

## Book reviews

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Rossana Fenu Barbera, *Dante's Tears: The Poetics of Weeping from "Vita Nuova" to the "Commedia"*, Leo S. Olschki Editore: Florence, 2017; 204 pp.: ISBN 9788822265067, €34.00 (PBK)

**Reviewed by:** Aniello Di Iorio, University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA

The idea of weeping has played an important role in the development of Dante's theological implications through the Christian doctrine. Because the idea has been neglected for a number of centuries, it is not surprising that a scholarly volume such as *Dante's Tears: The Poetics of Weeping from "Vita Nuova" to the "Commedia"* has come under scrutiny. Rossana Fenu Barbera models her well-constructed argument around the complex notion of tears and their importance for understanding the scholarly elaboration around the sphere of Dante's works. It is the first critical work from which Barbera demonstrates the centrality of tears in the development of Dante's lifelong search for a new poetics. While she hopes to reveal the correlation between *Vita Nuova*, *Inferno*, and *Purgatorio*, the scholar constructs a new model for the poetics of tears, which turns out to be hermeneutically evocative in Dante's text.

Barbera divides her scholarly work into five chapters, along with an introduction and a conclusion, and carefully provides a succinct outline for each chapter. She organizes her volume into two sections: one section features the significance of tears from the *Vita Nuova* and *Inferno*, while the second features weeping in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. In the first section, she analyzes Dante's tears from *Vita Nuova* by taking into account the figure of Beatrice in the face of Dante's "desires and fears in his dreams" (p. XII). She also demonstrates how Dante moves from developing a poetics of tears through his inner struggles to defining the "performances of tears" (p. XIII), which convey special meanings through the description of characters like Paolo Malatesta and Count Ugolino. The second section unfolds with the scholar's re-interpretation of tears through a dual line of argument. The empirical evidence from antiquity to Dante's time serves Barbera's need to trace direct and indirect sources, a transition from a direct weeping to an indirect form of tears, which leads us to understand how tears become useful for the Florentine poet as a poetic mediation. This mediation serves as a witness to Dante's defiance against communal life through a socio-political flouting of the order of civic life and the city of Florence through the last tears for Dante in *Purgatorio* (p. XV). The scholar's final focus on *Purgatorio* XXX establishes a contrast between the static tears in *Inferno* and the

dynamic tears in *Purgatorio*, from which Dante's weeping becomes an instrument of change in his writing since *Vita Nuova*.

A significant aspect of Barbera's analysis is the notion of tears as a constructive and regenerative mechanism. She identifies this as "intellectual development" (p. 39) whose course begins in the *Vita Nuova*. Because weeping goes beyond Dante the pilgrim's verbal qualities, this development underscores the tears' function through a systematic process of contemplating weeping as a language of their own. According to Barbera, this system operates on a tripartite level in the *Inferno*, which indicates a moral discourse, a rhetorical role, and a structural function. Such a task can also encompass a bodily procedure when the scholar argues that the figure of Lucifer should be juxtaposed to that of the Old Man of Crete. When she claims that the "same watery substance that the Veglio of Crete cannot shed from his eyes passes directly to Lucifer multiplied by three, and is poured, as a stone fountain, from his six eyes" (p. 105), this shows that the mechanism of tears also endorses a regenerative motion. It is a recurring development that is examined to a greater extent in Chapter four, where we witness a transformation from liquid tears into Ugolino's frozen tears in *Inferno* XXXIII. This oscillation from active to passive tears accentuates not only the dual nature of such a mechanism, but also Barbera's effort to identify the poetics of weeping through multiple layers of interpretation.

To empower the study of this mechanism of tears, Barbera traces a line of thought with a clear logic of argumentation. She makes use of argumentative questions throughout the entire volume, which proves to be efficient and simultaneously compelling. It is a literary strategy that occurs particularly when she contextualizes several characters from the *Commedia*. For instance, Dante's weeping in the face of Filippo Argenti and Frate Alberigo in *Inferno* VIII & XXXIII (p. 124) might have remained unexamined without Barbera's juxtaposition of these characters' literary natures and their own pasts. On the one hand, this operation highlights a way in which the scholar channels the significance of tears in overcoming the boundaries that previous critics have elaborated in the past; on the other hand, it endorses the reader's understanding of Dante's sagacity through the notion of tears.

In addition to that, the rationality of the scholar's reasoning occurs also if one takes into account the structure of the book. It almost goes without saying that Chapter one entails an elucidating analysis of tears in *Vita Nuova*, while the last chapter unfolds Dante's final tears in *Purgatorio*. Furthermore, we witness a progressive strategy which allows us to embrace more clearly the hermeneutic steps that Barbera takes in order to diversify her reasoning about the mechanism of Dante's tears. She claims that if Dante's poetics of weeping occurs by stressing "confession, repentance, and purification," these are to be considered moments that unveil "structural and strategical ways" that allow Dante to shift from his "celebration of a youthful, unfulfilling and sinful love to the contemplation of a more mature and sacred love for God" (p. 193).

Barbera's volume is a milestone that bridges the notion of tears across the realms of Christianity, psychology, physiology, and philosophy. While she leads the reader through this series of disciplines that characterizes a hermeneutical progression, the

reader also feels engaged with this intensifying course, which leads him/her towards a collective understanding of tears. Furthermore, to Barbera tears can be seeds that unfold from the literature of Dante, and that assist him in distinguishing his knowledge of religious beliefs as well as non-religious beliefs on medicine, anthropological development, and physiological matter from Galen to Avicenna. The scholar intentionally selects those examples from *Vita Nuova* and *the Commedia* to first strengthen the medieval poet's artistic and literary perspective, and then considers the poetics of Dante's weeping as a methodological mechanism. It is an indispensable and original work that can be aesthetically pleasing to a modern reader, historically bound to a medieval audience, and universally inspiring to a comprehensive reader, who wishes to digest Dante's poetics of tears in the *Commedia*, while seeded in *Vita Nuova*.

Robert Black and John E Law (eds), *The Medici: Citizens and Masters*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2015; 444 pp.: 9780674088443, US\$40.00 (PBK)

**Reviewed by:** Brian Jeffrey Maxson, East Tennessee State University, USA

This wide-ranging book offers 22 essays mostly on the political rule of Cosimo, Piero, and Lorenzo de' Medici. All of the uniformly high quality essays in the book are written by well-established scholars from both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, all scholars interested in 15th-century Florence or the early Medici family should have this book on hand. Its range and quality make it a rare edited collection that deserves to be read in its entirety.

The book is organized into four thematic sections with a central introduction. Robert Black's Introduction lays out the fundamental disagreement between Philip Jones and Nicolai Rubenstein regarding the nature of Medici power in 15th-century Florence. Jones argued that the Medici were "signore in all but name" (p. 1). By contrast, Rubenstein contended that the Medici worked within the Florentine constitution, often using indirect means to maintain the structures of the republic while also exerting their influence within it. The essays in the book engage with this overarching framework to varying degrees, even as some of the most notable contributions in each chapter fall outside this specific context.

Part One, "Power and Legitimacy," and Part Two, "Economic Policy," encompass the first half of the essays. Giorgio Chittolini contextualizes the language used in Florence to legitimate its conquests with that employed by other northern neighbors. Gian Maria Varanini contrasts territorial organization and local autonomies within the territorial holdings of Florence, Milan, and Venice. Andrea Zorzi offers an historiographical essay that suggests a more inclusive, less value-ridden use of the term "*signorie*" as it applied to late medieval Italian rulers. Rather than political realities, Melissa Meriam Bullard focuses on the images of political power created by Lorenzo de' Medici and his allies. Riccardo Fubini also looks at Lorenzo de' Medici's rule, but this time through the lens of diplomacy. Fubini highlights the institutional changes in Florence from the late 1470s used to legitimate the regime within an