

THE THREE GREATEST POETS.

DANTE, Shakespeare and Goethe are the greatest poets of the Christian era; as Job, Homer and Virgil were the greatest of the era before Christ. They rise like pyramids in the history of literature. Their works have a universal and perennial interest. Their theme is man as man, and they sympathize with all that is human. They describe, with the intuition of genius and in classical style, our common nature in all its phases, from the lowest to the highest, from the worst to the best.

But with this common characteristic they differ as widely as the nation, and ages to which they belong, and as the languages in which they wrote. They are intensely human and yet intensely national. Dante could only have arisen in Italy and in the thirteenth century, Shakespeare only in England and in the sixteenth century, Goethe only in Germany and in the eighteenth century. Dante is the poet of the Middle Ages and of Catholicism; Shakespeare is the poet of the transition period of the Renaissance and Reformation; Goethe is the poet of modern cosmopolitan culture.

It is difficult to say who is the greatest and the most universal of the three. Shakespeare is an unexplained literary miracle as to creative fertility of genius and intuitive knowledge of human nature, English, old Roman, Italian, French, Scandinavian, Christian, Jewish, heathen, noble and wicked, angelic and Satanic. Goethe presents greater variety of poetic and literary composition, and excels equally in drama, epos and song, in narrative prose and critical judgment. Dante in one respect is the most exalted and sublime of the three, as he follows men into the eternal world of bliss and woe. Goethe does the same in

his "Faust," who in the first part goes down to perdition for his sins, but in the second part we find him in heaven without passing through the purgatory of repentance, and without faith in Christ. The angels who carry the immortal part of "Faust" greet him as one who is saved by a process of self-purification. This is the moral defect in that great tragedy. Dante was a Catholic believer, and peoples his Paradise with spotless saints. Shakespeare professes no religion, and is hid behind his character; but he reverently bowed before Him

Whose blessed feet were nail'd
For our advantage on the bitter cross.

There is no finer and more truly Christian description of mercy than that given by Shakespeare in the "Merchant of Venice" (Act IV., Scene 1):

The quality of mercy is not strain'd;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice bless'd:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the fear and dread of kings.
But mercy is above this sceptred sway:
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest
God's,
When mercy seasons justice.

Of Dante and Shakespeare we know very little, and that little is uncertain and undisputed. Goethe left a charming record of his early life, and his later years are equally well known. Dante and Shakespeare died in the vigour of manhood, Goethe in serene old age praying for more light, and leaving as one of his wise utterances this testimony: That however the human race may advance in science, literature and art and every branch of