The Word Made Flesh in *Inferno* 5: Francesca Reading and the Figure of the Annunciation

MARTIN EISNER

“Non tener pur ad un loco la mente.”

—Virgil (*Purg.* 10.46)

*Inferno* 5 has long occupied a central place in the reception of Dante’s *Commedia*. Passages from the canto were transcribed in the *Memoriali bolognesi* well before Dante’s death in 1321; Boccaccio appropriated the canto’s key term *Galeotto* as the surname for his *Decameron* (1351); and Petrarch, who so strenuously resisted Dante’s influence, nonetheless includes “the pair from Rimini” (“la coppia d’Arminio”) in the catalog of tragic lovers in his *Triumphus Cupidinis* (3.82–84). Even when Dante’s fortunes reached their nadir during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the episode of Francesca, along with that of Ugolino, continued to be singled out. When Francesco De Sanctis observed in 1876 that “per molti la *Divina Commedia* non è che due nomi soli: Francesca e il conte Ugolino,” he was speaking not only for his own age but also for several centuries of reception.

Despite the fame of the episode, it is only at the end of the eighteenth century that artists begin to represent Francesca’s story outside of the frame of the *Commedia* itself. Whereas most manuscript illuminations depict the Pilgrim’s encounter with Paolo and Francesca in the otherworld, romantic illustrators chose to represent Francesca’s story of love and murder. The Swiss artist Henry Fuseli seems to have been the first to depict the terrestrial scene in a 1786 painting (fig. 1), but John Flaxman’s

Outline of the episode (1792) provided the model that others would follow (fig. 2). By 1819 artists such as Joseph Anton Koch, Marie-Philippe Coupin de la Couperie, and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (fig. 3) had produced their own pictures inspired by Flaxman’s image. Indeed, Ingres was so obsessed with the scene that he completed seven paintings and eleven drawings of it. Whereas Flaxman’s illustration was part of a series of engravings that depicted the whole poem, the representations by Ingres dispense with the infernal context of the poet’s condemnation and the pilgrim’s pity to portray instead the terrestrial scene alone in a domestic frame constituted by the menacing return of Francesca’s husband.

This shift of attention to Francesca’s falling in love could be interpreted as part of a broader romantic interpretation of the poem, and several scholars have called attention to the importance of these illustrations as
part of the romantic fascination with Francesca that also inspired poets like Ugo Foscolo, Leigh Hunt, Lord Byron, John Keats, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.” For some, the power of this episode surpasses, or even destroys, the frame that contains it. As Hunt puts it in The Story of Rimini (1816), in the episode of Francesca, “We even lose sight of the place, in which the saturnine poet . . . has thought proper to put the sufferers; and see the whole melancholy absurdity of his theology, in spite of itself, falling to nothing before one genuine impulse of the affections.”

Erich Auerbach offers a more sophisticated expression of similar sentiments on Dante in Mimesis (1946). Even as he shows how Hunt’s “melancholy absurdity of [Dante’s] theology” actually produces Dante’s realism through the notion of figura, he likewise sees that frame as broken by what it contains. “In the very heart of the other world,” Auerbach writes, Dante “created a world of earthly beings and passions so powerful that it breaks bounds and proclaims its independence. Figure surpasses fulfillment, or more properly: the fulfillment serves to bring out the figure in still more impressive relief.” In this way, Auerbach continues, “The image of man eclipses the
image of God. Dante’s work made man’s Christian-figural being a reality, and destroyed it in the very process of realizing it. The tremendous pattern was broken by the overwhelming power of the images it had to contain.” Auerbach applies this idea to the whole poem, but there are only a handful of examples when “the overwhelming power of the images” does indeed produce an afterlife that is independent of the
poem’s representation of the otherworld, as in these romantic illustrations of Francesca. For Auerbach, the episode of Francesca is also exemplary of the power of the everyday events he examines throughout *Mimesis*, because Dante’s representation of the scene “scorns every kind of finely wrought coincidence, and the scene which he describes—the lovers reading the book together—is the most ordinary thing in the world, of interest only through what it leads to.”12

The romantic depictions of Francesca reading provide powerful evidence for Auerbach’s claim about the way these images surpass their frame, but they also complicate his statement that the scene of reading was “the most ordinary thing in the world” because they borrow the iconography of the Virgin reading at the Annunciation to represent Francesca. Two critics have briefly noted the connections between these nineteenth-century images of Francesca and representations of the Annunciation. Paola Pallotino sees the appropriation of the iconography of the Virgin reading in representations of Francesca as part of a larger migration of Annunciation imagery during this period that also occurs in images of Ophelia and Sleeping Beauty.13 In his reading of the canto, John Frecceo similarly observes that those illustrations look “like a grotesque parody of the Annunciation.”14 This essay argues that the parallel between Francesca and Mary reading visualized in these paintings not only constitutes an art historical migration or a parody proposed by later painters but also reveals a genealogical relationship between visual representations of the Annunciation and Dante’s textual construction of the scene. In other words, the pictorial transformation of this verbal object reveals a visual tradition that may have informed the construction of the textual episode itself. This connection, moreover, radiates throughout the poem both in Dante’s own reflections on the relationship between verbal and visual representation in his description of the Annunciation on the Terrace of Pride, which connects to Marian interpretations of the Song of Songs, and Bernard’s prayer to the Virgin.

These romantic illustrations thus suggest another answer to the question of why Francesca is reading, which, as Boccaccio notes in his commentary, was Dante’s representational choice: “Col quale [Paolo] come ella poi si giugnesse, mai non udi’ dire se non quello che l’autore ne scrive; il che possibile è che così fosse: ma io credo quello essere più tosto fizione formata sopra quello che era possibile ad essere avvenuto, ch’io
Modern critics have been particularly interested in exploring the literary sources that Francesca suggests were at the root of her love, and they have proposed analogues not only from the Arthurian accounts of Lancelot that Francesca herself invokes, but also Tristan, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, and even Abelard. The question of Dante’s model for the episode, however, remains an open one, as Lorenzo Renzi notes in his recent monograph on the Francesca episode, *Le conseguenze di un bacio*.

Dante undoubtedly had many models in mind—Arthurian romances, Augustine, the *Aeneid*, maybe even Abelard—and he transformed each of them in his own way, but this essay proposes that the visual reception of this episode in these romantic illustrations offers another possibility. Just as Dante scholars have long recognized the importance of the visual arts for interpreting other episodes in Dante’s poem, the Annunciation informs Dante’s representation of the scene. Exploring the afterlife of Dante’s work may thus help—perhaps paradoxically—to historicize the episode.

Like Dante’s choice of the act of reading, these romantic artists could have chosen any number of representational arrangements besides the Annunciation, as Garrett Stewart’s extensive analysis of painted scenes of reading in this period amply demonstrates. What makes this iconographical choice so interesting is that a comparison of the Annunciation with Dante’s representation of Francesca’s story of reading reveals correspondences not only in the narrative scene but also in iconographic details and thematic concerns. Mary and Francesca are not only shown reading but also interrupted in their reading when what they read about actually happens. When Paolo and Francesca read about the kiss of Lancelot and Guinivere they begin to kiss: “Quando leggemmo il disiato riso / esser baciato da cotanto amante, / questi, che mai da me non fia diviso, / la bocca mi baciò tutto tremante” (*Inf.* 5.133–36). In medieval representations of the Annunciation, likewise, Mary is imagined to be reading the text of Isaiah 7:14, “Ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium et vocabitis nomen eius Emmanuhel” (Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel) when, in Luke 1:31, Gabriel arrives and speaks the words she is reading: “Ecce concipies in utero et paries filium et vocabis nomen eius Iesum” (Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus). The close verbal resonances of *pariet, concipiet*, and *nomen eius* make the scene a
model moment of textual fulfillment, as the author of the Gospel of Matthew explains (1:21–23) by quoting Isaiah in his narrative: “Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which the Lord spoke by the prophet, saying: Behold a virgin shall be with child, and bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.”

In the twelfth century, this textual fulfillment takes on a narrative form as artists and exegetes begin to imagine Mary reading the prophecy that the Annunciation fulfills. Whereas earlier representations of the Annunciation, like that in the fifth-century mosaic in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, represent Mary holding a textus in the form of a piece of cloth while spinning, images in the West from the twelfth century—and increasingly through the thirteenth and fourteenth—show the Virgin reading a book. Otto Pächt traces the origins of this innovation to the influence of Cluny, but he also notes that early examples range from England to Bohemia, so it would appear that the innovation had a wide diffusion. Pächt demonstrates how certain suggestions in writings of Ambrose and Bede come to fruition in the work of Aelred of Rievaulx (1109–1166), who appears to be the first to propose explicitly that the Virgin is reading Isaiah at the moment of the Annunciation: “Perhaps she was holding in her hands Isaiah and in the course of her reading had come upon the chapter: Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.” Aelred’s “forte” (perhaps) would be lost in contemporary visual representations like that on one of the mid-twelfth-century carved capitals of St. Martin d’Ainay at Lyons, where Mary holds a book with the engraved letters E V C P (ecce virgo concipiet et pariet). By the time of Duccio’s Annunciation, commissioned in 1308, around the same time that Dante began writing the Inferno, Mary is represented holding in her hand the text of Isaiah 7:14. My claim is not that a particular picture of the Annunciation inspired Dante but that the image of the Annunciation in those pictures informs his representation of Francesca. I rely here on W. J. T. Mitchell’s distinctions between image and picture: an image exists independently of any material form, whereas a picture is the materialization of an image in a particular medium. Mitchell develops his definition of iconology in contrast to that of Panofsky because he feels that Panofsky’s mode of iconology too often explains the icon through the logos and therefore diminishes the complexity of the visual by reducing it to the verbal. In this sense, Dante’s use of the Annunciation in Inferno 5 would constitute
a remarkable moment in which the icon pushes back against the logos, since illustrations of the text suggest an icon behind the logos itself.  

The possibility that a visual icon could have informed Dante’s verbal representation of Francesca reading is supported by Dante’s description of the Annunciation in *Purgatorio* 10, where it serves as the first example of a virtue in pointed structural contrast to first examples of punished vice in *Inferno* 5. Dante uses the Annunciation to explore—and contaminate—the boundaries between verbal and visual representation. As the Pilgrim walks along the terrace of pride, he sees the image of the event engraved on its bank in marble:

L’angel che venne in terra col decreto
de la molt’ anni lagrimata pace,
ch’aperse il ciel del suo lungo divieto,
    dinanzi a noi pareva si verace
quivi intagliato in un atto soave,
che non sembiava imagine che tace.
    Giurato si saria ch’el dicesse “Ave!”;
perché iv’ era imaginata quella
    ch’ad aprir l’alto amor volse la chiave;
e avea in atto impressa esta favella
    “Ecce ancilla Dei”, propriamente
come figura in cera si suggella.

(*Purg. 10.31–45*)

The Pilgrim sees engravings that surpass conventional human modes of representation by fusing language and action. Gabriel is “in atto soave” and is said to utter “Ave,” while Mary’s speech “Ecce ancilla Dei” seems inscribed “in atto.” The concluding simile of the “figura in cera” not only conveys the identity between Mary’s *atto* and her speech but also recalls the *figura* of prophecy that is fulfilled in that moment. When Dante describes these artworks’ fusion of the verbal and the visual as *visibile parlar* (*Purg. 10.95*), he is not just using a figure of speech, since the Annunciation is the figuration of speech, as the Word becomes flesh in the Incarnation, “in che ’l verbo divino / carne si fece” (*Par. 23.73–74*).  

Giovanni Pozzi maintains that the words *Ave* and *Ecce ancilla Dei* cannot actually be inscribed here, but while God as sculptor may communicate dialogue without the need for textual inscription, Dante’s choice of words nonetheless draws on inscriptions that he would have found in actual visual representations of the Annunciation. Medieval illuminations of
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The terrace confirm this connection by usually representing the Annunciation as an artwork, while the extended dialogue between Trajan and the widow that follows, where Dante pushes the disjunction between words and images beyond all bounds of verisimilitude, is most often represented as if it were actually happening instead of merely representing something else.\(^\text{32}\) On the basis of Dante’s description, Roger Tarr suggests that Dante would have known a relief of the Annunciation on the thirteenth-century facade of Santa Reparata (fig. 4), which shows not only the inscribed text but also the doves that are typical of Annunciation scenes since the fifth-century mosaics in Santa Maria Maggiore.\(^\text{33}\) Although Dante excludes these doves from his description of the Annunciation in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, they migrate into *Inferno* 5, where Dante uses them to describe Paolo and Francesca moving toward the Pilgrim and Virgil: “Quali colombe dal disio chiamate / con l’ali alzate e ferme al dolce nido / vegnon per l’aere, dal voler portate; / cotali uscir de la schiera ov’è Dido, / a noi venendo per l’aere maligno, / si forte fu l’affettuoso grido” (82–87). Dante uses these doves to describe the encounter between two realms of being, which is the same function they serve both in visual representations of the Annunciation, where they embody the Holy Spirit and thus materialize the act of mediation between eternity and the earthly, and in the *Aeneid* (6.190–209), where they show Aeneas the Golden Bough.\(^\text{34}\)

Dante’s representation of Mary on the Terrace of Pride draws not only on visual depictions but also on an exegetical tradition. When he describes Mary as “quella / ch’ad aprir l’alto amor volse la chiave” (*Purg.* 10.42),
Dante indicates that he interprets the Annunciation through the Song of Songs, where the image of keys occurs in what is one of the most erotic passages of that poem: “My beloved put his hand through the key hole, and my bowels were moved at his touch” (Song of Songs 5:4). Dante’s Marian interpretation of the Song of Songs, which Lino Pertile and Paola Nasti have established, has implications for an interpretation of *Inferno* 5. What distinguishes the Marian exegesis of the Song of Songs is its interpretation of the kiss with which the Canticles begin—“Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth”—not as the kiss between the church and Christ but as Mary’s “Ecce ancilla” at the Annunciation. In one of the foundational expressions of this Marian interpretation of the Song of Songs, Rupert of Deutz (1075–1129) writes:

Was not this word from the angel a word and promise of the kiss of the Lord’s mouth even now at hand? If so, then let the skilled assessor place the two sayings on reason’s scales—both this one (*Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth*), the word of a soul or heart that is filled with joy; and the other (“Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to your word”), which was the utterance of an exultant mouth. Is it not the case that their burden is the same? Is not the same meaning conveyed by the differing words or sounds? Just as you heard and believed—just as you said in making the request, “be it unto me”—so it has happened for you. God the Father has kissed you with the kiss of his mouth.

Rupert’s identification of the kiss from the Canticles with Mary reflects the increased interest in the Virgin that characterized the late Middle Ages and persists in the work of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who was influenced by Rupert’s commentary and whose concern with Mary is conveyed in the final cantos of the *Commedia* itself. Francesca’s kiss, then, recalls and enacts the scene in the Arthurian romance and also evokes the kiss of the Song of Songs that is interpreted as prefiguring the Annunciation. Whereas encounters of the human and divine in classical literature occur either through force or fraud and usually result in human injury or death, medieval interpretations of the Annunciation such as Rupert’s emphasize the importance of Mary’s consent. In his *Homily on the “Missus Est,”* Bernard dramatically celebrates Mary’s fiat:

See, the price of our salvation is offered to you; if you consent, we shall at once be delivered. By the Eternal Word of God we were all created, and behold we die. By your short answer we shall be refreshed and recalled to life. . . . Answer,
then, quickly to the angel yes, through the angel give your consent to your God. Answer the word, receive the Word. Utter yours, conceive the Divine. Speak the word that is transitory, and embrace the Word that is everlasting.\textsuperscript{39}

Picking up on the distinction between the divine Word and human words that one finds in Augustine’s \textit{Confessions} (11.6.8), Bernard underlines the way those words both mediate the Word becoming flesh and reflect Mary’s assumption of responsibility.

These issues of consent, responsibility, and agency that characterize medieval exegesis of the Annunciation are also central problems in the Francesca episode. In her complex reading of Francesca as “both powerless and strong,” Teodolinda Barolini calls attention to Francesca’s efforts to present herself both as a passive subject of Love’s power and as an active reader, indicated by the series of verbs she uses to describe her reading: “Noi leggiavamo,” “leggemmo,” “leggemmo.”\textsuperscript{40} Francesca thus reflects the complex blend of agency and passivity that also characterizes medieval examinations of Mary at the Annunciation.

Francesca’s use of the word \textit{Galeotto} to describe the book’s function both continues her efforts to disclaim responsibility by attributing agency to the book with the name of the Arthurian character and calls attention to the new, mediating role that the book plays in Dante’s scene.\textsuperscript{43} Dante’s use of the book is part of his novel treatment of the problem of lust in general, which, as Barolini notes, avoids the grotesque literalism characteristic of other visions.\textsuperscript{44} Dante’s decision to have Francesca read her way to damnation thus significantly realigns the relationship between love, desire, and the book as it had been imagined in medieval culture. In other medieval representations of the book in relation to desire, the book represents reason as opposed to desire, a contrast vividly conveyed in illustrations of the story of Aristotle and Phyllis, where the philosopher is seduced away from his book by a woman, who then rides him, in a graphic expression of reason submitted to desire (\textit{Inf. 5.39}).\textsuperscript{45} For Dante, it is not the book itself but reading that can incite desires. This new function of the book as a \textit{Galeotto} does not, however, entail the condemnation of a certain kind of literature that critics from Jacopo della Lana to Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi have perceived it to endorse. Francesca may blame the book, but Dante does not, as his use of the same scene from the romance in \textit{Paradiso} 16 makes clear. As Boccaccio comments in his conclusion to the \textit{Decameron}, his novelle “non correranno di dietro a
niuna a farsi leggere” (Dec. Concl. 15). Although Boccaccio makes his claim in a different context, his notion of the reader’s role is not far removed from Dante’s: the responsibility for determining the moral value of a work ultimately lies with the reader. If a book can lead to damnation, it can also lead to salvation, as Dante’s account of Statius’s conversion through reading Virgil illustrates. In this sense, the only fourteenth-century illustration in which Francesca’s account invades the space of the otherworldly encounter between the Pilgrim and the pair from Rimini (Trivulziano 1076) misunderstands the point of the scene by having Paolo offer Francesca the book as a kind of temptation that recalls representations of Adam and Eve. Visual representations such as Ingres’s that are based on the Annunciation, however, convey the significance of the single moment of interruption that Dante’s text underlines by depicting the book in mid-drop: “ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse” (Inf. 5.132). Dante’s emphasis on the point (punto) of reading underlines the role of will in consent and makes the act reading into a paradigm for making choices more generally.

The multiple connections between Francesca and Mary are not simply oppositions. By putting Francesca in a scene that recalls the Annunciation, Dante indicates the potentially positive outcome that reading might produce. He underlines this positive dimension by reintegrating the courtly tradition that Francesca represents into his description of the Annunciation in Paradiso (32.85–114). The courtly imagery first used in Inferno 5 now returns, transformed into a religious, devotional setting in “la bella corte” (Par. 32.98), which was already adumbrated by Virgil’s tale of “la corte del cielo” in Inf. 2.125). It is not only that these courtly terms have new, chaste meanings here, as has been proposed in the case of Beatrice; Dante purposefully draws on Francesca’s courtly language and integrates it into his description of Mary. As Barolini notes, Dante has Bernard describe Gabriel using the word leggiadria, a term that defines the courtly register for Dante and is “the hallmark of the third canticle’s transfigured courtly mysticism.”

These nineteenth-century visual representations of Francesca reading suggest that far from being “the most ordinary thing in the world” as Auerbach put it, Dante’s scene of reading evokes the most extraordinary event in human history: when God became man, and Word become flesh. In this sense, Dante’s theology both enables his realism through the idea of figural allegory (as Auerbach argues) and informs his representation of
Francesca’s act of reading in its shared narrative of reading interrupted by its fulfillment, iconographic elements such as doves and the kiss, and a thematic concern with consent and agency.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin famously laments the loss of an artwork’s “aura” that he associates with its technological reproduction, but he also notes that this mechanical transmission can reveal new features that were previously hidden. Although Benjamin specifically links his argument to the emergence of a new media, his observation is valid for most acts of transformation across media, whether from canvas to photograph (as in Benjamin’s example) or from text to sketch, engraving, and painting. By putting works in new contexts, transmission can disclose new or unrecognized details. Benjamin’s idea of the dialectical image, which means that certain works “attain to legibility” at different times may prove a valuable concept for using this reception history—all the more so since Benjamin’s idea of the dialectical image derives both from Luther’s use of Bild to translate Paul’s typos, as Agamben has argued, and from the idea of figura (the Latin translation of Paul’s typos), which he would have found in his reading of Auerbach.

This mode of using reception for interpretive purposes can be applied to other parts of the poem as well, such as the tale of Ugolino, which like Francesca’s story ends with a rhetorical reticentia that produces a rich visual reception. In the case of Ugolino one also finds illustrators anticipating, or, one could say, prefiguring, later critical positions. Fuseli’s representation of Ugolino’s tale about the tower, for example, uses Michelangelo’s Pietà as a model in order to help associate the children’s self-sacrifice with that of Christ, which Dante implies by having Gaddo echo Christ’s words on the cross (Inf. 33.68, based on Matthew 27:46). Fuseli’s painting thus suggests a Christological reading of Ugolino that would only be fully developed much later by Dante critics. Just as Fuseli reveals the children’s positive sacrifice through his visual allusion to Michelangelo, these nineteenth-century visual representations of Francesca reading emphasize an association with Mary’s reading at the Annunciation, which adds to the remarkable catalogue of sources, both textual and visual, on which Dante draws to construct his poem.

Duke University
Durham, North Carolina
NOTES


2. For some examples of these comments, see Alessandro Guarini (1610), translated in Michael Caesar, ed., *Dante: The Critical Heritage* (1989; repr., London: Routledge, 2010), 306–10. See also, op. cit., Giuseppe Baretti (1764), 396; and Martin Sherlock (1780), 399.


5. Henry Fuseli (Füssli), *Paolo and Francesca Surprised by Gianciotto*, was first shown at the Royal Academy in 1796; it is now in Aarau, Aargauer Kunsthaus. In a later watercolor dated to 1808, Fuseli represents the two lovers surprised on a balcony while apparently dancing, but without a book. John Flaxman’s outline drawings, completed in 1792, were engraved by Tommaso Piroli and printed in 1793. Although the first printing was limited, Schlegel obtained a copy, according to Sarah Symmons,

6. In Flaxman’s first sketch, now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Lanciotto (Gianciotto) has a sword, which he will also carry in both the Coupin and Ingres paintings, but which is absent from the engravings of Flaxman. Did Flaxman’s original sketches circulate independently? Daniel Ternois, “Paolo et Francesca (1819),” in Ingres: Petit palais (Paris, 27 octobre 1967–29 janvier 1968) (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1967), 156, argues that Ingres borrows from Coupin, but Ingres’ representation of the sword shares more of the energy and dynamism of Flaxman’s first sketch than what one finds in Coupin, which may suggest that he knew not only Coupin but also Flaxman’s sketch. The early sketch is printed in Francesca Salvadori, ed. John Flaxman: The Illustrations for Dante’s Divine Comedy (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2004), 61.

7. Patricia Condon, Marjorie B. Cohn, and Agnes Mongan, Ingres, In Pursuit of Perfection: The Art of J.-A.-D. Ingres, ed. Debra Edelstein (Louisville: J. B. Speed Art Museum, 1983), 70. It is worth recalling that Ingres’ master, Jacques-Louis David once remarked of Flaxman’s Homeric illustrations, “This work will produce paintings” (Cet ouvrage fera faire des tableaux), which could be applied a fortiori to Flaxman’s Dante designs.

8. The extraction of the tragic tale from its infernal context can have surprising consequences. In William Dyce’s 1837 representation, now in the Scottish National Gallery, for example, a later alteration of the canvas reduces the husband to a hand lingering on the balustrade to the couple’s right, and even those traces are eliminated when the image is used as the cover for an edition of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), thus completing the transformation of Paolo and Francesca from condemned for lust (even while they are pitied by the Pilgrim) to tragically killed for love. For examples of other artists who represented the scene of reading after the remarks of Enrico Mestica in his edition, La commedia di Dante Alighieri; esposta con metodo dantesco (Ascoli Piceno: G. Cesari, 1909), 74. The fusion of reading and murder crossed the Atlantic as well, as seen in Longfellow’s drawing in his notebooks from 1828 to 1829. See Christoph Irmscher, “Reading for Our Delight,” Dante Studies 128 (2010): 45–64, at 53, fig. 2. Longfellow does adopt a slightly different configuration from what one finds in Flaxman, possibly inspired by Fuseli’s 1808 watercolor, which has the couple dancing but not the book that Longfellow includes.

9. For example, Ralph Pite, The Circle of our Vision: Dante’s Presence in English Romantic Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 39, aims “to show how the three sets of illustrations (by Fuseli, Flaxman, and Blake) follow a development in understanding Dante’s work that is similar to the one exhibited by his translators in the period.” For the nineteenth-century resistance to Dante’s condemnation of Francesca, see the discussion of Paton’s Dante’s Dream in Alison Milbank, Dante and the Victorians (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 154: “In this painting, Francesca is confirmed in her highest role in nineteenth-century culture: the victim of the orthodox Christian


15. “I do not recall ever having heard anywhere how this love brought [Francesca] to lie with Paolo except for what the author writes about it here. It is quite possible that everything happened just as he says, but I suspect that the story was invented more from what was possible than from what was actually true, given that it is hard to believe that the author could have known what took place.” Giovanni Boccaccio, *Boccaccio’s Expositions on Dante’s “Comedy,”* trans. Michael Papio (Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 280.

16. For examinations of the correspondences and incongruities between the *Lancelot* story that Paolo and Francesca are reading and what happens, see Anne Hatcher and Mark Musa, “The Kiss: *Inferno V* and the Old French Prose *Lancelot,*” *Comparative Literature* 20 (1968): 97–109. They argue that Francesca misrepresents the Arthurian episode by claiming that Lancelot kissed Guinivere when most versions have it that Guinivere kissed Lancelot to exculpate herself (which suggests that she herself initiated the kiss). Susan Noakes, “The Double Misreading of Paolo and Francesca,” *Philological Quarterly* 62 (1983): 221–39, argues that Paolo and Francesca have misread the story by not reading far enough to discover the negative consequences of the adultery. For the contrasting argument that the condemnation of the adultery only occurs much later in the tradition, in the *Quest for the Grail* and not the *Lancelot*, see Evelyn Birge Vitz, “Erotic Reading in the Middle Ages,” in *Performing Medieval Narrative,* ed. Nancy Freeman Regalado, Marilyn Lawrence, and Evelyn Birge Vitz (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2005), 73–88. For the claim that the moral status of the adultery is more ambiguous than has been acknowledged, see Elspeth Kennedy, “The Making of the Cycle,” in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle,* ed. Carol Dover (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2003), 13–22. For a summary of earlier interpretations, see Renzi, *Le conseguenze di un bacio: L’episodio di Francesca nella “Commedia” di Dante,* 25–52. Donald Maddox, “The Arthurian Intertexts of *Inferno V,*” *Dante Studies* 114 (1996): 113–27, modifies Noakes’s argument, claiming that reading further would not only have revealed the negative effects of the adultery but also the positive example of Lancelot’s conversion (following Dante’s praise of Lancelot on this matter in the *Convivio* (4.28.7–8). Also see Vincenzo Crescini, “Il bacio di Ginevra e il bacio di Paolo,” *Studi Danteschi* 3 (1921): 5–57. Dante shows that he knows the rest of this story by mentioning Modred’s death (*Inf.* 32.62) and Lady of Malehault’s cough (*Par.* 16).

17. See Renzi, Le conseguenze di un bacio, 264: “È rimasta aperta la domanda: Dante aveva un modello per la sua scrittura?” Renzi himself suggests that Dante was inspired by real life, a proposal that erases the hermeneutic force of Boccaccio’s literary question of why reading.


20. Garrett Stewart, The Look of Reading: Book, Painting, Text (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Stewart also discusses an unpublished monograph by Leo Steinberg on women reading, in which, according to Stewart’s summary, Steinberg opposes the figures of Mary and Francesca.

21. “Hoc autem totum factum est ut adimpleretur id quod dictum est a Domino per prophemat dicentem ecce virgo in utero habebit et pariet filium et vocabunt nomen eius Emmanuel quod est interpretatum Nobiscum Deus.” Isaiah 7:14 is not the only text that foretells this moment. Bernard of Clairvaux presents and elaborates the traditional anticipations of the Virgin birth in Isaiah, Moses and the burning bush, as well as Aaron, Gideon, Solomon, and Jeremiah, concluding that the Annunciation is: “A miracle which so many other miracles anticipated, so many oracles promised. One and the same spirit moved the Prophets and although they used differing signs at different times, they

22. For the argument that the appearance of the book reflects a rise in literacy, see M. T. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 245. For more general discussions of women readers, both of which take material primarily from Germany, see D. H. Green, Women Readers in the Middle Ages (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Jeffrey F. Hamburger, “Representations of Reading—Reading Representations: The Female Reader from the Hedwig Codex to Châtillon’s Léopoldine au Livre d’Heures,” in Die lesende Frau, ed. Gabriela Signori (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 177–239. It is worth noting that in the East during this period, Mary continues to be represented as spinning, not reading.

23. For the origins and development of Mary reading in scenes of the Annunciation, see Otto Pacht et al., The St. Albans Psalter (Albani Psalter) (London: The Warburg Institute, 1960), 63–67.


27. For a critique of Panofsky’s iconology, also see Christopher S. Wood, “Introduction,” in Erwin Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 7–24, at 24: “Iconology, in the end, has not proved an especially useful hermeneutic of culture. What it tells us about a culture is usually tautological (something like: this was the kind of culture that could have produced this work).”


29. For Dante challenging God’s artistry here, see Teodolinda Barolini, The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 122–42. For another example of the analogy between human and artistic creation, see the repetition of the verb spirare in Purg. 24 and 25.

30. In the same textual area (Purg. 10.99), one finds God described as the fabbro of these reliefs. This word is the same term Guinizzelli uses to describe Arnaut Daniel in Purg. 26. The idea of God as a craftsman is thus related to the idea of poet as craftsman. For the image of God as maker, see Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (1953; repr., Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 544–46. In the Convivio (1.13), Dante suggests that the vernacular was responsible for his existence because it brought his parents together.


33. Roger Tarr, “Visibile Parlare: The Spoken Word in Fourteenth-Century Italian Painting,” Word and Image 13 (1997): 223–44. For a reading of this relief as being suggestively erotic, as the dove penetrates the domed structure that seems to represent the Virgin’s womb, see Timothy Verdon, Mary in Western Art (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2005), 47 and 185. For an image of the relief, see Verdon 46–47. This erotic reading of the Annunciation is as medieval as it is modern. See, for example, Boccaccio’s Madonna Lisetta da ca’ Quirino in the story of Frate Alberto, who interprets Gabriel’s kneeling before Mary as a courtly encounter (Dec. 4.2.24). In Florence, moreover, where the year begins on March 25 and the cult of the Santissima Annunziata would soon emerge, there were undoubtedly many such images. The cult of the Santissima Annunziata likely occurred after Dante’s exile. See Beverly Louise Brown, “The Patronage and Building History of the Tribune of SS. Annunziata in Florence: A Reappraisal in Light of New Documentation,” Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz 25 (1981): 59–146; and S. Lang, “The Programme of the SS. Annunziata in Florence,” Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 17 (1954): 288–300. On the larger history of the Annunciation in this period, see Gertrud Schiller, Iconography of Christian Art (London: Lund Humphries, 1971), 1:33–55; and David M. Robb, “The Iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” The Art Bulletin 18 (1936): 480–526. Other sources for Dante were probably The Golden Legend and (Pseudo-) Bonaventure’s Meditations on the Life of Christ, the latter of which is replete with quotations from St. Bernard. For the argument that the image in the SS. Annunziata is a late fourteenth-century image, see Megan Holmes, “The Elusive Origins of the Cult of the Annunziata in Florence,” in The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance, ed. Erik Thuno and Gerhard Wolf (Rome: Biblioteca Hertziana, 2004), 97–121. For a discussion of its later development, with valuable bibliography, see Patricia Lee Rubin, Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 196–227. There are several famous representations of the Annunciation after Dante’s poem that also explore the boundaries between the verbal and the visual by representing text in the pictures, such as that by Simone Martini.

35. Lino Pertile, *La puttana e il gigante: Dal Cantico dei cantici al Paradiso terrestre di Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 1998) and Paola Nasti, *Favole d’amore e ‘saver profondo’: La tradizione salomonica in Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 2007) have shown the many resonances of the Song of Songs in the poem and demonstrated that Dante often uses Marian interpretation of the Song of Songs. Pertile argues that Dante uses Song of Songs marriage to structure his own encounter with Beatrice in terrestrial paradise and the kiss between the giant and harlot in *Purg* 32.153.


38. For discussion of various kinds of kisses, see Nicolas J. Perella, *The Kiss Sacred and Profane: An Interpretative History of Kiss Symbolism and Related Religio-erotic Themes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) and Michael Camille, “‘Gothic Signs and the Surplus: The Kiss on the Cathedral,’” *Yale French Studies* (1991): 151–70. For the historical problem of the kiss in Christianity, see Michael Philip Penn, *Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). Dante had long been concerned with the kiss as the point of intersection between the erotic and spiritual, as in his expression of anxiety in the *divisione* of “Donne ch’avete” over having mentioned Beatrice’s mouth in the poem; for discussion of this moment, see Valesio, “‘The Fierce Dove,’” 75–8. The kiss also returns in chaste form on the terrace of lust, where the first example of virtue is Mary’s “Virum non cognosco,” and again later in a more performative and allegorical mode in the scene of the giant and the whore in the terrestrial paradise. For the connections between *Inferno* 5 and *Purgatorio* 26, see Dante Alighieri: *Purgatorio*, trans. Robert M. Durling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 455; and Rachel Jacoff, “Transgression and Transcendence: Figures of Female Desire in Dante’s *Commedia,*” in *The New Medievalism*, ed. Marina S. Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee, and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 183–200. For the kiss with the giant, see Pertile, *La puttana e il gigante*.


40. Barolini, “‘Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender,’” 332.

41. See Milan, Biblioteca Trivulziana, 1076, c. 13r. For a reproduction of the image, see Brierger, Meiss, and Singleton, *Illuminated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy*, 2:85b.
For a discussion of the episode from the perspective of the long history of reading that addresses how they were reading (silently or aloud, one to the other, prose or verse, in translation or in French), see Vittorio Russo, “L’udito, l’occhio, la mente: “flashes” sulla “lettura” medievale,” Allegoria 5 (1990): 129–44.

In one of the more extensive investigations of the correspondences between Inferno 5 and Lancelot, Donald Maddox (“The Arthurian Intertexts of Inferno V”) suggests that the scene of interrupted reading derives from the attempt to interpret Galehot’s dream. This possibility only accounts for Dante’s reaction to Francesca’s story about reading, however, not her interrupted reading itself.

For discussion of Dante in comparison to other visions on lust, see Barolini, “Dante’s Sympathy for the Other,” 177–82. The novelty of Dante’s use of the book was not lost on contemporaries, as Boccaccio’s appropriation of the term Galeotto as the surname of his Decameron shows. In his reimagining of the scene of Paolo and Francesca reading in the Filocolo (2.4), however, Boccaccio remained within the tradition of opposing book to desire, as the love of Florio and Biancofiore blossoms in contrast to the schoolbooks that they do not read.

For a summary of Mary’s place in the poem, see Steven Botterill, Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the Commedia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 152–65.

While noting the connection, if without knowing what to make of it, Vincenzo Pernicone, Il Canto XXXII del Paradiso (Tirano: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1965), 21–22, discusses baldezza with reference to Conv. 4.5.5 and leggiadria with reference to Poscia d’Amor. He argues that “Dante è rimasto fedele alla definizione data nella canzone sublimandola a virtù angelica e umanizzando la figura dell’arcangelo che opera virtuosamente donandone con letizia la Regina del cielo.”


For this connection between Benjamin and Auerbach, see Martin G. Eisner, “The Return to Philology and the Future of Literary Criticism: Reading the Temporality of Literature in Auerbach, Benjamin, and Dante,” California Italian Studies Journal 2 (2011).

On Fuseli’s image as deriving from Michelangelo’s Pietà, see Frances A. Yates, “Transformations of Dante’s Ugolino,” Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 14 (1951): 92–117, at 112,
who also discusses its connection to Francesca (95–96). For Fuseli as trying to replace the lost Michelangelo drawings for Dante, see Paget Jackson Toynbee, *Dante Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), 151, where he quotes a passage from *Monthly Magazine* for August 1803 in which the writer remarks: “I wish Mr. Fuseli could be prevailed on to supply the loss of the marginal drawings which Michael Angelo drew in his Dante. There is, perhaps, no artist living better qualified to wield the might pencil of that wonderful painter. A Dante Gallery by this great master—for so Mr. Fuseli deserves to be termed—could not fail of being highly interesting. Perhaps, too, the horrors of hell, depicted by him after Dante, would render a more important service to morality than all the thunders of the pulpit.” See also Marianne Shapiro, “Addendum: Christological Language in *Inferno* XXXIII,” *Dante Studies* (1976): 141–43; and John Freccero, “Bestial Sign and the Bread of Angels: *Inferno* XXXII and XXXIII,” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 152–66.