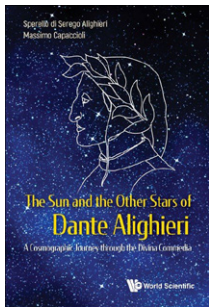


# RECENSIONI



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THE SUN AND THE OTHER STARS OF DANTE ALIGHIERI  
A COSMOGRAPHIC JOURNEY THROUGH THE DIVINA COMMEDIA

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2021 was the 700th anniversary of the death of Dante Alighieri, rightly considered the best known and by far the most influential Italian poet. This sparked a flourishing production of books and documentaries mainly focussed on his masterpiece *La Divina Commedia*, an epic journey through the Universe as it was known in the 14th century, whose reading is mandatory for all Italian students. Hardly considered an easy task, understanding the *Commedia* is an effort that encompasses countless hours over a time span of 3 years, one for each *cantica*. When I was a student, we had to read (and hopefully understand) 11 *canti* out of the 33 of each *cantica*. Moreover, we were requested to memorize the most relevant sections since my professor believed in the power of learning by heart. I distinctly remember how much I hated it, but somehow I can still recite long stretches of Dante's *terzine*. I doubt that this is the best way to make a teenager appreciate the *Commedia*, but I cannot offer a better method since when it comes to understand the meaning of Dante's poetry, the challenges are many. While the language is ancient and obscure, often the meaning is far from obvious for nowadays readers. Indeed, Dante is talking to his contemporaries, giving for granted their proficiency on all historical and political intricacies of the middle age Italy where cities were constantly battling each other taking sides with the Pope or the Emperor, who were bitterly fighting to establish supremacy. Since, during his journey, Dante meets scores of the leading characters of his time, to disentangle the political subtleties one should know who is who. However, although quite complex, this is not enough to understand the *Commedia*. To really appreciate Dante's masterpiece, one should also be aware of his cultural panorama as well as of his vision of the world, i.e. his knowledge of geography coupled with his grasp of science, mainly astronomy, but also meteorology, a matter pertaining to the first sphere of the heavens. Indeed, Dante was an accomplished scholar and an encyclopaedic mind mastering all the knowledge of his time.

What is hard for Italian students, who should already be somehow familiar with the historical and cultural settings, becomes much harder

for a foreign reader who is most probably unaware of all that but would like to be able to appreciate Dante's standing in the global panorama of the middle age literary world. That's why two leading Italian astronomers undertook the task to make Dante's vision understandable to a global audience. For Sperello di Serego Alighieri, himself a direct descendant of Dante, is a family business while for Massimo Capaccioli is a way to pay homage to middle age knowledge of astronomy when this science was the locator, the calendar and the time keeper of humanity.

Although the Title "The Sun and the Other Stars of Dante Alighieri" does point to an astronomical focus, the book is remarkably comprehensive, covering all aspects of Dante's world.

Before plunging into Dante's biography, the authors dwell into the history of this period when Italy offered a very complicated panorama, the details of which are deeply embedded in the *Commedia*.

The historical setting is also important to understand Dante's life, which was shaped by the political fighting which made him a prominent figure in Florence until 1302, when his enemies won and he was condemned to death, thus to a perpetual exile. He was forced to seek hospitality and protection at the courts of friendly rulers who took advantage of his political skills as an ambassador. Not many details are known for sure about his continuous travels. At first he was in Verona, then in Sarzana, in Paris (maybe), somewhere in Casentino, again in Verona and in Ravenna. Although obliged to be some kind of courtesan, Dante continued to be a high rank scholar writing important essays such as *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *Convivio* and *De Monarchia* where he explained his view on the shortcomings of the Italian rulers. He also wrote high visibility *epistulae* (letters) to the Emperor, to the Cardinals and, lastly, to the Florentine friends. If anything, he was not seeking oblivion; on the contrary, he wanted to make his point loud and clear.

Certainly, he would have liked to go back to Florence where his family was still living, but, in spite of the political vagaries, his stubborn attitude to refuse compromises did not help

and he continued to be banned and died in Ravenna in 1321.

The authors do a really nice job to set the stage and to prepare the reader to plunge into the *Commedia*.

Little is known about the *Commedia* genesis, probably it was conceived around 1307 but the imaginary voyage took place at the beginning of the century. Dante does not provide a date for the start of his adventure, it would have been too easy. He rather gives a number of astronomical clues: the Moon was full when Venus was visible in the morning in the Pisces constellation, while the Sun was in Aries and Mars together with Saturn in Leo. It could have been spring of 1300, the first Jubilee year in history, but this choice does not match the Venus position, which could be satisfied postponing the departure one year later, on the night between March 24 and 25, 1301. Owing to the subtleties of Florentine calendar, it was still Jubilee year, thus this date looks quite robust.

All in all, Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise was pretty quick, since it finished at midnight on March 31 in the glory of the Empyrean.

Although I still remember the beginning of the *Commedia*, I had forgotten all the astronomical details and I really enjoyed reading the chapter on the calendar of the Comedy that marks the starting point of the astronomical part of the book. The following ones cover the Moon, the planets (i.e. Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, following the Ptolemaic vision), the Stars, the Milky Way (with an interesting detour on the Magellanic Clouds, which Dante certainly never saw, although he could have heard about Arabic celestial maps depicting them). The last chapters deal with more speculative topics such as the possibility that Dante could have imaged a curved Universe, unlimited but finite.

Writing this book must have required a lot of work, but the result is remarkable since it provides countless reasons to open the *Commedia* and read it again.

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