

Dante: *Convivio*

A Dual-Language Critical Edition

Dante's *Convivio*, composed in exile between 1304 and 1307, is a series of self-commentaries on three of Dante's long poems. These allegorical love poems and philosophical verse become the basis for philosophical, literary, moral, and political exposition. The prose is written in Italian so that those who were not educated in Latin could take part in what Dante called his "banquet of knowledge." In this edition, eminent Dante translator-scholar Andrew Frisardi offers the first fully annotated translation of the work into English, with an extensive introduction, making Dante's often complex writings accessible to scholars and students. The parallel Italian text is also included for the first time in an English translation of the *Convivio*. Readers of this work can gain a strong understanding of the philosophical themes across Dante's work, including the *Divine Comedy*, as well as the logic, politics, and science of his time.



Frontispiece. Woodcut portrait of Dante from the title page of *Lo amoroso co[n]vivio di Dante: con la additione: Novamente stampato* (Venetia: Zuane Antonio & fradelli da Sabio, 1521). Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

Dante: *Convivio*

A Dual-Language Critical Edition

Edited and translated by
Andrew Frisardi



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In memory of my mother
MARIE SALLY FRISARDI CLEARY

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Translator's Preface

Any translator of Dante's *Convivio* is likely to feel somewhat disheartened at the passage in Book I where Dante writes about the value of translating poetry: "Everyone should know that nothing harmonized by a musical bond can be changed over from its own language into another without breaking all its sweetness and harmony." I exonerate myself in advance for whatever I have broken in my translations of the poems in this book. My goal in translating them has been to stay true to their sense and technique, while making them pleasurable as verse in English. The canzoni in the *Convivio* were written several years before the *Convivio* itself, but when they are published together with Dante's prose commentary on them, which constitutes the bulk of this book, the translator faces an unusual challenge. Since Dante's commentary relies on precise meanings and terminology, and often directly quotes the poems to make an argument, the verse translator cannot take as many liberties with the translation as he or she might do with a poem that stands alone. The literal sense has to trump the aesthetic or poetic when a compromise is necessary. My goal throughout, however, and surely a Dantean aspiration at that, always has been to blend semantics and aesthetics. To provide alternate readings and shades of meaning, and because the specific meanings of the poems are so important to the *Convivio* as a whole, I have also placed literal prose translations of the poems in the appendix to this volume. My metrical, rhyming verse translations of the canzoni appear at the start of each treatise.

My approach to translating the prose has been similar to my work on the poems: to make a readable version that does not ignore or smooth over the original's considerable complexity. I have wanted to remain as faithful as possible to Dante's text, of course; and I have always tried to make the English prose clear and fluid enough to be followed by an educated contemporary reader, while registering the style of writing that marks the original as the product of a wholly different culture – an entirely different collective state of mind, in fact. At times, though not usually, I divided longer sentences into two sentences of translated text, if the original's length did not seem integral to the thought it expresses. Most of Dante's longer, tortuous sentences, however, express long, tortuous trains of thought, and I aimed to replicate that as much as possible. I frequently consulted earlier translations of the *Convivio*, especially Richard Lansing's and often also those of

Christopher Ryan and Philip Wicksteed. On the occasions where I consciously adopted the phrasing of another translator, I acknowledge this in the notes.

Dante's verbatim quotes from the three canzoni of the *Convivio* are given in italics in the prose the first time they appear in each chapter, and in quotes thereafter. Wherever possible I have used the wording from my verse translations for these quotations. When, in a few scattered places, my verse translation was not precise enough in the literal sense for a given quotation in a particular context, I have used the wording from the literal prose translations of the poems in the appendix. These exceptions to the rule, in italics as well, are placed in square brackets. Dante also at times paraphrases his own canzone passage, rather than quoting verbatim, or repeats a quotation in a given chapter, and in these cases I use quotation marks instead of italics.

The text I have followed is the one established by Franca Brambilla Ageno, published by Le Lettere in Florence in 1995. I have adopted American-style punctuation for the Ageno text and made a few minor style adjustments to coordinate it with the translated text (for example, text that Ageno gives in italics to indicate conjectured spellings and words, I have reproduced in roman font). Other divergences from Ageno are acknowledged in the notes. Lacunae in Ageno's edition are indicated by brackets enclosing a string of ellipsis points, or (in the translation) by conjectured text which I have adopted from other editions, mentioned in the notes. For the sake of readability, in the translation I have left out the brackets that Ageno places around emended text; and again for readability, since there are about a thousand bracketed emendations in Ageno, the omitted brackets are *not* mentioned in my notes.

When the reader opens any densely annotated Italian edition of the *Convivio*, he or she encounters quote after quote from Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, and many other scholastic sources. These are given in Latin, which means that an already remote text, unlikely to be sought after except by Dante aficionados, students, and scholars, is relegated still further to the realm of the inaccessible to the large majority of readers. This has always struck me as ironic given Dante's express purpose in the *Convivio*: to make learning accessible for those who did not have time to learn Latin and other scholastic basics. All quotations in this edition are given in English translation; the original language is included

only when a specific textual point needs to be made, or for quotations from Dante's and others' poetry. When primary texts are quoted, the purpose is to shed necessary light on a given passage, directly relevant to the reader's experience of the text at that juncture; or to draw attention to some specific verbal usage. Often I cite just chapter and verse of primary sources, for readers wishing to follow up on texts which shed light on the subject or line of thought that Dante is discussing.

I have translated Dante's "uomo" and "uomini" sometimes as "man" or "men" and sometimes as "person" or "people" or "human" or "human beings," depending on the context. It is not always feasible or appropriate to force Dante's usage to fit twenty-first-century standards. *Man* in the generic sense is a metaphysical category or entity, actually a *kingdom* in Dante's thought, while *human being* and *human* have a more anthropological, evolutionary, or concrete shade of meaning. Also, I have tried to keep to a minimum the possessive "his or her" or other gender-neutral phrasings that would encumber Dante's prose.

My principal aim in the notes has been to provide factual, linguistic, and other information about Dante's text and what it discusses – enough to facilitate the general reader's and scholar's access to the *Convivio* and the culture behind it. They serve to provide everything that the reader will need to make sense of Dante's text, follow its arguments, and at least begin to see how it fits into its cultural and historical context. To keep the notes from being overlong and convoluted, I have followed a few guidelines. First, although the notes are heavily indebted to the Italian commentaries, in particular drawing on those of Giovanni Busnelli, Cesare Vasoli, and Gianfranco Fioravanti, I have cited a commentator directly only where he or she has been uniquely responsible for an important textual emendation or the identification of a previously unidentified but crucial source, or for a particularly fine or unique insight or formulation about the *Convivio*. More global points or statements of widespread consensus, or common citations of Dante's source texts or influences, are not cited by name. Likewise, for the sake of concision and readability, I do not call out my own original comments and insights in the notes; and my citations from the *Enciclopedia dantesca* and the *Dante Encyclopedia* provide only the *voce*, or name of the entry, leaving out the author's name unless there is some specific reason to draw attention to it.

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Without a Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, this project would not have been possible, or at least would have taken much, much longer to complete. My heartfelt thanks to Edward Hirsch, president of the Foundation, for his support and interest; also to the Foundation's Committee of Selection and the Board of Trustees for entrusting me with the generous award.

I am deeply grateful as well to Steven Botterill for his support and advice on this project. His sage counsel on the particulars of my manuscript has been invaluable, helping me to prioritize and order my notes and introduction, cutting extraneous material and increasing the focus wherever the text was diffuse or unclear.

Rosanna Warren's endorsement of my translation work over the years has been a major boon for me, and this project has been no exception. Thanks are due also to Jonathan Galassi for his support of this project and of projects in the past.

Various scholars have been more generous with their time than I had any right to expect. I thank Zygmunt Barański, Teodolinda Barolini, Simon Gilson, and Christian Moevs for sharing their insights, recommendations, and unpublished articles with me at various stages during my work on the *Convivio*; with special thanks to Professors Barolini and Moevs for their support early on in the project. As my bibliography demonstrates, the work of many other Dante scholars has been invaluable to my research and translation. Very often, I have benefited from contemporary scholars' *prontezza di liberalitate* in the form of online sharing of their articles, both published and unpublished. I especially would like to acknowledge Gianfranco Fioravanti, whose rich introduction to his edition to the *Convivio* was available to everyone well before the book was published, and whose vast erudition in the area of medieval scholasticism has been a key source for me.

My debt to previous translations of the *Convivio* is great, in particular that of Richard Lansing. The translations of Christopher Ryan and Philip Wicksteed have also been valuable for considering alternative interpretations and wordings of many passages.

My heartfelt thanks go to Brian Keeble for suggesting and to his Golgonooza Foundation for funding the publication of my 2014 lectures at the Temenos Academy in London, under the title *The Quest for Knowledge*

in Dante's "Convivio," for which Brian was the designer. The text of this booklet, revised, forms much of two parts of the introduction in the present volume. I have been extremely fortunate to benefit from Brian's skill and generosity. Thanks to the Academy for permission to reprint.

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For comments on my translations of the three canzoni in the *Convivio*, I benefited from insights of poets at the online forum of *Able Muse*, Eratosphere, which is owned and operated by Alex Pepple. My thanks to Alex for all he has done to make that medium available, and to all the poets who commented there on my translations, especially Adam Elgar, Don Jones, Siham Karami, and Edward Zuk.

The *Temenos Academy Review* and *Able Muse* published earlier versions of some of my translations in this book, for which I thank the editors of those journals.

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This book is dedicated to my mother, who passed away suddenly during the early phases of my work on it. As always, she had been warm and encouraging about my projected work plans. It is from her that I learned that only study approached as an *animo innamorato* really matters.

My wife, Daphne, not only has managed to bear with me through the years when I was preoccupied with the *Convivio* but has been unfailingly supportive and generous in helping me with this work. For that and everything else, I could never thank her enough.

Figures

- Frontispiece. Woodcut portrait of Dante from the title page of *Lo amoroso co[n]uiuio di Dante: con la additione: Novamente stampato* (Venetia: Zuane Antonio & fradelli da Sabio, 1521). Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library. *page ii*
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Introduction

The *Convivio*: A Portrait

At the start of the *Convivio*, Dante sets a supreme value on the place of knowledge in human life, echoing Aristotle's teaching that knowledge is the "ultimate perfection of our soul, in which our ultimate happiness resides." This, Dante affirms, is why all human beings naturally desire to know. One apparent contradiction to this claim, of course, is that people often seem much more inclined to wallow in ignorance than to seek knowledge and understanding. Dante divides into two categories the causes for this gap between essential reality and everyday experience: impediments to knowledge that come from outside individuals, and impediments that come from inside individuals. The latter include physical defects and mental addictions or false attachments; the former "civic and domestic concerns" and the accidents of destiny.¹ Since so many people are kept from knowledge by at least one of these four impediments, there are few remaining "who sit at the meal where the bread of angels is eaten"; most are reduced to sharing their food "with sheep."²

The good news, Dante adds, is that those who have achieved some degree of knowledge "are not without compassion toward those they see going around eating grass and acorns on the feeding grounds of animals," the ordinarily ignorant and sense-bound multitudes.³ Since Dante is one who has achieved some knowledge, having earned it the hard way and been there himself when it comes to eating the grass and acorns of ignorance, he in fact feels this compassion and wishes to share what he has learned. He mentions that some time earlier he had already started on this project of sharing knowledge, but what he offered to others at that time – doctrinal or ethical poems written years before the *Convivio* prose – "left them wanting more" because the canzoni (long lyrical poems) were not especially easy to understand, couched as they were in allegory.⁴ He realizes that he has to explain and elaborate upon them. His plan for this work, then, is to compose fifteen *trattati*, or treatises (usually referred to in English as

“books”), including an initial introductory book. Each of the fourteen principal books – only three of these would actually be composed – was to be based on a different Dante canzone, which would be interpreted and commented upon.⁵ Like his youthful work the *Vita nova*, in other words, the *Convivio* is a prosimetrum or combination of prose and poetry – a form well suited to Dante, who as much as any author imaginable orchestrated how his readers would respond to and understand his writing.⁶ The work is called a *convivio*, or banquet, because Dante pictures it as a communal meal of knowledge; each book will be a separate course in this banquet, where the poems are the food and the self-commentary the bread.⁷ The banquet will not be for professional philosophers or theologians, but for human beings who simply wish to realize human nature, which desires to know. Dante himself is not one of the learned elite, but a man who gathers what falls from the table of the learned, to share it with those still mired in “the wretched life . . . I left behind.”⁸ In modern terms, Dante intends this work to be for a “non-academic” audience, for whom “merely academic” means of restricted intellectual interest and having little relation to the real world. As we will see, the *Convivio* aims for an *integration* of knowledge that is difficult to imagine from the post-Enlightenment perspective, for which knowledge generally is partitioned into areas of specialization with little epistemological common ground.

But before Dante can continue with his project, he has to clarify a few things about himself and this work, a common procedure in medieval commentary, known as the *accessus ad auctores*, where the commentator of classical, biblical, or legal texts placed an introduction before the main work to provide information about the author and the work itself.⁹ First, Dante says, he must “purify” the bread of his commentary by explaining two incidental flaws in it: that he will be talking about himself in the course of the text (medieval convention generally discouraged this); and that although this work is supposed to be explaining certain things, the text itself will need some explaining (as the annotations to this book abundantly attest).¹⁰ As Dante states in chapters ii to iv of Book I, both of these characteristics of the text are meant to defend him as a man and poet whose reputation has been compromised by the ignominy of exile, and who has been forced to wander from court to court after having lost his possessions and his formerly high social standing.

The rest of Book I is a defense of using vernacular Florentine for the commentary – a “blemish” in the bread, Dante says, that is more substantial than the two he has just explained.¹¹ For his contemporaries such a defense

would have been necessary, since the *Convivio* was the first extended original work in a European vernacular to treat philosophical subjects in depth. There are three fundamental justifications, says Dante, for choosing the vernacular instead of Latin. First, it would not have been appropriate to write a Latin commentary on a vernacular poem, since Latin is superior in terms of nobility, virtue, and beauty.¹² Second, to use the vernacular is an act of generosity, since not everyone who can understand the Florentine can read Latin, so the use of vernacular is more consistent with Dante's aim in the *Convivio* of spreading the love of knowledge.¹³ As an act of liberal giving, he wants to make this philosophical work accessible to those who desire knowledge and learning but are too busy with social responsibilities to seek them out.¹⁴ And third, it is good to use the vernacular because every person naturally loves his or her mother tongue.¹⁵

I should note here that Dante's mode of discussion in this passage, as often in the *Convivio*, is argument by analogy, rooted in Aristotelian theory.¹⁶ Dante says that since he loves his vernacular tongue, he can explain why he chose to use it for the *Convivio* by specifying the three things that natural love always motivates a lover to do: "the first is to aggrandize the loved thing; the second is to be fearful for it; the third is to defend it, as one sees happen repeatedly." And these are the very three things that made him "choose it – our vernacular – which I love and have loved naturally and incidentally."¹⁷ Similarly, in chapter xi of Book III, where Dante has established that the philosopher is a "friend" of wisdom, he says that some insight into the activity of the philosopher can be gained by considering the general principles of friendship, gleaned from Aristotle and Cicero. And there are many other instances of this line of thinking: a procedure that aims to clarify an argument by expanding references through *qualitative* correspondences (or analogies) between things that are unrelated from a modern, quantitative perspective.¹⁸

In any case, with Dante's use of the vernacular in the *Convivio*, he is at the forefront of a cultural shift whereby the knowledge of the schools is being reoriented toward a project of ethical-political reform.¹⁹ This historical detail is consistent with Dante's specifying of ethics as the highest of sciences apart from theology; just as Roger Bacon, who was engaged in a moral and cultural reform of Christian society fifty years earlier, had placed ethics at the highest position. Dante in the *Convivio* assumes the authority of the university *magistri*, even as he intentionally aims for an audience outside the university culture. Book I concludes, referring to the "non litterati" for whom Dante is writing: "This will be a new light, a new sun, which will

rise where the customary sun will be setting, and it will give its light to those who are in darkness and obscurity, because the customary sun does not shine for them.”²⁰ As already mentioned, Dante himself tells us who these people are: individuals who are kept from learning by the *impedimenta* of physical disabilities, bad habits, or lack of initiative, and above all those whose time and energy are taken up with civic and family duties. This last obstacle, the exigencies of life, is one that was generally neglected in university culture, as it often still is, and Dante’s emphasis on it separates him from the professional *magistri*. As he puts it polemically in Book I: “For the mind’s goodness, upon which this service attends, dwells in those who, due to the world’s evil neglect, have left learning up to men who have made a prostitute out of a lady; and these nobles are princes, barons, knights, and many other noble people, not only male but female, among whom there are many in this language who use the vernacular and are not learned.”²¹ His aim is practical: to make his banquet “as useful as possible throughout.”²² Dante’s project in the *Convivio*, then, similar to that in the *Divine Comedy*, is a restoration of the just order of *humana civilitas*, with a collaboration between imperial authority and philosophical wisdom as its basis. At the same time, his own personal regeneration and exoneration are figured in the social vision, just as Dante’s personal, earthly exile is referenced when the pilgrim souls in *Purgatorio* sing the opening of the psalm *In exitu Israël de Aegypto*, “When Israel went out of Egypt.”²³

Books II and III form a unit focusing on Dante’s new love for philosophy after Beatrice’s death, which had been narrated about ten years earlier in the *Vita nova*. At the beginning of Book II, Dante discusses his use of allegory, explaining that he will give a literal interpretation for each canzone before the allegorical one.²⁴ In connection with the literal sense or evident subject matter of the canzone *Voi che ’ntendendo il terzo ciel movete* (All you who, knowing, make the Third Sphere [heaven] move), Dante discusses such subjects as astronomy; angelology; the conflicting thoughts between his old love for Beatrice and his new love for the so-called Donna Gentile (Noble Lady) or Philosophy; and the immortality of the soul – all of these subjects deriving from the need to explain and amplify the poem’s literal content. The discussion of the soul’s immortality arises in connection with Dante’s last mention of Beatrice in the *Convivio* – the last, in fact, until the *Divine Comedy*.²⁵ Book III is a polyphonic hymn of praise for Philosophy, occasioned by an interpretation of Dante’s great canzone *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona* (Love, who speaks to me in my mind). The dialogue of conflicting thoughts between the old love and the new love, examined in Book II,

has resolved into considerations that are focused on Donna Gentile–Lady Philosophy alone. On the literal level, this canzone is a love poem about a lady whose beauty and nobility are beyond words or even the mind’s ability to conceive her qualities. The sun in its daily trajectory over the earth sees nothing as noble as she is, the celestial Intelligences gaze down upon her admiringly, and a divine influx of emanatory power flows into her. The literal exposition of the canzone, then, includes a discussion of the nature of love; the noble powers of the soul; the ineffableness of the beauty and virtue of the beloved, Philosophy, as well as the inability of Dante to do justice to them in words; the astronomy of the sun’s apparent motions and the resulting providential cycles of light and dark; the theophanic emanation of the creation; and other mighty themes.

In both these books, the first two-thirds of the exposition are taken up with the literal commentary on their respective canzoni, while the final third is given to the allegorical meanings of the poems.²⁶ As Dante explains, the literal level of the poem is “fictive” (“fittizia”) and so needs to be interpreted for its real sense;²⁷ just as, in life, outward appearances have to be “read” for their inward significance. For example, in his commentary on *Voi che ’ntendendo*, Dante must explain whom he is addressing when he says, “All you who . . . move the third heaven” (he is addressing the angelic Intelligences), as well as the Ptolemaic cosmology implied by “third heaven” (which refers to the sphere of Venus). On an allegorical level, near the end of Book II Dante states that these movers of the heaven of Venus, which he associates with the persuasive power of rhetoric, are none other than Boethius and Cicero, whose *parola ornata* (finely crafted language) and high themes had moved Dante to the love of philosophy. In addition, the art of rhetoric, which these authors exemplify, is represented by the “rays” of Venus, which shed light on any subject that is artfully addressed, “so that in each field of knowledge writing is a star full of light which manifests that field of knowledge.”²⁸ In the allegorical exposition for *Amor che nella mente* in the final third of Book III, Dante elucidates what the name *philosophy* actually signifies and what constitutes a true philosopher. He also explains that the image of the sun in the poem is a figure for God, that the figure of Love represents the study which the philosophical seeker is committed to out of love for Philosophy, that the eyes of Philosophy are philosophy’s demonstrations or proofs while her smile is her persuasive arguments, and other details.

The subject of Book IV, by far the longest of the *Convivio*, is the nature of nobility. This book opens with the canzone *Le dolci rime d’amor ch’i’ solia* (Those sweet love poems which I used to), which, rather than being allegorical

like the other canzoni in the *Convivio*, is expository and explicit. This canzone, as well as all of Book IV, is written in the form of a scholastic *quaestio*, or formal discussion and analysis *pro* and *contra* a given thesis. The first half of Book IV's thirty chapters is dedicated to debunking the false idea of nobility as "antica possession d'avere / con reggimenti belli" ("old possession of wealth along with refined bearing"),²⁹ while the final fifteen chapters delineate what true nobility consists of and how nobility manifests in people at various stages of life.³⁰ As Dante writes about his procedure: "This is the manner followed by the master of human reason, Aristotle, who always first opposed the adversaries of truth; then, having prevailed over them, he presented the truth."³¹

More will be said about the contents of these three books later in the introduction, but it should be mentioned here that some scholars have argued that there is an ideological, stylistic, and thematic gap or caesura between Books III and IV, as well as an interval of a year or so between their composition, during which time Dante wrote his unfinished linguistic treatise, *De vulgari eloquentia* (On Eloquence in the Vernacular). In this view, the textual change is symptomatic of a departure for Dante from earlier opinions he had held when he wrote the first three books: Dante has become more Thomist in Book IV, more skeptical about the possibilities of fulfillment through purely natural knowledge.³² Certainly, since Book IV is in the form of a *quaestio*, with much less allegorical material, there is a marked change in tone between it and Book III. But there is more continuity between the books than the foregoing interpretation suggests. The themes of contemplative felicity developed in Book III are taken to the next level in Book IV by considering "the effects of that felicity, the moral and intellectual virtues through which the human *summum bonum* can be recognised and defined."³³ In other words, Book IV can be read as an *indirect* praise of Philosophy and her effects on the lover of wisdom. In fact, Dante's commentary on the canzone for Book IV opens with a restatement of his love for Philosophy, a follow-up to the praise of Philosophy in Book III; and the end of Book IV states that the association between philosophy and nobility is so intimate that "Philosophy casts not her sweet glance anywhere else" but at her friend, Nobility.³⁴

Not only is the *Convivio* unfinished in terms of the contents that Dante had projected for it, but its text was probably never fully polished for a reading public. It is likely that the manuscript remained among Dante's private papers during his lifetime, finding its first readers only in the decade after his death in 1321.³⁵ Since there are scattered references to it in some of

the earliest commentaries to the *Divine Comedy*, and there is a verified Trecento codex of the *Convivio*, it is certain that this early audience existed, however small.³⁶ The three canzoni in the *Convivio* were widely known, separately from Dante's commentary on them in this book – Boccaccio, for example, includes them in the order in which they appear in the *Convivio*, in his influential compilation of Dante's fifteen *canzoni distese*, or extended canzoni.³⁷ All three of the fourteenth-century commentators who cite the *Convivio* – Dante's son Pietro, the notary Andrea Lancia, and the anonymous author of the so-called *Ottimo commento* – had close personal ties to Dante.³⁸ It has been suggested that the return of the *Convivio* manuscript to Florence, where two of these commentaries were written, was due to Pietro's return to the city a couple of years after Dante's death.³⁹ It is possible that someone made a copy of the work from Dante's scribbled draft, which would have been difficult to read in many passages because of the provisional state of the text. This flawed text in turn would be the basis for all subsequent copies and editions, which have numerous lacunae and other defects.⁴⁰ This early history of the *Convivio* means that it never reached the audience for which it was originally intended: Dante's contemporaries who did not know Latin but who could read and write. Forty-four of the forty-five extant *Convivio* codices are from the Quattrocento, especially from the period 1440 to 1470. The high number of Quattrocento copies is due to Marsilio Ficino's Neoplatonist circle having made it canonical as a work of self-commentary and of philosophy for a general audience, pertinent to Florentine politics – as well as a model for the vernacular.⁴¹ For this reason also it was the first of Dante's "minor" works to be printed, in Florence in 1490; its popularity a short time later is attested by the fact that it is the only *opera minore* that was printed in more than one edition in sixteenth-century Italy. Leonardo da Vinci made use of the *Convivio* in his manuscript notes from the 1490s onward, especially for descriptions of nature.⁴²

The generally accepted dates for the composition of the *Convivio* are circa 1304 to 1307 – in other words, starting about two years after Dante was exiled from Florence.⁴³ Many have pointed out, then, that Dante must have composed the *Convivio* under circumstances that would be unusually challenging for any scholar. Books were unwieldy and would have been difficult to carry around by mule, especially in the mountainous territory of the Apennines. And they were very expensive. All of Dante's possessions were confiscated when he was exiled, so he would not have been able to afford many books. The books that he actually carried around with him necessarily would have been limited in number: perhaps a dozen or so

authors, classical and Christian; an *epitome* of history and one of geography, or a combined historical-geographical overview; a small collection of Provençal, French, and Italian poets; and maybe the *Razos de trobar* (Lives of the Troubadours), by Raimon Vidal de Bezaudun, and the *Summa de viciis et virtutibus* (Summa on the Vices and Virtues), by the Bolognese author Guido Fava.⁴⁴ In his travels in the Veneto and in Verona, soon after his exile from Florence in early 1302,⁴⁵ Dante may have had access to monastic libraries with various philosophical and theological texts; in Lucca in 1308 he could have had at his disposal numerous ecclesiastical and monastic manuscripts, since the city was so rich in them. Many scholars conjecture, too, that Dante visited Bologna on a number of occasions, where (because of its great university) he would have had access to a vast quantity of texts.⁴⁶ Although resources would have been far more limited in the Lunigiana, a region in northern Tuscany far from the centers of learning, where Dante probably stayed from the second half of 1306 until the end of 1307, some have speculated that he composed the later parts of the *Convivio* there.⁴⁷

The *Convivio*, then, is a bridge-text between Dante's years in Florence, where he became famous as the author of lyrical poems and the *Vita nova*, and the culmination of his life's work in the *Divine Comedy*.⁴⁸ In the *Convivio*, Dante translates themes which occupied him from the start – love, knowledge, and nobility – into a new conceptual language. He establishes two fundamental features of his masterwork: the expressive use of the vernacular and the providential mission of the Roman Empire.⁴⁹ Significantly, a key mentor for Dante in the *Convivio*, Brunetto Latini, also wrote in exile to defend his position in relation to the Florentine commune, trying to regain authority with his reading public. Brunetto's *Rettorica* (Rhetoric), a translation and commentary on Cicero's *De inventione* (On Invention) addressed to a non-university audience, discusses not only rhetoric itself but also the themes of philosophy and, as Dante does in Book II of the *Convivio*, the seven liberal arts.⁵⁰ For Brunetto as for Dante, man can realize his nature only as a member of a political community, and the medium for accomplishing this is language – so that rhetoric, as Brunetto learned from Cicero, is an aspect of a “civic science.”⁵¹ With eloquence, provided it is associated with knowledge and virtue, comes civilization and community. This realization is behind Dante's groundbreaking turn to vernacular prose in the *Convivio*, and throughout his poetry, where, as he states in the *Convivio*, he is conscious of “stabilizing” and establishing his mother tongue by “binding” it with meter and rhyme.⁵² And in fact history bears out his claim, since Dante's Florentine would become the basis of modern Italian.

In the *Convivio*, Dante often seems at pains to present himself to the reader as a man of learning – citing authorities in order to assume for himself the function of an *auctoritas*. As he states early in Book I, justifying why his text, which is meant to explain things, is so difficult at times: “it is fitting that through a higher style in the present work I give it a bit of gravitas, by which it may seem to have an air of greater authority.”⁵³ Since “the *Convivio* is... permeated by a polemic against university intellectuals,”⁵⁴ Dante assumes *auctoritas* precisely to undercut their authority. He views the knowledge on offer in universities by his time as having been compromised by the drive for lucre and power.⁵⁵ He expresses his authority by using scholastic techniques in his argument, as he will continue to do in the *Divine Comedy*.⁵⁶ These include the scholastic *quaestio*, referred to above; the *divisio textus*, those enumerated divisions of the text for the purpose of discussion which he also used in the *Vita nova*;⁵⁷ the syllogisms that he inserts into his exposition;⁵⁸ and vernacular calques of standard university-Latin phrases. The latter are pervasive in the prose of the *Convivio*. For example, Dante uses the verb *dichiarare* to mean “to explain, demonstrate,” as in scholastic treatises’ *declarare*; and “al principale intendimento tornando,” from *redeuntes autem ad principale intentum*, which means “to return to the main discussion.” Expressions such as the very frequent “è da sapere che” (“it should be understood that”), and variations on this such as “è da vedere che” and “è da notare che” (“it should be perceived that,” and “it should be noted that”), with which Dante often introduces an observation, echo the Latin formulaic phrases *est sciendum*, *est videndum*, and *est notandum quod*. Likewise, Dante expresses himself as someone endowed with *auctoritas* when he writes, “Alla questione rispondendo, dico” (“In answer to the question, I say”), which is a calque of *Ad quaestionem respondendo dico* – a stock expression used by university *magistri* who had the power and charge of responding to any question raised by students or colleagues.⁵⁹ While technical terms and expressions from scholastic Latin are present also in the *Vita nova*, and in Brunetto’s *Rettorica*, “in the *Convivio* they become a constant factor.”⁶⁰ Importantly, Dante differed from other writers in the vernacular at that time, who expressed regret at having to use common speech to reach their intended audience, since the vernacular for these authors did not have the precision or prestige of Latin for expressing ideas. But Dante does not doubt that his mother tongue is capable of being a medium for the technical language of scholastic philosophy, even if the grammar in the *Convivio* – for example, in its imitation of Latin syntax – is often remote from spoken Florentine.⁶¹ At other times, however, the language is down-to-earth; the *Convivio*, like Dante’s writing in the *Divine Comedy*

although not to the same extent, is “plurilinguistic”; he does not hesitate to juxtapose a technical lexicon with a popular one.⁶² The vocabulary of the *Convivio* is notably rich compared to that of Dante’s other “minor” works; the technical-scientific lexicon that Dante employs constitutes one of the first attempts in the Italian vernacular to appropriate such language.⁶³ For Dante, in short, establishing himself as an *auctoritas* is inseparable from instituting the authority and expressive power of his mother tongue.⁶⁴ The link with the *Divine Comedy* in this regard is obvious, since the great poem was meant to comprise a massive range of human knowledge and experience and was also written in the Florentine vernacular.⁶⁵

In his discussion of the etymology of *autore* (Italian for *auctor*), Dante glosses *auctoritas*: “*autore* in this derivation is used for every person worthy of being believed and obeyed. And from this comes the term which is under discussion here, *autoritade* [Italian for *auctoritas*], authority; thus, we can see that *autoritade* has the sense of ‘a declaration worthy of faith and obedience.’”⁶⁶ The reasons for Dante’s careful attention to his standing as an *auctor* include, not only his position as a man who was undeservedly exiled and socially humiliated, but his aim of making his mother tongue a vehicle that is able to hold its own against Latin as a subtle medium of expression.⁶⁷ This in turn is related to Dante’s practice of self-commentary. To write a commentary on vernacular poems that brings out their philosophical meanings is to place them, implicitly, on a par with the most authoritative classical and medieval authors.⁶⁸

At the same time, the authorities that Dante draws on in the *Convivio* are various, although his citations are often imprecise and apparently from memory, or drawn from anthologies, commentaries, and other secondary sources.⁶⁹ It has been well known for decades that it is impossible to reduce Dante’s philosophical-theological doctrine to that of St. Thomas Aquinas, as some critics had done. Dante was receptive to the many currents of thought in his time; he changed positions and innovated on his sources – he was a creative thinker, in short, whose works were hybrid.⁷⁰ From the opening sentence of the *Convivio*, Aristotle’s influence is central in this work.⁷¹ But Dante blends what he learns from Aristotle with his gleanings from other sources. For example, in Book III, Dante’s treatment of the theme of love and knowledge is heavily influenced by the Neoplatonic thought of Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, and the so-called *Liber de causis*, or *Book of Causes*, as well as by the biblical books attributed to Solomon.⁷² And Dante’s reading of Aristotle comes partly through the filter of St. Albert the Great’s work, which has a Platonizing flavor.⁷³ Besides Aristotle, foremost among

classical authors cited in the *Convivio* are Cicero and Seneca,⁷⁴ as well as the poets Virgil, Ovid, Statius, Lucan, and Juvenal. Other sources referenced by Dante include St. Augustine, who, along with Boethius, provides a precedent for the confessional thrust of the *Convivio*;⁷⁵ Isidore of Seville and Uguccone (or Huguccio) da Pisa, who composed important etymological compendia; Muslim philosophers and scientists such as Alpetragius, Alfraganus, Averroes, Algazali, and Avicenna;⁷⁶ and Dante's contemporary Aegidius Romanus, whose treatise *De regimine principum* (On the Rule of Princes) influences Dante's political thought in Book IV. Also in Book IV, Dante mentions by name the *Summa contra Gentiles* (Summa against the Nonbelievers) of Aquinas, from which he draws the idea of naming the third canzone in the *Convivio* "Contra-li-erranti," or "Contra-the-mistaken."⁷⁷ The Bible is often cited and alluded to, especially Wisdom and Proverbs, the Psalms, and the Gospels.⁷⁸ And one can never underestimate the constant and profound presence in Dante's thought of Christian liturgy, daily prayer, and ritual. Further likely sources for Dante are the encyclopedia by Vincent of Beauvais and the compendium on the virtue and vices by William Perault, as well as *La composizione del mondo* (The Composition of the World), by Ristoro d'Arezzo, the first astronomical treatise in vernacular Italian.⁷⁹ Brunetto Latini has already been mentioned. And as the notes to this book document, there are many other possible sources and influences besides.

Given the great range of references and content in the *Convivio*, it has been common to refer to it as an encyclopedic work similar to others in that genre during the Middle Ages: a *summa* of Dante's cultural references. Certainly his immersion in the Peripatetic tradition stemming from Aristotle, who wrote on nearly every subject imaginable, is already an encyclopedic pursuit.⁸⁰ The encyclopedic ideal was an *imagines mundi*, where books, in their very order and organization of knowledge, were meant to mirror the "book of the universe." We find this mode of thinking in the *Convivio*, for example, in Book II, where human knowledge is seen as analogous to celestial realities, in terms of the correspondences between the planetary spheres and the individual fields of knowledge.⁸¹ However, multiple-topic "encyclopedic" digressions in the *Convivio* are mostly restricted to Books II and III, which in the total plan of the work were probably meant to be introductory expositions. Already in Book IV the digressions are far fewer, so that we might wonder if this would have characterized the work as a whole if Dante had finished it.⁸²

In Dante's time, there were four recognized categories of producers of texts: the *scriptor*, *compiler*, *commentator*, and *auctor* (scribe, compiler,

commentator, and author) each fabricated texts in different ways and with varying degrees of creative input. The compiler went beyond the passive role of the scribe by rearranging, shaping, and imposing *ordinatio* or organization on others' materials, but he did not innovate. He was responsible only for the form he gave to the texts of his *auctoritates*, while the *auctor* was responsible for both the content and the form of the written work. The commentator's role was somewhere in between these two: obviously bound to the text he was commenting upon, but much more active and creative in relation to it than the compiler was.⁸³ As explained above, and as the notes in this book will show, Dante in his composition of the *Convivio* is decidedly innovative and active in his use of *auctoritates*. He was not content with merely using and citing the established authorities; rather, he draws on them to establish his own authoritativeness, living proof of which is the inventive freshness of his "convivial" *compilatio*.⁸⁴

A number of medieval genres have been identified in the *Convivio*. It is not adequate or accurate simply to categorize it as a philosophical treatise; the *Convivio* is too dispersive, especially in the first three books, to fit that description.⁸⁵ Other genres that Dante employs include *artes poetriae* (treatises on poetry and poetics), autobiography, literature of exile, the scholastic *quaestio*, compendia on the virtues and vices, literary criticism, and more.⁸⁶ Even satire is represented, particularly in Book IV, with passages characterized by blunt directness; simple, harsh language; and a derisive attitude toward perceived offenses to justice and morality.⁸⁷

As suggested by the above outline of categories of medieval text production, an established genre of the epoch which would have allowed Dante the freedom to discuss a potentially endless array of topics and to use a plurality of genres was the *comentum*, or commentary.⁸⁸ Dante himself refers to the *Convivio* as a commentary.⁸⁹ His great innovation is that he is an *auctor* (of the canzoni) who is also his own *commentator* – a novel combination in classical and medieval letters.⁹⁰ In addition, he reverses the conventional hierarchy in literary commentary by emphasizing the importance of the commentary itself, rather than presenting it as a humble adjunct to the poems. As he writes about the "food" and "bread" of his banquet: "The food of this banquet will be arranged in fourteen courses, that is fourteen canzoni on the themes of love and virtue, which without the present bread were obscured in shadow, so that many appreciated their beauty more than their goodness. But this bread, the present exposition [i.e., commentary], will be the light which will bring out every color of their meaning."⁹¹ The *Convivio* prose is bold in a number of ways: by including personal elements of the author, by being in the vernacular, and by being voluminous. Indeed,

the commentary dominates so much that the reader is often likely to forget about the canzoni that occasioned it, until Dante himself explicitly mentions the poems. At the same time, all the attention given to the commentary implies that the poems are well worth the labor involved, so the value of the poems is enhanced indirectly. As Dante states in the passage above from Book I, the purpose of the commentary is to inform his readers, who had “appreciated their [the poems’] beauty more than their goodness.”⁹² The tradition of commentary on poetry had long been an important way of affirming the “truth-value” of poetry – its ability to be a source, not only of beauty and emotion but of knowledge and wisdom – so that Virgil, for example, was renowned as a philosopher-sage.⁹³

Not only commentary in general but a specific tradition of medieval *comentum* has been shown to inform the *Convivio*: commentaries on Solomon’s Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom, and especially the *Canticum canticorum* or Song of Songs.⁹⁴ It is not surprising that these books in particular, and their commentaries, would appeal to Dante. The conjunction of love and knowledge, which commentators such as St. Bernard searched for in the Solomonic texts, is a central concern of Dante’s oeuvre from start to finish. Sixteenth-century editions of the *Convivio*, such as the one whose title page is reproduced for the frontispiece of this book, acknowledge this aspect of the *Convivio* by adding the word *amoroso* to the title, making it a Solomonic-Platonic banquet of love and knowledge: an *amoroso convivio*.⁹⁵ The particular combination of *scientia* and *sapientia* that characterizes the *Convivio* is embodied in Dante’s love for Philosophy-Wisdom personified as a woman, to which we will now turn.

Dante and Lady *Philosophia-Sapientia*

Early in the *Convivio*, Dante seems eager to distance himself from his youthful writings in the *Vita nova*. A decade or so of intensely active life has passed since Dante’s composition of his first book. He is now middle-aged and famous both as a lyric poet and as a leading politician of his city, Florence, from which he was exiled a couple of years before he started composing the *Convivio*. Since writing the *Vita nova*, in which he was a poet of love, he has become a poet of ethical and social vision.⁹⁶ As Dante puts it in the *Convivio*, while the *Vita nova* was “fervid and passionate” the present work is “temperate and virile.”⁹⁷

At the same time, close connections between the two works are clear as well. Near the start of the *Convivio*, the final episodes of the *Vita nova* provide background material. A crucial occurrence in the *Vita nova* is the

death of Beatrice. Dante's shock of recognition of what her impending death means occurs at exactly the center of the middle poem of that book – like a hinge between life before Beatrice's death and life after her death. Dante refers to Beatrice's death also in the *Convivio*, where he says it is the crisis in his life that led him to the study of philosophy, which he personifies as a woman he fell in love with. His love of her is his consolation for the loss of Beatrice. When Beatrice died, he writes, "I was pierced by such profound suffering that nothing could comfort me. However, after some time had passed, my mind, which was attempting to heal, turned, since neither my own nor others' consolation had made any difference, to the means that a certain disconsolate person had adopted for consoling himself."⁹⁸

The disconsolate person mentioned here of course is Boethius, whose *De consolazione philosophiae* (On the Consolation of Philosophy) tells of Boethius's rising above the most adverse circumstances through philosophical contemplation, personified as Lady Philosophy.⁹⁹ Dante tells us that at this time he also read Cicero's *De amicitia* (On Friendship), in which a man named Laelius, whose friend Scipio has died, claims that the soul does not perish at death. Rather, following the great philosophers and oracles of antiquity, he thinks that our soul has a divine origin and destination, and that after death the soul returns to heaven. So, he says, death did not actually destroy his bond of affection with his friend.¹⁰⁰ Dante writes in the *Convivio* that these works of Boethius and Cicero not only comforted him in his grief but led him to a newfound passion for philosophy:

And as it can happen sometimes that a man goes in search of silver and serendipitously finds gold, which a hidden cause presents, I, perhaps not without divine authority, in trying to console myself, found not only the remedy for my tears but words of authors, fields of knowledge, and books. Considering these, I determined then and there that philosophy... was a supreme thing. And I imagined her as a gracious lady, and I could not imagine her in any comportment that was not merciful; so that my truth-sense gazed on her so willingly that I could barely turn it away from her.¹⁰¹

The merciful quality that Dante says was intrinsic to philosophy, personified as a woman, is characteristic also of a beautiful woman who appears near the end of the *Vita nova*, after Beatrice's death: the so-called Donna Gentile, or gracious or noble lady, whose compassionate expression comforts Dante. Here is the scene in the *Vita nova*. The phrase "some time later"

at the beginning of the passage means that this episode takes place a little after the one-year anniversary of Beatrice's death:

Some time later, in a place where I was reminiscing on the past, I was so beset by anguish and painful thoughts that I was unable to hide this horrible turmoil. Becoming self-conscious about my tormented state, I raised my eyes to see if anyone was watching me. Then I saw a gracious woman, young and very beautiful, who was watching me from her window so compassionately, to judge by her look, that all compassion seemed gathered in her.¹⁰²

The bereaved poet becomes infatuated with this compassionate lady, only to find that this new love conflicts with his loyalty to the memory of Beatrice, who is now in heaven. In the *Vita nova*, the struggle between the new love and the old is depicted as one between the heart, which favors the new love, and reason, which defends the old love. "Heart" in this case, Dante tells us, means "appetite," or will. Finally, a powerful vision of Beatrice as she was when they first met in childhood moves Dante to renounce the new love. Near the end of the *Vita nova*, he repudiates his love for the Donna Gentile and entrusts himself completely to Beatrice in glory among the blessed souls in Paradise. He tells us he plans to commit himself to studying and to developing his skills to the point at which he will be capable of writing about Beatrice as no woman has ever before been written about. And the *Divine Comedy* is proof that he was good as his word.

Yet apparently things were not so simple, since, to the consternation of Dante scholars ever since, Dante says in the *Convivio* that the gracious lady who had temporarily eclipsed Beatrice in the *Vita nova* was none other than Philosophy herself. Dante explains, using the cycles of Venus as his measure of time, that he met the Donna Gentile, or Philosophy, exactly three years and seventy-two days after Beatrice's death on June 8, 1290, adding: "she was so moved by mercy over my widowed life that the spirits of my eyes became great friends of hers."¹⁰³

Much has been written about the discrepancies between Dante's account of the Donna Gentile in the *Vita nova* and his account of her in the *Convivio*.¹⁰⁴ For example, in the *Vita nova* passage I just quoted, he sees the Donna Gentile only a little while after the first anniversary of Beatrice's death, while in the *Convivio* passage I referred to, he says that more than three years had elapsed since her death. Also, readers have asked why the Donna Gentile is supplanted by Beatrice at the end of the *Vita nova* and is said there to be the "avversario de la ragione," or "adversary of reason";¹⁰⁵

while in the *Convivio* the Donna Gentile supplants the memory of Beatrice. And, of course, since she is Philosophy herself, in the philosophical *Convivio* she can hardly be viewed in any obvious sense as an adversary of reason. The *Convivio* proper opens with the canzone *Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete*, which describes the transfer of Dante's love, after Beatrice's death, to the Donna Gentile. Exactly as he does in the *Vita nova*, and as was common in Tuscan love poetry in general, Dante dramatizes the conflict as a battle of thoughts – the thought of the new beloved, Philosophy, and that of Beatrice, which, he says, was still holding “the citadel of my mind.”¹⁰⁶ None of the theories or explanations for these discrepancies are definitive, and it seems likely that we will never know with certainty what accounts for them.

Since Dante did not always speak in allegory we do know that he studied philosophy after Beatrice's death and that this study was hardly merely bookish and cerebral. Rather, precisely because Dante saw love as *intrinsic* to true philosophy – actually, he says outright that love is the *soul* of philosophy,¹⁰⁷ while wisdom or knowledge is its *body*¹⁰⁸ – its effect on him was transformative and all-encompassing. Whatever else she might signify, the Donna Gentile or Philosophy embodies and bears this love, as Beatrice in the *Vita nova* is the vessel for Dante's initiation into love as self-transcendence and intimation of beatitude.

As we have seen, after Beatrice's death, Dante read Boethius and Cicero. Boethius was especially dear to him.¹⁰⁹ The *Consolation of Philosophy* is an extended dialogue between Boethius, who is in prison on an unjust charge of high treason, for which he would be tortured and executed, and the allegorical figure of Lady Philosophy. Boethius depicts Philosophy as a great comforter and guide of human existence. By the time Dante wrote the *Convivio*, he too had been unjustly persecuted by his political enemies, which led to his exile from Florence. He identified not only with Boethius's misfortune but also with his transcending of adversity by turning to Truth. Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy* addresses questions of fortune and happiness, of evil, free will, and divine providence. As Boethius says in the final lines of a poem in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, human beings would be blessed if our minds were governed by the love that rules the heavens: he writes, “O happy race of men, if only Love who rules the sky also ruled your minds”¹¹⁰ – lines which Dante will quote in his tractate on monarchy, and which are echoed in the famous conclusion to Dante's *Paradiso*: “l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle” (“the love that moves the sun and the other stars”).¹¹¹ Moreover, Dante learned from Boethius, as well as from other philosophers, the satisfaction to be gained by applying thought to an

inquiry into the nature and causes of things; the truth behind appearances; and the relation between eternity, divine providence, and human freedom. Dante became an “amatore di sapienza,” as he puts it in the *Convivio*,¹¹² a “lover of wisdom,” whose goal, he adds, was “that supreme delight which suffers no interruption or defect, that is, true happiness, which is obtained through contemplation of truth.”¹¹³

Dante’s Donna Gentile in the *Convivio* is reminiscent of Boethius’s Lady Philosophy, but Boethius does not represent her, as Dante does his personification of philosophy, as the *lover* of all true philosophers.¹¹⁴ In addition, the Donna Gentile is, like the biblical *Sapientia* or Wisdom in the writings attributed to Solomon, the companion of God from eternity, but Boethius’s Lady Philosophy seems more separate from the eternal and God.¹¹⁵ Medieval commentators of Boethius – recalling St. Augustine’s conviction that true philosophy and true religion are the same thing – had often identified his Lady Philosophy with *Sapientia* in the wisdom books of the Bible. They referred to her as the mother of both wisdom and mercy.¹¹⁶ This association with *Sapientia* was influential on Dante’s conception of Philosophy, as it was on other writers in Dante’s time.¹¹⁷ As usual, however, Dante profoundly transforms his models. He adds to his depiction of Philosophy the praise of the lady-beloved that was standard in the love poetry of his time, and he introduces her as a way to share with others his own personal experience with philosophy.¹¹⁸ While the scholars of Paris or Bologna praised Philosophy but did not themselves ever appear in their own narratives, Dante turns his treatise, especially Books I and II, into an autobiography. He is a convert to philosophy and his story of conversion is a personal one.¹¹⁹

In addition to reading Cicero and Boethius, at about the time he was writing or finishing the *Vita nova*, in the mid-1290s, Dante attended the Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian schools in Florence.¹²⁰ He read essential theological and philosophical texts, often in the form of compendia or commentaries, and mastered the concepts, technical terms, and modes of argument of scholastic philosophy. He studied logic, mathematics, metaphysics, astronomy, optics, physiology, embryology, ethics, history, and political science. By the time he was thirty years old, these studies were established enough to be source material for his writing for the rest of his life – as the *Divine Comedy* attests. Dante was eclectic in his use of materials, not systematic as were his masters such as Aquinas or Augustine. As Marsilio Ficino would characterize him, Dante was “by profession, a poetic philosopher,”¹²¹ although most modern readers probably would reverse the order and call him a philosophical poet.

A work that was formative for Dante, and one whose spirit pervades the *Convivio*, is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹²² Aristotle addresses such questions in the *Ethics* as: What do human beings need to be truly happy? How do we become virtuous? What is the good and how do we attain it? Aristotle teaches that right choices are based on knowledge, not opinion, and well-being or happiness is not a matter of luck or fortune. So highly did Dante consider the love of truth and its ethical application that he poured scorn on those who studied jurisprudence, medicine, and theology simply for the sake of a livelihood and a prominent social position.¹²³

In 1302, a few years after Dante had completed his apprenticeship to philosophy, his political enemies sent him into exile from Florence, never to return. This bereavement was a death on a social level that surely rivaled or surpassed the grief he felt after losing Beatrice. For a period, early on in his exile, Dante tried to stay active in the politics of the political party of which he was a leading figure. The futility of political bickering eventually led him to abandon politics, to turn to *meta*-politics in his writing – a party all to himself, as he says in *Paradiso*.¹²⁴ By 1304 he was probably at work on the *Convivio*, in part to seek consolation through philosophy for the loss of his homeland and for political disappointments, as the *Vita nova* had been written to come to terms with the death of Beatrice.

Dante wanted to pass on to his audience of those engaged in practical life not only his philosophical insights but his abiding love for philosophy. Since the acquisition of wisdom requires everything we are, body and soul, the philosopher must love wisdom like a beloved who occupies his thoughts day and night. As Dante puts it in the *Convivio*:

My second love began with the merciful face of a woman. This love, then, finding the life within me open to its burning, lit up like a fire from a small flame to a large one; so that not only when I was awake but also when I was sleeping, her light was conducted into my head. And how great the desire was which Love instilled in me to see her can be neither expressed in words nor understood... Oh, how many nights there were when the eyes of other people were at rest, sleeping, while mine gazed steadily into the abode of my love! And just as a fire that has spread also wishes to be seen without, since it is impossible to stay hidden, a wish to talk about love came over me which was completely uncontainable.¹²⁵

Dante is quite specific about what he means when he says that the light of Philosophy's love filled his head. He writes that the mind or intellect

is not only the highest part of the soul but *deitade*, deity, and this, as he puts it, “is the place where . . . Love speaks to me about my lady.”¹²⁶ In other words, philosophy is associated with the essential core of the human being, the intellectual soul, which is made in the image of God. Philosophy is the reflexive love of intellect. The philosophizing soul, Dante writes, “does not only contemplate the truth, but, moreover, contemplates its own contemplation and the beauty of that contemplation as well, turning back upon itself and falling in love with itself through the beauty of its first gaze.”¹²⁷

In one passage in Book III, Dante describes the characteristic loves of the various levels of creation. Plants love the places where they flourish. Animals love not only their natural habitats, but each other. In the case of human beings, explains Dante, the intellectual soul gives us the possibility of comprehending the loves of all degrees of being, including those of plants and animals. As Dante writes, voicing a commonplace of medieval theology: “Human beings have their proper love for perfect and dignified things. And since man . . . has divine nature within himself, he can and does have [within himself] all . . . loves” of the various levels of creation.¹²⁸ It is possible that Dante’s view of this partly draws on the Hermetic treatise *Asclepius*, which he could have known either directly or through its frequent mention by Thomas Aquinas’s teacher, Albert the Great. In the *Asclepius* human beings are referred to as a *magnum miraculum*, a great miracle, who, although formed of the substance of mind, are given a “worldly sheath” or physical body by God so that we may love the created universe.¹²⁹ So, our proper love, which also enables us to comprehend all the levels of creation, is found in that highest part of the soul where Philosophy or Wisdom dwells: the intellectual soul.

The great canzone that opens Book III of the *Convivio* starts with the line *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona*, “Love, who talks and reasons with me in my mind.” Commenting on this line, Dante explains what he means by “love”: “Love, taken in its true sense and considered subtly, is simply the spiritual union of the soul with the beloved thing: toward which union the soul goes by its very nature, swiftly or slowly according to whether it is free or impeded.”¹³⁰ This definition echoes a passage in Aquinas: “Love . . . is a kind of union of the lover and what is loved, since the lover regards the beloved object as himself.”¹³¹ In his theory of love, Dante also draws on the Neoplatonic notions of the *Book of Causes*, which says that forms proceed from the first cause, or God, by way of the celestial Intelligences, so that all love in this world is ultimately a desire for union with the good as such, which is God. The soul longs for its essential being, and its being depends

on God, so it longs to be united with God. In the great chain of being that is the order of the cosmos, the celestial Intelligences, or first emanations of the divinity, transmit the divine goodness by which the unknowable Deity reveals itself – to the extent that created beings are able to receive this revelation.¹³² For Dante in the *Convivio*, love-union with the divinity takes the form of the union of his soul with the Donna Gentile, or Philosophy.¹³³

In addition to using metaphors from the sort of courtly love poetry that he published in the *Vita nova*, Dante conveys a sense of this union and love through the ideal of friendship as portrayed by Aristotle and Cicero. The very word *philosophy*, Dante notes, comes from Pythagoras, who, when he was asked whether he considered himself wise, said that he was not a wise man but a lover or friend of wisdom – a *philosophus*. As Dante writes: “From this stems the term for the philosopher’s proper activity, *philosophy*, just as from *friend* stems the term for the friend’s proper activity, *friendship* . . . Philosophy is simply friendship with wisdom, or with knowing; and thus in a certain sense we can call everyone a philosopher, in accordance with the natural love that generates in everyone the desire to know . . . Without love or without devotion one cannot be called a philosopher.”¹³⁴ Dante adds that by love for philosophy he also means the *study* required to win the love of Philosophy – the difficult study of philosophical texts. Here, Dante makes use of the double meaning of the Latin word *studium*, study, which also means eagerness, enthusiasm. So, as he writes, true scholarship or study is the “applicazione dell’animo innamorato della cosa a quella cosa,” the “application of the mind to the thing it is in love with.” In short, philosophy is “a loving use of wisdom.”¹³⁵

What is more, like any lady-beloved in courtly love poetry, Philosophy’s face has such charm as to awaken love in the one who beholds it. Allegorical treatment of the beloved’s physical features was common in medieval love poetry in both the West and the East. The Sufi poet Shabistari, for example, praises the metaphysical ramifications of his beloved’s hair and beauty marks. In the *Convivio*, Dante says that the eyes and smile of the beloved are like two balconies, onto which her soul – her essential form – at times emerges so that the lover can gaze upon it. The goodness of the soul of Philosophy is revealed to the lover as the sensible beauty of Philosophy, for Dante embodied by the Donna Gentile.¹³⁶ The soul of Philosophy is of such a high degree of goodness that its beauty appears visibly in her body.¹³⁷ This is reminiscent of Plato’s famous formulation that beauty is the splendor of the true, or that it is akin to the good.

The second canzone of the *Convivio*, *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona*, explains about Philosophy that “cose appariscon nello suo aspetto, / che

mostran de' piacer del Paradiso" ("in her face appear things that reflect / the beauties and delights of Paradise"). Dante specifies that by "face" he especially means her smile and her eyes, which he interprets allegorically: "And here it should be understood that the eyes of Wisdom are her demonstrations, with which the truth is seen with utmost certainty, and her smile is her persuasions, in which the inner light of Wisdom shows beneath a veil. And in these two things that sublime pleasure of blessedness is felt, which is the greatest good in Paradise."¹³⁸ And he adds: "The eyes of this lady are her proofs, which, directed into the eyes of the intellect, make the soul that is liberated from its contradictions fall in love. O utterly sweet and ineffable appearances, sudden ravishers of the human mind, which appear in the proofs, that is, in the eyes of Philosophy, when she speaks with her lovers!"¹³⁹ The reason for this fatal attraction to Philosophy, says Dante, is that since each thing by nature desires its own perfection, and since the intellect is the foundational principle of man's being, its realization is man's ultimate happiness.

Because Philosophy is the image of human perfection, she is also the source and inspiration for virtue, which is the beauty of the soul. Where *Amor che nella mente* states that "Sua bieltà piove fiammelle di foco" ("Her beauty rains small flames of fire"), Dante comments:

Here it should be understood that morality is the beauty of Philosophy; for just as bodily beauty results from its members insofar as they are harmoniously ordered, so the beauty of Wisdom . . . results from the order of the moral virtues, which make her pleasing in a manner that is perceptible to the senses. And so I say that her beauty, or morality, rains small flames of fire, or upright desire, which is engendered by the pleasure of moral doctrine: this appetite distances us from innate vices as well as acquired ones.¹⁴⁰

Philosophy's presence, that is, "gently redirects" us, as Dante writes, when we are "turned away from the proper order."¹⁴¹ Her beauty is such that she can awaken love, which is the soul's impetus to leave base attachments for its own higher calling.

The visible presence of the divine in Philosophy has a further practical effect: she can awaken religious faith in the one who beholds her. This is another theme that harkens back to the love poetry of Dante's early years. For example, a sonnet by Guido Guinizzelli, a mentor of Dante, states that his lady's beauty and grace have the power to convert a nonbeliever to the Christian faith.¹⁴² In the *Convivio's* use of this theme in a higher octave, the idea is that, since Philosophy can help us to see things, by means of reason,

which without her help seem fantastic or impossible, the lover of wisdom can come to understand that miracles have higher, hidden reasons. And through this rational basis for a faith in miracles, faith in a more comprehensive sense can be born.¹⁴³ The canzone says:

E puossi dir che 'l suo aspetto giova
 a consentir ciò che par maraviglia;
 onde la nostra fede è aiutata:
 però fu tal da eterno ordinata.

(And we can say her face helps us aver
 that wonder has become our certitude;
 so that our faith is all but guaranteed:
 thus from eternity she was decreed.)¹⁴⁴

Dante comments that Philosophy's appearance aids our faith because a principal basis for faith is the miracles performed by Jesus reported in the Gospels, as well as miracles carried out by Christian saints. However, many people are skeptical of miracles and cannot believe in them without visible proof. The Donna Gentile or Philosophy is a *visibly* miraculous thing, which people can experience for themselves – since philosophy has to do with truth accessible to reason. So she can be an aid to faith. Dante concludes that “*she was decreed* in the mind of God as witness to the faith for those who live in this time.”¹⁴⁵ More prosaically, in other words, Philosophy bears witness to faith by the light with which she illumines the intellect and by the moral beauty which she instills in the soul.¹⁴⁶

Not only is Philosophy the beloved of all true philosophers, but she is the daughter, wife, and sister of God. Here Dante draws on the writings of Solomon in which Sapientia or Wisdom is represented as bride, *sponsa*.¹⁴⁷ (As mentioned earlier, Dante says that wisdom is the body of philosophy, while love is its soul – in Aristotelian terms, wisdom is philosophy's material cause and love its formal cause.) Dante suggests that the intimacy of Wisdom with the Deity is obvious because God's own contemplation of Wisdom is simultaneously that of His own essence.¹⁴⁸ In addition, Philosophy perfectly realizes the idea of man that is in the mind of God. One line in the canzone reads: “Ogni Intelletto di là su la mira” (“Every Intellect from up above gazes upon her”). Dante comments on this line, “I simply mean that she is made thus as the intentional exemplar of the human essence in the divine mind, and, therefore, in all the other . . . [minds], most of all in those angelic minds which create with heaven the things here below.”¹⁴⁹ What is more, the same poem states that “In lei discende la virtù divina / sì come face in

angelo che 'l vede" ("In her, celestial potency descends / as in an angel who beholds it"). Dante explains this image in terms of the hierarchy or chain of being, to which he often refers. He says that gradations in the hierarchy of being are continuous, not discrete. For example, there is a gray, mixed area between human nature and the highest animal forms, just as between the most enlightened human beings and the angelic realm there is a connection rather than an unbridgeable gap. This is why, says Dante, Aristotle can refer to the most enlightened individuals as divine. The Donna Gentile herself is such a being, so that "the divine power, in the manner in which it descends into angels, descends into her."¹⁵⁰

What is more, there are passages in the *Convivio* that merge Philosophy-Wisdom with the divine Logos or Word. The Logos in Christian, Stoic, and hermetic tradition is the eternal, intelligible pattern of divine Ideas after whose model God creates the cosmos. It is the light of the world, the source of its intelligibility, order, and beauty; through the Logos, the transcendent God is linked to this world. At the same time, it is the light of the human mind, since in the world of appearances, true knowledge is impossible unless the intellect relates things to their source, which is their being in the mind of God.¹⁵¹ Likewise, wisdom is seen by Dante as having a harmonizing influence, since it is associated with the same cosmic harmony that balances the movement of the sun, the cycle of the seasons, and the natural law that manifests as social order.¹⁵²

In a passage in which Dante describes the patterns of the sun's apparent motion, he comments on the providential cosmic order in which Philosophy participates and which she bestows on the lover of wisdom. Dante writes in *Amor che nella mente*:

Non vede il sol, che tutto 'l mondo gira,
 cosa tanto gentil, quanto in quell'ora
 che luce nella parte ove dimora
 la donna di cui dire Amor mi face.

(The sun sees nothing, as he circles all
 the world, nobler than at the hour he gives
 his light to that part where the lady lives
 about whom Love has made me write and speak.)¹⁵³

Dante tells us that the sun in this passage is intended as a symbol for God, and therefore what is in question is the relation between the celestial powers and life on earth, including natural cycles. He adds: "Now we can see

that by divine providence the world is ordered such that, once the sphere of the sun has revolved and returned to one point, this globe on which we live everywhere receives as much time of light as of darkness. O ineffable Wisdom who ordained things thus, how impoverished our mind is in understanding you!”¹⁵⁴

Dante goes on to say that Philosophy, like Sapiencia in Solomon’s writings, is co-eternal with the Creator. Since the divine love is eternal, reasons Dante, its object of love must be eternal – as indeed Wisdom is. He quotes from the book of Ecclesiasticus or Sirach, where Wisdom says of herself: “From the beginning and before all time I was created, and in the age to come I shall be unfailing.” Dante continues, still quoting from the Bible: “in the Proverbs of Solomon this Wisdom says, ‘I was ordained from eternity’; and at the beginning of the Gospel of John, her eternity can be clearly ascertained. And from this it follows that wherever this love shines [meaning, God’s love of Wisdom], all other loves go dark and are nearly extinguished, since its eternal object immeasurably overwhelms and exceeds other objects.”¹⁵⁵

The opening of the Gospel of John which Dante refers to here, of course, states that “In the beginning was the Word,” the Logos which is Christ. Dante has identified, as if in passing, Wisdom with the Logos. We should not assume, however, that Dante is definitively equating the two. After all, earlier in the *Convivio* Dante refers to the Donna Gentile as a “creatura,” a created being,¹⁵⁶ but the Logos in Christian tradition is decidedly *uncreated*.¹⁵⁷ It seems likely, then, that the Logos passage comes out of Dante’s familiarity with a Christian tradition from antiquity that associated the feminine Sapiencia in Solomon with the masculine Logos, the second Person of the Holy Trinity.¹⁵⁸ The penultimate stanza of Dante’s canzone ends with the forceful line: “costei pensò chi mosse l’universo” (“He who moved the universe thought her”). Dante writes in his commentary on this line that Wisdom herself made the universe – a quite explicit association with the Logos, “through Whom,” as the Nicene Creed of Christianity states, “all things were made.” As Dante writes: “In supreme praise of Wisdom, I say that she is the mother of all things and the origin of every motion, stating that God commenced the universe with her, particularly the movement of the heaven which generates all things and from which every motion has its origin and on which every motion depends ... That is to say, she was in divine thought ... when he made the universe; therefore it follows that she made it.” Dante supports his point with an exalted passage from Solomon’s Proverbs, again in the voice of Wisdom herself: “When God prepared the heavens, I was there; when he set a circle on the face of the deep with a fixed

law and a fixed circuit, when he made firm the skies above and set on high the fountains of the waters, when he enclosed the sea within its boundary and decreed that the waters should not transgress their bounds, when he laid the foundations of the earth, I was with him, ordering all things, and I took pleasure every day.”¹⁵⁹

With such passionate and comprehensive statements in the *Convivio* about Philosophy or the Donna Gentile, we may be surprised that she does not appear anywhere in the *Divine Comedy*; or at least she does not appear directly. Near the end of *Purgatorio*, Beatrice reprimands Dante for going astray in some way after her death; her words have often been interpreted as referring to the Donna Gentile: “Si tosto come in su la soglia fui / di mia seconda etade e mutai vita, / questi si tolse a me, e diessi altrui” (“As soon as I was at the threshold of my second age and I changed lives [in other words, when she died], he separated himself from me and gave himself to others”).¹⁶⁰ And Beatrice also says: “se ’l sommo piacer sì ti fallio / per la mia morte, qual cosa mortale / dovea poi trarre te nel suo disio?” (“if the supreme beauty failed you upon my death, what mortal thing should then have drawn you into desiring it?”).¹⁶¹ Beatrice is telling Dante that the world of phenomena no longer should have dazzled Dante after her death, since while she was alive he experienced, through her, the substantial reality – the “supreme beauty” – of heaven. That was all he or anyone ultimately needs.

Beatrice in these lines and others in the scene in the Earthly Paradise – including her mention of a “pargoletta,” or young girl, who was a “vanità” or empty distraction¹⁶² – alludes to some sort of infidelity or inconstancy on Dante’s part. We notice that she does not mention the Donna Gentile or indeed any specific woman. As a result, countless pages of scholarship have been spent on theories about what behavior or attitude of Dante, precisely, Beatrice is chastising him for.¹⁶³ Dante himself, in this Earthly Paradise scene, tells Beatrice that “Le presenti cose / col falso lor piacer volser miei passi, / tosto che ’l vostro viso si nascose” (“Things right in front of me with their false pleasure turned my steps, as soon as your face was hidden”).¹⁶⁴ He confesses, in other words, to a carnal or spiritual betrayal of what Beatrice represents, after she was no longer physically present to sustain it in him. Many critics believe that Dante’s going astray was an intellectual error, a lapse into worldly thinking. Others say that Dante’s inconstancy took the form of a period of licentiousness after Beatrice’s death. No one is really sure, though it is clear that Dante does suggest some infidelity on his part to what Beatrice embodied or what she inspired in him. In a later passage in *Purgatorio*, Beatrice reprimands Dante for having followed a *scuola*, or

school, whose *dottrina*, doctrine, was as distant from the divine as earth is from the highest heaven. This passage does apparently refer to a specifically intellectual or spiritual lapse. Many have thought that it alludes to a period when Dante fell into the error of holding natural reason to be adequate for arriving at the truth of things. Some believe that the *Convivio* arises from and expresses this false direction, which Dante later regrets.¹⁶⁵

In any case, when Beatrice first appears to Dante in the Earthly Paradise, the words announcing her arrival are from Solomon's Song of Songs: "Veni, sponsa, / de Libano" ("Come, bride, from Lebanon").¹⁶⁶ Beatrice in this scene is called the bride of God, just as Philosophy was in the *Convivio*, so it is clear that aspects of Philosophia-Sapientia have been assumed by Beatrice.¹⁶⁷ And in other ways, too, Beatrice in the *Divine Comedy* has some of the attributes we have seen in the Donna Gentile or Philosophy. For example, both women are endowed with supernatural power in their eyes and smiles. In canto VII of *Paradiso*, Dante describes Beatrice "raggiandomi d'un riso / tal, che nel foco faria l'uom felice" ("shining me a smile such as would make a man happy even if he were burning in fire").¹⁶⁸ Then Beatrice launches into a long theological discourse on the fall of man and his redemption through Christ's crucifixion. There are two conspicuous features in this passage: Beatrice is speaking; and the transformed courtly love imagery of the beloved's mouth, applied also to Philosophy in the *Convivio*, is now used for Beatrice. The same is true of her eyes. In the *Vita nova*, Beatrice's eyes were said to be a source of "spirti d'amore inflammati" ("spirits hot with love"),¹⁶⁹ while in *Paradiso* Dante sees reflected in Beatrice's eyes a prefiguration of his final vision in the Empyrean: the nine angelic hierarchies as circles around a central point, which is God.¹⁷⁰ In the *Vita nova* Beatrice never says a word; her presence may speak volumes but no *speech* issues from her mouth. The same is true of Philosophy in the *Convivio*: Dante chooses not to represent her as speaking, even though he had the model of Boethius, whose *Consolation of Philosophy* is a dialogue with Lady Philosophy herself. But in the *Divine Comedy*, as the spokeswoman for holy Wisdom, Beatrice never hesitates to speak her mind.¹⁷¹ When Beatrice acts as a supreme authority on theological matters, we may note that this was a position forbidden to women in the Church of Dante's time. At one point she opens her discourse with the statement, "Secondo mio infallibile avviso" ("According to my infallible opinion"),¹⁷² so that Dante has implicitly placed Beatrice on a par with or beyond the doctors of the Church.¹⁷³ She has become a hybrid of Solomon's Sapientia, Boethius's Lady Philosophy, the *Convivio*'s Donna Gentile, and the young Florentine woman Dante pines for in the *Vita nova*.

As for the figure of Philosophy in the *Convivio*, some have suggested that she combines what would become Virgil's and Beatrice's roles in the *Divine Comedy*. Virgil is traditionally interpreted as representing natural reason and virtue; while Beatrice is the figure for theology or holy wisdom, the intellect inspired by divine grace. In this view of Lady Philosophia-Sapientia, Dante in the *Divine Comedy* decided to make two personifications out of one: the Sapientia-Wisdom side of Philosophy is now represented by Beatrice, while the Aristotelian-rational side of her is assumed by Virgil. Such an interpretation works to a point; however, it falls short when we observe that neither Beatrice nor Virgil in the *Divine Comedy* can be so neatly pigeonholed. Certainly Philosophy in the *Convivio* is far more baldly allegorical than Beatrice and Virgil are, and the love story of the *Convivio* is "more an artificial frame than a narrative comprising scenes and episodes." Indeed, the *Convivio* may have been abandoned when Dante realized that "Beatrice and Lady Philosophy could be one and the same woman."¹⁷⁴

Dante's Quest for Knowledge

From the opening sentences of the *Convivio*, it is clear that to understand Dante's approach to knowledge in this work we must consider Aristotle's influence on it. Aristotle and Aristotelianism pervaded the thought of Dante's time.¹⁷⁵ Until the twelfth century, the works by Aristotle that were in circulation in the West were mainly those on logic, some of them translated into Latin by Boethius in the sixth century. But between 1120 and 1220 – in Toledo, especially, but also in other important centers such as Palermo – translation from Greek and Arabic into Latin made almost all of Aristotle's works accessible in the West.¹⁷⁶ Aristotle became established as the most authoritative guide to philosophy and a crucial influence on Christian thinkers: so much so that, in the *Convivio* and the *Divine Comedy*, Dante calls Aristotle the "glorious philosopher to whom nature most disclosed her secrets," the "master and guide of human reason," and the "master of those who know."¹⁷⁷ At the same time, medieval Europe inherited an Aristotle strongly flavored with Arab and Neoplatonic thought, since the renaissance of Aristotelian learning also came in the form of Islamic commentaries and of certain Neoplatonic works that were mistakenly attributed to Aristotle.¹⁷⁸ As mentioned earlier, these streams of influence play an important part in Dante's quest for knowledge.

For St. Augustine, and continuing with the Franciscans and others who followed Augustine and distrusted the avant-garde Aristotelian learning,¹⁷⁹

philosophy had always been the *ancilla theologiae*, or handmaid of theology, with little independent life of its own.¹⁸⁰ In the terminology of our own time, we can gain insight into the conflict between philosophy and theology in Dante's era by recalling that modern philosophers going back to Descartes and Kant have argued that philosophy's role is to tell us *what* the world's nature is, but it cannot tell us *why* it is or what lies beyond it. The saint or mystic speaks from direct experience, but since this experience lacks the usual subject-object relation of rational philosophical inquiry, it cannot be conceptualized or communicated and so, for the modern philosopher (who equates knowledge with the representation of concepts), cannot be called real knowledge. But earlier mystics and theologians in the West, such as St. Augustine or Richard of St. Victor, and the sages of the East viewed the matter differently. For them, the profoundest interior experience is the *basis* of philosophical thought, while the role of reason is to clarify the meaning of this and to elaborate upon it.¹⁸¹

With Aristotelianism came a much higher estimation of human reason (*ratio*) and therefore of philosophy with respect to theology, and of rational thought in relation to faith.¹⁸² The high regard for reason is present in Dante himself even as early as the *Vita nova*. In the *Vita nova* Dante praises Beatrice because “even though her image, which was constantly with me, was the means by which Love ruled me, it was so dignified in its power it never allowed Love to govern me without the faithful counsel of reason.”¹⁸³ And the prose of the *Vita nova*, a love story, is sometimes structured in the form of syllogistic argument. The *Vita nova* tells of dream-visions and feverish hallucinations, but Dante was quite explicit from early on that he stood on the side of intelligibility rather than merely unintelligible imagery.¹⁸⁴ The motive for this, far from being a precursor to modern rationalism, was that Dante, in common with scholastic culture in general, saw reason as a trace of the spiritual intellect in the human soul. Dante never viewed reason, in the Renaissance and Enlightenment manner, as independent of its source in the Intellect. Rather, for Dante reason complements faith and is the instrument of man as made in the image of God, which is why man is, as Dante puts it in the *Convivio*, “the divine animal.”¹⁸⁵ Reason is not only or primarily a confidence in ratiocination, dialectic, and syllogism, although it is this as well. *Ratio* is the mind's discursive procedure from point to point; *intellectus* its resting, or its capacity to rest, in a truth that is totally apprehended because it is totally interior, in the substance of the mind itself.¹⁸⁶

It is useful to make these distinctions, since some have portrayed Dante in the *Convivio* as a kind of proto-Renaissance humanist undergoing a

major crisis about the relation of philosophy to theology and revelation.¹⁸⁷ In this view, there was an “Averroist” or “radical Aristotelian” phase in Dante’s development, during which he wrote much of the *Convivio*, when he supposedly favored philosophy and reason over theology and faith, just as some Latin thinkers influenced by the great Spanish-Arab philosopher Averroes had done.¹⁸⁸ Others have challenged this characterization, however, arguing that all of Dante’s works, the *Convivio* included, are geared toward facilitating “a perception of the divine.”¹⁸⁹

Whatever position we might take on this issue, it does appear that Dante was infatuated with philosophy at some point, as his effusions about Lady Philosophy-Wisdom in the *Convivio* attest, but there is really no clear evidence in his written works of his pitting philosophy per se against Christian teachings. Dante lived in an age of intense philosophical speculation, when there was much more liberty in Christian thought than there would be during and after the Counter-Reformation. Such important figures as Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Dante himself believed that the truths of religion and philosophy were ultimately compatible. They trusted that revelation, if it is indeed true, must somehow encompass *all* truth, including that of ancient pagan philosophers such as Aristotle.¹⁹⁰ Philosophy for Dante supplemented religion, it did not cut it off at the roots.

Nevertheless, during the thirteenth century, the idea caught on that philosophy has a distinct purpose as a complement to theology and that the ethics of Aristotle could be a valuable counterpart to Christian ethics. Theologians referred to the twin benefits of philosophy and theology as a *duplex beatitudo*, or twofold state of blessedness. They viewed the contemplative heights of philosophy as an anticipation of eternal bliss – a view that we find in the *Convivio* as well. As Aquinas expresses it: “Man’s happiness is twofold. One is the imperfect happiness found in this life, of which the philosophers speak... The other is the perfect happiness of heaven, where we shall see God himself through his essence and the other separate substances.”¹⁹¹ Central in Aquinas’s thought – and as we read in the *Convivio*, Dante does follow him in this – is the idea that our natural desire for knowledge cannot be *fully* satisfied by natural means, since human beings ultimately seek to know the divine essence. If philosophy is love of wisdom and God is Wisdom, humans are destined in this life to remain in a state of longing because we can never be totally united with God. The separate substances or celestial Intelligences *can* know God directly. So, Aquinas and Dante say, if we could know the celestial Intelligences, we would have at least some knowledge of God as well. But in this life it is not possible for

us truly to know them either, and so we cannot know God even in this indirect way. Aquinas and Dante conclude that all human knowledge on earth is limited by the senses on which it is based. *Nihil sit in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu*, “Nothing is in the mind which was not first in the senses,” was a maxim in scholastic philosophy, which Dante echoes in the *Convivio*.

On the other hand, obviously Dante at this stage does not deny that the divine vision is possible for human beings in temporal life.¹⁹² The examples of the apostles at the Transfiguration and of St. Paul when he had his ecstatic vision of the third heaven, as well as the testimony of various other saints and mystics – to say nothing of Dante’s early visionary experiences, alluded to in the *Vita nova* – are undeniable precedents.¹⁹³ But the beatific vision of heaven is habitual and permanent, while the mystical vision of men and women in this life is transient and sporadic. Dante in the *Divine Comedy* clearly does affirm that insight into the eternal is possible during life on earth. He makes a point of repeating many times in his great poem that he is still in his body while he is visiting the other world. In the *Convivio*, on the other hand, Dante often emphasizes the aspect of human knowledge that is limited by its mortal condition.¹⁹⁴ He writes: “I say that our intellect, through a defect in the power from which it extracts what it perceives – a power associated with the organs, namely the imagination – cannot rise to certain things . . . such as substances separated from matter – which, even if we are able to have some idea of them, we can neither grasp nor comprehend fully.”¹⁹⁵ As he states elsewhere in the *Convivio*, more poetically this time but echoing Aristotle:

Not having any perception of [the separate substances] with our senses (from which our knowledge originates), there still shines in our intellect some light of their essence that is . . . radiantly alive . . . : just as one who has his eyes closed affirms that the air is bright by means of a little splendor – as by a direct ray that passes through the pupils of a bat – because not otherwise are our intellectual eyes closed, while the soul is bound and imprisoned by the organs of our body.¹⁹⁶

Note that while Dante says we cannot know the celestial Intelligences fully, our intellect does receive an intuition of their existence, what he calls the “light of their essence.” Eyes as yet too closed to perceive the radiance of the divine vision may discern something of its reflected glory, in a form tempered to our earthly intellect’s limits. We are aware of God and the spiritual beings to the extent that we make ourselves receptive to them. We can know

that they are, but not *what* they are. Our knowledge of them is through their effects, and we may grasp a part, but only a part, of the causes of these effects. Metaphysics, then, as Dante uses the term in the *Convivio*, has to do with this kind of indirect, intermittent knowledge. It is reason's piecemeal view of the spiritual intellect's holistic vision. Dante expresses this metaphorically in the *Convivio* when he writes that metaphysics is like the Milky Way. Just as we cannot see the stars whose clustering creates the effect of the Milky Way, and just as we are forced to infer in the Milky Way the existence of numerous stars that we cannot see individually, so metaphysics deals with primary substances, which we cannot grasp other than through their effects.¹⁹⁷ Also in the *Convivio*, Dante asserts that only in the next life will it be possible to see the divine reality completely, which is the fulfillment of our desire for knowledge.¹⁹⁸

However, says Dante, the true Christian *can* know higher realities by means of faith. Unlike purely rational philosophers, those with faith in Christ are infused directly with the knowledge of divine things, even if this knowledge is elusive and fleeting in our present state. For Dante, such faith does not do violence to reason. Rather, faith in the incomprehensible is the consummation or perfection of rational knowledge. As St. Paul puts it, in words that Dante will quote in *Paradiso*, faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.¹⁹⁹ Being much more than blind belief in dogma, faith involves adherence of the will to divine revelation and the intuitions of the spiritual intellect. The sanctified are those whose desire for knowing or seeing God is proportionate to their natural goodness; they have surrendered to that wisdom which the nature of each can comprehend. As Dante says in the *Convivio*, in language that echoes the Neoplatonic *Book of Causes*, each thing in creation receives the divine emanation according to its predisposition. Dante writes: "Between the angelic nature, which is an intellectual thing, and the human soul there is no gradation, but one to the other is as it were continuous along the sequence of gradations," so that "some individuals are so noble and of so high a state that they are practically angels."²⁰⁰ And Dante adds that Philosophy herself is such a being. This closeness of Philosophy to the angelic realm is why she has the power in her speech and comportment to awaken higher love and a faith in miracles. Divinity descends into the human mind through the mediation of Philosophy; thus she is an *anticipation* of paradise on earth.

These various details suggest that Dante in the *Convivio* is working out the relationship between reason and faith: between *scientia*, applied or

rational knowledge, and spiritual *sapientia* or wisdom. He is convinced that a particular, circumscribed kind of knowledge is realizable through the devoted practice of philosophy;²⁰¹ and he allows a certain degree of validity to rational approaches to understanding the mysteries of the divine, as a way to harmonize the contrasting views that were current in his age.²⁰² Dante denies that the limited nature of our knowledge in this life is a deficiency, since a natural desire can only be satisfied on the basis of the capacity that nature has given. He suggests that if nature has not given us the possibility of knowing God and the celestial Intelligences fully in this life, this means that there is no natural desire in us for this knowledge. Trying to force such impossible knowledge in the present life, then, is an error in the etymological sense, a wandering from the way of nature, the cultivation of an impossible desire like wishing to fly or to be made of crystal. In the final chapter of Book III, Dante wonders how it can be that philosophical contemplation can bring a certain kind of fulfillment, if our desire to know cannot be completely realized during our life on earth. He concludes that “human desire is proportioned in this life to the knowledge which we can have here, and does not go past that point except by an error which is outside the intention of nature.” So, “inasmuch as it is not possible for our nature to know what God and certain other [divine] things are, we do not, by nature, desire to know this.” It has been pointed out that Dante’s thought in this chapter contrasts with Aquinas’s view of knowledge, which emphasizes it as a single direct motion toward a fixed end, God, whereas Dante accepts the intermediate stages as complete and perfect realizations in themselves. Aquinas’s solution to the sort of uncertainty that Dante explores in this passage is totally oriented to sustain the supernatural finality of human desire; while Dante’s approach to these matters is closer to that of other medieval Aristotelians, especially Albert the Great.²⁰³

By the time Dante writes the *Convivio*, he has absorbed several philosophical streams that he aims to blend or harmonize. One such influence is the *Book of Causes*, with its emanationist cosmology in which the divine outpouring descends from the First Cause or Supreme Good, via the celestial Intelligences or angelic spheres, to the lower spheres. From this perspective, Philosophy is a natural mediator, since the angelic Intelligences know her in the divine mind, although human beings receive her mediations at best indirectly and sporadically. Philosophy, contemplative intuition, instills the mind of the philosopher with the first principles, even if these cannot be fully known in themselves. As Dante writes in *Amor che nella mente*: “Cose appariscono nello suo aspetto, / che mostran de’ piacer del Paradiso” (“And in

her face appear things that reflect / the beauties and delights of Paradise”).²⁰⁴
 In Dante's commentary on these lines he writes:

I state that things appear in her face which reveal some of the pleasures of Paradise; and among those, the most noble, the one that is the fruit and end of all the others, is to be contented, which is to be blessed; and this pleasure truly, though in another manner, is to be found in her face. For, in gazing upon her, people are contented, so sweetly does her beauty feed their eyes; but in another manner than the contentment in Paradise, for contentment in Paradise is everlasting, which this cannot be for any person.²⁰⁵

Again, Dante portrays true philosophy as ultimately transcendent and ungraspable in this life, but the aspect that *can* be fully known – the face of Philosophy, her visible aspect – fulfills a basic human need, here and now.

Dante's pragmatic approach to philosophy, along with his love of the Latin poets and ancient Rome which appears in all his written works, shows that it really *is* accurate to think of him as a humanist – even if, unlike the version of humanism that became common during the Renaissance a century or two later, Dante's is a humanism centered on God rather than on Promethean man. In the *Convivio* the humanist insistence on the integrity of earthly life, without denigrating it in deference to the afterlife or the supernatural, manifests in close attention to applied ethics or moral philosophy, and in a long discussion – all of Book IV – on the true nature of nobility. The circumscribed knowledge and realization of earthly life informed by philosophy became for Dante the basis for his ideal of civic order and justice. This ideal permeates the *Convivio* in its very conception and execution. We saw earlier that the *Convivio* was written in the vernacular instead of in Latin partly to make it accessible to those whose social duties kept them too busy to learn philosophy – especially civic leaders. Dante believed that political thinking based on first principles and philosophical understanding could create the conditions for a just society. This is the basis for his pro-imperial argument in *Monarchia*, and already in the *Convivio* he refers to the politically beneficial effects of philosophy, where he chides rulers whose advisors care and know little about the higher aims of human life: “Consider who is by your side to provide counsel, and count how many times a day the final end of human life has been indicated by your counselors!”²⁰⁶

In the *Convivio* Dante proposes three kinds of human fulfillment: the active life and the contemplative life that can be realized during our time on earth are two of them; the beatific vision in heaven is the third.²⁰⁷ Dante views

1 Introduction

these kinds of fulfillment hierarchically. The contemplative life is superior to the active, and the beatific vision superior to the contemplative life. But Dante also suggests that the active life is the only one that may be completely and socially realized in *this* life, since contemplation is ultimately fulfilled only in the beatific vision. Dante comes to this conclusion because he views the human intellect in this life as too feeble to realize itself, so it must rely on the divine light of revelation. Consequently, the contemplative life is less human than divine. In this limited, practical sense, then, for Dante philosophical understanding can help us to realize our specifically human task during life on earth. Dante knows that it is not the ultimate fulfillment, but it is within our grasp, and its social usefulness encourages him to argue its virtues. So, he focuses for many pages in the *Convivio* on the positive results that can be attained through the exercise of moral and political virtues, as defined in Aristotle's *Ethics*.²⁰⁸ He aims to endow our life here and now with a practical end of its own, although he agrees with the theologians that earthly life is subordinate to the heavenly life, which is the telos and Pole star of all our activity.²⁰⁹

In a section of the *Convivio* that likens eleven sciences or fields of knowledge to the heavenly spheres, Dante surprisingly places ethics or moral philosophy above metaphysics in the hierarchy of knowledge.²¹⁰ As mentioned earlier, Book II of the *Convivio* is a commentary on the canzone that begins: "All you [celestial Intelligences] who, knowing, make the Third Sphere [or heaven] move." To explain what this third heaven is Dante says first that we have to know that the word *heaven* in this context signifies a science or field of knowledge. The seven planetary spheres of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, and so on are associated with the traditional liberal arts, the trivium and the quadrivium, which were the foundation of medieval education: grammar, logic, rhetoric; mathematics, music, geometry, astronomy. Learning and knowledge are connected to their transcendent sources or archetypes. The sphere of the Fixed Stars is associated by Dante with physics and metaphysics; the Primum Mobile or Prime Mover with ethics or moral philosophy; and the Empyrean or highest sphere with theology. Each heavenly sphere, Dante says, revolves around its center, which is motionless, just as each science revolves around its subject, which is also motionless, "since no field of knowledge demonstrates its own subject but presupposes it."²¹¹ And each science illuminates intelligible things the way each heaven illuminates visible things.²¹² Dante modifies the conception of metaphysics in order to assign it second place in the hierarchy, after ethics. He acknowledges that metaphysics remains *in itself* the loftiest and most perfect of the sciences,

apart from theology.²¹³ But metaphysics is not the highest science *in practical terms*, since our mastery of metaphysics necessarily remains incomplete in this life. Meanwhile, ethics or moral philosophy is associated with a higher sphere, the Primum Mobile or the Prime Mover, since moral philosophy moves and guides us toward the other sciences – just as the Prime Mover orders all the other heavens.²¹⁴ As in both Plato and Aristotle, in Dante the question of justice involves bringing human life into harmony with the universal order.

Dante says in the *Convivio* that, ultimately, our intellect can approach divine things and therefore the subject of theology only by *unknowing* them. Like Pseudo-Dionysius, Dante realizes that eternal “things somehow dazzle our intellect” so that “we cannot grasp what they are; the only way we can approach knowing them is by negating things.”²¹⁵ Dante’s statement here is a hint of the journey he will undertake in the *Divine Comedy*. He recognizes that one’s own efforts cannot penetrate the profoundest mysteries, which require the *self*-revelation of the Real.²¹⁶ The *Convivio* is, in part, a memoir in which Dante tells us of a period in his life when he was full of enthusiasm for the possibilities of philosophy. It is not possible to identify clearly, as critics have tried to do, Dante’s alleged *traviamento*, or going astray, in the *Convivio*, followed by a return to Beatrice and theology in the *Divine Comedy*. If nothing else, the placement of the “Averroist” Siger of Brabant next to Aquinas in canto X of *Paradiso* confounds any such reductionist account of Dante’s development.²¹⁷ Rather, Dante’s metaphysical and mystical concerns persist throughout his intellectual life.²¹⁸ And what the reader who follows the progress of Dante’s work witnesses is his integration of theology and philosophy; his evolving poetic vision; his blending of contrasting elements; and, above all, his strong tendency to harmonize rather than compartmentalize seemingly conflicting views.²¹⁹

In any case, however we interpret the movement from the *Convivio* to the *Divine Comedy*, there is no real basis for believing that Dante when he wrote his masterpiece had left philosophy behind in favor of theology. Even late in *Paradiso*, in the sphere of the Fixed Stars, Dante claims that his love for God is inspired not only by revelation but by the proofs of philosophy.²²⁰ In cantos XXIV–XXVI of *Paradiso*, the apostles Peter, James, and John question Dante on the theological virtues, using the rational-logical techniques and terminology of scholastic philosophy. Earlier in *Paradiso*, Dante makes it clear that both philosophy and theology are divinely ordained, within their respective spheres. In an ecstatic hymn to sacred science in canto IV of *Paradiso*, Dante affirms that the human intellect can be fully realized only

by divine illumination. And yet Dante concludes this passage with praise of Socratic openness to the yet unknown: “Nasce per quello, a guisa di rampollo, / a piè del vero il dubbio” (“Questioning arises from the desire to know, like the shoot of a plant at the base of divinely illuminated truth”).²²¹ In *Monarchia*, Dante accepts the Aristotelian notion of the nature of happiness;²²² refers to the *Nicomachean Ethics* regarding the argument that greed is a basic obstacle to justice;²²³ and writes a long section that is completely based on Aristotle.²²⁴ And two very late works, the *Epistle to Cangrande* and *Questio de aqua et terra*, use the technical, scholastic language that Dante uses in much of the *Convivio*.²²⁵

Dante states in Book III of the *Convivio* that “those who live by the senses cannot fall in love with” Philosophy, “since they are unable to conceive of her.”²²⁶ Similarly, in canto XXVIII of *Paradiso*, Beatrice tells Dante that knowledge precedes love: “Quinci si può veder come si fonda / l’esser beato ne l’atto che vede, / non in quel ch’ama, che poscia seconda” (“From this one can see how being blessed is founded in vision, not in that which loves, which then follows”).²²⁷ Here, Beatrice is saying that the soul can love only when it has first known or seen the beloved – when it has experienced the Other as itself. Both Augustine and Aquinas likewise taught that nothing can be loved that is not first known.²²⁸ The soul loves only what it has seen; and seeing and knowing are etymologically related, as in Sanskrit *veda*, “knowledge,” and Latin *videre*, “to see,” and Greek *oida*, “to know.”²²⁹ There can be no knowledge of anything to which the will refuses to give its assent. This is why the Christian definition of faith is “assent to a credible proposition”: *Credo ut intelligam* (“I believe in order to understand”) and *Intelligo ut credam* (“I understand in order to believe”), these two being simultaneous rather than successive.

When Beatrice’s role as Dante’s guide in paradise has reached its limit, her replacement in the Empyrean is St. Bernard. Commentators have said that Bernard represents the sort of knowledge or illumination which enables the vision of God, the *lumen gloriae* or light of glory, which is God’s own light by which the beatified may behold the eternal.²³⁰ Ultimately, knowledge of God is God’s knowing Himself through us. Beatrice describes this light to Dante in the Empyrean, in the devastatingly elegant verse: “luce intellettuale, piena d’amore” (“intellectual light, full of love”).²³¹ I have not seen this mentioned by the commentators, but it may be significant that the eleven syllables of this line (the standard line length in classical Italian poetry) are divided into two halves, the first half dedicated to knowledge or the intellect, the second to love: “luce intellettuale, piena d’amore.” The half

of this line allotted to knowledge or vision has one more syllable, six, than the half assigned to love, which has five. The balance between the two is close, swayed by a vowel's breath.

Dante and Nobility

Book IV, which accounts for more than 40 percent of the *Convivio*, is a treatise on nobility – the most extensive and sustained on this theme up to Dante's time, and the first prose treatment of it in the vernacular.²³² Theories of nobility occupied some of the most brilliant and erudite minds from ancient times through the Renaissance. A brief historical survey of the concept of nobility in Roman and Christian culture will help us understand Dante's approach to it in Book IV and better appreciate why the question of nobility was so important to him.

The Latin *nobilis* is from *noscere*, “to know” (an etymology which Dante rejects as false, preferring the etymology from Isidore of Seville, who says that *nobilis* is from *non vilis*, not base); to be *nobilis* was to be dignified, renowned, even famous.²³³ At first in ancient Rome, the concept of nobility was purely secular and practical, associated with social eminence and important public functions. Over time, leading Roman moral philosophers developed the idea of *nobilitas animi*, nobility of mind, a phrase that Dante uses in the *Convivio*.²³⁴ In Latin literature this theme became more common with the rise of the *homines novi*, those whose personal ambition and valor put them on a par, in theory at least, with the established *nobilitas*, those whose ancestors had occupied high offices of state. On the one hand there was inherited nobility, which guaranteed a rapid rise to the offices of the *res publica*, and on the other hand personal virtue and talent, which might open opportunities to social promotion of individuals without noble origins.²³⁵ A famous letter of Seneca identifies nobility with *bona mens*, potentially accessible to any human being but in practice more so to those who are more virtuous by nature.²³⁶ In this letter, written to encourage his friend Lucilius, who feels he is “a nobody,” Seneca reverses the traditional relation between virtue and nobility, so that nobility becomes an intrinsic quality of the individual which can manifest through the realization of the virtues rather than nobility resulting from virtue. Those from relatively modest family backgrounds can, through their valor and virtue, rise to social roles usually reserved for aristocratic individuals; to be truly “well-born” meant to be fitted by nature for virtue. Seneca points out, expressing a notion often raised by later philosophers and theologians, that since all human beings share a common

celestial (“from the gods”) origin, no one can claim to be more noble than another by nature. The nobler person is simply one with a greater disposition to do good. For this reason, Seneca devalues, as does Juvenal, ostentatious display of images of illustrious forebears and family trees in the *atria* of aristocratic homes.²³⁷ As Juvenal puts it, in lines which were proverbial in Dante’s epoch: “*tota licet veteres exornent undique cerae / atria, nobilitas sola est atque unica virtus*” (“though you decorate your hall throughout with venerable wax figures, virtue is the one and only nobility”).²³⁸

Early in the sixth century, Boethius similarly criticized the view of *nobilitas* as mere inheritance of status and wealth, warning that this is an illusion which draws people away from pursuing true, substantial happiness.²³⁹ Boethius also proposed a metaphysical notion of nobility, similar to Seneca’s, which was to have a major influence on later theological conceptions of it in the Middle Ages: “If you look to your beginning and your author, which is God, is any man degenerate or base but he who by his own vices cherishes base things and leaves that beginning which was his?”²⁴⁰ Boethius recognizes only one Principle of all, from which things have degenerated. For Boethius a *nobile germen* of the divine origin of mortal creatures is what nobility truly is. In *Le dolci rime*, the canzone that opens Book IV, Dante will adopt this notion of nobility as a divine seed: “*si ch’ad alquanti / ch’è ’l seme di felicità, si acosta, / messo da Dio nell’anima ben posta*” (“so that to some people it is clear that it is the seed of happiness, placed by God in the well-disposed soul”).²⁴¹

Boethius’s view, as well as other ancient perspectives that emphasized the superiority of nobility of mind or spirit, was background for the Christian conceptualization of nobility, which would counter the might-makes-right values of Roman society with the ideals of poverty and humility. The widespread Roman emphasis on social class as a function of blood ties was in conflict with the spiritual-egalitarian message of the Gospels.²⁴² Christian authors from Augustine to Rabanus Maurus argued, as had Seneca and Boethius, that the common origin of all human beings precluded a nobility based merely on family lineage.²⁴³ Augustine discusses a *nobilitas secundum Deum*, which consists in becoming a disciple of Christ – in other words, renouncing power and privilege and becoming poor in spirit, to follow Jesus’ example. In this, there is the characteristic Christian reversal of conventional values: what the world considers ignoble is noble in the view of God; “nobility” is actually ignoble if it is no more than external or worldly.²⁴⁴ For Christians, the human tendency to overvalue external appearances had resulted in an interpretation of nobility which required a *superbia* (arrogant pride) that is harmful to spirituality.

For Gregory the Great, nobility is a recovery of the original nobility of man, who is made in God's image, through the imitation of Christ which enables this recovery.²⁴⁵ In the Carolingian period, theologians such as Alcuin of York similarly emphasized the recovery, by means of divine grace, of the primordial nobility that has been obscured by original sin. His precedent for this notion was the Venerable Bede; in his *Hexaëmeron* (The Six Days), Bede had spoken of *nobilitas* in relation to man's creation in the image of God as a *rationalis creatura*. The highest part of the human soul, *mens* or the rational soul, is precisely where the image of God resides – and here is true nobility, which, however, man easily and often loses by falling into the ignobility of sin. This idea permeated Christian theology, from the so-called *Libri Carolini* (Books of Charlemagne, ca. 790) to Bernard, Bonaventure, Albert the Great, and Thomas Aquinas, as well as the leader of the Spiritualist movement of the Franciscans, Peter John Olivi:²⁴⁶ nobility was free moral conformity to the *imago Dei* in the rational soul.²⁴⁷ The biography of St. Bernard itself exemplifies the distinction between ancestral nobility and metaphysical nobility. Written by his close associate William of St. Thierry during Bernard's lifetime, this biography describes the aristocratic family of the saint as noble “secundum dignitatem seculi” but adds that his family was also noble “secundum christianae religionis pietatem.” In addition, the idea developed that a being – human or otherwise – is noble to the extent that it participates in the nobility of God, who alone is truly noble, since, as Aquinas puts it: “That which has being through itself is nobler than that which has being in another”; moreover, “The gradation of nobility and lowliness among all things is measured according to their nearness to and distance from God, Who is at the peak of nobility.”²⁴⁸

In a universe parallel to the theological notion of “metaphysical” nobility, within the feudal system that developed in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire and the barbarian invasions, developed the practice of nobility known as chivalry and courtly virtue. The ideal of the self-sacrificing knight who served his king and queen led in turn to the ideal of courtly love, which had a decisive influence on Dante's poetry, from his earliest love poems right through *Paradiso*. Courtly love emphasized the ennobling potential of human love, the elevation of the beloved to a place superior to the lover. It conceived of ideal love as an ever-increasing desire that was never satisfied or consummated. As Andreas Capellanus wrote in the twelfth century in his very influential treatise on love, such love was the force that inspired the lover to increase in worth and virtue – specifically the virtues of courtesy, chivalry, generosity, and humility. It involved a self-effacing surrender to

love's power, without demanding anything in return. Without love, Andreas would say, interactions between people would be entirely driven by egoism and self-interest, and the construction of a true *civilitas* would be impossible. This Christian Neoplatonist view of love, common in troubadour lyrics and in courtly romances – where the knight was dependent on the king the way a virtuous Christian depended on God – anticipated the views of the Sicilian and Tuscan poets. All of this was, of course, “exquisitely aristocratic” in an intellectual as well as social sense.²⁴⁹ Nobility of mind, *nobilitas animi*, not that of blood, was the precondition for *fin d'amor* – even though it was conceived of in a way that was “elitist” from a modern egalitarian perspective. Andreas would never have allowed that peasant farmers could be lovers in this way; the courtly lover was one endowed with a refined capacity for perceiving the virtues of the beloved. Occitan poets who treated the theme of nobility included Guilhem de Montanhagol, Giraut de Bornelh, Arnaut de Mareuil, and Perdigon. Significantly for the present topic, all of these poets, according to their *vidas* or biographies, came from humble (non-noble) families.²⁵⁰

Of the many Provençal and Italian poets who wrote about nobility, none was more directly important to Dante than the Bolognese father of the *stilnovo*, Guido Guinizzelli. With Guinizzelli and his successors in the new style came a more forceful and intellectually penetrating transfer of the concept of nobility from the feudal system and the code of chivalry to the moral and religious spheres. Utilizing Aristotelian concepts, Guinizzelli's famous canzone *Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore* (Love always takes refuge in the noble heart) argues that love and the noble heart are in a relation of act and potential – one is created for the other.²⁵¹ Nobility does not depend on birth but on the virtuous nature of the person; an individual from a family that is renowned as noble may very well be base or worthless. On the other hand, just as certain stones after being refined alchemically by rays of the sun derive their virtue from being exposed to the radiation of an appropriate star, the radiant woman ignites the love that is latent in the heart that is noble by nature. Dante echoes this imagery in the *Convivio* when he states that nobility “descends into us from a supreme and spiritual power, like virtue into a stone from a supremely noble celestial body.”²⁵² Guinizzelli's canzone is scientific and philosophical, modeling this predilection for later poets such as Cavalcanti and Dante.²⁵³

The stilnovists thought of themselves as belonging to an intellectual elite; indeed, the influential results of their labor demonstrate that they had reason for thinking so. In addition, Guinizzelli himself, from a Ghibelline

family in Bologna, was a judge and an expert in law. His poetic treatise on nobility, like that of Dante's *Le dolci rime*, ultimately addressed political and civic life as much as the noble individual.²⁵⁴ As was the case with Dante, Guinizzelli composed his canzone during a politically turbulent period in his city, when merchants, notaries, and other non-aristocratic social groups were seeking to become the new governing class of the commune. *Al cor gentil* dialogues with the official texts that participated in this discussion in Bologna, challenging accepted views of what constitutes nobility.²⁵⁵ Guinizzelli is less concerned with how those from a noble family might become noble than with how a noble family is no guarantee of individual nobility, which requires virtue and nobility of mind or soul.²⁵⁶ At the same time, while nobility in this conception is not merely inherited, it remains the provenance of a spiritual or intellectual elite – those in whom the “*seme di felicità*” (“seed of happiness”) in Dante's poem has been placed by God.²⁵⁷

Two other medieval authors out of the many who wrote about nobility should be mentioned here, the first for the widespread circulation of his work, the second for his decisive and direct influence on Dante. The Dominican William Perault's *Summa virtutum ac vitiorum* (Summa of Virtues and Vices), one of the most widely read moral treatises of the thirteenth century, states that “virtue perfects the true nobility of the soul, of which nature has laid the foundation.”²⁵⁸ The popularity of Perault's work is important here because it shows that by the time Dante wrote the *Convivio*, it was a commonplace to say that true nobility is of the soul. This work, which was used for the moral education of the noble class, accepts the idea of nobility by family lineage as part of the social order. It aims to instill virtues of magnanimity and liberality in the nobles, stressing that noble birth provides an opportunity for noble, moral action – an opportunity which it was particularly blameworthy to ignore or squander.²⁵⁹

Dante's mentor Brunetto Latini's statements on the subject of nobility were partly derived from William Perault.²⁶⁰ Unlike naturalistic writers on the subject such as William of Aragon, Brunetto reads Aristotle in the light of theology and religion.²⁶¹ For Brunetto, the soul is created the moment it enters the body, and this makes its good more worthy since it comes directly from God; virtuous works are only its outer sign, as we find in Dante. So, for Brunetto, the virtuous person is someone with the ability to be virtuous already in the soul. The noble person is *homo christianus* acting virtuously in keeping with his or her Christian faith.²⁶² And yet Brunetto was no exception from other medieval authors in granting importance to family and lineage in the transmission of nobility. Although Brunetto inclines

toward a theory of nobility based on individual merit, he recognizes the greater advantage of those who are “well-born.”²⁶³

In addition, and very significantly for Dante, Brunetto helped to make the ideal of nobility relevant to the social life of medieval Florence.²⁶⁴ Dante’s life and work unfolded at the center of major political and social change and turmoil, and Brunetto was an important model for combining ethical-literary aims with political involvement. To understand why Dante would devote so much space of the *Convivio* to arguing that nobility is fundamentally based on neither wealth nor established family lineage, we must keep in mind the political and social context in which he started to think about this theme. As Dante himself says in Book IV, he is forming his argument in this treatise (and the canzone *Le dolci rime*) “in the face of many adversaries” – obviously a comment about its political implications.²⁶⁵

In the decades between Guinizzelli’s composition of *Al cor gentil* and Dante’s of *Le dolci rime* (usually dated to 1295), political life in central Italy had undergone enormous changes, including the downfall of imperial power; the triumph of the Angevins-Guelphs and the defeat of the Ghibellines; the alliance between the French, the papacy, and Florentine bankers; and the rise of popular government. In Florence in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, immigrants from all social groups, from wealthy landowners to notaries and artisans and farmers who were leaving their work to join Florence’s growing textile industry, moved from the *contado* (surrounding countryside) into the city, swelling its population – as Guido del Duca in *Purgatorio* XIV and Cacciaguida in *Paradiso* XVI lament.²⁶⁶ During Florence’s economic and population expansion in the second half of the thirteenth century, an opposition developed between two general groups. The first group consisted of powerful families organized into lineages accumulating property and control of churches, neighborhoods, and patronage systems, and often engaged in struggles for economic and political advantage. The second group was a larger and more diverse community of local merchants, artisans, shopkeepers, and notaries, organized into guilds, or unions, whose activities led to a popular republicanism based on consent and representation. This led to two conflicts that were ongoing in Dante’s time: battles between upper-class families, and challenges on the part of the guild community (or *popolo*) to bring these ruling families under the yoke of communal law. From the latter situation arose the political thought and interest in classical history and rhetoric exemplified by such individuals as Brunetto Latini, who was chancellor of the first popular government (the so-called *primo popolo*) during the 1250s.

The distinguishing marks of nobility at the time of Dante's birth in 1265 were belonging to a family that has long held high office; knighthood (conferred by feudal lords or princes, or occasionally by the commune); or possession of towers and palaces, though these were not confined to the nobility.²⁶⁷ In theory there was a distinction between *aristocracy*, which referred to the governing class that derived its prestige and influence from privileges associated with wealth, from its political role, and from noted family traditions; and *nobility*, which, to be considered as such had to be a proper legal reality that enabled inheritance for descendants. In practice, however, nobility was associated with other related concepts – *dignitas*, *honor*, *magnitudo*, *potentia*, *militia* (this last both knightly dignity and military cavalry service); so the sources varied as well on the nature of *nobilitas*, oscillating between concepts of nobility of blood, of office (imperial or ecclesiastical), and of mind (related to *virtus* and individual *probitas*).²⁶⁸ A legal definition of nobility was introduced in the 1280s, when there was an oligarchy which combined old and new families, but this definition did not cover all the ancient noble families and it included families only recently risen to high social status.²⁶⁹

The date of the composition of *Le dolci rime* is probably soon after Brunetto Latini's death in 1294. The poem represents in part what Dante had learned about nobility from Brunetto, mentioned above, as well as Dante's current experience in the political life of Florence. Dante's own social position in the minor nobility favored his interest in the subject. His title in Florence was *equitator*, knight, for his service in such battles as the one against Arezzo in Campaldino in 1289; and during a visit to San Gimignano in 1300 as ambassador of Florence, he was recorded as a *nobilis vir*. After the antimagnate Ordinances of Justice went into effect in 1293 – legislation led by Giano della Bella which excluded the old nobility from political office and gave the guilds unprecedented power²⁷⁰ – Dante at first was excluded from political office because he was of the minor nobility. This exclusion lasted until June 6, 1295, when the so-called Temperamenti went into effect, a modification of the earlier law which allowed the nobility to participate in political decision making as long as they enrolled in one of the guilds. Dante promptly enrolled in the *Arte dei Medici e degli Speziali* (Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries) and began his active years at the center of Florentine politics, from 1295 until his exile in early 1302.²⁷¹

This involvement and the new practical demands that Dante was facing at this time account in part for the major change in direction that Dante announces at the start of *Le dolci rime*. For the time being, he is leaving

behind the poetry of love for poetry with an ethical and social focus, to become a *cantor rectitudinis* (poet of rectitude).²⁷² In addition, Dante tells us in his commentary, an intellectual impasse has created a distance or estrangement between him and philosophy. Specifically, the question of the relation between God and prime matter (the substrate or “substance” of all manifestation) has proved overwhelmingly severe or difficult.²⁷³ He can no longer write in the sweet register of his earlier love poetry and is now going to adopt the “aspr’e sottile” (“severe and subtle”) style that is appropriate for putting a *quaestio* about nobility into verse.

Dante’s commentary on the poem starts with a renewed declaration of his love for Philosophy personified as a woman – clearly a follow-up to the praise of Philosophy in Book III. As Dante puts it, using the first of the many vegetation metaphors in Book IV, Philosophy’s “rays make blossom, leaf, and bear fruit the true nobility of man.”²⁷⁴ His aim in this treatise is simply to shed light on a collective delusion, thereby dispelling it. It is essential that he or someone do so, since to be in error about the “human goodness which is sown in us by nature” is to lose the point of what it means to be human, which “brings suffering and harm” because the “good [are] held in harsh contempt and the wicked honored and exalted,” which throws “the world into hopeless confusion.”²⁷⁵ We recognize in this statement the same project in which Dante will be engaged in the *Divine Comedy*: social and political renewal by a return to first principles.

The emperor alluded to at the start of stanza 2 of *Le dolci rime* is Frederick II, who supposedly had said that nobility is old wealth and refined bearing or manners.²⁷⁶ After Frederick, undiscerning people in general took this definition and left out the second part, about refined manners – an omission which resulted in “the opinion of the common people, which is devoid of all reason,” so that “nearly everybody barks about” how nobility is an attribute that belongs to families that have been wealthy for generations.²⁷⁷ Since Dante’s view of nobility is going to force him to disagree publicly with unquestionable authorities, Frederick II and Aristotle, he must first clear the ground with a discussion of what the nature of imperial authority is and where it originates, as well as a parallel discussion of philosophical authority.

Once the nature and basis of imperial and philosophical authority have been established, Dante returns to the main purpose of his canzone and commentary: to clear up the weed-infested field of popular, false opinion about the nature of nobility, which consists of unexamined assumptions that are not “tilled” by reason. His task, he says, is to clear away the unruly overgrowth to let the true, healthy shoots of truth come forth. Many have

gone astray in their false values, but the worst of all is the person who has the good example of noble ancestors and still goes astray. Far more valuable – or noble – is the one who has no predecessors but who nevertheless finds his own way.

Dante refutes the notion that nobility is “old wealth” on two grounds: first in terms of wealth, then in terms of time (implied by “old”). Because wealth is base by nature, it would be a contradiction to say that it could generate nobility, since, as Aristotle said, “When one thing is generated by another, it is so generated by being within its being,”²⁷⁸ or by identifying with its being the way a painter does with the thing he portrays. Also, since riches are distant from nobility, like a river flowing along far from a tower, it is not possible that the fluctuation of riches could affect it. And it is clear that riches are imperfect, since however much they are accumulated they cannot bring tranquility, and imperfection by definition is that which leaves something to be desired. Rather, riches stimulate ever-renewed hunger to acquire more. This is because nothing in this life completely fulfills desire, since “the supreme desire of each thing, the primal one given by its nature, is to return to its principle. And since God is the principle of our souls and made them like himself . . . this soul desires more than anything else to return to him.”²⁷⁹ Dante follows this statement with a justly famous metaphorical passage that illustrates how each soul is serially attached to false images or idols of the supreme good: “and thus, whatever thing it sees which appears to have some good in it, believes it to be that good.”²⁸⁰ In addition possession of riches is harmful because one lives in constant dread of losing them; it is a privation of good because one person’s possessing them means someone else’s privation.

The idea that duration, the “old” in “old wealth,” has anything to do with nobility is easily refuted, says Dante, by pointing out that if nobility were generated by the passage of time, a low-born man could never become noble through his own actions or through circumstances, and a noble son could never come from a low-born or ignoble father. Lastly, if nobility cannot manifest where it did not previously show, this implies that there have always been many people in the world and therefore we did not descend from one human being, Adam. Or, it would imply that Adam was base and so we all are base, or that Adam was noble and so we all are noble. In addition, if no metamorphosis or change with regard to nobility can occur within a family, then we must descend from two different origins, a base origin and a noble origin. Yet clearly all these implications are false. Therefore, the passage of time has nothing to do with whether a soul is noble or not.

Chapter xvi, which opens the second half of Book IV, begins with a paean to truth and to liberation from false views of nobility. Nobility, Dante says, refers to “the perfection in each thing of its proper nature.”²⁸¹ In other words, the discussion will now proceed to the essential, interior dimension of nobility rather than its external appearances of it, whose overvaluation was critiqued in the first half of Book IV. Important also is that this approach takes the concept of nobility out of a purely anthropocentric view: “So, it is predicated not only of human beings but of all things as well: for human beings call a stone noble, a plant noble, a horse noble, a falcon noble, and similarly with regard to each thing which is viewed as perfected in its nature.”²⁸² In human beings, nobility is the seed of the virtues, so what follows is a discussion of the eleven Aristotelian virtues of courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, greatness of spirit, love of honor, equanimity, affability, candor, agreeableness, and justice. Each of these virtues is a mean between two vices, one an excess of the quality the other a deficiency of it; so that, as Aristotle says, virtue is “an elective habit existing in the mean.”²⁸³ It is clear, then, that the propensity for this habit arises from nobility. These eleven virtues are moral virtues, “which make man happy or blessed, through their exercise, as the Philosopher states . . . when he defines happiness, saying that ‘Happiness is activity in accordance with virtue in a realized life.’”²⁸⁴ The intellectual virtues such as prudence, which guides the moral virtues, are associated with the contemplative life, which is superior to the active life.²⁸⁵ Why then, one may reasonably ask, doesn’t Dante focus on the intellectual virtues instead? Dante answers that he has chosen to focus on moral virtues since they “seem to be and are more common and more known and more sought after than the others.”²⁸⁶ As this introduction has mentioned, he wants his work to be useful to more people, and especially with regard to political and practical life.²⁸⁷

People who are endowed with nobility are truly chosen by God, for “those who possess this *grace*, this divine thing, are ‘almost’ like *god[s]*, unblemished by vice; and God alone can give such a thing.”²⁸⁸ This divine seed does not fall on a family lineage, however, but rather falls on individual souls: “the stock does not make individuals noble; rather, individuals make the stock noble.”²⁸⁹ God extends this grace only to the soul that inhabits the individual’s body perfectly.²⁹⁰ This exclusive view of nobility has been much noted by scholars, contrasting with, say, the view of St. Bonaventure, who posited perfection in the union of the intellective soul and the body, which was applicable to all men and women, not just the exceptional individual Dante suggests. Yet surely Bonaventure was not suggesting that nobility

is realized in all individuals – a theory which common experience would disabuse rather quickly. Dante’s theory is meant to account for the obvious exceptional quality of certain individuals who seem to transcend naturally, as it were, average complacency and egoism. In any case, he later qualifies the elitist stance with the observation that “if a person does not possess this seed [of nobility] from his natural root, he can certainly obtain it by means of grafting” – in other words that it can be cultivated.²⁹¹

Dante’s exposition is now ready to give its most complete definition of nobility: “Human nobility is none other than the ‘seed of happiness,’ [*placed by God*] in the ready soul, that is, the soul whose body is perfectly disposed throughout.”²⁹² This definition includes all four of the Aristotelian causes: the material cause of the well-disposed soul; the formal cause that is the “seed”; the efficient cause, which is God who places the seed in the soul; and the final cause, happiness. The remainder of Book IV includes a digression on the creation of the soul, to see “how this excellence descends into us” (foreshadowing the discourse on embryology in *Purgatorio* XXV);²⁹³ the cultivation of the seed of nobility through self-discipline and *directio voluntatis* (directing of the will); and the outward signs or virtues by which the noble person may be recognized.

Near the opening of the section on the ages of life, Dante gives one of the most striking organic metaphors of the treatise:

This divine seed, which was discussed above, spontaneously sprouts in our soul, developing and differentiating into each of the soul’s faculties, in conformity with their needs. It sprouts, then, in the vegetative faculty, and in the sensitive and the rational; and branches out into the powers of them all, directing them to their perfection, and always persevering within them until that moment when, with the part of our soul that never dies, it returns to heaven, to the highest and most glorious Sower of seeds.²⁹⁴

What Dante is describing here might be characterized as a *developmental theory of nobility*; or to adapt Plato’s phrase, a moving image of nobility set against the background of its source in eternity. As in modern developmental theories, problems at an earlier stage of life will create imbalance at a later stage. For example, an inadequate sense of shame in youth might show as intemperance in early adulthood. Since we are in a state of becoming rather than being, nobility comes to us in phases; there are “ages of man,” like seasons of life. And because all life on earth is a microcosm of heaven, and the heaven we see is an arc not a full circle, our life span has an ascending

phase, a peak, and a decline: the arc of life. The midpoint of the arc, at thirty-five years, of the ideal life span is proved by referring it to divine life incarnate, the life of Christ. Since nobility is instilled by the divine, much of these culminating chapters of Book IV focuses on how the eternal and the temporal intertwine in the span of the arc of life, which corresponds to the four seasons, the four humors, the four hours of day, and so on.

As mentioned, it is clear that Dante's metaphysical and ethical conception of nobility, and his critique of unthinking definitions of it, implies a criticism of Florentine society and governance.²⁹⁵ As he writes in Book IV: "Oh my wretched, wretched fatherland! What pity for you pains me, every time I read, every time I write about anything having to do with civic government! But since the penultimate treatise of this volume will be about justice, let it suffice here to have touched upon it in passing."²⁹⁶ Although Dante never wrote the *Convivio* treatise that he refers to here, this may be what eventually took shape as the *Monarchia*, which is prefigured in the argument for imperial authority in chapters iv and v of Book IV.²⁹⁷ Book II of *Monarchia* presents what appears to be a somewhat different position on nobility from the one we find in the *Convivio*. Citing passages from Juvenal and Aristotle which were quoted earlier, Dante writes: "For 'nobility is virtue and ancient wealth,' as Aristotle says in the *Politics*; and according to Juvenal: 'nobility of mind is the sole and only virtue.' These two sayings refer to two kinds of nobility, i.e. a man's own nobility and that of his ancestors. Therefore the reward of a position of authority is appropriate to the noble by reason of the cause of their nobility."²⁹⁸ Similarly, in the scene of *Paradiso* where Dante encounters his knightly ancestor Cacciaguیدا, Dante glories in his noble ancestry.²⁹⁹ Many critics have interpreted this as a profound change in Dante's view between the *Convivio* and his later writings.³⁰⁰ However, given the context, is it really surprising that these two passages focus on both of the "two kinds of nobility," individual and ancestral? In the *Monarchia*, Dante is attempting to establish the noble lineage of Aeneas and therefore of the Roman people; and in the *Paradiso* passage an obvious parallel is being drawn between Dante and Aeneas, and between Cacciaguیدا and Aeneas's father, Anchises.³⁰¹ Both scenes constitute a paternal blessing of a providential undertaking – for Aeneas the founding of Rome, for Dante the founding of spiritual and social renewal in a new Rome – where the ancestral aspect of nobility obviously is pertinent.³⁰²

In the Cacciaguیدا sequence in *Paradiso*, Dante positively basks in his noble genealogy, with Cacciaguیدا referring to him as "O sanguis meus" ("O my blood") and "O fronda mia... io fui la tua radice" ("O my branch... I was your root"); while Dante responds to his great-great grandfather with, "O cara

piota” (“O my dear base or root”).³⁰³ After the opening lines of *Paradiso* XVI, referred to above, the smile of Beatrice in response to Dante’s pride in his noble ancestry has been taken by many commentators as derision for Dante’s self-contradiction and incoherence between his later view of nobility and the one presented in the *Convivio*. It has even been conjectured, somewhat bizarrely, that Dante did not know of his noble ancestry when he wrote *Le dolci rime* and Book IV of the *Convivio* – and that he changed his mind about nobility when he found out he was from noble stock.³⁰⁴ Later interpretations seem to make more sense in viewing Beatrice’s smile as a gentle admonition for any lingering worldliness in Dante’s attitude.³⁰⁵

We do not have to look far in Dante’s writings to find other passages which show that it is inaccurate to think of Dante as simply opposing a “false” nobility of blood to a “true” nobility of mind. To mention just two more examples: in canto XV of *Inferno*, Dante expresses pride in his noble Florentine-Roman ancestry when he encounters another important father figure, Brunetto Latini; and his dialogue with Guido del Duca, mentioned above, shows that he was nostalgic for ancient and illustrious families and lamented their decadence.³⁰⁶ While Book IV of the *Convivio* provides an argument for neutralizing superficial or corrupt hereditary nobility,³⁰⁷ the emphasis in Dante is on “corrupt,” not inherited nobility as such. As Johannis de Serraville expressed in his fifteenth-century commentary on *Paradiso* XVI, nobility of blood remains a value in Dante which, “though distinguished from and dependent on virtue, contributes to the greatness of man. It represents, so to speak, a transpersonal objectification of virtue, an endowment that, while not sufficient, is necessary.”³⁰⁸ So, while Dante never fails to emphasize that the virtue of individuals is necessary to maintain the nobility of a family, and that noble lineage is not a prerequisite for individual nobility, which is given directly by God,³⁰⁹ nevertheless noble lineages and families have an important social function that the individual noble person alone cannot fulfill. In short, Dante would have agreed with the conclusion to W. B. Yeats’s poem “A Prayer for My Daughter”:

How but in custom and in ceremony
 Are innocence and beauty born?
 Ceremony’s a name for the rich horn,
 And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

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