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'The Cambridge Companion to Dante's "Commedia." Zygmunt G. Barański and Simon Gilson, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

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REVIEWS

The Cambridge Companion to Dante's Commedia

Zygmunt G. Barański and Simon Gilson, eds.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. XXI + 306 pp. \$24.99.

As the editors of this volume point out in their introduction, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'* is possibly the first work of its kind entirely devoted to the *Comedy*. While readers could already rely on many comprehensive resources that offered an overview of Dante's life and work, with this companion, they can complement them and get "a strong idea of the poem and its core features" (i). In fact, Barański and Gilson propose using this edited volume in tandem with their *Dante in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), already well-known to scholars and educators interested in Dante's time and work. Together, these two volumes offer various methodological approaches to study and appreciate Dante's works. To provide an overview of the perspectives featured in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'*, I will follow the division proposed by the editors, who grouped its sixteen chapters into "four broad blocks": 1) narrative, 2) (meta)literary, linguistic, and stylistic features, 3) themes and motifs, and 4) transmission and reception (i-ii). A chronology spanning the years 1250-1340 (xv-xvii), a map of Italy (xviii), and the representations of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise (xix-xxi) complement the essays and serve as invaluable resources to navigate the text.

In the first essay, Lino Pertile provides an overview of the poem's narrative structure. His contribution prepares the reader for the complex intertwining of the poem's literary and metaliterary levels. At the same time, he helps us see how the structural and thematic constraints and the strict numeric patterns that Dante chose to follow prompted, rather than hindered, the creative solutions that allowed for the originality of each encounter in the fictional journey. In the second essay (translated by Demetrio Yocum), Giuseppe Ledda presents the fundamental question of Dante's twofold role as author and character with particular attention to the intellectual autobiography sketched in the poem. Laurence Hooper's contribution shifts the focus from the protagonist to the other characters of the poem exploring the complexity of Dante's "characterization" (the essay's title). George Corbett's essay closes the first section with an overview of the moral structure of the *Comedy*. His considerations go beyond mere morality and touch upon language, epistemology, and politics. For example, he argues that "one purpose of Dante's *Inferno* is to represent in the afterlife the moral justice which, in the absence of an emperor, Dante saw unfulfilled on earth" (68).

The second block of essays opens with a contribution by Theodore Cachey on the title, genre, and metaliterary elements of the poem. Cachey traces and problematizes the history of the title – *Divina Commedia*. He argues that the *Song of Songs* was an inspiration for the title and metaliterary language of the poem,

especially for the term *cantica*. Throughout his essay, he explores the tension between the truth claim of the “sacred poem” and its status as a work of fiction. In the following essay (translated by Demetrio Yocum), Mirko Tavoni offers some interesting reflections on the language of the *Comedy*, some of which are informed by syntactical and lexical searches conducted on *DanteSearch* (<https://dante-search.dantenetwork.it/>). Finally, James Kriesel delves into Dante’s use of allegory by situating it in the broader context of Christian and medieval theories and practices of allegory. In doing so, he can show how Dante’s allegory is especially imbued with references to the body/spirit dichotomy: allegory requires readers to “strip off the carnal veil” of the letter (118), thus turning reading itself into a journey toward either damnation or salvation.

Simone Marchesi’s essay on classical culture opens the third block. With insightful remarks on Dante’s reception of Virgil’s and Latin poetry, but also on the city of Rome and its “double identity, as both pagan and Christian” (139), Marchesi shows how Dante’s “classicism is clearly oriented towards the present” (138). This quasi-oxymoronic consideration perfectly captures the originality of Dante’s relationship with the classics. Equally insightful are Tristan Kay’s reflections on the “extraordinary breadth, eclecticism, and syncretism” of Dante’s reception of vernacular literature and culture (153-154), which Kay explores with particular emphasis on the relationships with Guido Cavalcanti and Brunetto Latini. In the following two essays, Paola Nasti and Simon Gilson turn to the sacred, with contributions on religious culture and doctrine, respectively. After defining “religion” in light of Aquinas as a virtue with “interior and exterior acts,” that is, devotion and prayer (interior acts), and sacrifices, vows, and praise (exterior acts), Nasti considers not only the biblical influences in the poem but also how liturgy and devotion inform its narrative. Gilson, on the other hand, reaffirms Dante’s doctrinal syncretism, consisting of Christian, classical, and even “non-Greco-Roman traditions,” and reconfigures it as “a highly sophisticated cultural operation that lies at the heart of [his] artistry” (175). The last essay of this section by Claire Honess looks at the *Comedy* as a “political poem” that addresses its readers “as citizens [and] as members of a community” throughout (192).

Zygmunt Barański’s essay on the relationship between the *Comedy* and Dante’s other works opens the last section of the volume. This is a theoretical intervention aiming to provide a clear framework to consider Dante’s other works in relation to the *Comedy*. Barański identifies six modes in which the poem and the other texts can interact and distinguishes between those “authorially sanctioned” and those that he qualifies as “external to the poem itself” (209). He then offers some case studies, primarily focusing on *Vita Nova*, *Convivio*, and the *Rime*. Prue Shaw’s contribution, entitled “Transmission History,” offers an overview of the manuscript and printed tradition, and the philological history of the poem. It is a remarkable work which features concision, clarity, and effective synthesis despite its broad scope. The last two essays focus on the reception of the poem, the first one, by Anna Pegoretti, up to 1481 (the year of publication of Cristoforo Landino’s commentary), and the second, by Fabio Camilletti, from 1481 to the present. Both explore the Italian and the international reception of the *Comedy*, painting a fascinating picture that attests to the poem’s ceaseless capacity to inspire new ideas and creativity.

As this overview aims to show, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'* offers a vast array of perspectives on Dante's poem. The contributions collected in this volume are heterogenous: some advance new interpretations of the text, some skillfully recapitulate previous scholarship, and others present what perhaps we already knew but from fresh and original angles. All are valuable and of great interest.

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Stefano Carrai.

Il primo libro di Dante. Un'idea della 'Vita nova'.

Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2020. 141 pp. € 10

A collection of brief essays on Dante's youthful *prosimetrum*, Stefano Carrai's *Il primo libro di Dante. Un'idea della Vita nova* addresses the broad issue of the relationship between *libello* and *Comedy* by way of a reexamination of some interpretive cruxes. Carrai's volume takes up where he left off in his previous *Dante elegiaco* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2006 [repr. 2020]) and collects work conducted since then, but it is also in dialogue with both older and most recent contributions on Dante's 'first work'. Composed of distinct research projects carried out in the course of over a decade, the volume is heterogeneous, unified to some extent by the premise that *Vita nova* and *Comedy* constitute a "diptych" (16) – that they are to be read together as parts of a broader plan.

Following an introduction on the poetic path delineated in the *Vita nova*, the volume is divided in seven chapters, published earlier individually. The first chapter considers the question of the chronology of the *libello* against the backdrop of the astronomical knowledge Dante displays in his philosophical treatise. The starting point of every argument about the date of composition of the *Vita nova* should be Dante's own declaration in the *Convivio* that his infatuation with the *donna gentile* took place after two revolutions of the star of Venus from Beatrice's passing. Carrai rereads the poet's indication in light of his declared astronomical source – Alfraganus' *Liber de aggregationibus*. The author subscribes to the customary view of the *libello* as having been assembled between 1293 and 1296, but only after considering some alternative readings. He engages particularly with Alberto Casadei's proposal to follow Jacopo Alighieri's calculation of Venus' orbit, which anticipates by two years the *terminus post quem* of the *Vita nova*. Carrai persuasively observes that it is not logical that Dante, who derives from Alfraganus' text every other notion of astronomical geography, divert from it only with regard to Venus' revolution to follow the unspecified tradition Jacopo draws on.

The following chapter revisits the vexed question of the textual variants, dwelling especially on those arguably authorial variants that appear to suggest Dante's search for a greater effectiveness of the poetic diction, which Carrai terms "pentimenti d'autore." The chapter reexamines Domenico De Robertis' studies of