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Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.**

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position within the frame of the envious, a point sometimes questioned by some modern scholars. Next, Bellomo focuses on Guido's political speech, highlighting its multiple rhetorical modules, and continues by analyzing the sin of envy and its corruptive influence on society through Cassell's Augustinian interpretation. The reader is left amazed at such a great capacity for synthesis combined with the incredibly detailed knowledge of Dantean centuries-old exegesis, as well as Bellomo's powerful interpretative skills.

After closing the soft pages of this beautiful edition of the *Purgatorio* and reflecting on such a work's greatness, one cannot help but feel deeply saddened, thinking that Dante's readers will never be able to read Bellomo's commentary on the *Paradiso*. After this initial heartbreaking thought, however, one can't help but smile for the great fortune they have had to read one of the most extraordinary Dante commentaries of the last century—a work that will surely make generations and generations of new lucky readers fall in love with the *Commedia* and its author.

Natale Vacalebri, *University of Pennsylvania*

Elena Lombardi.

Imagining the woman reader in the age of Dante.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 304 pp. \$80.

In the Palazzo Comunale of San Gimignano, there is a fresco depicting a man and a woman reading a large volume; the man is holding the text, while the woman is right behind him, clenching his shoulder from her posterior position. The fresco is unfortunately damaged and therefore it is not possible to identify the two individuals, nor do we fully understand the relationship between them. It is from this fresco and the spatial relationship of the figures that Elena Lombardi departs on her ambitious project of depicting women engaged with reading. Her intention and the limits of such research are expressed from the very beginning: the author is *imagining* what a female reader might look like, and what her approach to literature would be, with a focus on lyric poetry. The scholar aims not at identifying precise names or identities, but rather at describing how these readers were imagined by poets of the Italian tradition, such as Dante, Boccaccio, and Cavalcanti. The vernacular production of these artists is justified in many instances—it suffices to think of the *Decameron*—as the will of the artists in pleasing their female readers. Therefore, what starts to appear more regularly are women as addressees; it is with this intentional yet imaginary audience that the male writers interact.

It is along these lines that Lombardi structures her book, devoting the first chapter, a thorough introduction, to describe the main features of female literacy in the Late Middle Ages, starting with the issue of numbers: were women trained in writing and reading, and in what proportion? The historian Giovanni Villani, for instance, to show the power of Florence, speaks of at least ten thousand boys and girls learning how to read; these numbers immediately appear to be extremely

generous—even more so if one considers that he talks of people of both sexes. Yet, some sort of teaching was surely perpetrated. Ample space is then necessary to discuss what women could have read, including questions of what kinds of books and what sorts of materials they had available. The second chapter, by contrast, goes deeper into the goals of the book, namely trying to ascertain who were the women imagined by these male writers and poets as their audience. One example of this relationship is represented by Dante. He acknowledged the necessity for a poet of communicating with women, something that must happen in vernacular because they largely cannot read Latin. The issue, though, runs deeper, and Lombardi sheds light on other instances in which a female voice—or at least an imaginary female voice—could be identified. One such example is Cavalcanti's "Donna me prega," in which a male poet is speaking only because he becomes the addressee of a request. The evolution of this position shows itself again with Dante, who in the *Vita Nova* establishes a rather broader conversation with some women. First, Dante moves from a general "woman," celebrated in many of his poems, to Beatrice, an identifiable and living character. Second, the *Vita Nova* features women to whom Dante illustrates his *new life*, and who are the only ones who could fully understand his intentions. Dante praises these women as being gifted with knowledge and intellect to understand the complexity of the new path of his life: women, thus, that the poet deems capable of a deep and equal relationship, far from the distortions of the *donne schermo*. Dante reveals the evolution of his reading of the female role in the *Vita Nova* is also further complicated by his exchanges, direct and indirect, with other members of the lyric love tradition.

Lombardi's third chapter follows these lines and discusses the association between poems and the bodily image of the woman, which must be dressed—or undressed, if it is cloaked under an allegory or with complex language—to be revealed to a male reader. This is an ancient trope that through centuries was associated with gendered elements such as ornaments and makeup, generating the direct contrast between the bombastic and insincere female disguise and the naked and direct word. Lombardi analyzes the phenomenon of the personification of texts—each one seems to have specific elements, such as the young and less adorned *ballata*, or the noble matron with whom the *canzone* is identified. In this very stimulating journey through poems and poets and between personified texts and allegedly real women—including the Dantean Matelda as the symbol of what lies in between—the discussion could not but peak with Beatrice herself, the ultimate interlocutor in Dante's path. Beatrice, for Dante, represents the union of different aspects and goals: she is the loved woman, the allegory of a higher purpose, both a character and a real woman, whose shape in the *Commedia* is difficult to trace. It is from this point that Lombardi investigates how the character of Beatrice came to be, her voice, and her agency. It is through her presence at the top of the Purgatory mountain and her skim-reading of the *Vita Nova*—as Lombardi poises it—that Dante can reassess his previous poetical life in view of the *Commedia*. In the poet's creation, therefore, Beatrice is a reader capable of judging and even emending what she "read" first in the young work, then in the *Purgatorio*, and finally as a teacher and guide in the *Paradiso*—especially in the first *canti*. Although unique and with an importance that has no equal in his whole production, Beatrice is not the only woman with a specific role in the *Commedia*, and Lombardi emphasizes the literary ambiguity of

Francesca's story in Canto 5 of *Inferno*, another form—although possibly corrupted—of an in-between literary existence and reality.

There is much more in this very well-thought-out book, and Lombardi does try to encompass the various and multifaced themes of women reading, from different perspectives. The result is a text that is rich in all of its parts, that does not limit the study to one single tradition but tries to tie the connections between what was a shared cultural space. *Imagining the woman reader* is therefore an ally for all those scholars and enthusiasts interested in the complexity of a dense yet necessary discourse on entangled genders.

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Fabio A. Camilletti.

The Portrait of Beatrice. Dante, D.G. Rossetti, and the Imaginary Lady. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. 258 pp. \$50.

The Portrait of Beatrice has a defined aim: to adopt a double gaze in approaching the works of Dante and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The volume has as its focus the two authors' different responses to a crucial aspect of Western culture, namely the convoluted relationship between word and image, literature and the visual arts. Fabio Camilletti sets out to examine "the intellectual dialogue between Dante and Rossetti" by investigating ways in which each deals with the complex issue of figurability. Seeking to avoid "becoming trapped within the binary, hierarchizing, and implicitly judgmental opposition between original and later work, and between the author's 'will' and the 'distortions' of his interpreters" (p. 9), Camilletti's analysis ultimately endeavors to emphasize how Dante's and Rossetti's respective responses to the same problem, when considered in parallel, can be seen to enlighten one another.

The figure of Beatrice – without any doubts, in Camilletti's observation, "one of the most elusive characters in literary history" (p. 4) – has given rise over the centuries to almost ceaseless critical debate aimed at exploring her identity, evidencing her life, probing her existence. Whilst this search reached its (almost neurotic) peak in the context of Romanticism and later Positivism, Beatrice's very absence, to quote Camilletti, turned into "an incentive toward the visionary re-creation of the beloved's ideal beauty" (p. 4), thus shifting the domain of the *quête* from the external materiality of documentation and historical evidence to the inner domain of the self. Viewing the intergenerational dialogue between Dante and Rossetti through the lens of this precise cultural interstice allows the discussion of the book "to move beyond the outworn debate about [Beatrice's] actual existence and instead to focus on her quiddity, of a miracle made into flesh, that the poetic word seeks incessantly to grasp" (p. 9).

The imaginary portrait of Beatrice realized by Dante in chapter 23 of the *Vita Nuova*, together with the portrait Rossetti obsessively evokes throughout his