Introduction
Dante è un produttore di auctoritates. Culturalmente egli è un uomo del medio evo per il quale . . . la sentenza, il detto in cui si deposita la sapienza umana, è fonte di conoscenza non meno . . . che il ragionamento e l’esperienza diretta; salvo che, invece di limitarsi a incastornare e glossare detti memorabili . . . egli ne produce dei suoi, e conferisce lo stesso piglio legislativo a tutti i suoi enunciati.

(Contini 1965b: 76–7)

I. WHAT IS AN “AUCTOR”? 

From the perspective of the first decade of the twenty-first century, more than seven hundred years after the fictive date in which the events recounted in the Divina Commedia take place, it seems obvious that no single work and no writer in the Western canon possesses more authority, in a generalized sense of widely-acknowledged cultural prestige and ideological weight, than do Dante Alighieri and the “poema sacro” (“holy poem”; Par. 25.1) he began not long after his exile from Florence in 1301 and finished shortly before his death at the age of fifty-six in 1321. No work is more central to the Western canon and the educational and cultural apparatus that still actively propounds it, notwithstanding numerous recent contestations; no author possesses more “cultural capital.”

From shortly after Dante’s death, and perhaps even while he was still alive, the Commedia was recognized as a classic, comparable to the great poems of antiquity in a way that no other vernacular work of his era was. The poem appeared in manuscript after manuscript accompanied by a rapidly growing number of learned commentaries in both Italian and Latin: a treatment no vernacular work had received previously in the Western tradition, and which — to my knowledge — no work of any kind, possibly excepting the Gospels, had ever

1 Bourdieu (e.g., 1994: 4–7 et passim); also Guillory 1993.
received within such a short time of its composition. Within fifty years, Dante’s admirer and successor in the nascent vernacular tradition, Giovanni Boccaccio, was called to deliver public lectures on the poem in his and Dante’s native Florence. An uninterrupted and ever expanding tradition of academic study and commentary has continued over the centuries, most thoroughly demonstrated and embodied by the vast resources of the Dartmouth Dante Project, with its compilation of seventy-three distinct Italian, English, and Latin commentaries to date. Poets throughout Italy and all over Europe – for example, Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Christine de Pizan – were treating Dante as a poetic model, an auctor comparable to ancients such as Virgil and Ovid. Moreover, to read the Commedia is to know that Dante wished for this to occur and may well have hoped to be accorded authority greater than the pagan auctores, comparable, perhaps, to that of the fathers of the Church, or the human authors of the Bible.

Notwithstanding the apparent transparency of the question, looking at Dante’s relationship with authority is a little like looking directly at the sun: despite the impression of the intensest illumination, one runs a very high risk of being blinded by what one sees, of losing track of the contingent nature and the complex causes of the object, even as one is confronted most directly by it. In other words, because Dante and the Commedia have “always already” possessed authority, for today’s postmodern, post-millennial readers as for those who first read the poem, something very important has been lost from view. Specifically, whatever the final results may have been, it was not in any sense a given that Dante could hope to achieve authority in a late medieval culture that defined the term so as to exclude anyone like him a priori from laying claim to it, even as it was held up as the highest value to which a person might aspire.

What will concern us here, then, is how to historicize “authority” as a category in the conceptual repertoire of Dante’s time and place, and as a word and a governing thought that figures crucially in his own understanding of himself as cultural operator and as poet. To begin with, it is important

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1 To see the complete list, go to http://dartmouth.dante.edu and click on “index.” On Trecento and Quattrocento commentaries see, inter alia, Barbi 1890; Mazzoni 1951, 1958, 1963, 1976–1978; Dionisotti 1965; Sandkühler 1967; Jenaro-MacLennan 1974; Vallone 1981; Barkan 1986: 163–70; Minnis et al. 1988 (chapter 10); Palmieri and Paolazzi 1993; Hollander 1993; Parker 1993, 1997; Barański 2001; S. Gilson 2005. Especially useful is the overview in Botterill 2005. See Barański’s cogent critique of recent scholarly use of these commentaries (2001: chapter 1), as well as Parker’s apt assertion that “to read commentary is to move from a consideration of the Divine Comedy as a text to its use as a culture-bearing work – that is, as a social act with a variety of ramifications for successive social formations” (1997: 231). See Minnis, 2001: chapter 6, for a broad view of the emergence of vernacular commentary in Europe modeled on the Latin tradition. See also n. 48.

2 Others who have examined the categories of auctor and auctoritas, autore and autorità, in the Dantean oeuvre are: Mazzoni 1955; Mazzeo 1960; Nardi 1961; Dragonetti 1961b and c; Hollander 1969; Stabile
to acknowledge that medieval Latin *auctoritas* and early Italian *autorità do*
overlap in significance with modern understandings of the terms. Authority
was and still is a category through which an essential conjunction is posited
between individual persons and impersonal sources of power and/or knowl-
dge. To say, as Dante does, and as texts of the Middle Ages so often do,
that, in a primary usage, derived from Greek *autentim* or *autentin*, au-
thority is that quality which renders an author “worthy of faith and obedience”
(*CV* 4.6.5), is to give an individual access to transpersonal and transhistor-
cial “truth” – making his words worthy of *faith* – and to legitimated, and
officially delimited, power – making his words worthy of *obedience*. This is
not so far from what we think of today as the duly constituted authority of
administrative and judicial officials or as the special credibility of certified
experts, scientific and otherwise, in various fields of knowledge.

On the other hand, a world of difference separates medieval *auctor-
tas* from modern *authority*. There are striking differences of degree and
emphasis in the way that authority is recognized and exercised: at least in
theory, medieval *auctoritas* is far more rigidly hierarchical, far less subject to
challenge if not exempt from it, far more liable to be asserted as grounded
in an absolute order of Power and Knowledge deriving from the transcen-
dent Deity. There are the evident differences between how the political
and epistemological forms of authority are conferred: differences in the
norms of political legitimation; differences between medieval science and
modern, and so on. There are dramatic differences between the persons
who might legitimately be eligible for or lay claim to authority. Moreover,
as will appear in Chapter 2, the definition given above is only one of at
least three etymologically-grounded meanings attributed to the word, not
to speak of its dialectical twins, such as *actor*. Finally, in the medieval period
there is a broad spectrum of cultural domains in which *authority* is a fun-
damental category, ranging from the poetic, through the philosophical and
“scientific,” to the institutional (especially the Empire and the Church), to
the theological, which, in principle, subtends and comprehends all of the
others, and mediates the intricate relationships, conceptual and practical,
that exist among them. Both the lines that divide these distinct definitions
domains and the relations that connect them are significantly different
from those now drawn.

To give one, by no means casual, example, the relationship of literary
authorship to the other types of authority was generally conceived of by

1970; Mazzotta 1979; Gellrich 1985; Minnis et al. 1988; chapter 10 [written by David Wallace]; Minnis
1990; Stillinger 1992; Picone (e.g., 1993); Barański (e.g., 1996: 91; 1997a; 2005a); Coassin 1996; Botterill
1997; Levers 2002. My own earlier approaches to the question, here significantly revised, are in Ascoli
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Dante and throughout the Middle Ages in a way quite alien to ours. In modern times, an author is a writer of texts in general and a writer of literary works in particular, and, especially in the latter case, is not an authority at all, except in the diffusely cultural-ideological sense specified above. In the Middle Ages an “author” (Latin auctor and autore; Italian autore) was not any old writer of literature, but was instead, and against the modern definition, a person who possessed auctoritas, and who might also have produced texts that were known as auctoritates. Thus, on the one hand, an auctor might not necessarily be primarily a writer at all, and, on the other, there is a restricted field of writers who qualify as auctores. More exactly, this dominant concept of authorship was in tension with an emerging, proto-modern usage of the word to refer to “any person who writes a book.”

The question of how, and when, the medieval auctor began to look like the modern author, cogently raised by such very different contemporary scholars as Foucault (1968), Minnis (1984) and Chartier (1992), will turn out to be fundamental for thinking about Dante’s concept of authorship.

Even more specifically, and as is well known, the dominant medieval idea of the auctor, literary and otherwise, is in sharp tension with modern concepts of individual creative personality. If authority was then, as now, a quality mediating between impersonal sources of power/knowledge and historical persons who put them into play, the stress in the earlier period, nonetheless, lay heavily on subordinating the individual to the transhistorical and impersonal, though in somewhat different ways depending upon the domain one wishes to consider. In literature, as in the various branches of philosophy, the fields most obviously relevant to Dante as writer, the

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5 The question of the disciplinary standing of poetry is complex (see, e.g., Antonelli-Bianchini 1983; Minnis et al. 1988; Giunta 2002: especially 455–73; Minnis and Johnson eds. 2005), and depends to a significant extent in what context one views it. For Aquinas, writing in the name of theology poetry is “infima inter omnes doctrinas” (ST Ia.I., art. 1, q.1). In the school curriculum it was assigned to the first, though crucial, educational step, in the three liberal arts, grammar (Curtius 1948: 42–5 [see Chapter 3 for Dante on “gramatica”]). In the academic prologues (accessus) which frequently introduce the authoritative classical poets (see n 48), it is assigned to moral philosophy, aligning it with the epideictic rhetoric of praise and blame, in that it presents examples of morally-charged actions to be imitated or avoided. For the “ethical poetic” see Allen 1982; Minnis 1984: 23–7; Minnis et al. 1988; Carruthers 1990; Dagenais 1994; cf. Giunta 2002. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries spawned a series of treatises on poetry, often drawing heavily on both the rhetorical works of Cicero and Pseudo-Cicero (Rhetorica ad Herrenium), as well as the AP of Horace (for Dante’s debts to the
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Auctores consisted of a limited number of classical texts that have accrued cultural capital and with it the status of guarantors of truth and models for imitation over the centuries. While authority of this kind was expressed through texts bearing the proper names of time-bound human beings—most notably for Dante, “Virgil” and “Aristotle”—the essential point was that these texts had been proven to have transcended the limitations of the inevitably fallible men who wrote them and to bear truths that exceeded the limitations of historical contingency—being valid in any time and any place. What is more, their validity was closely dependent upon the language in which they were encountered (even if they were originally written in Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic), namely Latin, a language which, as Dante himself says in both Convivio and De Vulgari Eloquentia, a grammatica, that is, shaped to resist the individual personalities and historical circumstances of its users.

On the other hand, institutional authority, whether political or ecclesiastical, was necessarily available to living persons, although by definition it was not conferred by individual merit or local historical circumstance, but rather transmitted from generation to generation by the transpersonal mechanisms of office and/or genealogy, an idea crystallized in Kantorowicz’s formula of “the king’s two bodies” (1957). Finally, there is the phenomenon of theological auctoritas, which in principle encompasses and determines all other forms of authority. Here, as Minnis reminds us, the paradigmatic case is that of the Bible with its dual authorship—the human “scribes” whose names are associated with individual books of the Testaments—and God, the ultimate Auctor not only of the Scriptures, but of its authors, and of the universe itself. From this perspective, then, God is at the origin of latter, see Chapter 3, n 4; Chapter 4, n 42; Chapter 7, nn 15, 157). These include Matthew of Vendôme, Ars Verificatoria; Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Poetria Nova; John of Garland, Parisiana Poetria, and so on (see Nencioni 1967). During the same period, poetry was increasingly aligned with philosophy more broadly speaking, including metaphysics (Curtius 1948: 203–13; Wetherbee 1972; Greenfield 1981; Minnis et al. 1988); as with theology itself (see n 48; Chapter 2, nn 67, 68, 71; Chapter 7, n 134). It was even linked at times to medicine (Olson 1982). Although Dante criticism has focused most of its attention on his alignment of poetry with philosophy (especially CV) and/or theology (especially the DC, and, if authentic, the ECG; see Chapter 7, n 124), in fact, Dante moves strategically among the full range of available discourses concerning poetry in the later Middle Ages (see Mazzotta 1993a: 7–12 et passim; also Chapter 2, nn 86, 87).


For the relation of human auctores to divine Auctor, the precedence of the latter over the former, see Augustine, Conf. 12.14–32, especially 18, 24–5, 30; Aquinas ST 1a 1, 8 (cf. 1a 1, 10, resp.). See Chenu 1950: 138–138; Smalley 1952: 300; Minnis 1984: 36–9, 72–112, Minnis et al. 1988: 66–0, 75, 97, 197–200, 205, 241–2, et passim. See also n 52. For the topos of God as Author of both the Bible and Creation, see Chapter 2, n 87.
all human authority, whether over truth or over power, and the ultimate guarantor that it transcends the frailty of individual human beings and the contingencies of historical existence.  

What does this general scheme have to do with Dante Alighieri, late medieval poet, amateur philosopher, and sometime political activist, first of Florence, then from it? In the first instance, it reflects, though by no means completely or exactly, his own explicitly articulated views on what an auctor is and what auctoritas might consist of. In the entirety of Dante's canonical œuvre, the Latin and Italian words for author and authority and their derivatives appear one hundred seventeen times – five more if the etymons autentin and avieo are included; one more if the Epistle to Cangrande is recognized as Dantean. When he uses these terms it is almost always to indicate one of the following fundamental cultural domains, in this order of frequency: (1) supreme institutional authorities, above all the temporal authority of the Emperor and the spiritual authority of the Pope; (2) canonical classical writers, especially philosophers and poets, especially the Philosopher, Aristotle, and Virgil; (3) poetic authorship taken in isolation; (4) God as supreme Author and Authority, and, in subordinate relationship thereto, the authority of the Bible and the Church fathers. What this rough lexical scheme suggests is, first, that Dante valued authority as a quality with foundational applicability to the areas of experience that counted most in his culture and to him in particular, and that he returned to it at crucial moments over the course of his later career, especially in the major treatises. Second, it shows that his overt understanding of auctoritas was closely aligned with a typical medieval emphasis on its hierarchical and absolute nature: grounded in antiquity, legitimated institutional office, and/or

8 Stillinger 1992: 20, 26–32, 74–6, et passim, maps the structures of textual authority onto the totalizing and hierarchical neo-platonic cosmos, the "great chain of being," as elaborated from the writings of St. Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite and culminating in the ordered layout of the sacra pagina in Peter Lombard's commentary on the Psalms. While this is undoubtedly the primary conceptual framework for interpreting both textual and social orders in the Middle Ages, and while there is no doubt of its relevance to Dante (see, for example, Mazzeo 1960; Durling and Martinez 1990; cf. Schnapp 1991–92), it is not by itself sufficient to account for the complex discourse of medieval auctoritas in its various headings and subheadings or to explain the socio-historic forces guiding the articulation of that discourse in and around the times and places of Dante's writing. Stillinger recognizes resistances to the hierarchical-cosmological model authority both in Peter Lombard's book and in Dante's VN (especially 94–107).

9 See also Stabile 1970; Ascoli 2000a. Of the one hundred twenty-three references mentioned, sixty-six are in MN; thirty-five in CV; nine in the Ep., eight in DVE; five in the DC; none in other works. Of these, sixty-seven refer to institutional authorities with governing powers; thirty-seven refer to intellectual authority (primarily of classical authors); ten exclusively to poetic authorship; four to God as divine Author; two to Biblical authors; and three references are pre-definitional. (N.B., additional distinctions can and perhaps should be made; in some cases one reference indicates more than one type of authority, e.g., imperial and philosophical.)
extra-historical (i.e., divine) sponsorship. Indeed, as regards government
he is one of the leading late medieval theorists of the absolute, hierarchical
authority of the Emperor (see Chapter 5).

This survey shows immediately why Dante might find it difficult to
attribute the role of auctor and the quality of auctoritas to himself and his
works, despite his evident valorization of, and desire for, them. In his whole
oeuvre he uses words for “authority” or “author” in relation to himself alone
in only two isolated cases (CV 1.4.13; Ep. 3.2–3 [to Cino da Pistoia]), and
there is only a small cluster of references in Book 2 of De Vulgari Eloquentia
where he uses them in reference to modern poets, such as himself, as a class.
Each of these exceptional cases will be discussed in due course. However,
even this cursory description of what constituted auctoritas in the Middle
Ages reveals that Dante and his works, especially the vernacular works, had
limited or no access to the title and the quality he and his culture valued so
highly. To the extent that a modern person might claim the prestigious title
of auctor, Dante was poorly situated; he possessed none of the attributes
that could help transform his own ambitions and visions into auctoritas: as
a lay figure in a culture still dominated by clerics, a scion of a family on the
fringes of the aristocracy, without the standing conferred by public office,10
he had no claim whatsoever to institutionally derived authority.

As to literary authorship, the question is even clearer. By composing
his major poetic works in the vernacular, he denied himself the intrinsic
auctoritas of high Latin culture. More fundamentally, a modern, living
individual with a distinctive personality like Dante’s could not hope to claim
that depersonalized auctoritas which belongs to the Biblical and classical
auctores, all long dead, all part of an irretrievably distant past. Like all
moderns, Dante was constitutively relegated to the role of belated lector of
or commentator upon the true authors (see, e.g., Quain 1945: 225).

How, then, is one to square these two things? On the one hand are
the historical circumstances, reflected throughout Dante’s mature writings,
which dictate that he had little or no claim to authority as it was understood
in his culture. On the other is a tradition of reception that confers author-
ity virtually without reserve, notably the vast array of commentaries that
appeared almost immediately after the Commedia began to circulate, call-
ing Dante an autore without hesitation and treating his work to much the
same respectful glossing as had in the past been reserved for the Bible and
the classical auctores. One must begin with the knowledge that, however

10 Not forgetting his unfortunate two-month stint as Prior in 1301, I refer to the period of exile
thereafter. For cogent reviews of Dante’s involvement in Florentine politics, see Petrocchi 1983:
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rigidly, ideally absolute, however much aimed at establishing a transhistori-
cal, suprahistorical basis for knowledge and power, the phenomenon of auctoritas was a complex one in the later Middle Ages, and, in particular, was under transformative pressure from a series of intertwined histories, all of which in some way militated for a redefinition and reallocation of the quality so as to allow for the inclusion of new and different auctores, even moderns.

Most prominent among the historical trends in play,11 as is well known, was the dramatic shift from a feudal culture based on hierarchy and inherited nobility to a commercial and monetary economy, most powerfully embodied by Dante’s native Florence.12 Along with this came the gradual opening of possibilities for lay, and even non-aristocratic, participation in a literate culture previously dominated by clergy, a trend favored not only by economic developments, but also by popularizing religious movements, especially Franciscanism in its more radical expressions. The same period saw the emergence in Italy and elsewhere of new forms of statehood and political participation: in Italy, the communes and signorie; in Europe more generally, the prototypes of the modern European nation-state (especially France under Philip the Fair).

In tandem with these economic, social, and political phenomena was the rapid development of the romance vernaculars – especially Occitan, Old French, Italian – into acknowledged languages of culture, capable of sustaining important literary productions. (In Vita Nova, chapter 25, Dante dates this from the mid-twelfth century, but in France it goes back further still.) Works in these languages increasingly modeled themselves upon and undertook to mediate high Latin philosophical–rhetorical–literary culture (Imbach 1996), whether through translations (Segre 1963b; Copeland 1991; Cornish 2000a, 2003), like Brunetto Latini’s Italian Cicero, or a compendia of learning, like Jean de Meun’s continuation of the Roman de la Rose,


12 Dante’s conflicted attitude toward proto-capitalist Florence, of which he is both product and critic, gives some indication of the dynamic complexities of the situation. On the one hand is his consistent condemnation of “la gente nuova e i subiti guadagni” (Inf. 16.73), that is, the new Florentine banking and mercantile class, and, on the other, the obsessive return to problems of monetary value – as in the rough equivalence established between suicide and the wasting of one’s property in Inf. 13; as in the extension of the deadly sin of avarice to include its opposite, unrestrained generosity (prodigality) in Inf. 7 and Purg. 21; as in the elaborate metaphors of coinage deployed throughout the DC (on this last, see Shoaf 1983; Ferrante 1984: chapter 6). For readings of the DC in terms of the economic world of late thirteenth century Florentine banking and mercantilism to which, for example, Dante’s own father may have belonged in the specific capacity of usurer, see Noakes 1990, 2001, 2003; Steinberg 2007.
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Latini’s Tesoretto and Trésor, not to mention Dante’s Convivio, or even the doctrinally sophisticated lyrics of Guinizelli, Cavalcanti, and, again, Dante. These developments in turn coincided with the emergence of new forms of manuscript and book culture, together with novel practices of writing and of reading, which were linked in particular to a growing legal-notarial professionalism and an increasingly literate mercantile class.¹³

Related and important changes were taking place within the domain of High Latin culture. As the work of Giuseppe Billanovich (1961), Roberto Weiss (1969) and, most recently, Ronald Witt (2000) has shown, a classicizing, secularizing humanism was taking root in the Northern Italian signorie from the mid-thirteenth century on, through figures such as Lovato Lovati, Albertino Mussato, not to mention Giovanni del Virgilio, with whom Dante would enter into epistolary conversation late in life (see Chapter 5, nn 7, 9; Ascoli 2007). Even in what might seem to be the best fortified bastion of the culture of philosophical and theological auctoritas, Scholasticism, a sea-change was under way. Both the institutions and the interpretive practices of clerical-scholastic culture had already undergone significant transformations during the twelfth century,¹⁴ and evolved more rapidly and more radically over the course of the thirteenth. The rise of university education in the verbal arts, philosophy, and above all theology, in Paris, but also, nearer to hand in Bologna, at once reinforced and interrogated the standing of the auctores, as will be seen in Chapter 2, section ii.

In other words, against the basically static medieval definitions of authority and authorship, and the many deeply conservative tendencies of that culture, dynamic historical forces were at work that provided a contemporary writer of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, such as Dante, with the impetus and some of the resources to approach those categories creatively and transformatively. With this observation, we arrive at the basic project of this study: an exploration of how a culture in general, in the person of one of its most remarkable members, can engage in a distinctly conservative attempt to maintain and embody fundamental ideological categories, but still end up radically transfiguring those categories


¹⁴ For the importance of Chartrian Platonizing humanism, see Wetherbee 1972. For the twelfth-century Renaissance generally, see Haskins 1955; Benson and Constable 1982.