

BOOK REVIEW

Dante and the Blessed Virgin. By Ralph McInerny. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. 164 pp. \$30.00. ISBN: 978-0-268-03517-4.

Dante's status as Catholic civilization's premier poet has remained unchallenged for many centuries. In the ranks of the Dantisti, however, rivalry rules the day. Every generation produces a new set of scholars, both believing and unbelieving, determined to conquer the seven-storey mountain of Dante biography, translation, and interpretation. This work by a self-confessed "amateur" (xiii) reminds us of why we continue to read the ever-expanding literature—and especially why we care so much about its subject and continue to surrender, as *Commedia* translator Dorothy Sayers once said, to the magic of the Florentine's unsurpassed storytelling.

In this case, the amateur author happens to have been one of the foremost professional philosophers of the twentieth century. Ralph McInerny (d. 2010), long associated with the University of Notre Dame, is remembered today principally for his feisty determination to keep the Thomist legacy alive in a fiercely anti-medieval age. Under his direction, the university's Medieval Institute and Jacques Maritain Center came into their own as world-class research institutions dedicated to the cultural relevance of classical Christian wisdom. No ordinary Thomist, McInerny also published in multiple genres and co-founded a magazine (now thriving on-line). His novels (all 80-something of them) made Notre Dame's niche in Catholic myth even more secure than it already was and created what nobody thought was possible: a priest-sleuth character who is not a Father Brown clone.

This book, McInerny's final publication, profits greatly from his lifelong commitment to clarity of thought and disciplined prose. Focused primarily on the *Divine Comedy*, it advances a bold but concisely stated thesis: "The Blessed Virgin Mary is the key to Dante" (1). In more technical language, Mary is described as the *Comedy's* "prime mover" (125). Without her, McInerny contends, Dante's cosmic journey—and by implication the salvation of the human race—would have ended where it began: in the legendary *selva oscura* or "dark wood" of the opening canto (13).

After placing the *Comedy* in historical and biographical context, the author takes about 130 pages to show how the structure and logic of the poem make a case for the centrality of Mary in both the poet's imagination and his masterpiece. Chapters follow the threefold pattern of Dante's narrative and point to the "gentle lady in heaven" (32) who prompts Saint Lucy and Beatrice to fly to Dante's aid, the prominence of Marian themes in the purgatorial ascent

from vice to virtue, and the eventual dominance of the woman whose face “most resembles that of Christ” (129) in the extraordinary process of heavenly decision-making that grants the pre-mortem Dante an unprecedented vision of the “Love that moves the sun and the other stars” (141). For McNerny, Dante’s first-person narrative replicates the overall design of the universal drama of salvation—the divinely ordained plan which stretches from the eternity of celestial Wisdom, through the *felix culpa* of Eve and the *fiat* of the handmaid of Nazareth, and ultimately to the intercessory mission of the Queen of heaven. Grace comes to man through feminine hands, he declares. “Any attempt to bypass [Mary] is like a wingless bird attempting flight” (134).

McNerny enhances his argument with his own translations of Dante’s fourteenth-century Italian and spirited criticism of Dantisti commentators. Completely overlooked, however, is *Dante the Philosopher* (1949) by fellow Thomist Etienne Gilson. This omission is especially curious given the author’s interest in portraying the *Comedy* as “an instance of moral theology” (90) and Dante as both a “philosophical” and “theological” poet (91). Even so, McNerny’s tour of the *Comedy*’s intellectual and spiritual milieu is a miniature liberal arts education in itself. Just as C. S. Lewis smuggled Christian doctrine in his science fiction, McNerny slips what amounts to a condensed *Summa* into his analysis of Dante’s otherworldly adventure—or more properly, he demonstrates how the Christian intellectual heritage from Boethius to Bonaventure provided the mental scaffolding for Dante’s majestic cathedral in *terza rima*. Yes, the Catholic tradition’s greatest epic reveals secrets about angelic intelligence and interplanetary travel and revels in captivating tales of simoniac popes and star-crossed lovers. More importantly, it tutors poor banished children of Eve in vital lessons of nature and grace, happiness and holiness, desire and destiny. Dante’s intent may have been just this, McNerny concludes: to hold before us a mirror showing us why we seek what we seek and how the true object of our longing would ever elude our reach—save for the grace of Christ and his Mother.

Fellow amateurs and serious readers at all levels will gain much from this rich study of the place of Mary in Dante’s life and work and the role of Mariology in the larger Catholic literary imagination. Fans of the late professor will especially appreciate the light this crowning scholarly achievement sheds on his own eminently Christian mind. Once McNerny called Maritain a model of the truly Catholic scholar. This book proves that it took one to know one.

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