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BOOK REVIEW

Aldo S. Bernardo & Anthony L. Pellegrini (2006).
***Companion to Dante's Divine Comedy: A Comprehensive Guide for the Student and General Reader, Revised Edition.* Published under the auspices of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. Harpur College, Binghamton University: Global Academic Publishing. 217 pp. ISBN: 978-1-58684-263-5**

reviewed by Diana Glenn (Flinders University)

This revised edition, at a distance of 38 years since its appearance as *A Critical Study Guide to Dante's Divine Comedy* (a volume long out of print), offers useful study aids, including schematic charts, visual representations of the topography of the *Comedy*, biographical highlights and comparative chronological data. Composed in an accessible, unadorned style, Bernardo's and Pellegrini's companion study guide has appeal for English-speaking readers such as undergraduates, members of Dante reading or study groups and general readers of the poem.

A number of sections are quite succinct, for example, the historical account of Dante's life (21-24) and the brief section on the poet's other works (24-26). However, they serve a more positive function when seen as springboards for further discussion and elucidation of Dante's achievement; a task to be undertaken presumably under the guidance of a teacher well-versed in Dante scholarship who can provide the reader with opportunities for in-depth critical exposition or argument.

A background section entitled "Why Dante?" (29-39) begins by reminding the reader of T.S. Eliot's pertinent observation that Dante and Shakespeare "divide the modern world between them; there is no third" (29). According to the authors, the "abiding vitality" of Dante's great poem is attributed to the "incomparable power of his poetry" and "its complete and intimate involvement with existence" (29). In this section the authors outline major metaphorical devices employed by the Florentine poet, while providing introductory information on what is termed the "Christian epic" (based on Santayana's description), medieval cosmology, numerology, colour symbolism and the four-fold method of exegesis deployed by commentators in accordance with the statements found in the epistle dedicating the third canticle of the *Comedy* to Can Grande della Scala of Verona.

The main body of the volume comprises a series of summaries. A capsule summary of the three canticles of the *Comedy* equips the reader with a handy overview of the otherworldly journey. Dante-pilgrim's journey, in its doctrinal context, is presented as the soul's longing for the good. Most importantly, for our understanding of the poem, the enterprise is initiated by divine love, represented by Beatrice who symbolises Revelation. Worth noting in the capsule summary is that *Purgatorio* I-VIII is discussed in terms of the echoes and contrasts with *Inferno*, whereas the increased use of metaphor is highlighted when considering the ineffability of the *Paradiso*.

The introductory section is followed by a comprehensive summary of the entire work, with the narrative sequence of each canto linked to an interpretation of the significance of the events therein. Readers will find the overviews and commentaries most helpful and accessible in their style and content. In gauging its stand-alone merits, the volume succeeds in providing valuable starting-point summaries and overviews of Dante's drama of salvation; his story of "repentance, reform, and regeneration" (176) in a poem that is aptly described as a "hymn to love in all its manifestations" (183). The final section of the volume includes a critical analysis, character analyses, study questions and possible research areas for critical enquiry.

The authors are at pains to remind the reader that a suspension of disbelief is required when approaching the *Comedy* for the first time. However, while the poem does assume a certain knowledge of theological concepts, the volume offers no glossary assistance for understanding concepts such as the Incarnation or Predestination. A close scrutiny of the bibliography reveals remarkably few critical works or translations published in recent decades and there is no mention made of electronic resources. The latter is an unfortunate omission in a publication appearing in the new millennium. Nevertheless, *Companion to Dante's Divine Comedy* offers many benefits for the general or even first-time reader and may be considered a worthy study companion.