

Sir Henry Irving's "Dante"

BY
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The "Dante" of Messrs. Sardou and Moreau is not the youthful, poetic lover of Beatrice; but the man who has fought in the thickest of the world's strife, who has learned by experience the worth of this life's pleasures and the durability of its pains. Sir Henry Irving seems to have grasped to perfection the meaning of the dramatists, who claim to portray a moral Dante, not a historical figure. They give us the man and the poet shadowed always by that melancholy of which Macaulay says: "It was no fantastic caprice. . . . Neither love nor glory, neither the conflicts of earth, nor the hope of heaven, could dispel it." Surely no living actor but Sir Henry Irving could impersonate with such dignity this sorrowful soul! One feels the weight of his tragic personality towering above all others, and never more so than in his silences. His sad-coloured robes falling in classic folds and his ascetic, clear-cut face, make a picture perfect as the one Rossetti painted. And beneath the repression one feels the ardent, passionate nature of the man glowing through. His Southern instincts teach him to love and to fight, but his soul, heavy with prophetic knowledge, lifts him high above his fellow men in thought, and carries him far beyond the limits of human love. Sir Henry Irving makes this latter trait in Dante's character very apparent in his love scenes with Pia dei Tolomei, the lady who, by her sympathy with him when Beatrice died, won his affection. His caresses are exquisitely tender and delicate, full of protecting love, but never expressive of ardour, or even of the egotistical personality of the lover. His love for her seems vaguely touched with regret, and the strength of this sentiment reaches the climax in his passionate desire to protect the child of their illegitimate love

from trouble. It is only in his voice that Sir Henry Irving fails at all. Now and then it is very difficult to hear what he says, not from any peculiarity in pronunciation, but from sheer physical weakness of the vocal organs. The deep, musical voice, with which one imagines the Florentine poet must have spoken, is missing, and something of his charm is lost.

In the scene with his daughter, Gemma, whose ignorance of his relationship to him seems to fill his heart with a craving for the privileges of parentage, is a fine piece of acting, vigorous and youthful. But he is never so fine as in the scene with Cardinal Colonna after his dream of the Inferno. The strength of his presence is almost oppressive, and the remoteness of his spirit is clearly evident in the way with which friends and enemies alike regard him. His denunciation of the Cardinal, and his intervention for his daughter's freedom from the punishment to which she has been condemned for a refusal to enter convent life, are entirely ignorant of a personal note. His vision of the eternal judgments has removed him still farther from the ties of human love, and he stands to all as a prophet. It is with a feeling of positive awe that one sees the curtain go down on this scene.

The mounting of the piece is perfect, the actors make their exits and entrances in due accordance with the rules of dramatic art brought to its highest pitch. The only flaw in the whole wonderful representation is, to my mind, the appearance of the spirit of Beatrice before Dante's dream of Hell. There is something terribly suggestive of the pantomime in this white-robed figure which declaims in measured, soulless tones to the bowed figure of the poet before his descent into the fiery regions. The horrors of the Inferno are vividly brought before us, and the fire which burns up the wicked is very red. In fact, every detail of the play has had the most minute attention, and it must be added to Sir Henry Irving's long list of artistic triumphs.

RODIN

IV

Illusion

Icarus cries: "My love is robed in light
And splendour of the summits of the sun.
Wing, O my soul, thy plumed caparison
Through ninety million miles of space beyond sight!
Utmost imagination's eagle-flight
Out-soar!" But he, by his own force outdone,
His peacock pinions molten one by one,
Falls to black earth through the impassive night.
Lo! from uprushing earth arises love
Ardent and secret, scented with the night,
Amorous, ready. Sing the awakening bliss
That catches him, from the inane above
Hurled—nay! drawn down! What uttermost delight
Dawns in that death! Icarus and Gaia kiss.