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### **Justice, and Not “Just-Us”: *Paradiso* Challenges the Senior Room**

It has become increasingly apparent throughout our reading and discussion of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* that if we “squeeze” Dante’s poem, it will “squeeze” us back, all the while teaching us about ourselves and dilemmas that we face. This was perhaps no more apparent than after the “events,” as they are now being referred to around Gilman, that occurred just before winter break. The response by many people in and outside the Gilman community forced me to reconsider what it meant to “be Gilman” and take a look at how and why offensive and inappropriate acts may affect some people significantly more than others. The last few weeks have tested my potentially “blind” faith in the institution of Gilman and even in myself. I have been forced to consider utterly subjective nature of justice and the idea that people “creatively repurpose” the meaning of this word to fit their set of beliefs. I think this relates deeply to Dante’s journey to Paradise. Beatrice and Virgil consistently challenge the Pilgrim to maintain his “coach-ability” and not merely accept some set of values that he believes he has learned.

It is impossible to justify eighty boys throwing a blow up sex doll around the Gilman senior room. That was inappropriate and frankly, disgusting, especially in retrospect. I have struggled in recent weeks when, as part of a group or individually, I have been scolded for not “standing up” and stopping the inappropriate acts. The overwhelming nature of the mob mentality that had overtaken the room in those few minutes is almost indescribable. It would have taken a great amount of courage for anyone to stop what was happening. I think learning how to diffuse the feelings that led to the mob actions is far more important than finding individuals to punish, just as it is essential when reading the *Divine Comedy* to not focus too

deeply on each individual who he names but realize that they represent a set of values that the reader can both aspire to or learn from.

The Eagle says to Dante, as part of a passage about Justice, “Now who are you, who wish to sit on the bench and judge from a thousand miles away, with sight as short as a handbreadth?” (*Paradiso* 19.79-81). While the Eagle is speaking about the issues with Justice and Christianity, he could easily be speaking at Gilman after the last few weeks. The reality of social media is that it is extremely public. Once the videos were posted on Facebook, a deluge of comments about individuals and the senior class rolled in. One particular comment by someone outside of Gilman stated, “These boys have no future as good husbands, fathers, and sons.” In theory and perhaps a more “perfect world,” this type of comment is something that I could have let “roll off my back.” In reality, when I read this I was devastated. I was devastated for myself, for many of my classmates, and for Gilman as a school. It is easy to talk about not concerning myself with the opinions of others, but much more difficult to actually do. The person who wrote this was clearly feeling hurt as a result of viewing this video and felt the need to share her opinion of a group of boys who she had not met. “Justice” in her eyes was a sort of verbal assault on the seniors at Gilman. For a period of time after reading the comment, I believed this woman who I had never met was right in her assertion. I thought that since I had failed to diffuse the situation along with all my classmates, we had some sort of collective moral flaw.

The events have provided another opportunity to make a “fearless moral inventory.” Misogyny and insensitivity certainly existed before the senior room incident at Gilman and this event showed it. I think it is important to recognize that fact and resist the instinct that I have felt to get angry at people who felt the need to share their discomfort at the school. Just as Beatrice explained to the Pilgrim, saying, “Not that these things are unripe in themselves; rather it is a

lack on your part, since your eyes are not yet strong enough” (*Paradiso* 30.79-81). It was my natural inclination to believe that since Dante had reached this place so high in Paradise, Beatrice would have praise to bestow on the Pilgrim in some of her final words to him. Instead, she tells him that he must continue improve. He has earned an “atta boy” coupled with a “push much harder.” She is a blessed coach. Just like Dante, the senior class had received some “atta boys” on its journey to the final year of high school. Hopefully this event will prompt us to push much harder to make sure the final word on the class is not a completely negative one.

Clearly, Dante provides some important perspective on justice and complacency. To help ensure that the outside perspectives do not affect me in an adverse way, it will important to continue being a “fellow pilgrim on the road” and listen to the lessons Beatrice, Virgil, and others teach.

### **Works Cited**

Alighieri, Dante, Robert M. Durling, and Ronald L. Martinez. *Paradiso*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996. Print.