

Alfie, Fabian. *Dante's Tenzone with Forese Donati: The Reprehension of Vice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. 214 pp. ISBN: 9781442642232.

Scholars' descriptions of Dante often contain terms like "theological poet," "dolce stil nuovo" and "moralist." Fabian Alfie's *Dante's Tenzone with Forese Donati: The Reprehension of Vice*, however, explores an often overlooked side of the epic poet: "Dante the insulter" (4). Alfie provides a detailed analysis of the slanderous correspondence between Dante Alighieri and his contemporary Forese Donati, a series of six fourteen-line sonnets, in order to uncover the underlying intention of the poets. Alfie argues that this *tenzone*, a poetic correspondence, was not simply an expression of personal dislike or hatred, but was instead a discourse about the questionable definition of nobility in thirteenth-century Florence because "Dante and Forese treat each other as epitomizing of the thirteenth-century nobility" (14), and thus insult, publicly reprehend and slander not simply each other as individuals, but the morally-failing nobility of the time. As Alfie states, "The controversy about nobility centered on the essence of aristocracy, and focused in particular on the relationship between hereditary honours and true moral character" (13). The thinkers of the day questioned how far the nobility could disregard the public standards of order before they could no longer be considered noble. Through a historical view of comedy and vituperation, a close reading of the sonnets and an analysis of the various references to the *tenzone*, Alfie expands upon the underlying moral debate present in this "insulting" interaction.

Alfie's volume begins with a strong argument for why this brief correspondence merits scholarly attention and study: not only does the interaction shed light on social, political and moral discourse of the time, but also on how two poets considered the *tenzone* worthy of attention. Despite the brevity of the exchanges, Dante himself considered the *tenzone* to mark "an important phase in his artistic development" and continued the discussion of vice and nobility through references to the *tenzone* in *Inferno* XXIX and XXX and *Purgatorio* XXIII and XXIV. Similarly, the *tenzone* is referenced three times in the works of Giovanni Boccaccio, including two times in the *Decameron*. If two authors of such weight and merit take note of the interaction, literary historians of today should as well, Alfie argues.

After laying this foundation in the introduction, Alfie moves on in the first chapter to discuss the historical definition, purpose and tradition of slander in the Middle Ages. While modern readers tend to dismiss insults as trivial and irrelevant, Alfie notes that this was not the case in the Middle Ages. Comedy and tragedy both had ethical functions: "tragedy praised

virtuous individuals and actions, while comedy castigated the sinful. Both genres reinforced traditional moral behaviours and attitudes” (6). These writings were valued in the public and literary spheres as a mode of public chastisement or commendation for various people and behaviors. Alfie follows the etymology of the term *tenzone*, which he defines as literature that required its recipient to take action or contest in some way. He also notes that Dante and Forese followed in the footsteps of poet Rustico Filippi, who wrote several satirical sonnets to criticize his fellow citizens. Dante and Forese borrow several turns of phrase and rhyme schemes from Filippi’s works in their own sonnets, as well as themes of vituperation, reprehension of vice and political matters. The second chapter of the book is a close reading of the sonnets of the *tenzone*. Alfie highlights details of the correspondence that demonstrate how Dante and Forese both borrow from the literary traditions of vituperative verse and modes of insulting each other, including accusations of sexual inadequacy or immorality, as well as sins of gluttony and laziness.

In the third and fourth chapters, Alfie gives additional emphasis to the various references in the *Commedia* to the correspondence between Forese and Dante. He argues that Dante uses the *tenzone* as a “subtext” (80) to *Inferno* XXIX and XXX. As Dante the pilgrim interacts with the sinners in the seventh *bolgia* of hell (the falsifiers), especially Geri del Bello and Gianni Schicchi (both mentioned in the *tenzone*), Dante the author continues to reprehend members of the Florentine aristocracy with the intention of impugning not only individuals, but their entire social class as well. In *Purgatorio* XXIII and XXIV, Dante the pilgrim meets the ghost of Forese Donati himself. They converse and each engages in some sort of reprehension of vice: Dante against Florence and Forese against his brother Corso. They each take time to correct misstatements from the *tenzone* but do not contradict the need for, or value in, the reprehension of vice. Alfie suggests that, “perhaps in *Purgatorio* Forese personifies a particular form of writing, the poetry of reprehension” (99).

The final chapter of Alfie’s book discusses the citations of Forese and Dante’s correspondence in other literary works. Florentine poets Pieraccio Tedaldi and Deo Boni seem to have borrowed phrases and poetic elements from the *tenzone*. Most notable, however, are the references in the *Decameron* (4.10 and 7.8) and the *Corbaccio*, which indicate that Boccaccio understood the underlying meaning and purpose of the *tenzone* and subsequently evoked that meaning for his own satirical or ironical intentions. For example, in *Decameron* 4.10, Boccaccio alludes to the correspondence during a tale about a young wife committing adultery. Instead of the wife being reprehended for her vice, as was the intention of the *ten-*

zone, she is left seemingly blameless while the husband's actions are questioned, an ironic allusion which aids in Boccaccio's moral discourse throughout the tale. In *Decameron* 7.8, Boccaccio takes advantage of the criticism of the nobility within the *tenzone* to bolster his discussion of class differences within this tale and "bases his tale in part on the glorification of the nobility and the disparagement of the merchants prevalent in the culture of the age" (112). In the same tale, Boccaccio very clearly alludes to the correspondence once again, using a metaphor from the *tenzone* (the untying of the knot of vice) in a literal, concrete way (a character unties a literal knot in string), identified in Alfie's book as an example of "actualization" (115).

In the *Corbaccio*, Boccaccio spends much time reprehending the vices of women, and references an instance in the *tenzone* where that occurs as well. Different analyses have shown that Boccaccio may have been writing this part satirically, and so "Boccaccio's purpose in the work may be not to castigate vice per se, but rather to call into question the literature of castigation" (117). Boccaccio also spends time criticizing the nobility and basically asking the question: what is noble? Alfie concludes, "Indeed, the denigration of the nobility is the reason why Boccaccio echoes Dante's sonnet from the *tenzone* with Forese" (118). The chapter continues with more in-depth analyses of Boccaccio's references to Dante and Forese's series of sonnets and examines Boccaccio's intentions in using those references within the framework of his own writing. In fact, Alfie commends Boccaccio on his understanding and use of the *tenzone*, writing:

Boccaccio demonstrates a critical comprehension of the insulting poems. He exploits the intertextualities with Dante's sonnets by building upon many of the undertones of the correspondence, thereby giving further depth to his narratives. [...] Boccaccio understood the place of the *tenzone* between Forese and Dante in the overall context of Florentine literature. (120)

It is clear that Boccaccio's use of the *tenzone* not only adds depth and complexity to his own writing, but also confirms and supports the interpretation of the *tenzone* as a critical reprehension of the Florentine nobility.

Fabian Alfie's cleanly outlined work provides a unique and important contribution to the field of Dante studies, presenting a strong case for why the *tenzone* of Dante and Forese is worthy of further study and attention amongst literary critics and historians. These sonnets have a place within the discourse of Dante's identity and maturation as an author, as well as in the political, social and moral debates of late thirteenth-century Florence. Alfie's interpretation of the primary source texts is clear and well argued.

He shares his own reading of the sonnets and also contextualizes his position through the analysis of other citations of the *tenzone*, especially in the *Commedia* and Boccaccio's works. The ideas presented in the final chapter regarding Boccaccio's references to the sonnets certainly merit more exploration and analysis. The introduction to the complexity and sophistication of Boccaccio's citations was well done in this book; indeed, it sets the stage for useful further research. The book includes a complete appendix of the manuscripts and stemmas, an extensive bibliography and a useful index. This book is recommended for those with interests in Dante's writings, Florentine politics in the thirteenth century and Boccaccio enthusiasts.

MARY RIDLEY

INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR