Review of Dante: The Poet, the Political Thinker, the Man, Barbara Reynolds

Homan, Delmar C.

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Barbara Reynolds, a life-long Dante translator, scholar, and teacher, has written this book from a complete re-reading and re-thinking of Dante after her retirement. The book comprises 56 chapters and an Epilogue, of varying lengths but each of a topic that one can imagine would make a day’s lecture in a year-long course on Dante. The author even announces the next topic at the end of some chapters, as a teacher might announce the next lecture topic at the end of a class period. It is not that the book seems to recycle old lecture notes but that rather the author organizes the book as would a professor talking with her students, as she clearly and carefully passes along the results of her latest research, reading, and thinking.

Reynolds believes that Dante wrote to be read aloud, and she explores the onomatopoeia and rhetorical stance of his originals. Each translation is preceded by its original so that even those “without Italian” are helped to imagine the effect of the sounds that Dante’s audience heard, while those “with Italian” can test her interpretation easily.

This book is for everyone interested in Dante. This will include those wishing an introduction to Dante’s life and works, a refresher course, a supplemental resource for teaching, an approach to the poetry in the original Italian with English translation, or the latest scholarship, with many new ideas and challenges along the way.

The book gives both biography and literary criticism, with the biography interspersed and used to illuminate the textual analysis. The first chapters provide biographical/historical information for the following analysis of the first works written by Dante. Thereafter the
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The book alternates the factual and the interpretive, including literary, political, and philosophical/religious analysis.

Thus, the book shows the importance of Dante as a politician and negotiator after he turned thirty (the age for a citizen of Florence to become active in politics) and until he was exiled from Florence after six years when his party lost control. However, even in exile his help was requested by those leaders who offered him refuge during the last twenty years of his life.

Examples of philosophical/religious background include the political reasoning behind Dante's strong support for the office of Holy Roman Emperor (though not for the holders of the office in his lifetime) and a suggested reason for Dante's obvious dislike of Pope Boniface VIII, as shown in the Divine Comedy.

Literary analysis includes Dante's use, beyond the well-known 3 and 100, of numerology and "mystical addition," especially explained in chapters 2, 16, and 40, with endnotes for bibliographical references. (The index will not help.) The book also emphasizes the importance of popular culture incorporated in descriptions in Dante's work, as, for example, chapter 21 explains the drawing of the actions and language of the devils from medieval art and drama. (Again, the index will not help.) Those with special interests will probably make their own indices.

An example of a new support to an old literary/historical question, followed by new analysis of the text, is found in chapter 41, "Who is Matilda?" Here the author explains the old answer with more modern objections before her new analysis supports the answer given originally by Dante's son Pietro.

She asserts, in fact, that almost all chapters contain new insights, although she does not always highlight their newness by moving from former answers to new ones. These new insights seem to be emphasized even in the dedication of her book to her many students "for whom I wish I had been more courageous." Thus a novice or an only generally informed reader will use the insights as directions back to the text under study, and the scholar will add these fresh, careful explanations to those already known.

No one should overlook the "Epilogue," which describes Dante's last days, first as a negotiator for Ravenna's lord, then as a malaria
victim after his return from Venice through a marshland, and finally as a visitant who talks with his son Jacopo in a dream to tell him where to find the final thirteen cantos of the *Divine Comedy*, which no one has been able to find during the search in the eight months since his death. Boccaccio is cited as authority for the last story, based on his oral interviews with Dante’s sons and others before he wrote Dante’s biography. The reader is also reminded in the last sentence of the book that Boccaccio also added *divina* to the title of Dante’s *Commedia*.

This book, in sum, is a magisterial delight.