

ASCENT TO LOVE

A GUIDE TO DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY

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TO SHEFFIELD

Ecco chi crescerà li nostri amori.

Paradiso 5.105



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I HAVE COME TO THE GARDEN

The Classics, the Bible, and Love in Medieval Literature

Though Edmund Spenser was a contemporary of Shakespeare, he had at least one foot firmly planted in another age. His great sprawling poem, *The Faerie Queene*, was written in part to honor Queen Elizabeth I, but the poem is as medieval as anything the middle ages produced. Near the middle of Book 1, Redcrosse, the knight who will mature to become Saint George, the patron saint of Britain, is defeated and taken to the dungeon of Orgoglio, a giant. King Arthur shows up to rescue the beleaguered knight, but then he leaves. Redcrosse and his lady, Una, find themselves in the Cave of Despair, where Redcrosse is tempted to suicide. Una intervenes to save him and takes him to the House of Holiness, a kind of rehab center for backslidden knights, where three women, Faith, Hope, and Charity, nurse him back to physical and moral health.

Then he can continue the quest interrupted by his encounter with Orgoglio. He makes his way to a castle, where he fights a three-day battle with a dragon. On the first day, Redcrosse falls, but he is revived by water from the well of life; on the second day, he falls again, but he refreshes himself with fruit from the tree of life; but on the third day, Redcrosse defeats the dragon, and the wedding of Redcrosse and Una follows. No sooner has the celebration taken place than Redcrosse, like a modern superhero, is called back for another quest, another opportunity to save the world.

This story is so utterly medieval that it almost seems a parody of medieval literature. The characters and situations are obviously

taken from medieval and Renaissance romance—the knights, the dragons, the ladies in distress, the escapes. In one fundamental way, however, Spenser parts company from medieval romance. To understand how radical Spenser is, however, we need to review some of the main features of Western medieval literature. Medieval literature takes its specific shape from the combination of three main factors: the pagan literature and stories of Greece, Rome, and Northern Europe; the Bible and interpretations of the Bible by the church fathers and medieval theologians; and the courtly love tradition that arose during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. When we have examined these, we shall be able to see the innovative direction of the *Faerie Queene*. We will also have the background to see how Dante's *Divine Comedy* is likewise both an heir to earlier medieval literature and at the same time something quite different.

Christendom and the Pagan Past

“Today,” wrote the French playwright François Rabelais in his *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, “the old sciences are revived, knowledge is systematized, discipline re-established. The learned languages are restored: Greek, without which a man would be ashamed to consider himself educated; Hebrew, Chaldean, and Latin. Printing is now in use, an art so accurate and elegant that it betrays the divine inspiration of its discovery, which I have lived to witness. Alas! Conversely, I was not spared the horror of such diabolic works as gunpowder and artillery.”¹

Rabelais (1494–1553) was living through the latter part of the period known as the “Renaissance,” and his character celebrates the achievements of his age with great optimism. For Rabelais and for many others, the Renaissance was the time when the lights were finally turned on, when the sun rose after a very long and very dark night.

Rabelais' view of the relation between the Renaissance and medieval world has been a popular one since his time, but recent

¹ Quoted by P.M. Pasinetti in Maynard Mack, ed., *World Masterpieces* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 879.

studies have shown that the line between them is blurry at best.

The name “Renaissance” refers to the rebirth of classical learning, but many classical writings and stories were known during the middle ages.² From the other direction, it has become clear that the Renaissance was full of superstition and occult interest; it was not the age of cool reason that textbooks often claim.³ If the medieval world had some knowledge of ancient literature, however, they treated it with some care. Recognizing its pagan origins, they attempted to fit it into their Christian faith; when this could not be done, they cheerfully attacked and rejected it.

Conrad of Hirsau, a German schoolmaster of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, produced a work known as the *Dialogue on the Authors*, in which a pupil and teacher discuss the works of major pagan authorities. Overall, Conrad operates on the premise that “whatever truth and right thinking has ever been found in anyone has come from Him who created man,” and he finds truth and right thinking in many pagan writers. Conrad, however, could also be withering in his scorn. He commended the Roman poet and satirist Horace because he provides “guidelines laid down for writing,” but other parts of Horace are not so edifying, because his writing “is concerned with vice.” Similarly, Conrad recommends a few works of Ovid, but condemns him as “the inventor of a large part of idol-worship in the *Metamorphoses*.” Quoting Romans 1:18–23, he insists that Ovid’s work is idolatrous because it is concerned with “the transformation of substances” and obscures “the faculty of reason in man, whereby he is made in the image and likeness of God.”⁴

² See C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1964] 1994).

³ Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. Margaret Cook (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); William Monter, *Ritual, Myth & Magic in Early Modern Europe* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1983). Though it covers a later period, Keith Thomas’s classic study, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner’s, 1971), shows the persistence of magical beliefs and practices well past the beginning of the Renaissance.

⁴ Quotations are from A.J. Minnis and A.B. Scott, eds., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c. 1100–c.1375: The Commentary Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 56–58.

Though generally recognizing the sharp differences between pagan and Christian outlooks, medieval writers and commentators had different approaches to their classical and pagan inheritance. Though it is hardly an exhaustive classification, it is helpful to examine three of the ways that Christian writers dealt with the cultures of the past under the headings of “juxtaposition,” “critique,” and “incorporation.”

Scholars debate whether *Beowulf* should be considered a Christian poem, but whether or not the characters are Christians, it is quite evident that the poet is. He writes of Cain, the Almighty, the Judge, the Creator. Within the story, the characters populate a heroic world that shares many customs and values with the world of Homer. When he is getting ready to dive into the water to fight Grendel’s mother, Beowulf says, “As we must expect to leave our life on this earth, we must earn some renown, if we can, before death; daring is the thing for a fighting man to be remembered by”⁵—something that Achilles might have said in his most heroic moments. Later, the poet marvels at Beowulf’s ferocity in battle: “A man must act so when he means in a fight to frame himself a long-lasting glory; it is not life he thinks of.” Throughout the poem, pagan and Christian elements are side-by-side, juxtaposed, and the poet shows no recognition that there is a serious conflict between them.

A second option was to criticize the values and customs of ancient or Germanic heroes. Here the *Song of Roland*, the greatest of the *chansons de geste* (“songs of great deeds”), serves as an example. The poem tells of the battle of Roncevaux, a historical battle that occurred in 778 when Muslims attacked Charlemagne’s army as he returned from a campaign against the Saracens in Northern Spain. Assisted by a Frankish traitor, Ganelon, the Muslims decimated the rear guard, which was under the command of Roland, Charlemagne’s nephew and one of his Twelve Peers.

At the heart of the poem is the debate between Roland and his friend, Oliver, who urges Roland to blow his trumpet to call

⁵I am quoting the translation of Michael Alexander (London: Penguin, 1973).

reinforcements. Roland refuses until it is too late for Charlemagne, already far ahead, to help. The poem contrasts the foolish bravery of Roland with the wise prudence of Oliver. To be sure, Roland is no Achilles. More than anything, Achilles is out for personal glory, even if it means that he fights with his king and stands idly by watching his fellow warriors spill their blood before Hector's onslaught. A knight to the core, Roland knows he is a vassal, bound by oaths of loyalty to his king. Roland's glory is not so much the honor of personal achievement as the glory that he can bring to his lord. As he tells Oliver, "we must make a stand here for our king: one must endure hardships for one's lord and endure great heat and great cold, one must also lose hide and hair. Now let each see to it that he employ great blows, so that bad songs not be sung about us! I shall never be cited as a bad example."⁶ Yet personal reputation is also important to Roland. He refuses to blow his horn because "in fair France my fame would suffer scorn." Calling for help would "cast dishonor on my house" and "on fair France bring ill renown." "Roland is fierce and Oliver is wise," says the poet, and Roland's heroic ferocity leads to utter disaster. Oliver rebukes his friend: "you got us into this mess. There is wise valour, and there is recklessness: Prudence is worth more than foolhardiness. Through your o'erweening you have destroyed the French." Though there is no indication that the poet of *Roland* knew anything of the classical world, the poem confronts head-on a key classical value—the hero's quest for personal honor.

Juxtaposition and critique are less common, however, than efforts to weave threads of Christian faith and the pagan past together into a single fabric. This method of "incorporation" could take one of two forms. On the one hand, Christian writers sometimes place their Christian stories within the larger framework of classical history or literature. The big story is the story of Troy or Greece or Rome, and the stories of the Christian world are chapters of that larger story. The delightful poem *Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight* is a tale of Arthur's court and of an Arthurian knight,

⁶I am using the translation of Dorothy L. Sayers, reprinted in Maynard Mack, ed., *World Masterpieces* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974).