

**LITERARY STUDIES
OF POEMS, NEW
AND OLD**

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Literary Studies of Poems, New and Old by Dorothea Beale

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BY

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PREFACE.

THE following is chiefly a selection from papers written for English literature classes at the Ladies' College, Cheltenham. Others are reprints from various periodicals. The first two were written for meetings of our Guild of old pupils, at which were given respectively scenes from Dante, and from Spenser's *Faëry Queene*.

I have thought it best to leave them in their original form.

The allusions in the Britomart paper are to stained glass windows representing six episodes in the story. (1) Britomart is looking into the magic mirror. (2) She is clothing herself in armour in the Church. (3) She is defending the Red-cross Knight. (4) She is passing through the fire. (5) She meets Sir Arthegall. (6) She sends him out to accomplish his work.

LADIES' COLLEGE, CHELTENHAM,
September, 1902.

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Dante and Beatrice.

THIS is the fifth time that some members of our Guild have dramatised for us a great poem, and thereby helped to make the ideal of the poet more real, and more influential.

In Tennyson's *Princess* we sought to bring before you the woman full of noble aspirations, who learns that only in the communion of labour, through men and women seeking together the highest good, can the world be purified; each must bring to the commonwealth his own special gifts, and the ideal must be wrought out in the actual.

In *Britomart* we beheld the ideal woman of mediæval poetry, strong and brave, a helpmeet for the ideal Knight, ready to do her part in the crusade against wrong, and victorious over evil through the power of inward purity.

In *Comus* we saw the lady in less martial guise, saved by heavenly grace from the snares of the world, the flesh and the devil.

Last time we turned to the great epic allegory of Greece, and brought before our audience Homeric ideals in *Penelope*, *Nausicaa* and *Andromache*.

This is the six hundredth anniversary of the year to which Dante assigns his vision, and we propose to present in dramatic form some of the teachings of his great poem. It is a more difficult task than any we have yet attempted.

No poem perhaps forms so good an introduction

to the teaching of the seers and poets of all ages ; it translates into mediæval language the classical imagery, and spiritualises for modern thought the world of sense.

"The poetry of Dante," writes Shelley, "may be considered as a bridge, thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and the ancient world. Homer was the first, and Dante the second epic poet. Dante was the first awakener of entranced Europe ; he created a language in itself musical and persuasive, out of a chaos of in-harmonious barbarisms. He was the congregator of those great spirits who presided over the resurrection of learning ; the Lucifer of that starry flock, which in the thirteenth century shone forth from republican Italy as from a heaven, into the darkness of the benighted world."

Coleridge has drawn the contrast between the Greek and Christian ideals, with which Browning in "Old Pictures in Florence" has made us familiar.

"Dante is the living link between religion and philosophy. He philosophised the religion and christianised the philosophy of Italy. The Greeks changed ideas into finites, and these finites into anthropomorphs. Their religion, their poetry, their very pictures, became statuesque. With them the form was the end. The reverse of this is found in Christianity ; finites, even the human form, must be brought into connection with, and be symbolical of, the infinite, and hence arose a combination of poetry (1) with doctrine and (2) with sentiment."

No one can be considered really educated in the literature of the world who has not in some degree made a study of Dante, and yet there is in it much that is only for an age, not for all time, and to follow up the many bye-paths would divert us from the main current of the teaching. We introduce but little which has to do with the historical Dante, but we behold in vision "the passage of the blessed soul from the slavery of this present corruption to the liberty of eternal glory". We earnestly hope that the teaching of this wonderful poem may help our members in their earthly pilgrim-

age, and that they may be enabled in some measure to see in the visible universe, the scroll, that is written within and without, the picture writing, the sacred hieroglyphics which reveal the unseen.

Much of the scenery of the poem is incapable of representation, except in the chambers of imagery in which the soul dwells alone, for even pictures, much more dramatic representations, tend to materialise the spiritual; but there is a region in which the religious consciousness loves to dwell, a universe, in which pure form takes actual shape; into this region we are led by the artist and the poet; it is to this region that the master of Greek tragedy introduced us in the Prometheus, and Wagner has to-day shown that poetry, music, and dramatic action, help to make more real and present and energetic the convictions of our souls.

When the symbolism is too awful to represent to eye or ear, we pause, and leave it to the heart to conceive the things which God revealed to this great prophet during the years of his wanderings in the desert—this Moses sent to bring the people of God from the bondage of the letter into the liberty of the spirit.

The poem has exercised a strange fascination for great thinkers and writers of the most opposite opinions, and many have been the translations and commentaries published in recent times; the interest is increasing rather than diminishing.

I begin with a few quotations from the eloquent essay of Dean Church:—

“The Divina Commedia is one of the landmarks of history. More than a magnificent poem, more than the beginning of a language and the opening of a national literature, more than the inspirer of art, and the glory of a great people, it is one of those rare and solemn monuments of the mind's power. It stands with the Iliad and Shakespeare's plays, with the writings of Aristotle and Plato, with the Novum

Organum and the Principia, with Justinian's Code, with the Parthenon and St. Peter's. It is the first Christian Poem; and it opens European Literature, as the Iliad did that of Greece and Rome."

"The greatness of his work is not in its details. It is the greatness of a comprehensive and vast conception, sustaining without failure the trial of its long and hazardous execution, and fulfilling at its close the hope and promise of its beginning. Many a surprise, many a difficulty, many a disappointment, many a strange reverse and alternation of feelings, attend the progress of the most patient and admiring reader of the *Commedia*,—as many as attend on one who follows the unfolding of a strong character in life. We are often shocked when we are prepared to admire—repelled when we came with sympathy; depths are revealed which we cannot sound, mysteries which baffle and confound us."

"Those who know the *Divina Commedia* best, will best know how hard it is to be the interpreter of such a mind as Dante's, but they know and would wish others also to know, not by hearsay, but by experience, the power of his wonderful poem. They know its austere, yet subduing beauty; they know what force there is in its earnest and solemn verse to strengthen, to tranquillise, to console . . . they know how often its seriousness has put to shame their trifling, its magnanimity their faintheartedness, its living energy their indolence, its stern and sad grandeur rebuked low thoughts, its thrilling tenderness overcome sullenness and assuaged distress, its strong faith quelled despair and soothed perplexity, its vast grasp imparted the sense of harmony to the view of clashing truths. They know how often they have found in times of trouble, if not light, at least that deep sense of reality, permanent though unseen, which is more than light can always give—in the view which it has suggested to them of the judgments and the love of God."

"The primary purpose is to stamp a deep impression on the mind of the issues of good and evil doing here—of the real worlds of pain and joy. To do this forcibly, it is done in detail, of course it can only be done in figure. Punishment, purification, or the fulness of consolation are, as he would think, at this very moment, the lot of all the numberless spirits who have ever lived here—spirits still living and sentient as himself; without pause or interval, in all its parts simultaneously, this awful scene is going on. The judgments of God are being fulfilled, could we see it. It exists, as might be seen, at each instant of time, by a soul whose eyes were opened. And this he imagines. It had been imagined before; it is the working out which is peculiar to Dante. It is not a barren vision. His