
Il poemetto dell’intelligenza, written by an anonymous poet in Florence between 1260 and 1280, is the focus of and gives title to Rosetta D’Angelo’s excellent study of this little known thirteenth-century Italian poem. As D’Angelo states in the preface, the work’s significance—as it relates to Il Dolce Stil Novo and, more importantly, Dante—has not been adequately understood by critics. The aim of her scholarly, yet very readable book, is twofold. She intends to analyze the literary merits of the poemetto in the context of Sweet New Style aesthetics, while focusing especially on its relationship to Dante’s work: “vale a dire l’idealizzazione di Madonna Intelligenza (realizzata in modo assai originale), fondamento probabile di successivi processi idealizzanti quali i danteschi del Convivio e della Commedia” (5).

The cover’s thirteenth-century miniature aptly prepares the reader for a journey into the medieval mind. The miniature thus renders the book more attractive; but also, and more importantly, it makes a visual statement of what will be discussed in the following pages. We see a knight debating with a monk before a king. Next to the king’s throne sit the queen and the princess. Below them, asleep on an emerald meadow, a peasant follows their conversation in a dream. The triangle of men and women as well as the surreal ambiance underscore effectively the theological concerns of the poemetto.

Besides depicting the hierarchical structure of medieval society, the cover pictorially sums up the main themes of Il poemetto: the love of God incarnated by the Madonna, the woman-angel who represents intelligenza and sapienza, and the driving force of the celestial spheres that are in charge of human destiny. As D’Angelo’s close reading demonstrates, the poem can be placed next to the verses of the great Stilnovisti who celebrated God in love poems dedicated to beautiful women. Only a Florentine could have fused spiritual and earthly concerns harmoniously in a style so rich in color, texture, and emotion. Drawing parallelisms with Dante’s poetry, D’Angelo succeeds in supporting her thesis that Il poemetto had an impact on Stilnovo aesthetics as well as on Dante’s poetry.

Undoubtedly, as we read in the Preface, the poemetto manifests the more individualistic needs and the cultural values of urban, mercantile, wealthy middle-class laymen who populated Florence in the early Renaissance. In the Tuscan city-state, economic and political factors contributed to the evolution of medieval poetry. Florentines were keenly aware of the dangers of materialism as they pursued luxury and power. The author of the poemetto, D’Angelo seems to suggest, was a man much like St. Francis of Assisi, the son of wealthy merchants, individualistic, practical, materialistic, and ambitious, who saw in God the alternative to the lures of beauty, pleasure, and wealth. Indeed, the author of the poemetto belonged to this minuscule world of Florence made up of free men who lived democratically and were passionately guided by the love of God and of Mary. The Madonna was in the medieval mind man’s supreme happiness, and a paragon of perfection and virtue for all women.

The analysis of the theme of idealized womanhood unfolds in five chapters subdivided into sections dealing with themes and style, all emphasizing the intimate
interconnections between this poem and contemporary Florentine poetry. The wealth of information presented reveals a solid knowledge of medieval literature which is documented by quotations in Latin, French, and German. D'Angelo's approach is eclectic, effectively combining stylistic and linguistic analysis with historical information.

The first chapter aims to place the *poemetto* in its historical context. Having scrutinized medieval copies in Gothic handwriting found in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, D'Angelo is able to determine accurately the time of composition of the work. She concludes that it was unquestionably written in Florence in the last years of the thirteenth century. Her detailed description of these medieval texts heightens our sense of participation. D'Angelo takes issue with those who think that this poem was the work of Dino Compagni, and that it represents a poetic effort whose literary worth is overshadowed by its didactic and theological emphasis.

This part of the book also offers a historical review of *Stilnovismo*. The critic explores the coincidences between the treatment of the theme of love in the *poemetto* and in similar works by the *Stilnovisti* paying particular attention to the thematic and stylistic analogies with Dante's poetry. The discussion is helpful to our understanding of how Dante and the Florentine poets arrived at a less abstract and more earthly treatment of the Provençal theme of idealized womanhood. Her presentation reveals an extensive familiarity with several religions and cultures as she makes use of the Bible, ancient Egypt, hagiography, and classical literature.

We learn that the link uniting woman to God can be traced not only to ancient Rome, Greece, and Byzantium, but also to other cultures not normally associated with Renaissance culture, more specifically that of Egypt. In this regard, it is very interesting to read that we can find the idea of woman-angel in the Egyptian belief in Maat, the embodiment of truth and divine justice, and the spouse of Thoth, or divine intelligence. Maat has a role analogous to that of Beatrice since she has the power to lead man to salvation. The merit of this comparison is that the discussion on the *donna angelicata* is expanded to areas of scholarship outside the conventional boundaries of Italian or Western civilization. By taking into account unexplored critical paths, D'Angelo shows the philosophical affinity of the aesthetics of the Sweet New Style with Platonic thought.

This line of discussion is further supported by a parallelism between the Song of Songs of the Old Testament and Maat. In the Bible too, the woman portrayed is beautiful, ethereal, and totally removed from earthly concerns. Depicted in an unreal natural setting, she is the ultimate goal of man’s spiritual aspirations: “Allor le sue bellezze imaginai; / Di si mirabil cosa dubitai, / Ch’avea figura angelica vissuta” (*Il poemetto* 6.7–9).

Chapter 2 includes a discussion of the function and meaning of precious stones in medieval literature. Again, D’Angelo draws analogies with other poets, particularly with Dante, to explain how, for the medieval mind, precious stones had magical qualities which alluded to God’s invisible power. Dante depicts the sky of Purgatorio in terms of a luminous sapphire (“dolce color d’oriental zaffiro”).

Chapter 3 scrutinizes more closely what the allegory of the Madonna Sapienza must have meant to the medieval reader. Particularly convincing in this phase is D’Angelo’s use of quotations emphasizing the thematic and stylistic influence of L’Intelligenza on Francesco Barberino’s *Reggimento e costumi di donna* as well as on Dante. Capitolo 4 concentrates on the stylistic features—hyperbaton, refrain, anacoluthon, assonance,

In the recent wave of *Convivio* translations, Shapiro’s new translation of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* completes the series of the prose works that predate the *Commedia*. As we have come to expect from this scholar, Shapiro does not limit herself to translating Dante’s brief and incomplete work in good, flowing and readable English, but she also provides ample documentation on the general background of the work (“Introduction: Dante’s Book of Exile”); an essay on the lesser known precursors of Dante as a writer on the “Romance idiom” who probably influenced him and the writing of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, complete with a translation of Raimon Vidal de Besalú’s *Razos de trobar* and of a short piece by Joifre de Foixà, *De la doctrina de compondre dictatz*, probably a companion piece to his grammar *Regles de trobar* (“Vernacular Backgrounds”); a study on “Dante and the Grammarians,” where she argues the more “profound affiliations” between Dante and medieval grammatical investigations; and finally, the concluding paper where she deals with the possible elements that may link *De Vulgari Eloquentia* to the *Commedia*.

Both the translation and accompanying essays constitute a sound piece of scholarship which probes a mostly neglected early work by Dante and underscores its importance among the most illustrious examples of medieval grammars but also singles it out, rather than *Convivio*, as the work which is closer in inspiration to the *Commedia*.

In “Introduction: Dante’s Book of Exile,” Shapiro emphasizes the innovative character of Dante’s project both in subject matter and in recombining previous traditional disciplines. The influence of Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana* as well as Cicero’s