

DUBIOUS SYMPATHIES, LUST AND MISREPORTED KISSES: A READING OF CANTO V OF DANTE'S INFERNO

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ABSTRACT

If Francesca da Rimini is a lustful sinner in Hell, why is Dante at pains to elicit sympathy for her? Why is she the only woman allowed to speak to Dante in the course of his visit to the underworld? Some critics have played down the human elements of the conversation between Francesca and Dante, choosing instead to place greater emphasis on the theological co-ordinates of the canto, and the morality which underpins the episode. One such critic is Natalino Sapegno, whose edition of the Divine Comedy, even today, is used widely as a standard university text. The present paper is a plea for the reinstatement, so to speak, of the human dimension of the encounter - though not, as will be made clear, at the expense of its moral message. At the same time, and in the context of this plea, the paper also covers the vexed areas of inter-textuality, the seduction of the reading act and its consequences, and the distortion which may be applied to a given story or legend in an effort to curry the favour of one's interlocutor. The paper ends with an 11-minute video sequence: a contemporary version of the canto in question by Tom Phillips and Peter Greenaway.

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