

# ISCAD ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY: READERSHIP, READING & READERS

E. Plesnik (Toronto, CMS)

Last update: February 2019

## Main References to Reading and Readers in Dante's Works

### Commedia: Addresses to the Reader

Gmelin (1951), Auerbach (1953) and Spitzer (1955) identify nineteen to twenty-one passages in the *Commedia* in which Dante interrupts his narrative with a few lines beginning “lettor”, “tu che leggi”, or a similar vocative. Lanci (1970) offers the following summary of the explicit addresses. See:

- *Inf.* 8.94; 16.128; 20.19; 25.46; 34.23; 9.61-63; 22.118
- *Purg.* 8.19; 9.70; 10.106; 17.1; 29.98; 31.124; 33.136
- *Par.* 2.1; 5.109; 10.7; 10.22; 13.1; 22.106.

For appeals to the reader which are implicit, see Beall (1979).

### Commedia: Reading/Misreading

Dante's concerns about the dangers of reading and potential misreading have been a popular source for discussion among scholars such as Popolizio (1980), Noakes (1983), Bennett (2008), Levine (2009), and Lombardi (2012 & 2018). See especially:

- *Inf.* 5: the story of Francesca (and Paolo).
- *Purg.* 6-7: the representation of Statius, as a counterexample to Francesca and Paolo.
- *Par.* 9: the representation of Cunizza da Romano as a good female reader.

### Vita Nova

Discussions about Dante's female readership and questions surrounding the social status of his readers have often been brought up specifically in relation to the *Vita Nova*. See especially:

- 19.1: Assertion that Dante's poetry is intended for women who have an understanding of love.
- 25.6: Dante's discussion of the origin of vernacular poetry in relation to ladies.

### Convivio

Zanin (2018) and Simonelli (1984) offer a comprehensive discussion of the addresses to reader made by Dante in the *Convivio*. See especially:

- 1.1.6-7: Dante's concerns about the limitations of his readers' understanding.



- 1.9.4-8: Dante's justification of his decision to use the vernacular in relation to his readers, who are defined as those who possess true nobility.

### Monarchia

See Kay (1992) for a discussion of the intended audience of the *Monarchia*, with reference to:

- *Mon.* 3.3.3: Dante's exclusion of decretalists, particularists and hierocrats from his intended readership.

### Epistle to Cangrande Della Scala

This letter offers instructions on how to read the *Commedia* as a depiction of earthly and divine justice. Especially see Bennett (2008) for a discussion, with reference to:

- 10.225: The inclusion of women among Dante's readers.

## **Main Topics of Discussion in Dante Studies**

### A. Dante's understanding of himself in relation to his readers

This constitutes one of the most ancient issues of discussion in the field, polarized in the arguments advanced by Auerbach (1953) and Spitzer (1955), who respectively envision:

1. Dante as prophet and judge. See Auerbach, "Dante's Addresses to the Reader," 276: "The reader is not his equal. He may well repudiate Dante's message, accuse him as a liar, a false prophet, an emissary of Hell, yet he cannot argue with him on a level of equality, he must 'take it or leave it' (...) At any rate, his relation to the reader, as expressed in the addresses, is inspired by this 'poetic fiction': Dante addresses the reader as if everything that he has to report were not only factual truth, but truth containing Divine Revelation. The reader, as envisioned by Dante (and in point of fact, Dante creates his reader), is a disciple. He is not expected to discuss or to judge, but to follow; using his own forces, but the way Dante orders him to do."
2. Dante as friend and equal. See Spitzer, "The Addresses to the Reader in the *Commedia*," 160: "In my opinion, Dante's discovery of a new auctorial relationship with the reader was the consequence of the nature of his *vision* in which the presence of the reader for whom it is told is required. Although Dante presents himself as having actually been in the Beyond and giving an accurate factual account of his travel, and although he was well aware of the originality of his treatment of his subject, he surely thought no more of himself as belonging to a superhuman category of prophets than did any truly religious poet in other ages (...) his 'I' is indeed (...) a poetic-didactic 'I' that stands vicariously for any other Christian (...)."

### B. Dante's readers

Dante scholars have alternatively investigated the historical reality of Dante's intended audience or insisted on its fictive nature.



1. The historical reality of Dante's readers. See Simonelli, "Dante and His Public," 48: "He believed that two of the three constituents of the social order, namely the *laboratores* and the *oratores*, had betrayed their functions. The *laboratores* had become arrogant to the point of representing a political danger. The *oratores*, on the other hand, were corrupt, ambitious and greedy for money. The only social category which was not completely without hope was that of *bellatores* (...) The *Convivio* was addressed to them and was intended to show them the road towards the restoration of a perfect social order."
2. The fictive nature of Dante's readers. See Steinberg, "Dante's Bookishness," 32: "For Dante, then, female readers here represent something that the protohumanists abhor or neglect, as well as something that Dante himself, by contrast, embraces; they define Dante's position in the literary field and his opposition to the protohumanists. Precisely what those female readers represent, however, is less than clear, because for Dante, such readers appear to be both real and imaginary. On the one hand, prominent literate women were a reality in Dante's era (...) [But on the other hand] Dante's classical references, cosmological speculations, and theological disquisitions in the *Divine Comedy* would no doubt have been rather opaque to most female members of his audience."

### C. Dante's fear of being misread

A crucial topic of discussion deals with Dante's concern that his work would be misunderstood, resulting in feelings of distrust or even hostility towards the reader.

1. Concerns about the limitations of the reader's understanding. See Zanin, "Dante's Implied Reader in the 'Convivio', 214: "On the one hand, Dante aims at removing 'malice from the minds' in order to 'instil there the light of truth' (*Conv.*, IV. viii. 4). On the other hand, he states in the same book IV that he will address only 'those intellects who are not sick through infirmity of mind or body' but are 'in the light of truth' (*Conv.*, IV. xv. 17) (...) Paradoxically, Dante seems to be promoting knowledge for all, while excluding people from it. It appears, thus, that Dante is constantly redefining his public. Rather than explaining what philosophy is and how we can learn to love it, Dante considers the condition that makes knowledge a possibility. In other words, Dante is less interested in leading the way to knowledge, than in examining its limits."
2. Dante's hostility towards his readers. See Durling, "The Audience(s) of the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Petrose*," 28: "The *petrose* can stand for the fact that at no time in his career as a writer was Dante satisfied that the reciprocity he hoped to have with his audience – that is, a relation in which his intentions and achievement, and thus his authority, would be fully understood and recognized – in fact existed. Again and again, in virtually all of his works, we see Dante expressing anger, ambivalence, sometimes downright hostility to his audience (...)"

## Annotated Bibliography

### 1950s

**Gmelin, Hermann.** “Die Anrede an den Leser in der Göttlichen Komödie.” *Deutsches Dante-Jahrbuch* 30 (1951): 130-40.

Foundational work on Dante’s addresses to the reader not yet translated into Italian or English. Given the absence of addresses to the reader in classical literature, Gmelin argues that such appeals to the audience can be understood as characteristic of medieval poetry, representing a new and different relationship between the author and the reader. He identifies twenty-one explicit appeals to the reader, proposing that they are evenly distributed in the *Commedia*, which is to say that there are seven addresses found in each of the three books.

**Auerbach, Erich.** “Dante’s Addresses to the Reader.” *Romance Philology* 7 (1953): 268-278.

Auerbach discusses Dante’s addresses to the reader of the *Commedia*, which are defined as places in which a vocative noun, pronoun or imperative form are used. Comparing these addresses to other examples of apostrophe in works of medieval literary theory as well as classical poetry and oratory, Auerbach, following Gmelin, argues that no true precedents for Dante’s approach exists, making Dante’s understanding of himself in relation to his readers new and innovative. As Auerbach suggests, Dante, as a prophet relating a divine revelation, spoke to his readers as if they were his disciples, who were imagined as fellow Christians, but still subordinate to Dante in their comparative lack of knowledge of the divine. Although the emphasis which Auerbach places on Dante’s understanding of the moral inferiority of his audience will be challenged by Spitzer (1955), the didactic framework which Auerbach uses to understand Dante’s readers will largely be accepted and echoed by subsequent scholars such as Russo (1970), Beall (1979), and Simonelli (1984).

**Spitzer, Leo.** “The Addresses to the Reader in the *Commedia*.” *Italica* 32 (1955): 143-165.

Spitzer responds to Auerbach’s conclusions by deemphasizing the prophetic and authoritative dimensions of Dante’s explicit appeals to his reader. Instead, Spitzer suggests that the addresses to the reader functioned as aids to amplify and better convey the sensory nature of Dante’s divine revelation. In order to demonstrate this, Spitzer organizes the addresses to the reader into five main categories: “comedic,” which are concerned with capturing the reader’s attention; “artistic,” which develop the reader’s appreciation for the work; “dogmatic,” which guide the reader’s understanding; “intimate,” which evoke pathos; and finally “imaginative,” which aid in the visualization of Dante’s experiences. As Spitzer suggests, only the dogmatic addresses accord with Auerbach’s conclusions, as the majority of the addresses fall into the other categories. Accordingly, Spitzer concludes that Dante understood his readers not as his disciples, but that he imagined himself to have solidarity with them, identifying his readers as fellow Christians and suggesting that the task of understanding the divine revelation was shared between them.

### 1960s

**Petronio, Giuseppe.** “Appunti per uno studio su D. e il pubblico.” *Sonderdruck aus Beiträge zur Romanischen Philologie* 4 (1965); then in Id., *L’autore e il pubblico*, Padova: Studio Tesi, 1981: 3-18.

Petronio responds to Auerbach and Spitzer by reanalyzing Dante’s addresses to the reader, also referencing the *Convivio* and the *Vita Nova* to introduce a new perspective on these passages. He argues that Dante imagined an aristocratic and cultivated reader whose intelligence would permit him to grasp not only the literal sense of the *Commedia*, but its allegorical meaning as well. Dante’s decision to write in the vernacular was a result of the laicization of his culture, as he redefined his ideal public as readers who possessed a nobility of the heart and intellect, rather than the Latin-reading clerics or jurists, who Dante excluded from this new cultured society. In this sense, Petronio agrees with Spitzer’s suggestion that Dante felt a friendly solidarity with his readers, who he



perceived as individuals worthy and capable of receiving his poetry. However, according to Petronio, Dante did not imagine his readership to include all Christians. His intentions were influenced by an aristocratic spirit, which implied the exclusion of certain individuals from his re-imagination of this new public of readers. For further discussion about the nature of Dante's understanding of the nobility of the audience, see Simonelli (1984).

## 1970s

**Lanci, Antonio.** "Lettore." In *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, edited by Giorgio Petrocchi. Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970 (various reprints). Web:

[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lettore\\_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lettore_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/).

Lanci lists around twenty places in which explicit appeals to the reader occur in the *Commedia*.

**Russo, Vittorio.** "Appello al lettore." In *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, edited by Giorgio Petrocchi. Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970 (various reprints). Web:

[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/appello-al-lettore\\_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/appello-al-lettore_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/).

Russo summarizes the studies of Auerbach and Spitzer. Like these scholars, Russo emphasizes the novelty of Dante's addresses to the reader by comparing them with examples from classical poetry, but he also adds examples from medieval biblical exegesis, romances and history writing. Though Russo follows Spitzer in his suggestion that some of the addresses reveal a more charitable and brotherly dimension, he expands Auerbach's discussion of the discipleship of the audience by underlining Dante's constant awareness of his didactic commitment to these readers, who were imagined by him as careful listeners and constant participants. However, unlike Auerbach and Spitzer, who did not consider Dante's historical context in their analysis, Russo suggests that the core of Dante's innovation was in his decision to use the vernacular to treat deep doctrinal and ethical themes, appealing not only to an audience of learned scholars, but to the new cultured class of the urban society of the fourteenth century.

**Beall, Chandler B.** "Dante and his reader." *Forum Italicum* 8 (1979): 299-343.

Whereas Auerbach and Spitzer focus their discussions on the passages in the *Commedia* where Dante uses a vocative noun or pronoun in order to address his reader, Beall argues that the actual number of appeals to the reader is far greater than those they considered. He proposes an alternative to Spitzer's categorization of the addresses, preferring the following five types: remembrances, i.e. allusions to Aeneas' recounting of the last days of Troy; references to the author's construction of the story; admonishments to the reader; expressions of self-confidence in relation to authorial ability; and declarations of ineffability. Beall's categorization is based on his understanding of a distinction between Dante the Pilgrim and Dante the Poet, a distinction codified after Auerbach and Spitzer (see Contini, "Dante come personaggio-poeta della *Commedia*," 1957). For Beall, these appeals to the implied reader are artificial moments in which Dante's authorial voice intrudes into the narrative, demonstrating that to a certain degree the readers of the *Commedia* are fictive. These readers, as they exist in Dante's imagination, appear in the *Commedia* in the service of Dante the Poet and his effort to bolster his authority as a writer.

## 1980s

**Popolizio, Stephen.** "Literary Reminiscences and the Act of Reading in *Inferno* V." *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 98 (1980): 19-33. Web:

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40166285>.

Popolizio investigates the reasons for why Dante made the reading of books a major theme in *Inferno* 5, which is peopled with sinners affected by excessive passions. He informs his analysis with reference to Augustine's *Confessions*, the Old French prose *Lancelot* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, underlining the textual similarities which these works share with *Inferno* 5. In this way, he argues that Francesca's act of reading is essentially an emotional and carnal experience, rather than a learning process which is rational, indicating that the canto serves as a lesson on



how, and how not, to read. Accordingly, Popolizio highlights Dante's concerns with the didactic function of literature and the hermeneutical process through which his work would be received by his readers. These observations will be further explored and elaborated by Noakes (1983), Bennett (2008), Levine (2009), and Lombardi (2012).

**Ahern, John.** "Binding the Book: Hermeneutics and Manuscript Production in *Paradiso* 33." *PMLA* 97, no. 5 (1982): 800-809. Web: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/462171>.

Ahern discusses Dante's reference to "scattered pages" in *Paradiso* 33, arguing that the phrase is self-referential and functions to comment on the nature of the *Commedia* itself. Suggesting that Dante died before he was able to see the entirety of the poem bound into one book, as related in Boccaccio's *Trattatello*, Ahern demonstrates that the passage plays on an Augustinian understanding of human imprisonment in the temporal world, escape from which is only possible by grasping the overall coherence of the universe. In this sense, as Ahern suggests, Dante's understanding of the hermeneutical process of his readers resembles his understanding of God's creation of the universe: just as God's consolidation of the universe is understood as analogous to book-binding, the reader's perusal of the fragmentary pieces of the *Commedia* constitutes an effort to grasp the poem's overall aesthetic unity. Ahern's perspective on readership is distinct from past scholarship in its methodology, namely its lack of reference to Dante's more formal addresses to the reader and its emphasis on the commentary and intellectual tradition surrounding Dante. As Ahern demonstrates, Dante's understanding of his readers and the way in which he intended his work to be received was informed by the intellectual culture of his time, as well as his aspirations for himself as an author and the message which he hoped to convey.

**Chiampi, James T.** "Dante's pilgrim and reader in the *region of want*." *Stanford Italian Review* 3, no. 2 (1983): 163-182.

Chiampi explores the didactic and spiritual dimensions of Dante's attitude towards his readers in the *Commedia*. As he argues, Dante understood his act of writing to be a charitable deed which he carried out for the good of mankind, involving a careful disciplining and nurturing of the vision of those who were spiritually immature. Dante imagined this task to conclude with the spiritual reformation of both himself and his readers. In this respect, as Chiampi suggests, the *Commedia* encouraged an awakening of the soul which resembled Augustine's journey in his *Confessions* and invited readers beyond carnal understanding to the spiritual. Chiampi's situation of Dante's attitude towards his readers within this didactic and spiritual framework will be echoed and expanded by Baur (2007) and Amtower (2000), who similarly focus on Dante's relationship with his readers in the context of his hopes for spiritual transformation.

**Noakes, Susan.** "The Double Misreading of Paolo and Francesca." *Philological Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (1983): 221-239.

Noakes analyzes *Inferno* 5 specifically with reference to the events depicted in the Vulgate cycle *Lancelot del Lac*. She suggests that an analysis of Dante's depiction of Francesca and Paolo must include consideration for medieval concerns about the practice of reading, especially the interest in the intertextuality of the passage as well as anxieties about the inclusion of laymen and laywomen into the audience of readers. Accordingly, she argues that the lovers' misreading of the *Lancelot* is twofold: it involves their adultery, which is what the romance warns against, as well as Francesca's attempt to transform her life into literature, as she mistakes the boundary between literature and her own reality. Although her reading of *Lancelot* will be challenged by Balfour (1995), Noakes' argument against moralizing readings of *Inferno* 5 and her more sympathetic understanding of Francesca's actions will be echoed by Lombardi (2012).

**Simonelli, Maria Picchio.** "Dante and his public." *Deutsches Dante-Jahrbuch* 54 (1984): 37-54. Simonelli aims to identify and define the readers which Dante addressed not only in the *Commedia*, but the *Convivio* as well. Mapping Georges Duby's tripartite division of feudal society onto this audience, she suggests that Dante was primarily directing his works towards the "oratores", who were understood as morally corrupt, as well as the



“bellatores”, who were understood by Dante as holders of political power, yet still ignorant and in need of wisdom. As Simonelli suggests, Dante’s aim was to show the nobility how to use their power to restore order to their society, and to exhort the clergy to moral purification. Contrary to Russo (1970), she argues that Dante never aimed to address the mercantile orders, even though this class would ultimately embrace and appreciate his work to the greatest extent. Simonelli’s approach, which situates Dante’s audience in the wider context of medieval society, underlines the historical reality of Dante’s readers, whereas past approaches, such as Beall (1979), have tended to emphasize instead the “fictive” nature of this audience. Instead of understanding readership as a concept which Dante manipulated for the sake of constructing his own authorial voice, Simonelli clearly highlights the reader’s role as the recipient of Dante’s hopes for changing and improving his society.

## 1990s

**Ahern, John.** “The Reader on the Piazza: Verbal Dual in Dante’s *Vita Nuova*.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 32 (1990): 18-39.

Ahern explores the social context of Dante’s composition of the *Vita Nova*. In the opening line “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore,” as Ahern argues, Dante addressed his readers directly, thereby escaping the paradigm of the verbal duel as a vehicle for literary discourse between lovers or intellectuals. Whereas a number of his poems seek a perceptible response (like a nod, a greeting or a written reply), Dante’s innovation in these opening lines was to leave behind the social event of the verbal duel which had occasioned the poem, not seeking not a direct response from a collocator, but an invisible response from a distant public. In addition, Ahern discusses the gendered language which Dante uses in this address to his readers, suggesting that Dante’s decision to refer to his readers as ladies who had a knowledge of love was justified by a historical understanding of women as the originators of vernacular love poetry and romances. However, the word “intelletto” related to his male audience as well, specifically those who were trained in philosophical debate and participated in the scholastic culture of the universities. Thusly, Ahern argues, Dante succeeded in uniting the worlds of vernacular prose and poetry with philosophy, indicating that a full understanding of the *Vita Nova* required the combination of the two distinct modes of reading involved in vernacular and scholastic literature.

**Ahern, John.** “The New Life of the Book: The Implied Reader of the *Vita Nuova*.” *Dante Studies with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 110 (1992): 1-16. Web:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40166446>.

Ahern reformulates and emphasizes certain aspects of his 1990 essay. By liberating himself from the traditional confines of the verbal duel, Dante, as Ahern suggests, achieved a degree of self-reflectiveness which was unparalleled in his day. Discussing new developments in the author’s identification with the act of writing itself and changes in the material format of the book, he argues that Dante’s conflation of female readers of vernacular literature with male readers of philosophical texts was incorporated into the physical makeup of the text itself.

**Durling, Robert M.** “The Audience(s) of the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Petrose*.” *Dante Studies with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 110 (1992): 25-35. Web:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40166448>.

Durling explores Dante’s conception of his readers from the perspective of the *De vulgari eloquentia*, the *Convivio* and the *Petrose*. As Durling argues, Dante’s contradictory representation of his lady in his collection of *petrose* symbolized his ambivalent relationship with his readers, indicating that Dante was unsatisfied with the response he received from his audience, who he believed did not fully understand his intentions and literary achievements. As Durling suggests, the *Convivio* and the *De vulgari eloquentia* reveal that Dante’s intellectual aspirations were the root of this tension, encompassing both a disdain for readers of Latin as well as a desire for the admiration of the literate and educated. Whereas Petronio (1965) and Simonelli (1984) have pointed out Dante’s exclusion of certain groups from his ideal readership, Durling’s analysis is unique in his stress on the hostility and anger which Dante



felt towards his readers, suggesting that his works were shaped by a set of complex psychological motivations which derived from Dante's yearning for recognition.

**Kay, Richard.** "The intended readers of Dante's *Monarchia*." *Dante Studies with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 110 (1992): 37-44. Web: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40166449>.

Kay investigates the intended audience of Dante's *Monarchia* by examining the work through the lens of the medieval trivium, namely grammar, rhetoric and logic. He argues that Dante was ostentatious in his flaunting of the formal, logical underpinnings of his work, which suggests an intended audience of university-educated individuals who were trained in the arts, but had not received the advanced training of professional theologians or philosophers. As Kay concludes, the work was intended as a work of propaganda which was meant to reach the widest possible audience, especially the Latin intelligentsia. In this sense, Kay agrees with the conclusion made by Lansing (1992) in regard to the *Convivio*, which deemphasizes Dante's concerns about the intellectual inadequacies of his readers.

**Lansing, Richard.** "Dante's Intended Audience in the *Convivio*." *Dante Studies with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 110 (1992): 17-24.

Lansing investigates Dante's construction of his audience in the *Convivio*. As he argues, the most important strategy which Dante uses to identify his readers is by defining those who are not invited to the banquet, namely those who use and rely on Latin in professional settings, especially the clergy, lawyers, and jurists. Dante's mission, as Lansing suggests, is to undertake the moral project of civilizing and educating the highest classes in Italian society, teaching them how to acquire true nobility. However, whereas scholars like Petronio (1965) have focused on the ways in which Dante excluded certain groups from his intended readership, Lansing emphasizes the idea that Dante was hoping to reach the greatest number of readers possible. In this sense, he follows Simonelli (1984) in her emphasis on Dante's desire to create in the *Convivio* a treatise which directly engaged with – and attempted to change – his contemporary society.

**Balfour, Mark.** "Francesca da Rimini and Dante's Women Readers." In *Women, the Book and the Worldly: Selected Proceedings of the St. Hilda's Conference*, edited by Leslie Smith and Jane H.M. Taylor, 71-84. Cambridge: Brewer, 1995.

Balfour investigates the connection between Francesca's status as a female reader of vernacular literature in *Inferno* 5 with Dante's representation of vernacular literature in the *Vita Nova*, the *Convivio*, and the *De vulgari eloquentia*. He argues that Dante's expectations in regard to the reception of his vernacular works, and principally the *Commedia*, included the possibility of female readers as well as the possibility of misreading. As he suggests, the figure of Francesca in *Inferno* 5 is a representation of the two possibilities being brought together. Accordingly, he follows Noakes (1983) in the suggestion that it is not the act of reading itself which is considered sinful by Dante, but the way in which the reader engages with the text, demonstrating Dante's understanding of the reader's active role in the production of the text's meaning. The understanding of Francesca as a "bad" reader will be challenged by Lombardi (2012).

## 2000s

**Franke, William.** "Dante's Address to the Reader in Face of Derrida's Critique of Ontology." *Analecta Husserliana* 64 (2000): 119-131.

Franke investigates Dante's addresses to the reader through the lens of the works of Jacques Derrida, using Derrida's texts to reveal the different possibilities of meaning in the *Commedia*. This study represents a break from previous scholarship in its approach, which is based on the understanding that modern philosophical ideas can be used as an interpretive tool for unlocking the meaning of Dante's work. Applying this methodology to the addresses to the reader, Franke overcomes the traditional distinction in Dante Studies between the historical and fictive reader.





As he argues, the reader lies simultaneously outside of the text, as an external being whose invocation disturbs the fictional nature of the narrative, as well as inside of the text, as a product of the literary work itself.

**Kirkham, Victoria.** *Dante and the Book Glutton, or, Food for Thought from Italian Poets.* Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004.

Kirkham analyzes the representation of Dante as a book glutton, especially as it was expressed by his admirers Giannozzo Manetti and Boccaccio. Situating this portrait in a wider tradition in which authors were represented as inseparable from their books, she recalls classical, medieval and modern examples of “book gobblers” to demonstrate how books were – and continue to be – imagined as emblematic of the writer’s profession, connected to authors through an indissoluble bond expressed in literary and visual works alike. This study is unique not only in its focus on the iconography and literary imagery of how readers were imagined in Dante’s time, but in its investigation of how Dante’s status as a reader functioned to bolster his legitimacy in the eyes of his literary successors.

**De Ventura, Paolo.** “Gli appelli all'uditore e il dialogo con il lettore nella *Commedia*.” *Dante: Rivista internazionale di studi su Dante Alighieri* 1 (2004): 81-99. Web: [www.jstor.org/stable/26478954](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26478954).

In this study, De Ventura aims to add to Gmelin’s analysis (1951) by incorporating some observations about what it meant to read and be a reader in the medieval period. Referring to some of Dante’s earliest commentators, De Ventura argues that Dante sought to represent himself according to the model of the perfect preacher, understanding that the activity of listening was intricately connected to reading. De Ventura’s proposition that the addresses to the reader related to Dante’s desire to imitate a homiletic style highlight the performative nature of the text. Indeed, following the emphasis of Spitzer (1955) on the sense of friendliness and familiarity which Dante felt towards his readers, De Ventura argues that it is through this homiletic style that Dante was able to establish a sense of intimacy with his readers.

**Steinberg, Justin.** *Accounting for Dante: Urban Readers and Writers in Late Medieval Italy.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

Steinberg argues that the self-reflexive nature of Dante’s work can be explained by Dante’s awareness and concerns for the early circulation of his work, especially the urban public of readers and writers represented in the *Memoriali bolognesi* and the Vatican anthology. This concern motivated a process of revision and reinterpretation that can account for the poetic and personal development outlined in the *Vita Nova* and the *Commedia*. Whereas past scholars, such as Simonelli (1984) and Petronio (1965), have emphasized the aristocratic nature of Dante’s readers, Steinberg’s study represents a break from previous scholarship in its insistence on placing Dante’s readers within the municipal and social context of the Italian city-state. In fact, as a result of his lack of control over the material dissemination of his works, Dante’s oeuvre, as Steinberg argues, was defined by a kind of “spatializing poetics” which sought to blur the distinction between his text and his historical context, allowing Dante to have some influence over the urban readers’ interpretation of his work.

**Baur, Christine O’Connell.** “Dialectical Reading and the Dialectic of Salvation.” In *Dante’s Hermeneutics of Salvation: Passages to Freedom in the “Divine Comedy,”* 135-171. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.

Baur uses post-Heideggerian philosophy as tool for interpreting the roles of the reader and the text in the *Commedia*. In the chapter “Dialectical Reading and the Dialectic of Salvation,” she discusses Dante’s addresses to the reader and investigates how readers appropriated and transformed Dante the Pilgrim’s journey through the process of reading. More specifically, using the *Purgatorio* as her foundation, she argues that these addresses imply that the text’s meaning was not understood to be completely fixed by Dante himself, but derived from the reader’s participation, encouraging and aiding that reader to undergo a salvific journey of his or her own. In this sense, her



observations echo Amtower (2000), who makes similar conclusions about the *Vita Nova*, as well as Chiampi (1983), who also situates the addresses to the reader within the context of Dante's hopes for spiritual conversion.

**Bennett, Benjamin.** "Dante and the invention of the novel reader." In *The Dark Side of Literacy: Literature and Learning Not to Read*, 85-140. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.

This study is a critical, theoretical and historical investigation of the development and meaning of the modern conception of reading and readership. In his chapter on Dante, Bennett argues that the notion of reading expounded in the *Commedia* prefigures ideas later associated with modern novels. As Bennett suggests, Dante, motivated both by poetic and theological concerns, created a set of implied instructions for reading which resemble the expectations required by modern novels, involving the subjective participation of individual readers. His analysis is based on a close reading of a number of passages from the *Commedia*, especially the *Paradiso*, with reference to the *De vulgari eloquentia* as well as the Epistle to Cangrande della Scala. Though his approach is more theoretical, Bennett's emphasis on the individuality of the readers and the need for their subjective participation in the experience of reading closely mirrors the observations of Amtower (2000). In addition, in his analysis of *Inferno* 5, he follows Noakes' argument (1983) on the sinful nature of reading, which is due to its secular nature and the constant possibility of misreading, but he also emphasizes the dangers of the creative role of the reader's fantasy, the way in which readers tend to imitate and reimagine texts. Also see Levine (2009).

**Levine, Peter.** "Good and bad stories, and Francesca as a reader." In *Reforming the Humanities: Literature and Ethics from Dante Through Modern Times*, 105-125. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

In this chapter, Levine explores the ethical tensions related to the practice of reading in *Inferno* 5. He argues that although Dante viewed his own passion-inciting stories as moral tests that demanded the restraint of readers and required their condemnation of Francesca's misreading of romances, Dante also understood literature's capacity to help teach empathy, judgement and moral behaviour. In this respect, Levine's conclusions on Dante's fears about the dangers of misreading resemble the observations of Bennett (2008). However, Levine's approach differs in his incorporation of both medieval texts (such as the Letters of Abelard and Heloise, the *Roman de Lancelot*, and the *Consolation of Philosophy*) as well as modern literary texts into his analysis. In this way, Levine situates Dante's anxieties about the value of literary texts and the dangers of sentimentality within the context of a wider tradition, demonstrating the continuity of these doubts throughout the course of literary history.

## 2010s

**Lombardi, Elena.** "Reading." In *The Wings of the Doves: Love and Desire in Dante and Medieval Culture*, 212-247. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012.

In this book, Lombardi explores the multilayered nature of *Inferno* 5, addressing the way in which the canto represents the complicated relationship between spiritual and erotic versions of love and desire. In chapter 6, "Reading," she discusses the canto's relationship with intertextuality, the act of reading and the material culture of the book. Supplementing her analysis with references to iconographical representations of reading as well as Augustine's *Confessions*, she argues that the complex rhetorical and interpretive process through which Francesca and Paolo read the romance achieves the aim of Dante's canto. This is to say that the erotic union of the lovers is a representation of the process of book-binding, as if their union was a representation of the romance which they were reading or the *Commedia* itself. Accordingly, contrary to Levine (2009) and Bennett (2008) – and, more generally, the critical tradition dating back to Contini – Lombardi argues against the stigmatization of the canto as an episode of immoral misreading. Instead, she emphasizes the subversive nature of Dante's representation of the lovers, suggesting that the act of misreading does not make Francesca a bad reader, but rather reflects the carnality of the activity of reading itself.

**Steinberg, Glenn A.** “Dante’s Bookishness: Moral Judgment, Female Readers, and a ‘Rerealization’ of Brunetto Latini.” *Modern Philology* 112, no. 1 (August 2014): 25-55. Web: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/675936>.

Steinberg explores the way in which gender and sexuality symbolically relate to the concept of genre for Dante and his contemporaries, especially in connection to the representation of Brunetto Latini in *Inferno* 15. Following Justin Steinberg (2007), he seeks to situate Dante within the context of the literary and cultural debates of his day. He argues that Dante’s continual references to female readers in the *Commedia* as well as his decision to portray Brunetto Latini as a sodomite reflect his desire to distance his work from his literary rivals. In this way, as Steinberg suggests, Dante’s work represents and advances the stilnovistic poetic tradition in opposition to protohumanist principles. In relation to the concept of readership, Steinberg’s discussion of Dante’s intentions in directing his work to female readers is of particular interest. As he suggests, Dante’s references to female readers in the *Vita Nova* and the *Commedia* were addressed to a female public which was half-fictitious and half-real, reconciling the discussion of Ahern (1990) on the metaphorical nature of the addresses to the ladies with the argument of Balfour (1995) for the real engagement of female readers.

**Aleksander, Jason.** “The *Divine Comedy*’s Construction of Its Audience in *Paradiso* 2, lines 1-18.” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 30 (2014): 1-10. Web: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/587609>.

In this study, Aleksander discusses the theological doctrine of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* [no salvation outside the Church] in relation to *Paradiso* 19 and 20, proposing that Dante’s understanding of the salvation of individuals required nothing more than the individual’s potential for and orientation towards salvation. Using this interpretation as a lens through which to view the address to the reader in *Paradiso* 2, Aleksander argues that the passage presupposes the readers’ shared knowledge of the pilgrimage experience expressed in the *Commedia*, calling attention to the audience’s historical preparation for receiving and being transformed by Dante’s work. Whereas the approaches of Gmelin, Auerbach, Spitzer and Beall have shared the goal of studying and understanding all of the addresses in the *Commedia* together, Aleksander’s study is unique in its close reading of only one particular address. His observations align with Spitzer’s emphasis (1955) on the universality of Dante’s intended audience, but are also indebted to Auerbach’s remarks (1952) on Dante’s didactic conception of his duty towards his readers.

**Calenda, Corrado.** “Reticenza e allusione: strategie comunicative dell’autore e attese del lettore sulla soglia della *Vita Nuova*.” In *Per Beneficio e Concordia di Studio*, edited by Andrea Mazzucchi, 247-254. Cittadella: Bertonecello Artigrafiche, 2015.

Calenda explores the way in which the *Vita Nova* served as a beginning point for the development of Dante’s attitude towards the interpretation of his work, serving as a preliminary declaration of his intentions towards his readers. He argues that an implied appeal to the reader was hidden, but still active, inside of the sophisticated literary strategies which Dante used to convey his literary biography. Comparing the prosimetric structure of the *Vita Nova* with Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, Calenda suggests that Dante’s work would have served as a surprise for readers, since its genre was relatively rare and uncommon in Dante’s day. In the context of the scholarly discussion around the readership of the *Vita Nova*, Calenda’s approach is unique in its focus on the poetic and structural elements of the work. Whereas scholars have usually focused on issues of gender and class in relation to the *libello*’s readers, Calenda’s analysis illuminates some of their literary expectations.

**Ferrara, Sabrina.** *La parola dell’esilio. Autore e lettori nelle opere di Dante in esilio*. Firenze: Cesati, 2016.

This study investigates the literary works produced by Dante after his exile, exploring the way in which this experience shaped his representation of himself as an author as well as his relationship with his readers. As Ferrara argues, because Dante’s exile determined his need to reconstruct and propagate an image of himself to the reader which modified his historical reality, the sense of the text cannot be disassociated from the circumstances which generated it. Accordingly, as Ferrara suggests, Dante’s construction of his own authorship existed at the centre of



the texts which he produced during his exile as the fundamental source of their meaning, containing his hopes for his readers to identify and understand the nature of his authority as a writer. Ferrara's study represents a break from previous scholarship in its focus on Dante's exile as the crucial point for understanding the way in which Dante conceived his readers. Also see Zanin (2018) for discussions about the anxieties which Dante's exile introduced into his conception of his readers.

**McGerr**, Rosemarie. "The Judge as Reader, the Reader as Judge: Literary and Legal Judgment in Dante, Machaut, and Gower." In *Machaut's Legacy: The Judgment Poetry Tradition in the Later Middle Ages and Beyond*, edited by R. Barton Palmer and Burt Kimmelman, 165-191. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2017.

McGerr explores how mirrors of princes presented advice and political commentary to rulers in a camouflaged form. In an effort to understand the hermeneutics of Machaut's *Jugement dou roy de Navarre*, she uses Dante's *Commedia* and John Gower's *Confessio amantis* to highlight the importance of skilled reading in relation to a medieval ruler's capacity to deal out wise judgements. In reference to the *Commedia*, which McGerr considers in conjunction with the Epistle to Cangrande and the *Monarchia*, she argues that Dante employed literary techniques to deflect and disguise his advice, interweaving his lessons with discussions about good and evil forms of love, literary commentary, satire, and spiritual enlightenment. As McGerr suggests, these literary strategies, in combination with Dante's deep concern for the hermeneutical process, characterized the new form of the princely mirror in the fourteenth century. Whereas previous discussions about Dante's understanding of the meaning of correct reading have largely centered around *Inferno 5*, McGerr's approach is unique in understanding the *Commedia* from a purely political perspective.

**Zanin**, Enrica. "Miseri, 'mpediti, affamati: Dante's Implied Reader in the *Convivio*." In *Dante's "Convivio" or How to Restart a Career in Exile*, 207-221. Bern: Lang, 2018.

Zanin explores the way in which Dante's references to the implied readers of the *Convivio* function as a vehicle for Dante's epistemological and ethical concerns. She argues that these addresses to the reader served to test the very possibility that a reader could conceivably understand and fully appreciate the work, thereby demonstrating Dante's anxieties about not being correctly understood at the advent of his exile. Surveying these implied references throughout the course of the *Convivio*, Zanin suggests that although Dante invites his readers to discover the knowledge contained in the work, his words contain the fear that not all will be able to fully understand, excluding false philosophers and those who are not truly noble from his desired community of readers. This study is the most comprehensive analysis of Dante's implied and explicit allusions to the readers of the *Convivio* to date. Whereas Simonelli (1984), Lansing (1992), and Petronio (1965) similarly use the *Convivio* to comment on Dante's desire for a noble readership, Zanin situates these concerns within the context of Dante's exile.

## General Studies on Dante's Context

**Petrucci**, Armando. *Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy: Studies in the History of Written Culture*, edited and translated by C. M. Radding. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Petrucci employs a paleographical approach to argue that the history of books and their usage was an essential component of medieval Italian culture and intellectual history. Chapters 7 and 9 are of particular interest in reference to the concept of readership. In chapter 7, "Reading in the Middle Ages," Petrucci links the changes which occurred in manuscript production to the different modes of reading which developed throughout the course of the medieval period, arguing that the process demonstrates increasing concerns about the reader's reception of the text. In chapter 9, "Reading and Writing *Volgare* in Medieval Italy," Petrucci discusses the historical circumstances that led to the "canonization" of vulgar literature, the gradual process through which it was deemed worthy of being committed to text. This study is a fundamental reference work for understanding the context in which the readers of Dante's

vernacular works found themselves and the way in which they would have viewed and understood his works. Accordingly, Petrucci's study can serve as an extension of the historical discussion of Dante's most immediate readers, by supplementing the analysis of Ahern (1992), Simonelli (1984) and Steinberg (2007).

**Amtower, Laurel.** *Engaging Words: The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

This study investigates the relationship which existed between later medieval reading habits and the shaping of identity, especially in reference to the readers' creativity, responsibility and individual reading responses. Amtower refers to scholarship on medieval manuscript and print culture in order to demonstrate the ways in which social and technological shifts in book culture intersect with medieval conceptions of subjectivity. In addition to iconographic representations of readers, she bases her analysis of subjectivity on literary texts from the fourteenth to mid-fifteenth century, concentrating on England, but also including some discussion of Dante, Petrarch and Christine de Pizan. Like Petrucci (1995), she observes a new cultural trend in the later medieval period which saw a heightened awareness of a reader for whom manuscripts were intended and whom they were meant to instruct, further adding that the reader's response was anticipated and idealized by the author. This point is made particularly in reference to Dante's *Vita Nova*, in which Dante, as Amtower argues, demands the full participation of his readers, with their cooperation enacting the illusion of conversion through poetry.

**Ascoli, Albert Russell.** "Worthy of Faith? Authors and Readers in Early Modernity." In *The Renaissance World*, edited by John Jeffries Martin, 435-451. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Ascoli argues that early modern notions of authorship were intricately tied to ideas and realities of readership. In this essay, he surveys a collection of representative texts from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, investigating the ways in which authorial control over the meaning of a text was imagined in relation to the experience of its readers, as well as how readers either embraced the author's intended message or purposefully rejected it. As Ascoli suggests, these developments reflect a movement away from traditional readerly beliefs about the moral and intellectual credibility of the author. Ascoli considers the works of Dante and Petrarch as the moment in which these changes begin to occur. Particularly in reference to Dante, Ascoli refers to the *Convivio* to observe that Dante portrayed himself both as a reader of classical texts as well as a writer who possessed the same kind of intellectual authority as his predecessors, thereby collapsing the difference between these two roles and opening new possibilities for his literary successors in their relationship with their readers.

***Textual Cultures of Medieval Italy***, edited by William Robins. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.

This is an interdisciplinary collection of case studies on a number of different sources, including legal treatises, hagiographies, handbooks on rhetoric and vernacular poetry. The essays explore the way in which ideological and cultural concerns informed writing strategies, as well as the way in which these texts served as sites of cultural production, playing important roles in the shaping of medieval Italy society.

**Lombardi, Elena.** *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Lombardi explores how the figure of the female reader is central to the constructions of textuality and literary authority in Dante's time. She considers the history of female literacy, the material culture of the book, and the ways in which earlier Occitan and French poets imagined the female reader in order to argue that the inclusion of women readers brought several advantages to vernacular authors, such as the incorporation of ideas like orality, desire, the mother tongue, and the beauty of ornamentation. Specifically, in reference to Dante, in Chapter 5, "Francesca and the Others," Lombardi extends her 2012 study to explore the appeal of *Inferno* 5 to the visual, as well as the use of literary texts in Francesca's speech. In addition, she contextualizes Francesca's depiction through an analysis of the performative effects of medieval courtly literature, as well as a comparison to other female readers, such as Heloise and Alyson of Bath.



## **How to quote this paper:**

E. Plesnik, “ISCAD Annotated Bibliography: Readership, Reading and Readers,” *International Seminar on Critical Approaches to Dante. Website*, May 2019. Online:

<https://dante.medieval.utoronto.ca/readership/>