

Within and without *The Divine Comedy*

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Alison Morgan

DANTE AND THE MEDIEVAL OTHER WORLD

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A different solution to a similar problem ... is displayed in Alison Morgan's *Dante and the Medieval Other World*. As befits a book which is not an introduction, all quotations from primary texts are given in the original, and they are either paraphrased or (normally) translated in full. The print in the body of the text is disconcertingly small, however, and in the quotations and notes borders on the minute. The overall appearance is crabbed and unattractive.

The appearance, though, wholly belies the substance, which is richly expansive. Dr Morgan has put us deeply in her debt by a wide-ranging and detailed consideration of works of which most Dante scholars are at best only fleetingly aware. Her subject is stated in the opening paragraph: "this book explores the relationship between the [*Comedy*] and previous 'popular' Christian belief concerning the afterlife, as manifested in both written and visual representations of the other world between the third century and the year 1321, the date of Dante's death". Indeed, she does herself a disservice when she goes on to claim that she will discuss "non-Christian, highly literary and learned works" only "as background material", for one of the great interests of the book lies in the illuminating way in which she frequently compares (albeit briefly) the popular Christian to the classical accounts of the other world, and shows how developments in the learned Christian world often outstripped and inhibited popular accounts and mark off the originality of the *Comedy* in its triumphant incorporation of many of these developments.

Morgan explores in separate chapters six areas in which she sees a link between popular accounts and important aspects of the *Comedy*: topographical motifs of the other world; the inhabitants of the other world; the guide; the classification of sin; the mountain of Purgatory and the representation of Paradise. The dedication of the scholar, evident throughout the book, is finally displayed in two extremely useful appendices: a chronological table of the principal representations of the other world from the ninth century sc to the early fourteenth century AD (all, be it said, from Western Europe), including a list of the principal mosaics, frescos and altarpieces of the Last Judgment; and "summaries with background and bibliographical 'information'" of all the written representations of the other world given in the first appendix. Twenty-two plates and four figures carry forward the argument and often gladden the eye.

Scarcely surprisingly, Morgan sometimes fails to persuade, but the evidence is meticulously presented. And she undoubtedly does overturn a number of commonly accepted opinions which have had authoritative champions. She shows, for instance (against, for one, Curtius), that Dante is not original in peopling his other world with contemporaries; what does distinguish the *Comedy* are figures and *éxempla* from the classical world. Or, *contra* Aurigemma (in the influential *Enciclopedia Dantesca*), and in support of a somewhat vague generalization by Jacques Le Goff, she demonstrates that Purgatory was often portrayed as a mountain.

The great merit of the work, however, lies not in demonstrating that in this or that feature of the *Comedy* Dante drew on specific written or artistic sources. Despite Morgan's best endeavours, the evidence is often too tenuous to establish any very direct or even indirect connection between particular works or genres and the *Comedy*. The book's merit lies rather in its drawing the reader into a stream of expression and of consciousness regarding the other world which for most would otherwise remain unknown and uncharted. Enriched by the results of Morgan's patient labours, we are in a position better to appreciate both the complexity of medieval culture and the true nature of the originality of the *Comedy*, in which popular elements are absorbed into a sophisticated whole of startling ingenuity.

