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THE SUFFERING EMPIRE AND THE SUFFERING CHRIST
IN DANTE'S *INFERNO*

Abstract: The presence of imperial themes in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* has been well recognized, but it has long been asserted that Dante's *Inferno* is almost devoid of references to the Empire. This essay argues that imperial references, although muted by the dystopian climate of Hell, are found not just at the beginning of the cantica, as is well known, but also at its end, and at several crucial episodes in between, where they are associated with significant references to Christ. In *Inferno* 3-9 Virgil's formula for obtaining safe-passage resonates with Dante's phraseology for imperial prerogatives in the *Epistles*, where Henry VII is likened to Christ; in *Inferno* 12, the reference to the murder of Henry of Almayne, the innocent son of the emperor-elect Richard of Cornwall, is linked to Virgil's recall of the earthquake at Christ's death; the attack on the Sanhedrin and the *Frati gaudenti* in *Inferno* 23 echoes the imperial missive to Gregory IX comparing the papal curia to the high priests that condemned Christ; finally, the *contrapasso* visited on Bertran de Born, whose lament parodies that of Christ during the Easter liturgy, summarizes the imagery of division in the exordium, which concludes with reference to the decapitation of Conradin of Hohenstaufen and the extinction of imperial influence in Italy.

Keywords: empire, emperor, *recalcitrare*, centaur, *grembo*, heart, Mass, Christ, *crocifisso*, *concilio*, Pharisees, Papacy, Lamentations, schism, civil and canon law.

Introduction

Few would dispute the central importance of the Roman Empire in Dante's conception of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.¹ In the second cantica Dante argues the necessity of laws to regulate human behavior, which means the necessity of the Empire, and of the Emperor, the "cavalcatore de la umana volontade" (*Conv.* 4.9.10), for only imperial authority can pacify the civil conflict that has ravaged Italy. Thus in *Purgatorio* 6.73-142, during the sole extradiegetic authorial digression in the poem, Italy, because lacking an Emperor, is a rudderless ship,² while in *Purgatorio* 16, near the center of the whole *Commedia*, Marco Lombardo deplores the same absence of direction due to the imperial vacancy ("le leggi son, ma chi pon mano ad essi?," 16.97), and posits the need for a just state to direct the human will ("convenne legge per fren porre," 16.94)—which direction is the

¹ For comprehensive accounts, see Ferrante 44-75; Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory* 3-60.

² A comparison of Italy without a *nocchiero*, without an Emperor, to the ship of Aeneas—in effect an Ark carrying the future of Rome—deprived of its steersman, Palinurus, is variously explored in *Purgatorio* 1-6 (see Additional Note 4 in Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, ed. Durling and Martinez 597-600).