



Variants

The Journal of the European Society for Textual Scholarship

12-13 | 2016
Varia

Luciano Gargan, *Dante, la sua biblioteca e lo Studio di Bologna*

Alessandro Scafi



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/variants/314>

DOI: 10.4000/variants.314

ISSN: 1879-6095

Publisher

European Society for Textual Scholarship

Printed version

Date of publication: 31 December 2016

Number of pages: 243-246

ISSN: 1573-3084

Electronic reference

Alessandro Scafi, « Luciano Gargan, *Dante, la sua biblioteca e lo Studio di Bologna* », *Variants* [Online], 12-13 | 2016, Online since 01 May 2017, connection on 25 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/variants/314> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/variants.314>

This text was automatically generated on 25 September 2020.

The authors

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Luciano Gargan. *Dante, la sua biblioteca e lo Studio di Bologna*. Rome and Padua: Antenore, 2014. 156 pp. ISBN 978-88-8455-684-4.

- 1 Dante's Christian epic was not created out of nothing; nor did he write his didactic prose without reference to the work of others. This is not despite the poet's genius but because of it. Dante was a wordsmith, who worked with the materials he had at his disposal, melting them down in the furnace of his mind and recasting them in new forms. But what kind of materials was he dealing with? Is it possible to reconstruct the medieval network of knowledge that the poet drew upon to shape his vision? What specific texts formed the tradition that inspired him? A lack of direct evidence ensures that this question continues to be the subject of lively scholarly debate. This *Quellenforschung* (the pursuit of sources) is a familiar practice to Dante's scholars and commentators.
- 2 In his *Dante, la sua biblioteca e lo Studio di Bologna*, the late Italian Professor Luciano Gargan tries to establish the background of Dante's learning by virtually rebuilding his library. For that purpose, the author assembles five essays that have previously appeared elsewhere. Gargan reminds us of the relevance to the discussion of two works by Dante that unquestionably make abundant use of other books: the *Convivio*, a 'banquet' offering the intellectual food of true knowledge and celebrating Lady Philosophy, and *De vulgari eloquentia*, where Dante discusses the origin, dignity, and literary genres of the vernacular. To reconstruct the contents of Dante's library, Gargan also notes the way Dante acknowledges his sources dramatically by turning his predecessors into characters in the *Divine Comedy*, where pagan poets and philosophers

dwell in Limbo, while Christian mystics, scholars and theologians dance in the heaven of the Sun.

- 3 The main focus in Gargan's study, however, is on the works that Dante could have found on the shelves of Bologna's libraries. Gargan includes an edition of four early inventories, listing the books owned by significant Bolognese intellectuals: the physician Tommaso d'Arezzo (whose collection was catalogued in 1286), a friar Ugolino (1312), an anonymous Master of Arts (c. 1340) and the grammarian Filippo di Giacomo Cristiani (1341). These libraries include works on a very wide variety of subjects in fields including philosophy, logic, medicine and theology.
- 4 Gargan's aim is to allow the modern reader see with his or her eyes the very books that Dante himself could have perused. *Could* is the key word, however, because Gargan remains aware that he is not in a position to say with certainty which libraries Dante actually visited (if any) and which manuscripts he might actually have held in his hands. The only hard fact is found in the *Convivio*, where Dante recalls how he was converted to the study of philosophy after Beatrice's death, spending 'some thirty months' frequenting 'the schools of the religious orders and the disputations of the philosophers' (II.12.7). The accuracy and frequency of references to Bologna in Dante's work make it likely that the poet spent time in the city, but we don't know when or for how long. Also problematic is the fact that some scholars have questioned Boccaccio's report that Dante studied in Bologna as this is the foundation on which Gargan's conjectures are built. The first and most obvious alternative suggestion is that Dante might have attended the Florentine *Studia* (medieval universities) run by the Franciscans and Dominicans and associated with the convents of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella, respectively. Another possibility is that, before and after his exile from Florence, he might have attended educational institutions or had access to libraries in the other cities he visited, notably Verona and perhaps Paris. Nevertheless, despite the lack of robust evidence linking Dante's name with the libraries of Bologna, Gargan provides a valuable study of book circulation in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy.
- 5 Gargan's most interesting (and controversial) suggestion concerns the list, compiled in 1312 and now kept in the Archivio di Stato di Bologna, of the books donated to the Bolognese convent of San Domenico by Friar Ugolino. This was first published in 1961 by Venturino Alce and Alfonso D'Amato, but Gargan emphasizes the possibility that Dante may have read books from this collection in the library of the convent in Bologna. Only fourteen books are itemized in Ugolino's inventory, including the Bible and works by Augustine, Boethius and Hugh of St Victor. The most intriguing title is a copy of the *Liber Scalae*, the medieval Latin version of the *Kitab al Miraj* or *Book of the Ladder*, an Arabic text describing Mohammed's ascension to the heavens. Gargan's claim that Dante *could* (italics here is a must) have read this Latin translation was advanced in 1949 by Enrico Cerulli and José Muñoz Sendino, who presented their evidence showing Dante's indebtedness to the Muslim world. That the tradition available to Dante included Muslim lore about the afterlife, and that Muslim sources contributed to the structure of Dante's Hell, was suggested in 1919 by the Spanish Arabist Miguel Asín Palacios. Demonstrating the debt that Dante owes to Muslim thinkers, Asín Palacios pointed out various parallelisms between the *Commedia* and accounts of the netherworld in Arabic literature. In his view, the complex moral structure of the *Inferno* follows the general lines of hell as described in the wealth of Muslim beliefs about the

afterlife built up around the Qur'an and elaborated upon by Muslim theologians including Ibn Arabi of Murcia (1165–1240).

- 6 The thesis that Islamic depictions of the afterlife are a major influence on Dante's *Commedia* has caused great controversy over the years, both because it points to an Islamic component in one of the greatest Christian epics and because it casts doubt on Dante's originality. Asín Palacios's thesis has been generally rejected by Italian Dantists (with the important exception of Maria Corti), and the matter has provoked passionate responses on both sides of a debate that remains unresolved. The nature of the controversy has too often been overshadowed by nationalist and ideological concerns: Asín Palacios, for instance, stressed Dante's intellectual links with Moorish Spain in order to bolster Spain's national pride and offer a measure of support to its pro-Arab foreign policy. Comparably, current interest in the relationship between Dante and Muslim thought has been revived in the context of dialogue between world cultures and a radical questioning of Western mono-culturalism. In spite of any political bias that might underpin contemporary interest in the cultural influence of Islam on Western society, scholars in the West have done important work in reassessing the role Islam played in shaping their culture. While it has generally been taken for granted that European thinking was formed from a combination of classical and Judeo-Christian cultures, the Islamic component also needs to be taken into account.

AUTHORS

ALESSANDRO SCAFI

Alessandro Scafi is Lecturer in Medieval and Renaissance Cultural history at the Warburg Institute, School of Advanced Study, University of London. He is the author of *Mapping Paradise: A History of Heaven on Earth* (London: British Library; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). In addition to essays on various aspects of the history of cartography and the history of pilgrimage, he has published several articles on Aby Warburg, the relationship between the Italian and Hungarian Renaissances and on Italian art and literature, in particular on Dante and Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini.