

Understanding Dante/Dante in Love

reviewed by [Sharon Coolidge](#) in the [September 19, 2006](#) issue

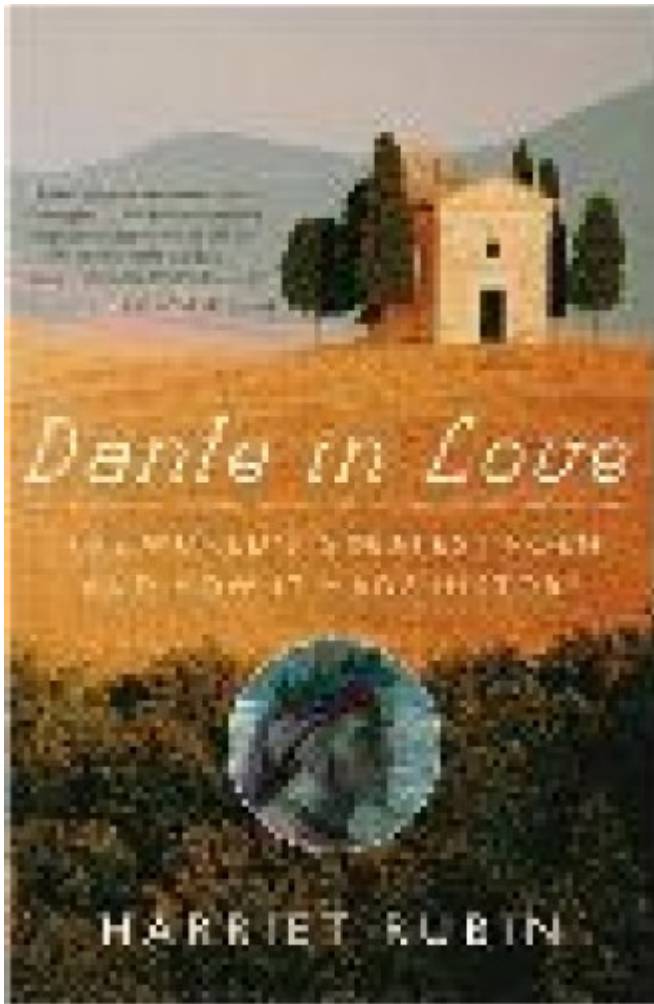
In Review



Understanding Dante

John A. Scott

University of Notre Dame Press



Dante in Love: The World's Greatest Poem and How It Made History

Harriet Rubin
Simon & Schuster

How should we read the classics? Should we, as C. S. Lewis suggested, read like a detective, searching for clues and patterns that reveal meaning? Or should we be more like inventors, looking for interesting bits and pieces to recombine into new meaning for ourselves? One approach respects the text; the other rewrites it. John Scott's and Harriet Rubin's books on Dante illustrate this striking difference.

The Divine Comedy, Dante's story of salvation, continues to make a compelling claim on readers. It traces a journey we all are invited to take, through God's grace: to recognize sin in our lives, to be released from it and to become whole by loving God. But the complex and highly imaginative structure of Dante's work openly

invites interpretation.

Scott's *Understanding Dante* is neither a commentary nor a sustained interpretation. It is more like a collection of notes carefully organized around all of Dante's writings: *The New Life*, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante's major treatises and his letters and lyric poetry. Scott also includes a section on contemporary history. By structuring his book this way, Scott provides a context for *The Divine Comedy*, revealing Dante's changing perspectives and suggesting his possible motivations.

The major focus, however, is on *The Divine Comedy*, which Scott explores by focusing variously on the moral order, the landscape, the people, the role of classical antiquity, and patterns of poetic genius. These topics plus detailed notes and an index provide readers with the tools necessary to see both the broad scope of Dante's work and the importance of the details.

The strengths of this book are clear. For knowledgeable readers of Dante, Scott's insights and observations will ring true. Whether he is talking about Beatrice's role as guide, Dante's use of number symbolism, or the reason there is vegetation in limbo, Scott's knowledge is deep and sound.

Scott also points out rarely noticed patterns in the way the nearly 600 named characters (250 contemporary, 250 classical, 80 biblical) appear. In his section on classical antiquity Scott demonstrates how Dante reinvented sources for his own use, and in the section on poetry he compels new appreciation for Dante's original expression by exploring linguistic texture (the sweet and harsh sounds of the original Italian), Dante's creation of new words (about 100), and his use of unresolved paradoxes in the *Paradiso*. He also includes a section on Dante's many citations of the Bible and adaptations of liturgy.

Certain features of the book suggest that its intended audience is people who already know Dante's work, rather than first-time readers. There is no introduction or conclusion, and Scott juxtaposes the various sections with each other by means of headings rather than linking them logically. The general reader might benefit from more connections between the points or a broader interpretive framework on which to hang the details. Despite these small shortcomings, however, readers will emerge with a new appreciation for Dante's artistry and with tools to enrich their understanding of his classics.

Rubin's *Dante in Love* also has its strengths, but it gives a very different reading of Dante. How Scott and Rubin handle the character of Ulysses illustrates the difference. Dante reshapes the classical story by placing Ulysses in hell for persuading others to sail with him beyond the known world. Just as they reach Mount Purgatory, God destroys them. Scott rightly sees Ulysses as guilty of sacrificing home to pursue his wanderlust, of lacking prudence, of exhibiting intellectual pride and of committing intellectual murder by persuading others to sin.

Rubin interprets his actions differently. She can see the sin (he is in hell, after all), but she paints Ulysses as an almost heroic figure, struggling against huge odds and searching for something beyond normal boundaries. Like others in history, he was shipwrecked, she says, "for no other reason than pursuing a noble dream." Her point is clear, but it is not Dante's point.

Rubin seeks to reinvent Dante's story of exile for the modern reader, who, like Dante, can use loss and pain to inspire a personal journey into the self. Dante is not "the professor's poet" but an inspiration to rethink human powers, to "become godlike" through self-knowledge and to journey into the self through love. It is true that Dante saw love for God as the means and becoming like God as the goal, but contrary to Rubin's interpretation, his aim was self-denial, not self-aspiration.

Rubin's strength lies in telling a story with interesting details, making characters, episodes and details come alive, but certain inaccuracies raise questions. For example, her definition of *hamartia* as "an innocent act with colossal consequences" is a misreading of classical drama. And although she sees *caritas* as charity, she redefines *amor* as "intimate and spiritual," "a divine love that is individual." No medieval reader would make this mistake. There are also stylistic features that readers may find annoying, among them rapid shifts from the past to the present (from Virgil to Martin Luther King Jr., from Dante's crossing of Acheron to T. S. Eliot's first marriage) and paragraphs that begin with one idea and end with another.

As a scholar Scott has lived inside Dante's work, so the bits and pieces are all very familiar to him. As a journalist Rubin is looking from the outside in, wanting to re-create Dante's tale as a story of the modern self's struggle for fulfillment. Both Scott and Rubin focus on love, but they understand it in opposite ways. Scott understands Dante's goal of finding ultimate fulfillment through love for God. Rubin mistakes the vehicle for the goal. Dante's work is ultimately not about the struggle of exile but about the joy of coming home.