

***Approaches to Teaching Dante's Divine Comedy*, 2nd ed.,
ed. Christopher Kleinhenz and Kristina Olson, pp. 312.**

Like other volumes in the MLA's *Approaches to Teaching* series, the second edition of *Approaches to Teaching Dante's Divine Comedy* brings together brief essays on a wide range of topics (from Dante's classical legacy to gender identity and sexuality in Dante's poem), written by a wide range of contributors (from distinguished scholars and emeriti professors to junior faculty and a high school teacher). The breadth of topics and variety of perspectives are excellent, covering a lot of ground, although the briefness of the essays (most around six pages) sometimes leaves a reader wanting more. Even so, the material presented is interesting and helpful, and I, a Dante scholar-teacher for more than a quarter century, learned a number of things from the volume.

The book has lots of good, practical information (including basic data on editions of the *Divine Comedy* and on how Dante is currently taught in classrooms across North America). I found several of the essays particularly useful and thought-provoking. H. Wayne Storey and Isabella Magni, for example, discuss how to use manuscripts of the *Divine Comedy* to teach students about the "cultural orientations of the society in which they are produced" (51)—and with the increasing availability of manuscript facsimiles online, such an approach no longer requires that one teach at an institution with a large rare books library. Kristina Olson contributes a very thoughtful essay about "the innovative nature of Dante's approach to women and the female gender" (110)—in which Dante, as Olson observes, both reproduces the antifeminist rhetoric of his times and "redeems [his female characters] from the totalizing conclusions in misogynistic rhetoric" (111). Joanna Drell presents a persuasive case for using Dante's poem to teach fourteenth-century history, both as "a contemporary's understanding and critique of his reality" and as "an introduction to historical study," including practice in the "[e]valuation of sources, close reading and critical analysis" (120). Madison U. Sowell offers his thoughts "On Selecting the 'Best' Translation of Dante" and, along the way, reminds us of some of the unique characteristics of Dante's Italian (including the fact that each tercet of the poem consists of 33 syllables—the same number as the number of cantos in each section

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of the poem and the number of years that Christ lived on earth). Suzanne Hagedorn suggests several ways to package general education courses that include Dante, as well as a provocative classroom technique for opening up discussion of the *Inferno*—a “damned rhetoric” exercise that prompts students to consider how characters in Dante’s hell view themselves and how they speak to Dante. Simone Marchesi offers a number of larger course strategies and more focused classroom techniques for directing and enlivening the instruction of Dante, including assigning students topics on which they are to do research and become “the class resident expert” (217) and asking students to initiate discussion by providing a single keyword or “one-word lecture” that encapsulates a canto (219).

As a longtime teacher of Dante myself, one of the most reassuring takeaways of the book for me was the recurring idea in multiple essays that Dante cannot be taught in a vacuum—that the thick intertextuality of Dante’s day requires familiarity with the complex network of texts out of which Dante composes and with which he often assumes familiarity on the part of his reader. Whether in a broad survey of literature to 1700 or in an upper-level course focused just on Dante, I don’t believe that I have ever taught the *Divine Comedy* without assigning other primary texts relevant to particular moments in the poem (including Virgil, Ovid, various biblical texts, Brunetto Latini, Bertran de Born, Sordello, Guido Guinizelli, and Dante’s own earlier poetry). Like other medieval writers, Dante was educated in a system that encouraged bookishness—because of the existence of a shared store of authoritative texts (of which the Bible, Virgil, and Ovid were supreme) and a strong tradition of appropriation and citation of previous texts and authors. Medieval writers, unlike their more recent counterparts, rely heavily on texts as the subject and focus of their writing. Even Chaucer’s illiterate Wife of Bath, who claims to base her principles solely on personal experience, is primarily responding to texts in her famous prologue—from the Bible and Saint Jerome to Walter Map and Theophrastus.

Students who lack familiarity with Dante’s rich intertext are therefore at a disadvantage, and an instructor must inevitably decide how best to make up this deficit. Roughly a quarter of the essays in *Approaches to Teaching Dante’s Divine Comedy* suggest assigning other primary texts—literary, linguistic, philosophical, religious, political, visual, documentary—in conjunction with particular

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cantos of Dante in order to tackle this problem. Perhaps the best example of this approach is F. Regina Psaki's "itinerary" of background readings in relation to Beatrice and courtly love (82-85). This itinerary pairs passages in Dante with clusters of primary texts and excerpts that provide students with a richer understanding of the literary context of love in Dante's poem. But as Psaki herself notes, "a course that intended to focus on another issue altogether—the proper role(s) of church and state, for example, or the nature and value of pagan antiquity—could deploy the same strategy" (83). I myself could envision a course that focuses on multiple such topics—e.g., love, antiquity, and Florentine politics, all three. In the past, I have had students read other literary texts in conjunction with the *Commedia*, but I now picture adding other kinds of texts as well, such as excerpts from Florentine chronicles (including, say, the story from Giovanni Villani's *Nuova Cronica* of the dastardly Ghibelline plot to destroy the Guelph church of San Giovanni Battista in conjunction with the story in *Inferno* 19 of Dante's breaking of a baptismal font in that same church).

I finished the book with lots of fresh ideas for future Dante classes, but I felt a note of sadness as I was reading. While I very much appreciate the creative approaches to teaching Dante that the volume offers, too many of the essays seem to me to focus externally rather than internally on Dante's poem. The essays that recommend fostering familiarity with medieval intertextuality are part of this external focus, looking to outside background texts to illuminate Dante's text in front of us, but another, less reassuring motif in the volume is the presumed need to enliven interest in Dante among students by looking outwardly from the *Commedia* to other, more current texts in various media (graphic novels, video games, African-American novels). I have no objections to using pop culture and topical references to "hook" students and draw them to the study of Dante, but I'd have welcomed more essays in the volume that focused more directly on Dante's text alone and on specifically literary—rather than interdisciplinary—approaches to the poem. How might a little Derrida and deconstruction change how students approach the unreliable narrators in the *Inferno*, for example? How would a glance at Althusser and a focus on ideological triggering in the text enrich our reading of the Florentine politics that haunt so much of the poem? Where might a bit of Freudian analysis take us in a poem of such primal resonance? Couldn't we all learn more about how to use close reading

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effectively in the classroom? For a book about teaching a literary text, primarily in literature classes, this new edition of *Approaches to Teaching Dante's Divine Comedy* spends relatively little time on literary approaches to Dante. While so much of the volume is stimulating and useful, I'm sad that so little of it seems to be focused on literary analysis of Dante's poem itself.

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