

# Dante the Heretic

*An Exploration of Cathar Beliefs  
in the Divine Comedy*

Written by  
**Maria Soresina**

Edited by  
**Caterina Soresina Stoppani**

Series in Literary Studies



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# Table of contents

<b>Preface and acknowledgements</b>	v
<b>Foreword:</b>	
<b>Dante the Gnostic? Seeking reconciliation with unsettling truths</b>	vii
Daniela Boccassini <i>University of British Columbia</i>	
<b>Introduction</b>	xvii
<b>Which doctrine?</b>	1
The sources of the books on Catharism	2
Origin and history of Catharism	3
Catharism, Manichaeism and Gnosticism	6
The Albigensian Crusade	7
In Italy	9
Marco Lombardo	10
The Italian Cathar Churches	12
The Inquisition	13
Greedy behaviour	15
Posthumous convictions	16
Farinata degli Uberti	17
<b>The Divine Comedy: a political manifesto</b>	21
Guelphs and Ghibellines	21
The empire	22
The courtesy	23
<b>Cathar beliefs in Dante's verses</b>	27
Dualism	29
Creation	35
Jesus Christ	43
Reincarnation: soul and spirit	57

Resurrection	63
Reincarnation	69
Free will and freedom	83
No churches	93
No saints	95
No relics	101
No miracles	103
No meat	107
No tithes	109
No lies	111
<b>The Sacrament of the Cathars: the <i>consolamentum</i></b>	113
Purgatory	117
Dante's path to the consolamentum	119
Dante's consolamentum in the Earthly Paradise	131
<b>Bibliography</b>	139
<b>Index</b>	145

## Preface and acknowledgements

*This book took up the last months of the life of Maria Soresina, an Italian writer, who was the first to perceive a link between Dante Alighieri and Catharism, and who devoted thirty years of her life to the in-depth study of this subject.*

*The book aims to be a demonstration of how Cathar doctrine is revealed in the Divine Comedy, in a way that was hidden from the Inquisition, but obvious if one reads the text without preconceptions.*

*Unfortunately, the author's sudden death did not allow her to finish the work: the last pages (from chapter "No meat") were found on her computer in draft form, but it was deemed important to publish them anyway to complete the discourse she had begun and give meaning to her work.*

*The publication of this book was only made possible due to the support of those who merit profound gratitude.*

*Special thanks go to Professor Martino Marazzi of the University of Milan; to Michael Allen, for his great help and generosity; to Connie Diamant, for her great help and closeness; to Brendam Tannam, for his esteem.*

*Thanks also to the editor Irene Benavides, for her patience and kindness.*

*In loving Memory,  
Caterina Soresina Stoppani*



# **Foreword:**

## **Dante the Gnostic?**

### **Seeking reconciliation with unsettling truths**

Daniela Boccassini  
*University of British Columbia*

Notre pâle raison nous cache l'infini ! (Rimbaud).

Last week I was unexpectedly invited to write an introduction to Maria Soresina's first book in English — her own English, that is, not a translator's: how proud would she be of holding this book in her hands, of having pulled this one off! It did not take me long to accept the proposal. Somehow, Maria (in Milan) and I (in Canada) had almost inadvertently fallen out of touch with each other a few years ago. Hence this invitation came as a serendipitous, welcome opportunity to honor those aspects of Maria's personality that always stood out for me: her fierce determination, her keen intelligence, her passionate enthusiasm. How moving that, while reading the pages of this book, I could sense those same qualities burst out at every turn of phrase, as if Maria was speaking her mind right next to me, in utter immediacy. And how inevitable that, while reading along, I found myself beholding, as if in-between the lines, images of the times when our friendship was fuelled by animate conversations on the most disparate subjects, all of which ended up circling, one way or another, back to Dante, our common mentor and friend, and to the enigma of his legacy to *us*, today. While there was a lot we agreed upon, in our separate, yet not incompatible, understandings of Dante's *Comedy*, we always also managed passionately to disagree on one point or another — usually around a plate of lentils and barley, a variety of cheeses, a bottle of hearty wine, a good measure of laughter and untold amounts of pervasive joy, in that room of hers that functioned at once as grand dining hall, cozy parlor, concealed library — and after lights out, as conduit to dreamland. In all these years, barley and lentils have remained my way of conjuring Maria's presence. Dante himself would not have disdained sharing in such a wholesome meal.

I finished reading Soresina's captivating *Dante the Heretic: An Exploration of Cathar Beliefs in the Divine Comedy* last night, September 29<sup>th</sup>. It matters to my argument to recall that since 2021 here in Canada September 30<sup>th</sup> has become a statutory holiday, intended «to honour the children who never returned home

and Survivors of residential schools, as well as their families and communities».<sup>1</sup> Hence, this morning, I joined in the ceremony held on the unceded territories of the Salish People, the land where I am grateful to live, yet also where the survivors of this genocide are trying to reconcile themselves with long-unaddressed trauma, while attempting to revive their culture. One thing stands out as one walks their land: whatever did not get smashed, trampled or erased within the survivors' territory and psyche, is still being coerced into assimilation and forced to fit, one way or another, into the colonizers' unrelenting agenda.<sup>2</sup> If conversion to Christian dogma (mostly in its Catholic version around here) is no longer an ideological priority, "progress" — understood as privatization and ruthless exploitation of the land, economic competition, and technological "development" — remains the all-pervasive doctrine, enshrined in creed, practice and law (not to mention the increase in surveillance that the unwholesome *coniunctio* of AI and the ubiquitous technology of social media now affords). In the face of civilization's ambition to enact a global paving of earth and soul, there is hardly any soil left, in landscape or psyche, where the rhizome of *another* worldview might dare send its shoots into the air.

Somehow synchronistically, while walking with my Indigenous hosts and friends along the path of their ancestor-children's tears, this morning I found myself inwardly led also to remember and honor both my Waldensian forebears and *our* Cathar elders. Had Maria happened to relocate on these Pacific shores as I did, I have no doubt she would have joined the march. And I believe she would be as aware as I am that those of us alive today are heirs in equal measure to both the victims and the perpetrators, so that the Cathar legacy, like the Indigenous one, is inscribed in our collective memory, whether we like it or not. Which is to say: it is up to us to choose how to *read* the events that have shaped the world we live in, and what to *write* about them — not just on paper, but on the pages of that collective book of life wherein our individual lives take their

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/national-day-truth-reconciliation.html>

<sup>2</sup> Even though this day named "Truth and Reconciliation" is a national holiday, it is plain to see that neither the government nor the community of settlers (whether recent or long-time) in any way *care* about this day's truth, nor feel any need to reconcile themselves with it, let alone with the Indigenous peoples of this land. The burden, in other words, falls entirely on "them" and their inability to be like "us". Across continents and centuries, we are faced with the same psychic realities that haunted Europe at the time of the Albigensian crusade: it is one and the same crime of discrimination that keeps being perpetrated, in different ways — one half of humanity failing to acknowledge the humanity of its other half.



mysterious form, to use one of Dante's favorite images. Of this obligation to read and write righteously, Soresina is a luminous example.

As chance would have it, then, it is just on this day of "Truth and Reconciliation" that I get called to grapple with Soresina's seemingly outrageous claim to a "truth" with which we may have no idea how to reconcile ourselves, so preposterous it does appear at first: namely, that what shines through Dante's lines may be nothing less than a Cathar worldview — shrewdly disguised as a journey into a more or less orthodox Christian beyond, by way of an "art of writing" resilient and subtle enough to succeed in slipping through the cracks of ideological censorship and inquisitorial persecution. As if some Indigenous authors had managed to sneak their worldview into the cultural framework of the settlers' society, which in part at least has become their own daily reality. As if? We *know* this has happened over and over through history, and we *know* this keeps happening. Why not in Dante's case, then? As readers in a world increasingly haunted by a global culture of hegemonic import, it seems to me that, in order properly to harken Soresina's seemingly *out-landish* contention with regard to Dante's Cathar affiliation, we should strive to keep as firmly into focus as we possibly can this connection with calls for "reconciliation" to "truths" other than those spelled out by the colonizers — calls to this day unheeded, in the out-lands I speak from: so that with Soresina's help we may try to apprehend anew some of the *Comedy's* most cryptic «versi strani». For Dante's sake, our own sake — and, possibly, also in recognition of the silenced ones Dante may have been speaking for: because there is a chance that their indigeneity reaches further into the invisible depths of pre-history than we ever fathomed.

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So now: why these silenced ones, on whose behalf Dante may have been speaking, should be understood as "Cathar"? Whilst the intimation that Dante was a heretic in disguise is not new, pinning down his purported heresy in disguise as *the* archetypal heresy of Catharism is most likely an unprecedented allegation. As readers, our reaction to Soresina's claim will largely depend, at first anyway, on what we think we know of Catharism: how aware, or unaware, we are of the murky mists that to this day surround this "unsettled", and still largely unsettling, worldview.

There is little doubt, among today's heresiologists, that what has survived and adhered to the name of this once widespread, refined and powerful movement is largely, if not exclusively, the inquisitors' well-attested characterization of Cathars' views as a world-denying dualistic ideology, shrouded for good measure in a thick weave of contumelious rhetoric. While the inquisitors' specious reading of Cathar beliefs was arguably intended at legitimizing the

disciplining of such alarming convictions, the process itself was aimed at the outright suppression of what had ostensibly turned into a pervasive threat to conventional society, on the part of a thriving “counter-culture”. In case we forgot, Carlo Ginzburg’s poignant words remind us that “the voices of the accused reach us strangled, altered, distorted; in many cases, they haven’t reached us at all”.<sup>3</sup> The only gossamer-thin thread of tenable substance that shines through the inquisitors’ vilifying rendering of the Cathars’ creed (not to mention the belittling of their name: Cathars used to call themselves simply “good Christians”, not Cathars) is the kind of understanding those heretics yearned for. This was a form of insightful *knowing*, to be achieved through direct experience and intuitive, visionary means — deemed heterodox because distinct from the knowledge gained through established theological dogma and accepted philosophical inquiry, heretical because unfettered from both faith and reason. It is indeed on account of this individually-oriented experience of salvation through unmediated inner realization that medieval Cathars find themselves related to late-antique *gnostikoi*: people of comparable kin, just as hard-to-pin, just as harshly persecuted, and mostly for the same reasons, namely their advocacy of what might be called “the knowledge of the heart”.

I trust these few hints are sufficient to suggest that, once approached sympathetically, the Gnostics’ worldview begins to disclose its own complex psychic landscape and coherent cosmology — in ways quite remote from those alleged by their persecutors. In the words of Gilles Quispel, an eminent specialist: for the Gnostics, “the world was brought forward to serve as a catharsis for the spirit, to make men and women conscious of their unconscious selves, a belief that, in effect, redeems the phenomenal world.”<sup>4</sup> And in Hereward Tilton’s most recent phrasing: gnosis is “an experiential knowledge of our innermost identity with the primordial mind.”<sup>5</sup>

There is no doubt that, in her reading, Soresina embraces this sympathetic, “insider’s” approach to the Cathars’ inherently gnostic worldview. In fact, she has a deceptively simple, cogent definition of gnosis to offer, one that validates the current understanding of Cathar *knowing* as an ultimately unitive, rather than divisive, stance towards life: gnosis, according to Soresina, entails “*seeing* the divine spark that is in us and *recognizing* it as one’s true essence” (p. 7, emphasis added). Yet the process of transformation necessary to bring about

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<sup>3</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath*. University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Quispel, “Gnosis and Culture”. In *Gnostica, Judaica, Catholica. Collected Essays of Gilles Quispel*, ed. by J. van Oort. Leiden: Brill, 2008. 142.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.kosmosinstitute.org/gnosis-i-the-white-serpent>

such a *seeing*, and the attendant ability to *recognize* it through self-awareness, is far from spontaneous or easy to achieve, as it occurs through a slow inward turning-around, through a long purgatorial training, which may culminate in a direct experience of visionary import. It is precisely this transformative visioning that authenticates a Gnostic's life, yet always on the threshold of (in)visibility, and (un)sayability — the reason being, that any attempt at institutionalizing, dogmatizing or canonizing such inner realizations would entail morphing them into what a Gnostic most earnestly strives to eschew: the literalizing of such experiences, which in turn breeds the institution of a school, the establishment of a dogma, and ultimately the enforcement of a religious orthodoxy wielding the divisive principle of righteousness against those who do not conform. Seen in this *other* light, the knowledge sought by the Cathars was both an exacting individual pursuit and a threat to settled societal norms — and this, in ways that make Dante's poem, Dante's *vision*, as he called it, oddly resonate much more closely with that gnostic "pursuit-as-threat" than against it.

It is to these odd resonances that Soresina pays close attention, summoning us to do likewise. Her conclusion is that Dante's *Comedy* may well be "the most important Cathar writing that has come down to us" (p. 83). Such a proposition in turn entails seeing Dante not just as a covert gnostic sympathizer (in the way that, say, Dante's own, largely imaginary, Statius maintains having been a concealed Christian) but rather, as a thoroughly achieved Cathar, a full-fledged *consolatus*: one, that is, who had received the *consolamentum* (the sole Cathar sacrament); one whom the inquisitors called *perfectus*, to mean "accomplished in heresy", and therefore "good to be abandoned to the secular authorities and burned at the stake" (p. 9). A startling claim indeed — and one that will sound objectionable, if not downright unsettling, to most readers. And understandably so, because a kind of barrier needs to be crossed inwardly, in order for Soresina's arguments to start bearing weight. Should we be willing to accept the challenge that Cathar, gnostic views may have been much more widespread in the 1200s than we ever surmised, and possibly endemic among literate people in particular, hence integral to a pervasive "counter-culture", such a perspective would considerably alter our still blurry apprehension of the medieval cultural landscape. Soresina's compelling reading of some key passages of Dante's *Comedy* may, in fact, contribute effectively to shifting our perception of the medieval cultural terrain, hence prove worthy of serious consideration.

For Soresina's foremost legacy rests in her fearless determination to read in and through the ostensible — on the basis of the realization that a long-canonized text may start resounding (hence signifying) otherwise, once we come to realize that ostracized worldviews carry their own, and oftentimes our

own, long-forgotten, disfigured truths. As such, they demand that we reconcile ourselves with them, through a rueful remembering of their primal countenance, and a ruthless acknowledgement of their forsaken dignity. Because let's say it: would Dante's *Comedy* be any less worthy of our admiration, would it have fewer human values to share, or punier cosmological insights to convey, should we opt to read it as the result of a transformative *gnosis* springing from a personal visionary experience, rather than construe it as a modern, at times whimsical, allegory of accredited, yet outmoded, theological tenets? What difference would it make to the poem itself, whether we see its author as the last of the Cathar gnostics, or (as has been suggested) as the first of the modern agnostics? Not a smidgen of difference to the poem itself — but a world of difference to our understanding of who we are, on whose shoulders we stand, out of which cultural rhizome we sprang.

We may, or may not, agree with Soresina's affirmations; and it is not my purpose to sway the reader one way or another. But one thing is certain: visionary experiences of a soteriological, if not eschatological, import, leading to heavenly ascension and mystic union are intrinsically insidious for a normatively-oriented culture. Representing, as they do, the most valuable result of an utterly personal inner journey, their canonization, such as in the *Comedy's* case, never quite succeeds in settling the elusive matter of their alleged orthodoxy. Because it is precisely the gnostic claim to divine union through a recovery of the soul's inborn noetic potential for cosmic participation — which ostensibly sits at the core of Dante's poem — that the religious (and political) institutions of all times deem necessary to nip in the bud, through whichever means available.

In other words, what is at stake here is nothing less than what Gregory Bateson felicitously called an «ecology of the mind»: just as much today among us globalized, mostly lackadaisical readers of Dante's poem, as in the otherwise more fixated 1200s of the Church's relentless persecution of the Cathar heresy, or in the astonishingly spirited, syncretistic 200s of the first Christians' head-on confrontation with the Gnostic “hydra”. It does not take much to see how today more than ever the establishment's extraverted drive toward a canonized orthodoxy, understood as conformism to the principle of “knowledge-as-self-affirmation”, keeps waging its crusade against an introverted, visionary, transmutative and transpersonal heterodoxy aimed at fostering “knowing-as-self-realization” — supposing the remembrance of such a knowing still abides, that is, even among the fast-vanishing Indigenous cultures left on this planet.

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It is a pity that death prevented Soresina from bringing her argument full circle, and this book from its planned closure. Her writing breaks off on the suggestion

that, in their cryptic complexity, the Earthly Paradise cantos may be staging the “celebration of the *consolamentum*” (p. 89; as mentioned, the Cathars’ only sacrament). Dante would thus be elusively alluding to his own admittance among the initiated — through a ritual intended to mark the completion of his transformative purgatorial ascent, while also functioning as the prelude to the last, most explicitly visionary, phase of his journey through the Beyond.

There is no question that the sequence of the Earthly Paradise cantos records, in symbolic terms, an initiatory experience. However, Soresina’s reading raises the stakes considerably: because reckoning that Dante might have inscribed within his poem a memorializing of the foremost Cathar ritual *just at the time* when such a ritual was vanishing, along with those who knew how to conduct it, is a game-changer. It would be akin to realizing that — for example — some well-known text of antiquity may enshrine a more or less recognizable recording of an ancient Mystery (something that, incidentally, has been, and is being, done, particularly in the case of some of Plato’s dialogues). While retaining its own intradiegetic coherence, the *Comedy* would then *also* come to look uncannily close to one of those jars that in the 1940s resurfaced at Nag Hammadi or Kumran: vessels stuffed with codices and scrolls, to serve as repositories for some of the most personal, most visionary *evangelia* composed within the Gnostic communities of late antiquity, sealed and buried for future generations to discover, at a time when a societal recognition of such truths was no longer possible, within the drastically altered political climate.

Should we be amenable to entertaining such a possibility — and much pondering, much weighing and assessing remains to be done, after Soresina’s whispering it to us, before crossing the threshold — then the *Comedy* would take on yet another layer of conceivable meanings, among the many it has garnered over the centuries. In the face of the Cathar genocide (and the Templar annihilation), Dante’s vision would also manifest as an expression of “martyrdom”: a noun which etymologically simply means “confession”, “testimony” — and above all, “remembrance”.

I do not know whether Maria would agree with this possible “extension” of her views, but if I imagine myself conversing with her while we share a meal of lentils and barley, I would want to assay her intuition regarding the Earthly Paradise sequence as evidence of a Cathar *consolamentum*, by enquiring about the supplemental possibility that the poem as a whole may be understood as a gnostic *evangelion* of sorts — hardly in disguise, in fact — silently consigned to the bewildered memory of a darkening age, for recognition in future, possibly more aware, times.

Within such a perspective, we would then be led to wonder whether Dante’s Epistle to Cangrande (as an authorial writing, or possibly not), with its daring

suggestion that the poem be read through a layering of meanings normally reserved for the Sacred Scriptures, might gain a new cogency of its own: in such a light, that dubious letter might appear as a strategy simultaneously aimed at “canonizing” the poem (admittedly in a paradoxical way, especially in the context of a Ghibelline stronghold such as Cangrande’s court), while covertly confirming the poem’s peculiar status as a gnostic *evangelion* of sorts. In this light, Boccaccio’s resolve to raise Dante’s *Comedy* to the rank of “divine” would also resonate “otherwise”, especially considering Boccaccio’s own retreat into the non-visionary, if socially engaged, prose writing of the *Decameron*, presented as an altogether earthly “comedy”, once the encompassing vision of a Cathar gnosis was no longer a socially and culturally viable dream.

Even more cogently, perhaps, we might recall Dante’s encounter with his ancestor Cacciaguida: an exercise in “active imagination” untenable from a historical standpoint, yet aimed at tracing a lineage in chivalric worth that effectively discloses the type of “martyrdom” one is called to embrace, once the “usurper” of truthful Christianity is no longer found besieging it from the outside, but rather dilapidating it from within. What should readers still endowed with “intelletti sani” infer from this, if not that the “infidel” now lurks undetected not just within the societally accepted “truths” of the so-called-Christian political enterprise and its hegemonic pursuits, but within the lair of our own individual, unwary psyches? «Closer to our jugular vein than we ever thought possible», as used to say the chief among the Islamic gnostics, duly crucified and burned to ashes in 922 CE. He meant God, of course. But our gods, once we think we own them, become our diseases.

And yet. Even as Dante was cognizant of the urgency to expose the abuses and diseases of the living to an increasingly befuddled community of readers, even as he consented at waging his pen as a sword in the internecine type of crusade that was tearing Christendom apart, he may have been even more keenly aware that the real threat to his life as an exile, as a Ghibelline, as a gnostic — if not, as Soresina suggests, as a straight-out Cathar — rested primarily with the *outrageousness* of his final vision: that clairvoyantly unitive, love-inspired cosmic *theosis* granted him before death, which he dared to call nothing less than a “squaring of the circle”. In this light, we should perhaps ponder anew the reason why the last cantos of *Paradiso*, far from circulating freely, as the first ones of *Inferno* did soon after being composed, were to be found instead, through a revelatory dream after Dante’s passing, concealed in a crack of his bedroom wall — if we give credence to Boccaccio’s fondness for seemingly far-fetched stories. Dante knew all along that he had been tasked with a mission. Only at the end, he must have come to realize that the kernel of that mission lay, in fact, in his vision of a path to rebirth into the blessedness of

a truly divine, cosmic mindfulness. That gnostic vision sealed the last canto, a gift for future generations to rediscover—long after the erasure of the Cathar legacy from the sanctioned repositories of human history had become a *fait accompli*.

Halfmoon Bay, B.C  
September 30th 2025

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# Bibliography

## *Abbreviations used in the text*

CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
Cv	Dante Alighieri, <i>Convivio</i>
EC	<i>Enciclopedia Cattolica</i>
ED	<i>Enciclopedia Dantesca</i>
IF	Dante Alighieri, <i>Inferno</i>
PD	Dante Alighieri, <i>Paradiso</i>
PG	Dante Alighieri, <i>Purgatorio</i>
PL	Jacques Paul Migne, <i>Patrologia Latina</i>
SCG	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa contra Gentiles</i>
ST	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologica</i>

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# Index

## A

Abelard, Peter, 8  
Adam, 40, 47, 64, 65, 74  
Ahasuerus, 55  
al-Ghazālī, 39  
Amaury, Arnaud, 8, 9  
Anthony of Padua, 95, 97, 99, 100  
Anthony the Abbot, 95, 96  
Ariosto, Ludovico, 24  
Aristotle, 1, 8, 57, 85, 87  
Arius, 4  
Arnold of Brescia, 8  
Augustine of Hippo, 4, 6, 11, 47,  
57, 104  
Averroes, 1  
Avicenna, 39

## B

Barolini, Teodolinda, 78, 81  
Beatrice, xix, 30, 35, 36, 37, 39, 44,  
48, 49, 50, 59, 60, 61, 63, 64, 65,  
75, 76, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 98, 99,  
103, 104, 111, 128, 129, 131, 132,  
133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138  
Benedict of Nursia, 103  
Benedict XV, xvii  
Benedict XVI, 105  
Bernard of Clairvaux, xvii, 14, 32,  
76, 77, 78, 80, 81, 82, 95  
Bertholet, Edouard, 69  
Bloom, Harold, 6  
Boccaccio, Giovanni, xviii, 15, 16,  
36, 101, 131, 137  
Boethius, Anicius Manlius  
Severinus Boethius, 1  
Bonaccursus of Milan, 3  
Bonaparte, Napoleon, 22  
Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, 15,  
110

Boniface VIII, 97  
Bonnefoy, Yves, 1, 75  
Borst, Arno, 6, 8, 10, 40, 43, 52, 53,  
57, 93  
Bosco, Umberto, 19, 66, 71, 75, 76,  
77, 80, 86, 91, 105, 120, 129, 135  
Boyde, Patrick, 38  
Brass, Marcel, 83  
Brenon, Anne, 8, 9, 12, 21, 25, 43,  
46, 47, 52, 53, 61, 93, 103, 109  
Brutus, 107

## C

Cacciaguida, 23, 25  
Caesar, Gaius Julius Caesar, 22  
Caiphas, 54  
Cardenal, Peire, 16  
Cassius, 107  
Cato the Younger, Marcus Porcius  
Cato Uticensis, 119, 120  
Cavalcanti, Cavalcante de', 18  
Cavalcanti, Guido de', 18  
Cerberus, 107, 108  
Charles II of Anjou, 22, 25  
Chiavacci Leonardi, Anna Maria,  
11, 39, 48, 64, 66, 70, 72, 73, 75,  
76, 77, 79, 80, 84, 87, 89, 91, 96,  
99, 100, 104, 105, 110, 128, 137  
Christ (Jesus Christ-Jesus), 3, 4, 5,  
7, 16, 19, 32, 40, 43, 44, 45, 46,  
47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55,  
63, 76, 77, 81, 87, 93, 98, 99, 103,  
104, 105, 111, 113, 114, 115, 119,  
122, 124, 125, 133, 134

## D

de l'Isle, Alain, 6  
Del Col, Andrea, 13, 14, 15, 16  
del Duca, Guido, 24

Di Salvo, Tommaso, 22  
 Dominic of Guzmán, xvii, 14, 15,  
 17, 110  
 Dondaine, Antoine, 2, 6  
 Duvernoy, Jean, 5, 6, 29, 40, 41, 43,  
 46, 47, 50, 52, 53, 59, 63, 66, 93,  
 95, 101, 103, 109, 122, 132, 135

## E

Eckbert of Schönaue, 2, 5  
 Eckhart, Meister, 46  
 Eco, Umberto, 14  
 Eliade, Mircea, 63, 82  
 Eliot, T.S., 36  
 Epicurus, 18  
 Epiphanius of Salamis, 3  
 Esau, 79, 80, 81  
 Eve, 40, 65  
 Ezzelino III da Romano, 9

## F

Farinata degli Uberti, 17, 18, 19,  
 20, 21, 25  
 Fenelli, Laura, 96, 97  
 Ferrucci, Franco, 44  
 Foscolo, Ugo, xviii, 21  
 Francis of Assisi, 95, 96, 97, 98, 109  
 Frederick II, 9, 18, 26  
 Fubini, Mario, 120

## G

Geryon, 112  
 Giovanni di Lugio, 2, 83  
 Gregory IX, 13  
 Guénon, René, xviii, 127  
 Gui, Bernard, 6, 14  
 Guinizzelli, Guido, 129

## H

Haman, 55  
 Hollander, Robert and Jean, 45,  
 46, 95, 102

Holofernes, 101, 102  
 Honorius III, 97

## I

Innocent III, 8, 11, 13  
 Innocent IV, 9, 14, 96  
 Isaac, 80  
 Isidore of Seville, 75

## J

Jacob, 79, 80, 81  
 Jacopo da Varazze, 96  
 James Apostle, 103  
 Joachim of Fiore, 8  
 John the Evangelist, 12, 32, 40, 44,  
 52, 53, 69, 72, 87, 91, 103, 111,  
 125  
 John, Robert, 61  
 Jonas, Hans, 7, 39, 63  
 Judas, 107

## K

Kirkpatrick, Robin, 45, 95

## L

Lanza, Adriano, 126  
 Leonhard, Kurt, 11, 86  
 Longfellow, Henry W., 45, 46, 74,  
 89, 90, 95, 102  
 Lucan, Marcus Annaeus Lucanus,  
 119  
 Lucifer, 6, 12, 32, 41, 47, 107, 128  
 Lucius III, 13  
 Luke Apostle, 52, 113, 114, 122,  
 125  
 Luther, Martin, 99, 100

## M

Maimonides, Moses ben Maimon,  
 xviii



Mandelbaum, Allen, 45, 46, 64, 74,  
95, 96, 102  
Mani, 7  
Manselli, Raoul, 3, 29, 138  
Marco of Lombardy, 10, 11, 12, 83,  
84, 85  
Matelda, 74, 133, 134, 135, 137  
Matthew Apostle, 7, 40, 51, 63, 69,  
103, 104, 105, 114  
Minos, 82  
Mnemosyne, 75  
Moneta of Cremona, 3  
Montanelli, Indro, 98  
Morghen, Raffaello, 6  
Moses, 103, 135  
Mühlestein, Hans, 11

## N

Nardi, Bruno, 39  
Nestorius of Constantinople, 4

## O

Origen, 57, 69  
Ovid, Publius Ovidius Naso, 1

## P

Papini, Giovanni, 44  
Parenti, Giovanni, 98  
Pascoli, Giovanni, xviii, 44  
Pasquini, Emilio, 25  
Paul Apostle, 32, 49, 57, 63, 80, 81,  
91, 135  
Pazzini, Adalberto, 96  
Peter Apostle, 103, 104, 138  
Petrarca, Francesco, 23  
Piccarda, 39  
Pius VI, 97  
Plato, 1, 8, 38, 57, 61, 62, 75  
Portinari, Bice, 131  
Pratesi, Riccardo, 97, 98, 100  
Pythagoras, 107

## R

Raymond V, 54  
Rebecca, 80  
Reggio, Giovanni, 19, 66, 71, 75,  
76, 77, 80, 86, 91, 105, 120, 129,  
135  
Roché, Déodat, 53  
Roquebert, Michel, 6, 9, 12, 13,  
14, 16, 52  
Rossetti, Gabriele, xviii  
Rusticucci, Iacopo, 24

## S

Sacconi, Raniero, 3, 9, 10  
Sapegno, Natalino, 80, 86, 89, 91,  
96, 97, 102, 137  
Satan, 31, 32, 39, 40, 41  
Scaduto, Mario, 96  
Schmidt, Charles, 6  
Simon Magus, 39  
Sinclair, John, 95  
Solomon of Lucca, 17, 20  
Sordello da Goito, 72  
Spinoza, Baruch, xviii, 104  
Stabile, Giorgio, 18  
Statius, Publius Papinius Statius,  
60, 61, 70, 71, 124, 125, 126, 127,  
134  
Strauss, Leo, xviii, xix, 33, 65, 126

## T

Thomas Aquinas, 1, 15, 39, 49, 50,  
51, 71, 77, 85, 86, 87, 95, 104,  
105, 110  
Tocco, Felice, 1, 2, 6, 43, 98

## U

Ugolino della Gherardesca, 107,  
121  
Ulysses, 129  
Urban II, 96  
Urs von Balthasar, Hans, 48, 55

**V**

Valdes, Peter Waldo, 4, 8  
Virgil, Publius Vergilius Maro, xix,  
1, 18, 19, 30, 65, 70, 83, 85, 86,  
88, 89, 90, 91, 111, 119, 120, 121,  
122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 128, 132,  
133, 134

**W**

Weber, Max, 17  
Weil, Simone, 7, 9, 105

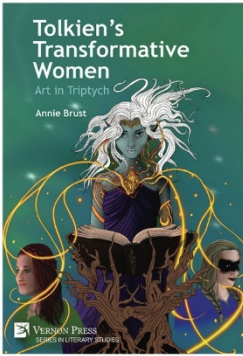
**Z**

Zambon, Francesco, 35, 39, 40, 43,  
46, 53, 57, 58, 83, 109, 115, 119,  
133, 138  
Zeus, 75



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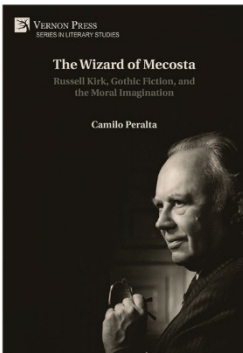
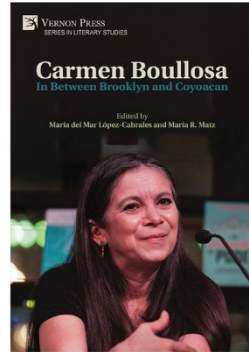
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