Dante’s portrayal of lust and the lustful in Terrace 7 as a reflection of medieval attitudes towards sex and sexuality.

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores Dante’s portrayal of lust and the lustful in Terrace 7 of *Purgatorio*, examining how it reflects and challenges medieval attitudes towards sex and sexuality. While Dante aligns with traditional theological views, notably Aquinas' interpretation of lust as a psychological vice rooted in excessive desire and the distortion of reason, he also perpetuates medieval gender stereotypes by using female characters to symbolize heterosexual lust. However, his treatment of homosexuality diverges from prevailing medieval norms. Instead of condemning sodomy with harsh, sexualized punishments, as was common in art and vision literature, Dante presents the sodomites in Terrace 7 as penitents purging their excessive love through purifying flames. This nuanced portrayal, influenced by classical and twelfth-century gay literature, contrasts with the violent societal and ecclesiastical views of homosexuality in the thirteenth century. Ultimately, Dante’s depiction of lust is multifaceted—both reflecting orthodox theological views on sin while offering a more compassionate treatment of homosexuality, challenging conventional medieval notions of sexuality.

Dante's portrayal of the lustful in Terrace 7 has three facets: the sin of lust, heterosexual lust, and homosexual lust. Dante's portrayal of the sin of lust aligns with medieval attitudes towards sex and sexuality, particularly in terms of theological and gender perceptions. The theological framework through which Dante views lust as a psychological vice, rooted in the distortion of reason and excessive desire, originates from Aquinas’ interpretation of Aristotelian ethics. Furthermore, Dante's use of female characters to represent heterosexual lust in Terrace 7 reflects prevalent medieval notions regarding gender stereotypes and sexuality. However, a closer examination reveals complexities within Dante's portrayal that challenge conventional medieval depictions of lust. Unlike the overtly grotesque punishments of lust depicted in vision literature and art in the thirteenth century, sinners in Terrace 7 are purified by flames while unceasingly moving and shouting their sin.

Dante's portrayal of the sodomites, a subgroup of the lustful souls in Terrace 7, represents a complete rejection of thirteenth century medieval attitudes towards homosexuality. While homosexuality was increasingly condemned, Dante's treatment of sodomy as a sin of "excess

love" rather than violence against God diverges from the prevailing theological discourse of the time. This raises questions about the origins of Dante's perspective on sodomy and its relation to contemporary medieval discourse. Twelfth century gay literature, a body of poems not yet connected by scholars to Dante's treatment of sodomy, may explain the mystery of Dante's views on sodomy. The poems' reliance on classical works and its benevolent treatment of same-sex relationships resembles the sodomites' treatment in Terrace 7, suggesting a connection between Dante and twelfth century discourse on homosexuality. Contextualising Dante's portrayal of lust and the lustful within medieval ideas about sex and sexuality is challenging. While Dante maintains an orthodox theological notion of heterosexual lust and lust in general, his treatment of homosexuality is entirely unconventional in the context of thirteenth century attitudes.

Dante's portrayal of the lustful in *Purgatorio* resonates with medieval theological perspectives on sex and sexuality. Similar to Aristotle and Aquinas, Dante views lust as a psychological vice. Aquinas, in his commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, describes the incontinent as one who "pursues bodily pleasures excessively and against the order of right reason, not because he is convinced these pleasures are good."[1] The sinner is thus aware that such urges are sinful but is corrupted nonetheless due to a flaw in reason. The contrapasso assigned by Dante to the lustful in Terrace 7 reflects the sin's psychological nature. Penitents on Terrace 7, who have loved "with too much vigour" (*Purg*. XVII, 96), purge themselves of lust by passing through a purifying flame (*Purg*. XXVI, 81). The sin's psychological aspect is also evident in Dante's treatment of the lustful in *Inferno* 5. Guilty souls are uncontrollably swirled by a strong, never-ceasing wind (*Inf*. V, 29-31), resembling Aristotle's description of the effect of an involuntary act, such as lust, as being "carried by the wind."[2]

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[1] Thomas Aquinas (ed.), *Commentary on Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964), 7.8, 1430.
[2] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. David Ross (Overland Park: Digireads, 2016), 38. This connection was first proposed in Teodolinda Barolini, 'Dante and Cavalcanti (On Making Distinctions in Matters of Love): Inferno 5 in Its Lyric and Autobiographical Context,' in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, ed. T. Barolini (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 74.

The use of female characters to represent heterosexual lust in Terrace 7 also reflects medieval notions towards sex and sexuality. Pasiphaë's bestiality (*Purg*. XXVI, 82-87), she fulfilled her lust by having intercourse with a bull, exemplifies heterosexual lust. Similarly, in *Inferno* 5, the canto with the most women in the Commedia, Dante's portrayal of carnal sinners features Semiramis, Cleopatra, and Helen. The treatment of women as representatives of lust was common during the Middle Ages. Odo of Cheriton, an English preacher who lectured in France and Spain, accused "adorned" women of venturing around to attract lustful attention. Odo thus advised men to burn women's hair and dress them in long outfits so they would not be motivated to leave home.[3] A connection between women's sexuality and luxurious tendencies is reflected in fourteenth century sumptuary law restrictions, which led to the creation of the Office for Women, Ornaments, and Clothes in 1330.[4] The ideas about lust in the Terrace 7 resonate the societal distrust about women, which associated them with sin and temptation.

On the other hand, Dante's approach to punishing lust conflicts with general medieval attitudes towards sex and sexuality in art and literature. Unlike Dante's "desexualised" treatment of lust as a psychological vice, vision literature and artistic representations often employed physical punishments.[5] In *Thurkill's Vision*, an English source from the thirteenth century detailing a journey to the underworld similar to Dante's, adulterers face sexual castigation in hell. The contrapasso in the Vision involves the transformation from "outward love" into "cruelty," as sinners "tear one another" apart after engaging in sexual acts.[6] In a work from the twelfth century by an Irish monk, *Tundale's Vision*, the punishment for lust involves the conception of

[3] Odo of Cherinton, *The Fables of Odo of Cheriton*, trans. John Jacobs (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 143.
[4] Holly Hurlburt, "Men and Women," in *Dante in Context*, ed. Zygmunt Barański, and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 73.
[5] Teodolinda Barolini, 'Dante's Sympathy for the Other, or the Non-Stereotyping Imagination: Sexual and Racialized Others in the Commedia,' in *Critica del testo XIV* , 1, ed. Roberto Antonelli Annalisa Landolfi Arianna Punzi (Rome: Viella Libreria Editrice, 2011), 178-179.
[6] Ralph of Coggeshall and Roger of Wendover, 'Vision of Thurkill', in *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante*, ed. Ellen Gardiner (New York: Italica Press,1989), 230.

a "viper" for both men and women.[7] As Barolini observes, this "gendered punishment" aims to feminise men by altering gender roles.[8] The transformation of men into women during punishment for lust serves to associate the female gender with sexual transgressions. In contrast, Dante avoids corporeal punishments in his treatment of the lustful, instead choosing to purify their souls. Unlike the cruel, shameful, and sexualised punishments found in vision literature, the lustful in Terrace 7 do not experience punish. The lustful souls' purgation involves confidently exclaiming "Sodom and Gomorrah" in self-reproach and engage in a holy kiss (*Purg*. XXVI, 30-32, 40, 79).

The pictorial tradition similarly exhibits cruelty in punishing the lustful, often integrating overtly sexual elements into depictions of lust. In Giotto's *The Last Judgement* (fig.1 & 2), Derbes and Sandona identify a group of sinners on Satan's right who are punished for *luxuria*. One man has his penis gripped by a demon, two others are hanged by their genitals, one by her hair, and another by his tongue.[9] Giotto's representation of lust as a contemporary of Dante offers valuable insight into Dante's divergent understanding of the sin. Dante's theological perspective on lust renders lustful actions secondary to the underlying impulse that causes such behaviour. Hence, in representations of lust, the *contrapasso* in the *Commedia* depicts the insatiable and uncontrollable urges of sinners. On the other hand, vision literature and pictorial representations of lust dramatically construct exaggerated sexual punishments reflective of a popular understanding of the consequences of adultery.

In Dante's treatment of the sodomites, a subgroup of the lustful souls in Terrace 7, the author diverges from traditional thirteenth century medieval ideas about sex and sexuality. Dante's reclassification of sodomy as a sin of excess love instead of violence against God (*Inf*. XV & XVI) contrasts with medieval society's excessive hatred towards homosexuality. During the

[7] Marcus, 'Tundale's Vision,' in Gardiner, *Visions*, 169.
[8] Barolini, *Cavalcanti*, 71.
[9] Anna Derbes, Mark Sandona, *The Usurer's Heart: Giotto, Enrico Scrovegni, and the Arena Chapel in Padua* (University Park:Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 66.

thirteenth century, homosexuality was increasingly condemned and severely punished by judicial systems across Christendom. Dante's rejection of traditional medieval beliefs is characterised by what Pequigney sees as Dante's "acceptance of homoeroticism" in Terrace 7.[10] Indeed, compared to his contemporaries, Dante takes a light approach in "punishing" the sodomites.

Canon law evolved in the thirteenth century to unequivocally condemn homosexuality. There was an increased association between sodomy and heresy, and even Islam, leading those accused of homosexuality in the West to be considered heretics. Guillaume Adae, a Dominican papal missionary in Persia from 1314-1317, described the behaviour of the "Saracen" as "effeminate men who… sell their bodies and expose them, and men who engage in male indecency."[11] Adae's choice to describe Muslim men as sodomites is intriguing. The preacher demonstrates a keen awareness of the gravity inherent in his accusation, methodically selecting a term poised to elicit profound shock and repugnance in the West.

The first significant manifestation of intolerance towards homosexuality is discernible within the pronouncements of the Third Lateran Council (1179). This Council, the first of its kind to judge homosexual practices, considered excommunication to be the just punishment for those who commit "incontinence which is against nature."[12] By the mid-thirteenth century, Italian city-states developed cruel punishments against sodomites. Bologna introduced statutes in 1288, on behalf of the pro-Guelf party, instructing enforcers to burn persons dwelling where sodomy was practiced along with the house.[13] In Pisa, the punishment for homosexuality was to be

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[10] Josephe Pequigney, "Sodomy in Dante's Inferno and Purgatorio," *Representations*, 36 (1991), 23.
[11] Guillelmus Adae, 'De Modo Sarracenos Extirpandi' in *Recuil des Historiens des Croisade: Documents armeniens*, vol. 2 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1906), 524. "*homines efleminati… et sic sub peccato venumdati contumeliis afficiunt sua corpora et exponent, et masculi in masculum turpitudinem operantes.*"; also cited in Boswell, *Homosexuality*, 282.
[12] Giovanni Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collection* (Venice: expensis Antonii Zata Veneti, 1769), 224-225. Extract translated in John Boswell, *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality: gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 277.
[13] Gina Fasoli & Pietro Sella (ed.), *Statuti di Bologna dell'anno 1288*, vol. 2, *Studi e testi* (Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana,1939), 196. Developments in the law of European kingdoms against

hanged by the genitalia.[14] Dante's portrayal of the sodomites in Terrace 7 does not resemble the censoring and hostile views encountered in canonical and judicial sources. Dante rejects any form of punitive and sexualised corporal punishment against sodomy, instead opting for the curative flames (*Purg*. XXVI. 27-81) that extinguish excess desire from penitents.

Conversely, the predominance of male sinners in Terrace 7 reflects medieval ideas that accorded greater significance to male homosexuality in comparison to the female counterpart. For instance, Adae's description of Muslim men is primarily concerned with their effeminacy, while Pisan law required a genitalia to be hanged certainly referred to the male organ. Karras attributes the absence of female homosexuality in contemporary discourse to the patriarchy, arguing that female behaviour is only deemed significant "insofar as it affects men."[15] Etienne de Fougères' *Livre des manières* confirms that female homosexuality was perceived comically due to the absence of a phallus. Although the women derive satisfaction from their relationship, the author jests about the collision of "shield and shield without a lance."[16] Dante's differentiation between lust, as depicted in *Inferno* 5, where Francesca was the protagonist, and sodomy in *Purgatorio* 26 reflects medieval gender stereotypes. While female lust was perceived as dangerous because of the danger a pregnancy posed to patriarchal inheritance and succession mechanisms, female sodomy did not directly affect men, so it naturally was less important.

Nevertheless, Dante's portrayal of the sodomites remains estranged from medieval ideas about sex and sexuality. The author's portrayal also does not reflect medieval theological ideas about homosexuality. In the brief work titled *On Sodomy*, Peter Cantor, a late twelfth century

homosexuality are also investigated by Michael Goodrich, Sodomy in Medieval Secular Law, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 1:3 (1976), 299.

[14] John Ahern, "Nudi grammantes: the Grammar and Rhetoric of Deviation', *Romanic Review*, 81(4) (1990), 467.

[15] Ruth Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe, Doing unto others* (London: Routledge, 2012), 139.

[16] Robert Clark (trans.), 'Jousting without a lance: the condemnation of female homoeroticism in the Livre des manières,' in *Same Sex Love and Desire among Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Francesca Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 166.

French theologian, interprets sodomy strictly as homosexual lust and sodomites as deserving of the same fate as Sodom and Gomorrah, to burn in the "fires of hell".[17] Aquinas, whose views on the sin of lust generally shaped Dante's depiction in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, argued that homosexuality is a sin because it is "unnatural". For Aquinas, sodomy is a sin against nature and God, as it involves sexual intercourse without the intent to procreate.[18] However, Aquinas does not clarify what nature homosexuality violates. Can a person not have their own "nature" in which homosexuality is normal and heterosexuality is not? Could Dante have realised the flaw in Aquinas' interpretation of homosexuality, influencing him to alter his perception of sodomy when writing *Purgatorio*?

The theological discourse surrounding sodomy is evident in Dante's portrayal of the sodomites in *Inferno*. A rain of fire leaves sinners "scorched" and disfigured (*Inf*. XV. 1-27), reminiscent of the biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Gen*. 19: 1-28). However, in Terrace 7, sodomites are on the doorstep of heaven. Barolini has identified a further "problem" with Dante's portrayal of the sodomites. Since sinners are in Terrace 7 for "excess love", in theory, a moderation of their urges could render homosexuality "natural".[19] Dante's unprecedented acceptance, if not encouragement, of homosexuality cannot be contextualised within thirteenth century discourse on sex and sexuality.

Twelfth century gay literature potentially influenced Dante's portrayal of the sodomites in Terrace 7. Poems depicting homosexuality, termed by Boswell as a form of gay subculture, were common in the century preceding Dante's *Commedia*.[20] Dante and gay literature authors shared a surprising acceptance of homosexual practices. Prominent individuals, such as Marbod of Rennes, the master of the school of Chartres, chancellor of the Diocese of Angers,

[17] Peter Cantor, 'On Sodomy' in, Boswell, *homosexuality*, 375.
[18] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Bezinger Bros. edition, 1947), II-II: q. 154, a.11 & a.12.
[19] Teodolinda Barolini. "*Purgatorio* 26: Human Sexuality." *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2014), par. 4 & 11.
[20] Boswell, *homosexuality*, 243-268.

and Bishop of Rennes, wrote homoerotic poems. In *The Unyielding Youth*, a poem influenced by Horace, Marbod describes a young boy's beauty and his refusal to yield to love.[21] As a distinguished Churchman and scholar, Morbod's erotic poetry demonstrates that homosexuality was normalised in the twelfth century. Although a shared acceptance of homosexuality exists between Dante and Morbod, the Frenchman's poem likely exerted minimal influence on the *Commedia*'s author. Morbod's "story of love" is entirely motivated by lustful desires, which are condemned by Dante in Terrace 7.

A poem more likely to have influenced Dante's portrayal of the sodomites in Terrace 7 is *Ganymede and Helen*, a debate between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Helen's arguments in favour of heterosexual love involve its fertility, "nature", and love. While Ganymede unapologetically defends same-sex relations by claiming that "illustrious people" also engaged in sodomy. [22] Dante associates the sodomites in Terrace 7 with Caesar (*Purg*. XXVI. 76-78), who once was accused of relations with King Nicomedes and was called "Queen of Bithynia" by a crowd in response.[23] The use of Caesar to create a moral excuse for sinners who were following the example of an acclaimed figure resembles Ganymedes' argument in favour of homosexuality. In this aspect, Dante's treatment of homosexuality is not revolutionary, as claimed by Boswell, instead being predicated in twelfth century literature.[24]

While Helen emerges victorious, Ganymede's enjoys impunity despite extensively defending same-sex love. The Commedia and twelfth-century gay literature share a profound preoccupation with love and a scepticism towards punitive measures for sodomy. In Terrace 7, Dante is not concerned with the sin of sodomy, but rather its underlying excessive impulse.

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[21] Morbod, *The Unyielding Youth* in Boswell, *Homosexuality*, 370.
[22] 'Ganymede and Helen' in Boswell, *Homosexuality*, 384.
[23] Paget Toynbee, "Dante's Obligations to the Magnæ Derivationes of Uguccione da Pisa." *Romania* xxvi (Paris: 1897), 553.
[24] John Boswell, "Dante and the Sodomites." *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 112 (1994), 63

The accepting tone used by Dante and his classification of sodomy as “excessive desire” can be well contextualised along twelfth century attitude towards homosexuality.

Gay literature was influenced by classical sources in the same way Dante was, so it is enticing to connect Dante to the tradition. Dante would certainly be aware of his guide’s homosexuality. In Virgil’s *Eclogue II*, evidence of a normalisation of homosexual desires is encountered. A story about Corydon, a hopeless lover, and a young man named Alexios who would not yield, resembles the discourse in twelfth century gay literature.[25] The preference for young men, the flattering descriptions of their looks, and their unwillingness to yield to their lovers were present in classical and twelfth century works accessible to Dante.

In conclusion, Dante's portrayal of lust and the lustful in Terrace 7 of *Purgatorio* serves as a multifaceted reflection of medieval attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Through his intricate narrative, Dante not only illustrates theological perspectives on lust but also perpetuates gender stereotypes prevalent in medieval society. However, his condemnation of heterosexual lust diverges from the over-sexualised and cruel punishments often depicted in vision literature and artistic representations of the time, suggesting a more nuanced approach to sin and its consequences. Furthermore, the contextualisation of Dante's portrayal of homosexuality within medieval ideas remains a complex issue. Dante’s acceptance of homosexuality and the *contrapasso* assigned to souls in Terrace 7 does not reflect thirteenth century medieval ideas about sex and sexuality. Conversely, an exploration of gay literature from the twelfth century enables the contextualisation of Dante’s “innovative” attitude towards homosexuality. Thus, while Dante's portrayal of lust in Terrace 7 aligns with certain medieval attitudes, it also challenges conventional notions and invites a deeper examination of societal norms surrounding sex and sexuality during his era.

[25] Virgil, *Virgil’s Eclogues*, trans. Barbara Fowler (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 4-6.

Appendix

Figure 1. Giotto, Last Judgment, 1305-1306. Fresco, 1000 x 840 cm. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua. Credit: https://www.wga.hu/html_m/g/giotto/padova/4lastjud/index.html

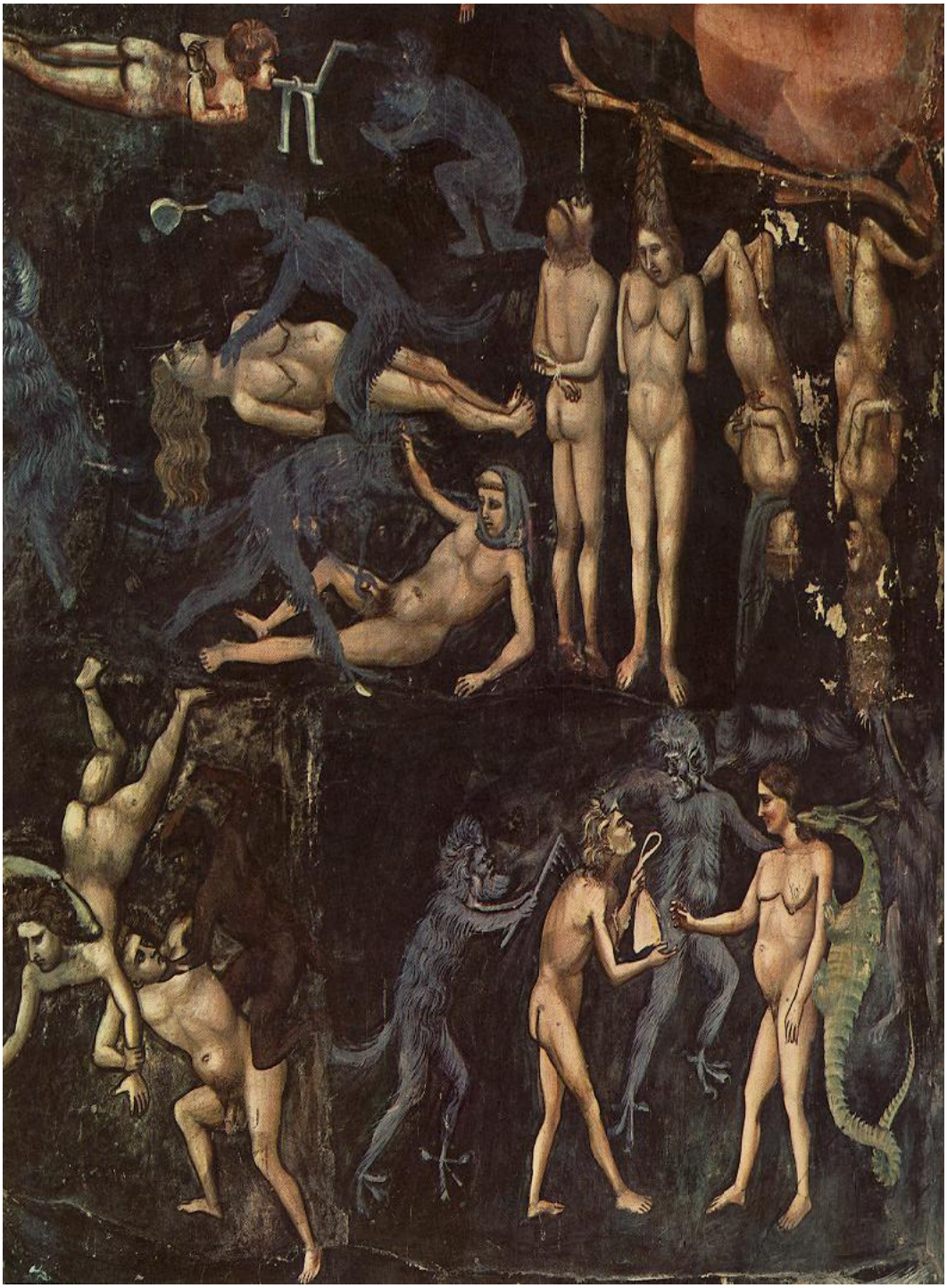

Figure 2. Giotto, Last Judgment, Luxuria in detail.

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