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Dante: The Poetics of Conversion by John Freccero (review)

Raymond-Jean Frontain

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STUDIES IN THE AGE OF CHAUCER

Chaucer's texts. She approaches them with goodwill, a fact which also involves the reader of her book in a meaningful process of interpretation.

JOERG O. FICHTE
Universität Tübingen

JOHN FRECCERO. *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*. Ed., with Intro. by Rachel Jacoff. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1986. Pp. xvi, 328. \$25.00.

This volume collects 17 essays published by John Freccero between 1959 and 1983, under cover of an introductory essay by Rachel Jacoff analyzing Freccero's critical methodology and his place in contemporary Dante studies. The essays have been revised only in small part, and are printed in order of the progress of the poem's parts rather than in order of their publication. While this decision by the editor allows the reader a broad view of the *Commedia* as Freccero sees it, it also makes for disjunctive reading. Early chapters presume the reader's knowledge of later ones because these were published before them as articles; chapters start and stop abruptly because there is no general argument being developed which might bridge them; style and strategy shift from chapter to chapter because, as essays, they were written at different times and for different purposes. Composition is particularly eclectic, eleven chapters treating the *Inferno*, two the *Purgatorio*, three the *Paradiso*, and one the *Commedia's* stanzaic form. In short, this is a collection of essays and not a book. Professor Freccero has been done a great disservice by editor Jacoff and by Harvard University Press, which suggest that he will deliver more than he can under such an arrangement but which the reader familiar with his work has every reason to hope that he might.

But frustration with the packaging of Professor Freccero's work aside, one cannot but be grateful to have his major essays on the *Commedia* collected between two covers, and interested to see how Freccero's critical end is written in his beginning. For if the essays do not delineate, as promised, a coherent poetic system invented and employed by Dante to explore the significance of the experience of religious conversion and to instill in the reader desire for a similar experience, they do to varying extents treat the theme of conversion, often with illuminating results, and show this to be

the consistent (if sometimes deeply submerged) concern of Freccero with the poem.

To summarize Freccero's oftentimes isolated observations: the *Commedia* is a conversion narrative, the model for which is Augustine's *Confessions*. Dante, however, makes Augustine's pattern of spiritual death and resurrection dramatically real by beginning with a literal descent into Hell (p. 4). The pilgrim's awakening is "a kind of conversion to truth, . . . an abrupt movement from sin and ignorance into wisdom and virtue" (pp. 30–31); the outlines of his poetic journey are those of exodus from Egypt to Jerusalem which, as Freccero points out, Charles Singleton has analyzed as the biblical "figure of conversion" (p. 56). The metamorphosis of the sinners in Hell is a sort of antitype of the pilgrim's conversion, for the destruction of their "anterior form" is "the goal of the first part of . . . [his] journey" (p. 109). The pilgrim's spiritual change is "represented by the pilgrim's turning upside-down on the side of the *crux diaboli*"; his education, which has consisted of "righting the inverted world and distinguishing right from left," is appropriately accomplished on an antitype of Christ's cross (pp. 182–83). In Paradise, the pilgrim's encounter with Cacciaguida allows for a retrospective illumination of Dante's life that structures history according to the Christ event, underlining the nature of conversion as the "recapitulation of the Christ event in the history of the individual soul" (p. 216).

Freccero is most provocative when analyzing what could be an actual "poetics" of conversion. The pilgrim's aversion from the petrifying gaze of Medusa in *Inferno* 9, for example, is related to the reader's conversion to the spiritual truth that lies beneath the strangeness of Dante's allegorical text (chap. 7). And Cato's scolding of Casella for singing the second *canzone* of Dante's *Convivio* in *Purgatorio* 2 carries a palinodic force that suggests "the conversion of the Dante who *was* into the poet whose work we read" (chap. 12, p. 186). Even Dante's *terza rima*, with its "logical reversal" and "recapitulative effect," is shown to mirror "theologically the movement of conversion": "The paradox of continuity/discontinuity in the formal representation of *terza rima* is matched by the paradox of continuity/discontinuity involved in the logic of autobiographical narrative: I am I, but I was not always so" (p. 264).

Freccero's place as one of the great Dante scholars of this century can only be confirmed by this collection of his essays. To read them at one time, however, within the context suggested by his editor's title, is as provoking as it is provocative. One can only hope that he will soon apply himself to a

comprehensive treatment of the theme of conversion and of the poetic operations by which it is delivered.

RAYMOND-JEAN FRONTAIN
Harpeth Hall Preparatory School

STEPHEN KNIGHT. *Geoffrey Chaucer*. Rereading Literature. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986. Pp. xi, 173. \$19.95. £4.50.

Of the several guides to Chaucer's poetry that have recently appeared, Stephen Knight's *Geoffrey Chaucer* is certainly the most provocative and arguably the best. It is a brief book, and is evidently written, at least in part, for an audience new to Chaucer. Yet its appearance in Terry Eagleton's "Rereading Literature" series guarantees that it will be both theoretically motivated and resolutely revisionary, and Knight's book is indeed imbued with a polemical, even militant spirit. As readers of his challenging essay on "Chaucer and the Sociology of Literature" (*JAC* 2 [1980]) know, the formalism of his excellent 1973 book, *Ryming Craftily*, has in recent years been replaced by a politically committed concern with historical situating, and he offers this book as "a thorough study of Chaucer's major work in terms of its relation to the dynamic historical forces of its own period." As this phrasing itself suggests, Knight's brand of historicism is explicitly Marxist, and he sets himself in opposition not just to the "anti-historical and asocial" criticism practiced by "bourgeois ideologues" like the New Critics and their heirs, but also to two other, inadequate versions of historicism: the glossatorial positivism of scholars whose "worm's eye view of history . . . quite obscures the real historical function" of the poetry, and the monolithic *Geistesgeschichte* of "a priestly caste of American professors [which] has baptized the text in a shower of footnotes and pronounced it devout Christian allegory." On the contrary, for Knight "the dynamic historical forces" that shaped Chaucer's poetry are neither local events nor intellectual traditions but social contradictions generated by the displacement of the feudal mode of production by capitalism. Chaucer's poetry is part of the cultural superstructure, and to be understood must be realigned with the material base which originally conditioned its production.

There will doubtless be many readers who will immediately dismiss Knight's project as hopelessly tendentious, another anachronistic attempt