

Justin Steinberg. *Accounting for Dante: Urban Readers and Writers in Late Medieval Italy*.

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It is clear from the first pages that Justin Steinberg's book is innovative and groundbreaking. Returning the rightful importance to the cultural circumstances and social context surrounding some of Dante's most important declarations of poetics, this critical analysis provides new and convincing answers to highly-debated issues. It effectively accounts for Dante's repeated attempts at directing his readership, not only using well-known self-referential speech acts, but especially through careful manipulation of the instruments and techniques of book production and circulation.

Focusing on the transcriptions of vernacular lyric poetry in the *Memoriali Bolognesi*, chapter 1 successfully demonstrates that the selection of lyrics presented in these manuscripts and the codification of different formats for their transmission are part of an active and conscious cultural policy. The choice of lyrics offers clear evidence of the Bolognese notaries' support for an emerging cultural ideology, inextricably linking their transcriptions to their social and historical context. For Steinberg, the occurrence of Dante's writings in the *Memoriali* has therefore a specific cultural sign, especially evident when contrasted with his general exclusion from contemporary lyric anthologies. Examining in detail the notaries' changing practices and techniques, Steinberg also reveals the lyrics' function in the manuscripts as both textual and cultural artifacts, thus demolishing the established view that assigned them the purely practical and legal purpose of filling blank spaces on the page. In chapter 2, Dante's discussion in the *Vita nova* of the circulation and interpretation of the crucial "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" is examined in relationship to the specific issues raised by the material dissemination of the *canzone*. Steinberg concentrates in particular on its occurrence in Vat. Lat. 3793, where the transcription of "Donne ch'avete" is followed by a somewhat trivializing and simplifying response in the form of the anonymous *canzone*, "Ben aggia l'amoroso et dolce chore." In an attempt to reclaim the philosophical complexity of his composition and preserve the original message of his *canzone*, Dante was forced, Steinberg argues, to unequivocally define the hermeneutical framework of "Donne ch'avete" and to establish its innovative poetic focus on authenticity and

interiority. It was, in fact, his acute insight into issues of reception and readership that drove him to constantly and publicly revise his positions in response to unwarranted interpretation of his work.

However, the inauthentic, ritualized, and conventional poetic dialogue constructed by the anonymous *amico* in “Ben aggia” better responded to the taste and ideological discourse originating the collection in Vat. Lat. 3793, as becomes even clearer in chapter 3. Here, a close inspection of the notions informing the literary history offered by Dante in his *De vulgari eloquentia* lead Steinberg to reframe the treatise as a conscious reaction to cultural operations like the Vatican collection and to the municipal poetics epitomized there. Dante codified a new linguistic space to reject this cultural system, Steinberg convincingly argues, so that an illustrious vernacular could exist beyond geographical specificity and escape the boundaries of local politics. In this conceptual dimension, the exiled author could create a permanent *locus* for his writings, where his creation remained immune from the uncertainty that conditions every contextualized communicative act. But Dante, Steinberg justly insists, always remained keenly aware of the importance of space, time, and material circumstances for the reception of his texts, thus withstanding a consuming intellectual conflict between coming to terms with his ineludible historicity and fulfilling his pressing desire to transcend space and time. Such concerns and aspirations were uncommon in mercantile Florence, where poetry remained a public and standardized display of class and gender. As the codicological features of Vat. Lat. 3793 examined in chapter 4 openly reveal, the production and collection of literary texts constituted a social practice integral to the collective cultural interaction of the ruling class. The poet-banker Monte Andrea perfectly embodied all aspects of this mercantile poetics. His municipal focus, his extreme *trobar clus*, his debt to Guittone, his endorsement of a sceptical and materialistic mentality promoting self-interest and wealth, fully expressed the literary and political paradigm inspiring the anthology. Monte’s consistent omission from Dante’s literary canon is nothing short of predictable. And yet, Steinberg warns us, it is crucial to bear in mind that Dante’s motivations were foremost ideological, before psychological, aesthetic, doctrinal. As proved in chapter 5, the extremely problematic system of tacit references to Monte’s poetry traceable in *Inferno* is indicative of Dante’s engagement with contemporary issues of class tensions and social struggle. Critics have rarely questioned Dante’s silence over Monte and his strenuous attempts at distancing himself from the mentality of the emerging mercantile class. His energy and determination in constructing a self-referential hermeneutical framework as the only legitimate source of his poetic assume a very different meaning when examined, as Steinberg does, in the light of the material and historical need of granting circulation and authority to his writings.

In an attempt to overcome more simplistic and less historicized views, Steinberg shows how Dante’s literary choices were in fact articulate responses to the political, economical, and material circumstances the poet found in his surrounding cultural context and to the ideological challenges he had to face to secure a

place in history for his production. This investigation opens up Dante's work to the historical reality of his time and for once tries to interpret both in the light of their reciprocal interaction. Undoubtedly, one of the book's greatest merits is to finally reestablish "Dante as a historically specific reader and author" (3).

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