

## Exploring Dante

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Robert C. Evans

*The present essay offers an overview of the topics discussed in all the succeeding essays, thus helping readers quickly locate which essays may be most relevant to their particular interests.*

This volume, like all the others in the Critical Insights series, is divided into several sections. It begins with an introductory essay, then provides a deliberately brief biography, then offers four contextual essays, then moves to ten critical readings, before finally closing with a list of helpful resources.

**An introductory essay by Edwin Wong highlights Dante’s complex attitudes toward some of the great writers, from the classical period, who preceded him.**

Edwin Wong’s opening essay, titled “Amplifications of Antiquity in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*,” provides a lively overview of Dante’s reasons for writing as well as of his relations with his classical predecessors. Dante admired the great classical poets who preceded him (especially Virgil), but Wong argues that he also saw himself in competition *with* them. He felt strongly confident, both about his own talents as a poet and about the worthiness of the poetic project he was undertaking in writing the *Divine Comedy*. In fact, he even

made himself that poem's chief character and narrator. According to Wong, Dante understood, however, that the disadvantage of "writing his own personal odyssey [was] that praising himself was in poor taste." Therefore, instead of offering "self-praise, he adopts the narrative strategy of amplifying and overcoming antiquity: if others invoke the Muses so many times, he will invoke more Muses more often. If others sight landfall, he *makes* landfall." Wong thinks that even as Dante "blows the stars out of the sky, he says the right things, humbling himself, paying his debts to his predecessors, addressing them with reverence: in a world where the last will be first, and the first will be last, to be last is the best strategy. To this day," Wong asserts, Dante "is remembered as the humble hero, who, despite being past his prime, pushed back the everlasting night by everywhere going further than everyone else."

Next, in an intentionally brief biography, Robert Evans sketches the main events of Dante's life, including his childhood, his early encounter with "Beatrice," his short military career, his involvement in the politics of Florence, his eventual exile from that city, his later wanderings throughout Italy, and the composition of his various works, including the *Commedia*, later known as the *Divine Comedy*.

## CRITICAL CONTEXTS

**Four introductory essays discuss Dante's life and works by (1) examining them in a historical context, (2) reporting how various recent critics have responded to them, (3) adopting a specific critical lens to study them, and (4) comparing and contrasting them with the life and works of another major author.**

In the first of the four contextual essays, Brandon Schneeberger adopts a historical approach in his exploration of "The Life of Dante and the *Commedia*." He provides "a reading of Marco Santagata's *Dante: The Story of His Life*, translated into English by Richard Dixon" in 2016. Rather than trying to survey Dante's entire complex career, Schneeberger instead focuses "on the events in Dante's life that helped to shape some of his lesser-known writings as well as his greatest literary work, the *Commedia*." He notes that

## Amplifications of Antiquity in Dante's *Divine Comedy*

Edwin Wong

*Edwin Wong's introductory essay explores a major issue relevant to any reading of the Divine Comedy: how does Dante present himself in relation to the great classical poets who preceded him—poets he deeply admired but poets with whom he was also deliberately and obviously competing? According to Wong, "Instead of engaging in self-praise, Dante adopts the narrative strategy of amplifying and overcoming antiquity: if others invoke the Muses so many times, he will invoke more Muses more often. If others sight landfall, he makes landfall." He thus seeks both to honor and surpass the writers he most valued.*

Some pursue wealth. Others, love. Many pursue knowledge. Few, however, pursue undying fame. They are the dreamers who, like writer Ernest Hemingway, "face eternity, or the lack of it, each day" ("Nobel Speech"). The elect, stung by destiny's allure, desire an everlasting day of remembrance. Reading their Horace, they nod their heads:

Now have I reared a monument more durable than brass,  
And one that doth the royal scale of pyramids surpass,  
Nor shall defeated Aquilo destroy, nor soaking rain,

Nor yet the countless tide of years, nor seasons in their  
train.

Not all of me shall die: my praise shall grow, and never  
end. (*Odes* 3.30)

How they acquired their longing, no one knows. Some, perhaps, were born with it. Others, perhaps, acquired it through nurture. When Alexander the Great was young, as his mother said in his left ear that the king of gods, rather than Philip, was his father, Philip would say in his right “My boy, you must find a kingdom which is your equal. Macedon is too small” (Plutarch *Alexander* 3, 6). Although no one knows how their dreams began, everyone knows that Dante, an Italian poet from the thirteenth century, wanted to live forever.

To play the long game, Dante invested the last fourteen years of his life writing the *Divine Comedy*, a work he refers to as the *Commedia*. It contains a blueprint of how one trades in fourteen years to live forever. In the *Commedia*, he has Dante, his fictionalized self, say: “I have as yet won very little fame” (*Purgatorio* 14.21). When he wrote those words, he had already become the best of the Italian poets. Italy, however, was too small. He was after more. In a telltale sign of his appetite, the shade of the poet Virgil uses fame as a goad when Dante despairs:

“Up on your feet! This is not time to tire!”  
my Master cried. “The man who lies asleep  
will never waken fame, and his desire  
and all his life drift past him like a dream,  
and the traces of his memory fade from time  
like smoke in air, or ripples on a stream.”

(*Inferno* 24.46–51)

“I am strong and ready,” Dante replies, stung (24.60).

His fear betrays his yearning: “I am afraid,” he says, “I shall not live for those / who will think of these days as ‘the ancient times’”

## A Biography of Dante Alighieri

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Robert C. Evans

*This deliberately brief biography sketches the main events of Dante's life, including his childhood, his early encounter with "Beatrice," his short military career, his involvement in the politics of Florence, his eventual exile from that city, his later wanderings throughout Italy, and the composition of his various works, including the Commedia, later known as the Divine Comedy.*

Dante (aka Durante) Alighieri was born in Italy in the city of Florence, probably on May 29, 1265, to a lawyer named Aldighiero degli Aldighieri and his second wife, probably Gabriella degli Abati, known as "Bella."<sup>1</sup> Already, during Dante's boyhood, Italy in general and Florence in particular were politically unsettled, partly because of an ongoing conflict between two factions, the Guelphs (who supported the papacy and with whom Dante's family was initially aligned) and the Ghibellines (who supported the rule of the Holy Roman Emperor). The dispute between these two groups would play a crucial and highly complex part in the poet's later life and would eventually lead to his own expulsion from Florence, a major event in his personal story and one that would also have a huge impact on his career as a writer.

Dante's mother died sometime in the early 1270s (Jay Rudd says her death occurred in approximately 1272), when he was still a young boy, but he later claimed that it was two years later, in 1274, when he was just nine, that he first met a figure who would become, in many ways, the most important woman of his life. In 1274 she was an eight-year-old girl called "Beatrice" ("she who makes happy"), who is often identified as Bici Portinari, the daughter of a neighbor. Accord-

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**In 1274, when he was just nine, he first met an eight-year-old girl called 'Beatrice' ('she who makes happy').**

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ing to Dante's later version of events, his early encounter with Beatrice was a decisive development in his life, although it is difficult to know just how literally to take these later claims. He reports, in his important later collection of poems-with-prose-commentary titled the *Vita Nuova* (*New Life*), that he instantly fell in love with Beatrice, having been impressed by her humility, gentleness, and angelic beauty and having interpreted her mere presence as a gift from God. She, meanwhile, may have known nothing of the impact he would later claim she had on him.

In any case, three years later, in 1277, when Dante was now a talented student, his widowed father, who had himself remarried and had another son as well as a daughter, arranged that the twelve-year-old Dante would eventually marry not Beatrice but an entirely different girl—a ten-year-old named Gemma di Manetto Donati. Dante's father died sometime in the several years after this marriage was contracted, and the marriage, when it eventually did occur several years after the engagement, receives far less attention in Dante's writings than his obsession with Beatrice, although the marriage to Gemma did ultimately lead to the birth of four children, named Giovanni, Iacopo, Pietro, and Antonia.

By the early 1280s Dante had begun writing poetry, had become friends with an important fellow poet named Guido Cavalcanti, had developed a strong interest in reading of all sorts, and had begun studying with a learned man and significant political figure named



Fig. 1. Dante's House in Florence, via Wikipedia.

Brunetto Latini. In short, both Dante's serious studies and his literary career had begun, but by 1289 he had also made a name for himself as a brave cavalryman in a battle in which he and his fellow Guelphs defeated the Ghibellines at Campaldino. Dante was proving himself skilled in the various kinds of attainments often valued in his day, making a name for himself not only as a writer and soldier but also, before long, as a significant political figure.

It was in June 1290, however, that an even more profound event in Dante's life occurred: the death of Beatrice, which affected him quite deeply, plunging him into great grief and extended weeping. He decided, however, not to write much about Beatrice until God had first granted him the ability to describe her (and her impact on his life) in ways that might do justice to such a lofty and noble subject. Eventually, of course, he would make her the symbol of godly love in his greatest work of all, the *Divine Comedy*. But in the years following her death he did begin writing the *Vita Nuova*, which Jay Ruud has called "a fictionalized autobiography of his love of Beatrice told through a collection of his youthful poems about her"

## The Life of Dante and the *Commedia*

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Brandon Schneeberger

*Employing a historical approach, Brandon Schneeberger provides a reading of Marco Santagata's Dante: The Story of His Life, translated into English by Richard Dixon (2016). Schneeberger focuses on the ways Santagata describes the events in Dante's life that helped to shape some of his lesser-known writings as well as his greatest literary work, the Commedia. He reports that "Santagata presents a very detailed account of the specific educational, historical, political, geographical, and relational factors that influenced Dante the person and the writer."*

This essay will provide a reading of Marco Santagata's *Dante: The Story of His Life*, translated into English by Richard Dixon (2016). Such an essay cannot possibly convey all, or even the majority, of the content of Santagata's biography. I, therefore, focus on the events in Dante's life that helped to shape some of his lesser-known writings as well as his greatest literary work, the *Commedia*. Santagata's biography is divided into two parts, the first four chapters documenting Dante's life before exile, and the final six tracing his life in exile. The biography is particularly useful for readers and scholars of the *Commedia*, as Santagata presents a detailed account of the specific educational, historical, political, geographical, and relational factors that influenced Dante the person and the writer.



*Dante: The Story of His Life* helps us better understand the shifting political viewpoints, and what may be considered political inconsistencies, characteristic of Dante while he was writing the *Commedia*. Moreover, Santagata scrupulously records Dante's travels during exile and helpfully analyzes the importance of location for Dante as he wrote his masterpiece.

### **The Florentine Years: 1265–1302**

In his opening chapter, Santagata explains that from an early age Dante believed he was destined to be great. He “glimpsed some sign of destiny, the shadow of an unavoidable fate, the mark of a higher will” that led him to a “conviction that he had been invested by God with the prophetic mission of saving humanity” (4). Dante's family were likely moderate Guelfs, one of the political factions that contested for dominance in Florence for many decades. Although his family was not wealthy, Dante had a private tutor, and it seems likely that he began attending school in the 1270s (25). As a child, he suffered from various health problems, including poor eyesight and cases of epilepsy. Santagata suggests that Dante's poor eyesight led to his devotion to St. Lucy, patron saint of the blind and those with eye trouble and an important saint in the *Commedia* (28). Dante believed his epileptic fits were signs of his predestined greatness, and he attributed to them his first encounter with Beatrice, the woman who had such a great influence on his mind and spirit (33). Dante records that he first met Beatrice at the age of nine and did not see her again until he was eighteen, a fact reinforcing his deep interest in the number nine, an important number for the *Commedia* (36). But Beatrice's marriage to Simone dei Bardi made her one of Florence's elite, and she was socially distanced from Dante (39). His marriage to Gemma Donati also involved an alliance with a powerful family (41). The prenuptials were signed when Dante was just twelve years old, and he was married sometime between 1283 and 1285.

In chapter 2, Santagata discusses Dante's marriage and family before turning to his service in battle and the early years of his

## **“By the testimony of reason and authority”: Reason, Rhetoric, and Literature in Dante’s *Monarchia***

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Matthew M. Thiele

*Examining another major work by Dante—his political treatise De Monarchia [On Monarchy]—Matthew Thiele explains that this work was “aimed at a specific audience at a particular moment in time. Its stated purpose is to justify the authority of the Holy Roman Emperor and limit the governing authority of the pope. “This,” Thiele notes, “was primarily a religious dispute, and Dante relies heavily on his understanding of theology, scripture, and the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church to support his argument.” Thiele cautions, however, that this text by Dante exemplifies “the complicity of the learned in legitimizing and reifying dominant power structures. It begs us to be suspicious of those who would deploy art and philosophy in partisan politics.”*

Dante’s *Monarchia* is aimed at a specific audience at a particular moment in time. Its stated purpose is to justify the authority of the Holy Roman Emperor and limit the governing authority of the pope. This was primarily a religious dispute, and Dante relies heavily on his understanding of theology, scripture, and the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church to support his argument. History has rendered most of Dante’s original reasons for writing *Monarchia*

moot—the Holy Roman Empire no longer exists, and the pope’s temporal authority has been extremely reduced from what it was a thousand years ago—but certain aspects of Dante’s text that remain relevant have not been properly analyzed.

Friar Guido Vernani of Remini, in around 1328, wrote a refutation of *Monarchia* that addresses what he considers to be the text’s religious shortcomings, but his critique does not offer a comprehensive analysis of Dante’s references to philosophy and literature, and he had little to say about Dante’s use of rhetoric. The ways that religion and government cooperate to legitimize governing authority have been well understood for centuries, but the roles of philosophy and literature in this are not highlighted enough. Dante’s *Monarchia* is an important early example of the ways governing authorities can abuse thinking, learning, and art.

### **The Appeal to Authority**

There is nothing extraordinarily unorthodox about Dante’s rhetoric in *Monarchia*. Early on, he indicates that he will support his claims by referring to authority and reason. Each of the three Books of *Monarchia* is designed to investigate one specific problem related to the conflict between the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor over the proper seat of secular governing authority. Book 1 asks “whether temporal monarchy is necessary for the well-being of the world” (115). In answering this question, Dante proposes to use rhetorical appeals based on reason and the authority of classical authors:

This, certainly, can be demonstrated (since no force of reason or authority is opposed) with extremely strong and valid arguments, the first of which we adduce from the authority of the Philosopher [i.e., Aristotle] in his *Politics*. There, in fact, this venerable authority affirms that when several things are ordered to unity, one of them must rule or govern, whereas the others must be governed or ruled. Indeed, not only the authority of his glorious name, but

## Rare Illustrated Editions of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (With Some Thoughts on Using Illustrations to Read and Teach Dante)

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Robert C. Evans

*In the present essay, Robert Evans suggests that “anyone wanting to learn more about the actual poetic methods of the Divine Comedy—or anyone wanting to teach those methods to students—can benefit from reading the poem side-by-side with as many different illustrations as possible. On the one hand,” Evans argues, “illustrations can help us notice details in Dante’s narrative that we may miss through our own mere reading, because artists are often trained to notice visual clues and details that many of us may overlook. On the other hand,” he continues, “illustrations can also help us notice how Dante’s poetry sometimes radically differs from the artistry employed by the poem’s illustrators.” Evans’s essay looks at a number of illustrations of Dante’s poem, including some from rare and little-known editions from the nineteenth century.*

Of all the great classic poets of the Western world, Dante is definitely one of the writers who has appealed most to visual artists. His *Divine Comedy*, completed in the early fourteenth century, became the subject of painters, engravers, and book illustrators almost from the start, and the tradition of illustrating his epic masterpiece continues to this day. Illustrated editions of Dante became particularly widely available

in the nineteenth century, when literacy rates in Western nations rose impressively and when highly efficient printing presses could bring out editions that could be purchased by the thousands (unlike medieval illuminated manuscripts) and when circulating libraries made it possible for many people to borrow or at least examine books they might not personally be able to afford. It was the work of the immensely talented French artist Gustave Doré (1832–83), in particular, who showed just how popular illustrations of Dante’s work could become. His splendid depictions of episodes from the *Divine Comedy*, produced in the mid-1800s, quickly became available in editions published in Europe, North America, Australia, and other places where Western culture was valued. Doré’s vivid illustrations became, if anything, even more popular and even more widely available in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries when they could be reproduced—in books, in full-sized reproductions, on posters and T-shirts, especially on the Internet—either at little cost or at no cost at all.

Doré’s impact can be seen, for instance, in a rare 1894 Greek edition of the *Divine Comedy*, which includes illustrations that sometimes look like outright copies of Doré’s work, even though subtle differences are detectable if the original and the “copy” are examined side-by-side. Consider, for instance, figs. 1 and 2. Fig. 1 is a much-miniaturized version of Doré’s drawing of the leopard confronting the pilgrim in *Inferno* (Canto I). Fig. 2 is a small and subtly different copy of Doré’s drawing—a version that appears in the 1894 Greek edition.



Fig. 1. Dante confronted by the leopard. Illustration by Doré, owned by volume editor.



Fig. 2. Dante confronted by the leopard. Copy of Doré’s drawing in 1894 Greek edition, owned by volume editor.

## Chronology of Dante's Life<sup>1</sup>

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<b>May 1265</b>	Dante is born in Florence.
<b>early 1270s</b>	Dante's mother dies [Lansing dates her death ca. 1270-75; Ruud dates it to ca. 1272].
<b>May 1274</b>	Dante later recalls that as a boy he met, in 1274, a slightly younger neighbor girl, whom he calls "Beatrice" (often identified as Bici Portinari) with whom he claims he immediately fell in love because of her beautiful character and with whom he remained obsessed for the rest of his life.
<b>1277</b>	Dante's father engages his son to be eventually married to Gemma Donati.
<b>early 1280s</b>	Dante's father dies [Lansing dates his death to "1281 or 1282 (1283?)"; Ruud dates it to "about" 1283.
<b>sometime in the 1280s or in 1290</b>	Dante marries Gemma Donati. [Lansing dates the marriage to 1285 or 1290; Ruud dates it to 1283 "or shortly thereafter."
<b>1289</b>	Dante serves in the cavalry in the Battle of Campaldino.
<b>June 1290</b>	"Beatrice" dies, devastating Dante.
<b>early 1290s</b>	Dante begins writing his <i>Vita Nuova</i> ( <i>New Life</i> ). [Lansing dates this work to "1294 (1292?)"; Ruud dates its beginning to 1293.
<b>November 1295 to April 1296</b>	According to Lansing, Dante serves as a member of Florence's "Council of Thirty-Six."
<b>1296</b>	According to both Lansing and Ruud, Dante becomes a member of Florence's "Council of the Hundred."