

## Dante's 'love' for Beatrice: A Courtly Romance

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Beatrice Portinari is quite an obscure figure in history. That she is known at all is due to the works of Dante Alighieri, the famous medieval poet who harboured a secret love for her that inspired many of his greatest works. According to historical sources and to Dante himself, he and Beatrice were only ever introduced on two occasions and Dante knew very little about her. However, the ways in which Dante chose to express his love for Beatrice often coincided with the medieval idea of courtly love, an unrequited, secret, but highly respectful form of admiration. It is difficult to understand what it was Dante fell in love with, having had no meaningful association with her and apparently having been fairly unconcerned with her physical appearance. In the words of Marianne Shapiro: "It is at least arguable that Beatrice answers the question of the lady while ignoring the question of woman." Beatrice first appeared as in Dante's *La Nuova Vita*, and later as a character in *La Divina Commedia* where she was Dante's guide through heaven, a significant role illustrating the fact that Beatrice as a person was an unknown entity to Dante but was symbolic to him as an ideal and this is what he fell in love with.

Beatrice appears to be, by all accounts, a fairly normal woman of noble birth. She lived in Florence, which was also Dante's home, and the pair first met when Beatrice was nine years old and Dante nearly ten. Beatrice became an object of inspiration for Dante, who wrote endlessly about her for years afterwards. According to historical sources and to Dante himself they did not formally meet again until nine years later, although Dante supposedly saw Beatrice around the city but never spoke to her. On their second encounter Beatrice greeted Dante as she passed him, and Dante wrote later: "the hope of her admirable greeting abolished in me all enmity and I was possessed by a flame of charity, and if anyone had asked me a question I would have said only Love! with a countenance full of humility."

However, this was to be their last meeting despite the fact that Beatrice, who died at the young age of 25 was still alive for the next eight years. Sources believe that Dante kept his love for Beatrice secret. He was betrothed to and married a woman by the name of Gemma Donati, although the time at which this marriage took place is unclear, and Beatrice later married a man named Simon de' Bardi before her death in 1290.

The concept of courtly love is certainly a medieval one. Courtly love itself is difficult to define, but it does have certain characteristics similar to those which were represented in Dante's affection for Beatrice, such as the secretive element of the relationship, where Dante was so determined that Beatrice would not discover his feelings towards her that he pretended to be courting other Florentine women. The idea of unrequited love which never gave up hope (supposedly the most noble love was devoted love), the resulting admiration from afar as opposed to a functional relationship, and the suffering involved on the part of the suitor, all fit the definition of courtly love, and these elements are visible in Dante's affections towards Beatrice. No actual relationship ever occurred between the two except the one imagined by Dante in his work.

It is not entirely clear what it was in Beatrice that Dante fell so utterly in love with. After Beatrice's death, Dante continued to write about her: "The love between them was wholly spiritual; after her death Dante realised she was more alive than ever." But why was this? Having met her only twice, Dante had no real insight into her character. He wrote of her once: "She has ineffable courtesy, is my beauty, the destroyer of all vices and the queen of virtue, salvation." Obviously Dante believed that Beatrice rid him of all evil intention, but it must be asked, was it Beatrice herself who had this effect or the idea of her Dante had in his mind? Attributes such as 'ineffable courtesy' and 'virtue' can be seen from a distance; one does not necessarily need to know a person to recognise such traits. It was also apparently not Beatrice's outward appearance that drew Dante to her. According to one source, he rarely seemed concerned with physical qualities when he wrote about Beatrice, alluding only once to the colour of her complexion, her skin, and her 'emerald' eyes. Little else is known about Beatrice's appearance, so it appears that Dante was attracted to more in Beatrice than her physical features.

Beatrice first appears as Dante's inspiration in *La Nuova Vita*, which Dante wrote in 1291 after her death. The book contained many poems about Beatrice and described her with such words as 'gentilissima' (gracious) and 'benedetta' (blessed). Having once referred to Beatrice as his 'salvation,' Dante reinforced later this idea in *La Divina Commedia* where a fictional Beatrice became his guide through heaven. In this epic, Beatrice speaks to Dante on personal terms and is 'maternal, radiant and comforting,' which is certainly an improvement on their real relationship which had barely any personal basis at all. It is here that Dante begins to shape Beatrice as a person, but as a person of his own creation; the words she speaks and the relationship between them all come from Dante's pen and not from Beatrice herself. He referred to her once as 'la gloriosa donna della mia mente,' (the glorious lady of my mind) and in truth, the Beatrice Dante fell in love with and wrote about was certainly in his mind, a glorious fictional lady but an unknown woman.

Dante fell in love with an idea of his own making. Beatrice was, to him, an ideal, a perfect woman in every sense of the word, and this suited his purpose. She was a tool of inspiration to him, and he was a devoted if secret suitor who still loved her long after she died. The admiration and affection he felt for her were directed towards a perfection she may not have possessed at all, but Dante apparently chose not to explore Beatrice the person; instead he was satisfied with the fantasy relationship he created through his writing.

### **Bibliography**

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