

cosmopolitan perspective, a developing Italian vernacular, and a powerful sense of local self-confidence. This was the age of Dante.

## DANTE AND THE LATE-MEDIEVAL ITALIAN WORLD

The role of Dante in the history of Italian cultural development was more a question of debate in the Renaissance than it is now. Dante's posthumous reputation underwent a change between the early Renaissance in the mid-fourteenth century, the age of Petrarch, and the mature Florentine Renaissance of the fifteenth century, the age of Brunni. Petrarch, as we shall see in the next chapter, was one of the most influential of the early Renaissance humanists in Italy. He admired Dante, although he had reservations, seeing him reduced

in stature because he wrote the *Divine Comedy* in Italian, the vernacular, rather than in elegant, classical Latin—a tongue that Petrarch believed Dante had mastered only imperfectly because his Latin writings reflect the style of the Middle Ages, a style Petrarch abominated. Also, Dante was different from Petrarch. He was a politician; he married and had legitimate children, and never lost his interest in the things of the world. He was not a pure scholar, on the model of Petrarch, who never married or held significant political office.

Petrarch's exact contemporary, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75), saw Dante as one of the first lights of a new age, although more a harbinger than a fulfillment of the rebirth in style and art. Boccaccio was born to a Florentine family in exile and lived the life of a wandering scholar and teacher, producing some of the most popular books of the early Renaissance such as his *De-*



chancellor Leonardo Bruni (d. 1444) wrote a new life of Dante in which he praised the very things criticized by Boccaccio.

However, interesting as this history is for understanding the Renaissance, there is more to it. Why is Dante being discussed in a chapter entitled "Before the Renaissance"? The answer becomes clear with a brief look at Dante's major literary works and his biography, at least as much as is known of it. (Boccaccio's *Life of Dante* is the primary source.)

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in May 1265, the son of Alighiero Alighieri and Bella degli Abati. Dante's father was an aristocratic supporter of the Guefs, an allegiance that had led to his banishment from Florence before Dante's birth. Dante's mother died when her son was only ten years old, and his father subsequently remarried. This event apparently led to Dante's



equally rich and influential citizen, Simone de'Bardi, a member of the great banking family. Beatrice died seven years later, in 1290, and Dante never completely recovered. The shock of Beatrice's death made Dante spiritualize her by believing that she was too perfect for this world, that she was really an angel who cared not about the wretchedness, squalor, pain, and misery of earthly life, and returned therefore to heaven where she belonged. Here, then, was the genesis of the Beatrice of Dante's *Paradiso*, his vision of heaven.

To recover from the depression caused by Beatrice's death, Dante sought solace in philosophy—Aristotelian philosophy—studying with the great Brunetto Latini (1220–94), whom Dante was reluctantly obliged in his *Comedia* to place in hell among the sodomites. Also, Dante began the cultivation of classical poets, especially Ovid and Virgil, the great favorites of the Middle Ages.

At this point, the scholar started to draw connections between his two literary inspirations—Latin letters and philosophy—and came to believe in the unity of poetry and philosophy since both represented moral and absolute truths. Again, we can see the beginnings of the *Divine Comedy*.

Despite his sorrow over Beatrice's death, Dante married (probably some time before the end of the century) one Gemma Donati, by whom he had at least three children. During this first stage of Dante's life, the political world of Florence was confused and riddled with faction. The old distinctions of Guef and Ghibelline remained, but during the later thirteenth century this division was complicated by the rise of a rich entrepreneurial class that was generally opposed to the feuding aristocratic thugs of both parties who made the city unstable and unsafe for commerce. Because of his birth and his interests, Dante found

himself caught in the middle of these factional disputes. As a member of a greater guild (he entered the guild of physicians and apothecaries, although he was neither), he was eligible for high office and subsequently held several senior positions, both externally as an ambassador and internally as a prior, the highest office in the republic. Dante's performance appears to have been dedicated to maintaining harmony within Florence, as well as protecting the city's independence from Pope Boniface VIII. The result was that he became an enemy of the violent papal party, which, once it came to power with the help of the French army in 1301, began to try, condemn, and exile its opponents. Dante was one of the first to suffer. His sentence in two unfair trials was at first a heavy fine, loss of all political rights forever, and two years' exile. But his enemies, still unsatisfied, ordered a second trial that sentenced







Henry VII, who had entered Italy to impose peace. Dante had great hopes for Henry, as his *De monarchia* (*On Universal Dominion*) was to show, but Henry's futile mission ended with the monarch's untimely death in 1313, leaving Dante and his Ghibelline hopes for revenge shattered.

Dante thereafter continued his travels, moving from one Ghibelline city to another: Verona, Lucca, Verona again, and, finally, Ravenna in 1315. Dante rejected an offer of pardon from Florence, refusing to cooperate with his former enemies. As a consequence, he and his sons were once again sentenced to death and proclaimed outlaws. Dante spent the remainder of his life in Ravenna, living as an honored guest in the house of Guido Novello until his death in the fall of 1321 at the age of fifty-six.

### Dante's Works



readers. It is a series of four *canzoni*, or poems, together with explanations, arranged according to the scholastic method. Indeed, the poetic treatises are simply mirrors of Aristotelian learning and hardly Dante's own expression at all. The work's greatest merit rests in its attempt to use the vernacular for ideas previously limited to Latin, and it is so didactic that it almost seems to be a manual on the art of poetry.

*De vulgari eloquentia*, or *On the Eloquence of the Vernacular Tongue*, is a Latin prose work proposing the development of a new literary language of convention to replace the various Italian dialects, Provençal, and even learned Latin. This is Dante's *vulgare illustre*, or illustrious vernacular, which could express the highest thoughts in a *dolce stil nuovo*, a sweet new style. None of the many variants of Italian could do this in his time, Dante writes, not even his own Tuscan, a dialect

he specifically vilifies. Yet the great implication of this work is its irony: because of Dante's achievement in the *Divine Comedy*, his native Tuscan did indeed become the *vulgare illustre* and his style the *dolce stil nuovo*.

*De monarchia*, *On Universal Dominion*, is important as a work of political thought. In essence, it is simply a learned statement of the Ghibelline creed, a position to which Dante was driven by his exile: the world needs peace and harmony, and these qualities are best delivered by a universal monarchy, that is, the Holy Roman Empire. The papacy's claims in this regard are usurpations since priests rule in the spiritual rather than the temporal sphere.

But of course Dante's most famous work is the *Divine Comedy* or *Commedia*. In its simplest form, this great poem studies allegorically the movement of the soul's conversion to God through

a wanderer's journey among the kingdoms of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. The first kingdom represents sin, the second repentance, and the third grace, or knowledge of God. The Latin poet Virgil functions as Dante's guide through Hell and Purgatory, Beatrice through Paradise. In these visions, the characters of Dante's age and from his historical knowledge are portrayed as individuals, being either rewarded or punished as the poet sees fit.

But to return to the question with which this section began: why place Dante in the Middle Ages rather than, as many other scholars have done, in the early Renaissance? The answer is clear from his attitudes and writings, especially the *Commedia*. Certainly, he illustrates many later characteristics in his work, such as a deep love and respect for the classical world, although this was true of the Middle Ages as well. He was an active citizen

who took part in the civic life of Florence; he married and had children and he lived a secular life.

Nevertheless, in essence, the ideas Dante expresses are almost completely medieval, as was his education. The saints Dante meets in heaven are largely scholastics, for example, Sts Thomas and Bernard, the latter of whom, in fact, leads him toward God. His method in all of his work is Aristotelian—in other words, scholastic. He has little concern for classical Latin style and he saves his greatest respect for the Roman Empire rather than the Roman Republic; indeed, Brutus and Cassius, the betrayers of Caesar, share the lowest pit of Hell, the ninth circle, with Judas, the betrayer of Christ. The Middle Ages celebrated the Empire because it was at that time that the incarnation took place, established the conditions for the evangelization of the Roman world, and



institutionalized Christianity; the adulation of the Republic was a later phenomenon.

Also, Dante's view of the past is medieval. He sees no gulf between the ancient world and his own; rather, he accepts the principle of a continuum, elaborating God's plan for humanity. As a consequence, his attitude toward history looks backward rather than forward. He does not differentiate between historical fact and legend, both of which help equally in establishing allegorical visions and examples for his readers. In short, Dante does not engage that critical faculty so important to the Renaissance. He is, to be sure, interested in individual men and women and their experiences; however, he tends, like his medieval antecedents, to abstract them, allegorize them, and universalize them. Unlike Petrarch, as we shall see, who continually investigates his inner workings, his psychology, and his motivations,

Dante accepts the teachings of an omniscient Church, illuminated by scholastic thought. In the *Divine Comedy*, for example, what are the areas of punishment and reward? The traditional rules and morality represented by the seven deadly sins that animate Hell. Catholic penance is the theme Dante develops on the plateaus of Purgatory; and both the worship of God and the Virgin—again explicated by scholastic philosophy—and the absorption of the individual soul in God dominate the *Paradiso*. Dante is, then, a medieval man, but one so remarkable and so great that he transcends any period.

One reason why several of Dante's characteristics seem to have been part of the later Renaissance is that they were resurrected as *ex post facto* arguments in favor of those elements of Florentine life that happened fortuitously to conform to the new requirements of the fif-







Was Dante “modern” in the Burckhardtian sense? He did write in Italian, and that was a new trend; but he wrote religious allegory about a world that comes down to a universal battleground between good and evil. His vision was circumscribed by the immediate concerns of his age: Guef and Ghibelline, pope and emperor, friend and enemy, God and the devil. Finally, how did Dante relate to the classical past? His appreciation of antiquity was that of any good, sensitive medieval scholar. Virgil, the great Roman epic poet, is indeed his guide through Hell and Purgatory; but it is not so much the Virgil of *The Aeneid*, the poet of Rome, as much as the medieval Virgil, the poet of the Fourth Eclogue that was interpreted to foretell the coming of Christ.

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