

**THE DIVINA COMMEDIA  
AND  
CANZONIERE, VOL. V,  
STUDIES AND ESTIMATES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649112791

The Divina commedia and Canzoniere, Vol. V, Studies and estimates by Dante & E. H. Plumptre

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**DANTE & E. H. PLUMPTRE**

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DANTE AND MATILDA

# DANTE

## THE DIVINA COMMEDIA AND CANZONIERE

*Translated by the late*

E. H. PLUMPTRE D.D.

*Dean of Wells*

WITH NOTES, STUDIES AND ESTIMATES

IN FIVE VOLUMES

BOSTON, U.S.A.

D. C. HEATH & CO., PUBLISHERS

1899



DANTE

VOL V STUDIES AND ESTIMATES





## THE GENESIS AND GROWTH OF THE "COMMEDIA"

### I

IT is not easy to assign a date to the time when the first germ of Dante's great poem was planted in the fruitful soil of his brain and heart. One gifted with a prophet's insight might, I am inclined to think, have seen it, in its promise and potency of a yet unconscious life, within a few days of that marvellous May morning which transformed and transfigured the whole nature of the wondrous boy (*V. N. c. 1*). From that hour, as we know, Beatrice was never absent from his thoughts, worshipped with all the power—such as we often discern even in natures less sensitive than Dante's—of a boy's idolising devotion. One half of the *Commedia* (if indeed we may distinguish where it is impossible to divide) was involved in the manner in which that thought dominated his mind and heart during the whole period of his boyhood. Nor could the other half be well absent. Twenty years before Giotto painted the Bargello portrait, Dante's eyes must have had that dreamy far-away look, that power of seeing things which others do not see, that "other-worldliness" that tells of a mind to which Heaven and Hell are the most real of all realities. The teaching which influenced his youth would tend to foster that tendency. His early recollections of Brunetto Latini, before he had seen, behind the veil of outward culture, the depravity which it concealed,

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were those of one from whom he had learnt "how man attaineth to eternity" (*H.* xv. 85). The preaching of the Franciscan and Dominican friars (the former, we may remember, were established at what is now the Church of Santa Croce) had not yet lost its savour, and their sermons would tell him, with all the vividness which characterised mediæval thought, of the penalties of the lost and the beatific vision of the saints of God. Every mass that he heard would bring before him the thought of that region of the intermediate state in which souls that had departed with an imperfect holiness were purified from the stains of earth. Looking both to his gifts and his environment, it might almost be said of him, as it was said of the prophet to whom he turned in after years (comp. *H.* i. 32 *n.*), with the natural sympathy of one who saw in him a character like his own, that he too was "sanctified" from the earliest dawn of life, and "ordained to be a prophet unto the nations" (*Jer.* i. 5).

The studies of advancing youth—I am still speaking of the period before the story of the *Vita Nuova* begins—would tend in the same direction. Virgil was then, as in after years, the Master to whom he owed most of his mental nurture (*H.* i. 85), and the Sixth Book of the *Aeneid* would impress upon his mind its vivid and indelible pictures of Tartarus and the Elysian fields. So he would come to blend, in that strange weird manner which so often startles us as we read the *Commedia*, the forms, names, and legends of classical antiquity with those which had at least a starting-point in Scripture, and which permeated the mind of the thirteenth century in Western Christendom. And when he came to study, as he must have done before he wrote the first sonnet in the *V. N.*, the poets of his own fatherland, the choice which he made of Guido Guinicelli of