University of Southern Indiana

Engaging with Literature in Translation: A Comparative Analysis of Female Archetypes in

English Translations of *The Divine Comedy.*

Jade Gatewood

Graduate Student

28 Feb. 2024

The process of translating texts is complex and full of nuance. Translators seek to capture a text's ideas and, if applicable, preserve the author's poetry. This challenge is no easy feat, as each language differs grammatically; the variations are endless as translators encounter syntactic, lexical, and orthographic differences. This study seeks to identify elements of variation by referring to translated versions of Dante Alighieri's epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. Today, the text transcends Dante's medieval Italian into fifty-two languages. It has been adapted for centuries, held by many translators looking to do justice for their respective readers, both in the linguistic and cultural sense. This study examines three English translations spanning different historical periods, focusing on their portrayal of the poem's complex female figures. Drawing on David Damrosch's framework for analyzing translated works mindfully, this paper compares the lexical choices employed by each translator in representing the archetypes of female virtue and condemnation.

This analysis examines the role a translator plays in shaping the reader's understanding by presenting these figures differently, even at times reflecting their own biases. By examining these differences in representation across these translations, we gain insight into how a female figure, like Myrrha, in Henry Francis Cary's (1805), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's (1867), and Henry Johnson's (1915) translations, can be both wretched and wicked, even nefarious, all within the same narrative. This comparative approach underscores the importance of critical engagement with translated works, recognizing the authorial liberties often taken during translation that can subtly shape how we, as contemporary readers, perceive a classic text like *The Divine Comedy.*