

A Pilgrim and his Journey:
Illuminating Interpretations of Dante's *Commedia*¹

Linda C. Sokolowski

While there is no reason to believe that medieval interpretations of medieval works are more correct than our own, such interpretations can often assist and enhance our own understanding of medieval works because they have been developed by those who share, or at least are closer to, the author's culture. Our most obvious source of more or less contemporary interpretations is the written commentary. But just as useful are medieval manuscript illuminations because these often serve functions other than the purely decorative. Since an illuminator or his patron must select the scenes and episodes he will picture, and because his selection will emphasize the depicted episodes over others, illuminations often serve as guides for readers, focusing their attention on the particular aspects of a work and sometimes going so far as to suggest interpretations of the work or parts of it.

In particular, fourteenth-century illuminations of Dante's *Commedia* provide us with much insight into the medieval understanding of this work, not just because of the large number of illuminated manuscripts but primarily because of the high degree of consistency these manuscripts show in the subjects they depict. As Peter Brieger has noted, the canon of scenes to be illustrated was set by the mid-fourteenth century, with few deviations into and even after the fifteenth century.² This relative uniformity of scene and subject among fourteenth-century illuminations suggests a relative unanimity of interpretation,

page 220

giving us the ability to generalize in our conclusions about the way which a medieval audience read Dante's poem.

On the most basic level, illuminations of the *Commedia* clarify the medieval understanding of the primary subject of the work. Though Dante himself characterized the poem's literal subject as "the state of souls after death,"³ the illuminations focus the reader's attention on the journey of the pilgrim rather than on the souls encountered along his way. Even those manuscripts which illuminate every page or every canto of the work rarely exclude the pilgrim and his guide from any miniature or initial, and often the two travelers have a prominent position in the picture. This focus on the pilgrim and his guide is even more noticeable in manuscripts which illuminate only the beginning of each of the three canticles, rather than each of the 100 cantos, of the *Commedia*. From time to time, an illumination of this type may depict the realm of the canticle. The historiated initial that begins *Purgatorio* in Laurenziana MS Pluteus 40.12, for example, portrays a praying soul enclosed in flames, while in Parma, Biblioteca Palatina MS 3285, *Purgatorio* begins with a praying soul in a six-sided baptismal font, with two figures presumably the pilgrim and his guide looking on from behind.⁴ But more often than not, illuminations of the canticles both miniatures and historiated initials depict the pilgrim alone or with his guide. The beginning of *Inferno* usually portrays the author or presents a narrative scene of the pilgrim lost in the wood, encountering the beasts, or meeting Virgil. *Purgatorio* sometimes begins with a portrayal of the pilgrim and his guide on the shores of Purgatory, Dante kneeling before Cato, or Virgil washing Dante's face. But most often the second canticle opens with a picture of the "little

page 221

ship" of the opening lines of the canticle, usually carrying the pilgrim and his guide. This focus on the travelers does sometimes disappear in *Paradiso*, specifically in those manuscripts which present a traditional portrait of Christ in majesty or the Virgin enthroned. Elsewhere, the pilgrim and his guide now Beatrice may remain, but the focus will shift away from the travelers to the goal of their journey, a goal clearly announced at the beginning of *Paradiso*.⁵ In Laurenziana Pluteus 40.13, for example, Christ appears in the initial "L" of the canticle, with Beatrice and Dante looking up toward him from the left border below the letter. But often the illumination of *Paradiso* continues the focus on Dante and Beatrice, painting the pilgrim in a pious pose, his eyes following his guide's gesture upward.⁶ In varying degrees, most manuscript illuminations emphasize the characters who travel through the otherworld, rather than the otherworld itself, and this emphasis suggests that the work should be read less as a description of the otherworld than as a record of the pilgrim's journey.

That medieval readers were encouraged to understand the text in this way is indicated not only by the pilgrim's constant presence in the illuminations but also by particular pictorial details used to distinguish the pilgrim from his guide. Most manuscripts depict Virgil and Beatrice in the pose of a guide, pointing the way. But Virgil in particular is also distinguished in his role as guide by the ducal nature of his garments, often red or lined in ermine, and by features suggesting age, such as a beard of white hair. By contrast, the pilgrim is beardless or wears a shorter or darker beard than Virgil; sometimes he is shown in a short robe, while Virgil wears a full-length robe. Such details mark the pilgrim as an

page 222

inexperienced, immature uninitiate in need of direction from an older, wiser guide. This particular characterization of the pilgrim as a young man, even more than his constant presence in the illuminations, suggests that medieval audiences read the *Commedia* not as a description of "the state of souls after death," but rather as a "pilgrim's progress," a record of the pilgrim's journey and the education it provides him.

This is not a startling reading of Dante's poem, but it does raise another question about medieval understanding of the *Commedia*'s illuminations: Who is the pilgrim meant to be? Just who is taking this journey and being educated? The first-person narrative of the poem itself suggests that the pilgrim is the author himself, Dante. But as some have noted, fourteenth-century illuminators do not seem to identify the pilgrim as the author, because they do not give him the physiognomic features commonly attributed to Dante.⁷ Instead of portraying the pilgrim with the aquiline nose and squarish jaw associated with Dante since the fifteenth century, fourteenth-century illuminations tend to give the pilgrim a rather "generic" face, roundish and without distinguishing features. The absence of facial features identifying the pilgrim specifically with Dante has led at least one commentator to suppose that fourteenth-century illuminators were not interested in presenting the pilgrim as Dante, or the journey as Dante's; rather the illuminators were interested in the allegorical level, in presenting the pilgrim as Everyman and the journey as the journey of any soul.⁸ The problem with this view of the illuminators' aim is that such an interpretation cannot be justified by the text itself, in which a first-person protagonist narrates his own experiences, is recognized by specific, identifiable

page 223

individuals as Dante Alighieri, and is eventually even called by name, by Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise (*Purg.* XXX, 55). The illuminations do not stand in a vacuum, and any reader would, upon reading the work, identify the pilgrim as Dante, even if on the basis of the illuminations he initially identified him as an allegorical Everyman.

It is, of course, possible that illuminators are trying to "correct" this identification of the pilgrim. Perhaps the apparent allegorical depiction of the pilgrim is meant to encourage the reader to see the Everyman figure in the man specifically identified as Dante by the text. But how then do we account for those few illuminations which label a "generic" pilgrim either with a "D" or with "Dante," as in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Canonici MS it. 108 and in Holkham Hall, Library of the Earl of Leicester, MS 514?⁹ More important, how do we account for the many more illuminations which do not explicitly label the pilgrim but nonetheless identify him rather directly with the author? In Laurenziana MS Tempiano I, for example, *Paradiso* begins with a miniature of Christ in glory, surrounded by saints; off to the side, in the bottom left corner, the pilgrim without Dante's supposed features sits writing in a book, Beatrice in front of him evidently dictating.¹⁰ This depiction follows the poem, in which the pilgrim is encouraged many times to take note of what he sees or hears, and report it to the world.¹¹ Are we to believe that Everyman is supposed to keep a record? Laurenziana MS Pluteus 40.13 provides a more significant example, since it presents the author at the very beginning of the work, depicting Dante in the initial "N" of *Inferno* at his desk in the manner of the evangelists. In the historiated initial of *Purgatorio* in this same manuscript, the pilgrim-

page 224

figure is depicted tending the sails of a small boat, his guide at the rudder; this pilgrim-figure is recognizably the same character as the author-figure portrayed in *Inferno*. Certainly, the illuminator intended the reader to identify the author-figure of *Inferno* and the pilgrim-figure of *Purgatorio* as the same person. Yet any reader seeing the figure in *Inferno* would not be inclined to consider him an Everyman, for given his writing desk and cathedra-like chair, he is too obviously a writer of some authority. Yet this figure, undifferentiated in facial features, comes no closer to looking as Dante is supposed to have looked than the figure in illuminations which do not present the author or label him as Dante. Are we to assume that an unindividualized pilgrim should be interpreted allegorically *unless* some detail in the

illumination suggests otherwise?

The answer, I suggest, is no. We are expected to interpret the pilgrim-figure wherever he appears and however he appears as Dante. The pilgrim-figure never appears in an illumination without his guide, and all the guides are specifically identified as Virgil, Beatrice, and Bernard from their very first appearance in the poem.¹² Yet neither Virgil nor Beatrice, the guides appearing most often in the illuminations, are given distinguishing facial features by most fourteenth-century illuminators. The Virgil-figure could be any man of authority; the Beatrice-figure, any beautiful woman. If the undifferentiated features of the pilgrim imply that this figure is supposed to be Everyman, what are the undifferentiated features of the guide-figures meant to represent? Is each of them "Any Guide"? Furthermore, the illuminations do not represent the guide-figures with iconographical features which might identify them with the allegorical meanings that commentators,

page 225

including those in the fourteenth century, have traditionally given them. Nothing in the portrayal of Virgil suggests that he is Reason; nothing in the portrayal of Beatrice suggests that she is Theology or Faith. If these figures are to be interpreted literally as specifically Virgil and specifically Beatrice, then consistency would require that the pilgrim-figure be identified specifically as Dante.

One illumination in particular provides compelling evidence for this view: the depiction of Dante and Virgil in a small boat or ship traveling to *Purgatorio* is perhaps the most popular in the entire *Commedia*, appearing more often than any other single illumination of any of the canticles. Its popularity is attested to by its use in *Purgatorio* in the Tempiano I manuscript. The illumination here presents a narrative sequence of four scenes: the pilgrim and Virgil in their boat, the two meeting Cato (from Canto I), the two standing on the shore awaiting the arrival of the ship of souls (Canto II), and the two approaching the Gate of Purgatory (Canto IX).¹³ The use of the boat image here stands out because it is the only scene in the sequence of four which does not accurately reflect the work itself, for the travelers arrive in Purgatory not by sailing, but by climbing through the center of the earth (Inf. XXXIV, 70-139). Yet the illuminator opts to depict the pilgrim and his guide traveling over the water, even though he had alternatives which would preserve the literal accuracy of his sequence. Many narrative-style illuminations depicting more than one scene include the meeting with Cato and may include the ship of souls and/or the arrival at the Gate of Purgatory. But most do not include the pilgrim and his guide in their ship, choosing instead a picture of Virgil washing Dante's face (Purg. II, 121-29) or a picture of Dante and Virgil

page 226

looking at the sky and the four stars that do not appear to men in this world (*Purg.* I, 22-24). The illuminator of Tempiano I, then, could have chosen an episode other than this boat with its two travelers, and the same could be said of those illuminators who depict only a single scene in an historiated initial. The fact that they chose the boat scene, even though they abandoned literal accuracy in doing so, suggests that illumination was believed to be particularly appropriate and meaningful. Discovering the reasons behind its propriety and meaningfulness may give us a key to understanding other illuminations.

The illumination is intriguing because it does something no other manuscript illumination I have seen or read of does: it inaccurately reads the text even while remaining true to both the letter and spirit of the text. The scene is drawn from the opening lines of *Purgatorio*:

Per correr miglior acque alza le vele omai la navicella del mio ingegno, che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele. (*Purg.* I, 1-3)

To course over better waters, the little ship of my wit now raises its sails and leaves behind it a sea so cruel.

In the illumination, the pilgrim and his guide appear in their ship, presumably "coursing over better waters" as they move from Hell to Purgatory. But in the work, as already noted, Dante and Virgil do not reach Purgatory by sea. Normally, according to Dante, the saved soul, released from its body, is transported by boat from the mouth of the Rubicon to the purgatorial island (*Purg.* II). But Dante and Virgil reach the island by climbing up Satan's legs and

page 227

through the center of the earth. So the illumination, while accurately portraying the usual means of arriving in Purgatory, does not accurately represent this stage of the pilgrim's journey. This might suggest that the illumination should be read allegorically rather than literally, since Everyman will arrive at Purgatory by boat. This reading is problematic, however, because the pilgrim of the text undergoes a journey of conversion analogous to that of a living man in this world, while the voyage of the souls is the journey of the dead, already converted and already saved. Perhaps more pertinent, and just as problematic, the illumination does not accurately represent the saved soul's voyage. It includes a figure iconographically identified as a guide by a directing gesture, and while the pilgrim of the text arrives in Purgatory alone with a guide, the saved soul arrives without a guide but with other souls in a ship piloted by an angel. We cannot cite space limitations to account for the absence of fellow travelers in the *Purgatorio* illumination since a group is portrayed in illuminations which more directly and literally choose the ship of souls as their subject. In addition, the guide in the *Purgatorio* illumination is not normally portrayed as an angel, or even as a person of religious authority, but rather as a person of secular authority. These inconsistencies suggest that the *Purgatorio* illumination should not be taken to represent the ship of saved souls. More obviously, if the pilgrim's boat were meant to figure the ship of souls, there would be no reason to include both vessels in the same narrative sequence of illuminations, as Tempiano I does.

More important, the textual source of the illumination raises another problem with the interpretation of the pilgrim-figure as

page 228

Everyman. Though the illumination does not accurately represent the literal truth of the pilgrim's journey from Hell to Purgatory, it is faithful to the literal level of the opening lines of this canticle, in which "the ship of my wit" carries Dante into what he calls the "second kingdom." Again, this might suggest that the illumination should be read allegorically because the literal level of the opening lines does not describe concrete reality; rather the opening lines are metaphoric or we could say allegorical. An allegorical reading, however, cannot suggest that the pilgrim is Everyman since the subject of the metaphor is not even the pilgrim but rather the author, who uses the metaphor to describe his writing process. The "allegory" of the metaphor, then, is strictly concerned with the author, who will find the writing of Purgatory a smoother process than the writing of Hell was. This suggests that the figure in the illumination should be interpreted as the author rather than the pilgrim. Such an interpretation can account even for the presence of Virgil in the illumination: Dante, after all, credits Virgil as the source of the "beautiful style which has done me so much honor" (*Inf.* I, 86-87).¹⁴ If the figure is the author, it is difficult to give the illumination any allegorical meaning applicable to an Everyman. On the other hand, such a reading of the picture requires a thorough knowledge and memory of the text. It seems more logical, then, to assume that the presence of Virgil in the boat identifies the other figure as the pilgrim, rather than the author. And indeed, this does not altogether defy Dante's meaning in his opening lines. The metaphor in those lines can easily be extended to mean that Dante-author's experience in writing is analogous to that of the pilgrim on his journey, for certainly

page 229

Purgatory is a "less cruel" realm than Hell, and certainly the pilgrim's journey through the second kingdom is smoother than that through the first. But if we extend the metaphor in this way and so label the second figure in the boat as the pilgrim rather than the author, that figure must be specifically identified as Dante, rather than as Everyman, for it is to Dante first as author, then as pilgrim that the metaphor and its extension apply.

If the pilgrim of the *Purgatorio* illumination is Dante, the pilgrim of other illuminations must also be Dante, since this figure does not deviate in appearance from one canticle to another, except in those manuscripts whose later illuminations were completed years after the illuminations of an earlier canticle. But the conflation of the author's composition process and the pilgrim's journey in the *Purgatorio* illumination should remind us that there are many ways to make a journey, and that Dante-author, like Dante-pilgrim, is making one; in writing his *Commedia*, the author is in a sense reliving the journey he once made as a pilgrim. But that pilgrim's experience *is* analogous to that of Everyman, and the *Purgatorio* illumination also reminds us that Everyman cannot be divorced from the pilgrim-figure. We cannot altogether discount the analogy between the "ship of Dante's wit" and the ship of saved souls, for both are bound for Purgatory and all the travelers are pilgrims still en route to their ultimate goal in Paradise. Furthermore, Dante himself would not have opened the second canticle with the ship metaphor unless he had wanted us to see this analogy between his own journey and that of the saved souls, who are making the voyage Everyman hopes to make. It matters very little if the analogy does not extend to all particulars.

The same can be said for those illuminations which overlook Dante's supposed facial features and make him seem to be an Everyman; it matters very little if the pilgrim-figure agrees in all particulars with the author's actual appearance. The figure represents the protagonist of the text, is the visual analogy of the verbal creation. And this alone makes him Dante. But just as the pilgrim of Dante's text should be seen *both* as a specific individual *and* as allegorically meaningful, so should the pilgrim of the illuminations. In this is the particular genius of fourteenth-century illuminations of the *Commedia*. In choosing scenes and settings from the literal level of the text, the illuminators identify the pilgrim as Dante; but in giving the pilgrim generic facial features, they do not restrict the reader's ability to see the analogies between his own experience and Dante's. When these illuminations focus attention on the pilgrim and his journey, they invite readers to see the journey as Dante's and Dante's alone, a unique experience which nonetheless has much to teach readers about their analogous though not always similar journeys to God.

University of Wisconsin

Notes

1. Most of the illuminations discussed in this paper appear in manuscripts held by the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence, Italy. I take this opportunity to thank the staff of the Laurenziana for assisting me during my research at their library during the late winter and spring of 1983, and for providing me with color slide reproductions of some illuminations. These slides accompanied the original delivery of this paper at the Third Annual Meeting of the Illinois Medieval Association. For illuminations in manuscripts not held at the Laurenziana, I have relied on the reproductions edited and selected by Peter Brieger in Volume II of Brieger, Millard Meiss, and Charles S. Singleton, *Illuminated Manuscripts of the "Divine Comedy"*, Bollingen Series 81, (Princeton University Press, 1969).

2. "Pictorial Commentaries to the *Commedia*," in *Illuminated Manuscripts of the "Divine Comedy"*, vol. I, p. 85.

3. "Est ergo subiectum totius operis, literaliter tantum accepti, status animarum post mortem simpliciter sumptus." Epistle X. 8, in Paget Toynbee, *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920; rept. 1966).

4. See Plate 18 in Brieger, et al., *Illuminated Manuscripts*, vol. II. All plate numbers refer to this Volume. Plate numbers are provided in the paper only for specific illuminations. Where a plate number is not given for a specific illumination, the illumination is not reproduced in Brieger.

page 232

5. See Brieger, "Pictorial Commentaries," p. 83, for a summary of the most common subjects chosen for illuminating the three canticles. For summaries of the subjects illuminating each canto, see Brieger, "Analysis of the Illustrations by Canto," in *Illuminated Manuscripts*, vol. I, pp. 115-208; especially pp. 117-18 on *Inferno* I, p. 158 on *Purgatorio* I, and pp. 182-83 on *Paradiso* I.

6. "La gloria di colui che tutto move per l'universo penetra, e risplende in una parte più e meno altrove. Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende fu'io...." (*Para.* I, 1-5). "The glory of him who moves all penetrates the universe and shines more in one part and less in another. I was in the heaven that receives the most of his light...."

7. Brieger, "Pictorial Commentaries," pp. 93-94. Charles S. Singleton, "The Irreducible Vision," p. 10, and Millard Meiss, "The Smiling Pages," p. 45, both in Brieger et al., *Illuminated Manuscripts*, vol. I. See also Dorothy Hughes Gillerman, "Trecento Illustrators of the *Divina Commedia*," *Dante Studies*, 77 (1959), pp. 4-5. Brieger comments that the portrait image we have come to identify as Dante's was not formulated until the fifteenth century (p. 94).

8. Brieger, "Pictorial Commentaries," p. 94. Brieger allegorizes the figure as "Christian Endeavor."

page 233

9. See, e.g., Plate 49a for Bodleian Can. it. 108; Pl. 42b for Holkham Hall 514.

10. Plate 26.

11. See, e.g., *Purg.* XXXII, 104-05; XXXIII, 52-54; *Para.* XVII, 128-29; XXI 97-99.

12. Virgil is identified at *Inf.* I, 67-81; Beatrice, at *Purg.* XXX, 128-35, 73; Bernard, at *Para.* XXXI, 59-63, 102.

13. Plate 21.

14. "'tu se' solo colui da du'io tolsi lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore."