

demise are the necessary background to the “celestial crowning” of that love, then the *libello* should be thought of as “the grievous, dismal premise to the ultimate apotheosis” (125-26). On this ground, Carrai reiterates the reading of the *Vita nova* advanced in his former monograph as elegiac text modeled after Boethius’ *Consolation of philosophy*, which in Dante’s time – Carrai maintains – was considered a chief example of elegy.

Given the wealth of allusions that each chapter brings in, a lengthier discussion would have been beneficial. For example, in his last contribution Carrai recalls a vast array of accounts of the Orpheus myth, from Fulgentius’ to Bernardus Silvestris’ to that of Boethius and his major commentators, Remigius of Auxerre and William of Conches. Carrai’s list is somewhat cursory, especially given the resonance of the allegorical reading of the myth advanced in the Remigian commentary, to which perhaps the author might have referred more extensively.

In its brevity, *Il primo libro di Dante* pays attention to specific exegetical questions in the history of the critical debate and will appeal to readers concerned with the interpretive details of Dante’s juvenile work whether or not they accept its fundamental continuity with the poem.

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Luca Carlo Rossi.

*L’uovo di Dante. Aneddoti per la costruzione di un mito.*

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The 2021 Dante Centenary renewed the public’s attention for the troubled life of Dante Alighieri with a new wave of biographies published in that same year (and mostly reviewed in volume 4 of this journal). John Took’s grand *fresco* delineated the journey of the poet’s mind through the combined study of the socio-political context and the literary text. Alessandro Barbero’s international bestseller, *Dante*, offered a captivating, often adventurous portrait of the poet opening with the battleground of Campaldino. Both Paolo Pellegrini’s *Dante Alighieri. Una Vita* and Elisa Brilli and Giuliani Milani’s *Vita Nuove. Biografia e autobiografia di Dante* grounded their reconstruction onto re-discovery and re-reading of archival sources, literary and historical, to ‘merge historical analysis, philology, and critical interpretation’ (Vacalebre, 219).

Recently, this biographical frenzy has taken a transmedial turn with the release of Italian director Pupi Avati’s project twenty-year in the making: a novel titled *L’alta fantasia* (Solferino, 2021) and, most importantly, the feature-length film *Dante*. While Avati’s cinematic work claims to be staging ‘la vera vita, fatta di lotte, rinunce, innamoramenti, vittorie e perdite’, Luca Carlo Rossi’s *L’uovo di Dante. Aneddoti per la costruzione di un mito* is a scholarly investigation that problematizes the very notion of truth by reconstructing the mythopoetic process encompassing Dante’s life through the lenses of a largely untapped biographical source, the

*anecdote*. Rossi presents this literary form as a short, often quick-witted and highly descriptive narrative, which captures and memorializes a peculiar detail relating to a marginal or secret episode in the life of an historical figure with the intent of humanizing it in the eyes of the common public. The first chapter proposes a conciliatory rather than antagonistic relationship between the anecdotal tradition and official historiography arguing for the essential complementarity of their functions. The anecdote, Rossi observes, ‘fills the voids, the cracks’ of mainstream historiography by integrating the documentary evidence, at once reinforcing and revivifying it with a ‘spark of authenticity’. The seven chapters carry out a compendious yet highly entertaining study of the tradition of *aneddotica dantesca*. The examination is not just thematic, but extends to the dynamics of formation, transmission and transmedial reception in the visual arts. Rossi collects and reproduces, often *in extenso*, a wide-ranging selection of anecdotes from the early commentators such as Iacopo della Lana, Giovanni Boccaccio, Benvenuto da Imola and Francesco Petrarca to Renaissance *novellieri*, historians and humanists such as Giovanni Sercambi (ca. 1424), Poggio Brecciolini (1438–52) and Ludovico Domenichi (1562). Either attested to the written or to the oral tradition, Rossi’s range of testimonies brings much-needed diversification to the early reception discourse. As the tables in appendix conveniently show, the chronological arch spans over three centuries, with most anecdotes dating to the years between 1320 and 1588. After this point, the modern selection is circumscribed to two episodes dating to 1612–13 and 1707. The exclusion of the nineteenth century is most striking if we consider the number (and commercial success) of anthological volumes of Dantean anecdotes published during this very period. Interestingly, Rossi does not extract episodes from Filippo Scolari’s *Intorno agli aneddoti spettanti la vita di Dante Alighieri* (1865) or Giovanni Papanti’s *Dante secondo la tradizione e i novellatori* (1873). Rather, reader will discover that the study evokes the *Ottocento* as a turning point in the history of the *aneddotica dantesca*, when the literary genre began to exert an extraordinary influence on Italian and European pictorial tradition. Rossi includes an iconographic section at the close of every chapter to explore the progressive fixation of the mythopoetic process through the transmedial literal adaptation or creative reimagining of anecdotal matters. One of the most praiseworthy and innovative aspects of the study, Rossi’s selection of works, mostly dating from the mid-1860s to late 1880s, produces a significant expansion of the nineteenth-century visual canon. From Sir Frederick Leighton’s *Dante in esilio* (1864) Jean-Leon Gerome’s *Dante (He hath seen Hell)* (1864) and Francesco Saverio Altamura, *Ecco colui che andò all’inferno e torno* (1865), to Antonio Cotti, *Dante deriso in Verona* (1879), Marie Spartali Stillman’s *Dante at Verona* (1888), Rossi’s inclusive painterly corpus reveals the impact of the anecdotal tradition in expanding the range of biographical episodes (the exile), physical details (the beard, the modest garments), expressive nuances (embarrassment, anger or frustration) and symbolic elements (the book) that found memorialization and even monumentalization through the visual medium.

Like the iconographic corpus, the thematically arranged selection of anecdotes alters the linearity of biographical tradition by opening secondary paths within the dominant, grandiose narrative. In chapter 2, Rossi’s selection of “scenes from courtly life” complicates the representation of Dante’s exile revealing the unsuitability of his temperament to the role (one ‘requiring deference, praises and nuanced

judgements’) as well the public scorn and humiliation suffered because of his modest appearance. Chapter 3 examines the anecdotal tradition relating to Dante’s esotericism, detailing its popular elaboration and political exploitation. Originating with Francesco da Barberino and recovered by Boccaccio, the fame of Dante as infernal traveler, able to communicate with the dead circulated widely among the vernacular, uneducated public (particularly women) fueled by their naïve interpretations of the first cantic and the poet’s disquieting appearances with “his dark complexion, his thick, black and frizzy hair and beard”. Rossi also considers how the spread of anecdotes about Dante as necromancer and alchemist, keeper of the recipe of the philosopher stone not only exposed the poet to persecutions for heresy and to constant risk of papal condemnation to the stake. Chapter 4 centers on the poet’s sentimental and even erotic life recounted by an anecdotal tradition that goes beyond the figures of Beatrice or Gemma to encompass a much longer and varied catalogue of women. In Rossi’s reconstruction, the “racconti piccanti” titillatingly insist on the poet’s carnal urges are counterbalanced by Francesco Sacchetti’s story of the poet as a wise and placid love adviser in Ravenna. The following two chapters mark a return to a more traditional biographical narratives, feeding into the portrayal of the poet’s extraordinary intellectual qualities, and the representation of the *Commedia* as a miraculous work. In chapter 5, the biographical anecdotes are awe-struck by Dante’s immersive and omnivorous approach to reading and learning as well as the capacious and enduring quality of his prodigious memory. The closing reference to the antagonistic nature of the early reception of the *Commedia* introduces chapter 6. Here Rossi shows how the anecdotal insistence the ‘supernatural, if not properly divine quality’ of the poem stirred up the jealousy of his contemporary philosophers and theologians, sullyng Dante’s reputation by referring to him as “ladro” and “villano”, guilty of having deprived them of the possibility of making an equal contribution to their field of studies. Chapter 7 carries on the exploration of Dante’s biographical and textual encounter with contemporary artists and literati with anecdotes about Giotto, Cecco D’Ascoli and Capocchio as well as an episode that stages Dante’s direct confrontation in Parnaso with a multi-generational group of commentators of the *Commedia*. The final chapter examines one of the most obscure and conflicted aspects of the mythopoetic process: the poet’s physical appearances. Rossi engages in a lively discussion of the ways in which Dante’s beard, a trait openly evoked by Beatrice in Purgatorio 31, 61-75 and reiterated by Boccaccio, has been systematically and progressively erased from the literary and iconographic tradition.

Despite its brevity and its somewhat rushed closure, Luca Carlo Rossi’s *L’Uovo di Dante: Aneddoti per la costruzione del mito* stands out as one of the most innovative and engaging studies published in the year of the Centenary for the way such recovery of the anecdotal tradition questions, subverts and expands dominant biographical narratives.

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