

Zygmunt G. Barański. *Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio: Literature, Doctrine, Reality*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2020. xiv + 644 pp. 9781781888803.

*Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio: Literature, Doctrine, Reality* is a collection of eighteen of Barański's essays, revised from articles published between 1991 and 2017. The volume provides a comprehensive overview of the author's scholarly endeavors throughout his career. Being the work of a *dantista*, as the author identifies himself, the book focuses extensively on Dante's works, even in chapters mainly dedicated to other authors, such as Petrarch and Boccaccio. The unity among its chapters is provided by Barański's approach, which gives significant attention to the contexts that shape the different literary works, while giving prominence to the historical background to provide "an understanding of texts, authors, institutions, events, ideas, practices that grant primary and determining significance to the time and place of their existence" (2). Moreover, the volume comprises a remarkable engagement with previous scholarship, which the author often critiques while presenting innovative interpretations.

The first section, "Debating Doctrine," critically examines various aspects of Dante's works. Barański engages with several critics' interpretations, revealing their limitations and highlighting the potential for further studies in the field. The first chapter, "On Dante's Trail: From 1295 to 2018," challenges conventional interpretations of Dante's intellectual formation. Barański warns about the danger of identifying Dante the author with Dante *personaggio*, a habit that caused critics to reconstruct his biography through his works rather than basing it on historical documents. The following chapter, "Dante and Doctrine (and Theology)," clarifies the distinction between doctrine and theology in Dante's thought. Barański gives a comprehensive overview of scholarship on these topics, critiquing the limitation of "restricting his treatment of theology to its doctrinal effects" (48). By clarifying the separation of these concepts, Barański expresses his view on Dante's concept of theology. In chapter 3, "(Un)Orthodox Dante," the author engages with Cristian Moevs' book *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy* (2005) to discuss the intricate question of Dante's orthodoxy. By examining some of the most seemingly unorthodox passages of the poem, such as the resurrection of the flesh in association with the suicides' bodies in *Inferno* 13 and the peculiar condition of the inhabitants of Tolomea, Barański demonstrates how these cases are "the perfect execution of divine justice" (98). The fourth chapter, "Reflecting' on the Divine and on the Human: *Paradiso* XXII," deals with the intricate interpretations of this canto. Barański's critique here lies in the fact that previous scholarship failed to provide a unitary reading of the whole canto. He then continues to provide the first step to a comprehensive analysis of *Paradiso* 22, laying the groundwork for further studies. Focusing on the importance of certain passages that were previously overlooked, Barański reveals their key role in understanding the canto's ideological and

structural content. The last chapter of this section, “‘Affectivity’ and Theology: The Representation of Beatitude in Dante’s *Paradiso*,” engages in a dialogue with contemporary theories of emotion and affection, offering potential fresh insights into Dante’s text. Barański’s chapter is an attempt to do so “from a historical and overarching perspective that acknowledges the complexity of the emotions in medieval culture” (165).

In the second section, “Inventing Literature,” the author investigates literary techniques and structures within Dante’s work, underscoring the poet’s distinctiveness, especially during his own time. In the sixth chapter, “‘Tres enim sunt manerie dicendi...’: Some Observations on Medieval Literature, ‘Genre,’ and Dante,” Barański deals with questions of literary genre in the medieval context. He contends that a textual interpretation that focuses merely on genre leads to “a misleading representation of medieval textuality and medieval thinking about literature” (211). To support this claim, he engages in a close examination of the definition of genre in the *Ars poetica* and Dante’s texts, specifically the *Epistle to Cangrande*, to demonstrate a multifaced conception in medieval times. Barański identifies fifteen schemes for classifying literature in Dante’s times, and notes that categorizing a text strictly by genre is unproductive for literary analysis. The following chapter, “‘Primo tra cotanto senno’: Dante and the Latin Comic Tradition,” focuses on Dante’s engagement with Latin comic poets. Barański highlights the lack of reference to these poets in the *Comedy*, signifying that his choice of entitling the poem *Comedia* may indicate a deliberate departure from the conventions of comic poetry. The last chapter of this section, “The Poetics of Metre: *Terza rima*, ‘canto,’ ‘canzon,’ ‘cantica,’” explains the naming convention of Dante’s poetic elements. The poet’s definition of *canto*, *canzone* and *cantica* reveals the poem’s peculiarity in relation to other literary texts of the Trecento.

In the third section, “Creating Canons,” Barański focuses on the creation of literary canons by broadening his discussion to include, in addition to Dante, a strong focus on Petrarch’s production. This section focuses on themes of intertextuality and poetic creation between Dante, Petrarch, and other poets. In the chapter “*Purgatorio* XXV: Creating Poetic Bodies,” Barański focuses on one of the most challenging cantos to interpret. He begins the chapter by addressing three interpretative tendencies, which he defines as *readings/misreadings* since they fail to provide a comprehensive connection between ideological and thematic themes. The first critical trend arises from Bruno Nardi’s interpretation of *Purgatorio* 25, in which the canto is read in association with its significance to medieval science and philosophy. While highlighting the main theme of the canto, the generation of the rational soul, this approach was limited by an exclusive focus on its relevance to Aristotelian theories. The second trend follows John Freccero’s interpretation in his essay, “Manfred’s Wounds and the Poetics of the *Purgatorio*” (1983), in which the canto is seen as fundamental from a metaliterary point of view, and he suggests

“an analogy between the act of writing and the act of procreation” (202). The third critical trend results from readings of several critics, such as Giorgio Padoan and Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, who are united in reading the canto in its entirety. Barański proceeds then to give his own interpretation of *Purgatorio* 25, pushing the limits of previous trends. The central focus for the understanding of this canto is Dante’s invention of aerial bodies, the element that connects “the relationship between the human and the divine to that between doctrine and poetry, and from the ‘sacredness’ of the *Commedia* to the primacy of inspired forms of knowledge” (345). Chapter 10, “Petrarch, Dante, Cavalcanti,” is the first of the volume that focuses on authors beyond the *sommo poeta*. Barański uses the chapter’s titular asyndeton to offer some insights into the relationship between Dante and Petrarch. He eschews other potential alternatives (e.g., “Dante and Petrarch,” “Dante in Petrarch”) inasmuch as they seem to suggest an implicit opposition or a supremacy of one of the authors over the other. For Barański, Petrarch’s feelings toward Dante, beyond what critics dismiss as literary envy, “redimension and delimit Dante’s enormous cultural prestige, thereby opening up a space in which to locate himself and his own work” (357). Barański analyzes the passages of Petrarch’s work that explicitly mention Dante, focusing on how these cases seek to situate his predecessor within a specific literary mindset. For instance, mentions of Dante in *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (287 and 70) and in the *Triumphus Cupidinis* are specifically meant to reduce the *sommo poeta* to the realm of love poets, a clear diminution of the ‘canonization’ that was happening during the fourteenth century. The last sections of chapter 10 focus on Cavalcanti, who, according to Barański, is also mentioned in Petrarch’s works, again in order to launch an indirect attack on Dante.

In the concluding remarks of chapter 10, Barański acknowledges that, being a *dantista*, his inclination is to sympathize more with Dante when analyzing the dynamics between the two poets. Nevertheless, the two following chapters focus extensively on Petrarch’s works. In chapter 11, “‘Io mi rivolgo indietro a ciascun passo’ (*Rvf* 15.1): Petrarch, the *fabula* of Eurydice and Orpheus, and the Structure of the *Canzoniere*,” Barański engages with the critical trend that emphasizes the connection between the second part of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* and the myth of Orpheus. He begins by recognizing the fundamental importance of the myth for Petrarch, as is evident in a meticulous study of the organization of sonnets in different manuscripts. He then warns against simple associations among the character pairs of Orpheus/Francesco and Eurydice/Laura in or order to demonstrate how Petrarch absorbs the myth while opening it up to his own exegesis. In “‘Weeping’ and ‘Singing’ With Orpheus (and With Dante): Emotional and Poetic Structures in *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* 281–90,” Barański focuses on ten sonnets from the *Canzoniere* that have been problematically interpreted with respect to the poet’s journey after Laura’s death, and explores the ideological importance of the order

in which Petrarch constructed his text. The chapter's analysis then expands to include a few more sonnets, focusing on *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* 279–92. In the first sonnets (279–86), Petrarch describes his attempts to keep Laura alive in his mind and hints at his own psychological condition. It is after this first group of sonnets that we find the poet's only quotation of Dante in the whole *Canzoniere* (287). Its appearance, Barański concludes, is necessary to show that “the *Canzoniere* cannot accept [...] Dante's claims about his relationship with the dead Beatrice” (432). In the last group, the poet completes his redemption, recognizing the need for a change in his style, for leaving love poetry in exchange for elegy.

The fourth section, “Exploiting Epicurus,” addresses the very limited and often incorrect conception of Epicureanism that existed in the Italian medieval literary context, especially in the works of Dante, Cavalcanti, Petrarch and Boccaccio. “Guido Cavalcanti and his First Readers” examines the figure of Cavalcanti in the fourteenth century, by which time views on Cavalcanti had been prejudiced by his depiction in *Inferno* 10 and *Decameron* 6.9, works in which “Guido is utilized as a vehicle through which both authors attempt to establish their own literary identity” (445). Barański underlines then how, during the Duecento, Cavalcanti was the only vernacular poet, together with Dante, “on whose behalf serious effort was expended in order to elevate him to the rank of an *auctoritas*” (449). The aim of chapter 14, “The Ethics of Ignorance: Petrarch's Epicurus and Averroes and the Structures of *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*,” is to clarify Petrarch's distinction between Epicureanism and Averroism, a separation that medieval thinkers often failed to make. In the *De ignorantia*, Petrarch's description of Epicurus seeks to present a more historically accurate depiction, in opposition to the distorted medieval one. In the same work, however, Averroes is treated more prejudicially, which Barański noticed to be in line with other commentators of the time. Chapter 15, “Alquanto tenea della oppinione degli epicuri”: the *auctoritas* of Boccaccio's Cavalcanti (and Dante),” argues against the widespread idea that Cavalcanti's poetry was a significant influence in Boccaccio's literary production. Barański analyzes some passages in which Cavalcanti appears clearly in Boccaccio's works, such as in the *Teseida* and in the *Decameron*, to underline how “Boccaccio was primarily interested in Guido as an intellectual and moral *auctoritas* rather than as a poet” (493). Furthermore, Boccaccio's use of Cavalcanti can be interpreted as an aim to contrast Dante's negative stance on him. In the following chapter, “Boccaccio and Epicurus: From Epy to Tito and Gisippo,” Barański explores the relationship between Boccaccio and Epicurus. The author respectfully argues against Vitore Branca's and other critics' views on what can be defined as “Boccaccio epicureo.” To support his argument, Barański explores the presence of Epicurus in the *Decameron* to confirm the “ideological and spiritual gulf that separates [Boccaccio] from the ancient philosopher” (538).

The last section of the book, *Writing Reality*, challenges the traditional interpretation of certain passages of the *Comedy* in relation to common medieval knowledge. In chapter 17, “Guido Cavalcanti Among the Cruces of *Inferno* IX–XI, or Dante and the History of Reason,” Barański examines the episode of Guido’s disdain in *Inferno* 10. As he does for other passages, he here insists on the importance of considering these verses not only as a key point for the canto in which they appear but also reading them in relation to their overall centrality in the cantos of heretics (*Inferno* 9–10). Barański demonstrates how Guido’s *disdegno* symbolizes a kind of ahistorical thinking that pertains to all the heretics. Chapter 18, “‘E cominciare stormo’: Notes on Dante’s Sieges,” deals with a topic that Dante scholars have often neglected: the treatment of sieges in the *Comedy*. As Barański notes, sieges were, in medieval times, a part of daily life. In *Inferno*, the siege of the city of Dis has been mostly overlooked by critics, who read it in a parodic key. Still, the theme of the siege is central to the Pilgrim’s journey, and according to Barański, it becomes “a topic through which Dante defined the sacred character both of his otherworldly journey and of his *comedia*” (601). The last chapter of the book, “Scatology and Obscenity in Dante,” examines *Inferno* 18. Barański argues that the numerous scatological references to the *adulatores* led critics to overlook this passage out of a sort of embarrassment, which led to interpretations that were historically and critically inaccurate. Focusing on the ‘low style’ suited to this section of hell, critics failed to appreciate Dante’s reasons for using erotic and excremental imagery in association with these sinners. Since the Bible provides several examples of a similar technique, according to Barański, their use in *Inferno* 18 is nothing exceptional but, indeed, a fundamental aspect of the *Commedia*’s inclusion of Scripture.

*Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio: Literature, Doctrine, Reality* is a majestic work that offers an insightful examination of medieval authors while also serving as an overview of Barański’s career as one of the most distinguished experts on Dante of the last decades. It should be noted that despite its title, the book focuses mostly on Dante; this is a warning that the author explicitly acknowledges in the introduction and in some of the essays. The author’s profound knowledge of the field’s vast scholarship makes this a volume that is an invaluable resource for researchers working on Dante and related subjects.

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