

Beatrice and the Astronomical Heavens

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In "Beatrice and the Astronomical Heavens," Alison Cornish thoroughly explains the relationship between love and knowledge in the forms of beautiful Beatrice and the nine celestial moving planets. Cornish interprets Dante's search for truth and beauty as one illustrated by the perfect, eternal presence of the stars surrounding Beatrice's graceful figure and occupying most of the astronomical heavens. Cornish then clarifies the issue by displaying the allegorical reasons for the repetitive figures of Beatrice and the vast heavens discussed throughout Dante's various written works. In the end, Cornish believes that the concepts of beauty, love, and intellect are the best possible mediums that Dante could have used to fully express both his poetic and philosophical ideas concerning a seemingly inaccessible God.

According to Cornish, the symbol of Beatrice is not only used to represent a beautiful and angelic lady, but also to show how her love made intellectual and moral progression possible for those around her. Cornish mentions both Aristotle and Albert the Great's theory that the heavens are set in motion only after being both "desired and loved," an act believed to be the origin of all change (21). She relates Beatrice's ability to awaken love in the most hopeless of hearts to a life-changing transformation that could quite possibly cause the above-stated theoretical movement of the celestial bodies. This explanation places Beatrice in a powerful role yet again, although Cornish proposes it is the stars which have a strong "physical influence on the body, [. . .] suggest[ing] to the mind an invisible and far superior reality" than what most readers are used to (20). In this way, because both Beatrice and the stars have the power to seduce the minds of men,

one can only assume they symbolize one concept: philosophical love. Here, that love appears perfect because it is powered solely by the psyche instead of the traditional senses often created by an imperfect human heart.

This argument gives weight to the assumption that the natural response of human nature is to react before thinking. Cornish supposes that some part of love *must* be rational, although we, as humans, tend to prefer things that *seem* pleasant and look good over those that we *know* to be good, thus acting irrationally. The standard human reaction is to act first and think later because thinking takes more effort and time than most people were usually willing to volunteer. However, because Beatrice is of a superior intelligence, she reacts in the opposite way and refuses to succumb easily to the disillusionment of the senses. Besides Beatrice, the planets and stars are the only other objects to possess that kind of intellectual power.

However, Cornish states emphatically that Beatrice's power of persuasion comes not only from her beauty, but also from the "goodness of her soul" and the sweetness of her sensible acts which capture men's intellect and inspire their philosophic and progressively moral ideals (25). Cornish also seems to admire Dante's original way of making ordinary traits seem sensual. For example, Beatrice's eyes have both the ability to reflect the stars and the intellectual power to transform the impossible into the probable. In this way, her eyes are beacons, acting not only as windows to the soul, but also as vehicles for a deeper education. In her place beside the planets, Beatrice functions not only as a star, but also as the sun with the power to awaken even the coarsest of hearts to the foreign prospect of love. In this way, she brightens others' lives with the hope and possibility achieved primarily through the fulfillment of desires.

Cornish goes on to compare love with the science of astronomy and Beatrice's movement through the spheres. But we, the readers, soon realize that the purpose of love is to educate and

broaden the horizons of the mind. Philosophy is a science meant for sharing knowledge and establishing new possibilities and moral pathways. According to Cornish, since the origin of philosophy is associated with the beauty of the celestial spheres and not necessarily beauty itself, this makes astronomy, "the noblest of sciences, concerned with the most perfect of bodies, and proceeding by the surest of methods" (26). Even the ignorant know to marvel at the stars and other phenomena of the sky because the cosmos represents "the template for the organization of knowledge" (25). Throughout her article, Cornish thoroughly explains the constant links between love, knowledge, and the divine stars, all of which tend to have a miraculous effect on philosophy as a whole.

Cornish has done an excellent job expressing what Dante intended the world to hear concerning the metaphor of Beatrice, with her constant, yet unattainable, intellect and beauty. Regarding the mind versus the senses, I agree with Cornish's idea that people in love do not tend to react rationally. Love has nothing to do with the mind's intelligence. It has to do with the heart and the senses and is usually an irrational and confusing occurrence, because people will always desire the perfection that they cannot have and never will be. There is only one picture of perfection in someone's mind, and if one does not match up to another's unrealistic desire, his chances of a future with that person are relatively slim. It is here that Beatrice embodies the perfect example of virtuous love and unreachable intellect for Dante, which is probably the reason he wanted her so badly and wrote about her so often.

After realizing that and commending Dante on his personification of Beatrice as Lady Philosophy, Cornish focuses on Beatrice's power "to awaken love not just in the proverbial gentle heart, but also in hearts where it does not even lie dormant" (23). Although the celestial bodies generally symbolize the equality of intellect and desire, Dante insists these traits stem

from "an act of pure intelligence" which few people accomplish (24). In Dante's argument that love is knowledge, the joyous perfection of the heavens is comparable to the sensual "delights of the beloved" (26). At this point, Cornish ties in the relationships of philosophic love to Heaven's natural resources and explains how that association results in the purest form of knowledge possible. In conclusion, Cornish effectively explains how "stars are the only incorruptible visible things" which can compare with the beauty, love, and intellect necessary for full poetic and philosophic expressions of a poet like Dante (26-7).

Work Cited

Cornish, Alison. "Beatrice and the Astronomical Heavens." *Lectura Dantis: A Forum for Dante Research and Interpretation* (Spring-Fall 1996): 20-29.

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Dr. Walter's Comments: *Stephanie's own deep insight into the interdependence of love and knowledge in Dante's Divine Comedy guides her excellent review of a challenging essay. Her tracing of Cornish's argument clarifies how classical philosophy and Christian theology enrich the poet's conception of Beatrice, who is the goal of the journey that readers of the poem share with Dante.*