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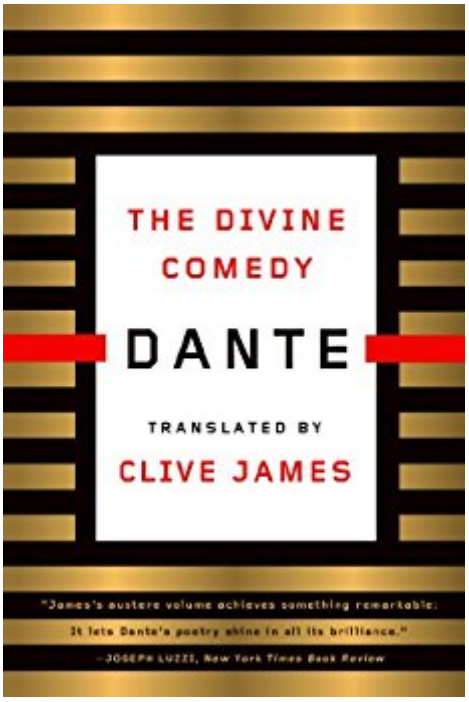
The Divine Comedy



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Synopsis

â œUnder Jamesâ ™s uncanny touch, seven long centuries drop away, and the great poem is startlingly fresh and new.â •â ”Stephen GreenblattThe Divine Comedy is the precursor of modern literature, and Clive Jamesâ ™s translationâ ”decades in the makingâ ”gives us the entire epic as a single, coherent, and compulsively readable lyric poem. For the first time ever in an English translation, James makes the bold choice of switching from the terza rima composition of the original Italianâ ”a measure that strains in Englishâ ”to the quatrain. The result is â œrhymed English stanzas that convey the music of Danteâ ™s triple rhymesâ • (Edward Mendelson). Jamesâ ™s translation reproduces the same wonderful momentum of the original Italian that propels the reader along the pilgrimâ ™s path from Hell to Heaven, from despair to revelation.

Book Information

File Size: 1453 KB

Print Length: 560 pages

Publisher: Liveright; 1 edition (April 15, 2013)

Publication Date: April 8, 2013

Sold by:Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00BN3HSEY

Text-to-Speech: Not enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Not Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #456,882 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #19 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Literature & Fiction > Poetry > Italian #72 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > Poetry > Regional & Cultural > European > Italian #110 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Literature & Fiction > Poetry > Epic

Customer Reviews

I’ve read The Divine Comedy several times, in different translations, but I have always found Paradise a slog. I’m happy to report that Clive James has made even this abstract exploration of light and doctrine (and, I might add, occasionally smug self-righteousness on Dante’s part) a fascinating journey. James has chosen an unusual verse form - quatrains, with an abab rhyme

scheme - to translate this, but it works well: it moves quickly and smoothly, each line pulling you forward to the next. I'm sure the labor was intensive, but most of the time the word order, the rhythm, the rhymes all fall into place as if they just happened that way. It unfolds naturally. And James has extended the verse in places by filling in some of the oblique references Dante makes. You can read it without having to flip back and forth between notes, which is a good thing, because there aren't any.There are risks in bringing notes into the verse itself: some references in the poem are ambiguous; which do you pick? James tries to stick close to scholarly consensus, where there is any. For example, the "one who made the great refusal" is identified in the verse as Pope Celestine: if you have to pick one among many, that IS the closest to a scholarly consensus; but purists would argue against closing off other possibilities. If that bothers you, this is not the translation for you. But if you've never read Dante before, I would definitely recommend starting here.My one complaint is that the quatrains are not separated by a space. I don't know whether this was James's decision or the publisher's. I suppose it was an effort to increase the forward momentum and call less attention to the formal structure. Just a personal preference on my part; in no way does it detract from the readability of the poem.(In case this review floats around, the way they sometimes do on , I should clarify that I'm describing the 2013 translation by Clive James.)

This is an interpretation rather than a translation. Explanation is inserted into the verse in lieu of footnotes. This will surely drive the purist wild and certainly this is not the version to read is you want unadulterated Dante. (Singleton is that, although then you must give up the verse). But James gives you much of the poetry and a reasonably faithful approximation of Dante and he is intermittently able to hit the grandeur as well. But his singular achievement, which as he says in his intro was his goal, is his readability. This Dante begs to be read aloud. Gone the terza rima but a propulsive quatrain scheme is substituted with plenty of internal, alliterative rhyme. And he is able to achieve mostly full rhyme without the clangy fall into limerick, a danger full rhyme is prone to.Here is the entrance to Hell: FROM NOW ON, EVERY DAY FEELS LIKE YOUR LAST FOREVER. LET THAT BE YOUR GREATEST FEAR. YOUR FUTURE NOW IS TO REGRET THE PAST. FORGET YOUR HOPES. THEY WERE WHAT BROUGHT YOU HERE. (Page 15)No longer "Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here". In fact his reading alters the meaning of Hope slightly (I was going to say "a shade" but feared the resulting groans).My favorite Dante is Pinsky's but he only did Inferno. Hollander is particularly good for the scholarly footnotes and the accuracy of the verse. Ciardi remains the most poetic for the entire Commedia. And I continue to have a fondness for Sayers, despite the just criticisms, as she was my "first" and you never forget the first time with Dante. But

James honorably joins the team of wonderful Dante translators and since the explanations are built into the verse, he remains the most readable of them all. He is an excellent guide to this great poem - almost as admirable as Virgil himself.

To begin with, a translation of Dante's Divine Comedy into rhyming English verse doesn't work. The English language isn't made for it. Italian is a naturally rhyming language. English is not. John Ciardi's rhyming translation is the best available...and it's forced, awkward, and artificial. Clive James gave it a good honest try -- he even changed from three-line verses to four-line verses to give himself more room to work with -- but it comes out forced, awkward, and artificial. It isn't his fault; Homer, Hesiod, and Virgil couldn't have done it. Also: despite a heroic attempt to avoid anachronisms, James lets anachronisms slip in. Finally, he interpolates too much into the text. In an effort to minimize footnotes, he incorporates the footnotes directly into the verses. This is unfaithful to the original. Dante was content to present a menacing she-wolf, and later scholars have concluded that the wolf represents avarice or greed. James says so right in the text, but this is not Dante's actual denotation, and the blunt declaration contradicts Dante's open-ended interpretation. What the wolf represents is for the reader to intuit, not for the translator to aver.

I first read Dante's The Devine Comedy in college and have read it a number of times since. Each time, as I grow older, I understand it a little more. James, admits his translation as a younger man would be much different that this one, written as an older person who has gone through life threatening illness. This modern translation has so much more meaning because of where he is in his life.

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