

# DANTE, COLUMBUS AND THE PROPHETIC TRADITION

Spiritual Imperialism in the Italian Imagination



MARY ALEXANDRA WATT

ROUTLEDGE

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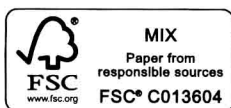
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# Dante, Columbus and the Prophetic Tradition

Exploring the diverse factors that persuaded Christopher Columbus that he could reach the fabled “East” by sailing west, *Dante, Columbus and the Prophetic Tradition* considers, first, the impact of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the apocalyptic prophetic tradition that it reflects, on Columbus’s perception both of the cosmos and the eschatological meaning of his journey to what he called an “other world.” In so doing, the book considers how affinities between himself and the exiled poet might have led Columbus to see himself as a divinely appointed agent of the apocalypse and his enterprise as the realization of the spiritual journey chronicled in the *Comedy*. As part of this study, the book necessarily examines the cultural space that Dante’s poem, its geography, cosmography and eschatology, enjoyed in late fifteenth century Spain as well as Columbus’s own exposure to it. As it considers how Italian writers and artists of the late Renaissance and Counter-Reformation received the news of Columbus’s “discovery” and appropriated the figure of Dante and the pseudo-prophecy of the *Comedy* to interpret its significance, the book examines how Tasso, Ariosto, Stradano and Stigliani, in particular, forge a link between Dante and Columbus to present the latter as an inheritor of an apostolic tradition that traces back to the *Aeneid*. It further highlights the extent to which Italian writers working in the context of the Counter-Reformation, use a Dantean filter to propagate the notion of Columbus as a new Paul, that is, a divinely appointed apostle to the New World, and the Roman Church as the rightful emperor of the souls encountered there.

**Mary Alexandra Watt** is an Associate Professor of Italian Studies and Associate Dean in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Florida, USA.

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# Introduction

## Setting sail

Christopher Columbus was a sailor who imagined himself as a writer.<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri was a writer who figured himself as a sailor, and both were avid readers of the Bible. Although Dante died 130 years before Columbus was born,<sup>2</sup> they shared a concept of the cosmos in which time is finite and human history has both a beginning and an end.<sup>3</sup> The book of *Genesis* recounts that beginning and the book of *Revelation* foretells its end. In between lies the plot, complete with prophecies or foreshadowing expressed through a variety of hermeneutic strategies, all with the purpose of facilitating man's understanding of the reason for his sojourn here. In each life, of course, there is also a beginning and an end, such that each human life may be seen as a microcosm of this larger universe.

In the fifth century St. Augustine linked scriptural history to physical space when he called the world a book.<sup>4</sup> In associating travel and exploration with reading, Augustine likened both to hermeneutic exercises through which the meaning of one's own journey might be revealed. In the Christian tradition (as in others), sacred travel in the form of pilgrimage embodies a similar dualism, figuring the physical journey as a spiritual journey from darkness into light, from ignorance into knowledge, from blindness into sight.<sup>5</sup> Further, the end of the pilgrimage represents the end of one journey and the beginning of a new life, functioning much the same way as baptism, which ends one life and initiates another. The end of the pilgrimage corresponds to the conversion experience in which the "old man" (*homo vetus*) is transformed into the "new man" (*homo novus*). The macrocosmic counterpart of the pilgrimage of an individual is equally cataclysmic; at the end of the book of the world, at the end of mankind's journey, the meaning, or the truth of the book will be revealed as the old world gives way to a new one.

In the late medieval Christian tradition pilgrimage was equally concerned with the direction of such progress, for such travel was not mere wandering. For the most part, pilgrimage was directed to the East where the sun rose, where Jerusalem was located and where even further east, lay the fabled Eden, closed to mankind since his fall. The return to Eden was equally linked to the beginning of the journey, but also to its end, for this return to an age of innocence, to a time when the world was new, would only come

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when mankind had grown too old. Indeed, the East was also where the end of the world would take place.

The timing of the end of one's own history as well as the larger history of humankind in the Christian imagination, necessarily concerns itself with the question of when, but for those who perceived the world in Augustinian terms, the end of the world was also necessarily linked to the question of where. In the Middle Ages, maps of the Christian world reflected this perspective so that mapmaking constituted an act of writing, as medieval maps represented the history that the book of the world recounted. Maps existed, as they do now, alongside guidebooks, the former showing and the latter telling the voyager how to reach the desired destination. Such maps and guidebooks reflected the significance of place and embodied the intersection of geography (world-writing) and Holy Scripture (God's book of the world).

Dante's *Divina Commedia* reflects the importance of both pilgrimage and the eschatological traditions in medieval Christian Europe. As Dante's pilgrim protagonist enters zones normally forbidden to living creatures, the poet provides a vision of both the end of one man's life and the end of the world. For modern readers the nature of the *Commedia*'s daring might not be immediately obvious but in the fourteenth century, Dante's journey bordered on blasphemy. Consequently, his task as a writer was a dangerous one that required him to convince the reader that his audacious voyage through hell, purgatory and the spheres of heaven was willed by God and, therefore, his transgression into sacred spaces was legitimate.

Although his election was exceptional, Dante's trek is intended to have broader implications for he leaves a trail for others to follow. The Ulysses episode recounted in *Inferno* 26 tells the reader how to find Eden: sail west from Gibraltar, bearing always a little south until you come to the antipodes. There on top of the mountain you will find Earthly Paradise. The trail, however, does not give carte blanche, for not all will be permitted to follow it to its final destination. Dante uses the Ulysses episode to underscore the extraordinary nature of this *iter*: only those called by God can complete it and reenter Earthly Paradise. The episode also reiterates the danger of the forbidden fruit that grows in that garden since it is precisely a thirst for knowledge that lures Dante's Ulysses to his death. The apocalyptic pageant<sup>6</sup> that Dante witnesses in the garden, moreover, underlines the link between this reentry and the end of time. The lesson of the Ulysses episode is revealed when Dante reaches the destination that Ulysses could not.

In late fifteenth century Europe, so frequently associated with the newness of the Renaissance, the question of the end of the old world was never far from the reimagining of a new one. Moreover, in an age that took its cues from the past, a return to a golden age was not so immediately severable from a leap into the future. The apocalypticism associated with Franciscan and Joachimite culture had not died with the emergence of Renaissance thinking (humanism), rather the late fifteenth century, confronted with a very changing world, turned to the prophets for an explanation and to make sense of

the unfolding of history while new prophets emerged to interpret the events of the century in eschatological terms.

In the late 1480s and early 1490s, neither Italy nor Spain were oblivious to the voices of those who imagined the end of the world was imminent. The Italian preacher Girolamo Savonarola predicted a coming apocalypse, while the closing battles of the Reconquista in Spain were figured as the closing chapters of Armageddon.

From this study emerges the depth of Columbus's concern with the timing of the coming apocalypse. Columbus, a "profoundly religious individual much influenced by the Spiritual Franciscans" (Kagan 36), we learn, saw the events of the late fifteenth century as important clues as to the timing of this apocalypse.<sup>7</sup> Columbus's knowledge of a Christian apocalyptic tradition that envisioned the spiritual conquest of Islam, the liberation of Jerusalem, and the conversion of the Jews as preludes to the millennium and the second coming of Christ, caused him to conclude that the end days were imminent<sup>8</sup> and that the world was on the brink of a new age. Columbus was, for example, acutely aware of the predictions of Peter of Aragon<sup>9</sup> and of John Alamany<sup>10</sup> for he cites them and others<sup>11</sup> in his own *Libro de las profecías*, an unfinished book of prophecies that he worked on throughout his lifetime.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Columbus cited a number of these prophecies when making his case to Isabella and Ferdinand (Columbus, 1991, 29).

But for a sailor such as Columbus, steeped in a millennial culture, the itinerary contained in the *Commedia* must have been enormously tempting. Its implicit warning was nonetheless daunting and Columbus had to be certain that he was divinely sanctioned to make this transgressive and potentially fatal journey. At least two other documented expeditions had attempted to sail west to reach the East and failed. Perhaps more importantly, Columbus had to convince others, namely a monarch with funds and authority, that he was chosen by God to succeed where others could not.

Columbus, we know, was well acquainted with the imagery of medieval millennialism and put great store in Franciscan apocalypticism, as well as a great number of medieval prophecies. But it was Dante's literary imagining of the *aldilà* that provided Columbus with a "summa" of the various and sometimes conflicting sources he had consulted and which can be found at the heart of Columbus's unique perception of the cosmos. Indeed, more than any medieval geographer's, Dante's geography legitimized Columbus's perception of the world and his conviction that his journey was a pre-ordained portent of a coming apocalypse.

In his letters and in his will, Columbus also writes that his discovery of the New World was part of a series of apocalyptic events of which the Reconquista was but one. The gold that would be revealed in the New World would provide the means of financing the eventual recapture of Jerusalem, the next step in the apocalypse.

Similarly, the question of why Columbus would sail west to reach the East can only be satisfactorily answered with recourse to more than the

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Franciscan prophecies in which Columbus was steeped. Despite the plethora of Columbus scholarship, little has been made of the Italian cultural heritage of which Columbus was a product or of his own fascination with the Roman Empire and its westward course.

For Columbus, who also linked the end of the world with a return to the garden from which mankind had been expelled, reaching it by sailing west must necessarily have been interpreted in the context of the successful Reconquista of the Roman Empire's westernmost extension and his own interest in Empire. To go west to reach the East, for Columbus was to bring such expansion full circle, and was thus linked to the prophesied Last World Emperor.

The book starts, therefore, with an overview of this backdrop, examining the context into which we ought to consider how Christopher Columbus "read" the world and the unfolding of time. More importantly it considers the extent to which the *Commedia* provided Christopher Columbus with an encyclopedic compendium of this tradition together with a series of signs that would support Columbus's assertion that he had been chosen for this task.

In so doing, it considers the role that the *Commedia* played in Columbus's social circle and in the courtly circles he frequented in search of funding. It looks at how affinities between himself and the exiled poet might have led Columbus to see himself as a divinely appointed agent of the apocalypse and his enterprise as the realization of the spiritual journey chronicled in the *Commedia*. As part of this study, the book necessarily examines the cultural space that Dante's poem, its geography, cosmography and eschatology, enjoyed in late fifteenth century Spain as well as Columbus's own exposure to it.

In this respect, the book also considers the dissemination of the *Commedia* in Columbus's world. It argues that Columbus used the poem as an itinerary as well as a hermeneutic tool by which to interpret his own role in the unfolding apocalypse with which he associated his journey.

While it is impossible to determine precisely all that Columbus had read in his lifetime, it is possible from his *Libro de las profecías* and the copious notes that he has left behind in his extant books to conclude not only that he read extensively but also that, like Dante, Columbus was thoroughly engaged in glossing and absorbing a variety of sources to create his own text.

A certain debt to Dante's own hermeneutic strategy is evident if not explicit in Columbus's writing. Like Dante, Columbus explicitly relies upon the four-fold methodology of the *quadrige*<sup>13</sup> when studying scripture. Moreover, Columbus notes that in addition to this four-fold methodology, he also employs a system used by Nicholas of Lyra in his *Glossa ordinaria* in order to include in his hermeneutics a two-fold system (Columbus, 1991, 17), similar to that known to Dante scholars as *figura* and fulfillment.

It is also possible to get a good sense of his knowledge and absorption, whether conscious or unconscious, of the *Commedia*. Most striking are the similarities between Columbus's perception of the shape of the earth and the

shape of the earth as posited in the *Commedia*. Columbus's earth, like Dante's is pear-shaped rather than perfectly spherical. Columbus's departure from a spherical configuration, like Dante's is created by the existence of a mountainous landmass, located in the western hemisphere antipodal to Jerusalem. For Columbus, as for Dante, Paradise could be found because it was perceived as a real location. While Columbus relies on the Bible as proof of the physical existence of Earthly Paradise it is the *Commedia* that provides Columbus not only with its physical locator but also with the eschatological key to its whereabouts or perhaps more accurately, its "whenabouts."

For Dante, the Reconquest of Earthly Paradise in the *Commedia* was a staging for reentry into the Holy City, into that Rome where Christ is a Roman.<sup>14</sup> For Columbus, it was a staging point from which Christianity could finally spread and conquer the entire unknown world. Columbus's *postille* in his own books<sup>15</sup> and his *Libro de las profecías* reveal a man who was deeply concerned with issues of Empire.<sup>16</sup> Although we cannot confirm that Columbus owned a copy of the *Aeneid*, his margin notes suggest that he was at least familiar with it and in all likelihood with the prophecies that it contained, especially that of a Roman empire without end in time or space.<sup>17</sup> The *Aeneid* establishes the westward trajectory of this expansion, but it is subsequently reiterated in the *Acts of the Apostles*, and ensconced in the *Commedia*.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time though Columbus would have found numerous affinities in Dante's life and his own that would eventually allow him to adopt the figure of Dante as a paradigm for preordination. Columbus, like Dante, a person living far from his home, was "anxiety ridden about his social status" (Cachey, 2002, 22). The affinities that Columbus bears to Dante, however, extend beyond their common social circumstances which could describe any number of sailors.

Dante's question, "Why me? I am not Aeneas; I am not Paul?"<sup>19</sup> was the same one that Columbus asked and reflected the same self-doubt that had kept him at the mouth of the Orinoco, fearful of sailing inland to penetrate Paradise. Like Dante's Ulysses, Columbus was conscious of the destruction that befalls the navigator who goes beyond what has been providentially destined. Yet the question of who should be appointed to make this westward journey to uncover and recover Paradise lost, was integral to Columbus's imaginings and crucial to the success of his project. The prophecies on which Columbus relied did not always name names, however, and Columbus was therefore constrained to consider the exempla contained in his readings, to find justification for his own election as "agent of the apocalypse."

If early in his enterprise Columbus was not convinced that he was the one, he did eventually come to see himself as divinely appointed, asserting that he was the appointed agent of this apocalypse.<sup>20</sup> After the discovery, he says that the idea of crossing this western ocean (Columbus, 1991, 12) was planted in his head by God much earlier, around the time he was living in Santo Porto with his wife.<sup>21</sup> Writing in 1500, Columbus reports that "Of

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the New Heaven and Earth which our Lord made, as St. John writes in the Apocalypse, after He had spoken it by the mouth of Isaiah, He made me the messenger thereof and showed me where to go."<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the more Columbus's world began, geographically to resemble that suggested by Dante, the more Columbus came to see himself as a divinely appointed agent of the apocalypse, like Dante, deposited at the foot of the mountain atop which lay Terrestrial Paradise. Like Dante, Columbus began to see himself as being at the center of salvation history.

Similarly, the more that Columbus's exegetical processes came to resemble those used by Dante, the more Columbus came to see himself less and less as an infernal Ulysses, a sailor destined to crash on the shores of Mount Purgatory and more and more, like Dante, Paul and Aeneas before him, as a legitimately appointed agent of God, permitted by privilege to enter the "other world." It is, therefore, arguable that Dante's eschatology urged Columbus to journey towards what he called an "other world" (Keller 43) and to perceive his discovery as destiny, preordained and as another page in the medieval book of the world. Columbus's own *Libro de las profecías* bears witness to his belief that his life, his own pilgrim journey, may be read as a part of a continuum, a literary laying on of hands, as it were, that traces its way back through the *Commedia* and the *Acts of the Apostles* to Virgil's *Aeneid*.

In short, if it was Dante who provided the road map to Paradise in the first place, then it was equally Dante who provided the paradigm that permitted Columbus to legitimize his voyage and discovery as divinely willed. For it is in the *Commedia* that Columbus would have encountered another soul seemingly unworthy yet nonetheless called to make such a journey, and permitted as well to see Paradise, notwithstanding his seemingly unworthy estate.

Despite his apparently undeniable reliance on Dante in his writings, however, nowhere in the extant documents does Columbus acknowledge a debt to the Florentine poet. To a Dante scholar this is at first somewhat troubling. It is impossible to imagine that a voracious reader, an Italian reader no less, such as Columbus who has a proven familiarity with Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, Joachim of Fiore, Pierre D'Ailly, and a host of other medieval authorities would not also have been familiar with Dante. One is, therefore, tempted to go off in search of a lost Columbus letter, to find a document where Columbus explicitly states that he could not possibly have sailed but for Dante's guiding presence.

Yet as Nicolás Wey Gómez notes, "acquaintance with the contents of books does not proceed only from having purchased and read them especially when books were still precious commodities that few could afford," asserting that knowledge of a work or a tradition is often attributable to one's cultural milieu (139).

This study, therefore, necessarily considers the question of Columbus's knowledge of Dante's works. The cultural presence of Dante in late



Quattrocento Italy, the cultural presence of Dante in Spain as well as Columbus's contact with Italians on the peninsula and in Spain, renders it highly probable that the Genoese sailor knew the *Commedia* and that his failure to cite Dante does not detract from the proposition that Columbus had Dante's world in mind as he set sail. Rather, it merely indicates that the cosmology of Dante was as much a part of Columbus's consciousness as is our modern day perception of universe based on Galileo's heliocentric model. Just as Galileo's universe has now become the prevailing norm and to cite it would be redundant, so too might Columbus have found it unnecessary to cite Dante.

Even if Columbus was not relying on the Dantean model, his discoveries were not only consistent with the prophecies that foretold Christianity's triumphant return to Jerusalem, but they also confirmed the validity for subsequent explorers and writers of Dante's own prophetic vision, as the poet's allegorical journey had now materialized in the physical or literal world. For those contemporaries of Columbus's who were familiar with Dante, Columbus's discovery would have confirmed the accuracy of the *Commedia*'s cosmology and underlined the legitimacy of the poet's prophetic stance. Amerigo Vespucci, for example, a friend of Columbus's, cites Dante in his own letters describing the discovery of the New World.

Moreover the mapping "mania" of the late 1400s that continued into the 1500s legitimized the transformation of imagined metaphorical space into physical quantifiable space. Whereas on medieval maps this metaphorical, or allegorical world had been cartographically represented by fanciful depictions of history and myth, exotic persons and wild beasts with little more regard for proportion than medieval art typically exhibited, by Columbus's time, there had been a subtle shift towards the mathematizing of maps.<sup>23</sup> This shift also factored into Columbus's assessment of the feasibility of his plan as cartographers such as Paolo Toscanelli started to present the world as measurable and thus more navigable.

In the same period, mathematized maps of other spaces, such as Dante's three realms of the otherworld, also emerged, proving that the allegorical nature of space did not preclude it from being realized or navigated. Consequently, Dante's otherworld, though imbued with allegorical significance, was nonetheless capable of being literalized. Similarly Columbus's own accounts and maps of the "other world," though literal representations, are nonetheless infused with a spiritual force, what Catherine Keller calls a "motivational force field" (51), that is, by his own apocalyptic interpretation of the world. That this "other world" existed, moreover, was confirmed by its "mappability." Neither its allegorical nor its typological significance were refuted by its discovery; quite the contrary; its significance was thereby emphatically confirmed.

Nonetheless, for Columbus, Paradise could not be reached until the end of time; just as heaven and hell were real locations that could not be visited until the end of one's own time except by divine appointment. The end of

time for Columbus, his apocalypse, is thus linked to the beginning of time. This new place, this new world is in fact very old. Or as Catherine Keller has put it, "the symbolic future has been remade as a literal past" (52). It is likely that it was Pierre D'Ailly's intertwining of the legends of Eden with the eleventh century prophecies of Joachim of Fiore that made his *Imago Mundi* so appealing to Columbus.

Virgil's *Aeneid* and the *Acts of the Apostles*, specifically those portions referring to Paul's journey to the west, would certainly have furnished Columbus with examples of westward journeys willed by God, but it is the absorption, appropriation and reiteration of both in the *Commedia* that provides the typology into which Columbus could insert himself as well as a scriptural template against which to measure and define himself.

Moreover, Columbus's desire that the people of this other world should be converted to Christianity<sup>24</sup> recalls the cleansing mission of Paul, and in turn of Dante whose literary journey was aimed at bringing about a New Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup> But Columbus does not go so far as to pronounce himself a new Paul, just as Dante did not explicitly do so, but allowed others to infer this. Columbus's journals and letters describe his mission in apostolic terms. Following the hagiographical conceit in which the saint's name is also a signifier, Columbus exploits the meaning of his own given name ("Christ bearer") and adopts a new signature: "Christo ferens."

Most importantly Columbus's discovery would have legitimized Dante's paradigm as the typological model for a new apostle. Columbus thus becomes, for writers and poets of the late Italian Renaissance and Counter-Reformation, a "type" of Dante just as Dante was a "type" of Paul and of Aeneas before him, and is legitimized as the heir to an apostolic tradition that starts with Aeneas and continues through Paul.

Perhaps the most compelling argument in favor of such influence is the frequency with which Italian writers in the years following the discovery used a Dantean filter to represent Columbus and to lend significance to his journey.

At the same time that contemporary cartographers confirmed Columbus's New World as the world imagined by Dante, so too did the Italian Renaissance writers confirm Columbus as the inheritor of the Dantean journey, informed in turn by the journeys of St. Paul and before him Aeneas. Columbus is thus another exile bound for Rome, a new apostle on the road to the New Jerusalem.

The mapmaking frenzy spawned by the Age of Encounters, however, ought not to be considered as distinct from but perhaps as symptomatic of a concomitant cosmopoietic impulse, or "worldmaking,"<sup>26</sup> that Giuseppe Mazzotta has suggested is the most emblematic feature of Renaissance culture.<sup>27</sup> Columbus's letter on his first voyage had barely been translated into Latin<sup>28</sup> and disseminated in Italy when in 1493 Giuliano Dati wrote a poetic version of it in Italian. And while it may be tempting to view the emergence of the Columbus myth merely as a consequence of the *cosmopoietic* urge, a



closer look at the figure of Columbus himself, as well as his writings, suggests that the Italian literary and cultural treatment of the New World owes as much to the medieval imagining that facilitated Columbus's journey in the first place as it does to fifteenth and sixteenth century humanism.

In the decades and centuries following his historic journeys, Italian poets and writers almost invariably elevated Columbus from Genoese navigator sailing for Spain to an Italian apostolic warrior fighting on the side of Christendom. In such literature, the discovery of the western landmass constitutes a reconquest of Paradise and signals the coming of the apocalypse and the eventual triumph of the Church militant.

In the wake of the New World discovery, the Italian literary treatment of the figure of Columbus, and other explorers, but mostly of Columbus, fortified the notion of Columbus's discovery as providential and confirmed the Italian and, consequently, the pan-European impression of Columbus as an inheritor of a long standing tradition of apostolic voyagers eschatologically linked to the role of Rome as the New Jerusalem.

Not surprisingly, Italian Renaissance writers imagined the Columbus episode as an historical event with ontological significance and crucially, to exploit the Dantean model in interpreting such significance. Torquato Tasso's revision of Canto 15 of his *Gerusalemme liberata* (1575) to include a reference to the eventual discovery of a new world by Columbus, a man from Liguria,<sup>29</sup> provides a good example of such literary construction. Significantly, Tasso's epic interprets Columbus through a Dantean filter, contrasting Columbus's success with Ulysses's failure, implying that Columbus, like Dante was able to complete a journey that the pagan voyager was not.<sup>30</sup>

Notably, it is not Homer's Ulysses to which Tasso makes reference, however. Rather his paraphrasing of Ulysses's journey and Ulysses's eventual destruction are a clear reiteration of *Inferno* 26. Tasso thus invokes a Dantesque reading in which Columbus is, like Dante, distinguishable from the pagan navigator.

Accordingly, later chapters of this book examine how Italian writers, such as Ariosto and Tasso, in particular, interpreted Columbus and his voyages and how they used Dante to do so. It seeks to contextualize these works against the backdrop of the Counter-Reformation and the increasingly secular and commercial New World enterprise, and considers their appropriation of a Dantesque Columbus to promote the position of Rome on the world stage. Specifically, it considers how the existence of the Dantean exegetical model and the auto-exegetical project undertaken by Columbus himself, allowed Italian writers to perceive Columbus's journeys as a fulfillment of the prophecies promulgated throughout the Middle Ages and absorbed into the narrative of the *Commedia*.

The book proposes that these writers as well as artists such as Giovanni Stradano recognized the integral role played by Italian navigators in the Age of Discovery and, in the absence of an Italian colonial project, sought