

*Interpreting Dante: Essays on the Traditions of Dante Commentary*. Paola Nasti and Claudia Rossignoli, eds.

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The latest volume in the vibrant William and Katherine Devers Series in Dante and Medieval Italian Literature from Notre Dame Press presents fifteen essays by scholars from Italy, the UK, and the US on the vast and rich corpus of commentaries on Dante's *Commedia*. While the number of commentaries prohibits an attempt to offer a comprehensive account of this tradition (the Dante Dartmouth Project lists over seventy-five commentaries), the editors Paola Nasti and Claudia Rossignoli have crafted a volume that offers broad coverage while focusing on two periods of particular vitality: the earliest commentaries of the fourteenth century, and the sixteenth-century commentaries, which recast Dante's poem in the period of the Counter-Reformation. The meticulously researched and footnoted essays offer an entry point into the study not of Dante's *Commedia*, but of the most important commentaries that have accompanied the poem.

With only a few exceptions, each chapter focuses on individual commentators: Iacomo della Lana, the *Ottimo Commento*, Pietro Alighieri, Francesco da Buti, Guiniforte Barzizza, Tifon Gabriele, Lodovico Castelvetro, and Federigo Zuccari. Guido da Pisa and Giovanni Boccaccio receive special attention; Boccaccio figures into many of the early chapters as a point of reference for other commentators, and Guido da Pisa is the subject of two chapters. These chapters shed light on the intellectual context of the commentators. Spencer Pearce's dense chapter on Iacomo della Lana investigates how the commentator's own doctrinal and theological concerns, which themselves depend on contemporary Bolognese debates, determined his reading of Dante, sometimes leading to a failure to grasp Dante's poetry. Similarly, Paola Nasti links the content of Guido da Pisa's commentary to his membership in the Carmelite order. Lino Pertile's concise essay on Trifon Gabriele's *Annotazioni nel Dante* places the commentary in the turbulent waters of Counter-Reformation ideologies. Claudia Tardelli's essay takes a different track, focusing on the philological and grammatical culture of Francesco da Buti's commentary.

Two essays give detailed accounts of the relationship between image and word in the commentary tradition. Lucia Battaglia Ricci contributes a chapter on the Chantilly illuminated manuscript of the *Commedia* with Guido da Pisa's commentary (Chantilly, Condé Museum, 597); and Andrea Mazzucchi offers a long and comprehensive description and interpretation of Federigo Zuccari's illustrated volume *Dante historiato* (Gabinetto

Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi). Both of these chapters argue that the commentators controlled the iconographic systems of their book products and that this “marriage of words and images” (181) should be taken into account when considering the commentaries. The editors lavishly accompany these two chapters with images from the volumes under discussion.

Beyond the methodological variety in the approaches described above, which this reader considers a strength, the volume fails to provide coherent support for the value of the commentary tradition beyond interest in individual commentators. In the introduction, the editors raise many questions that the present volume purports to discuss: the particular hermeneutics of the commentary tradition, the interaction between commentators through time, and the role of Dante commentaries on the development of literary criticism. Essays by Botterill and Bellomo near the beginning of the volume do offer brief overviews of some of these questions, but the individual essays only occasionally gaze beyond the confines of their own commentaries. We find two notable exceptions to this in the essays by Usher and Rossignoli. Usher problematizes the category of the commentator, using Boccaccio as an example of the peculiar “authorial” commentator (252). Rossignoli expands her reflection on Castelvetro’s *Sposizione* to include valuable comments on humanist hermeneutics.

At the outset of the volume the editors and the first chapter’s author claim that the study of Dante’s commentators represents “the most exciting area of innovation in Dante studies” (17). Perhaps because of this exuberance, coupled with the smattering of negative remarks about modern Dante critics, who, according to two authors, have “ransacked” (18) and “plundered” (84), like pirates I suppose, the early commentators, I looked for a stronger demonstration of what Dantisti can gain from a more profound knowledge of the commentary tradition. It may be hard to disagree with the statement that the “early commentators share Dante’s mind-set and culture” (85), but, as that same author notes, those same early commentators failed to note much of what makes Dante innovative and durable. *Interpreting Dante* puts a spotlight on important moments of the reception of Dante’s poem, but the volume does not tell modern readers of Dante just what that intense focus can show us.

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