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# DOROTHY L. SAYERS AND FEMINIST ARCHIVAL HISTORIOGRAPHY IN DANTE STUDIES

*(Re)discovering Female Authorship in Fin de Siècle Britain*

**ABSTRACT:** This article compares the vociferous Dantean archive of Dorothy L. Sayers with the deafening silence that swallowed up the first generation of British women *dantiste*, whose achievements lie dispersed across general collections and print archives. My documentary reconstruction counters these narrow representational politics by placing Sayers' experience within a longer historiographical perspective which recovers the role of Victorian foremothers as agents of production and mediation (interpretation, transmission, circulation, and popularisation) of Dante's critical and scholarly knowledge across different media, genres, and generations of readers at the turn of the twentieth century.

**KEYWORDS:** Dante studies, women intellectual history, archive studies, feminist historiography, nineteenth-century periodicals, translation.

## Framing female *dantismo* in *fin de siècle* Britain \*

The Oxford-born Dorothy L. Sayers was the first internationally recognized woman *dantista* of the modern era. In 1999, Sayers' biographer and close friend, Barbara Reynolds, recalled the "phenomenal results" (Reynolds 1999, 3) achieved by her *terza rima* translation of the *Divine Comedy*. With "50,000 copies" of *Inferno* (1949) sold at once, "Dante had become a best-seller" published in the "Penguin Classics, a series recently created for book-hungry post-war readers" (Reynolds 1993, 372). Despite discovering Dante in her fifties, Sayers spent the last two decades of her life writing articles and commentaries, delivering public and academic lectures on the poet and his oeuvre across Britain. These were soon collected in *Introductory Papers on Dante* (1954) and *Further Papers on Dante* (1957): volumes that Cesare Foligno considered "unquestionably of far greater importance" than the "somewhat superficial little essay on

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\*The research for this article has been supported by the Leverhulme Trust via the Early Career Research Fellowship [ECF-2020-512].

Dante by T. S. Eliot” (1958 in Reynolds, 217). Upturning the twentieth-century critical canon, Foligno demoted the 1929 essay that had opened the doors to the modernist reception of Dante in favor of her outstanding “clarity, perspicacity, boldness of comparison and fluency in exposition” and elucidation of Dante’s use of the allegory “(qualities usually conspicuously absent from writings of the kind)” (217).

Whilst Reynolds and Foligno celebrated Sayers for having brought “Dante within the reach of thousands of readers for whom he would otherwise have remained unintelligible” (Reynolds 1962, 9), such a popularising approach was frowned upon by “professional Dantists” (Reynolds 1958, 217). The Anglo-Italian academic community struggled to recognize her scholarly authority, remaining “prejudiced against the attempt of an author of detective novels to rank herself among them” and “naturally touchy and hostile towards all intruders” (217). Foligno’s comment exposes the cultural elitism and gender exclusivity that had been characterizing the field of Dante studies since the 1870s, when a *folta schiera* of ‘professional women “emerged as a group, simultaneously with their male counterparts” (Peterson 2009, 3).

Throughout the late Victorian period, women translators and commentators like Sayers were often belittled by periodical reviewers and scholars for the unrefined, almost far-fetched knowledge of Dante; the questionable scientific value of their textual, translational, or historical approaches; the ingenuity of their interpretations. Eighty years on and “despite the recent waves of democratization that had knocked down barriers based on class and gender” (Moulton 2019, 3), academic fields and highbrow culture were still “most resistant to female infiltration in the area of high-prestige non-fictional prose” (Mermin 1993, 96). The historical record consigned their experiences to the realm of amateur *dantofilia* arguing that these did not further the advancement of the “more careful school of criticism” and “annotation, based upon ample knowledge and the most careful attention to details” (Valgimigli 1921, 436) established by “men such as Henry Barlow, Edward Moore, Philip Wicksteed, and Paget Toynbee, who made a life’s work of Dante Studies” (Laurence 2011, 285).

Recent research in the history of women’s education and professional authorship has unearthed the gender disparity in the modes of instruction and acquisition of scholarly expertise (Purvis, 1991; Laurence et al. 2000; Pedersen 2017). Whereas Victorian men developed their knowledge of Dante through university study, peer exchange, and research infrastructures, women traditionally relied on self-designed programmes of reading carried out within the domestic sphere, through occasional perusal of subscription libraries and cycles of extramural lectures. While men secured academic positions dedicated to the study of Dante, women remained excluded from these career paths for many decades “continuing to face unequal opportunities, double legal standards and systematic discrimination” (Moulton, 3). As they “operated outside of the major institutions of scholarship” (Hannan 2014, 290), they relied on the financial

security and literary status derived from them being best-selling novelists, respected poets, prolific periodical contributors, and editors to pursue their Dante studies.

Much like women's history, the British tradition of Dante studies has been only recently turned into "a subject of historical reflection, narrativization and consciousness-raising" (Henderson 2013, 91). The paucity of historiographical endeavours, however, is an opportunity for (re)writing a more inclusive narrative that recognises to nineteenth and twentieth-century women the status of "co-makers" of Dante's reception as translators and commentators, editors and biographers, critics and scholars writing and reading across genres. The historiographic re(dis)covery of their experience can open new research pathways in reception studies by contextualizing the rise of British *dantismo* within broader transformations in women's education and professionalisation as well as in the mechanisms of discipline formation, where the figure of the *dantista* emerged "as a conceptual category" (Peterson, 3).

In this article I compare the vociferous Dantean archive of Dorothy L. Sayers with the deafening silence that swallowed up the work of the first generation of British women *dantiste*, whose achievements lie dispersed among the stacks of general collections and fragmented across the periodical print archive. My documentary reconstruction counters the common narrative which has canonised Sayers as a unicum in the history of British Dante studies in terms of gender and her democratising approach. It questions these narrow representational politics to demonstrate that Sayers was not the only woman, but the one who has remained most visible on the literary market as well as within the archive, where manuscript papers, printed books, and ephemera relating to the Florentine poet are preserved as a foundational part of her named, personal collection.

### The Vociferous Archive: Dorothy L. Sayer's *dantismo*

The material memory of Dorothy L. Sayers's life as a reader, translator, and commentator of Dante lays within the walls of the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, a Christian liberal arts college in the Chicago area. Sayers was one of the seven British Christian authors that the founder of the Centre, Clyde S. Kilby, envisioned as "part of the anticipated holdings" (Mitchell 1995, 13). Featured in the original 1965 proposal, Sayers was the only woman writer forming an otherwise-all-male 'school of thought' that included C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, Owen Barfield, Charles William who "shared Christian interests and wrote on Christian themes" (13).

The acquisition of Sayers' entire personal and professional archive took more than a decade, reaching a turning point in 1975 when Barbara Reynolds was invited to give a "lecture at Wheaton, on Sayers and Dante" (16). A generation younger, Reynolds was an

Italian and Dante scholar at the University of Cambridge. In 1946, she invited her to give a talk at the Summer School: a watershed event that ushered Sayers' career as a Dante lecturer, and her introduction to exclusive academic circles. Despite the significant age gap, the two women developed an intimate friendship and close scholarly partnership. Reynolds became her most trusted collaborator on all Dantean matters to the point that she completed the translation of *Paradiso* (1962) upon Sayers' sudden death in 1957. After her passing, Reynolds took on the task of monumentalizing her life by working as a biographer, editor of her correspondence and adviser to the Wade Center.

Mostly produced over the last fifteen years of her life, the archival materials relating to Dante constitute a large portion of the contents of the Dorothy L. Sayers Collections at Wade College. These range from diaries and letters to notebooks, annotated copies of Dante-books from her library collection, and cuttings of reviews and articles from the British press. The papers relating to her undergraduate degree in Medieval and Modern Languages at Somerville College (Oxford) record that she attended a Dante lecture by H. A. L. Fisher during her first term. It is the personal correspondence, however, that details most effectively material and emotional circumstances of Sayers' first encounter with the *materia dantesca* and the sophistication of her hermeneutical approach over the following decade.

The letters recount Sayers' serendipitous discovery of Dante through the mediation of Charles Williams, fellow novelist, literary critic, and theologian met in 1933. In 1943, he had published *The Figure of Beatrice* read out in virtue of their sincere friendship rather than of any remote interest in the Florentine poet or his muse. Much to her surprise, Williams' exposition intrigued her to the point that in summer of 1944 Sayers devoured the *Comedy* at the rhythm of (at least) five cantos a day. The 'fevered reading' was an intellectual and emotional *raptus* for which she admittedly "bolted my meals, neglected my sleep, work, and correspondence, drove my friends crazy" (in Reynolds 2005, 16). The awe and excitement for the unexpected turns of the story was mixed with the physical strain of "trumping up and down and round all these circles," "panting along with [her] tongue hanging out" (20, 18) as she followed Dante-pilgrim in his journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise.

Early on Sayers felt the need to turn her solitary ecstatic immersion into a shared reading experience, persuading her friends, many of whom were women, "into having a go at the *Divine Comedy*" (62). For Marjorie Barber, she restaged the exact circumstances of her first bout at Dante. On Christmas day 1944, she gifted her Williams's book along with copies of *Inferno* and Laurence Binyon's *terza rima* translation, leaving "her to read while she herself [went] on with cooking the Christmas dinner" (62). The force-fed reading delivered the desired effect: Barber saw past the intimidatory greatness and monumental solemnity of his fame to recognize in Dante "the most incomparable storyteller who had ever set pen to paper" (19).

The archive records the growth of Sayers' epistolary community, which encompassed *dantofili* (Wilfrid Scott-Giles, Muriel St Clair, Helen Simpson) and *dantisti* (Williams, Reynolds). The new, Dante-centric network acted as "a forum for collaboration, support, critical feedback" (Moulton 10) and even book-lending along the lines of the all-female literary circle she had founded in Oxford, the Mutual Appreciation Society. With some correspondents, she shared doubts and questions, problems and solutions underlying the authorial construction of her interpretative and linguistic approach as she undertook the task of translating the *Commedia* in 1944. To others, she recounted the sense of excitement and fulfilment derived from her lecturing activity, occasionally asking advice on which subjects would be most suitable for diverse audiences she confronted, from first year students of Italian to adult students with no previous knowledge of Dante.

With many, Sayers opened up about the orchestrations that preceded the book publication, requiring her to "clear up the industrious printer's reader's innumerable marginal queries, verify all the notes and contrive a series of running heads" (Sayers, 360). A painstaking work undertaken with the meticulousness of the academic habit of mind combined with the disillusionment of the professional writer who had never "worked so hard for £75 down" and sincerely "hope[d] it makes something up in royalties!" (360). This intimate circle also included her publisher and editors at Penguins towards whom Sayers took a severe, authoritative stand instructing them on the precise page layout for the cantos, the notes, and the six-hundred and forty-entry long glossary to ensure the global "intelligibility" (306) of textual and paratextual elements. In September 1946, she wrote to E. V. Rieu that she did not "want most of the cantos to run out at 8 pages; I want to alter their "present state" to bring most of them down to 6 pages" while the notes were kept to an average of "about 500 words to the page" (267). In June 1947, she forbade the production manager from using single quotes arguing that "Dante is difficult enough already, without our conspiring to prevent people from seeing where dialogue ends and narrative begins" (306).

Throughout, the continuous contact and exchange fostered in Sayers a shift towards more critical and scholarly modes of readerly engagement. The first built on what Reynolds called "the *writer's eye*" (Reynolds 2005, 57) observant of the mechanisms of narrative tension and character construction at play in Dante's works. The other turned her "innocent, carefree personal letters about a great poet" (36) into sites of hermeneutical elaboration and scholarly collaboration. Between ten and twenty pages-long, in her *lettere-fiume* Sayers discussed Dante's use of the allegory, unravelled the intertextual relations that connected the *Comedy* to classical authors and Romance epics, commented textual *loci* and expounded philological and historical questions underlying his oeuvre. The epistles from 1944-46 voice her dissatisfaction with the translation and the exegetical apparatus of Dent's Temple Dante, the three-volume edition of the *Comedy* she had borrowed from her family library, likely belonging to her mother and

grandmother. Frustrated by Wicksteed's and Okey's linguistic choices, Sayers relied on her knowledge of French and Latin to make her way through the facing Italian text, annotating their pages, and integrating their reading with other editions, translations, and secondary sources.

Already in 1944, Sayers had begun building her own private Dante collection leaving "instructions with Mr. E. Seligman, dealer in rare books in Cecil 1 Court, off Charing Cross Road, to keep his eye open for any books about or in any way relevant to the *Commedia*" (Brabazon 1985, 234). In May 1945, she had found a "nice man at Zwemmer's" who "with really surprising speed produced not only the *Vita* [*nuova* and *Canzoniere*, sic] but also the *Convivio* and the *Latin Works*," thus completing her Temple Dante. These purchases allowed her to "extend my studies to cover the *De Eloquentia*, the *De Monarchia*, and the Letters" (*Letters*, 145). More recently, the Wade Center acquired a representative selection of Sayers library, including Giambattista Pasquali's *Opere minori* (1741) and *Commedia* (1751); Leonardo Ciardetti's six-volume edition of Dante's *Opere*, and a copy of *Commento alla Divina commedia d'anonimo fiorentino del secolo XIV* edited by Pietro Fanfani. Secondary sources range from Ozanam's *Dante et la philosophie catholique au treizième siècle* (1869), Edward Moore's *Contributions to the Textual Criticism of the Commedia* (1889) to Karl Vossler's *Medieval Culture: An Introduction to Dante and his Times* (1929) and a subscription to the journal of the Societa Dantesca Italiana, *Studi Danteschi*. The material examination of these works show how Sayers anchored her writerly responses directly onto the page of her Dante books. From single and double lines to asterix and crosses, these *marginalia* inscribed her extemporaneous reactions of notice, doubt and of particular *loci* directly onto the page of her Dante books; singling out words, full verses, and groups of *terzine* "to be mentally registered and guarantee further attention on later reading" (Jackson, 2005); establishing an intertextual dialogue with the Dantean text through interlinear glosses, lateral comments, summaries and extra-textual references to secondary sources.

Within the archive, however, the Dantean manuscript evidence extends beyond the margins and endpapers to fill the pages of, at least, nine notebooks kept between 1947 and 1957. Running parallel to her lively scholarly correspondence, the notebooks convey the unfiltered account of her fulminous development from common reader to best-selling Dante translator and in-demand lecturer. The lined pages register the intensification of the readerly activity as it acquired greater purposefulness in Sayers' mind as she decided to take on her "theological and educational mission" of translating and commenting on the *Comedy* "as helpfully as possible to the many who want to learn something about him" (Reynolds 2009, 373).

The notebooks are witnesses of Sayers' indefatigable attempts at isolating, extracting and transcribing passages; at questioning, absorbing, and re-contextualising scholarship to form her own hermeneutical discourse. The transcribed tercets and bouts at

translation show her mastering the Italian text to “bridge time and space and come back, not with a “crib” but with an English poem that people will read” (117). The lists of characters, quotes, and queries, the comparisons of themes all form the mould of the apparatus criticus designed to cater for the needs of ‘most Penguin readers’: a public who she expected to be “very ignorant about the Middle Ages in Italy,” “lacking in literary background” with “no Catholic theology, no history, no classic mythology” (Sayers, *Letters*, 197).

The published outputs of her endeavours in Dante translations and lecturing are part of the general collection of the Wheaton College library in multiple copies and editions. The archive came in possession of a large folder containing two lists V.I.P.s and people receiving personal copies of the *Hell* and of an unspecified Dante, along a pile of press-cuttings relating to her Dantean publications. It is likely that Sayers kept these clippings to exert bibliographical control over the reception and dissemination of her work across general and specialised; metropolitan and provincial; working-class or religious reading communities in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Despite the lack of overall organisation, the corpus of excerpted witnesses materialises the most ephemeral aspect of Sayers’ work.

Between 1947 and 1957 her popular *dantismo* attracted the interest of critics writing in leading national newspapers (*The Manchester Guardian*, *The Times*, *Irish Times*, and *the Irish Independent*), exalting the canon-making quality of her work and the accessibility of her edition. Features that appealed also to reviewers and readers of local and regional press alike, including *The Evening Sentinel*, *Northern Echo*, and the *Manchester Evening News* in England; *The Scotsman* and *Ayrshire Post* in Scotland. Along with them, Sayers kept cuttings from high-culture periodicals, including the *Dublin Review*, *The Bookseller*, and the *Poetry Review*; as well as popular literary magazines like *Times and Tide* and *John O’London’s Weekly*, which variously commended the aesthetic sensibility and scholarly quality of her Dantean works. In the *Times Literary Supplement* one reviewer praised her “familiar handling of this mighty masterpiece” through “her fluid, racy and unanxious verse” as unparalleled in winning “for Dante the sincere interest of fresh exploring minds” (TLS, 1950, 224). Anglican and Catholic newspapers (*Church Times* and *Church of England*; *Catholic Herald* and *Catholic Times*) praised Sayers’ ability in elucidating the complex theological discourse at the heart of the poem, and to revivify the ethical and spiritual message for the modern public.

Extensive and diverse, the array of press-cuttings includes only limited traces of the academic reception of her works. Of the many reviews published in academic journals such as *Italica and Comparative Literature*, *The Modern Language Review*, Sayers kept only the one published in the *Cambridge Review*. Similarly, while she archived her own responses to and correspondence with periodical reviewers, she did not save her own academic articles for the *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, an archival absence that speaks

of the persisting conflictual relationship with academia. Sayers might have found the words of the American *dantista*, Charles Singleton, hurtful as they deemed her translation “a failure—no worse, perhaps, than a number of others in English, but quite as bad” (1950, 394). But one wonders if she appreciated the historical significance of Edward Williamson’s observation in the *Modern Language Review*, which identified “the value” of her *Penguin Dante* in “the splendid frame of scholarship” (1951, 201) that surrounded the less accomplished *terza rima* translation. This gave not only “permanent form to the excellent understanding of the *Commedia* which she displayed in her lectures” (200) but was destined to become a universally “indispensable supplement” (202) to any English edition of the poem. Over the years, academic reviewers and general critics echoed Williamson’s comment and sealed Sayers’ transatlantic fame as a competent, insightful, and innovative interpreter of Dante.

These very reception dynamics are most significant when contextualised within the broader dimension of women’s literary history, where they mark a major turning point. The fact that the critical consensus was (almost) univocally directed to the hermeneutical apparatus developed on the page and in the classroom fashioned her authority as a professional *dantista*. The preference accorded to the commentary work over the translation broke with the gendered limitations and the subaltern positions of women in the literary professions to men. Sayers was the ultimate proof that twentieth-century women writers could reach beyond the constrictive realm of translational and editorial work, and gain recognition and visibility as public figures of higher intellectual and academic status. Among the first to proudly claim her university “education” as a “source of authority for claims to scholarship” (Bellamy *et al.* 2000, 9). In a letter to E. V. Rieu at Penguins, she asserted:

If I have not long been a Dantist, I am at least a Romance linguist and, to some extent, a mediaevalist. I was a scholar of my college, I am a Master in my university; I took First Class Honours and was, after all, a scholar, and a poet before I was anything else (Reynolds, 45).

Studying, writing, and publishing throughout the mid-1940s and 1950s, Sayers’ *middlebrow dantismo* was the product of more systematic reflection on “the relationship between high art and popular culture, and between elite intellectual ideas and ordinary life” (Moulton, 5) that she had been upholding since her early days of the Mutual Appreciation Society. Her “desperate urge to make Dante known” (Fitts 1955, 59) was part of a broader, long-standing commitment “to turn the mechanisms of mass culture into conduits for enlightenment” in the firm belief that “vibrant, organic culture only thrived in a society that thoroughly integrated its highest culture with the full range of its population” (Moulton, 6-7).

## The Fragmented Archive: Victorian *dantiste* in the Periodical Press

Sayers' approach to the reading and study of Dante can be seen as a more academic expression of the popular *dantismo* designed and practiced by her Victorian foremothers. In these cases, the terms 'popular' and 'middlebrow' as synonymous and non-pejorative labels reflect the broad interclass public reached by women's intellectually accessible and commercially affordable form of scholarship that effectively brought Dante outside elitist territories of study and reception.

Although, as Joan Bellamy observed, "women asserted that they wrote for a general audience and, in the process, denied any claim to high-flown status" to "find publishers and acceptance with both reviewers and readers" (Bellamy 2000, 10), many others engaged in an ambitious project of critical dissemination of Dantean knowledge. Like "most women's materials" (Hildebrand 1986, 7), the published works of this submerged galaxy of *dantiste* are found in the back stacks of general library collections across Britain, Ireland, and the US. Among these, the Dante Special Collection at the John Rylands Library in Manchester holds a conspicuous corpus of translations (abridged and complete), annotated, and illustrated editions, critical companions, biographies, handbooks, biographical and historical studies, and adaptations for children produced and published in the period between Dante Centenaries of 1865 and 1921. A corpus that grows exponentially in size and range when surveyed through the *Nineteenth Century Short Title Catalogue* (NSTC) bibliography and after considering works and articles written anonymously or under a male pseudonym.

Unlike Sayers', however, the archival evidence is scarce and fragmentary because the majority of these authors were middle-class women whose personal papers were not preserved. In most cases, their historiographical record is peritextual, consigned to the space of prefaces, introductions, and short biographical notes. The only exceptions are 'great women' such as Margaret Oliphant, whose scattered archives contain letters to her publishers; or from 'great families' like Maria Francesca Rossetti's whose famous siblings kept epistolary records documenting several phases in the composition of her companion, William Michael, and the transatlantic publishing afterlife of her work, Christina. The lapses in documentation can be integrated with the selected contents of a much broader archive, that of the British periodical press. Extending far beyond Sayers' single folder of clippings, the reviews in the print archive are now largely accessible via digital repositories like Gale Cengage's 19th Century UK Periodicals, British Library's British Newspapers 1800-1900, Pro-Quest's Historical Newspapers and British Periodicals.

A keyword search on any of these repositories unlocks a diverse landscape of short book notices, single-title, or bulk reviews of 'recent Dante literature'. Although freestanding articles on the poet's life and works became increasingly widespread in the

late Victorian periodical press, the book-review established itself as the main intermediary of critical discourse throughout the long Nineteenth century. These appeared regularly in daily, morning, and evening newspapers; literary reviews as well as religious and family, women, and leisure magazines. These permeated the market reaching multiple segments of the reading public with their diversity of format and price, geographies of production, and distribution.

From high-culture periodicals to popular magazines, reviewers were the first to grant public legitimisation and wide, miscellaneous readership to women's critical and scholarly endeavours on Dante. While the space of an article cannot allow for an exhaustive documentary inquiry, it can certainly survey the reception of the key-works that marked the evolutionary stages of the matrilineal lineage in nineteenth-century British Dante Studies and of which Dorothy L. Sayers was the most celebrated descendant.

Almost a century before the *Penguin Dante*, in 1862 the Scottish Claudia Hamilton Ramsay was “the first woman to make an English translation of any considerable portion of the *Divine Comedy*” (Cunningham) complemented with a self-enclosed corpus of notes at the end of each volume. Little is known of her life and education. The *Preface* reveals that she was well-travelled and had worked on her translation “during a long residence in the land of Dante, in the very scenes where he lived and wrote; beneath the shadow of Tuscan hills, on the shores of the Bay of Naples, among the ruins of Old Rome” (Ramsay 1962, vi). The long sojourns in the country made “the Italian tongue [...] as familiar to me as my own” and the frequentation with Anglo-Florentine intellectual circles had put her in contact with “the greatest Italian students of Dante”, from whom she received “advice” and encouragement “to publish this translation” (vi-viii). The *Preface* also conveys a clear declaration of method and demonstrates her awareness of the textual processes embedded within the act of translation. First, she defends her choice of “attempting the very difficult triple rhyme of the original” on the grounds that “the faithfulness of a translation consists, not merely in the sense, but likewise in the sound” (vi). She then criticises the “writing in blank verse” as an “easier task”: a comment that indirectly places her work in contrast to Henry F. Cary's epoch-making translation of the *Commedia*, *The Vision of Dante*, whose (re-)publication in 1818 had effectively brought Dante to the forefront of the poetic and interpretive discourse in British literary culture. A conflict that did not pass unnoticed: the critic in the *London Review* commended Ramsay's authorial “courage” for “grappling with [...] the arduous Italian terza rima” that “some translators, like Cary, have avoided” (1863, 653).

When the first two volumes came out in 1862, the *Glasgow Herald* celebrated her as “a thoroughly accomplished Italian scholar” whose “beautiful translation” preserved “the spirit and meaning of the original singularly well” (1862, 2). The *London Review* commented twice on the work in May and November 1863, following the publication of

*Paradiso*. Yet, in this case, the reviews were tinged with gendered condescension embedded in the adjectivation and the figurative language used to exalt the “degree of elegance” that made the translation more “lovely” and “prettier” than most (*LR* 1863, 653). Similarly, the *Atheneum* typified Ramsay’s enterprise as “loving labours” and her versification as “graceful” (1864, 333). Finally, an anonymous reviewer in the *Blackwood’s Magazine* condemned her translational approach as “too ladylike”, intrusive and manipulative for “she too often forgets that her business is to repeat her author’s own words; not to add to them or soften down their ruggedness” (1867, 741). In the first case, such gendered phraseology undermines the ‘highly complex literary activity’ (Basnett 2005, 89) involved in Ramsay’s act of translation by emphasising the aesthetic over the interpretative value. In the second, it quickly dismissed Ramsay’s intervention as an act of forced moralistic domestication without really exploring what Lesa Scholl calls the “cultural ideology” guiding her behaviour as “an interpretative medium” on “the competitive arena of authorship” (2011, 3). Blinded by their gendered stereotypical views, the *Blackwoods’* reviewer failed to recognise the greater historical significance of Ramsay’s work as the first British woman of her generation to enter “into an intimate” critical and linguistic “discourse” (3) with the Florentine medieval poet, which she successfully carried out on the bases on a self-taught knowledge of ancient and medieval literature and history, philosophy, and theology. Judging the value of the work for the here and now, the reviewer—later identified to be Julia Elizabeth Hassell, could not see the lengthier historical path pioneered by this Scottish writer. The example she set forth granted women like Elizabeth Sayers (1887), Catherine Hillard (1899), Caroline Potter (1894-1899), Frances De Mey (1902) among others, the possibility to fashion and assert their authorial identity as Dante translators.

Another model of female achievement was set forth by Maria Francesca Rossetti, the eldest and least known of the Rossetti family. Private letters and sketches of her more notorious siblings (William Michael, Dante Gabriel, and Christina) retrace how Rossetti turned Dante from plausible object of domestic recreation to subject of independent critical industry, winning professional and popular recognition in the literary marketplace all while resisting the forces of gendered marginalisation and patriarchal influence within the circle of her family *dantismo*. In 1871, Maria Francesca Rossetti published with Rivingtons her *A Shadow of Dante: being an Essay Towards Studying Himself, His World and His Pilgrimage*, one of the earliest examples of Dante-companion in English language. Acquired by two American publishers, the work circulated on both sides of the Atlantic where it was favourably reviewed in major periodicals. It reached its tenth edition in 1913, it relied on direct sales and, even more, on the advantageous path of book lending, being included in Mudies’ catalogue along with several other works of acknowledged merit and general interest.

In adopting the essay format for her Dantean intervention, Rossetti transgressed the Victorian conservative patriarchal provisions on the inappropriate employment of a form that exuded experience, wisdom, and contemplation, none of which fell within the province of women's expected behaviour. Long-before Sayers' commentaries and lectures-turned-essays, Rossetti's companion offered her public the tools for a critical and conscientious, serious, and systematic reading of Dante. It unfolded over eleven chapters adopting a narrative approach to criticism with the alternation of quoted text and commentary, all integrated with a compact paratext openly antithetic to "the glosses of commentators bound up with academic pedantry that often took for granted in the reader a certain amount of preliminary knowledge and interest" (Rossetti 1871, 4). As such, the companion was designed to serve as "an incitement and introduction for those who had never looked upon the substance, never tasted the entrancement of this Poet's music, never entered into the depths of this Philosopher's cogitations" (5).

The press positively welcomed Rossetti's work with reviews penned by authoritative *dantisti*. The comments, however, differed in the emphasis paid to her family heritage being the eldest daughter of Gabriele Rossetti, the Italian exile and renowned *dantista* and sister of the pre-Raphaelite poet-painter Dante Gabriel, author of an epoch-breaking translation of the *Vita Nuova* (1861). In the *Athenaeum*, Henry Clark Barlow stressed the derivative nature of "Mrs. Rossetti's work" as the product of the family's "hereditary admiration" (1871, 586) undermining her critical acumen, scholarly knowledge, and independence of thought in the eyes of the high-culture weekly. Differently, the *Saturday Review* exalted "Miss Rossetti's" role as a "faithful guide and a lucid interpreter" responsible for a "book" that was "admirably adapted as an encouragement to those students who wish to obtain a preliminary survey of the land before they attempt to follow Dante through his long and arduous pilgrimage" (1871, 690-691). In the *Academy*, Frederick Tozer echoed the appreciation for her hermeneutical approach which provided an "uncommonly unitary" (1871, 551) outlook over the poem. Tensions with the patriarchal authority were ultimately resolved in the *North American Review*, where James Russell Lowell applauded Rossetti's cleverness in "interpreting Dante out of himself, a method in which Germany reigned undisputed", exalting the scholarly quality of the "comment" equally useful to Italian or English readers by providing to the former "many suggestive hints" and to the others "a travelling map in which the principal points and their connections are clearly set down" (1872, 148).

Riding Rossetti's wave of critical and commercial acclaim, in 1879 the Victorian novelist Margaret Oliphant compiled a portable compendium on *Dante* to inaugurate a new book series she created and edited for Blackwell: the *Foreign Classics for English Readers* after the moneymaking *Ancient Classics for English Readers*. Much like the Penguin Classics, the series sought to introduce "the great writers of Europe in a similar manner to the many readers who probably have a perfect acquaintance with their names,

without much knowledge of their works, or their place in the literature of the modern world” (Oliphant 1875, 3).

Like Rossetti’s companion, Oliphant opened with a biographical account, followed by a cantica-by-cantica analysis of the *Commedia* and a final survey of the “lesser-known works” which “though dear to the student”, had failed “to attract popular sympathy or interest such as the *Convivio*, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *De Monarchia* and *Canzoniere*” (194). Reviewers in the *Academy* and *Athenaeum*, however, discerned between Rossetti’s and Oliphant’s popular *dantismo* arguing that the latter demonstrated “neither the carefulness nor grasp of the subject necessary to make it useful” and essentially lacked “the dignified learning of Miss Rossetti’s *A Shadow of Dante*” (1877, 31). On the opposite side of the spectrum, mid-culture periodicals like *The Examiner* hailed it as “one of the best works on Dante in English” (1877, 920); the *London Quarterly Review* praised the great “educational value” of the book sketching a “much clearer idea of Dante’s meaning and symbolism, as well as of his style and chief beauties, than they could have got from a long study of Cary” (1878, 516). Both agreed that despite the methodological and philological shortcomings of Oliphant as a self-made *dantista*, her work channelled to perfection the intellectual needs of the growing middle-class public who read Dante with no “zeal enough to study translations, nor learning enough to read pleasantly in a foreign tongue” (516).

Many women writers followed in Oliphant’s footsteps producing articles, thematic studies, handbooks, and guides “helpful to [the] comprehension and retention as well as enjoyment, of [Dante’s] work” (Shore 1886, v) such as Arabella Shore’s *Dante for Beginners* (1886), Rose E. Selfe, *How Dante Climbed the Mountain: Sunday Readings with the Children from the “Purgatorio”* (1887); *With Dante in “Paradiso”* (1900); and Alice M. Wyld, *The Dread Inferno: Notes for Beginners to the Study of Dante* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1904).

By the last decades of the century, women’s interventions in Dante literature had grown exponentially in number and range of interest, with two versions of *Convivio*, published less than two years apart. The second was authored by Katherine Hillard and published in 1889 by Kegan Paul and Trench. Like Ramsay, the biographical record is consigned to the peritext detailing that Hillard was living in Rome at the time she began working on her translation. Although it is unclear how her choice landed on the *Convivio*, we know that she sought the assistance of “many friends in Rome” thanking Alessandro Costa, Italian orchestra director and composer, for “the patient revision of her translation” and James Sinclair Esq. for “his kindness in allowing me the use of his valuable library” (Hillard 1889, lxi).

The volume was a scholarly edition in its own right, with the annotated translation of the work framed in-between a quadripartite introduction that discussed ‘vexed questions’ on the compositional history of the *Convivio* combining the study of internal

references and historical evidence; on the structural organisation of the work and its foundational links to the *Vita nuova* and the *Commedia*; she then intervened in the discussion that had dominated the Victorian criticism, “the historical or allegorical nature of Beatrice” (Hillard xxxix). The introduction concludes with a direct address “To The Student of Dante”, men and women alike with whom the translator shared “the course I have found advantageous” (lix) for becoming a proficient interpreter. The good command of the Italian language (possibly through ‘several years’ residence in Italy and intercourse with intelligent Italians) was essential for undertaking repeated bouts at “the three most important works of Dante several times” (lix). Hillard recommends the direct and unmediated encounter with the primary texts as quintessential for developing an independent critical understanding and appreciation. For Hillard, the shift from intensive to extensive reading modes involves the study of “the most important of the commentators” (lix) and gaining a general idea of the history and philosophy. To facilitate the retrieval of these sources, she appended a list of suggested editions, translations, and secondary sources in which canonical studies by Fraticelli and Witte, Scartazzini, Ozanam, and H. C. Barlow were recommended alongside recent publications including Maria Francesca Rossetti’s *A Shadow of Dante*.

Edward Moore—the foremost authority in British Dante studies of the time, founding president of the Oxford Dante Society, and editor of the *Oxford Dante*—reviewed Hillard’s translation for the *Academy* in April 1889. The lengthy piece “heartily welcome[d]”, “acknowledge[d] at once and unreservedly the excellence of this translation” for being “accurate, scholarly, and graceful in style” (1889, 264-65). Despite having refined her Dantean scholarship outside the academe, within intellectual circles and private libraries, Hillard had been altogether successful at dealing with “passages of much difficulty or obscurity” and constructing an effective commentary at once “careful and accurate, telling the reader in a short compass just what he wants to know” with “ample and most instructive,” “illustrative” (264) cross-references to the Comedy. In “the midst of much merit and general excellence,” Moore detected some points of friction within “the careful and valuable introduction of about sixty pages” and firmly critiqued her for entrusting her hermeneutical doubts to Giambattista Giuliani, “the most short-sighted and uncritical of the modern editors of Dante in the matter of textual criticism” rather than “trusting her own judgement or that of other commentators” (265).

This closing comment signals an opening towards the legitimation of Victorian women’s scholarly professionalism in the expanding field of Dante studies: a symbolic gesture of far-reaching resonance made by the foremost authority in the discipline from the pages of an authoritative high-culture periodical. Echoing Moore, the reviewer in the *Athenaeum* too defied Victorian gendered prejudices to acknowledge Hillard among the

“considerable number of students who [were] working at their Dante seriously” and her work as emblematic “symptom of progress in the ‘popularization’ of Dante” (1889, 754).

At this time, the reviewer could not anticipate how the phenomenon of popular/middlebrow *dantismo* would be transformed by women’s increased access to high and university education, the award of awarded degrees, the widening of professional careers beyond education and the “raft of legislation [that] transformed British women into citizens” (Moulton, 3) in the first half of the Twentieth century. As in broader women’s history, the success of Sayers translations and scholarship was made possible by “the victories won by the previous era of feminist activists” (Moulton, 3).

Entering the arena at the apex of her career as an acclaimed detective novelist and playwright, Dorothy L. Sayers upheld the legacy of the first generation of women *dantiste*, vindicating their *dantismo* as the expression of greater “literary or academic aspirations” rather than “the fulfilment of an enthusiasm” (Laurence, 285). The article demonstrates the role that the material conditions of women’s archives play in preserving the memory of these achievements. The reconciliation of the vociferous with the silent and fragmented archives enables us to place Sayers’ experience within the broader intergenerational development of Dante’s female public between the mid-Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries. The longer historical perspective makes the continuities emerge in the way these writers “constructed their authorial identities self-consciously” (Peterson 4), negotiated their ideological and material status as professional public mediators of Dantean knowledge on the literary market, while challenging the gendered, non-inclusive principles upon which the male-centric canon had been traditionally built.

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