

Leeds Centre for Dante Studies

UNDERGRADUATE STUDY DAY: DANTE AND VIRGIL

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Virgil in the Middle Ages

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These notes accompany the Leeds Dante Podcast item 9

[(1) N/a]

(2) 'In the other subjects, however, I was compelled to learn about the wanderings of a certain Aeneas, oblivious of my own wanderings, and to weep for Dido dead, who slew herself for love. And all this while I bore with dry eyes my own wretched self dying to thee, O God, my life, in the midst of these things. [...] For my own condition I shed no tears, though I wept for Dido, who "sought death at the sword's point", while I myself was seeking the lowest rung of thy creation, having forsaken thee; earth sinking back to earth again. And, if I had been forbidden to read these poems, I would have grieved that I was not allowed to read what grieved me. This sort of madness is considered more honorable and more fruitful learning than the beginner's course in which I learned to read and write. But now, O my God, cry unto my soul, and let thy truth say to me: "Not so, not so! That first learning was far better". For, obviously, I would rather forget the wanderings of Aeneas, and all such things, than forget how to write and read.' (St Augustine, *Confessions*, I, xiii)

(3) 'If the [pagan] philosophers chanced to utter truths useful to our faith [...] not only should we not fear these truths, but also we must remove them from these unlawful usurpers for our own uses.' (St Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*)

(4) 'Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns; now a new generation descends from heaven on high.' (Virgil, *Eclogue* IV, 6-7)

(5) 'The integument [covering] is a kind of teaching which wraps up the true meaning inside a fictitious narrative, and so it is also called "a veil" [*involucrum*].' (Bernardus Silvestris [?], from the prologue to *Commentary on the 'Aeneid' Books I-VI*)

(6) 'So the reader derives a twofold benefit from this work. The first is skill in writing acquired by imitation. The second is the knowledge of how to act properly, acquired from the exhortation imparted to us by the examples. For instance, the trials of Aeneas give us an example of endurance; the love he showed towards Anchises and Ascanias an example of steadfast loyalty; the reverence he displayed towards the gods, his sounding out of oracles, the sacrifices he offered, and the prayers and vows he poured out attract us in a certain way towards religious observance. The excessive love of Aeneas for Dido restrains us from the desire for what is unlawful.' (Bernardus Silvestris [?], from the prologue to *Commentary on the 'Aeneid' Books I-VI*)

(7) 'For the name "Aeneas" is *ennos demas*, that is "dweller in the body", *ennos* in Greek being in Latin *habitor* ("dweller"). [...] *Demas*, that is, "a chain", means "the body", because it is the prison of the soul.' (Bernardus Silvestris [?], from the exposition of Book I, *Commentary on the 'Aeneid' Books I-VI*)

(8) Nel mezzo del cammin di *nostra* vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
ché la diritta via era smarrita. (*Inf.* I, 1-3)

Sí pïa l'ombra d' Anchise si porse
se fede merta *nostra maggior musa*
quando in Eliso del figlio s'accorse. (*Par.* XV, 25-27)

(9) 'You may be confronted by the Mantuan poet [i.e. Virgil], who under the pretext of fiction expressed all the truths of philosophy.' (John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, VI, 22)

(10) Lo buon maestro cominciò a dire:
'Mira colui con quella spada in mano,

che vien dinanzi ai tre sí come sire:
quelli è Omero poeta sovrano;
l'altro è Orazio satiro che vene;
Ovidio è 'l terzo, e l'ultimo Lucano.
Però che ciascun meco si convene
nel nome che sonò la voce sola,
fannomi onore, e di ciò fanno bene'. [...]
e piú d'onore assai mi fenno,
ch'e' sí mi fecer de la loro schiera,
sí ch'io fui sesto tra cotanto senno. (*Inf.* IV, 85-93; 100-02)

(11) 'Insofar as the subject matter of poetry is concerned, we have to decide whether it is necessary to write in a tragic style, a comic style or an elegiac one. When we refer to tragedy we mean the superior style, whereas by comedy we mean the inferior style, and by elegy we mean the most humble style of all. If the subject matter which we have chosen seems to require the tragic style, then it is necessary to use the most noble form of the vernacular. [...] If, on the other hand, we are at the comic level, then it is necessary to use sometimes a 'middle' form of the vernacular and sometimes a more humble form [...]. Finally, if we are at the elegiac level then we should use only the most humble form of the vernacular' (Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* II, iv)

(12) 'He [Virgil] produced three works, employing the threefold range of styles, that is the lowly, middle and grandiloquent, in the *Bucolics*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid* respectively. In the weighty thought expressed in these works, and in the text presented to him in a manner that is most appropriate, the penetrating reader will be able to observe that this great poet has acquired a full grasp of all the liberal disciplines.' (Conrad of Hirsau, *Dialogue on the Authors*)