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“LE NOTE DI QUESTA COMEDIA”:  
MUSIC AND METAPOESIS IN *INFERNO* 16

**Abstract:** At the end of *Inferno* 16, prefacing the arrival of the monster Geryon, Dante-author swears an oath “per le note / di questa comedia” that his poem is a truthful record of what he saw. While many critics have discussed the metapoetic implications of the episode, few have paid more than passing attention to the actual medium on (and through) which the oath is made: not just “questa comedia,” but in fact “*le note* / di questa comedia.” In this article I reconstruct the semantic breadth which the term “nota” would have held for Dante’s early readers, most significantly within the context of theoretical discussions of musically performed vernacular poetry. I propose reasons for the term’s neglect in critical discussions of *Inferno* 16 and elsewhere in the *Commedia*, and I end by considering what is gained by reintroducing the musical resonances of the term to a reading of Dante’s text.  
**Keywords:** Dante, Geryon, nota, polysemy, music, metapoesis, divorce hypothesis.

**1. Introduction: Dante’s Poetic Oath**

In the closing lines of *Inferno* 16, on the precipice of the circle of violence, Virgil announces the arrival of Geryon, the winged beast on whose back the pilgrim and his guide descend to the eighth circle:

El disse a me: “Tosto verrà di sovra  
ciò ch’io attendo e che il tuo pensier sogna;  
tosto convien ch’al tuo viso si scovra.”<sup>1</sup>

(*Inf.* 16.121-23)

With the face of an honest man (“faccia [...] d’uom giusto,” *Inf.* 17.10), a scorpion’s tail (“la venenosa forca / ch’a guisa di scorpion la punta armava,” *Inf.* 17.26-27), hairy paws (“due branche [...] pilose insin l’ascelle,” *Inf.* 17.13), and the body of a serpent (“d’un serpente tutto l’altro fusto,” *Inf.* 17.12), Geryon is a hybrid, mythical creature whose dramatic appearance in the *Commedia* has elicited a wide range of allegorical readings over the centuries. For Dante’s earliest readers and commentators, Geryon—“quella sozza imagine di froda” (*Inf.* 17.7)—invariably represented fraud, the general category of sin punished in the eighth circle. Jacopo della Lana, for example, writing in c. 1324-28, glosses him

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the *Commedia* are taken from *La commedia secondo l’antica vulgata*, edited by Giorgio Petrocchi.