There have never been so many opportunities for the public to engage with Dante's works: translations, introductions and online resources are being produced all the time. Yet Dante can be intimidating. One of the consequences of the long tradition in Dante studies, and the vast amounts of scholarship on the poet, is that the sheer volume of writing on Dante, rather than making him more accessible, can seem to present a barrier to engaging with his work. Even full-time specialists are hardly able to keep up with the volume of new scholarship being published each year on Dante; this arguably prevents new, multidisciplinary voices from entering debates in Dante studies and it can be off-putting to non-academic readers.

In discussing responses to Dante in the new millennium, this essay directly addresses the question of how specialist and non-specialist Dante audiences were able to come together in creative ways under the auspices of a large-scale, international research collaboration, investigating ‘Dante and Late Medieval Florence’. This project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the UK, ran at the Universities of Leeds and Warwick from 2011 to 2017. The academics leading the research shared a strong conviction that their scholarly activities needed to be allied with a commitment to using that work to provide a platform for the public to engage with Dante. They were keen to avoid any sense that, as researchers’ understanding of Dante and his contexts deepened, increased specialisation might somehow create yet further barriers to new readers of Dante. Indeed, they sensed that the project’s approach to Dante’s engagement with theology and religious culture offered new opportunities to capture the imagination of the public and to facilitate new and creative approaches to Dante’s works.
The project itself emerged from a number of collaborative activities on Dante’s theology. Such activities helped in various ways to identify the importance of understanding the local conditions in which Dante and his contemporaries would have experienced theology and religious culture. The project aimed, therefore, to recover the multiple experiences of theology in late medieval Italy, focusing on Florence in the 1280s and 1290s, and to examine the way in which Dante engages with the forms of these experiences in his works. The project drew together a team of seven researchers, based in the Leeds Centre for Dante Studies at the University of Leeds and in the Department of Italian at the University of Warwick, in partnership with the Devers Program in Dante Studies at the University of Notre Dame in the USA. The team sought to cast light on the ways in which medieval theology was mediated and experienced within a specific historical and geographical context, while paying close attention to its varieties and their effects upon different publics.

It did so through four strands of research. The first, ‘Theological learning in Dante and Dante’s Florence’, examined the sites of theological learning in Florence. It asked what an educated layman such as Dante might have learned at the Scuole of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella in the 1280s and 1290s, and the forms that learning might have taken. The second, ‘Religious culture and the mediation of theological ideas in Dante and Dante’s Florence’, examined the ways in which theological ideas were mediated in late medieval Florence beyond the learned context, in particular in the form of preaching. The project’s third theme, ‘Dante and the theological poetics of the social encounter’, examined the theologians who appear as characters in the Commedia. In so doing this theme considered the templates that existed for mediating the theologian as a historical figure and explored the model of theological discourse presented in Dante’s poem, as a personal, social interaction with individually named and characterised theological authorities. Finally the fourth strand, ‘Dante, theology, and socio-political thought’, examined the close interaction between Dante’s religious thought and his social and political ideas. In particular, it considered the ways in which the prophetic mode informed and helped to shape political discourse, connecting the social context of its audience with broader questions of theological significance.

Drawing on these four strands of research, we were able to explore opportunities for bringing Dante to new audiences in fresh and engaging ways. The first of these was rooted in the desire to consider the full range of ways in which theology and religious culture were experienced in the context of Dante’s Florence. The project’s attention to the ways in which
theology was mediated to non-learned and lay audiences, alongside its interest in the higher scholastic forms in which theology was practised and studied, was intended to highlight the vibrant and diverse ways in which theology entered the fabric of Florentine life – including through visual culture, architecture, ritual, vernacular song, preaching and storytelling. Through the activity of the mendicant orders and associated groups, one might see late thirteenth-century Florence as marked by experimentation in modes of engaging the public in theological ideas (albeit with varying senses of the hierarchies of authority). This diversity of experience – engaging the senses as well as the mind – seemed to us entirely in keeping with the way in which Dante’s *Commedia* offered a rich, multilevelled approach to the spiritual, poetic, philosophical and political questions it wished to address. It also offered a diversity of models for engaging the public in our research.

Secondly, we saw Dante’s work as aiming not merely to encapsulate a set of ideas for his readers to receive passively, but rather to provoke thought and responses. Indeed, as we explored the forms of popular engagement with theology in Florence – including through the activities of confraternities, pilgrimage and preaching – we gained an increasingly strong sense of the desire in Florentine society to be active participants in, rather than passive recipients of, religious culture. It was therefore entirely right, in our view, to help support well-informed but nonetheless creative responses to Dante and to his context.

Finally, it was clear to us that, while both Florence and Dante had strong visibility in twenty-first-century Western society and attracted a good deal of interest among the public, there were limited openings for thinking about the two together. The packaging and branding of the tourist experience of Florence strongly emphasised its Renaissance heritage, with the medieval city featuring far less prominently in tourist material and publicity. We felt that through the research project’s emphasis on the rich context of late medieval Florence, it would be possible to make the most of the strong interest in Florence in order to offer a more coherent understanding of the ways in which the late medieval city would have been experienced.

Two sets of public engagement activities were developed to try to maximise the benefits of the project for the public. The first, focused on engagement with Florence itself, was carried out by Lois Haines, Leeds Undergraduate Leadership and Research Scholar, and Ruth Chester, AHRC Cultural Engagement Fellow. Together, they developed a set of materials to engage the public in the context of late medieval Florence. In particular, Chester led on the development of new tourist material, now
available in tourist offices in Florence, which offers a walking itinerary through Dante’s Florence. Produced in collaboration with the Comune di Firenze and with UNESCO, this offers a new way for visitors to Florence to look beneath the Renaissance city and develop a sense of the diverse, vibrant forms in which Dante’s Florence was renewing its economic, cultural, and religious life. It also offered a structure to well-attended public lectures, presented by a number of project team members and orchestrated by Chester and Haines. Audience members reported that the imaginary ‘walking tour’ format gave a memorable and inviting entry point to understanding the late medieval city.8

The second set of activities focused on bringing ideas and experiences from late medieval Florentine society into direct dialogue with contemporary experience in a more local context – not in Italy this time, but in contemporary northern England. This activity was particularly closely linked to the fourth strand of the AHRC project, which asked to what extent Dante’s social and political thought was shaped by his theological understanding and religious practice, and was driven by the desire to understand the often conflicted relationship between an individual and her or his community.

The city of Wakefield is a city of around 300,000 inhabitants, situated in the south of the county of West Yorkshire.9 Originally built on industry and coal mining, the city, like much of the surrounding area, has significant areas of social deprivation,10 although there have been some attempts at cultural regeneration in recent years.11 Through creative engagement with the ideas on community found in the Commedia, the Leeds Centre for Dante Studies attempted to encourage local residents with no previous knowledge of Dante to reflect on the meanings of community for them and for their city.

Starting from the point of view that all three realms of Dante’s afterlife are communities of sorts, the project explored the ways in which twenty-first-century communities – taking Wakefield as a case study – might be construed as heavenly, purgatorial or hellish, characterised by community, learning or isolation. Hell, from this perspective, is a ‘city’ made up of many individuals, but which entirely lacks any sense of community. It is a ‘città dolente’ [grieving city] (Inf., III. 1) – a city which is also a wilderness, in which citizens are punished together, but each is alone in isolation from God and from her or his fellow-citizens.12 In contrast, Purgatory is a place of education, where the souls, as part of their process of cleansing and renewal, learn to live and work together towards a common goal. Paradise is a place of perfect community, where the desire for the common good overpowers all selfishness and cupidity
and leads to an existence of perfect peace. This is perhaps best exemplified in the Heaven of Jupiter, where Dante sees a huge eagle made up of a great multitude of individual souls but which speaks with a single communal voice. The concept is visually depicted, in John Flaxman’s memorable image, on the cover of the present volume:


(Par., XIX. 10–12)

[I saw and also heard the beak speaking, and the voice sounding both I and mine, though logically it was we and ours.]

Participants in the project were asked to consider how Wakefield’s citizens might be working together today to create community so that they can live together in peace and harmony, and how it might feel to be deprived of a community, isolated in the midst of others, as is the case in Dante’s Hell. At the most basic level, they explored the ways in which a city such as Wakefield can be a heaven or a hell for its citizens, but they also probed the ways in which art and poetry might be one method by which community is communicated or even created.

Working with the Education Department at Wakefield Cathedral and with a local poetry group known as the Black Horse Poets, responses to these questions were invited in the form of photographs of Wakefield itself, seen in the guise of Heaven, Purgatory or Hell, and through the medium of poetry. Around 30 images and 13 poems were submitted. The six photographs which were felt best to represent the potential relationships between Dante’s Commedia and Wakefield were exhibited in Wakefield Cathedral throughout the month of May 2016. Alongside these were exhibited three poems (one for each cantica of the Commedia), accompanied by the three extracts from Dante’s own text which had been used to stimulate the reflections of participating poets and photographers. All submissions were included in a project booklet that was freely available in the cathedral throughout the period of the exhibition. Space, in the present context, does not permit a detailed discussion of the contributions to the project, but a few examples will allow the immediacy, reflectiveness and nuance of the responses received to emerge.

Fig. 9.1, then, presents an image of litter on Wakefield’s Kirkgate Station on a rainy day, epitomising the bleakness and loneliness of Dante’s Hell. There are no people in this city, although wet footprints suggest the
presence of others who remain out of sight and out of contact with the viewer. But this image also hints ironically, with its sign proclaiming ‘Way out via subway’, at the overall trajectory of Dante-pilgrim’s journey through Hell, descending ever further into the depths of the earth before emerging, via the narrow passage which leads from Hell to Purgatory, to see the stars.

In contrast, Fig. 9.2 shows a peaceful demonstration in support of refugees. This seemed to sum up the way in which, in Purgatory, the souls provide moral and physical support for one another; they suffer, but also work to make themselves, and by extension their community, better. In this image the individuals’ anonymity gives them a universality, in the same way that Dante-pilgrim in the Commedia is often seen as an Everyman figure. The Purgatorio is also evoked in the image of Wakefield Cathedral’s stone floor labyrinth, installed in 2013 (Fig.9.3). At the beginning of this cantica, Virgil tells the souls who are newly arrived in Purgatory, “noi siam peregrin come voi siete” ['we are pilgrims here, as you are'] (Purg., II. 63), and the journey through this second realm is, indeed, a pilgrimage of sorts. Like the journey of the labyrinth, however, there is only one way through Purgatory – and it is impossible, having undertaken it, to lose the ‘diritta via’ [straight way] (Inf., I. 3), for this journey inevitably leads to God. In the same way, the worshipper walking the Wakefield labyrinth is led to the centre; here, facing east, s/he is naturally turned towards the altar and towards God.
Figure 9.2  Harriet Evans, *Solidarity* (peaceful demonstration in support of refugees by Wakefield City of Sanctuary on the steps of Wakefield Cathedral). Used by permission of photographer.

Figure 9.3  Rich Wainwright, *Pilgrimage* (sandstone labyrinth, Wakefield Cathedral). Used by permission of photographer.
Finally, Fig. 9.4, which shows the crowds and excitement in Wakefield’s city centre when the Tour de Yorkshire passed through the city, is an image that seemed to reflect Dante’s conception of Paradise – not in a religious sense, but precisely in the way in which the heavenly community is expressed through the image of the eagle in Paradiso XIX. Here a spontaneous coming-together, with a single purpose and speaking with a single voice, is shown to lead, above all, to joy: ‘la bella image che nel dolce frui | liete facevan l’anime conserte’ [that image made by the joyous souls woven together in their sweet frui] (Par., XIX. 2–3).

Very similar ideas emerged from the poems submitted by members of the Black Horse Poets. In his poem The Streets of Me, Michael Yates conveyed the idea of both the pointlessness of Hell’s punishments – the endless circling of the free city bus recalls all those punishments in the Inferno that involve circling, such as those of the avaricious, the fortune-tellers and the hypocrites – and also the isolation of the sinners, even in the midst of crowds of their fellows. Yates describes how:

There is no transport but a circle;  
the Free City Bus running round forever,  
and the station with its machines clickety tickety,  
where the only change will be small change.  
Though I step outside my semi-detached,  
I am never detached from the Streets of Me.

(The Streets of Me, lines 19–24)
In a different way Angie de Courcy Bower’s poem *If Heaven’s Too Bright*, constructed entirely around doubt and negativity, was reminiscent of the negativity of Dante’s Wood of the Suicides. Compare the following extracts, for example:

What if deeds are never good  
if water’s thicker than blood  
if dreams should not be chased  
if there’s an end to space [...]  
if cats don’t have nine lives  
if two wrongs make a right  
if heaven’s too bright?

(*If Heaven’s Too Bright*, lines 1–4; 22–4)

Non fronda verde, ma di color fosco;  
non rami schietti, ma nodosi e ‘nvolti;  
non pomi v’eran, ma stecchi con tòsco.

(*Inf.*, XIII. 4–6)

[Not green leaves, but dark in colour, not smooth branches, but knotted and twisted, no fruit was there, but thorns with poison.]

In complete contrast, the opening line of Michael Yates’s poem about Paradise, *In Cathedral Square*, captures entirely – even if in a tongue-in-cheek way – the focus on community that characterises the *Paradiso* in its assertion that ‘Paradise is other people’. Peter Bedford’s poem, *The City at a Distance*, while confronting Wakefield’s real social and political issues directly, offers a conclusion of hope. His poem’s nod to the city’s more recent attempt to reinvent itself as an artistic hub combines with an understanding of the city’s much earlier history, and above all with a statement of faith in the resilience of its people.

Somewhere in the eighties  
In a place where politicians play  
They stole its heart away [...]  
Depart King Cotton. Depart King Coal  
Four horsemen came-a-riding  
Rough shod, merciless, over the hill  
Closure, Demolition, Dispersal, Landfill  
Decline could not be declined.

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On that cold and frosty morning
You may see through history's mist
Shrouding this nursery-rhyme town
A wealth that pays no heed to money
A running seam of richness
Footsteps on pathways, voices on the air
Sculpture living in hands of people
New music growing and dancing
A place for painters, poets, artists all
And rarely, in an occasional hush
The tallest spire, a dying prince
And a mulberry bush.

(The City at a Distance, lines 13–15; 20–24; 37–48)

This idea of resilience and of hope emerged even more strikingly in the poems that focused on the idea of Purgatory, which constituted perhaps the most interesting of the poems submitted. The idea of education, in particular, and of change, growth and development, seemed to resonate with those who took the idea of Purgatory as a learning community and applied it to their own time and place. Michael Yates again approaches the topic with wit in his reference to a ‘Diploma in Guilt Management’, an almost perfect condensation of the theology of Purgatory. But his poem concludes more seriously by exploring the hope of ‘graduating’ – aided by a combination of self-assessment (Dante’s Purgatory depends on the souls recognising, repenting and then working to remove the stain of their own sins) and the help of a guide (some Virgil or Beatrice figure, perhaps):

Higher Diploma,
Guilt Management

With the help of self-assessment,
the mercy of a Personal Tutor,
I still dream I will graduate,
be a living soul again,
between Thornes Park and Lightwaves.

(Purgatory: The Full-Time Course, lines 8–9; 24–8).
Perhaps the most striking of all the poems submitted, however, was that entitled *Purgatorio* by Paul Crossley. In this work a latter-day Dante stumbles through twenty-first-century Wakefield in a haze of alcohol and drugs; he eventually gets into a fight in a club ironically named ‘Paradiso’, finds himself arrested and ultimately wakes up to the tentative hope of redemption. The author of this poem has not only grasped something of the tension that exists in Dante between human sinfulness, which translates into selfishness, aggression, greed and violence towards those around us, and the ever-present – however unlikely – possibility of redemption. He has also managed to reflect something of Dante’s stylistic novelty: not only in choosing to write his poem in *terza rima*, but particularly by mixing stylistic registers in the work. *Purgatorio* thus engages inventively with the real, earthy, everyday language of the city, blending this with more erudite references (such as that to Newton’s final Law of Motion):

We kicked off at mid-day, me and my guide –  
I woke, stiff as a bread-stick, on the floor –  
With two Red-Bulls, leftover Southern-Fried

And after that two Fosters. Then two more  
While taking turns to play Assassin’s Creed  
On – was it the X-Box or the PS4?

Well, that was when we started on the weed –  
My guide does, on the side, a little dealing –  
His dividend smelt very good indeed

And I suspect we shared the same appealing  
Getting-It-On-While-Listening-to-Marvin-Gaye-  
Singing-’Let’s Get It On’ – type of feeling.

[...]

Double Jack and Red-Bull in my hand  
Told me that all was well – but then this shit-head

Grabbed my neck and, barking some command,  
Dragged me toward the doors. I should’ve said  
‘Excuse me Sir, you fail to understand … ’

But my glass was already swinging for his head.  
It didn’t land, though Newton’s Final Law  
Meant something final came at me instead,
Connecting very neatly with my jaw
As bodies clambered into the affray
And that was me. Out. Stars were all I saw.

(Paul Crossley, Purgatorio, lines 1–12; 44–54)

Taken as a whole, the poems and images generated by the Wakefield project stand as an eloquent testimony to the way in which Dante is still able to speak to audiences today. He does so particularly, perhaps, through his attention to human beings as ‘political animals’, and to human lives as inextricably bound up with one another. Moreover, and even more significantly, the way in which this project engaged Dante with the gritty reality of life in a real twenty-first-century community reflected precisely those more scholarly ideas that lay behind the desire to explore Dante in his late medieval context and gave rise to the AHRC-funded project. That is, it illuminated even more clearly the need to read Dante in his own context; the conviction that questions of theology, community, art and poetry could not be easily separated; and, following from this, the belief that reading Dante in this highly contextualised way might open up new perspectives on his work for scholars and non-specialists alike.

Notes

1. Most notably, Dante’s ‘Commedia’: Theology as Poetry, ed. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); and Reviewing Dante’s Theology, 2 vols, ed. Claire Honess and Matthew Treherne (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2013).
2. The project team comprised Matthew Treherne (Principal Investigator; University of Leeds), Simon Gilson (Co-Investigator; University of Warwick, now University of Oxford); Claire Honess (Co-Investigator; University of Leeds); Anna Pegoretti (postdoctoral research fellow, University of Warwick; now Università di Roma Tre); Nicolò Maldina (postdoctoral research fellow, University of Leeds; now University of Edinburgh); Kevin Marples and Abigail Rowson (both of whom successfully completed their PhDs at the University of Leeds under the auspices of the project).
4. For an example of the outputs of this strand, see Nicolò Maldina, In pro del mondo. Dante, la predicazione e i generi della letteratura religiosa medievale (Rome: Salerno, 2018); and the same author’s essay in this volume.
7. Haines’s Undergraduate Leadership and Research Scholarship was financed by a philanthropic gift to the University of Leeds, where she was then working for a BA in French and Italian. Chester had recently completed her PhD in the Leeds Centre for Dante Studies.
8. The lecture series, ‘Three Evenings in Dante’s Florence’, was held in Leeds in November 2012.

10. Wakefield is in the bottom quintile of local authorities in England according to the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation (coming in 65th place out of 326 authorities). This source also shows that 47,400 people in the district (14.4 per cent of the population) live in neighbourhoods that are in the top 10 per cent of the most deprived in England. In particular, the district shows high levels of education and skills deprivation, as well as worsening indicators of deprivation in income and health. See http://www.wakefieldjsna.co.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/Poverty-Profile.pdf and, for the full data set, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015 [accessed 20 June 2018].

11. The Hepworth Wakefield, which opened in 2011 and was awarded the title of Art Fund Museum of the Year in 2017, has been central to this cultural renewal. Simon Wallis, Director of the Hepworth, spoke of ‘the value and power of culture in transforming the quality of people’s lives in the Wakefield district’ when collecting the award. See https://hepworth-wakefield.org/news/the-hepworth-wakefield-wins-art-fund-museum-of-the-year-2017/ [accessed 21 June 2018].


13. Participants in the Wakefield project were provided with a booklet with a brief explanatory introduction and three short extracts from Dante’s text (one from each cantica), namely: Inferno III. 1–30; Purgatorio XIII. 82–111; Paradiso III. 67–90.

14. The authors are grateful to Tracey Noble and to the clergy and staff of Wakefield Cathedral, to members of the Black Horse Poets and to Simone Lomartire for their practical support and for their enthusiasm for the project.

15. Around 80 copies of the booklet were distributed during May 2016. The complete poems and the photographs can be viewed via the Leeds Centre for Dante Studies webpages at: https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/leeds-centre-dante-studies/doc/community-projects [accessed 30 November 2018].

16. The opening line of the poem, ‘Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita’ [In the middle of the journey of our life] (Inf., I. 1; our emphasis) is often seen as indicative of this universal perspective: the character’s life is also our life, the life of his readers.

17. While Hell is a journey of dead ends whose end-point (Lucifer, frozen in the ice-lake of Cocytus) is ultimately static, the journey through Purgatory can have only one outcome – reunion with God in Heaven. See for example Virgil’s words to the penitent souls in Purg., III. 73–5.

18. A mulberry bush in the prison yard at Wakefield’s notorious Category A prison is thought to be the origin of the nursery rhyme ‘Here we go round the Mulberry Bush’; the dying prince is, of course, Richard, Duke of York, who was killed at the Battle of Wakefield in 1460, very close to where the Hepworth Gallery now stands.