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*What Was Good About Dante's «buona Gualdrada»\*\**

Questi, l'orme di cui pestar mi vedi,  
tutto che nudo e dipelato vada,  
fu di grado maggior che tu non credi:  
Nepote fu della buona Gualdrada;  
Guido Guerra ebbe nome,  
Ed in sua vita fece col senno assai e con la spada.

He whose tracks you see me trample, though he goes  
naked and peeled, was of greater degree than you think:  
grandson of the good Gualdrada, his name was Guido  
Guerra, and in his lifetime he did much with wisdom  
and with sword.

(Inferno XVI, 34-39)<sup>1</sup>

With these words, the flayed sodomite Iacopo Rusticucci introduces one of his two fellow Florentines, both aristocrats, suffering under the scalding rain of fire and ash in the second canto that Dante devotes to the punishment of sodomy. It seems that Rusticucci expects Dante to step back in wonder when the ancestry of this as yet unnamed sinner is revealed. To his way of thinking, being the grandson of «la buona Gualdrada» qualifies the shade for respect despite his naked, flayed condition. Yet, for a contemporary of Dante this association of him with his ancestor would hardly have been necessary to bolster the earthly fame and social status of this soul. The famous Count Palatine Guido Guerra (1220-1272) was nearly Dante's contemporary. The terse description of him two lines later, «fece col senno assai e con la spada»

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\*\* It gives me great pleasure to write this essay in honor of *la buona Dora*, good to family, students, and friends. I have very often benefitted from her warmly welcoming hospitality, lively conversation, and patient willingness to speak Italian with me, despite her excellent English.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the *Commedia* are from Dante Alighieri (1955); all translations are from Dante Alighieri (1970).

(he did much with wisdom and with sword), effectively evokes the deeds that earned him a positive reputation for military and political action. He was a Guelf leader, who led the Florentine Guelfs to victory over the Ghibellines at the battle of Benevento (1266) and, having restored Guelf control of Florence, was appointed captain of the city. Clearly, memory of him would still have been fresh among Florentines, and the contemporary audience would not have needed the reference to his grandmother to identify him.

Why then invoke Gualdrada? Who was she and what was so good about her? How does her naming provide perspective on Guido? And how does it contribute to the religious and political themes of the *Commedia*?

Who she was is not difficult to answer. Gualdrada was Florentine. She lived a long life; married by 1180, she died in 1226. She was the daughter of Bellincione Berti dei Ravignani, an office-holding member of the Florentine ruling class, and his wife, whose name is unrecorded. In *Paradiso* XV, 112-114, Cacciaguida, Dante's great great grandfather, lauds husband and wife as representatives of the Florentine good old days. As another of this couple's daughters is thought to have been married to one of Cacciaguida's sons, Dante's great grandfather, Gualdrada probably was Dante's own great great aunt (Faini, 2014: 9). Gualdrada's husband was Count Palatine Guido Vecchio (d. 1213), head of the Guidi dynasty, whose vast family territory, given to it by various Holy Roman Emperors, lay in the mountains and valleys of the Casentino to the east of Florence in Tuscany and to the north in Romagna<sup>2</sup>. The couple had five sons, four of whom survived to adulthood and, after Guido's death, divided the family territory, creating four counts Guidi in the place of one. The Guido Guerra whom Dante encounters in Hell is the son of one of these sons, Marcovaldo. The couple also had at least two daughters. Sofia became a nun and Emilia (Imilia) married Pietro Traversari, Lord of Ravenna, and was celebrated in the poetry of troubadours (Sanguineti, 2016).

Gualdrada's marriage to Guido was of substantial political and personal importance. It led the Guidi, long-standing enemies of Florence, to establish a base in the city in properties that Gualdrada was given

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<sup>2</sup> The male heads of the Guidi family named Guido are very numerous. The systems of numbering them used by various scholars are not consistent. Gualdrada's husband is sometimes referred to as Guido IV and sometimes as Guido VII. Villani (1990) calls him Guido Vecchio, and so shall I.

by her father<sup>3</sup>. Thus, they became allies of the city, at least for a time, though, of course, they remained lords of their Casentino properties. As I will explain below, however, the alliance was not without strain in a period when Florence was attempting to extend its control to territory surrounding the city. The marriage brought substantial personal change to Gualdrada. It moved her from the life of an urban unmarried girl to that of the wife of one of the most important lords of the surrounding territory. She became part of a powerful and sophisticated noble family. Their expectations for women's public conduct were wider than restrictive urban ones. Guido's sister, Sofia, abbess of the convent of Pratovecchio was regent over Guidi properties in the count's absence in the period before his marriage to Gualdrada and at times raised armed forces to assist him in various conflicts (Passerini, 1876: 69). The family aspired to high culture: Boncompagno da Signa, one of the most prominent Italian intellectuals in the field of the *ars dictaminis*, was in the family's employ (Cozza, 2018: 11).

What Dante means by calling Gualdrada *buona* is more difficult to determine. The word itself is highly charged when encountered in *Inferno* because it is alien to the malignant spirit of Hell and offers a glimpse of a better world. It is a reminder that good people do exist. Although here in this line *buona* might seem to indicate an anodyne, bland, feminine conformity to societal expectations, given the context and Dante's usual precision, that seems overly limited. According to the authoritative *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, when Dante uses the word *buono/a* to modify the name of a historical person and places it directly in front of the name, the function is not merely decorative. The adjective has an elevating function and expresses an admiring evaluation of the virtue, power, or ability of the person, thus meaning excellent, strong, valiant, capable, etc. (Anceschi, 1970)<sup>4</sup>. That these aspects of the word apply to women as well as men was understood by Sapegno in his note to «'l buono Augusto» at *Inferno* I, 71. He interprets that *buono* as *valente* and refers to «buona Gualdrada» as analogous, saying, «per questa accezione di buono, cfr. [...] Inf XVI, 37» (For this meaning of *buono* see etc.). Useful as this explanation is in demonstrating that Dante expected that the word would be taken seriously, it does not, I

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive discussion of the relations of the Guidi with Florence, see Sestan (1968).

<sup>4</sup> In her gloss to this line, Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (2016) takes its ungendered application for granted, noting «la denominazione *buona* è tipica di altre figure esemplari di cittadini: cfr. 'l buon Lizio di *Purg.* XIV, 97, 'l buon Gherardo di *Purg.* XVI, 124».

believe, begin to exhaust the rich contribution to this canto of *buona* in association with Gualdrada.

Dante's representation of Gualdrada's parents as austere representatives of the good old days in *Paradiso* suggests a way forward, especially as, in *Inferno* XVI, shortly after mentioning Gualdrada, Rusticucci asks whether «cortesia e valor [...] dimora/ nella nostra città sì come sole» (courtesy and valor abide in our city as once they did). Dante responds with an attack on the «gente nova» (new people) (XVI, 73) who have ruined Florence with their rapid acquisition of wealth and their pride and excess. This suggests that Gualdrada, a representative of the city as it once was, was good in the way that people of those old times were good. But what were Rusticucci and Dante's old time *cortesia* and *valor* when demonstrated by a woman and this woman in particular? I suggest that the answers to this question are personal, civic, political, and spiritual.

Personal goodness applies to Gualdrada's chastity. Ever since the mid-fourteenth century when the Florentine referred to as l'Ottimo wrote his glosses to the *Commedia* (1333), Giorgio Villani wrote his *Nuova Cronica* (c 1348), and Boccaccio gave his lectures on Dante in Florence and wrote his *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante* (1373-1375), annotators' explanations of this word have cited a story about how Gualdrada's marriage to Guido came about. The three authors' stories differ in some details, but the picture they give of Gualdrada does not vary. As Villani's son attested to a friendship between his father and Dante, I will summarize Villani's version, on the assumption that, if the poet knew this story, it was probably in Villani's version: When the emperor Otto IV came to Florence, the elite of the city gathered in Santa Reparata (the cathedral of the city, parts of which are still extant under the Duomo) to welcome him. Among them were the maiden Gualdrada, her father, and Count Guido Vecchio (at that point, a young man known as Guido Guerra). The emperor noticed the young girl, and her father offered to let him kiss her, but she, overhearing, answered that «no man alive would kiss her if he was not her husband». The emperor praised her for these words, and Count Guido, overcome by love and on the advice of the emperor, married her, not caring that she was of lower lineage and indifferent to her dowry (Villani, 1990: 265; Book 6, chap. 37, lines 22-41).

In fact, Gualdrada's heroic refusal has since been proven to be impossible. Otto IV did not visit Florence until 1209, and Gualdrada and Guido were already married and had a child in 1180, but the charming

picture the story draws of Gualdrada is such a perfect representation of female chastity that almost without exception modern annotators continue to gloss *Inferno* XVI, 37 only by referring to the story of the refused kiss, even as they acknowledge that it is a fiction, as a glance at the comprehensive list of glosses to this line included on the Dartmouth Dante Project webpage shows (Trustees of Dartmouth College, 2023). According to this very reasonable explanation, Dante calls Gualdrada *buona* because «she was known in her day as an example of domestic virtue and high morals» (Singleton quoting Sapegno, who here seems to contradict his previous ungendered reading of *buona*).

For a reader acquainted with the facts of Gualdrada and her grandson's lives, this reading of *buona* as meaning sexual probity opens up an as yet unnoted aspect of Guido's sin. It indicates, by way of contrast, not just how far the damned Guido Guerra's sexual morals are from his ancestor's, but also the damage he has done to the family. Married because she was admired for her moral virtue, Gualdrada fulfilled her marital duty and gave birth to five male and two female children<sup>5</sup>. Guido had only one son and that a bastard (Litta, 1865: tav XVIII). For a reader aware of her fertility, the reference to her can be read as an aspersion on his homosexuality, the reason for his damnation. The identification of her as his grandmother calls to mind her role as the fertile progenitor of the four major Guidi lines extant at the time of Dante, whereas he was the progenitor of none, as his younger brother's sons inherited the title and property.

Moreover, in co-operating with those who negotiated her marriage, in legend and in fact, Gualdrada played a civic role as well as a familial one, the only one open to Florentine women of her day: she helped to bring about unity between previously warring parties, in her case the Guidi and the Florentines<sup>6</sup>. Given the central emphasis on the disastrous effects of political factionalism throughout the *Commedia* – its climax is the placement of Brutus and Cassius in Satan's mouth – it seems likely that 'bringer of civic unity' is yet another unrecognized resonance of *buona*. This possibility is increased by the existence of another

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<sup>5</sup> Dante and his readers were likely to be aware of this fertility as, in addition to naming Guido here, at *Inferno* XXXIII, 77 Dante refers to two of her grandsons, employers of the forger Master Adam.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Noakes (1990: 212), in a reading that departs from the standard focus on Gualdrada's personal virtue, suggests, the «goodness Dante had in mind when mentioning Gualdrada was more civic than moral» and discusses the positive political effect of «her marriage to a Guidi count».

very bad Gualdrada who was the good Gualdrada's far more famous contemporary. She was the villain of a historically true story of the origin of civic division in Florence first told in the thirteenth century *Cronica dello pseudo-Brunetto* (ed. Schiaffini, 1926: 82-150) and retold in numerous Florentine sources<sup>7</sup>. Dante makes the event and its disastrous civic consequences the climactic conclusion to his lament about the condition of contemporary Florence (*Paradiso* XVI, 140-144). Though he does not mention the bad Gualdrada by name, merely referring to the story would have brought her to mind.

The story goes as follows: in 1215 (1216 according to the modern calendar), a young noble citizen of Florence, named Buondelmonte di Bondelmonti, was betrothed to a young woman of the honorable and noble Adimari family in order to end a feud, but Gualdrada Donati, wife of Vinciguerra Donati, one of the leaders of another noble Florentine family aligned with the Buondelmontes, waylaid the young man and suggested to him that the Adimari girl was unworthy of him and he would do better to marry her much prettier daughter. Without consulting his elders, the young man accepted the offer and, on his way to marry the Donati daughter, was murdered by the jilted Adimari fiancé's relatives. As a result of this Gualdrada's betrayal and the subsequent murder, the whole city, which until that time had been free of factions, divided into opposing camps and aligned themselves either with the Guelfs or the Ghibellines, who were active in the surrounding territory.

Thus, the bad Gualdrada's action, though in the personal domestic sphere, brought about disastrous civic consequences. For a Florentine reader of Dante's day, the adjective *buona* applied to a woman named Gualdrada would have been likely to bring its opposite meaning, *cattiva*, to mind. *Buona* Gualdrada represents the values of dedication to the good of family and city, whereas *cattiva* Gualdrada places familial and civic good in opposition and leads to the factionalism that devastated the latter. Good Gualdrada stands as an image of good citizenship.

After her marriage, Gualdrada remained a peace-maker and the opposite of the bad Gualdrada, but in a larger, region-wide, political context. Her playing of this role is recorded in testimony in support of a lawsuit instituted by the Guidi against the cloistered benedictine nuns of the monastery of Rosano, which is located at the strategically important junction of the rivers Arno and Sieve about 10 miles from

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<sup>7</sup> Villani clearly saw a connection between the two. He tells the story of the Buondelmonte murder in the chapter (VI.xxxviii) immediately following the one in which he tells the legend of Gualdrada's marriage though he does not give her name.

Florence. The convent had been under the patronage of the Guidi since its foundation, but in 1203 when their abbess died, the nuns, abetted by the Florentine government, elected a new abbess of their choice instead of installing the official Guidi candidate as the traditions of patronage dictated. The Guidi brought suit in the papal court. They supported their case with nuns' and retainers' testimony about the family's past relations with the monastery to prove that they had always behaved like patrons and been treated as such. Gualdrada's actions figure largely in this documentation, and most important for her reputation as *buona* is testimony about an event that occurred while the nuns still accepted the Guidi's jurisdiction over their property. An armed force of Florentines was besieging the monastery in an attempt to collect taxes that the nuns declined to pay because they said they were owed to the Guidi, not to the comune. The abbess Teodora appealed for help, and Gualdrada came. She succeeded in persuading the Florentines to abandon their claim (perhaps her being a Florentine herself helped) and peace was restored (Passerini, 1876: 212-214). Some years later, Gualdrada again represented the family interests in this matter. The Guidi, having won the suit, nevertheless decided to relinquish their rights, and the official recording document says clearly that she was the family representative at the signing; she signed the agreement, using her elaborately executed mark (Passerini, 1877). In the context of the family's relations with Rosano, Gualdrada was *buona* because, after her marriage, she took on the active, intercessory role of a feudal noblewoman and represented the Guidi in negotiations of peaceful settlements of disputes between regional political entities.

My suggestion that Dante calls Gualdrada *buona* in the *Inferno* at least in part because she acted as a peacemaking intercessor must, of course, be highly speculative. We cannot be certain that the poet's readers or, even, Dante himself, knew about events that took place more than half a century before his birth. Nevertheless, at several points in his exile, Dante was closely involved with one or another of Gualdrada's grandsons<sup>8</sup>. Through Gualdrada's descendants and his own, albeit remote, familial relationship to her, Dante may well have known about her reputation as peacemaker, which undoubtedly endured in the collective memory of the family. Thus, it is possible that, when Dante called her *buona*, in addition to invoking her as an opposite to the well-known bad Gualdrada, he was holding her up as the exemplar

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<sup>8</sup> See Sestan's thorough discussion of this topic.

of a positive, active way of resolving the tendency to division that was endemic to Florentine and, indeed, Italian politics.

More certain than family memory as a source for Dante's association of Gualdrada with the promotion of unity are two letters by Boncompagno da Signa, the rhetorician employed by the Guidi family. The *Epistola mandativa ad comites palatinos* was definitely known to Dante, as he uses phrases from it in his poem *Doglia mi reca* (Carpi, 2013: 87). The *Littere consolationis, quas direxi comitisse Waldrade commatri mee post mortem viri sui Guidonis Guerre comitis palatine* (Letter of consolation to the countess Gualdrada, his spiritual co-parent, after the death of her husband, Guido Guerra knight palatine) appears in Boncompagno's widely circulated collection of model letters of consolation, *De Consolationibus*, and, thus, would have been available to Dante. *Epistola mandativa* is about the dangers of division. It was commissioned by Gualdrada's sons after the death of their father when they had to decide whether to form a *consorteria*, «a kinship system of shared rule and inheritance», or divide up the patrimony, each taking title to a part (Wright in: Boncompagno da Signa, 1998a). Boncompagno ends his argument in favor of unity by invoking their mother as «the principal column and most solid foundation of your county [i.e. title and unified territory]». Following his advice will make it so that «the Divider [i.e. the Devil] will not be able to enter your house»<sup>9</sup>. Unfortunately, the sons listened neither to their mother nor to Boncompagno, and, by the time Dante was writing, their division into the Guelf and Ghibelline camps had contributed to the undoing of the familial, civic, and political good done by Gualdrada's marriage and territorial peacemaking. The damned Guido Guerra, who used his *spada* for factional causes, is an example of the effective work of the Divider.

Boncompagno's other epistle, the *Littere consolationis* addressed to Gualdrada herself, speaks of an aspect of Gualdrada's character that has not yet explicitly entered my analysis of *buona*, her spirituality. This is not really new, however, because, finally, for Dante and his Christian readers, all the particular goodnesses considered thus far – personal/familial, civic, and political – have their source in the supreme Good that rules the universe. Boncompagno creates the impression of Gualdrada as a woman of intelligence and spiritual wisdom by stating that he felt no urgency to write to advise and console her on her husband's death.

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<sup>9</sup> Boncompagno da Signa (1998a: § 18) «Illustre namque comitisse V. matri vestre, que [est] principalis columpna vestri comitatus et solidissimum fundamentum»; «Phares domum vestram ingredi non valedbit».



«I have firmly believed and do believe your Wisdom to be the most capable of providing a remedy of consolation for yourself and for others»<sup>10</sup>. He deferred writing because «the Omnipotent Father [...] was and is your special consoler»<sup>11</sup>. A sign of this closeness to God, he says, is having offered to God as a nun her firstborn girl, «lady Sophia, who [...] is called ‘wisdom’» and having a son who «is a standard-bearer of Jesus Christ», that is, a crusader (Boncompagno da Signa, 1998b: § 4). Whatever the actual reality of Gualdrada's character, this letter creates a warm and strongly positive image of her for posterity. She was *buona* because she was spiritually wise and close to God. Everything that Boncompagno says to her and about her suggests that she herself is destined for Heaven.

A celestial destiny is implied, of course, by Dante's naming her «la buona Gualdrada» in whatever sense we take ‘buona’. Whether they manifest their virtue in personal, familial, civic, or political fields, according to Dante's belief and that of the church, the good go to Heaven eventually, though sometimes after a long residence in Purgatory. The contrast with Gualdrada's grandson is stark. He has achieved his destiny: damnation. He used *senno* and *spada* for secular factional purposes; he was not a crusader like his uncle, and he is in Hell. She, however, used a higher form of wisdom, *sapientia*, to promote blessed peace and unity. With the single extremely rich word *buona* to describe a particular Florentine woman, Dante introduces into the bleakness of the third round of the seventh circle of Hell a brief but potent memory of the potential of good deeds on earth. Dante the traveler in Hell seems to have been stimulated by the memory when he later launches into his tirade decrying the *gente nova* and the changes they have wrought in his beloved city in a mere two generations. As Dante hoped for his time, may *buona* Gualdrada's good example inspire Dante's readers to work toward the good of unity and peace today.

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<sup>10</sup> Boncompagno da Signa (1998b: § 3) «Quia firmiter credidi et credo sapientiam vestram sufficientissimam esse ad exhibendum vobis et aliis consolationis remedium, idcirco post mortem domini comitis in tantum distuli altitudini vestre meas litteras destinare».

<sup>11</sup> Boncompagno da Signa (1998b: § 4) «Vel ideo distuli, quia Pater Omnipotens [...] fuit et est vester precipuus consolator».

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