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Love Poems

FROM
Rime

[I]

Dante da Maiano to other poets*

*Wise man, regard this vision with some care, I
And draw out its true meaning, if you please.
So here it is: a lady who is fair,
A lady whom my heart is keen to please,
Made me a present of a leafy crown
And placed it on my head invitingly;
And then I found myself wearing a gown
Made to her measure, so it seems to me.
And then, my friend, it was that, growing bold,
I took her gently in a fond embrace; IO
She did not struggle, no: she smiled at me.
I kissed her many times, and she just smiled:
I'll say no more – she made me swear to this.
My mother, who is dead, was standing by.*

[J.G.N.]

[I a]

Dante Alighieri to Dante da Maiano

You could work out the meaning on your own, I
You who are so renowned for being wise;
And so I shall reply as best I can,
Without delay, to your well-fashioned phrase.
Now true desire, so hard to satisfy,
Produced by virtue or by beauty, must –
So I imagine in my friendly way –
Be shadowed by the gift you mention first.
And by the gown, you may be sure, is meant
That she will love you whom you most desire; IO
Of this you have a clear presentiment:
I'm thinking of what happened next with her.
And by the figure of one dead is meant
The constancy you may expect from her.

[J.G.N.]

[II]

Dante da Maiano to Dante Alighieri

To find its value by experiment, I
The goldsmith puts his gold into the fire
And, by refining it, he can be sure
Whether it's worth a little or a mint.
And I, to put my singing to the test,
Put it to you, the recognized touchstone
Of all who make this serious skill their own,
Or are reputedly among the best.
And I ask this, in my best poetry:
Will you, with your extensive knowledge, deign IO
To say what are Lord Love's most deadly cares?
I have not set my heart on splitting hairs
(Not something that you set your heart upon),
But ask what my worth is, what it will be.

[J.G.N.]

[II a]

Dante Alighieri to Dante da Maiano

Whoever you are, it seems to me you wear I
A cloak of wisdom, one that is not light;
So that, because I cannot praise aright,
Or fairly answer you, I blaze with ire.
So be assured (I know myself) compared
With yours my wisdom is a grain of sand;
Nor do I take wise ways like you, my friend,
Who seem so wise, looked at from any side.
But, since my mind is what you would discover,
I shall without a lie make it quite plain, IO
And talk like someone talking to a sage;
So in all conscience here's what I allege:
Whoever is in love, with no return,
Bears in his heart a grief that's like no other.

[J.G.N.]

[III]

Dante da Maiano to Dante Alighieri

*All you have said, so elegant and certain, I
Exemplifies what people say of you;
And, what is more, we'd find it a great burden,
Trying to give the praise that is your due.
For you have risen to such high repute
No one can reckon it sufficiently;
And now whoever speaks of your estate
And thinks to praise it, simply speaks awry.
You say: to love when love is unreturned
Is the worst fate that can befall a lover: IO
And many say there's something worse than that.
And so I beg: be not too disinclined
In all your wisdom to again discover:
Is this truth from experience, or not?*

[J.G.N.]

[III a]

Dante Alighieri to Dante da Maiano

Although, my friend, I do not know your name, I
Nor even where he's from, whom I hear speak, I
I do know that his wisdom has such fame
That nobody I know enjoys the like.
With men it is not hard to recognize
If wisdom's there – speech makes it obvious.
Since I'm obliged to send you nameless praise,
My tongue has much ado to talk of this.
Friend (I am sure of this, since I have known
True love), he feels most anguish, be assured, IO
Who is in love, but not loved in return;
That pain is worse than any other pain,
And that is why it is all sorrows' lord:
And hence comes every grief love can contain.

[J.G.N.]

[III b]

Dante da Maiano to Dante Alighieri

Alas, the grief that grieves me now the most I
Is giving thanks, not knowing in what wise;
It needs, instead of me, someone as wise
As you, who lay uncertainties to rest.
The grief which you say many people suffer
Comes from your disposition, not from theirs;
These nuances are what my mind desires,
Being at the end, so often, of its tether.
I ask you in your wisdom to repeat
Your argument, and cite authorities IO
To make your thesis still more glorious;
It will be clearer if you answer thus,
And we'll be sure what brings most miseries,
Having the proofs that make it definite.

[J.G.N.]

[IV]

Dante da Maiano to Dante Alighieri

Love makes me love and suffers no distraction; I
He has me so subjected to desire
That my poor heart cannot for one short hour
Send its thoughts in a different direction.
I have been trying hard to find out whether
*Ovid's prescription's valid for love's cure,**
And as for me I find him but a liar;
So I surrender and beg grace and favour.
And now I really know and know for sure
That Love is not thrown back by strength or art, IO
Or wit or any words that may be found:
There's only pity and the skill to endure
And serve him well: for so one plays one's part.
Tell me, wise friend, if what I say is sound.

[J.G.N.]

[IV a]

Dante Alighieri to Dante da Maiano

Knowledge and courtesy, shrewdness and skill, I
Beauty, nobility, and affluence,
Strength of mind, mildness, sparing no expense,
Courage, worth – joined or individual,
These graces and these virtues everywhere
Overcome Love because they give such pleasure;
One may indeed be stronger than another,
But each will be contributing its share.
So, if you really wish, my friend, to use
A natural power or one that you have learnt, IO
Loyally use it for Love's delectation,
Not to oppose his gracious operation:
Against Love you will be quite impotent,
If you and he should ever come to blows.

[J.G.N.]

[V]

If, Lippo, it is you who are my reader, 1
 Before you start to ponder
 Over these words which I intend to say,
 According to his wish who wrote to me,
 I give myself to you,
 And send such greetings as will give you pleasure.
 Then I implore you, on your honour hear,
 And hearing bring to bear
 All your intelligence and your full mind:
 I say I am a humble sonnet, and 10
 I come and take my stand
 In front of you, to make sure that you hear.

I come companioned by a naked maid*
 Walking, but somewhat bashfully, behind:
 She dares not wander round,
 Because she has no clothes in which to hide;
 I beg your gentle heart to take in hand
 To clothe her,* and you two be close allied,
 Till she is recognized
 And where the fancy takes her walks around. 20

[J.G.N.]

[VI]

I beg Love to commend I
My humble heart that he has given to you,
And I beg Mercy too
To make sure that you keep me in your mind;
I've hardly left behind
Your virtue and immediately I find
How I draw comfort from
The hope I nourish of returning home.
I shall but be a little time away,
Or so it seems to me, IO
And dwell continually
On how I see your semblance in my mind;
When near, when far, when wandering to and fro,
My lady, I commend myself to you.

[J.G.N.]

[VII]

Relentless memory, that is always 1
Looking towards a time that now is past,
Is striking at my heart upon one side;
And amorous desire, that gently draws
Me to the precious region I have lost,
Assaults upon the other with Love's forces;
Nor do I feel I have enough resources
To fight off these attacks for very long,
Madonna, if you do not send me succour:
And therefore, if you ever 10
Think it your duty to deliver it,
Be pleased to send your greeting to my heart:
That may revive its strength and comfort it.

Be pleased, my lady, to provide relief
In this emergency for my poor heart:
It hopes for help from you and none but you;
A good liege-lord will never slacken off
When speeding to his vassal in distress,
Safeguarding him and also his own honour.
And certainly I feel the greater dolour 20
When I recall, my lady, how you stand
Depicted there within by Love's own hand;
Which means you ought to lend
Your hand to care more often for my heart;
For He by whom all good's apparent here
Holds us, since we're His image, the more dear.

If what you wish to say, my dearest hope,
Is that I should postpone what I am asking,
My answer is: I can no longer wait;
My strength is gone; I've almost given up; 30

Which ought to be apparent from the fact
That I am driven to this last resort:
A man should bear all weights – except the weight
Which has the power to crush him unto death –
Before he puts to proof his greatest friend:
How can he know what mind
He'll find him in? And if it turns out badly,
There's nothing costs so much and out of hand
Brings him to such an acrimonious end.

And you alone are she whom I most love, 40
Who can give me the greatest gift of all,
And she in whom my greatest hope is placed;
To serve you is the reason why I live,
And only things redounding to your honour
Meet my desires: everything else I loathe.
You can give me what no one else can give,
And all my thoughts are balanced in your hand,
Placed there by Love; of which I rather boast.
The reason for my trust
Lies in the kindness of your demeanour; 50
For everyone who sees you sees indeed
From outward looks what pity is inside.

It's time now for your greeting to set out,
And come inside my heart that has been waiting,
My gracious lady, as you have been told;
But you should know the entrance to my heart
Is locked and barred and bolted by that arrow
Love shot the very day that I was stricken;
And so to go in there is now forbidden
Except to messengers from Love, who can 60
Open it by the will that shut the door:
And therefore in my war
Your greeting when it came would do me harm,

If it arrived here unaccompanied
By messengers from Love who is my lord.

Canzone, you must travel at full speed,
Since you know well what little time is left
To achieve the end for which you're on the road.

[J.G.N.]

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