

THE POLITICAL VISION OF THE
DIVINE COMEDY

JOSEPH M. FERRARE

ALBANY

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of the
Divine Comedy

Joan M. Ferrante

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FOR MY PARENTS,
who taught me to love Dante
and to honor his long struggle

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THE POLITICAL VISION OF THE
DIVINE COMEDY

INTRODUCTION

Political Theory and Controversy

THE *Divine Comedy* purports to be a description of the state of souls after death. So Dante describes it in his dedicatory letter to Can Grande. But this refers only to its literal sense; allegorically, the subject is man as he, by the exercise of his free will, merits reward or punishment. Dante's focus is on men's actions and their responsibility for them. Thus, though the setting of the poem is the three realms of the other-world, and though almost all the characters are dead, there is a persistent concern throughout the work with what is going on on earth, not because of the punishments that might result in the next life, but because of the disruption being caused in this one. The most violent attacks are directed against corruption in the church and the secular state, and they are voiced through the highest regions of heaven. Far more attention is given to public issues and their effects on society than to personal moral questions, the assumption being that personal morality is virtually impossible within a corrupt society. It is obvious from the poem that Dante, whose political career was cut off by false accusations and condemnation to death, who was forced into exile from his own city but not from the political situation which had troubled it, continues to be concerned with political issues throughout his life and throughout his works.

The political issues of primary concern to Dante fall into three large categories: the individual and society, city and empire, the church and the secular state. These were major topics for philosophical discussion and political controversy in his time, and they occupied him in one form or another in the *Convivio*, the *Monarchy*, the letters, and the *Comedy*. Like

the *Monarchy*, the *Comedy* is a political tract, although it is also much more, and both occupy, or should, a position in the church-state polemic of the early fourteenth century. The purpose of this study is to analyze the political concepts expressed in the *Comedy* in relation to contemporary history and theory, and to define the political message(s) of the poem. This is offered as one perspective on an unusually complex and multifaceted work. It is not meant to deny the importance of other aspects—religious, aesthetic, philosophical, cultural, allegorical—but rather to emphasize one that was far more important to Dante than it has been to many modern critics.

Among those writers who do discuss the political side of the *Comedy*, there is some disagreement about its relation to Dante's other political works. Some critics see a change from the *Monarchy* toward a more religious orientation in the *Comedy*, though they do not deny the political side of the poem. A. P. d'Entrèves says that Dante deliberately subordinates politics to religion in the *Comedy*, that Rome's mission was to provide the seat for the church; but he also notes that the *Comedy* is as much a political as a religious poem, and that for Dante religion involved changing this world.¹ Jacques Goudet states uncompromisingly that the politics of the *Comedy* does not continue from the *Monarchy*, that Dante's reasons for being a monarchist are quite different, and that the *Comedy* has a fundamental religious orientation; but since the shift lies in the empire's taking on the reformation of

¹A. P. d'Entrèves, *Dante as a Political Thinker* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), 62–66. Paolo Brezzi, in "Il Pensiero politico di Dante," *Dante*, ed. Umberto Parricchi (Rome: De Luca, 1965), 149–58, notes that Dante gives greater importance to the church and ecclesiastical problems in the *Comedy* than he had in the *Monarchy*, but also that he did not give up the empire as the guarantor of justice in the world, or the independence of the two powers and the parallelism of the two ends of man. A. Chiavacci-Leonardi believes that the earthly end is clearly subordinate to "the other" in the *Comedy*, but the theses of the *Comedy* are the same as those of the *Monarchy*, perhaps because in order to achieve the perfect earthly order, one has to base it on something absolute beyond the earth, "La *Monarchia* di Dante alla luce della *Commedia*," *Studi medievali* 18 (1977), 147–83, particularly 157–58, 164.

the church, in its assuming an active part in the economy of salvation, one could say that this mission gives the empire even greater scope than it had in the *Monarchy*.² Charles Davis does not take a position on the question in *Dante and the Idea of Rome*, though he notes that there is no contradiction between attitudes in the *Convivio* and *Monarchy* and those of the *Comedy*, even if there is a development, a difference in emphasis depending on a difference in subject. In a recent article, however, he argues for the essential connection between ecclesiastical poverty and the restoration of empire in the *Comedy*.³

Most critics who concern themselves with the subject emphasize the similarities in Dante's political views throughout his works. Francesco Mazzoni, in his introduction to an edition of the *Monarchy* and the political letters, proves the connections by juxtaposing specific passages in the *Convivio*, the letters, the *Monarchy*, and the *Comedy*.⁴ Like Mazzoni, Felice Battaglia draws on all of Dante's political works to make his points, assuming a continuity of vision in them.⁵ Arrigo Solmi says quite explicitly that there is nothing new in the *Comedy*, that Dante's political program, from his acts as a council member and his philosophical works, to his concep-

²Jacques Goudet, *Dante et la Politique* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1969), 8-9, 147.

³Charles T. Davis, "Poverty and Eschatology in the *Commedia*," *Yearbook of Italian Studies* 4 (1980), 59-86. In *Dante and the Idea of Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), Davis emphasizes the unity in Dante's ideas of Rome, the ancient city, the Christian empire, and the papal see. In "Dante's Vision of History," *Dante Studies* 93 (1975), 143-60, Davis traces Dante's belief in the providential pattern through history, and suggests that the *veltro* of the *Comedy* is to be a secular ruler, a precursor of Christ's second coming, as Augustus was of the first.

⁴Francesco Mazzoni, "Teoresi e prassi in Dante politico," in Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia, Epistole politiche*, ed. Francesco Mazzoni (Turin: ERI, 1966). Mazzoni dates the *Monarchy* 1314, after the deaths of Henry and Clement, which allows greater scope in interpreting the political prophecies of the *Comedy*; if the *Monarchy* was completed after Henry's death, Dante must still have believed in the possibility of, or at least need for, a secular leader.

⁵Felice Battaglia, *Impero, Chiesa, e Stati particolari nel pensiero di Dante* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1944).

tion of the *Comedy* or the *Monarchy*, are one "compact structure."⁶ Recently, George Holmes has written, "The main political conclusions of *Monarchia*—the necessity for a universal Roman Empire and a Church without money or jurisdiction—are entirely in agreement with the views expressed in the *Commedia*."⁷

Etienne Gilson does not address the question directly, but he points out that even in the *Convivio*, Dante derives imperial authority immediately from God and secularizes the church's ideal of universal Christendom, though the state, however independent of the church, is never independent of God. Gilson also notes that the Christian God of Dante is interested at least as much in protecting the empire from the church as the church from the empire.⁸ Similarly, Ernst Kantorowicz, as he demonstrates the working out in the Earthly Paradise of the goals posited in the last chapter of the *Monarchy*, and the man-centered concept of kingship throughout the *Comedy*, argues implicitly for the continuity of thought between the two works.⁹ A number of other critics primarily concerned with the *Comedy* rather than with the strictly political works

⁶Arrigo Solmi, "Stato e Chiesa nel pensiero di Dante," *Archivio Storico Italiano* s. 6, 79 (1921), 59: "Sicchè il programma politico dell'Alighieri, dagli atti della sua vita civile come membro dei consigli e dell'amministrazione della sua patria, alla sua prima opera filosofica, alla concezione della *Commedia* o della *Monarchia*, si presenta come una compatta struttura."

⁷George Holmes, "Dante and the Popes," *The World of Dante*, ed. Cecil Grayson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980). He goes on to say: "The Dominican defender of the papacy, Guido Vernani, who wrote a rebuttal of *Monarchia* about 1330, was entirely justified in saying that Dante undermined orthodox views not only by that book but also by the 'poetic figments and fantasies' and the 'sweet siren songs' of the *Commedia*."

⁸Etienne Gilson, *Dante and Philosophy*, trans. David Moore (1949; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 147, 166, 301, 307. Gilson does say that the essential postulate of Dante's thesis is simply "that natural reason is perfectly competent to confer on man earthly felicity in the sphere of action. This sphere of action is the sphere of politics, together with its *sine qua non*, the sphere of ethics. I cannot see that Dante ever said anything else: he hardly stopped repeating this between the beginning of the Banquet and the Divine Comedy" (304).

⁹Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1957), chapter 8.

emphasize Dante's concerns for this world in the poem: Erich Auerbach, Allan Gilbert, Dorothy Sayers, Marjorie Reeves, Karl Maurer, and most recently, E. L. Fortin.¹⁰

I hope to show in the course of this study that the political views of the *Comedy* are indeed consistent with those of the *Monarchy*, but that by expressing them in poetry rather than in discursive prose, Dante is able to put them far more forcefully. As Antonio de Angelis puts it, "the *Comedy* is to the *Monarchy* what the proof is to the doctoral thesis."¹¹ Before

¹⁰Erich Auerbach, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (1929; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961; Allan Gilbert, *Dante and his Comedy* (New York: New York University, 1963). Dorothy Sayers, *Introductory Papers on Dante* (London: Methuen, 1954), describes Hell as Dante's picture of human society in a state of sin and corruption, Purgatory as the restoration of society that must come from within, and Paradise as the projection of the regenerate world (112 ff.). Marjorie Reeves, "Dante and the Prophetic View of History," *The World of Dante*, ed. Cecil Grayson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) focuses on the prophecies in the *Comedy*, which point to a secular savior: "I take the view that the *Commedia* is in many ways a this-worldly poem, still concerned with all that hinders the realization of the earthly beatitude, as well as with the soul's pilgrimage towards the heavenly beatitude" (51). Karl Maurer, "Dante als politischer Dichter," *Poetica* 7 (1975) 158-88, commenting on the *Comedy*, says there is no doubt that Dante looks for the victory of a strong German emperor or his vicar, the return of the pope to Rome, the separation of church and state, and the union of Italian cities under the empire (179). E. L. Fortin, *Dissidence et philosophie au moyen âge*, *Cahiers d'études médiévales*, no. 6 (Montreal: Bellarmin, 1981), suggests that the political message of the *Comedy* is paramount, that Dante exalts the empire and philosophy over the church and religion, but that the message is hidden and can only be reached through acrostics and complex allegorical interpretations.

¹¹Antonio de Angelis, *Il concetto d'Imperium e la comunità soprannazionale in Dante* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1965), 183. Cf. U. Limentani, "Dante's Political Thought," *The Mind of Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1965), where Limentani suggests the *Monarchy* deals scientifically with one aspect of mankind's pilgrimage on earth, the *Comedy* deals poetically with the whole (130). Limentani also says that Dante does not alter his views in the *Comedy*, that the *Monarchy* focuses on the regeneration of the empire, the *Comedy* on the regeneration of the empire and the church (129). Bruno Nardi, who thought the *Monarchy* was written before the *Inferno*, comments that the passion which pervaded the *Monarchy* erupts in an impetuous torrent of poetry in the *Comedy*, which transforms it into a lucid prophetic vision, "Il concetto dell' Impero nello svolgimento del pensiero dantesco," *Saggi di filosofia dantesca* (1930; 2nd rev. ed., Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1967), 274.

turning to the *Comedy*, however, I would like to trace briefly the major political issues of concern to Dante as they were treated by more or less contemporary writers whose ideas he most probably knew. Dante's views of government reflect both the influence of Aristotle's *Politics* on thirteenth-century philosophers and the contemporary political situation in northern Italy and western Europe. The practical reality Dante saw was the independent city-state, torn by factions within, pressed by papal and imperial claims from without, but nonetheless an economic and political force to be reckoned with. The theory he learned in his studies presented the state as a natural extension of the individual, a necessity not only for survival, but for peace and well-being. The basic political unit, in reality as well as in theory, was the city. The problem was to find a way to preserve the city as the essential unit and, at the same time, to ensure peace and prosperity to all citizens. This could be accomplished only by placing the smaller unit under the protective jurisdiction of a ruler who could mediate between warring parties and control them; for Dante that was the emperor, for papalists, the pope. Dante does not really discuss the problem of independent kingdoms, which had more practical power in his time than the empire; theoretically for him they are simply larger forms of the city-state, vulnerable to the same destructive forces and therefore in need of the same universal protector.

In the *Monarchy*, 1.5 and 6, Dante says that kingdoms and cities have the same ends, though the kingdom has a stronger bond of peace, and therefore the same need for a governing authority; but all cities and kingdoms must be subordinate to the rule of the single monarch, the emperor, in order for mankind as a whole to achieve its goal. In the *Comedy*, Dante does mention specific kings and kingdoms, but only to criticize particular abuses of power (see chapter one).¹² The papacy, of

¹²B. H. Sumner, "Dante and the *Regnum Italicum*," *Medium Aevum* 1 (1932), 2-23, notes that Dante rarely speaks about the *regnum*, never uses *regnum italicum* in his writings, and frequently attacks the *regnum* he knew best, the French.

course, claimed universal jurisdiction by virtue of the unity of Christendom, a claim that was opposed both by the empire and by the French monarchy, which also contested the supremacy of the empire in the secular sphere. Although Dante's sympathies are entirely with the empire—indeed, for him the French monarchy presents as serious a threat to peace as the church and is as fiercely condemned in the *Comedy*—the arguments put forth by the French apologists are probably more influential in his thinking than imperial propaganda, but he twists them to support the empire as the only secular authority with a claim to universal jurisdiction. The *Comedy* can in fact be seen as Dante's final word on the controversy between the papacy and the secular powers, where all the arguments and analogies of the historical conflict are translated into potent poetic images (see chapter two).

The positive attitude towards the secular state, prevalent among political theorists of Dante's period, is a significant shift from the earlier Augustinian view that secular authority was based on force and that government was a remedy for and necessitated by man's fallen state. Moerbecke's translation of Aristotle's *Politics* (c. 1259) made available to western Europe a very different position, much more congenial to the expanding states of the north Italian cities and western European kingdoms. Although, as Gaines Post has shown, there are indications that society and the state are natural institutions for twelfth-century writers, particularly John of Salisbury, and these views were available in Latin writers such as Cicero, in Chalcidius's version of the *Timaeus*, and in Roman law, it is nonetheless Aristotle's *Politics* which gives the solid theoretical support to secular government as a moral entity and an essential part of human life.¹³ Aristotle emphasized the social-political nature of man: that he, alone among animals, has speech means he is supposed to communicate, to associate with his fellows; he is related to them as a part to the whole, and

¹³Gaines Post, *Studies in Medieval Legal Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1964), particularly 291, 301, 496–519. For the use of the word "state" in the medieval context, see below, fn. 21.

the whole can offer him the best setting for a happy life. It can provide him with both necessities and knowledge, which will enable him to pursue virtue, the basis of happiness. In return, he owes the community his support, his obedience and virtuous action. In other words, it is natural to man as a human being, not as a sinful creature, to live in society with others, and it is advantageous to him to do so, not just physically but morally. The state is a community that exists for the good of its citizens, to maintain order and administer justice.

Thomas Aquinas, a central figure in Dante's *Paradise*, is probably the most important Christian disciple of Aristotle for Dante.¹⁴ Thomas makes it clear that man is intended by his very nature to depend on his fellows: if he were meant to live alone, reason would suffice for his needs as instinct does for animals, but it does not. What nature gave other animals (covering, defense), man has to procure by his reason (clothing, weapons), which he cannot do entirely for himself; man therefore needs the help and knowledge of others, not only for his physical needs, but for stimulation to good and restraint from evil.¹⁵ Man needs the help of other men in order to attain his

¹⁴Albertus Magnus, Thomas's teacher, whom Dante places next to Thomas in the circle of the sun, also commented on the *Politics*, and Siger, who appears on the other side of Thomas, was believed to have written on it as well, though no evidence of the work remains. See Martin Grabmann, "Die mittelalterlichen Kommentare zur Politik des Aristoteles," *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Munich (1941²), 24. Jeremy Catto, "Ideas and Experience in the Political Thought of Aquinas," *Past and Present* 71 (1976), 3–21, suggests that Albert's teaching on friendship and on societies had political implications which Thomas drew out.

¹⁵These remarks are based on the *De regno* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*, henceforth cited as ScG; the *Summa Theologiae* will be cited as ST in the text. On man's need for the help of his fellows, see Thomas's commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*In decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum expositio*, ed. Angelo Pirota [Taurini: Marietti, 1934]); the needs that the individual cannot furnish for himself he must get as part of a group, the necessities of life from the domestic group, the necessities of living well from the civic group. I used the *Opera omnia iussu impensaque Leonis XIII* (Rome, 1882–1899) for the major Latin texts and consulted the following translations: for the *De Regno*, "On Kingship to the King of Cyprus," trans. Gerald B. Phelan, rev. Thomas Eschmann (1949; reprint, Toronto: Pontifical Institute, 1967); for