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## A Sublime Guide to the Genius of Dante

### Dante's Invention

by James Burge

The History Press, £18.99

There are enough books on the life and works of Dante Alighieri to stock a considerable library. Of course, many of these will simply be students' guides and scholarly works with voluminous footnotes. But there are the popularisers, and TS Eliot comes to mind as a writer who conveyed the delight of reading Dante even before one had a knowledge of Italian. He was talking about the euphony, the sheer attractiveness of the poetic rhythms in the poetry. Now, we have a writer who is equally enthusiastic but who actually elucidates the Dantean world-picture.

James Burge writes with an attractive mix of contemporary metaphor and scholarly knowledge, and the result is a clear, reliable guide to the most important aspects of the context of Dante's Florence and the wider world of the Italian states.

But more significantly he also steadily reveals the nature of the dissension in the social world around the great poet. He explains the long-lasting enmity of the Ghibelline and Guelph factions: divisions that ran very deeply indeed. In a community in which men had to take sides, any statements about love and peace were bound to be limited in their audience. Readers would have wanted to know which faction the

writer aligned himself with.

We learn that Dante did his duty as a soldier, and took part in the Battle of Campaldino. The internal politics of Church and state are lucidly interpreted for us, and the effect of reading Burge's books is very much like being part of a first year university seminar in which Dante is made real.

Burge is very skilled at giving insights into his subject's attitudes and behaviour, and has a special quality in his writing of using deduction and common sense to draw out the meaning of both public actions and personal writing in the poet's life.

Perhaps the most challenging area of study when writing on Dante is *La Vita Nuova* and the relationship of the poet with his beloved, Beatrice Portinari.

In some ways, this is more difficult than providing a commentary on *La Divina Commedia*, and this is because, quite frankly, there was no real "relationship" in terms of actual documented events.

Burge writes very well on the inferences and guesswork we have to indulge in in order to form a believable picture of Dante and Beatrice. There was so much he either did not say or that he said in code, partly using her as an ideal of womanhood and as a religious symbol. It appears that the woman herself knew little of him either, and it is no surprise that such slender knowledge about a classic event in world literature is celebrated by the heritage industry with the supposed spot on the

Ponte Santa Trinità where Dante stood and saw his lady for the first time with eyes of profound love.

This is a book I strongly recommend to anyone reading Dante for the first time, or for students of Italian literature who want to understand Dante's social world without recourse to the annotated editions and monographs.

James Burge is to be congratulated in producing what is clearly a labour of love as well as an invaluable guide to one of the greatest writers in history. Whenever we say that there is a massive corpus of work on a poet and ask if another is needed, we usually give reasons why the new book has a claim on our attention. In this case, I was aware from the first three pages that I was being taken on a journey of discovery that was going to be hugely enjoyable so yes, we do need this new book on Dante.

**Stephen Wade**