

Medieval Academy of America

Dante and the Medieval Other World. by Alison Morgan

Review by: Teodolinda Barolina

Speculum, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Jul., 1992), pp. 728-729

Published by: [Medieval Academy of America](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2863714>

Accessed: 01/04/2013 12:38

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On page 39, poor Brunhild is “dragged to death tied to the tale of a horse” (the story is repeated on page 137 with the expected “tail”), and in the next sentence it is surely the treatment by the cooks, not the codes, which is the subject of Ruggieri’s double-negative question. The quotation from Glanvill on page 121 should be given the margins of quotations in prose, not those in verse. Footnote 125 on page 70 ends abruptly in mid-sentence, leaving the last eight lines of the Bracton quotation untranslated. In discussing Beaumanoir §1710 Mickel claims that “In this case [denunciation], Beaumanoir states, the plaintiff must act merely as ‘bons juges,’” but the real meaning is that upon hearing the denunciation the judge must do his duty (“fere comme bons juges”).

In short, this book is a courageous one, an attempt to use difficult and usually neglected material to solve some old problems; one of its virtues is that it shows the difficulties and dangers of such an undertaking.

F. R. P. AKEHURST, University of Minnesota

ALISON MORGAN, *Dante and the Medieval Other World*. (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 8.) Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Pp. ix, 256; 22 black-and-white plates, 3 graphs, 1 diagram. \$44.50.

In this useful book Alison Morgan organizes and classifies information derived from representations of the other world, paying particular attention to prefigurings of Dante’s *Commedia*. Not the least of this book’s helpful features are its two appendices: appendix 1 is a chronological table of principal representations of the other world, while appendix 2 offers summaries of the same texts (now arranged alphabetically rather than chronologically), with background and bibliographical information provided as well.

The author tells us that her book “explores the relationship between the poem and previous ‘popular’ Christian belief concerning the afterlife” and that it is therefore “based on the study of the hundred or so surviving non-learned texts purporting to describe the other world, and on significant works from the visual arts” (p. 1). The book proceeds — via chapters entitled “Topographical Motifs of the Other World,” “The Inhabitants of the Other World,” “The Guide,” “The Classification of Sin,” “The Mountain of Purgatory,” and “The Representation of Paradise” — to demonstrate the validity of the contention that Dante is “the first Christian writer to combine the popular material with the theological and philosophical systems of his day” (p. 8).

The chapter on topographical motifs treats a somewhat hodgepodge assortment: the cauldron (related by Morgan to the *bolgia* of the barrators), the presentation of Satan, usury, the rivers of hell and the immersion motif, the bridge, and the ladder.

Chapter 2 takes issue with the widespread notion, disseminated by Curtius, that one of Dante’s greatest innovations is the introduction into his poem of figures from contemporary history. Dividing the characters in the visions into classical, biblical, historical, and contemporary (those alive during the visionary’s lifetime), Morgan demonstrates that the *Commedia* “contains a lesser, not greater, proportion of contemporary characters than the visions, and that Dante’s originality lies not here but rather in the inclusion of classical figures, who are totally unrepresented in the earlier medieval texts” (p. 57). This chapter concludes with supplementary tables presenting the author’s data on the character types that appear in the visions.

After treating various permutations of the guide in chapter 3, Morgan reaches the problem of the classification of sin in chapter 4. Once again Dante presents us with a unique synthesis of the popular with the learned. Morgan discusses the development

of the classification of sin in the popular tradition, which reached its greatest complexity in the *Vision of Tundale* (1149), the *Vision of the Monk of Eynsham* (1196), and the *Vision of Thurkill* (1206), concluding that “the inconsistencies and ambiguities in the classification of the *Inferno* bear witness to the mass of traditional material which lies behind it” (p. 131). Appended to this chapter are tables comparing the classification of sin in *Inferno* with that of the other visions.

The last two chapters deal with purgatory and paradise. The chapter on purgatory complements Jacques Le Goff’s *La naissance du Purgatoire* (1981) by dealing systematically with material that Le Goff sometimes includes in his discussion and sometimes omits; particular attention is paid to the *Vision of Thurkill*, which is the first vision to distinguish clearly between hell and purgatory. With regard to Dante’s iconography for purgatory, Morgan contends that “rather than placing the Earthly Paradise on the summit of the mountain of Purgatory, Dante placed Purgatory on the slopes of the mountain of the Earthly Paradise — that is, that his mountain has its origin not in any traditional iconography for Purgatory, for there was none, but in the learned traditions of Eden and of Jerusalem” (p. 160).

In dealing with representations of paradise, Morgan distinguishes three traditions: the learned tradition of the Earthly Paradise; the Eastern and classical tradition of the celestial spheres, which influenced Bernard’s *Cosmographia* and Alan’s *Anticlaudianus*; and the tradition deriving from John’s Apocalypse, whose description of the heavenly Jerusalem dominated popular representations of paradise. Surveying the last tradition in particular, the author looks for motifs that anticipate Dante’s *Paradiso*.

Let me conclude by noting that the chief importance of this book resides in what it presupposes and leaves unsaid. Without entering into the debate on the *Commedia*’s allegory, it presupposes that the poem should be classified as a vision and that the question of its relation to the popular traditions that undoubtedly inform it should be reopened. At the same time, its comparison of the *Commedia* with its popular precursors gives us valuable information that remains precisely that: Morgan indicates the location of the critical aquifers but leaves the vast reservoirs untapped. Armed with *Dante and the Medieval Other World*, on the one hand, and Eileen Gardiner’s handy translation of selected visions, on the other (*Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante* [New York, 1989]), we can now confront the task of reconsidering Dante in relation to his visionary predecessors. This ghettoizing of Dante will not lessen his stature (the concern of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholars who dealt with this material) but rather will give us a venue for assessing more precisely the ways and means of his remarkable originality.

TEODOLINDA BAROLINI, Columbia University

PIERO MORPURGO, *Filosofia della natura nella Schola salernitana del secolo XII*. Preface by Enrique Montero Cartelle. Bologna: CLUEB, 1990. Paper. Pp. xviii, 245. L 35,000.

During the past two decades both the conception of nature in the twelfth century and the history of the school of Salerno have been the subjects of a revival of interest, and Piero Morpurgo has been an important contributor to both those streams of scholarship, which he unites in this study. Consciously following the works of P. O. Kristeller, Morpurgo first conducts a review and partial revision of the history of the school of Salerno from its beginnings to the late thirteenth century, filling in several gaps and providing a more complete list of its masters than we have previously possessed, from “Giuseppe medico” in 848 to Arnold of Villanova in 1310. (He lists