shades, see Homans 2010: 269.

14. Hermann Gmelin argues that David's wife Michal prefigures the punishments of the proud, see Gmelin 2008: 99.

15. Interestingly, dance historian Germaine Prudhommeau discusses how, in ancient Greek thought, the caryatids were considered priestesses of dance, see Prudhommeau 1986: 125.



turn; *advertere*, to turn away; *revertere*, to turn back), the psalmist configured the movements of conversion (*convertere*, to turn over, turn upside down, change, or alter) as the repentant soul turning to God, turning away from sin, and returning to the path of righteousness (Staley 2007: 221-69; Holsinger 2001: 196; cf. Freccero 1988; *Pg.* XXXI 2, 34-36, 43, 62). Conversional choreography reestablished the portal of grace that linked humanity to divinity. In this way, *Purgatorio* recalls the image of David put forth in *De Poenitentia* (*Concerning Penitence*) of Ambrose of Milan (d. c. 397), a text often cited in medieval penitentials:

. . . . The dance [*saltationem*] should be conducted as did David when he danced before the Ark of the Lord [*quam saltavit David ante arcam domini*], for everything is right which springs from the fear of God. Let us not be ashamed of a show of reverence which will enrich the cult and deepen the adoration of Christ. For this reason the dance [*saltatio*] must in no wise be regarded as a mark of reverence for vanity and luxury, but as something which uplifts every living body instead of allowing the limbs to rest motionless upon the ground or the slow feet to become numb. St. Paul danced in the spirit [*saltabat spiritaliter Paulus*] when he exerted himself for us, when he endeavored to be a soldier of Christ, because he forgot the past and longed for the future. But you, when you come to the font, do lift up your hands. You are exhorted to show swifter feet in order that you may thereby ascend to everlasting life. This dance is an ally of faith and an honoring of grace [*haec est saltatio fidei socia, gratiae comes*].  
(Ambrose 1955: 181-82; Backman 2009: 26-27; cf. Miller 2000: 203-205, 207-209, 217-32)

Ambrose wrote about David in the context of early baptism, which aligned the baptized with the Christian brotherhood, and erased their prior sins. Read through the prism of *Purgatorio*, the passage suggests that certain bodily articulations honor God and temper pride. Moreover, Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604), an early authority on penitential theology, construed David's dance as abjection and self-annihilation. In his *Moralia in Iob*, Gregory reflected, "I am more surprised at David dancing, than fighting (*plus saltantem stupeo quam pugnantem*). For by fighting he subdued his enemies; but by dancing before the Lord (*saltando autem coram Domino*) he overcame himself."<sup>16</sup> In concert with Ambrose and Gregory, Dante showcased how reverence before divine majesty rewired the body's aptitude for spiritual service. Here, the medieval dancing body emerged as a site of formative change and metamorphosis (Bynum 1995b: 13-15, 33). Though Dante populated *Purgatorio* with shades, that is, aerial bodies, their corporealization of repentance, as historian Caroline Bynum analyzed, located the purgative experience within the plastic power of the body. Disembodied shades re-somatized themselves through the activity of

16. Gregory 1979 and 2015. In this passage, Gregory responds to Job 37: 24. For a more in-depth analysis of the dance of David in medieval Christianity, see Dickason 2018.

their souls (Bynum 1995a: 83).<sup>17</sup> For the prideful penitents, dance reestablished the bond between self and other, reawakening Christian *communitas*.

Unlike Ambrose and the Urtext for David as the sacred *saltator*, i.e. the Vulgate (II Regum or II Samuel 6: 16-23), Dante did not employ the term *saltare*. This Latin verb conveyed leaping or dancing in a lively manner, and an analogous word existed in medieval Italian. Instead, Dante's David did the *tresca*, an Italian country dance with stomp-like percussive movements, sometimes tinged with illicit sexuality. As James L. Miller explains, the term *tresca* is related to the English verbs thrash and thresh. The vigorous, percussive motion of *trescare* is akin to the stamping of feet, the slapping of hands, or the beating of sheaves to separate kernels from stalks (Miller 2000: 218, 239, n. 19; Scartazzini 1899: 2013; cf. Ingrassia 2009: 21).

Aside from King David in *Purgatorio* X, the *Commedia*'s only other reference to the *tresca* occurs in the seventh circle of the *Inferno*, reserved for the violent (*In*. XIV 40-42). Given his university and Dominican education, Dante's decision to change the Vulgate was deliberate. Dante may have suggested that David's dance, although more rustic than royal, cleansed the *tresca* of its infernal residue. Moreover, I posit that the *tresca*'s rusticity, and even its vulgarity – in the literal spirit of *vulgare* – championed the vernacular project of Dante's poetry. Dances in the *Purgatorio* therefore harmonized the significance of human intention and Dante's own will (*vele*) to be a poet (Pasolini 1988: 102-112; cf. Carruthers 2010: 48-54). As the disciplines of penitence and poetry bled into one another, Dante achieved an equilibrium between crafting new language and announcing a moral imperative (Kirkpatrick 2007: xlii). Dance, as an aesthetic and ethical tool of expression, helped reconcile innovation and orthodoxy. Far from blasphemy, David's vigorous *tresca* signified a penitential exercise *par excellence*.

Although Dante did not include explicit dance content on any other terrace of Mount Purgatory, his imbrication of dance and pride is theologically significant. Pride constitutes the gravest sin in the *Purgatorio*, and it is therefore positioned on the lowest terrace of the mountain. The prideful undergo the greatest expenditure in paying off their debt to God. Scrutinizing the sin of pride, Dante reflected the positions of the Church Fathers and medieval theologians. Origen wrote that pride was the devil's downfall, whereas Augustine's *Civitas Dei* proclaimed that God rejects the proud but graces the humble (Origen 2010: 119; Augustine 1957: 10-11). In most medieval sources on penitence, pride comprised the direst sin.

17. Another key passage on this topic occurs in *Pg.* XXV, where Statius, a converted pagan, explains aerial bodies' ability to be seen and experience pain. For studies on Statius's discourse vis-à-vis Thomas Aquinas, see Gragnolati 2003: 192-210; Durling 2003: 183-91; Gilson 1967: 124-42.

When dance did appear in late medieval treatments of pride, it was in a negative, condemnatory way. An anonymous confession manual, for instance, when commenting on pride, instructed preachers to “[inquire whether the penitent] will have celebrated dances (*si coreas celebraverit*) which may have been done in many ways: in assembling together, in buying fine clothes, in disturbing young girls, and in doing things of this kind” (BL MS. Bodl. 801, fol. 203<sup>v</sup>; Page 1989: 120 n. 47). The *Speculum Laicorum* (*Mirror of Lay People*) and other pastoral texts recounted the story of a dead girl whose entire body burned again and again on a fiery wheel in retribution for her pride and fondness of dancing (Hoveden 1914: 32; Tubach 1981: 114; Levy 2000: 109-110). The Middle English version of *Somme le Roi* (or *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, c. 1279) described Lucifer as the original sinner. “Pride is kynge of alle synnes and grettist of alle,” the author proclaimed. Therefore, he contended, pride causes Christians to violate holy days, making them resemble the Saracens who dance before false gods (Diekstra 1998: 100, 104, 106). Dante derived inspiration from Guillaume Perardus’s *Summa Vitiatorum* (*Summa on Vices*), particularly the section on pride, despite Guillaume’s vehement denunciations of dance (Delcorno 2010: 85; idem 1998: 147-48; idem 1989: 195-227; Perardus 1648: 41-43). Given the associations between pride, sin, and Satan, the valorization of dance in *Purgatorio* X may have struck medieval readers as subversive.

Beyond theological reasoning, Dante’s obsession with pride may implicate his personal connection to it. Pride was a particularly piquant subject for Dante. He considered it his greatest vice, which perhaps clarifies the *Commedia*’s continual juxtaposition between Dante and Ulysses (cf. Brown 1993: 21; Yearley 2004: 324). In his bold attempt to render sacred truths in vernacular poetry, Dante sought a tenuous balance between celebrity and piety. In doing so, Dante empathized most with *Purgatorio*’s prideful. Traversing the terrace of pride, Dante the pilgrim felt the weight of stones on his back. He anticipated returning there one day, where he would spend a great deal of time (*Pg.* XIII 133-38). Interestingly, part of Dante’s own legacy involved the mockery of his self-glorification. Folkloric tales caricatured Dante as a smug know-it-all. He outsmarted kings, chastised a blacksmith who sang the *Commedia* badly, and instructed minstrels on how to garner success (Gigli 1860: 274-76; Salza 1900: 49-51). Despite his best efforts to humble himself in the *Commedia*, Dante’s self-awareness of his own greatness was the stuff of comedy.

For Dante, the terrace of the prideful was the most self-referential place in Purgatory. King David, redeemer of dance and paragon of humility, perhaps inspired Dante more so than any other purgatorial inhabitant. Through King David, dance achieved moral rectitude. And, as the next section shows, it is

through Lady Matelda and her techniques of transformation that dance completed the passage from sin to salvation.

### THE *PARADISO TERRESTRE*: CHOREOGRAPHING TRANSFORMATION<sup>18</sup>

The subsequent dance scenes in the *Purgatorio* consecrate Dante's penitential program. Situated on the top of Mount Purgatory, these dances take place in the *Paradiso terrestre*, or the Earthly Paradise, a lush garden reminiscent of Eden. Here Dante encounters Matelda, a beautiful woman who appears to him singing, dancing, and picking flowers:

e là m'apparve. . .  
 una donna soletta che si gia  
 e cantando e scegliendo fior da fiore  
 ond' era pinta tutta la sua via. . .  
 Come si volge, con le piante strette  
 a terra e intra sé, donna che balli,  
 e piede innanzi piede a pena mette,  
 volsesi in su i vermigli e in su i gialli  
 fioretti verso me, non altrimenti  
 che vergine che li occhi onesti avvalli;  
 e fece i prieghi miei esser contenti,  
*si appressando sé, che 'l dolce suono*  
 veniva a me co' suoi intendimenti

[and over there appeared to me. . . .

a solitary lady, who was walking along both  
 singing and choosing flower from flower among  
 those that colored all her way. . . .

As a lady turns who is dancing, with her feet  
 pressed to the ground and together, scarcely  
 placing one foot before the other:

so she turned on the crimson and yellow flowers  
 toward me, not otherwise than a virgin who lowers  
 her modest eyes,

and she contented my prayers, drawing so near  
 that the sweet sound reached me with its  
 meanings.]

(Pg. XXVIII, 37-60)

For medieval readers, a woman singing, dancing, and gathering flowers easily evoked the bucolic aura of pastoral poetry. Yet Dante the pilgrim did not seem to recognize this *donna*, either as an historical figure or a Florentine

18. Here I invoke the graphic element of choreography, after André Lepecki's provocation of "choreo-graphy" as "dance-writing," see Lepecki 2004: 124-39.

contemporary. Over the years, Dantisti exerted painstaking efforts in trying to identify Matelda's historical prototype. Within Dante scholarship, specialists on Matelda are called Mateldisti. For some scholars, her embodiment of the active life finds parallels with the early medieval saint Matilda of Saxony (d. 968) and Matilda, Countess of Tuscany (d. 1115). Others hypothesize that Dante was drawn to the embodied mysticism of Saints Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1294) or Mechtilde of Hackeborn (d. 1298). More secular readings of her character identify Matelda as the screen lady in Dante's earlier work, *La Vita Nuova*. (Barnes 1973: 1-9; Badelli 1993: 45-52; Kirkham 2008: 319-21; Meiklejohn 1971: 23-28; Gardner 1968: 267-97; Reynolds 2006: 319-22; idem, 1969: 549-55). Jacques Goudet argued earlier for Matelda's name as the anagram: *ad letam*, towards the joyous, or blessed one (i.e. Beatrice), alongside her correspondence with John the Baptist (Goudet 1954: 28-52). Giovanni Boccaccio (d. 1375), like many medieval commentators, identified Matelda as Matilda, Countess of Tuscany, for deeply political reasons (Boccaccio 2009: 444-45). Other scholars deliver more theologically determined interpretations, situating Matelda within a biblical or Marian framework (Pacchioni 2001; Fissi 1997: 23-82). Still others focus on Matelda's artistic afterlife, or suggest that she germinated the *Primavera* motif in Botticelli's paintings (Marmor 2003; Korbacher 2014). Recently, Valentina Atturo and Lorenzo Mainini argued that Matelda was not a woman at all. Instead, she was a literary construct that embodied Dante's own lyric voice (Atturo and Mainini 2013).

To date, Dantisti have not reached an agreement concerning Matelda's historical identity. If Dante intentionally designed Matelda as an enigma, then perhaps there is no definitive answer to this question. In the *Purgatorio*, Matelda remains anonymous until Beatrice names her in the final canto (*Pg.* XXXIII 118). Fraught with intertextual identities, Matelda recalls the biblical figures Eve (before the Fall) and Leah (for her active piety) (*Pg.* XXVII 91-114). Accordingly, an anonymous fourteenth-century Lombard commentator explained that Matelda's active (as opposed to contemplative) life emblemized the apex of worldly happiness, gathering flowers as if she were selecting preeminent virtues (*dicit autor quod ista domina... et per hanc Mateldam inteligit felicitatem mundanam... et ideo dicit quod coligebat et eligebat flores in floribus, quasi dicat quod in vita active elegit sibi preheminentiores virtutes*) (Luiso 1904: 130).<sup>19</sup> However, Matelda carried an ambivalent charge. Her aesthetic allure reminded Dante of Prosperina and Venus, pagan goddesses of fertility and sexuality, respectively (*Pg.* XXVIII 49-51, 64-66).

Although Matelda occupied a realm beyond sin, Dante did not attempt to over-spiritualize her dancing. Integrating the sacred and the profane, the

19. For a speculative attribution of this commentary, see Sandkühler 1967: 116-31.

erotic and the chaste, Matelda introduced a new kind of lyric that was both sensual and ethical. She remained religiously sacrosanct, yet her words and gestures appropriated popular entertainment, namely the *ballata*. Related to the Italian verb *ballare* (to dance), the *ballata* was a dance-song, that is a mixed genre of love poetry, music, and dance, that was performed from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries (Fischer and D'Agostino 2001: 563-65; Lograsso 1965: 23-48; Dronke 1996: 191; Pizzorno 1994: 115-32; Atchinson 2005: 93; McGee 2009: 86; Lansing 2010: 81; Barolini 2014: 151-53).<sup>20</sup> By performing something reminiscent of the *ballata*, Matelda popularized piety, thereby relocating otherworldliness into the medieval world.

In the Middle Ages, the *ballata* consisted of an initial refrain (*ripresa*, or *ritornello*) sung by a solo woman who stood in the middle of a ring of dancers. The next few verses (*pièdi*) were sung and danced by everyone. Typically, a soloist sang the final "turning-line" (*volta*), which signaled the end of the strophe and transitioned into the refrain. Medieval *Commedia* readers probably performed *ballate* on regular basis. Aligning the strange with the familiar, Matelda's dancing imbued the new Eden with a sense of immediacy; the distant past reentered the reader's / dancer's present.

Moreover, the *ballata* alluded to in canto XXVIII overlaps with another Italian love lyric. Dante's friend and fellow *Dolce Stil Nuovo* poet Guido Cavalcanti practiced the *pastorella*, a re-adaptation of the earlier Occitan *pastorela*. Typically the *pastorella* staged an encounter between a knight and a shepherdess. As the poem progressed, the man abused his knightly privilege by attempting to seduce the woman of lower rank. In some versions of the *pastorella*, the woman tried to resist the man's advances, so he took her by force. According to feminist scholars, the *pastorella* was essentially a romanticization of rape (Gravdal 1991: ch. 4). Despite the sexually-charged overtones of this poetic genre, Matelda remains pristine and unravished (Durling and Martinez 2004: 485 n. 37-42, 588-89; Poggioli 1962: 1-20; cf. Fergusson 1953: 198). Dante therefore recast secular dance and love lyric within a realm of Edenic innocence. And through a feminist lens, Matelda reinstates female agency with an independent, emancipatory discourse.

An inter-canticle reading of *Purgatorio* XXVIII generates a deeper significance of Matelda's dancing. Matelda's physical adroitness and internal purity contrasts with *Inferno* XXVIII, in which sowers of discord receive a fitting *contrapasso* (or counter suffering) of bodily bifurcation or dismemberment. The Earthly Paradise necessitates concord and community, or, as Giuseppe Mazzotta suggested, its pastoral scenes embody corporate and civic ideology (Mazzotta 1979: 131). Moreover, Matelda's dance of good works signals a

20. Elsewhere, Dante notes the primacy of dance in the *ballata*, and contrasts the *ballata* with the *canzone*, see *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, II.3.5-7.

precursor to *Paradiso* XXVIII, the cosmic realm of the *primum mobile*, whose dancers are marked by a dazzling speed and close proximity to God (cf. Armour 2000: 1-20).

On a metaphorical level, Matelda represents the power of language. In other words, she shows readers how words can move us, and specifically move us into action. As John Freccero emphasized, Dante designed the *Commedia* to inspire conversion, and to poeticize the experience of conversion (Freccero 1988). Analogously, Matelda embodies a conversional poetics. Throughout the Earthly Paradise, Dante frequently employed the Italian term *passo* (step, pace, or dance step), which is derived from the Latin verb *patior, pati, passus sum* (to suffer, undergo). Naturally, the Latin noun *passio* was invoked often in the Middle Ages for religious designations, as in the *passio Christi* (Passion of Christ). In his liberal use of *passo* to denote dancing, stepping, and suffering, Dante's corporealization of conversion conflated movement and sacrifice.<sup>21</sup> Matelda's own dainty steps captivated Dante. He responded by replicating her movements:

E com ninfe che si givan sole. . . .  
 allor si mosse contra 'l fiume, andando  
 su per la riva, e io pari di lei,  
 picciol passo con picciol seguitando

[And like nymphs that used to walk alone. . . .  
 she then moved against the stream. . . .  
 and I even with her, matching  
 little steps with little steps.]  
 (Pg. XXIX, 4-9)

The correspondence between motion and mimesis integrates penitential theology, specifically the sacrament of penance, or reconciliation. In the previous canto, Dante informed the reader that he stood three paces (*tre passi*) away from Matelda (Pg. XXVIII 70). For *Commedia* commentator Benvenuto da Imola (d. 1388), the three paces symbolized the three steps of penance: contrition, confession, satisfaction (Benvenuto 1907: 449; cf. Kirkpatrick 2007: 491). Dante's synchronization with Matelda's footsteps traced his own movement toward reconciliation and redemption.<sup>22</sup>

Far from an obstacle to penitence, Matelda typifies a female counterpart to King David. Although her *picciol passo* seems radically incongruous with

21. Coincidentally, the *contrapasso* became a court dance in fifteenth-century Italy, see Brainard 1981: 36-37; Lo Monaco and Vinciguerra 2005: 51-78.

22. The *tre passi* may also refer to three steps (*tre gradi*) before the gate of Purgatory (Pg. IX 76-108). From an inter-canticle perspective, the *tre passi* may foreshadow the three theological virtues, Beatrice's trinitarian nature, or the three concentric spheres of the beatific vision in Pd. XXXIII.



his exuberant *tresca*, Matelda appropriates the words of the *umile salmista*. In canto XXVIII, she references Psalm 91, *Delectasti* (“You have delighted”), which monastic communities sang at Lauds. In the following canto, Matelda sings *Beati quorum tecta sunt peccata*. (“Blessed are those whose sins are covered”), from Psalm 31, a penitential psalm sung at Matins. The integration of psalmody and monophonic chanting infuses the Earthly Paradise with the sacred aura of Christian fellowship (cf. Hawkins 1999: 174-78; Mahrt 2004: 65-69; Ciabottoni 2010: 97; Cappuccio 2014; *ibid.*, 2015: 57-58). Although she first appears as *una donna soletta* (a solitary woman), Matelda, through regularized rituals, demonstrates that penitence is not an end in itself. One must advance further, re-integrating into the social body.

As Dante traverses the Earthly Paradise, physical movement reintroduces him into the Christian community. He witnesses a liturgical pageant, as well as a flashback to the Garden of Eden. The first procession, equipped with elders and candelabras, reenacts Christian history (*Pg.* XXIX). The allegories of Faith, Hope, and Charity dance at the chariot’s right wheel, following the shifting tempo of *caritas*:

Tre donna in giro da la destra rota. . . .  
e or parèan da la bianca tratte,  
or da la rossa, e dal canto di questa  
l’ altre toglien l’andare e tarde e ratte

[Three ladies came dancing in a circle at the  
right wheel. . . .  
and now they seemed drawn by the white  
one, now by the red one; and from the latter’s  
song the other two took their slow and rapid pace.]  
(*Pg.* XXIX, 121-29)

As the passage indicates, the virtues enact circular and wheeling motions. The *rota* is theologically dense, as it signified a shift from an old dispensation (i.e. Old Testament / temporal virtues) to a new order (i.e. New Testament / theological virtues).<sup>23</sup> The kinesthetic texture of the choreography is therefore both cyclical and progressive, mirroring the structure of *terza rima*, or third rhyme (e.g. *aba*, *bcb*, etc.), an original poetic schema that Dante devised when composing the *Commedia*. Moreover, the processional unfolding of the Earthly Paradise mimics the formalized, ceremonious movement that animated Italian civic and ecclesiastical rituals (Vauchez 1993: 153-66; Keen 2003: 11-16, 192). As the *Purgatorio* continues, processants encircle the Tree of Knowledge while murmuring “Adam,” thus momentarily recapturing Edenic harmony (*Pg.* XXXII 37). The conflation of collective dancing and pre-lapsarian existence

23. For the rich theological symbolism of wheels, see (Pseudo) Gregory 1971.



mirrors representations of utopias in medieval art and literature. For example, a manuscript miniature from Guillaume de Deguileville's *Le Pèlerinage de l'Âme* (The Pilgrimage of the Soul) depicts the descendants of Adam dancing around the Tree of Life, as a *homunculus* / allegory of the soul and an angel observe (Fig. 4). The archaic participants imply that there is something primordial and pre-cultural about dance that reminds us of the essence of our humanity (Brandstetter 2015: 210, 225). Accordingly, *Purgatorio*'s ritualistic, yet apocalyptic, processional provides an impressionistic interlude that re-invests dancing bodies with the rhythms of sacred history. In a Christian framework, dance was at once nostalgic and proleptic, acknowledging the past and anticipating beatitude.<sup>24</sup>

Within the Earthly Paradise, the most significant function of dance is to lead Dante to Beatrice, his portal to grace. To prepare Dante for this reunion, Matelda and the virtues direct a dance of initiation:

La bella donna ne le braccia aprissi;  
abbracciommi la testa e mi sommerse  
ove convenne ch'io l'acqua inghiottissi.  
Indi mi tolse, e bagnato m'offerse  
dentro a la danza de le quattro belle;  
e ciascuna del braccio mi coperse.  
"Noi siam qui ninfe e nel ciel siamo stelle;  
pria che Beatrice discendesse al mondo,  
fummo ordinate a lei per sue ancelle.  
Merrenti a li occhi suoi; ma nel giocondo  
lume ch'è dentro aguzzeranno i tuoi  
le tre di là, che miran più profondo." . . .  
atti, l'altre tre si fero avanti,  
danzando al loro angelico caribou.  
"Volgi, Beatrice, volgi li occhi santi,"  
era la sua canzone, "al tuo fedele,  
che per vederti ha mossi passi tanti!"

24. This is not to imply that *Purgatorio* is an apolitical realm. On the contrary, its political underpinnings are complex. In general, Dante's second processional scene (*Pg.* XXXII) stages the gradual erosion of Christian authority, from the first emperor (with particular reference to the notorious Donation of Constantine), to fourteenth-century Florence. The whore of Babylon alludes to the papacy (probably Boniface VIII or Clement V), whereas the giant represents the monarchical corruption of Philip the Fair. Their disastrous union facilitated the invasion of Italy by Charles of Valois and the transfer of the papacy from Rome to Avignon, see Durling and Martinez 2004: 565, n. 148-60. Dante came from the Guelph-dominant Florence, which supported papal authority. During Dante's political career, the Guelph party split into the Black and White Guelphs, whose rivalry came to eclipse that of the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. The latter faction, to which Dante belonged, was cast out of Italy in 1302. In his years of exile, Dante developed sympathies for the Ghibelline (pro-empire) position, which colored his major political treatise, *De Monarchia*, see Bemrose 2009: ix-xxi; Scott: 1996.

[The beautiful lady opened her arms, embraced my head, and submerged me, so that I had to swallow some of the water.

Then she took me, and, drenched as I was, inserted me into the dance of the four beauties and each of them covered me with her arm.

"We are nymphs here, and in the sky we are stars; before Beatrice descended into the world, we were appointed to be her handmaidens.

We will lead you to her eyes, but to the joyous light that is in them yours will be sharpened by the three over there, who see more deeply."

. . . the other three, showing their more noble rank in their bearing, came forward, dancing to their angelic carol.

"Turn Beatrice, turn your holy eyes," was their song, "to your faithful one, who has come so far (or trodden many steps) to see you!"<sup>25</sup>  
(Pg. XXXI, 100-III, 131-35)

In this evocative passage, Matelda submerges Dante in the river Lethe, or the mythical river that erases the memory of sin. Matelda assumes an ecclesiastical role by overseeing and administering a religious ritual, a sacramental privilege that excluded actual medieval women.<sup>26</sup> Dante's immersion recalls ancient baptisms practices and gnostic rites of initiation that underscored the necessity of death before rebirth (Eliade 1956: 133-36; Payen 1970: 23). A mysterious *pas de six* follows the cleansing act, which involves Matelda, Dante, and the four (feminized) temporal virtues (Prudence / *Prudentia*, Justice / *Iustitia*, Moderation / *Temperantia*, and Courage / *Fortitudo*). These dancers then lead Dante to an ethereal *pas de trois* of the theological virtues (Faith / *Fides*, Hope / *Spes*, and Charity / *Caritas*). Together, they prefigure the triune Beatrice, clad in all three colors (white, green, and red) of the theological virtues. As the vehicle of revelation, Beatrice leads Dante to Christ / the gryphon and to the Church / the chariot. A late fourteenth-century manuscript illustration conflates these narrative moments (Fig. 5). With the authority of a priestess, Matelda mobilizes the initiatory rite as a physical progression through space.

This scene is one of the most enigmatic of the *Commedia*.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the dance ritual, Dante seems to be entranced, submitting willfully to a self-othering ordeal. For the purposes of this article, I employ the terms

25. Robin Kirkpatrick suggests that the Italian *caribou*, in line 132, might be related to the Occitan *garip*, see Kirkpatrick 2007: 495.

26. However, some scholars have found evidence for the ordination of medieval women, see Bugvis 2017; Macy 2007.

27. For related discussions about procession's phantasmagoria, as well as medieval phantasmology, see Dronke 1986: ch. 3; Agamben 1993: 75-81; Carruthers 2008: 19, 211; Gilson 2000: 16; Franko 1987: 69-76.

“trance” and “trance dance” as anthropologists and ethnographers do. For example, anthropologist Erika Bourguignon explained that trance may be construed cross-culturally as “dissociation in the service of the self.” Often employed in religious rituals as a rite of passage, trance produces altered states of consciousness that modify the body, mind, and personality through dissociation. Trance induces ecstasy and expands the potential for human experience and self-transformation. While trance may appear unsettling, strange, or involuntary, Bourguignon understands it as empowering, as it grants practitioners the experiential freedom to inhabit desired identities (Bourguignon 2004: 558; idem, 1968: 6; idem, 1991: 41). Theorizing further, dance scholar Gabriele Brandstetter suggests that trance allows the dancer to transcend him/herself. Trance effects the dissolution of the individual ego into a limitless, cosmic abyss (Brandstetter 2015: esp. 199-235).

Consonant with these frameworks, medieval trance elicited movement (or stillness) that merged self and other. According to the medieval documents, trance transpired when trancers visited Purgatory, performed the liturgy, ingested the Eucharist, practiced mysticism, or revealed prophecy (Dunn 2007; Rodgers and Ziegler 1999; Youngs 1998: 212-34; Newman 2000: xii-iv; Caciola 2003: 34, 45, 76, 88-89, 105, 112, 313).<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Dante positioned trance dance strategically, between his baptism at Lethe and his encounter with Beatrice. The dance scene in *Purgatorio* XXXI was not just symbolic or representational; it encoded an epistemological shift and ethical recalibration. Both were necessary preconditions for the absorption of grace and revelation. Empowering the penitent, dance created metamorphosis.

Though Beatrice herself did not partake in dancing, her presence animates the performative nature of the Earthly Paradise. Beatrice is, according to Robert Harrison’s phenomenological approach, an event (Harrison 1988). I would add that Beatrice also operates kinesthetically, setting the whole scene, and arguably the whole *Commedia*, into motion. The mobile impetus of Dante’s poem helped articulate his ethical program. As Harrison elaborates, Dante was “a poet of motion.” Throughout the *Commedia*, his kinesthetic craftsmanship activated “the Love that moves” (Harrison 2012: 35; Werge 1979: 21; Kirkpatrick 1978: 136). The poet’s progress, like that of a pilgrim, relied on movement. He obtained moral aptitude by adopting a strategy of self-mobilization. Kinesthesia is built into the very prosody of Dante’s oeuvre. The poetic structure of *terza rima* is dynamic; it moves forward by turning, effectively rotating along a spiral. With each tercet, Dante circles backward (earthbound) and proceeds forward (heaven-bound), integrating pre-Christian wisdom / Virgil

28. Perhaps there is a gendered component to Dante’s trance dance, as late medieval trancers were most often female (Marie d’Oignies, Christina Mirabilis, Elisabeth of Schönau, Elisabeth of Spalbeek, etc.)

with Trinitarian revelation / Beatrice (Harrison 2012: 35-43; Freccero 1986: 258-72; cf. Acone 2011: 226-51). By mobilizing *caritas*, Beatrice becomes the dancing master. Her spiritual dynamism helps the reader embody the moral heartbeat of the *Commedia*.

After eliciting Dante's own confession and absolution, Beatrice deems Dante "puro e disposto a salire a le stelle" (*Pg.* XXXIII 145). This passage is often translated into English as "pure and made ready for the stars." An alternative translation refashions Dante into a cosmic dancer, as *salire* also meant to leap or to dance.<sup>29</sup> The latter translation is perhaps more accurate, philologically and artistically. At the most pivotal moments of the *Commedia*, and particularly the *Paradiso*, Dante appealed to dance metaphors and kinetic language. The body in motion fulfilled his poeticized ethics and vernacular spirituality.

By the end of the *Purgatorio*, dance departs from penitence. It migrates toward redemption and heavenly rewards. Emboldened by his reformed conscience, Dante continues his journey as he tours the celestial spheres with Beatrice, bedazzled by the cosmic choreography of paradise.

## CONCLUSION / EXCURSUS

This article began by differentiating the penitentiary discipline of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* from the penitential discipline of Dante's *Purgatorio*. Whereas Foucault's prisoners seemed devoid of agency and autonomy, Dante's penitents were self-motivated actors who changed voluntarily.

Interestingly, however, Foucault's notion of corporeal discipline eventually evolved into more Dantesque patterns. James Miller's provocative biography recounts how, during a visit to Death Valley in 1975, Foucault had an epiphany. Whether induced by hallucinatory drugs or the desert climate, Foucault's experience there caused him to reevaluate embodied being. His subsequent relocation to San Francisco inspired creative approaches to the body, pleasure, and truth (Miller 1993).<sup>30</sup> Diverging from the austerity of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault began to contemplate how bodily regimes could expand the modalities, possibilities, strategies, discoveries – and even liberties – of pleasure and selfhood. Foucault henceforth relocated spirituality within the immanence and ecstasy of "limit-experiences." Moreover, Foucault embraced Socrates's idea of the care of the self, and extended this insight to the care of another. Indeed, his late writings reveal an optimistic curiosity about friend-

29. Fortini 1961; Acone 2011: 230. Thomas of Celano also used the Latin corollary to describe St. Francis of Assisi preaching, see *Vita Prima Sancti Francisci*, I.27.

30. However, some scholars have critiqued Miller's sensationalism, see Carrette 1999: 10, 51, 143-46, 172; Halperin 1997: 143-82; Jantzen 2007: 247-49.

ship and community, and their role in the circulation of values (Miller 1993: 250-52, 263-93, 322-28; Carrette 1999: ch. 5; Nehamas 1998: esp. 167).

By the end of his life, Foucault realized that discipline operates not only within the purview of the state or other institutional structures. The cultivation of self-discipline can be meaningful, impressing itself onto formative relationships and interpersonal exchanges. In this way, Foucault's later musings on human experience and his own inner transformation resonate with *Purgatorio*. Though Foucault's change of thought was admittedly indebted to the "gay scene," Socrates, and other classical thinkers, its resemblance to Dante's purgatorial bodies – and especially dancing bodies – is striking.

I have observed another unlikely, and unintentional, appropriation of *Purgatorio* in a contemporary setting, namely women's prisons. In recent years, Seattle-based choreographer Pat Graney established Keeping the Faith (KTF), an art outreach program based in Washington state, USA (Fig. 6). As many dance critics have remarked, Graney addresses feminism, gender constructs, and inequality with her compelling manifestos of moral outrage (Davis 2006; Gunawan 2015; Jowitz 2015; Kurtz 2015; Lecour 2015). By teaching dance to incarcerated women, KTF is Graney's signature contribution to social justice.

Graney is a product of Euro-American modern dance. Contrary to the formalistic rigidity and patriarchal confines of classical ballet, modern dance pioneers Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) and Martha Graham (1894-1991) saturated their movement with a liberating, counter-cultural, even Dionysian momentum (LaMothe 2006; Heil 2016). While modern dance created its own disciplinary technology of the body, its emancipated aesthetic contrasts with the reality of contemporary carceral practices. Living in a prison conjures images of confinement, docility, and solitude, whereas modern dance communicates creativity, empowerment, and interaction. As one of Graney's KTF dancers explains, "[to live in prison is] to be in a box. You move when they tell you [that] you can move, you eat when they tell you [that] you can eat and what you can eat" (Dickason 2013). Such a regimented way of life contradicts the revolutionary principles of modern dance history.

Working with incarcerated women, Graney abandons conventional disciplinary methods that regulate inmates' lives. Instead of compulsory, monitored, and regimented impositions of order, Graney implements rhythmic, bodily, and sensory modalities of discipline. Graney often teaches socially rich choreographic forms, such as circle dances. In doing so, the dancers cultivate inter-personal relations through bodily discipline. As I have written elsewhere, "the social embeddedness of collective movement allows dancers to work on relationships, which, for Graney, is a healthy, natural human tendency that prison negates. Dance reestablishes a space for interaction, change, and achievement" (Dickason 2013). Like Dante's dancers, participants of Keeping

the Faith develop an empathetic depth that enriches their lives and reintegrates them into society (Ross 2008: 270-84; Dickason 2013; cf. Christout 1972: 96-97; Heil 2016; Foster 2011). As Graney says, “the sophistication and the maturity of our culture will ultimately be judged on how we treat segregated people and segregated populations. Do you want to rehabilitate and reintegrate someone into the culture or do you want to punish them?” (Dickason 2013).

It is here, within the liberating, restorative, and (re)socializing constitution of physical discipline that Dante’s vision remains. Retrospectively, then, we can use Dante to help us understand Foucault, and appreciate the transformative potential of the body in society.



## FIGURES



Figg. 1a and 1b, detail. Andrea di Bonaiuto (Andrea da Firenze), *La Chiesa Militante e Trionfante* or *Via Veritatis*, east wall fresco in the Cappellone degli Spagnoli at Santa Maria Novella Florence, c. 1365-1367. Photograph 1a by Tina Dickason, used with permission.



Fig. 2a and 2b, detail. *La Commedia Illumina Firenze* (The Comedy Illuminating Florence), Domenico di Michelino, Florence Cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore, 1465, photograph by John Dickason, used with permission.





Fig. 3. *Commedia* illustration for *Purgatorio* X Northern Italy (Emilia or Padua), early/mid-fourteenth century. © The British Library Board BL Egerton MS. 943 fol. 80<sup>v</sup>, used with permission.  
 Fig. 4. Guardian Angel, Soul of the Pilgrim, Adam, and his descendants around the Tree of Life from Guillaume de Deguileville's *Le Pèlerinage de l'Âme* Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève (Paris), MS 1130, folio 155 cliché IRHT, used with permission.



[Fig. 5. *Commedia* illustration for *Purgatorio* XXXI Northern Italy (Genoa?) late fourteenth century. Oxford Bodleian Library, MS. Holkham misc. 48, Roll 389.2, frame 51. See <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/medieval/jpegs/holkham/misc/48/1500/04800485.jpg>.]

Fig. 6. Dancers from Keeping the Faith / Prison Project, Seattle area, Washington state, c. 2013, photograph by Pat Graney, used with permission.

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In preparing and improving this work, I would like to thank George Hardin Brown, John and Tina Dickason, Mark Franko, Marisa Galvez, Hester Gelber, Josh Gentzke, Pat Graney, Beatrice Kitzinger, Bissera Pentcheva, Janice Ross, the curatorial staff at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève and the British Library, the anonymous peer reviewers, and the editors of *Dante e l'arte*. Lee Yearley was instrumental in refining my theoretical approach to Dante and discipline. I am especially grateful to Beth Coggeshall, whose expertise, generosity, and friendship nurtured this project from its inception.