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Reviews

The critical interventions of *Wonderful to Relate* are many and important. In particular, Koopmans' untangling of the relationships between the Becket miracle collections will be invaluable. In many cases, she reorients traditional interpretations and offers new perspectives. For example, Koopmans disputes Southern's argument that the impulse behind miracle collecting reflected the need for and importance of a written record, as well as those arguments that see in miracle collections a propaganda for the monastic reform movement directed at the laity. Here, however, I was sometimes left wondering if her central argument that the chief motivating factor behind the collection of miracles was a desire to preserve the past takes her texts a bit too much at face value. After all, this study does such a good job of presenting these miracle collections as key and central cultural documents that it is difficult not to see them performing variously in multiple contexts. Nevertheless, throughout this study, Koopmans' insistence on unearthing and attending to the 'personal stories' that, she argues, were the lifeblood of the tradition of miracle collecting – and, indeed, of the cult of saints more generally – offers up a series of engaging anecdotes, such as the story of the Knight of Thanet, which make this book a pleasure to read and which make these miracles come alive once more.

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Massimo Verdicchio, *The Poetics of Dante's 'Paradiso'*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. xi + 177 pp. ISBN 978-1-4426-4119-8. \$45.00.

According to the author, *The Poetics of Dante's 'Paradiso'* came from a desire to continue the critical reading of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* established in his earlier work *Reading Dante Reading*, which identified the *Commedia* as a text with a predominantly ironic tone. The criticism of the characters in Paradise, which Verdicchio believes the poet intended, 'required on Dante's part the use of a very subtle irony, which, while upholding their status as blessed souls, exposed their earthly flaws ... in *Paradiso* there is no punishment, only ... an ironic smile that serves as a *contrapasso* for these souls' (p. x). The analysis of *Paradiso* is sequential, dedicating a chapter to each heaven, each beginning with a quote from the *Convivio* referencing the connection made in that work between the heaven and its respective science. While this mode of reading relies on accepting a continuity between the thought of the *Convivio* and *Commedia* which is not uncontroversial, it nevertheless acts as a productive lens for interpretation which would merit more consistent and detailed analysis.

Prologues I and II establish Verdicchio's rationale for reading the *Commedia* as primarily a work of social and linguistic critique. He puts forward a case for seeing in the figures of the *veltro* of *Inferno* I and the DXV of *Purgatorio* XXXIII respectively the *Commedia* itself and Dante the poet, whose joint role is to critique the Church and Empire. The subsequent argument is largely dependent on one's acceptance of this interpretation, though perhaps sufficient grounds for reading the *Commedia* as biting comment could be found without recourse to such an elaborate and therefore vulnerable interpretation. Furthermore, in the book as a whole the author has chosen to minimise engagement with other critical works which, while allowing for a certain purity of argument, also at times impoverishes it. Prologue II establishes 'the poetics of *Paradiso* as an allegory of irony' as only this mode of reading recognises Dante's intention to reveal the deception and 'empty rhetoric' (22) of language.

The chapters dedicated to the heavens of the Moon, Mercury and Venus argue that by connecting the heaven with its respective science Dante is encouraging us to see the souls met there as two-sided, their words concealing another truth. The partial illumination-partial truth manifested in the image of the moon spots and suggested by the heaven's relation to grammar leads to the suggestions that the moon's principal characters are engaged in acts of deception. In Mercury, Justinian, the representative of Empire, is suggested to be an unreliable, anti-example of justice when the narrative of his actions is read in the light of their historical context. The souls in Venus, principally Charles Martel representing the House of Anjou, are revealed as lacking maturity, development, and self-knowledge, still equating love with pleasure and being misled by its language.

In opposition to those who read these cantos as a manifestation of the intellectual and spiritual harmony of Dante's religious thought acting against the corruption of the Church, Verdicchio reads the heaven of the Sun as characterised by religious conflict and by Dante's desire to highlight the blessed souls' earthly flaws, thereby carrying out a critique of the Church. However, because other ways in which Dante engages with Dominicanism and Franciscanism in the *Commedia* as a whole are not addressed, it is difficult to substantiate the argument beyond these cantos. That these cantos — and those in the heaven of Saturn — criticise the corruption of the religious orders, is somewhat self-evident.

The following six chapters continue to emphasise the ironical tone of the *Paradiso* to prove that its message is to be found by seeking beyond the literal words and reading the characters and events in the light of certain historical facts. In Verdicchio's analysis of the heaven of Mars, Cacciaguida is presented as characterised by 'greed and evil', as the 'caesar responsible for Florence's civil wars' (p. 81), whose real historical actions undermine his positive heavenly projection. This furthermore make implausible the historical Dante's familial relationship to him. On the heaven of Jupiter, the disharmony, which marks this canto, is demonstrated and stress placed on the reference to the corrupt princes of the earth so that 'the story of the Monarchy as told by the Eagle is a story of corruption, debauchery ... Justice is nowhere to be found' (p. 112). In analysing the heaven of Fixed Stars, Verdicchio suggests that Dante undermines the three apostolic figures by reference to 'historical' details which appear to counteract their virtues. The arguments here are weakened by the selectiveness of those details listed, lack of further references, and assumptions about the poet Dante's thinking, which do not always ring true. For example, contrary to casting Peter as the example of anti-faith, one could argue that it is precisely his doubt and later convictions which make him an accessible and humane example of human weakness and potential. Both here and elsewhere, some of the points (and terms, for example *piacer*, *disio*) which are raised could be made more convincing if placed in dialogue with these issues as they are present in the text as a whole. The analysis of the Primum Mobile reiterates the important theme of the misuse and deceptiveness of language. The role of the *Commedia* comes to be to teach proper, ironic reading. Verdicchio's analysis of the Empyrean relies heavily on his readers' knowledge of *Reading Dante Reading*, and undertakes only a cursory analysis of the figure of Beatrice and Dante's vision of the heavenly city.

Verdicchio's book is strongest in its call for a reading of the *Paradiso* which allows for a tone of critical irony, highlighting the essential deceptiveness and insufficiency of language. In its desire to give an 'oppositional' interpretation to the general positive view of the blessed souls, however, he goes too far (in his eagerness to support his interpretative stance) in asserting Dante's negative, critical tone. A more productive analysis may be produced by

a recognition of the 'grey' areas of Dante's thought which instead of passing black and white judgements on humanity, engage with the problematics of being human in a vivified and eschatological context which is not simply driven by a desire to make a social point but is instead engaged in an exploration of human and divine nature.

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Katharine Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public, 1150–1400*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. x + 287 pp. ISBN 978-0-5211-9922-3. £58.00.

In her introduction to *Imagining an English Reading Public*, Katharine Breen explains that her book will chart the 'translation' of the Latin concept of *habitus* into a Middle English 'habit' that 'lies at the heart of — and conditions — late-fourteenth-century contests over vernacular authorship'. (As later chapters explain, medieval grammarians claimed that *habitus* — which in this context can be loosely defined as the conscious cultivation of virtue — could be acquired only through the study of grammar, and therefore of Latin.) These 'contests' are initiated by the 1381 revolt, in which William Langland's *Piers Plowman* was subjected to a radicalized interpretation. 'After 1381', Breen explains, 'English authors had to confront the fact that their texts were potentially available to anyone who could read or even speak the mother tongue'. She labels the result for Middle English authors a 'shift in imagined audience' (p. 10).

In the development of her thesis, Breen shows that she can be an intelligent, industrious researcher. However, there are some serious problems with her presentation and interpretation of this research. The most serious is that she has buried, in the next-to-last section of her last chapter, an acknowledgement that her thesis is untenable — at least for her main example, *Piers Plowman*. I can only assume that this acknowledgement was exacted by a reviewer, but what I find disturbing is that having made it, Breen did not then revise her claims about post-1381 literature.

Obviously, I must now substantiate my own claim about Breen. To do that, I provide a close reading of parts of Chapter 5, which is titled '*Piers Plowman* and the Formation of an English Literary *Habitus*'. In this chapter, Breen examines Langland's revisions of the C-text as an attempt to 'habituate' potential non-latinate readers and thus avoid the kind of misinterpretations exhibited by the 1381 rebels. In doing so, she encounters two examples that seem to point in the opposite direction, suggesting that Langland was seeking to limit rather than broaden his audience. In an effort to minimize the impact of these examples, she employs increasingly questionable strategies.

The first example is Conscience's complicated grammatical metaphor in the third passus of the C-text. Breen describes the metaphor as 'a gatekeeper or shibboleth' (p. 187), one that 'sorts authorized from unauthorized readers based on their grammatical knowledge and mastery of difficult syntax'. She seeks, however, to soften this conclusion, noting that the rendering of the grammatical terms into English suggests 'that English can be an appropriate vehicle for activating or developing a virtuous *habitus*' (p. 189). Breen then turns the focus back to the less educated, 'lower-common-denominator' audience, pointing out that Conscience, and his ally Reason, only confuse the king with their grammatical terms, while Will later comments that education is expensive. Accordingly, she concludes, Reason and Conscience 'give Will conditional permission to continue writing in hopes that the specifically literary