

Franz Liszt's Francesca da Rimini: The Quintessential Emancipated Woman

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Francesca da Rimini came to be one of the most popular characters from Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1308–1321) depicted in nineteenth-century European poetry, plays, and music.¹ Though Dante placed her in Hell as a sinner who subjected reason to emotional desire, in the nineteenth century she became ennobled, often depicted as a “symbol of pathos, but with . . . illicit passion” and “wronged innocence.”² Various commentaries written on the *Comedy*—especially Giovanni Boccaccio's, which attempted to fill in the gaps left by Dante's vague portrayal of the young lover—contributed to the shift in attitude toward Francesca. Even devotees of Dante's masterpiece found their reading of the Francesca story in Canto 5 influenced by Boccaccio's romanticized invention. Franz Liszt (1811–1886), a lifelong reader of the *Comedy*, exemplifies such an enthusiast, and his musical portrayal of the Francesca episode in *Eine Symphonie zu Dantes Divina Commedia* (1857) reflects this interpretation.

In this paper I will give a brief synopsis of Canto 5 and an interpretive history of the Francesca episode to the nineteenth century. Then, I will turn to Franz Liszt and his involvement with the *Comedy* and conclude with an analysis of Liszt's musical portrayal of the Francesca episode.

Canto 5 begins with Dante's and Virgil's descent into the Second Circle of Hell. Here, the departed Lustful suffer constant exposure to unrelenting violent winds and rain. Because these sinners lacked control from within to bridle their temptations of carnal desire, their flesh must now endure unappeasable torment from without. Francesca and Paolo, however, seem less affected than the other inhabitants. Virgil allows Dante to speak with the couple, and Francesca launches into the first part of her monologue, in which she blames Love for her and Paolo's downfall: she and Paolo, the brother of her husband, were reading the Vulgate cycle *Lancelot del Lac*; when they reached the point when Lancelot and Guinevere kissed, their own secret love urged them, too, to kiss. Francesca's husband learned of the affair and had the young lovers killed. Overwhelmed by pity, Dante faints.

Modern readers often focus on the romantic story of Paolo and Francesca and overlook this canto's function as a lesson. Virgil had hoped what Dante saw and heard, prior to the arrival of Francesca and Paolo, would horrify the pilgrim into shielding himself from Francesca's seductiveness. Upon meeting Francesca, among the mass of the damned, however, Dante falls

¹Dierdre O'Grady, “Francesca da Rimini from Romanticism to Decadence,” in *Dante Metamorphoses: Episodes in a Literary Afterlife*, ed. Eric Haywood (Portland, OR: Four Courts, 2003), 227.

²Richard Cooper, “Dante on the Nineteenth-Century Stage,” in *Dante on View: The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts*, ed. Antonella Braida and Luisa Calè (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 26. and O'Grady, “Francesca da Rimini from Romanticism to Decadence,” 222.

under her spell and subjects his own reason to emotion; he himself becomes a member of the masses.³

Dante's language admittedly encourages the reader to romanticize the episode. The poet transforms the canto's tone from moralistic to romantic by shifting from "lust" to "love."⁴ Dante further hints at a romanticized interpretation by making Francesca the passive object and Love the active subject. In the original Arthurian legend, love overcomes the "manipulative and disdainful" Guinevere, and she seizes and kisses the "foolish and bumbling" Lancelot. Francesca's story reverses the roles: while reading the tale of Lancelot and Guinevere, Love seizes Paolo, and their eyes meet; but, not until "one point alone,"—when "the desired smile was kissed by one who was so true a lover"—did Love force Paolo to kiss Francesca.⁵ This rhetorical reversal creates an instability in the text's meaning, thus forcing the reader to interpret the story.⁶ Susan Noakes contends,

[Dante] is aware that, if 'his' words endure, they can and will be read in ways other than the ones he intends: Paolo and Francesca's misreading of the Lancelot romance shows this clearly. He has called these words from their lives elsewhere to a metamorphosis in his text, and there they have taken on new meanings. . . . Yet the words themselves, if Dante gets his wish, will endure, even if time changes their meanings.⁷

Owing to the poet's obscure presentation of Francesca, time quickly changed the meaning of Dante's words in her story.⁸ What readers know about Francesca comes mostly from Dante's commentators, because the *Comedy* gives minimal biographical information about her. Dante makes privy her birthplace, her Christian name, that a kinsman killed her and her lover, and that she and her lover are in-laws. Dante never names her lover, or her husband, Gian Ciotto. This information, along with the romantic account of the murder by the jealous husband, comes from commentaries, which began to appear as early as 1322.⁹ By the mid fourteenth century, however, commentators began interposing romance elements, in particular the dishonest marriage and the death scene. Boccaccio amplified these two elements to great proportion in his last major work, *Exposition on Dante's "Comedy"* (1373–74). This version bears notable responsibility for turning Francesca into, what John Freccero calls, "the heroine of medieval romance and, eventually, of nineteenth century melodrama."¹⁰

A story about two young lovers whose passion triumphed over human and divine laws no doubt resonated with late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century readers.¹¹ During this time,

³Ibid., 13–14.

⁴Virgil speaks of Semiramis's "vice of lust" (*lussuria*) and of "the wanton" (*lussuriosa*) Cleopatra, but Achilles meets "love" (*amore*), and the other thousand souls departed this life because of "love" (*amor*). Teodolinda Barolini, "Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender," *Speculum* 75, no. 1 (2000): 8.

⁵Susan Noakes, *Timely Reading: Between Exegesis and Interpretation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 43.

⁶Ibid., 44.

⁷Ibid., 67.

⁸No independent documentation of Francesca's story exists.

⁹Barolini, "Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender," 6.

¹⁰John Freccero, "The Portrait of Francesca: *Inferno* V," *MLN* 124, no. 5 Supplement (2010): S10.

¹¹René Girard, "The Mimetic Desire of Paolo and Francesca," in *"To Double Business Bound": Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 1.

the rise of individualism in France had caused a shift in attitude that quickly spread across Western society, whereby personal self-fulfillment gradually displaced duty as the motivation for love and marriage.¹² By the mid-nineteenth century, passionate love—characterized by “intense affection, extreme emotion, and, even, suffering” and experienced only by those who freely chose their own mate—had become the key to achieving personal happiness, a situation supported by an explosion of new literature based on the story of the paramour Don Juan.¹³

Ever the disciple of passionate love, Franz Liszt became what Marie d’Agoult, his first of several mistresses, called “a Don Juan *parvenu*.”¹⁴ As a follower of Saint-Simonian doctrine, Liszt believed in the emancipation of women and the abolishment of all privileges, including that of being born male; women, too, deserved admission to the hierarchy of sexual pleasure.¹⁵ Saint-Simonism encouraged the freedom of women from the bondage of domestic duty assigned to them by patriarchal interpretations of Christian scripture.¹⁶ In a meeting attended by Liszt on 19 November 1831, Prosper Enfantin, leader of the Saint-Simonians, proposed a new Christianity, one directed by a male and female couple-pope who would engage in a lifelong “open marriage” that would be of valuable service to unfortunate couples trapped in loveless marriages. In the spirit of such thinking, Liszt provided the love and attention his mistresses craved and deserved, but that their spouses did not, or could not, themselves provide. He treated each mistress with complete respect.¹⁷ And with the exception of Marie d’Agoult, none felt abandoned when the affairs came to an end.¹⁸

When Liszt encountered Marie in 1833, she had been unhappily married to Count Charles d’Agoult for almost six years and had two children with him: Louise (1828–1834) and Claire (b. 1830). Marie and Liszt fell in love at first sight, their affair developed within a matter of six months, and the two became lovers in December 1833.¹⁹ Despite the possibility of serving two years in prison for adultery, in May 1834, Marie made the bold decision to leave Charles and Claire and to exercise her right to pursue a life of freedom and happiness with a man whose interests reflected her own. In her letter to Charles announcing her decision to separate from him forever, Marie wrote,

When fate has brought together two persons who do not know each other and who have characters and minds as unlike each other as ours are, then their most constant efforts and greatest sacrifices only serve to deepen the gulf between them.²⁰

¹²Allan H. Pasco, *Revolutionary Love in Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century France* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 1, 180.

¹³*Ibid.*, 46, 181.

¹⁴Eleanor Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 187.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁶Saint-Simonism was a form of French nineteenth-century utopian socialism based on the fundamental beliefs of Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825) that masculine rule by might and an unrestrained expansion of industry and trade had made society ill. These beliefs later contributed to the Saint-Simonist feminism, developed in the early 1830s by Prosper Enfantin.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁹Richard Bolster, *Marie d’Agoult: The Rebel Countess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 119–20.

²⁰Originally in Jacques Vier, *Marie d’Agoult, son mari, ses amis*, Collection Jules Lemaître (Paris: Éditions du Cèdre, 1950), 22. Cited and translated in Bolster, *Marie d’Agoult: The Rebel Countess*, 128.

Marie and Liszt's honeymoon, however, lasted about two years. Infatuated with the idealistic relationship of Dante and Beatrice, they modeled their relationship on that of the literary couple. But when Marie and Liszt could not live up to each other's unreasonable standards, the relationship began to deteriorate, and it came to a bitter end in 1844.²¹

Liszt began nurturing ideas for his *Dante Symphony* during his affair with Marie, but he abandoned them until 1847.²² Soon after, he began an extended affair with Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, who offered 20,000 thaler to fund an extravagant, multi-media production of the symphony. Liszt, however, shelved the project until 1856. In the meantime, he had been waiting for years to marry Carolyne, but politics had prevented her ability to divorce Prince Nicholas von Sayn-Wittgenstein. This political roadblock, perhaps, colored Liszt's musical depiction of the Francesca da Rimini episode, for it was an utter cruelty that politics had denied him and Carolyne their nuptial request.

The first movement of the *Dante Symphony*, presents five passages of Dante's *Inferno* in an A-B-A' architecture. Section A, comprises a bellowing out of the inscription above the Gate of Hell and the miserable lamentations, sighs, and wails of those souls in Canto 3, "who lived without disgrace and without praise." Section B portrays the "Francesca da Rimini" episode of Canto 5. In A', Liszt transforms material from Section A to evoke the Barrators' mocking laughter encountered in Cantos 21 and 22, and to evoke the sight of Lucifer in Canto 34. The "Lasciate" motive links each section, and "Inferno" ends mercilessly with its restatement. (Ex. 1)

Ex. 1:

Horn in F

La - scia - te o - gni spe - ran - za, voi ch'en - tra - te!

Regardless of this motive's instrumentation, it always reminds the listener that whoever has been, or will be, represented is a wretched soul sentenced by God to eternal hopelessness and suffering in Hell. Their placement in Hell can never change, but, throughout time, their story's interpretation can.

When the lovers appear in Section B, Francesca dominates the scene, capturing the listener's attention with a solo recitative: a brooding lament in the upper register of the bass clarinet, characterized by a descending triplet figure, and marked *espressivo dolente*. (Ex. 2) Through Francesca's recitative, Liszt expresses his own disagreement with Dante's decision to condemn Francesca and Paolo to eternal suffering. Whereas Dante saw adulterous behavior as an

²¹In the *Vita Nuova*, Beatrice symbolized genius-Dante's soul—his source of comfort from earthly pain—and in the *Comedy*, her perfection earned her the allegorical role of Theological Wisdom. Sharon Winkhofer, "Liszt, Marie d'Agoult, and the Dante Sonata," *19th-Century Music* 1, no. 1 (1977): 22.

²²In February 1839, he wrote in his journal: "If I feel within me the strength and life, I will attempt a symphonic composition based on [Dante's *Divine Comedy*]." D'Agoult, *Mémoires, 1833–54*, 180. Quoted and translated in Winkhofer, "Liszt, Marie d'Agoult, and the Dante Sonata," 27.

act of disregard for God’s will, Liszt perceived it through the Romantic lens, which declared it an act of submission to God’s will:

‘There is a sister-soul Providence reserves for each woman, and this sister-soul is seldom the husband’s. If the woman finds it under the features of a lover, she belongs to him of right. ‘Tis God Himself who commands love, brings lovers together, predestines them one for the other. . . . If love runs low, if the heart is seized by another passion, again it is God that calls it to another vocation, and by consequence inconstancy is an act of submission to the Divine will!’²³

Because they submitted to God’s will, Francesca and Paolo should be exalted, not punished. But placing the lovers in Purgatory or Heaven would be a sign of impertinence. Out of respect for Dante’s masterpiece, Liszt maintains the narrative structure and keeps the lovers in Hell. However, he turns Dante’s moral message on its head by presenting the lovers’ story as one of triumph over tragedy.

The triplet figure in the recitative melody is of particular significance, because it suggests a programmatic connection to Liszt’s symphonic poem *Tasso, Lamento e trionfo* (1849). (Ex. 2) In both works, the composer takes an identical descending triplet figure through several transformations and expresses each transformation in terms of a representative topic.

Ex. 2:
Dante Symphony



Ex. 2 continued:
Tasso



Keith Johns associates the triplet figure in *Tasso* with Tasso himself, and if one associates the triplet in the Francesca episode with Francesca herself, a parallel can be drawn between the two works.²⁴ In the preface to the original edition of *Tasso*, Liszt wrote: “Tasso loved and suffered at

²³Louis Proal, *Passion and Criminality in France: A Legal and Literary Study* (Paris: Charles Carrington, 1900), 439–40.

²⁴Keith T. Johns, *The Symphonic Poems of Franz Liszt*, ed. Michael Saffle (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1997), 12.

Ferrara; he was revenged at Rome; his glory still lives in the popular songs of Venice.”²⁵ Collaterally, it can be said that Francesca loved and suffered in Rimini; she was revenged in her affair with Paolo; her glory still lives in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and, especially, in Boccaccio’s *Exposition*. In Liszt’s eyes, if Tasso could be “surrounded with radiant halo by posterity” after being “misjudged by his contemporaries,” so, too, should be Francesca.²⁶

Liszt follows Francesca’s lament with an equally dolorous clarinet duet, characterized by sighing appoggiature at the third. (Ex 3)

Ex. 3:

In this passage, the two clarinets represent Francesca and Paolo: Francesca continues to tell her story, while Paolo sobs the sobs of the wrongly convicted. All melodies thus far gravitate downward, reminding the listener of the heroes’ whereabouts, but a second iteration of the recitative and duet takes place a fourth higher than the first, suggesting further opposition to Dante’s judgment.

The next section serves as a psychological transition. Once again, Francesca sounds her recitative, this time, in the English Horn. Liszt inscribed Francesca’s woeful declaration above the melody, supported by harp accompaniment: “There is no greater sorrow than thinking back upon a happy time in misery.”²⁷ (Ex. 4) Used to symbolize the raging winds of Hell earlier in the movement, the harp now suggests Liszt’s view of Francesca as hero. Since Ancient Greece, the harp has been used to accompany the telling and singing of heroic tales, and Liszt set a precedent for employing this device in earlier instrumental works, e.g., *Tasso* and *Orpheus* (1853–4). With its pitifully nostalgic character, this section confirms Liszt’s sympathy with Francesca’s misery.

²⁵Franz Liszt, “Synopsis of Form,” in *Tasso: Lamento e trionfo* (Wien: Wiener Philharmonischer Verlag, 1900z).

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷“Nessun maggior dolore che ricordarsi del tempo felice nella miseria.” Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, 80.

Ex. 4:

English Horn

Nes - sun mag-gior do - lo - re che ri - cor - dar - si del tem - po fe - li -

mf *espress. molto* *sf*

ce nel - la mi - se - ri - a.

p *f* *fp* *rinf.*

The episode concludes with a sweeping cantilena celebrating Francesca and Paolo's divinely-willed love. In 7/4 time, this cantilena is a product of Liszt's preoccupation with the Romantic notion of synthesizing opposites as a means of expressing perfection. The measures divide 3/4 + 4/4: the less active 3/4 symbolizes Paolo, and the 4/4 contains Francesca's active triplet motive. (Ex. 5)

Ex. 5:

2 Violini senza sordini

(p) dolce con intimo sentimento

Liszt composed his rendering of the noble and triumphant affair over this odd-time structure. The evocative music conjures up delightful images of the blissful and carefree couple. But after only twenty-eight measures, Liszt refocuses on the heroes' locale by restating the "Lasciate" motive.²⁸ Another furious harp cadenza signals the episode's end and Liszt's recommitment to Dante's intended message of "Inferno": all who die unrepentant have no hope of experiencing anything but misery and suffering for eternity.

Though Liszt's interpretation of the Francesca da Rimini episode strayed significantly from Dante's intended message, the poet's narrative devices and wording encouraged such a divergent reading by granting radical interpretive license. Informed by contemporary politics and personal experience, Liszt took this license and ran with it. For Liszt, Francesca acted as the quintessential emancipated woman. As such, he portrayed her as a wrongly convicted hero, a portrayal which Dante likely would have disapproved but perhaps could have accepted as a small price to pay for the longevity of his words.

²⁸Michael Saffle points out that "the emotional thrust of this beautiful interlude misses Dante's moral point: Francesca was neither repentant nor reasonable, and she is to blame for her own damnation." Michael Saffle, "Orchestral Works," in *The Liszt Companion*, ed. Ben Arnold (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 267.

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