

Winthrop Wetherbee. *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets*.

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The *Commedia* is a source of wonder to those who have the privilege to study it because of its endless capacity to open up worlds. Winthrop Wetherbee, noted classicist and Dantista, has done us the great favor of revealing any number of new ones in *The Ancient Flame*. He argues that Dantisti have thus far employed a limiting reading of Dante's engagement with ancient epic. Critics have long and often taken a typological approach to Dante's use of classical poetry, showing the ways in which the characters and poetic matter of the classical world are made to serve Dante's Christian poem. Wetherbee suggests that Dante's work with pagan sources might be "more intimate, more closely responsive to the distinct qualities of their poetry, and far less violently interpretive than even the most thoughtful modern studies would suggest" (22). He proposes a Dante who is an ideal reader, taking each of the *poeti* on their own terms, from within their own contexts.

Wetherbee reads the *Commedia* as "something other than a religious poem" (13). He charts a coherent narrative of artistic development in relation to the Roman poets that is often in tension with spiritual progress. What I find most intriguing in this regard is the way in which Wetherbee shows how spirituality in the pagan epics might translate to Dante's developing vision of spirituality in the *Commedia*. In bypassing a stark division between pagan and Christian, he indicates the possibility of a certain continuity of spiritual feeling. References to the *poeti*

thus acquire a new depth. It is not enough to identify the character mentioned and his or her role in the ancient epic: Wetherbee moves swiftly from these coordinates to the passions that breathe within each epic as a whole, to the spiritual mood that surrounds each of the characters invoked.

In the space of eight chapters, including an introduction, *The Ancient Flame* takes the reader through the entire *Commedia*. The author moves from a discussion of Virgil's role in the *Inferno* in chapter two to the invocation of Lucan in the city of Dis as a necessary precedent for the anger, horror, and the emphasis on the grotesque that will dominate lower hell in chapter three. As he turns to the *Purgatorio* in chapter four, Wetherbee makes the interesting argument that the figure of Cato is more of a completion of the *Inferno* than properly purgatorial, and thus can only be fully understood through attention to Lucan's "infernal" poetics. Chapter five takes up Purgatory proper, as the author seeks out Ovid's influence particularly, and the ways in which this poetics of transformation offers both license for imaginative response and a hint of the dangers therein. It is also here that the author details the ways in which Virgil as character is reduced to a mere spectator of the mysteries of Purgatory, while the pilgrim is drawn into ecstatic visions that inform what he experiences. Virgil is compared here to Aeneas's helmsman, Palinurus, having lost the capacity to direct Dante. In chapter six, the author focuses on the character Statius as author of the *Thebaid*, arguing that we cannot understand the presence of Statius without taking this work fully into account. The last two chapters consider Virgil's departure (but lingering poetic presence in *Paradiso*) and Ovid's role in the poetics of the *Paradiso*.

A brief mention of Juno in *Paradiso* 12 opens a whole discussion of the role of Juno in Virgil and Ovid and the ways in which evoking her, and thus her "disputatious character," might reflect Dante's concerns about the militancy of the Church embodied in Dominic. At moments such as these, some may feel that the author has, as he notes himself in his introduction, "explored an allusion at unnecessary length" (23), but overall, it is my feeling, to quote Dante's Peter, that it is better to "err in opening than in keeping closed." And the author has indeed opened a great number of possibilities for scholars of Dante, who will benefit greatly from Wetherbee's masterful work of drawing connections between Dante's world and the worlds of the ancient epic.

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