Giovanna as John the Baptist and the "disdegno" of Guido

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Dante links Cavalcanti's lady, Giovanna, with Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* XXIV. "For that day," Giovanna appears first as John the Baptist, and Beatrice follows as Christ. Beatrice's role as the vehicle for Dante's salvation is implicit in both the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divine Comedy*; yet, nothing has been said regarding the possibility of Giovanna having a similar role for Guido. Was Giovanna's presence in the *Vita Nuova* XXIV to have no importance for Guido?

In the bulk of Cavalcanti's extant poetry, Giovanna is portrayed as that pitiless lady who places ever more distance between herself and the poet. Cavalcanti discusses how a love-sick poet can be freed from the torments of love by means of thinking of other things in "Guata Manetto, quella scrignutuzza." Guido does precisely this. He directs his thoughts away from Giovanna and to philosophy, outside the bounds of courtly love.

If Beatrice could be seen as a positive vehicle whereby in following her Dante would be saved, for Cavalcanti one could conclude that Giovanna's attributes sent him to perdition. Her attributes would be her cruelty and obstinance. His perdition would be his moving outside of courtly love poetry and into his brand of philosophy, namely Averroism, as reflected in "Donna me prega."

Why, when the relationship between Giovanna and Guido was very much on the wane, on more than one occasion did Dante seek a reconciliation between them? Apparently Dante wished to adopt Giovanna as a very different vehicle from that one used by Guido. It shall be argued that Dante sees Giovanna as emblematic of the correct road for the erring Guido to follow in this life, in very much the same way that Dante sees the thrust of his own relationship with Beatrice. However, there is a major difference. While Dante abandons Beatrice for a brief period only to return to her with more fidelity than ever, Guido abandons Giovanna permanently.

Guido's disenchantment with this relationship is at the core of
his extant poetry. With the exception of Guido’s few youthful poems of praise, almost all his poetry bemoans the reality that Giovanna does not look upon his plight sympathetically. In fact, she takes great delight in his suffering. In light of this, the reader is not surprised when Guido responds negatively to Dante’s first attempt to bring these straying lovers together. I am speaking of Dante’s “Guido, i’ vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io,” and Guido’s response, “S’io fosse quelli che d’amor fu degno.”

The exchange reads as follows:

Guido, i’ vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io
tessimo presi per incantamento
e messi in un vasel, ch’ad ogni vento
per mare andasse al voler vostro e mio;
si che fortuna od altro tempo rio
non ci potesse dare impedimento,
anzi, vivendo sempre in un talento,
di stare insieme crescesse ’l disio.
E monna Vanna e monna Lagia poi
con quella ch’è sul numer de le trenta
con noi ponesse il buono incantatore:
e quivi ragionar sempre d’amore,
e ciascuna di lor fosse contenta,
si come i’ credo che saremmo noi.

S’io fosse quelli che d’amor fu degno,
del qual non trovo sol che rimembranze,
e la donna tenesse altra sembianza,
assai mi piacerei siffatto legno.
E tu, che se’ de l’amoroso regno
là onde di merzé nasce speranza,
riguarda se ’l mi’ spirito ha pesanza:
ch’un prest’ arcier di lui ha fatto segno
e tragge l’arco, che li tese Amore,
si lietamente, che la sua persona
par che di gioco porti signoria.
Or odi maraviglia ch’el disia:
lo spirito fedito li perdonia,
vedendo che li strugge il suo valore.

While Dante’s request falls within the genre where he wishes for a hypothetical situation in which the lovers and their ladies would interact in an ideal situation, just the same, it is possible that Dante meant this to be the first of a number of serious messages for Guido. It is unlikely that Dante did not know of the rift that had grown between Guido and his lady. Such being the case, Dante either wanted to open up still fresh wounds, something hardly plausible, or, more credibly, he hoped Guido would carry on in the
plazer genre and write more optimistic poetry. Dante has grown out of Guido’s shadow and has learned that he can write superior poetry in an optimistic manner. He is inviting Guido to do likewise.

Guido rejects Dante’s proposal. He explains that his lady is more cruel than the others and therefore he cannot remain a “fedele” in Love’s court. With this refusal, one may question if this heralds the beginning of the parting of the ways for the two poets. Dramatic, tormented lines make up the substance of Guido’s extant poetry; yet, the maturing Dante, who is not so influenced now by Guido, wishes Cavalcanti to reject that kind of poetry for which he has become renowned.

One problem that Contini notes in “Guido, i’ vorrei” is the association here of Giovanna with Dante’s “donna de le trenta” who is not Beatrice but probably Dante’s screen lady. The screen lady appears in the Vita Nuova as one of essential importance for Dante. It is on account of her, that Beatrice refuses to greet Dante, which ultimately leads Dante on his first step out of traditional courtly love and into a second stage where he no longer demands something in return from Beatrice, namely “mercede.” He realizes that to praise her alone is all the reward he requires. Dante, consequently, needed the screen lady in order to gain a greater understanding of Beatrice and all she will later become. Giovanna has a similar role to that of the screen lady in the Vita Nuova XXIV, in that she too is a necessary first step before attaining Beatrice. Therefore, as opposed to questioning the pairing of the screen lady with Giovanna, one might conclude that the Dante of the Vita Nuova XXIV could have looked back at “Guido, i’ vorrei” and realized that Giovanna, like the screen lady, should be seen as one who anticipated Beatrice.

According to Barbi, the sonnet “Io mi senti’ svegliar dentro a lo core” circulated separately from the Vita Nuova, probably a short time before Beatrice’s death in June 1290. This means that Dante’s desire here to discuss Guido’s past beloved actually occurs on two occasions: first in “Io mi senti’” and later in the prose of the Vita Nuova XXIV of which the sonnet then becomes a part (in around 1292 when the Vita Nuova was written).

Dante’s message to Guido in “Io mi senti’” is like that one in his prose where he is hopeful Guido will return to Giovanna. By displaying Giovanna and Beatrice in this close relationship Dante might be anticipating Guido will see that just as Dante values Beatrice, so too, he should value Giovanna.

A further, more subtle indication of this same message could be Dante’s adoption of Giovanna’s senhal, Primavera. Guido calls his
lady Primavera in the early *ballata*, “Fresca rosa novella,” which was addressed to Dante. There is manuscript evidence that this was one of Guido’s earliest works, written when he looked on the love experience as something salutary and ideal.\(^{11}\) With Dante’s mention of Primavera, in this sonnet addressed to Guido, it might be considered Dante’s response to “Fresca rosa novella.” There has been a span of a number of years, but perhaps only now does Dante see a reason to press the issue. It is here that Guido must be reminded of that period when he wrote about love so optimistically as to call his lady an “angelicata creatura.”

Dante’s message to Guido in the prose of Chapter XXIV is more direct. In praise of Giovanna, Dante states:

\[
\ldots io vidi venire verso me una gentile donna, la quale era di famosa bieltade, e fue già molto donna di questo primo mio amico. E lo nome di questa donna era Giovanna, salvo che per la sua bieltade, secondo che altri crede, imposto l’era nome Primavera; e così era chiamata.
\]

The notion that Dante places Guido’s ex-lady on such a pedestal is remarkable. All is over between Guido and Giovanna now; yet, Giovanna is so central. Dante goes on to reveal precisely what his thoughts are concerning Guido’s feelings toward Giovanna:

Onde io poi, ripensando, propusii di scrivere per rima a lo mio primo amico (tacendomi certe parole le quali pareano da tacere), credendo io che ancor lo suo cuore mirasse la bieltade di questa Primavera gentile \ldots

Again there is that suggestive *senhal*, Primavera, as Dante attempts, in vain, to reconcile the differences between Guido and Giovanna.

The most famous passage of Chapter XXIV is where Dante calls upon his reader, “per questa venuta d’oggi,” to look upon Beatrice as Christ:

E appresso lei, guardando, vidi venire la mirabile Beatrice. Queste donne andaro presso di me così l’una appresso l’altra, e parve che Amore mi parlassè nel cuore, e dicesse: “Quella prima è nominata Primavera solo per questa venuta d’oggi; ché io mossi lo imponente del nome a chiamarla così Primavera, cioè prima verrà lo dice che Beatrice si mosterrà dopo la imaginazione del suo fedele. E se anche vogli considerare lo primo nome suo, tanto è quanto dire prima verrà, però che lo suo nome Giovanna è da quello Giovanni lo quale precedette la verace luce, dicendo: ‘Ego vox clamantis in deserto: parate viam Domini’.”

Considering the focus on Giovanna here, it would be odd for the reader not to probe Dante’s message to Guido (let the reader be
reminded that the \textit{Vita Nuova} is dedicated to Guido); yet, this is precisely what has come to pass. There has been much discussion regarding Giovanna's importance for an understanding of Beatrix's role; however, nothing has been said regarding the importance of Giovanna's role as John the Baptist for Guido. Through Giovanna's role as John the Baptist, Dante's criticism of Guido goes much further than simply being one of too much pessimism and the understood rejection of Giovanna as \textit{domina}. If Guido denies Giovanna in her role as John the Baptist, followed by Christ, we are talking about the salvation of the soul.

When Dante quotes John the Baptist's words, "\textit{Ego vox clamantis in deserto: parate viam Domini}" ("I am the voice of one crying in the desert: prepare the way of the Lord") John 1:23, the reader ought to question the importance of these words for Guido's personal situation. Bruno Nardi has shown, I believe unquestionably, that Guido Cavalcanti was an Averroist. Here in the \textit{Vita Nuova} we witness Dante's last attempt, through Giovanna, to call Guido out of the desert to Christ. This voice of the one crying, "for today," is Giovanna's voice. It is that same Giovanna whom Guido has abandoned in recent years.

Giovanna cries into that ungodly "deserto," that very same "deserto" which will appear again in \textit{Inferno} I. Here, Dante chooses to follow Virgil on the correct path to salvation. So this is the difference between Dante and Guido. Beatrice cries into the "deserto," through Virgil, and Dante follows him out of the desert and toward salvation. Giovanna's cry into the desert meets no response. Guido is quite content to remain in his own "dark wood" of Averroism. Cavalcanti had the choice that everyman has in life. His choice was through Giovanna which he rejected.

The question of Guido's choice appears in \textit{Inferno X}, one of the most studied and argued cantos in the \textit{Divine Comedy}, in part because of the view to be taken regarding Guido's perdition. Guido's father, Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti, begins:

\ldots "Se per questo cieco
carcere vai per altezza d'ingegno,
mio figlio ov'è? e perché non è teco?".\ldots

E io a lui: "Da me stesso non vegno: colui ch'attende là, per qui mi mena
forse cui Guido vostro ebbe a disdegno".

Le sue parole e 'l modo de la pena
m'avean di costui già letto il nome;
però fu la risposta così piena
Di sùbito drizzato gridò: “Come?
diciesti “elli ebbe”? non viv’ elli ancora?
non fiere li occhi suoi lo dolce lume?”: (58-69)

With Cavalcante’s inquiry regarding the whereabouts of son Guido, and why Dante and Guido are not together, the reader is called to think back to that time when Guido and Dante were in fact inseparable. There was this “foursome”: Guido and Giovanna, Dante and Beatrice. Dante declares that he is being led to Beatrice, and this is the way I interpret the famous “cui” of line 63, and the salvation that she represents. Guido also had a courtly lady, but he abandoned her, something Dante had hoped Guido would not do. It could be, that had Guido kept his Beatrice, namely Giovanna, he would have been shown the right way.

It is opportune to recall that even the Beatrice of the (Divine Comedy), stripped of her allegorical meaning, is still the domina of Dante’s courtly love poetry. This reminder, here, is central to our understanding of Guido’s situation. When Guido holds Beatrice in disdain, we must direct our thoughts to his own courtly lady, namely Beatrice’s precursor, “for today,” that John the Baptist, Giovanna. Everyman has his own way to salvation. Guido’s way, as is understood in the Vita Nuova, was to begin with Giovanna. Dante dedicated the Vita Nuova to Guido in the hope that he would return to Giovanna and the optimistic view of love that would declare this action. Implicit in Dante’s vain attempt was his desire for Guido to abandon his particular brand of philosophizing.

The way of Guido’s salvation, then, would have been to keep Giovanna and from there to attain what Beatrice represents. Looking at this in another way, if we recall the final two lines of “Io mi senti’”: “Amor mi disse: “Quell’è Primavera, le quell’ha nome Amor, sì mi somiglia’” we see Giovanna as Beauty (Primavera - Beauty) and Beatrice as Love. First Guido would be attracted by the beauty; however, later, this courtly love stage would be transcended and Guido could move on to the love represented by Beatrice (“per questa venuta d’oggi” as Christ). But Guido disdains Beatrice in Inferno X. He disdains her by not caring to hold on to Giovanna, the necessary prerequisite. Dante makes it clear to Guido in the Vita Nuova that Giovanna is the prerequisite, when he gives her the role of John the Baptist to herald the coming of Beatrice as Christ.

Dante’s use of the past remote “ebbe” misunderstood by Cavalcante and argued by Dante scholars ever since, would refer back to that moment when Guido abandoned the right road that would
lead to all that Beatrice represents, by rejecting Giovanna and turning to Averroist philosophy.

Dante would most likely have seen Guido’s moment of refusal (to which the “ebbe” would refer) back in the *Vita Nuova* when John the Baptist’s words try to reach Guido in the guise of Giovanna for that day. Guido, however, did not heed that cry into the desert, and so he held the Lord or, “per questa venuta d’oggi” Beatrice, in disdain.

The two moments at issue here, the *Vita Nuova* XXIV and the *Inferno* X, must be studied side by side in order to have a full understanding of Dante’s message concerning Guido. This is not to say, however, that Dante’s perceptions of Guido do not change. Indeed they do. Just as Dante says that Guido still has some feeling for Giovanna’s beauty, in the *Vita Nuova* XXIV, so too, then, he had hope for Guido’s soul. This is no longer the case in *Inferno* X, written some years after the death of Dante’s once “first friend.”

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**NOTES**


4. Both Barbi as well as Foster and Boyd places “Guido i’ vorrei” a number of years before the writing of the *Vita Nuova*. They agree that Guido’s response, “S’io fosse,” reflects a moment when he was still in love with Giovanna, even though he is in great torment. This love no longer exists at the time of the *Vita Nuova*. See Michele Barbi and Francesco Maggini, *Rime della ‘Vita Nuova’ e della giovinezza* (Firenze, 1956), pp. 193-98; Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyd, *Dante’s Lyric Poetry*, (Oxford, 1967), II, 54-55.

5. All quotations from Dante’s minor works are taken from the critical edition of the Società Dantesca Italiana (Firenze, 1960); all quotations from the Divine Comedy are from *La Commedia secondo l’antica vulgata*, a cura di Giorgio Petrocchi (Milano, 1966-67).


7. The first three words of line 1 of Dante’s sonnet, “Guido i’ vorrei,” state in a forthright manner that Dante wants something of Guido. It is to be remembered that the first line of a sonnet is of preeminent importance, considering that it is also the title of the sonnet. While it is true that Lapo is mentioned as well, the
poem is addressed to Guido. If anything, considering Guido's response, this only serves to remind us that Guido is not only abandoning Dante, but others as well in the Stilnovo.

8 For Contini's discourse, see Dante Alighieri, Rime, ed. Gianfranco Contini (Torino, 1946), p. 36.


11 See Guido Cavalcanti, Le rime, ed. Guido Favati (Milano, 1957), pp. 121-123. Favati explains how "Fresca rosa novella" is found on the most ancient of all the manuscripts (the "Pe" Manuscript) which contain Cavalcanti's extant poetry.

12 See Nardi's two articles in "note 3" which analyze "Donna me prega" and reflect the extent of Cavalcanti's Averroism. Also, see Paul O. Kristeller, "A Philosophical Treatise from Bologna Dedicated to Guido Cavalcanti: Magister Jacobus de Pistorio and his 'Quaestio de felicitate'" in Medioevo e Rinascimento, (Firenze, 1955), 1, 427-63.

13 I agree with the bulk of modern scholars who accept the "cui" in line 63 as a dative not an accusative, meaning Beatrice, not Virgil, is held in disdain by Guido. Two studies that have done much to convince many Dantists are S.A. Chimenz, "Il disdegn di Guido e i suoi interpreti," Orientamenti culturali, 1 (1945); A. Pagliaro, "Il disdegn di Guido," Letterature moderne, 1 (1950).

14 While Cavalcanti's date of birth cannot be pinpointed, he was roughly five to ten years Dante's senior. This would mean that Cavalcanti was probably in his mid-thirties, or better his "mezzo del cammin" of his life when the Vita Nuova was written and, possibly, when Giovanna cried out to him.