Review Essay: Dante Alighieri. *Monarchia*

Joseph Rosenblum

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Measure for Measure, the audience experiences “a sense of mercy that paradoxically subsumes judgment” (113). And in the statue scene of The Winter's Tale, Shakespeare “brings to a focus his artful handling of the paradox of judgment and mercy” (118). To the extent that the playwright makes that paradox central to his plays, he resembles the Puritan preacher who wants his auditors to “feel simultaneously the deathlike weight of judgment and the quickening lift of mercy” (120).

In the book's final section, the author discusses the problem of predestination, relating it to various sermons and to The Duchess of Malfi. According to Crockett, Webster “intensifies the exclusivist rhetoric implicit in discourse centering on election and reprobation” (138). In practice this means that the audience, trying to interpret the dramatic action, “is polarized into separate camps” (138). Just as a sermon may pose the prospect of two utterly different outcomes (salvation or damnation), so “at the play’s close, two mutually exclusive interpretive options—the Christian and the absurdist—remain clearly and insistently delineated” (139).

No one who reads this book will doubt that both preacher and playwright shared an interest in paradox and that this interest was an important part of Renaissance culture. (The final chapter suggests just how important paradox is to such plays as Richard III and Othello.) Open to debate, however, is the claim that “Reformation theology and Renaissance drama were mutually influential” (131). It is one thing to show that preachers thought of their sermons as performances or to show that moral concerns are sometimes turned into dramatic action. It is another thing entirely to say that preachers were profoundly influenced by what was going on in the theaters or that Webster and Shakespeare owed their rhetoric or theatrical power to what was being said during church services.

Frederick Kiefer
University of Arizona


Dante’s political views might be described as lingua romana in bocca toscana. The Roman language that Dante speaks is that of the empire, and his Monarchia provides an argument for the supremacy of secular power in temporal matters. The defense of empire against pope, though grounded
in long-standing theological and philosophical considerations, is based on thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century realpolitik. Dante had witnessed the ravages wrought by papal interference in political affairs and owed his exile to the machinations of Pope Boniface VIII. Ironically, the *Monarchia* was probably composed during the pontificate of Clement V (1305-1314), which witnessed the beginning of the “Babylonian captivity” (1309-1377) and the decline of Church power vis-à-vis secular authority. Dante’s treatise may be seen as a response to Boniface VIII’s *Unam sanctam* (1302), which built its case for clerical supremacy in secular matters on Luke 22:38, in which the disciples say to Jesus, “Behold, here are two swords,” representing, according to Boniface and other church officials, secular and religious authority. Dante addresses this argument in the third book of his *Monarchia* (3:9), rejecting the allegorical interpretation placed on this passage. For Dante, sometimes a sword is just a sword. Even the *Unam sanctam* was, however, stillborn. Prompted by Philip IV of France’s trying a bishop in a royal court, the papal bull led to Philip’s attempt to arrest and condemn Boniface as well. Though Boniface was rescued, he was physically assaulted, and papal prestige declined. Boniface died soon after Philip’s attack and was succeeded by the more malleable Clement V.

While the *Unam sanctam* and Boniface’s political activities underlie the *Monarchia*, an even greater influence is Augustine’s *De civitate Dei*. Peter S. Hawkins observes in “Divide and Conquer: Augustine in the Divine Comedy” (PMLA 106 [May 1991]: 471-82), “Augustine negated pagan Rome, discredited Vergil, and refused the idea of temporal beatitude as a legitimate human end. It was against his authoritative naysaying that Dante had to contravene in his own bid to underwrite not only a renewed Roman empire but a vision of redeemed political life on earth” (472).

In the *Monarchia* Dante conducted his lover’s quarrel with Augustine by using the Church Father for his own purposes. Dante’s list of heroes in the *Monarchia* 2:5:8-17 derives from *De civitate Dei* 5:18. For Augustine, these Romans illustrate a misguided quest for earthly glory. Dante discusses them to prove secular Rome’s disinterestedness, its concern “to promote the public interest for the benefit of mankind” (*Monarchia*, 63). In *De civitate Dei* 2:22 Augustine ridicules the notion that a special providence was shown in the rescue of Rome by geese in 392 B.C. when their cackling warned of a surprise night attack by the Gauls. The *Monarchia* (2:4:7) cites this example as a miracle showing God’s will “that the Roman empire might be supreme” (*Monarchia*, 59). In *Monarchia* 3:4:7-9 Dante utilizes Augustine’s principles set down in both *De civitate Dei* and *De doctrina christiana* to undergird his antipapal
arguments, making Augustinian theology support Augustan politics and the supremacy of the Holy Roman Emperor in temporal affairs.

The Monarchia is a significant text for students of medieval politics and philosophy, though most readers will come to it to understand Dante’s thought. It serves as an important commentary on the Commedia for such images as the giant of Crete in canto 14 of the Inferno with its iron and terracotta feet or for the lament in canto 19 of that canticle regarding the Donation of Constantine (examined in Monarchia 3:10). Even Beatrice’s promise to Dante in Purgatorio 32 that he will soon be a citizen “di quella Roma onde Christo è romano” (line 102) assumes added resonance when one recognizes what Rome meant politically to the poet.

The learned dantista Prue Shaw notes in her introduction that the three books of the Monarchia constitute a syllogism proving the supremacy of secular over spiritual Rome in political affairs. Dante draws heavily on Aristotle’s political theories, and he grounds his arguments on the fundamental principle that “universal peace is the best of those things which are ordained for our human happiness” (Monarchia, ii). Book I demonstrates that humanity is best governed by a single ruler. Book II rehabilitates the Roman Empire from Augustine’s strictures, placing Dante in a tradition that moves from Orosius to Otto of Freising to Jordanus von Osnabrück, who emphasized “Reditte cesare, que sunt cesaris.” Book I may be viewed as the major premise, Book II the minor; the syllogism then culminates in Book III, which refutes three “proofs” from the Old Testament, three from the New, and three from history traditionally used to bolster papal claims to temporal power.

Shaw has provided an excellent text and translation for all who would turn to Dante’s treatise. The Latin version is based on Pier Giorgio Ricci’s 1965 edition published as volume 5 of the Edizione Nazionale delle opere di Dante Alighieri under the aegis of the Società Dantesca Italiana, though she has amended Ricci’s reading in over forty places. The translation is the first in English in forty years and captures as well as possible the original meaning, though Shaw acknowledges the problem of rendering into colloquial language words “dense with philosophical implications” (xiii). Turning monarchia into “monarchy,” for example, may mask for some readers the emphasis on single government. For Dante, Philip IV was no more the solution to world strife than Boniface or Clement. Indeed, the Monarchia concludes with a thinly veiled criticism of Philip’s treatment of Boniface and Clement: “Let Caesar therefore show that reverence towards Peter which a firstborn son should show his father” (Monarchia, 149). Dante wanted a new Augustus in the guise
of the Holy Roman Emperor to end political turmoil in Europe generally and in Italy particularly. Similarly, *imperium* means so much more than "empire," including absolute power and dominion.

Shaw's introduction offers a clear overview of Dante's arguments and includes a fascinating discussion of his use of numerology in constructing the *Monarchia*. The notes in the text are concise yet informative, though keyed only to the English, not the parallel Latin text. The bibliography is comprehensive. The proofreader missed a typographical error on page 74, line 4: the correct reading of the line from the *Aeneid* (6:852) is "Hae tibi erunt artes," rather than "Hee" as given in the text.

Joseph Rosenblum
Greensboro, N.C.


Writings about Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, Robert Penn Warren observed, "The philosophical novelist, or poet, is one for whom the documentation of the world is constantly striving to rise to the level of generalization about values, for whom the image strives to rise to symbol." This statement could serve as the epigraph for Lorenzo de' Medici's unfinished *Comento de' miei sonetti*, a significant contribution to both the poetry and the philosophy of the quattrocento. Patterned on Dante's *Convivio* and *Vita Nuova*, as well as Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, the *Comento* consists of 41 sonnets (of the 108 that Lorenzo wrote), each followed by explication. Begun perhaps as early as 1473, the work apparently underwent at least two phases of revision, one in 1484-1486, another in 1490-1491. In *The Autobiography of Lorenzo de' Medici the Magnificent: A Commentary on My Sonnets*, Lorenzo treated not only his love for Lucrezia Donati, his long-time mistress, but also other episodes of his life (such as the Pazzi conspiracy of 1478, in which he was wounded and his brother killed), Neoplatonism, and literary theory.

In the *Proemio*, a prologue, Lorenzo addresses three possible objections to the work. The first is the inappropriateness of his commenting on his own poems. Lorenzo responds that the poet is in the best position to analyze his own verses. A second criticism might be that love is a topic unworthy of Lorenzo. Here Lorenzo offers a Neoplatonic defense of love: love leads to