

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Diana Glenn, *Dante's Reforming Mission and Women in the Comedy* (Troubadour Publishing, 2008)

This book is that wonderful combination of impeccable scholarship and elegant and accessible text, which lends it to a far wider readership than the title would suggest. It goes without saying that it should be read by all those who have a special interest in Dante's *Commedia*. Although the *Commedia* has been read and discussed over the centuries, Diana Glenn has found new insights and a fresh approach to this work, in assigning special significance to the figures of women, who may be thought of, on superficial reading, as marginal. Glenn points out that the *Commedia* was written in an 'era when women, with few exceptions, did not generally occupy influential roles in the public sphere' (xiii). Therefore, to start with the premise that Dante invested women within the *Commedia* with a 'freight of salvific virtues, closely linked to his secular goals' (xiv) is to create a new dimension to the interpretation of the *Commedia*, but also points to new ways to consider the role of women in previous centuries. This approach is reminiscent of the reassessment, by medieval historians, of the role and achievements of women of that period.

To put it in context, the *Commedia* is the description of Dante's travel, as the pilgrim, through the three transmundane kingdoms: Hell (*Inferno*), Purgatory (*Purgatorio*) and Heaven (*Paradiso*). During this imaginary journey, Dante describes the situation of a number of human souls after their deaths. During his sojourn the pilgrim plumbs the depths that those in hell experience, until he eventually reaches the knowledge of the beatific vision. Glenn states that: 'Dante's universalizing goal is to provide a poetic blueprint for his age: an epoch in need of renewal and regeneration, openness and unity in diversity' (147).

The analysis of the women who appear in the *Commedia* proceeds diachronically, rather than simply following the format of the three canticles. Thus in Chapter 1 she treats the women in Limbo, in Chapter 2, the women in Hell, in Chapter 3 the women in Purgatory, Chapter 4, the women in Paradise and in Chapter 5 the women of the Beatific Vision. A total of forty-two female characters are compared and analysed, concluding with the Virgin Mary and Beatrice, who appear in the Beatific Vision.

Who are these women? And why these particular women? They range from the famous women of ancient history or literature, such as Electra, Antigone and Ismene, Cleopatra and Helen, to those found in biblical sources, such as Eve, Rachel, Ruth, and Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary. Included in this biblical group is Lucy, associated with ancient Rome, suggesting 'spiritual regeneration to be achieved through the conjoining of female and male symbols as part of God's plan' (119). In each case the women chosen by Dante represent a position in their society or situation, which illuminates the wider vision he is presenting. As Glenn explains in her conclusion: 'Through an exploration of the historical, literary and social significance of the women in the *Comedy*, Dante is signaling unequivocally that women, contemporary and historical, play a fundamental role as active agents in his vision of spiritual revitalization in the living Christian community' (147).

Even for those not closely concerned with the study of Dante's *Commedia*, but who may have an interest in medieval history or literature in general, or in a sociological study of the position of women throughout history, this book would serve them well. Glenn places the women, who are met by the pilgrim in his journey, in a larger historical context. Their significance and characteristics are explained beyond their reference in the canticles. It is

Book reviews: *Dante's Reforming Mission and Women in the Comedy* by Diane Glenn. Emily Sutherland.

Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

only possible to discuss a few of these women. Beatrice is known as the woman whom Dante loved all his life although he only loved her from a distance. Beatrice's historical reality suggests that Dante's representation of her must be regarded as symbolic, for she is the soul who prepares him for his experience of divine glory. His re-awakened love for Beatrice is a 'profound and deeply-felt experience ... and this moment signals an opening of the spirit to receive the lessons that Beatrice will impart' (139).

Dante gives credence to women who did not live within the Christian community, yet who represent virtue or moral qualities, and who offer positive role models. Electra and Lavinia are 'emblematic of courage in military combat and self-actualisation'(9). In Hell the pilgrim meets the Theban prophetess, Manto. While she showed filial devotion to her father, she is also condemned as a sorceress. 'In this respect, Manto anticipates the figure of the occult-worshipping witch so savagely hunted down in the fifteenth century' (58).

This is a book which deserves its place as a serious work in Italian studies and literature. It has, however, much to offer beyond those limits, because Glenn, in taking a new approach to the place of women in the *Commedia*, has examined their place in the canticles not only in depth but also with a breadth that brings them into wider focus and scope. In doing so she has opened up avenues of further scholarship and scrutiny.

Emily Sutherland