

Introduction

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The idea for this book came to us as it comes to every university teacher when preparing a list of secondary readings for a course on Dante. One needs to offer a context, namely, an idea of the cultural, historical, intellectual, and geographical conditions in which Dante lived and wrote. What was happening in Florence around the year 1300, and why was Dante banished? Who were the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, and the Whites and the Blacks? And why were the empire and the Church always at loggerheads? How could the Church be so wealthy when St Francis was so poor? There are also trickier questions that one must be ready to answer – questions concerning vernacular and Latin; genre, language, and style; poetry, philosophy, and theology; religion, heresy, and orthodoxy. And questions concerning everyday life: rich and poor; immigration, the expansion of cities, forms of government, and social change; public health, justice, and injustice; literate and illiterate audiences; the condition of women (Dante does not spare them his invectives, yet he is also sensitive to issues of what today we would term gender difference); not to mention family life, lust, and love (why does Dante write so much about Beatrice, and not a word about his wife Gemma?). Answers do exist, but students, and we their teachers, must extract them from scores of scholarly volumes, each dealing with individual aspects of the economy, society, politics, religion, philosophy, art, literature, and music of the time, just to mention the most obvious subjects the knowledge of which would help facilitate an understanding and an enjoyment of Dante's works. In short, there is no single volume, as far as we are aware, either in English or in Italian, that offers a comprehensive overview of the material, cultural, and intellectual world in which Dante became Dante. This book aims to fill this lacuna by providing original essays on a broad array of facets of life in central and northern Italy at the time of Dante Alighieri, roughly between the middle of the thirteenth and the middle of the fourteenth centuries.

Yet despite the range of *Dante in Context*, its treatment of the late medieval Italian world cannot but be partial and fragmentary. There are issues, such as literature written in Latin in the post-classical age, and especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, that might have merited chapters of their own. Ultimately, editorial decisions needed to be made, and we feel confident that the decisions we took were appropriate. At the same time, literature in Latin in its many forms does appear at various points in the book. To guide the reader through the book, we have introduced some cross-referencing between chapters. However, we believe that consulting the index, which includes selected names, titles, and subjects, will offer a more effective means both to grasp something of the complexity of the medieval world and of the interconnections that defined it, and to begin to appreciate the cultural weight of a figure like Thomas Aquinas or of a text of the calibre of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Although far from exhaustive, the index thus expands the book's range beyond the apparent limits imposed by the ostensible subject-matter of its thirty chapters.

A first series of essays introduces the reader to the economic, social, and political realities of life in Italy around the year 1300, casting light too on the life of the Church and of religious movements outside the Church, on law and justice, and on men and women's experience of everyday life. A second section devoted to intellectual traditions maps out major developments in Western thought, including the presence of Jewish and Islamic currents, and explores the practice of medicine and the understanding of geographic and cosmological space in the culture of the time. A third section deals with linguistic and literary cultures, but also offers chapters on all levels of education, visions and journeys to the other world, and popular culture. A fourth section examines the fast evolving urban spaces, and offers a panoramic view of the extraordinary changes that occurred in the fields of art, architecture, and music. Only at this point, within the contextual framework thus reconstructed, did it seem appropriate to present in a final section an up-to-date overview of Dante's life, works, and reception. In this way, it ought to become apparent how Dante's experiences as man, thinker, and writer were in constant dialogue and tension with the historical events, circumstances, and anxieties of his time. In every chapter, the reader is presented with modes of thinking, being, and behaving that Dante supported and longed to see developed, but also with other ways whose development he abhorred and did his utmost to challenge and stifle. The book closes with a critical reflection on the modalities through which the poet's works were transmitted, received, and read, especially in

the two centuries after his death, which highlights how Dante's engagement with the world continues, indeed grows, beyond his own time.

The twenty-five scholars responsible for the essays included in the first four sections of this volume represent together a wide range of expertise and critical traditions in Anglo-American and Italian scholarship. Black is the leading authority on education and schooling and a specialist on classicism in the late Middle Ages; Day is an expert on the Florentine economy before Dante; Hurlburt is a medieval historian specializing in women and gender; English focuses on Sieneese life in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; Menzinger is a researcher in the history of medieval law; Caferro has written extensively and innovatively on economy, war, and a range of aspects of Trecento Italian society; Cuthbert is a musicologist whose interests combine the music of the fourteenth century as well as computational musicology; Milani is the author of a recent innovative and much acclaimed book on the Italian communes; Dameron is an eminent historian with special expertise on Florentine Church power; Burr is a leading scholar of Olivi and Italian Franciscanism; Bianchi is a world-renowned specialist on medieval ethics and Aristotle; Robiglio works on late medieval philosophy from Aquinas to humanism; Girón Negrón is a well-known comparative literature specialist who works on Arabic and Jewish literature and the history of religion; Tavoni is a historian of the Italian language who has recently been making groundbreaking contributions in Dante studies; Bourdua and Marina are art historians of noteworthy originality; Grant is a most distinguished practitioner of the history of science and McVaugh is a prominent historian of medicine; Ziolkowski is a leading authority in medieval Latin studies, and Gardiner has published extensively on the tradition of journeys and visions; finally Barnes, Cachey, Hawkins, and Martinez all have strong international reputations as Dantists, but they also have separate and powerful specialisms in the topics for which they have been selected to write, while Cherchi is an illustrious historian of Romance literatures.

Though at different stages of their careers, these scholars are all specialists in their separate, individual fields, the majority, we should like to stress, are not professional Dantists. This was a deliberate choice on our part. We wanted to avoid as much as possible viewing late medieval Italy *sub specie Dantis*, as inevitably happens when the focus is placed on the great poet. In this volume, the reader will not find chapters on Dante and politics, Dante and justice, Dante and literature, Dante and music, and so on and so forth. Our authors were instructed to write on politics, justice, and literature in Dante's time but largely independently of him.

Only in a very few cases, when it seemed difficult to deal with certain topics outside of Dante's works (see for example the chapter on popular culture), Dante has provided the basic focus, but this has been very much the exception rather than the norm. By coming to Dante from the context, rather than the other way round, we hope to refine, nuance, and sometimes challenge a number of assumptions that are often made and accepted in Dante studies regarding the poet's historical, economic, and cultural background.

This is not then, and is not meant to be, another collection of essays on Dante, but a book that we are confident will *indirectly* cast new light on Dante and his works. 'Indirectly' is the crucial word here. None of the contributions included is about Dante – except of course the first two chapters in the last section – but all are about the world in which Dante lived and out of which his genius arose. Dante is one of those rare writers whose genius cannot easily be explained as a straightforward product of social, intellectual, or even literary forces and traditions. However, the *Commedia*, just to mention the best known of his works, is – perhaps more than any other poem produced in the West – deeply rooted in its place and time, and one can understand it more clearly and effectively by looking at the picture of the world from which it comes. This is the picture this book intends to sketch.

The collection has been conceived with mainly the needs and questions of undergraduate and graduate students in the English-speaking world in mind. It thus provides a large amount of basic information. However, the essays are not mere syntheses of existing scholarship. All the authors have aimed to provide personal, original overviews of their topics, while also offering suggestions for further reflection and debate on the part of specialized scholars, and even of general readers. By suggesting connections across different historical fields and disciplines, it is hoped that, ultimately, the book will encourage and inspire new research into the relationship between material culture, intellectual traditions, and literary and artistic expression in the late Middle Ages.

Dante in Context has not been an easy academic and editorial project. We are thus extremely grateful to Linda Bree and Anna Bond at Cambridge University Press for their constant support, advice, and timely efficiency. Most of all we are thankful for their unflagging patience, as we are for our contributors' forbearance. Demetrio S. Yocum is an excellent and sophisticated indexer and James Cotton is an elegant and painstaking translator. The book has been enriched by their contributions. We are also very pleased to express our warmest gratitude to the Institute for

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Dante in Context has had many 'homes' – Cambridge, England and Massachusetts; Chicago and Notre Dame; Reading and Florence – which are, of course, the places where we live and work, and between which we regularly move. In fact, over the past several years, we have very rarely found ourselves in the same place at the same time. And yet, thanks to the unexpected intimacy offered to us by Skype and to the swift efficiency of electronic communication, collaborating has not been difficult. Indeed, it has been a source of satisfaction and pleasure that has further strengthened our close friendship of now many years. We are both extremely fortunate that, wherever we might be, we always have the support, advice, gentle irony, and love of our partners, Maggie and Anna, to whom the book is dedicated.

