



Reading Dante: From Here to Eternity

Prue Shaw

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Prue Shaw is one of the world's foremost authorities on Dante. Written with the general reader in mind, *Reading Dante* brings her knowledge to bear in an accessible yet expert introduction to his great poem. This is far more than an exegesis of Dante's three-part *Commedia*. Shaw communicates the imaginative power, the linguistic skill and the emotional intensity of Dante's poetry—the qualities that make the *Commedia* perhaps the greatest literary work of all time and not simply a medieval treatise on morality and religion.

The book provides a graphic account of the complicated geography of Dante's version of the afterlife and a sure guide to thirteenth-century Florence and the people and places that influenced him. At the same time it offers a literary experience that lifts the reader into the universal realms of poetry and mythology, creating links not only to the classical world of Virgil and Ovid but also to modern art and poetry, the world of T. S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney and many others.

Dante's questions are our questions: What is it to be a human being? How should we judge human behavior? What matters in life and in death? *Reading Dante* helps the reader to understand Dante's answers to these timeless questions and to see how surprisingly close they sometimes are to modern answers.

Reading Dante is an astonishingly lyrical work that will appeal to both those who've never read the *Commedia* and those who have. It underscores Dante's belief that poetry can change human lives.

Reading Dante: From Here to Eternity Details

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From Reader Review Reading Dante: From Here to Eternity for online ebook

Matt Moser says

Shaw is weak on The Comedy's religious and theological meaning, but she is brilliant on everything else. Compelling and illuminating writing throughout makes this a fitting introduction to Dante's great poem.

Mrs Lecter says

This book dug deep into some aspects of the divine comedy that I hadn't even thought about. I took lots of notes and enjoyed every minute reading it!

It also has a fantastic further reading section.

Jordan says

Excellent. One of the best books on Dante I've ever read.

Elena Sala says

The Divine Comedy is, surely, the greatest poem of the Middle Ages. But is a daunting text for the modern reader. It is an adventure story, a journey into the mysteries of the after life, a pilgrimage towards a final meeting with God. But it also deals with contemporary politics.

Dante was a politician as well as a poet, very much involved in the public life of his city. In 1302 he was sent into exile due to his political activities. And his Divine Comedy is born from that loss.

Reading Dante is an introduction to Dante's poem aimed for the general reader. It is a scholarly, though accessible, book. Its chapters are organized around themes and illustrated by key episodes from Dante's poem. It is the ideal companion for readers who approach Dante for the first time.

Stephanie Graham Pina says

I bought Reading Dante in an effort to expand my knowledge of the Commedia. It takes Dante's works and places it in a contemporary context, explaining the politics and Florentine life at the time he wrote. The author discusses themes, language, and significant numbers as well. It's a fascinating book and I'm certain that I will revisit it more than once. A text about Dante could easily become dry but Prue Shaw keeps it as fresh and engaging as possible. My appreciation for Dante's works has reached a new level and, partly thanks to this book, I feel it will continue to deepen over time.

Monet says

A First Reads giveaway book, I really enjoyed Ms. Shaw's analysis of Dante's classic poem. In plain language, she was able to convey the nuances of Dante's exploration of the afterlife. She also provided historical background that helped me understand the viewpoint of a Florentine born in the 13th century.

This is a book that anyone with an interest in poetry can read and enjoy.

James Murphy says

I thought this an excellent study of Dante and his Commedia. Meant for the general reader rather than the academic, it should be enormously useful to any reader of the poem, especially those entering it for the first time.

Shaw analyzes the Commedia through the use of seven themes: friendship, power, life, love, time, numbers, and words. The discussion moves from how Dante came to begin it to the historical reality of its final existence and everything in between, including the importance of the Trinity, explorations of love, and how the poem's cosmic scope can be squeezed into the conscience of a man. That design means her gloss isn't a canto by canto summary, and it allows her plenty of leeway to discuss the other important material associated with the poem. Biographical details of Dante and others are included along with descriptions of Florence and the Italy they lived in. Shaw spends time explaining the theology of the times and the tumultuous politics of the mid to late 13th century, both Papal, which influenced all of Europe, and the regional politics Dante had to skate through. She maps the "geography of the afterlife," as well as the all-important structure of the poem itself. I especially liked her writing at length on the influences such ancients as Aristotle and Ovid had on Dante and those Dante had on such moderns as T. S. Eliot and Seamus Heaney.

I'd think *Reading Dante* a useful book for anyone interested in Dante and his work. If you've read his Commedia before, Shaw's study can only add to your appreciation. If you're reading for the first time, using her book in conjunction will allow it to act as the Virgil guiding you through the elaborate world Dante created.

Ed says

“*Reading Dante*” is a sublime book, the work of a scholar who has spent fifty years studying, translating and editing the works of Dante Alighieri and his contemporaries in fourteenth century Italy. Prue Shaw seems to know her way around late medieval Florence and Tuscany as well as the byways of University College, London her academic home base. This is a book that one feels lucky if he encounters something like it every five years—beautifully written, packed with the result of a lifetime of scholarship and presented in a distinctive but easy to follow manner, organized thematically instead of the more typical “and then he went to the next circle where Virgil said...”.

Even though “*The Divine Comedy*” is a narrative poem, Prue Shaw dispenses with a plot summary, a good idea since it would become simple chronology in inferior language or just a list of sins and horrors that await

sinners. She shows us the experience of the journey, the sense of being at the pilgrim's side as he is gradually changed by what he sees, hears, and feels, as he moves from a man 'lost in a dark wood' to one who is "turned by the Love that moves the...stars." Shaw deals with some of thorny questions of literary theory; for example the liquid identities of Dante as author, Dante as character, a pilgrim who writes poetry and Dante the author of the poem we are reading not by explaining theory—often an excellent way to kill the reader's interest—but by showing how the various guises adopted by Dante shift and fuse into each other depending on theme. A masterful performance, taking a fourteenth-century allegorical poem on sin and redemption, written in a medieval Florentine vernacular following the theology of the time and letting the reader discover its heretofore hidden beauties.

She makes a supremely difficult undertaking, given the remoteness of the historical and cultural period in which Dante writes and the complexity of his language seem, if not easy then less difficult. Most importantly "Reading Dante" succeeds in persuading on to do exactly that: begin or continue reading Dante.

Beth Lynch says

Excellent book. Will definitely need to re-read the *Commedia*....

Ashley Adams says

Many critical companions to the *Commedia* function as canto-by-canto summaries, leaving readers drowning in details. Prue Shaw to the rescue! Shaw's aim is to highlight the unity in Dante's work. She places incidents from each cantica side by side in order to highlight important themes and relationships in Dante's poem when taken as a whole. She provides necessary context, depicts Dante's personal growth as a poet, and makes modern connections for a modern audience. While Shaw acknowledges that her audience primarily speaks English, she is careful not to let the beauty of the original language and poetic form get lost- she provides a linguistic taste intended to inspire readers to further study. Comprehensive and compressed, at fewer than 300 pages, this is a valuable read.

Mieczyslaw Kasprzyk says

For me, one who thought himself to be well-acquainted with the "Commedia", well - I felt like some rookie detective at the scene of a crime stumbling over the body having never seen it; Prue Shaw is the seasoned expert shining her light here, then there, pointing out all the little things I'd missed or could never have noticed. This wonderful book inspires one to read again. It is written, on the whole, in a very clear manner and, I believe, is accessible to anyone who is even vaguely interested in Dante.

Prue Shaw tackles the "Commedia" through topics ("Friendship", "Power", "Life", "Love" etc) that transcend all three books, thus highlighting links between them or the way that themes are developed, sometimes running parallel to each other (certain themes recurring at the same point in each book) or flowing through from one to the other. In the process, she unfolds the social, cultural and historical background to Dante's

vision.

It is really when we get to her final topics of "Numbers" and "Words" that I experienced what I can only call an epiphany because Prue Shaw revealed the true magic of Dante's work which can only be appreciated by reading the "Commedia" in its original language. Her absolutely fascinating chapter, "Numbers", starts off quite simply by highlighting the importance of the number three - centred, of course, on the Trinity - but goes on to reveal the numerical patterns that underpin the work. The whole of the "Commedia" is divided into cantos; there are thirty-three cantos in each of the three books, plus a preface to "Inferno" (which creates a total of, what was seen as the perfect number, one hundred). Each canto is around one hundred plus lines, divided into groups of three ("tercets"). Each line has eleven syllables so in each "tercet" there are thirty-three syllables. The last word in the first line of each "tercet" rhymes with the last word in the group. The last word in the middle line creates the rhymes for the next "tercet", and so on, so we get aba, bcb, cdc, etc. This is the "terza rima".

Dante invented the "terza rima", a way of writing poetry, he then took vernacular Tuscan and adapted it to fit in with his new invention, in the process creating Italian. Since no formal vernacular structure existed Dante would invent his own rules, even invent words. Unless you read the "Commedia" in its original language then it is impossible to appreciate the subtleties of his creation just as it is impossible to appreciate his shifting from Tuscan to Latin and, at one point, even to Provencial for narrative and dramatic effect. Dante was fascinated by language; he carried out a study of the vernacular languages of Italy and was one of the first to identify not only the differences between towns but even of streets - he was the Henry Higgins of his age! In the "Commedia", language becomes an incredibly important tool which is used to create atmosphere and to reinforce Dante's vision.

I cannot praise Prue Shaw's book enough. I first read the "Inferno" at the young age of twenty and have lived with it, and been inspired by it, ever since. I know I am not alone. Artists and poets have been inspired by Dante almost since the day he first published his great creation. As an artist I am driven to look again at the "Commedia", to look at the potential it unleashes as I contemplate further works and to reveal that vision in a fusion of my own. I feel reborn.

Rebecca says

I read this guidebook as an introduction to Dante's translated *Commedia* which I will be reading shortly. I think Shaw's general approach to breaking her analysis of this revered poetic work into 7 categories (friendship, power, life, love, time, numbers, words) generally worked well for me and will be helpful in preparing me for actually reading the work.

However, I confess to a certain impatience I developed about 2/3 of the way through. Shaw is (in all likelihood justifiably - I'll see shortly if I still agree!) overawed and enamored with this seminal poetic, political, philosophical and theological (yup, it's all there and more) treatise. There were portions of her commentary that I wearied of due to the feeling that the same exposition of some marvelous aspect of The Comedy was being re-stated multiple times, each in a slightly different way.

This method can definitely be extremely helpful in ensuring that if one illustration doesn't do it for the reader another approach might do the trick. But it sometimes seemed that Shaw could not disengage herself

sufficiently from a personal fascination with Dante's brilliant work to consider that her audience may have gotten that particular point several iterations back, thank you.

I imagine that in the course of a scholarly lifetime of reading it in the original Tuscan (Dante's dialect that he stretched to effectively become modern Italian) a work of this stature would truly form a large part of a devotee's world view. Perhaps my intent in reading this in-depth discussion of Dante's spectacular poem as a pre-lecture outline was unwise, since I really was after something more like an outline. Yet I did find it interesting and now feel much better prepared to digest as much as I am capable of Dante's "The Comedy" when I read it.

John says

This is a well-written and very readable book about one of the greatest works of imaginative creation in history. Dante is really about one work, his *Commedia*, and this book gives a very lucid understanding of the work. I would recommend it to the reader considering giving *The Inferno* a try and then moving on to *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. The contemporary references, for example, that are in *The Inferno* need an explication to better understand the work. This book provides that.

Tobias says

Perhaps the best modern introduction to Dante's life and work. Written with scholarly professionalism but with the general reader in mind, Shaw, as a Virgil-figure, guides us through just how it came to be that one of the greatest poems in world literature was written by an exile from Florence about 700 years ago. Instead of picking apart the poem from every possible angle (which, she admits, must require a much longer book), she has divided the book into relatively compressed chapters with each their own thematic focus and how it relates to the *Commédia*, which walks us through the political mess in Florence at Dante's time, a literary and allegorical tradition which is incredibly hard to grasp today, and even the autobiographical elements of the poem.

Matt McCormick says

It's been awhile since I rated a book a 5.

This one is absolutely phenomenal. My only regret is that Prue Shaw hasn't written ten other books for me to read.

She has a perfect mixture of erudition, passion, and respect for the common reader. She made an 800 year old Italian poem understandable and thought-provoking. Ms. Shaw placed Dante's writings in the context of his time - historically, politically, theologically - and as a result, educated not only on poetry itself but on culture. I came to realize just how much of the *Divine Comedy* I didn't understand and certainly didn't appreciate. I am well motivated to pick it up again and read it with the background of Prue Shaw's analysis and criticism.

This book is definitely well placed on my "favorites" shelf.

