

DANTE: A DRAMATIC POEM

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Dante: A Dramatic Poem by Héloïse Durant

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HÉLOÏSE DURANT

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Hélène Girard

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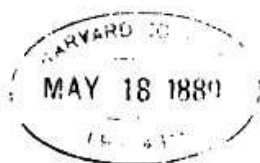
MEMBER OF THE DANTE SOCIETY, CAMBRIDGE, MASS., U.S.A.

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P R E F A C E.

IN Petzhold's catalogue (1882) of Dantesque literature, there are over 750 volumes; in Hoepli's (Milan, 1884) there are 1149 volumes. Translations of Dante's poetical and prose writings, commentaries and essays upon his life and works, have been published in Latin, Italian, English, German, French, Russian, Swedish, Danish, Polish, Spanish, Dutch, Hungarian, and Hebrew. It would be presumptuous to compete with the many scholars who devoted their deeper research to the study of Dante, or in one poem to draw a perfect picture of Italy's greatest poet.

Since the beginning of this century, Dantesque controversies have arisen. Documents hitherto consulted as authentic have been condemned as forgeries.

Dante's celebrated "Peace!" has proved anything but a peaceful subject of discussion. It is now doubted

whether the Friar ever existed to whom the remark was supposed to have been addressed, which rather precludes the possibility of any one answering him. And it is a mooted question if Beatrice of the "Vita Nuova" represents the fair Portinari or is merely a personification of philosophy; while the petulant Gemma whom Boccaccio describes, is modified from a second Xantippe to a faithful wife not unreasonably troubled by her husband's moody abstractions. Longfellow himself held this opinion, and more than once said to me, "Vindicate Gemma!" His words, and the feeling that a tangible woman must have existed for Dante's heart as well as for his imagination, induced me to side with those who exonerate Gemma, and believe that the actual Beatrice Portinari inspired the "Vita Nuova." I am indebted to Professor Charles Eliot Norton's admirable translation for several lines in my prologue.

In 1881, while at Cambridge, Mass., Longfellow accepted the dedication of my poem and revised part of it; but his death and the loss of his kindly interest in my work, made me lay it aside until this summer. It will always be a lasting source of regret to me that my poem was not completed before death silenced one of the sweetest of our singers.

I have tried to give an outline of Dante's life as drawn from his own words. But the rays shed by this great light of the fourteenth century touch us each so differently through the prism of years, that perhaps my vision of Dante may only meet with the sympathy of a few.

HÉLOÏSE DURANT.

September 10th, 1888.