

HOMER, DANTE, MILTON: BY VIDA D. SCIDDER

THE OREGONIAN'S HOME STUDY CIRCLE DIRECTED BY PROF. SEYMOUR EATON

GOLDEN AGES OF LITERATURE

XIV—HOMER, DANTE AND MILTON.

It seems natural to group these three great epic poets together, but at least two points of contact. Nothing could better measure the distance in experience than the contrast between the dawn of civilization to the culmination, so far, of Christianity as the contrast between the "Iliad" and "Odyssey" and the "Divine Comedy."

longer over infernal princes, but over infernal serpents. It is glorious work. Dante has nothing like it. There is a famous passage in Macaulay's youthful essay on Milton, comparing the conceptions of hell in Milton and in Dante, in which Macaulay says that Milton is far the greater because less definite, leaving more scope for his imagination. As it has been pointed out again and again that Milton's hell and his devil have an unflattering dignity and grandeur, while Dante's are often almost absurdly grotesque. It is true, Macaulay could be strangely different, for instance, than the conceptions of Lucifer. Dante's Lucifer is no magnificent tragic, impressive, thorough creature; he is a helpless, motionless, at the lowest point of hell, in the exact center of the earth; the weight of the whole material world pressing upon him from every side. From his three horrible jaws flow tears that perpetually freeze, he gnaws three chief sinners in his three jaws, and the slow waving of his batlike wings diffuses an icy wind



JOHN MILTON.

of death throughout the nethermost hell; for to Dante, cold, not fire, is the supreme expression of the second death. All this is very strange; far less appealing than Milton's yet if we think we may discover that Dante had a special meaning and had brooded long over the nature and function of evil before he presented Lucifer as he did.

When we turn to comparing the heavens of the two poets, Macaulay's distinction becomes entirely false; one question is if he had ever read anything in Dante beyond the "Inferno." For Milton's heaven is a large, definite country, with precise geography, up somewhere in the sky. Dante's is infinite though ordered space. The heaven of "Paradise Lost" is surrounded by a crystal battlement; the rebel angels, having been driven in the northern part of the land; when they are in the final conflict routed by the Messiah, they are driven back to the battlement, and, breaking through it, fall down through the material universe, a verse of chaos, till they tumble into hell. The denizens of this country are as clearly visible to us as the scenery. They are magnificent creatures, Milton's angels; it is well as different and far more mystically conceived—less loquacious, less like intelligent statesmen on a heroic scale; more like spiritual forces, focussed and even at the most important, where no one can question which of our two poets is the greater—the treatment of the "Paradise Lost" is absolutely obnoxious here. Dante was wise; it is not for us to say whether his greater wisdom sprang from deeper reverence. God, in his "Paradise," is all pervasive, and the consciousness of every spirit in paradise is fixed on him alone; as in the "Paradise," the more wonderful it appears. And the reason why Dante has succeeded where all others have failed is because he is one, so far as man can be, as dying the rays of God, as the sun, as a golden stairway mounting upward, as a crown, as stars losing themselves in a deepening day, as a river of light, and, finally, as a celestial rose—the rose of the cross, which is the crown of faith; in the "Paradise Lost" Milton presents eloquently a world conceived by theology. It is a very different matter.

It follows that there is a deep personal note in Dante's poem that is not found in Milton's. Milton wrote a most wonderful description of the Garden of Eden, and of Adam and Eve in it. This description is one of the most beautiful in literature. It is so powerful in beauty, in melody, in intellectual presentation, that for generations it fairly imposed on the English imagination, and although it is a mere relation to the more brief account of paradise and the fall in holy writ, we still today mix up Milton and the Bible. And yet, with all the beauty of the description, we do not feel as Milton had visited the place. I am quite sure that Dante, in his own person, wandered in that little wood, where the breeze was blowing and the brook was flowing, on the top of the Mount of Purgatory. I am, however, confident that Milton's own feet had not trod through the winding paths of his Eden.

A TALE OF ALEXANDER

THE MOABITISH WOMAN.

WASHINGTON.—A few weeks ago a Washington society paper published a cartoon which excited a great deal of comment, because so many people recognized it as an accurate representation of a certain sitting upon a high stool. A woman who bore a striking resemblance to Mrs. Dewey had already removed a laurel wreath from his brow, and had substituted a fool's cap. She had dressed him of his sword and sash, which lay on a chair near by, and had strided him with a spangled belt of mock diamonds and jingling bells, and was removing his epaulettes and other insignia of rank, and the medals and decorations that covered his breast and concealing his uniform with fantastic decorations.

Admiral Dewey was represented by Her, and Stultified. Chicago Record. WASHINGTON.—A few weeks ago a Washington society paper published a cartoon which excited a great deal of comment, because so many people recognized it as an accurate representation of a certain sitting upon a high stool. A woman who bore a striking resemblance to Mrs. Dewey had already removed a laurel wreath from his brow, and had substituted a fool's cap. She had dressed him of his sword and sash, which lay on a chair near by, and had strided him with a spangled belt of mock diamonds and jingling bells, and was removing his epaulettes and other insignia of rank, and the medals and decorations that covered his breast and concealing his uniform with fantastic decorations.

Then came the years of the Napoleonic Wars, in which Russia was embroiled on one side or the other until the burning of Moscow and the destruction of the grand army of Napoleon. It was in the leading power on the Continent of Europe, this position chiefly due to the influence of the young Emperor. All at once his characteristics began to change. He became moody, suspicious and discouraged, but on the contrary, for several months he refused to accept a nomination. At first the Admiral condemned this idea in the most emphatic manner, and used such language as sailors are often addicted to when he said that he would never be entrapped into making a blankety-blank blank fool of himself by setting a Presidential seal in the northern part of the land; when they are in the final conflict routed by the Messiah, they are driven back to the battlement, and, breaking through it, fall down through the material universe, a verse of chaos, till they tumble into hell. The denizens of this country are as clearly visible to us as the scenery. They are magnificent creatures, Milton's angels; it is well as different and far more mystically conceived—less loquacious, less like intelligent statesmen on a heroic scale; more like spiritual forces, focussed and even at the most important, where no one can question which of our two poets is the greater—the treatment of the "Paradise Lost" is absolutely obnoxious here. Dante was wise; it is not for us to say whether his greater wisdom sprang from deeper reverence. God, in his "Paradise," is all pervasive, and the consciousness of every spirit in paradise is fixed on him alone; as in the "Paradise," the more wonderful it appears. And the reason why Dante has succeeded where all others have failed is because he is one, so far as man can be, as dying the rays of God, as the sun, as a golden stairway mounting upward, as a crown, as stars losing themselves in a deepening day, as a river of light, and, finally, as a celestial rose—the rose of the cross, which is the crown of faith; in the "Paradise Lost" Milton presents eloquently a world conceived by theology. It is a very different matter.

Some weeks ago a scout in the person of a general visitor was sent out to ascertain the sentiments of Mr. Whitney, Mr. Gorman, Mr. Hill and other anti-Bryan Democrats concerning Admiral Dewey as a candidate, and while everybody was in a friendly "jolly" so far as can be learned no encouragement was offered, chiefly because the matter was not regarded seriously, and the character of the agent who made the inquiry was such as to command the attention of men like the political managers he approached. It is now believed, however, that Mrs. Dewey herself induced the Admiral into the political field as an opponent of Bryan would immediately have welcomed a solution of the Democratic difficulty.

Both Admiral and Mrs. Dewey have recently expressed resentment toward President McKinley. Mr. Hanna and other Republicans, however, whom they hold responsible in some manner for the scandal about the house and other newspaper comments that have appeared of late, and only as a means of escape from the scandal would they like to have the Admiral run for President simply to "knock out" McKinley.

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