

Heather Sottong

**Bartolomé Mitre's Translation of the *Divine Comedy*:
An Anti-*Martín Fierro***

Abstract: Bartolomé Mitre, President of Argentina from 1862–1868, was also the first Argentine translator of Dante. He translated the *Divine Comedy*, a nation-building, foundational text within Italy, with the intention of adopting it to similar ends in Argentina. The present article discusses how Mitre's translation of the *Divine Comedy* can be considered a counter operation to the aesthetic and thematic tendencies and social message promoted by José Hernández, Mitre's political adversary and author of what is today considered Argentina's greatest epic—*Martín Fierro* (1872). Mitre's decision to fill what he perceived as a "cultural void" with translations of classics from Old World Europe was a means of negating the importance of the local literary production that ran counter to his Eurocentric vision of a post-Independence, progressive Argentina.

Keywords: Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, nation building, Argentine literature, Bartolomé Mitre, translation, José Hernández, *Martín Fierro*.

Si Italia tiene su *Divina Comedia*, España su Quijote, Alemania su Fausto, la República Argentina tiene su *Martín Fierro*.

(Just as Italy has its *Divine Comedy*, Spain its *Don Quixote*, and Germany its *Faust*, Argentina has its *Martín Fierro*.)

(Pablo Subieta, online)

Introduction

José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* has long been considered Argentina's most prized literary classic. Upon its publication in 1872, it enjoyed immediate and popular success. Within two years of publication, it had been printed nine times.¹ It was sold in rural *pulperías* and read aloud at public gatherings in the countryside. Many Argentine intellectuals, most notably Leopoldo Lugones (1874–1938), would later uphold the work as the greatest reflection of Argentine national identity. In his 1913 lectures, Lugones declared the work to be the epic of Argentina, comparable to Italy's *Divine Comedy* or Spain's *Don Quixote*.²

It is interesting to note, then, that Bartolomé Mitre, a contemporary of Hernández who was fully aware of the book's popular success, chose not to mention it when asked about the state of Argentine literature. In 1887, Señor don Miguel M. Ruíz wrote to Mitre to ask about the possibility of establishing a course

¹ *Concise Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature* 304.

² Although Lugones insists that *Martín Fierro* is an epic (as cited in Sava 52), the work's genre is debatable. For example, Jorge Luis Borges, among others, throughout his own *El "Martín Fierro,"* described it as a verse novel more than an epic.