

Dante. John Took.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. xxiv + 582 pp. \$29.95.

The years 2020 and 2021 witnessed an intense critical production devoted to Dante Alighieri's life and works in the lead-up to the seventh hundredth anniversary of the poet's death. New specialized studies were published on varied aspects of Dante's literary production, from vexed questions of attribution and textual variants to the technical aspects of metrics and metricology. Comprehensive studies aimed at providing general interpretations of the Florentine poet were comparatively few. The exceptions, however, are notable, and noteworthy among these is John Took's monumental intellectual profile of Dante, titled simply *Dante*. Took's work combines a chronological account of Dante's life—more relevant because Dante's literary production is informed by a strong autobiographical component—with an attentive exegesis of each text in Dante's varied opus.

The book's division into four parts follows a fairly traditional structure, with two preliminary chapters—"Historical Considerations" and "Biographical Considerations"—followed by an intellectual biography organized into three chronological phases (early years, middle years, and final years) and further subdivided into chapters focused on the works of each phase. But even where Took's reading is not particularly innovative—and readers will notice the influence of Kenelm Foster's investigations into Dante's philosophical background and Gianfranco Contini's attention to Dante's relentless experimentalism—it is always profoundly analytical.

This analytical depth is most evident as Took engages in dialogue with Dante's texts, which he cites profusely in the original and interprets throughout the book. Took's examination of the topoi and tropes of Dante's early lyric poetry and his discussion of the most theoretical sections of Dante's prose works are clear and will be accessible to both specialist and nonspecialist readers. Particular attention is paid to Dante's metaphysics, as it is exposed in the self-exegetical treatise *Convivio*, and to Dante's *Fiore* and *Detto d'Amore*, texts that—at least in English—remain relatively understudied. As Dante himself argued in the *Convivio*, in textual interpretation the literal sense must always come first. Took does full justice to the letter of Dante's works—for instance, in his summary of the *Comedy's fabula* (the *Commedia à la lettre*)—en route to a better understanding of their spirit: I suspect that students will seek Took's volume not least for this captivating rendition into prose of the contents and essence—in addition to the contexts—of Dante's masterwork.

Among the strengths of Took's book are the elegance and precision of the writing, the in-depth contextualizations, and the conceptual coherence of the analysis. The more strictly biographical and historical parts of Took's *Dante* belong to the best tradition of historiographical and biographical prose. The more speculative and exegetical sections on Dante's metaphysics—the object of Took's inquiry over several prior publications—stand out for the author's success in clarifying without sacrificing complexity or terminological precision.

A particularly valuable contribution is Took's reconstruction of the thick network of intertextual dynamics between Dante and his Occitan, Sicilian, and Tuscan



predecessors, as well as between Dante's philosophy and his ancient, late antique, and medieval sources. The notion of love is at the very core of Took's interpretation of Dante, and love coherently informs his analysis of the poet's texts throughout: from its literary and psychological manifestations in Dante's early production, to its political connotation as universal harmony in the treatises, to its theoretical ontological reverberations in the *Commedia*, love represents the ultimate mover in Dante's cosmos, the definitive motive of his literary work, and the final destination of his literary and existential pilgrimage.

The book's intended audience consists primarily of students and scholars but may include other readers interested in the tumultuous life and superb intellectual achievements of one of the greatest poets of all time. A preface, a brief evocative afterword ("A Coruscation of Delight"), a list of abbreviations, four maps detailing Dante's universe and each of its otherworldly realms, a select bibliography (inevitably privileging texts available in English and Italian), and an *index nominum* complete the volume.

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Love and Sex in the Time of Plague: A Decameron Renaissance. Guido Ruggiero. I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 292 pp. \$49.95.

Research on emotions and feelings has been steadily flourishing in pre- and early modern studies, with a growing attention to how literary texts construe affects or systems of emotions. In this historical study, Ruggiero aims at reconstructing the cultural world that inhabits the pages of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and in particular how the shared culture of the day imagined and perceived the emotions associated with love and sexual desire. By employing the tools of both archival research and literary criticism, the volume unfolds "a microhistory or microstudy" (207) of these complex emotions as it emerges from the *Decameron's* tales.

Through a careful selection of *novelle*, Ruggiero focuses on the interplay of emotions and reason. He argues that, on one hand, the tales suggest that love and sexual desire could be perceived as dangerous because of their uncontrollable nature; on the other, in the frame story the group of Florentine storytellers presents love as a potentially civilizing emotion when partnered with *virtù*. Ruggiero's analysis demonstrates that for the *brigata* and the tales' characters, *virtù* consists in the ability to display self-control and measured manners. If once it was associated with the violent defense of honor, in the *Decameron*, according to Ruggiero, *virtù* requires reason to prevail over emotion. Through an attentive analysis of the text, the volume convincingly shows how the *Decameron* documents the shift in the meaning attributed to *virtù* that was happening