

DANTE  
CONVIVIO

A Dual-Language  
Critical Edition



Edited and translated by  
Andrew Frisardi



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Dante's *Convivio*, composed in exile between 1304 and 1307, is a series of self-commentaries on three of Dante's long poems. These allegorical love poems and philosophical verse become the basis for philosophical, literary, moral, and political exposition. The prose is written in Italian so that those who were not educated in Latin could take part in what Dante called his "banquet of knowledge." In this edition, eminent Dante translator-scholar Andrew Frisardi offers the first fully annotated translation of the work into English, with an extensive introduction, making Dante's often complex writings accessible to scholars and students. The parallel Italian text is also included for the first time in an English translation of the *Convivio*. Readers of this work can gain a strong understanding of the philosophical themes across Dante's work, including the *Divine Comedy*, as well as the logic, politics, and science of his time.

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Lo amoroso Conuiuiio di Dante:  
te:con la additione: Noua-  
mente stampato.



Frontispiece. Woodcut portrait of Dante from the title page of *Lo amoroso co[n]uiuiio di Dante:con la additione:Novamente stampato* (Venetia: Zuane Antonio & fradelli da Sabio, 1521). Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

In memory of my mother

MARIE SALLY FRISARDI CLEARY





## Translator's Preface

Any translator of Dante's *Convivio* is likely to feel somewhat disheartened at the passage in Book I where Dante writes about the value of translating poetry: "Everyone should know that nothing harmonized by a musical bond can be changed over from its own language into another without breaking all its sweetness and harmony." I exonerate myself in advance for whatever I have broken in my translations of the poems in this book. My goal in translating them has been to stay true to their sense and technique, while making them pleasurable as verse in English. The canzoni in the *Convivio* were written several years before the *Convivio* itself, but when they are published together with Dante's prose commentary on them, which constitutes the bulk of this book, the translator faces an unusual challenge. Since Dante's commentary relies on precise meanings and terminology, and often directly quotes the poems to make an argument, the verse translator cannot take as many liberties with the translation as he or she might do with a poem that stands alone. The literal sense has to trump the aesthetic or poetic when a compromise is necessary. My goal throughout, however, and surely a Dantean aspiration at that, always has been to blend semantics and aesthetics. To provide alternate readings and shades of meaning, and because the specific meanings of the poems are so important to the *Convivio* as a whole, I have also placed literal prose translations of the poems in the appendix to this volume. My metrical, rhyming verse translations of the canzoni appear at the start of each treatise.

My approach to translating the prose has been similar to my work on the poems: to make a readable version that does not ignore or smooth over the original's considerable complexity. I have wanted to remain as faithful as possible to Dante's text, of course; and I have always tried to make the English prose clear and fluid enough to be followed by an educated contemporary reader, while registering the style of writing that marks the original as the product of a wholly different culture – an entirely different collective state of mind, in fact. At times, though not usually, I divided longer sentences into two sentences of translated text, if the original's length did not seem integral to the thought it expresses. Most of Dante's longer, tortuous sentences, however, express long, tortuous trains of thought, and I aimed to replicate that as much as possible. I frequently consulted earlier translations of the *Convivio*, especially Richard Lansing's and often also those of

Christopher Ryan and Philip Wicksteed. On the occasions where I consciously adopted the phrasing of another translator, I acknowledge this in the notes.

Dante's verbatim quotes from the three canzoni of the *Convivio* are given in italics in the prose the first time they appear in each chapter, and in quotes thereafter. Wherever possible I have used the wording from my verse translations for these quotations. When, in a few scattered places, my verse translation was not precise enough in the literal sense for a given quotation in a particular context, I have used the wording from the literal prose translations of the poems in the appendix. These exceptions to the rule, in italics as well, are placed in square brackets. Dante also at times paraphrases his own canzone passage, rather than quoting verbatim, or repeats a quotation in a given chapter, and in these cases I use quotation marks instead of italics.

The text I have followed is the one established by Franca Brambilla Ageno, published by Le Lettere in Florence in 1995. I have adopted American-style punctuation for the Ageno text and made a few minor style adjustments to coordinate it with the translated text (for example, text that Ageno gives in italics to indicate conjectured spellings and words, I have reproduced in roman font). Other divergences from Ageno are acknowledged in the notes. Lacunae in Ageno's edition are indicated by brackets enclosing a string of ellipsis points, or (in the translation) by conjectured text which I have adopted from other editions, mentioned in the notes. For the sake of readability, in the translation I have left out the brackets that Ageno places around emended text; and again for readability, since there are about a thousand bracketed emendations in Ageno, the omitted brackets are *not* mentioned in my notes.

When the reader opens any densely annotated Italian edition of the *Convivio*, he or she encounters quote after quote from Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, and many other scholastic sources. These are given in Latin, which means that an already remote text, unlikely to be sought after except by Dante aficionados, students, and scholars, is relegated still further to the realm of the inaccessible to the large majority of readers. This has always struck me as ironic given Dante's express purpose in the *Convivio*: to make learning accessible for those who did not have time to learn Latin and other scholastic basics. All quotations in this edition are given in English translation; the original language is included

only when a specific textual point needs to be made, or for quotations from Dante's and others' poetry. When primary texts are quoted, the purpose is to shed necessary light on a given passage, directly relevant to the reader's experience of the text at that juncture; or to draw attention to some specific verbal usage. Often I cite just chapter and verse of primary sources, for readers wishing to follow up on texts which shed light on the subject or line of thought that Dante is discussing.

I have translated Dante's "uomo" and "uomini" sometimes as "man" or "men" and sometimes as "person" or "people" or "human" or "human beings," depending on the context. It is not always feasible or appropriate to force Dante's usage to fit twenty-first-century standards. *Man* in the generic sense is a metaphysical category or entity, actually a *kingdom* in Dante's thought, while *human being* and *human* have a more anthropological, evolutionary, or concrete shade of meaning. Also, I have tried to keep to a minimum the possessive "his or her" or other gender-neutral phrasings that would encumber Dante's prose.

My principal aim in the notes has been to provide factual, linguistic, and other information about Dante's text and what it discusses – enough to facilitate the general reader's and scholar's access to the *Convivio* and the culture behind it. They serve to provide everything that the reader will need to make sense of Dante's text, follow its arguments, and at least begin to see how it fits into its cultural and historical context. To keep the notes from being overlong and convoluted, I have followed a few guidelines. First, although the notes are heavily indebted to the Italian commentaries, in particular drawing on those of Giovanni Busnelli, Cesare Vasoli, and Gianfranco Fioravanti, I have cited a commentator directly only where he or she has been uniquely responsible for an important textual emendation or the identification of a previously unidentified but crucial source, or for a particularly fine or unique insight or formulation about the *Convivio*. More global points or statements of widespread consensus, or common citations of Dante's source texts or influences, are not cited by name. Likewise, for the sake of concision and readability, I do not call out my own original comments and insights in the notes; and my citations from the *Enciclopedia dantesca* and the *Dante Encyclopedia* provide only the *voce*, or name of the entry, leaving out the author's name unless there is some specific reason to draw attention to it.



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Without a Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, this project would not have been possible, or at least would have taken much, much longer to complete. My heartfelt thanks to Edward Hirsch, president of the Foundation, for his support and interest; also to the Foundation's Committee of Selection and the Board of Trustees for entrusting me with the generous award.

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My debt to previous translations of the *Convivio* is great, in particular that of Richard Lansing. The translations of Christopher Ryan and Philip Wicksteed have also been valuable for considering alternative interpretations and wordings of many passages.

My heartfelt thanks go to Brian Keeble for suggesting and to his Golgonooza Foundation for funding the publication of my 2014 lectures at the Temenos Academy in London, under the title *The Quest for Knowledge*

in Dante's "*Convivio*," for which Brian was the designer. The text of this booklet, revised, forms much of two parts of the introduction in the present volume. I have been extremely fortunate to benefit from Brian's skill and generosity. Thanks to the Academy for permission to reprint.

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This book is dedicated to my mother, who passed away suddenly during the early phases of my work on it. As always, she had been warm and encouraging about my projected work plans. It is from her that I learned that only study approached as an *animo innamorato* really matters.

My wife, Daphne, not only has managed to bear with me through the years when I was preoccupied with the *Convivio* but has been unfailingly supportive and generous in helping me with this work. For that and everything else, I could never thank her enough.

# Introduction

## **The *Convivio*: A Portrait**

At the start of the *Convivio*, Dante sets a supreme value on the place of knowledge in human life, echoing Aristotle's teaching that knowledge is the "ultimate perfection of our soul, in which our ultimate happiness resides." This, Dante affirms, is why all human beings naturally desire to know. One apparent contradiction to this claim, of course, is that people often seem much more inclined to wallow in ignorance than to seek knowledge and understanding. Dante divides into two categories the causes for this gap between essential reality and everyday experience: impediments to knowledge that come from outside individuals, and impediments that come from inside individuals. The latter include physical defects and mental addictions or false attachments; the former "civic and domestic concerns" and the accidents of destiny.<sup>1</sup> Since so many people are kept from knowledge by at least one of these four impediments, there are few remaining "who sit at the meal where the bread of angels is eaten"; most are reduced to sharing their food "with sheep."<sup>2</sup>

The good news, Dante adds, is that those who have achieved some degree of knowledge "are not without compassion toward those they see going around eating grass and acorns on the feeding grounds of animals," the ordinarily ignorant and sense-bound multitudes.<sup>3</sup> Since Dante is one who has achieved some knowledge, having earned it the hard way and been there himself when it comes to eating the grass and acorns of ignorance, he in fact feels this compassion and wishes to share what he has learned. He mentions that some time earlier he had already started on this project of sharing knowledge, but what he offered to others at that time – doctrinal or ethical poems written years before the *Convivio* prose – "left them wanting more" because the canzoni (long lyrical poems) were not especially easy to understand, couched as they were in allegory.<sup>4</sup> He realizes that he has to explain and elaborate upon them. His plan for this work, then, is to compose fifteen *trattati*, or treatises (usually referred to in English as



“books”), including an initial introductory book. Each of the fourteen principal books – only three of these would actually be composed – was to be based on a different Dante canzone, which would be interpreted and commented upon.<sup>5</sup> Like his youthful work the *Vita nova*, in other words, the *Convivio* is a prosimetrum or combination of prose and poetry – a form well suited to Dante, who as much as any author imaginable orchestrated how his readers would respond to and understand his writing.<sup>6</sup> The work is called a *convivio*, or banquet, because Dante pictures it as a communal meal of knowledge; each book will be a separate course in this banquet, where the poems are the food and the self-commentary the bread.<sup>7</sup> The banquet will not be for professional philosophers or theologians, but for human beings who simply wish to realize human nature, which desires to know. Dante himself is not one of the learned elite, but a man who gathers what falls from the table of the learned, to share it with those still mired in “the wretched life...I left behind.”<sup>8</sup> In modern terms, Dante intends this work to be for a “non-academic” audience, for whom “merely academic” means of restricted intellectual interest and having little relation to the real world. As we will see, the *Convivio* aims for an *integration* of knowledge that is difficult to imagine from the post-Enlightenment perspective, for which knowledge generally is partitioned into areas of specialization with little epistemological common ground.

But before Dante can continue with his project, he has to clarify a few things about himself and this work, a common procedure in medieval commentary, known as the *accessus ad auctores*, where the commentator of classical, biblical, or legal texts placed an introduction before the main work to provide information about the author and the work itself.<sup>9</sup> First, Dante says, he must “purify” the bread of his commentary by explaining two incidental flaws in it: that he will be talking about himself in the course of the text (medieval convention generally discouraged this); and that although this work is supposed to be explaining certain things, the text itself will need some explaining (as the annotations to this book abundantly attest).<sup>10</sup> As Dante states in chapters ii to iv of Book I, both of these characteristics of the text are meant to defend him as a man and poet whose reputation has been compromised by the ignominy of exile, and who has been forced to wander from court to court after having lost his possessions and his formerly high social standing.

The rest of Book I is a defense of using vernacular Florentine for the commentary – a “blemish” in the bread, Dante says, that is more substantial than the two he has just explained.<sup>11</sup> For his contemporaries such a defense