

Commedia and dualism



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A number of overlying themes have persisted throughout the three canticles of Dante's *Commedia*. The politically charged and spiritually passionate Florentine elegantly laced into his masterpiece general topics – affairs of state, religion, and human nature – and expressed them thematically from the deepest trenches of the *Inferno* to the loftiest celestial bodies of *Paradiso*. One such theme that has resonated throughout Dante's work is the idea of dualism. Dante focuses on the dual nature of man throughout the *Commedia*, stressing the idea that he put forth in *Monarchy* that “man alone among created beings is the link between corruptible and incorruptible thing; and thus he is rightly compared by philosophers to the horizon, which is the link between the two hemispheres” (91). Dante, as an active member of the Florentine assembly before his exile and as a devout man dedicated to God, also emphasized the synthesis of and struggle between Church and Empire. Dante acknowledged Church and Empire as two equal and distinct faculties of God manifested in two different forms on earth. This duality of roles is deeply explored and intensely critiqued by Dante throughout the *Commedia*. Dante's means of expressing the duality of man, Church and state are not always clear; however, his point is quite lucid – all mankind is split between the divine and the terrestrial; thus, any creation of man, i. e. the hierarchy of worship and the offices of government, must also represent this duality. Anything that is controlled by man must reflect his internal struggle between corporal and divine. The duality of Church officials is apparent in canto XIX of *Inferno*. Dante visits the *bolgia* of the Simonists, people who paid for pardons and positions in the Church. Here, Dante finds the sinners hung from their feet into holes in the ground with flames coming from their soles. Dante approaches the soul “that writhes in his torment more than any of his

fellows and is licked by a redder flame” (239), who he finds out is the soul of Pope Nicholas III. Nicholas, when Dante approaches him, cries ““ Standest thou there already, standest thou there already, Boniface?” (239). The voice coming up through this fiery hole in the trenches of hell is only surprised by the fact that Boniface has arrived three years before he was expected to do so (Boniface died in 1303). Dante makes it explicit that “ the fate of the great Pope [is] a thing not so much asserted as determined and beyond question” (Sinclair, 244). Nicholas was Boniface’s predecessor in the Church and began the “ crescendo of iniquity” (Sinclair, 244) that characterized the terms of Nicholas, Boniface, and Pope Clement V. Nicholas began the downward spiral of Church moral practice; however, Boniface took the foul practices further. Boniface was “ a worldly, unscrupulous and powerful ecclesiastic, and incidentally the corrupter of the public life of Florence and the cause of Dante’s exile” (Sinclair, 244). Thus, when Nicholas thought Dante to be Boniface, Dante “ became like those that stand as if mocked, not comprehending the reply made to them, and know not what to answer” (239). It is an interesting contradiction for someone as devout as Dante to be offended when being mistaken for a Pope; however, this is exactly the type of satiric duality that Dante is intending to present. Dante is so much more pious than Pope Boniface, despite the latter’s prominent position in the Church, that likening the two is an insult to Dante. Dante clearly articulates his feelings on the duality of human nature in Purgatorio, when he puts forth his concept of the “ Little Simple Soul” and how it is compromised in humans. Dante contends, “ The heavens initiate your impulses... To a greater power and to a better nature you, free, are subject, and that creates the mind in you which the heavens have not in their charge” (213). Here,

Dante is quite explicit about the duality of man in soul and mind. He attests that God gives man the materials – the impulses – of the human consciousness, i. e. the soul, but it is up to man's own free will to allow that soul to guide him in earthly matters. In the following passage, Dante goes further to say “ From His hand who regards it fondly before it is, comes forth, like a child that sports, tearful and smiling, the little simple soul, that knows nothing, but, moved by a joyful Maker, turns eagerly to what delights it” (213). Dante's metaphor is based on desire, a human emotion that is at the base of consciousness, yet he is applying the metaphor to an intangible of the heavens – the soul. This subtle duality is clearly intentional because Dante is then poised to enter into a fiery discussion on the natural duality of a specific human – Pope Boniface VII. Just as the “ little simple soul” can be compared to a child, the Pope and Emperor can be mirrored as shepherds who direct their “ children” in “ social and spiritual order” (Sinclair, 218). With two equally powerful shepherds, one from the Church and one from the State, the little simple soul should be led down the right path. However, “ when the power becomes unbalanced, thou canst see plainly that ill-guiding is the cause that has made the world wicked” (213). Dante has given himself the perfect opportunity to attack the duality of Pope Boniface VII and the direction in which he was taking the Papacy in the late 13th century. Dante had a personal vendetta with Pope Boniface, a man Dante partially blames for his exile, and makes it clear in the *Inferno* that he blamed the Pope for the corruption that was rampant in the Church. Dante, as a member of the more moderate White Guelph party in Florence, was sent on a mission to Pope Boniface in 1301 to plead that he cease interfering in affairs of the State, especially the Pope's latest expansion policy, which Dante explicitly

condemned. Back in Florence, however, the papal supremacist Black Guelphs defeated the White Guelphs and, thus, Dante was severely persecuted and sentenced to exile for his disloyalty to the Pope. The overlying personal duality of Pope Boniface is unique because it is a struggle between the divine and the temporal manifested as a struggle between duty and greed. Pope Boniface, though the Church was his given realm, made himself into a dominant political force that was bent on having all of Italy under his jurisdiction. Pope Boniface's duality showcased the weakness of human nature and how any human, even one who is expected to be at the pinnacle of his field, cannot be a true representative of divine faculty. Pope Boniface was characteristic of the tragic flaw that is omnipresent in any office held by man. Beyond the personal dualism of one Pope, there was a great deal of institutional dualism in the Church itself. Strikingly, Pope Adrien V in canto XIX in *Purgatorio* says, "' when I was made Roman Shepherd I discovered how lying is life'" (XIX: 106-107, p251). The Pope, the veritable " spouse" of the Church, is the last person who should utter such a phrase; however, it was the nature of the corrupt Church to necessitate habitual lying and deceit. In a short soliloquy by Adrien, Dante includes Christ's words from the Scriptures, "' Neque unbent,'" which is a reference to the Gospel of Matthew, when Christ said: "'[In the Resurrection] they neither marry nor are given in marriage'" (251). By using the Latin translation, Dante is placing a special emphasis on the phrase; by using the formal language of the Church and not translating the phrase into the " vulgari" in which he writes, Dante is stressing the unadulterated sincerity of Christ's words and the hierarchy of their importance. Dante's words in the *Commedia* are speculation and largely fictional, and, therefore, are appropriately written in

the crude language of the common man. Christ's words, on the other hand, are the divine truth and should be treated with greater linguistic reverence. However, they can be used in the context of Dante's vernacular because Christ was divine and human, typifying the juxtaposition of these two natures, which is reflected in Dante's choice of quotation and language. More important than the words, however, are their meanings. In the previous passage, Dante kneels to Pope Adrien to pay him reverence. "' What cause' he said ' has bent thee down thus?' And I said to him: ' Because of your dignity my conscience stung me, standing erect'" (251). Adrien, by referencing Christ in his response, is devaluing his earthly status as " spouse" of the Church, because, in the resurrection, marriage, like any other such earthly ties, does not transcend into the afterworld. Dante is proving that the status and prestige of earthly Church officials holds no weight beyond the temporal office. Despite the fact that the Church on earth is supposed to be a terrestrial representation of the heavenly, it was at the hands of some very dishonest figures. Pope Adrien even admits that "' avarice quenched all our love of good so that our labors were vain,'" but, despite his Church rank on earth, in Purgatory "' now, as thou seest, I am here punished for [avariciousness]... so justice here holds us fast, seized and bound in feet and hands, and as long as it shall please the righteous Lord so long shall we stay motionless and outstretched'" (251). Dante makes the important moral point that the justice of the Lord is inescapable and is based on personal conduct, not on artificial titles. The Church was an imperfect establishment because its mission to serve God and spread the Word of the Lord on earth was tainted by power-hungry and selfish clergy members. This dualism of the Church was recognized and satirized by Dante, who, through

his use of Pope Adrien V, made a strong argument for divine justice. Dante continues with the theme of duality in reference to Rome, the center of the Empire. In Paradiso, Dante encounters Justinian, the first Christian Emperor, who identifies himself as “ I was Caesar and am Justinian” (87). This simple but striking duality is indicative of the broader attitude of Dante concerning Rome as a link between paradise and the world. When Dante enters the sphere of Mercury in Canto V, directly before he is introduced to Justinian, Beatrice tells Dante ““ Speak, speak with confidence, and trust them even as gods.’” (81). Implicitly, Dante is stressing “ the divine authority of the Empire that Justinian is to speak, of God’s making, through its victorious history, of an earthly order in which men may find their public justice and peace” (Sinclair, 95). Dante is putting forth his idea that the glory of the Empire is a direct reflection of God’s divine plan for mankind. In the opening of canto VI in Purgatorio, Dante references Emperor Constantine and his moving of the seat of the Empire from Rome to Constantinople in the following manner: “ After Constantine turned back the Eagle against the course of heaven which it had followed behind him of old that took Lavinia to wife...” (87). The Eagle is a common metaphor for God that Dante uses often throughout the Commedia; thus, turning the Eagle “ against heaven” is an explicit commentary on Dante’s disapproval for Constantine’s attempted movement of the center of the Empire. The remainder of the passage, “ him of old that took Lavinia to wife,” is a reference to Aeneas, the divinely directed founder of Rome. Dante clearly objects to the attempted move because he believes that Rome was chosen by God to be the center of the great Empire. Overall, the dualism of the Holy Roman Empire is accentuated throughout these early cantos in Purgatorio; Dante uses a Christian Emperor as his mouthpiece for

this canto as a means of propagating his belief that the Empire, though it has a secular purpose, is of divine origin. Like the earthly Church and like the “little simple soul” at the base of humanity, the Empire is a necessary element of ordered life. Dante related Roman Law to the chosen people of Palestine in that both groups were divinely temporal. Accordingly, this idea complements Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in that it stresses the Godly origins of Rome. Thus, “the Emperor was an almost sacerdotal figure, who had been anointed by the grace of God to rule over the Christian people and to guide and protect the world...” (Sinclair, 98). Dante even goes so far as to liken the Roman emperor to Christ when Beatrice, in *Purgatorio*, says, “‘Here thou shalt be a little while a forester, and shalt be with me forever a citizen of that Rome of which Christ is Roman!’” (423). This passage follows the conclusion of the pageant, when the participants gathered around “the great tree” – a symbol for the natural law under which Adam and Eve were to live, “the ordinance to which they were freely to consent, in a word, their righteousness” (Sinclair, 430). Sinclair argues that this righteousness is manifested on earth as unity under one Empire; thus, all people are connected under the Empire through their innate sense of righteousness that was imprinted upon them by God. In this manner, Dante indirectly addresses the dual nature of Christ – to be man and divine. Dante, in *Paradiso*, puts forth the idea that the Empire and the heavens are eternally linked because Christ, by becoming man, “acknowledged the authority of the Empire” (Sinclair, 114) and represented “the perfected human order of Church and Empire” (Sinclair, 430). However, just as Dante proved with his commentary on Pope Boniface and the Church, any office of man is imperfect. The Empire, though subject to great praise by Dante, was the source of great

antagonizing. The crucifixion of Christ, done at the hand of the Empire, is proof that the Empire of man is a flawed system; however, had the Empire not crucified Him, would there have been the Resurrection to save us from our sins? Fittingly, Beatrice, in canto VII of *Paradiso*, discusses redemption with Dante, stressing “the nature that was separated from its Maker He united with Himself in His own person by sole act of His Eternal Love. Now direct thy sight on what follows from that. This nature, thus united to its Maker, was pure and good, even as it was created; yet in itself, by its own act, it was banned from Paradise because it turned aside from the way of truth and from its life” (105). Dante presents an empirical conundrum that he cannot solve; instead, he looks to Beatrice and her divine wisdom. Beatrice relates the flaws of the Empire back to the flaws of man, proving once again that the duality of the Empire’s conflicting origin and actions are a result of it being an agency of man. Dante, in his *Commedia*, was not shy about passing his judgment on contemporary people and their roles in earthly offices. However, Dante also recognized that duality among men is universal due to the fact that it is of the exact nature of man to try to synthesize their lives and spirits, which can seem quite incompatible at times. Dante saw this dual nature as so essential to man and to everything which man creates because it is a distinguishing factor of earthly office that is representative of the fall of humanity and why man cannot achieve the perfection of the Christ.