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Author(s): Christie L. Maloyed and Mary Elizabeth Sullivan

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Dante's *Monarchia* as Political Satire

Christie L. Maloyed

University of Louisiana-Lafayette

Mary Elizabeth Sullivan

University of Central Arkansas

Dante is often portrayed as a theorist who is deeply concerned with the virtues, especially justice, yet, Dante's most overtly political work, Monarchia, contains no real discussion of justice as a virtue. In fact, his description of political justice - giving all power and all material goods to a single individual to enable him to rule justly without greed - is both bizarre and at odds with the notion of Aristotelian political virtue, which he employed in his other works. Most scholars have ignored or dismissed this discrepancy and claim Monarchia can fit comfortably with Dante's oeuvre. We propose that Monarchia be read as a political satire. Understood in this manner, Dante's aim was not to advocate an absolutist world monarchy, but rather to parody the papacy's claims to absolute power by presenting parallel and exaggerated versions of arguments being promulgated by papalist thinkers of the time.

Introduction

Through his widely varied works, Dante Alighieri expresses a deep concern with what is required to live a virtuous life. Perhaps, above all, Dante's epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, demonstrates a near obsession with the virtues and vices and particularly with the supreme political virtue – justice. Furthermore, his understanding of the virtues and justice is not simply theological but also rooted in a classical understanding of virtue. In particular, his discussions in the *Convivio* show a clear understanding of the Aristotelian notion of the virtues as expressed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Several scholars have noted Dante's concern with justice and argued that it forms the foundation for all his political thought. Despite this overarching attention to justice, however, Dante's most overtly political work, *Monarchia*, lacks a general concern with the virtues and also lacks a description of justice that bears resemblance to the Aristotelian virtue depicted in his other philosophical work, the *Convivio*. Moreover, most Dante scholars seem to have completely ignored this discrepancy.

Book I of *Monarchia* makes the argument that justice will be best served under an all-powerful world monarch; however, the reasoning Dante gives is largely at odds with an Aristotelian notion of justice. Among other claims, Dante contends that the monarch will be perfectly just because he will be

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immune from the vice of avarice; he will rightfully own everything in the world, so there will be no object for which he could possibly feel covetous (Dante, *Monarchia*, I.11.8-13). In fact, there is no need for the monarch to be properly educated in the virtues since he will be logically incapable of vice. This depiction of justice is so far from the political virtue described in the *Convivio* that one is left wondering whether Dante had abandoned his Aristotelian ethical commitments. In this paper we offer an alternative explanation for the unusual depiction of political justice found in *Monarchia*. We contend that *Monarchia*, and Book I in particular, was written as a political satire, parodying papalist claims to absolute authority, such as those of Giles of Rome. Thus, Book I of *Monarchia* should be read less as a serious proposal for a world government than as a rebuke of the pope's claims to absolute temporal authority. This interpretation allows Book I of *Monarchia* to support Dante's broader arguments against the papacy's encroachments in the political realm without having to suppose that he suddenly lost interest in Aristotelian political virtue.

Dante's Theory of Justice

Dante discusses the idea of justice at great length in his work, yet, for him, justice is not a single unified concept. In each of his major works he emphasizes different aspects of justice. In his magnum opus, the *Commedia* Dante emphasizes divine justice, with virtuous behavior defined in terms of Christian theology. Those who practice the virtues of faith, hope, and charity are blessed, while those who persist in breaking God's commandments are punished for their actions. In the *Commedia*, Dante's concern is the eternal and transcendent, whereas in the *Convivio* he is primarily concerned with earthly justice understood in Aristotelian terms.

Less well-known as it was unfinished and unpublished in his own lifetime, the *Convivio* is the most explicitly philosophical of Dante's works. Intended as an introductory text on philosophy for laymen, the manuscript is composed as a love story with Lady Philosophy as the object of Dante's affection. In Book IV of this work, the final completed book, Dante introduces readers to matters of politics and virtue with a specific focus on defining nobility. He rejects the idea that nobility is simply a matter of wealth and inheritance, and rather argues that nobility requires moral virtue. Drawing extensively from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Dante proceeds with a textbook description of Aristotle's moral virtues, outlines how vice is categorized by both shortfall and excess, and explains the role of habit in acquiring these virtues (Courage, Temperance, Liberality, Munificence,

Magnanimity, Honor, Gentleness, Affability, Truth, Good Disposition, and Justice) (Dante, *Convivio*, IV.17). Justice, he argues, is the foundation of both love and rectitude, and is a virtue typical of people who have reached a mature age. He further contends that what distinguished rulers in antiquity was that they had acquired justice, and he laments, it is absent from rulers during his own time (*Convivio*, IV.27). Hence, in the *Convivio*, Dante presents a thoroughly Aristotelian view of ethics, he considers the mastery of the moral virtues as necessary for a happy and noble life, and he believes that justice is especially necessary for good political leadership.

In the *Monarchia*, Dante develops a different idea of political justice. In Book I, he argues that justice is best served when all power is located in a single monarch who owns everything and has complete power to carry out his will. As such, Dante contends, the monarch will be free from cupidity and thus he will treat all citizens with love and generosity. Origins of this argument can be found in the *Convivio*, where in a short chapter (*Convivio*, IV. 4) Dante suggests that a monarch who possesses all things would not desire anything else and thus would be unlikely to make war with other kingdoms. In the *Convivio*, however, Dante spends the remainder of Book IV explaining the necessity of the Aristotelian virtues outlined above and stresses that these virtues are requisite to a happy and noble life. In the *Monarchia*, however, there is no such discussion of the Aristotelian virtues. While it would seem from the *Convivio* that a monarch would need a thorough education in the Aristotelian virtues in order to be a just ruler, in *Monarchia*, he need only be freed from avarice. Most scholars have taken Dante's proposal for an all-powerful world monarch in *Monarchia* as sincere albeit idealistic (Cassell 2004, 40).

Although Dante's use of the concept of justice is multifaceted, few scholars have fully appreciated the distinctions between divine, moral, and political justice in his work and the tension between his definitions of justice in the *Convivio* and *Monarchia*.¹ In fact, several have assumed a single coherent concept of justice, or even an overriding "theory of justice" that permeates Dante's work. One of the most notable of these scholars is Walter Ullmann, who argues that justice is the cornerstone of the universal monarchy in *Monarchia*:

¹ There is no conclusive answer to when *Monarchia* was completed. Cassel (2004, 23) places it between 1314 and 1318. See Cassel, *Monarchia Controversy*, 23. However, it was certainly written after the *Convivio*, which was composed between 1304 and 1308 (See Dante, *Convivio*, xiii [1940]).

The succinct term and notion of the *civilitas humana* expressed universal mankind in its natural, that is, baptismally unregenerated, state presided over by the universal monarch, who for Dante represented the abstract idea of justice and law... over and above the nations stands the universally valid idea of law and justice conceived in human terms, the custodian of which is the universal monarch (Ullmann 1977, 129).

Thus, according to Ullmann, Dante's political theory is built upon a universal conception of human justice, explicitly reaching beyond Christendom in its scope.

While Ullmann contends that Dante built his political theory on a strong conception of universal justice, Etienne Gilson takes this argument even further, explicitly connecting the discussions of the virtue of justice in the *Convivio* with the political justice of *Monarchia*:

Now Dante was not only acquainted with *Ethics ad Nichomachum*, but he treasured it... If, as all his work attests, Dante was animated by an ardent desire for justice and peace in the temporal sphere, it is understandable that this altogether admirable book, in which even St. Thomas's commentary with its Christian inspiration, the ideal of human temporal felicity secured entirely through the practice of the natural virtues was so clearly visible, was to him in a sense the Bible of the Lawgiver (Gilson 1949, 218).

Justice is, then, the driving force for Dante's political system. Moreover, according to Gilson's reading, the justice of *Monarchia* is the same justice presented in Aristotle's *Ethics*. Gilson thus reads a thoroughly Aristotelian conception of justice into Dante's political writing: "Aristotle's thought is so clear that even the Christian amendments of St. Thomas never prevent it from emerging" (219).

Similarly, C.T. Davis, deeply downplays the differences between Dante's works. For instance, he acknowledges that Dante is attentive to the role of the emperor as "the implementer and instiller of moral philosophy" in the *Convivio* (IV.4); however, Davis contends "if we look carefully at book I of *Monarchia*, we also find the emperor functioning in a moral role. But Dante describes this role very generally; there is no trace of the "mirror of princes" genre here (Davis 1997, 75). Even though Dante never explicitly refers to the Aristotelian virtues in *Monarchia*, nor does he suggest that the monarch needs to be educated in these virtues (as he does in Book IV of the *Convivio*),

Davis assumes that this argument for political justice does not differ in any important way from the *Convivio*. Michael Richter echoes this conclusion, arguing that the *Convivio* is “a work that otherwise, though in much less detail, shows many parallels to the *Monarchia* without any remarkable differences” (Richter 1981, 169).²

Even Ernst Kantorowicz, who does not argue for an explicitly Aristotelian reading of Dantean justice, still places justice at the heart of *Monarchia*. For Kantorowicz, Dante’s monarch is the embodiment of the political virtues, through which he guides mankind. He describes this monarch as, “admittedly a somewhat undefined and enigmatic personality, but undoubtedly meant to be a mirror of the *virtutes politicae*, a man owning all and desiring nothing and therefore capable at all times of actuating Justice as well as the other virtues” (Kantorowicz 1957, 472-73). Kantorowicz’s reading does recognize that the monarch’s justice is related to his “owning all and desiring nothing.” Yet, Kantorowicz still sees this monarch as a virtuous “philosopher-monarch” rather than simply a strong man who is logically incapable of acting unjustly.

In a similar vein, John A. Scott places justice at the heart of Dante’s political thought, emphasizing that Dante believed this justice to be attainable here on earth:

We must constantly bear in mind [Dante’s] belief that the earthly Paradise indicates a goal, a state of justice here and now, attainable by humanity on earth under the guidance of the Emperor... a goal that had in part been prepared for by the achievements of pagan Rome (Scott 1996, 184).

Scott emphasizes that while Dante always saw a role for religion in the political community, the justice of *Monarchia* is explicitly political and not theological. In the same vein, Barbara Carter has argued that the relationship between the world monarch and his subjects is rooted in the Christian conception of mutual obligation, such that “the common good is the criterion of justice” (Carter 1943, 349). While Dante certainly was influenced by Christian ideas of justice, both Scott and Carter fail to address the bizarre nature of political justice under Dante’s monarch. A.P. d’Entreves perhaps comes closest to acknowledging that the monarchy described by Dante is a

² Michael Richter does note differences between Book II of the *Monarchia* and the *Convivio*, specifically regarding Dante’s embrace of the classical Roman Empire as having God’s sanction, but these differences do not bear on our argument regarding Dante’s definition of political justice (1981, 169).

bit ridiculous, noting that “Dante was carried away by his enthusiasm. Under the stress of a tremendous emotion the Emperor had first appeared to him, in that now distant January of 1311, not only as a restorer of justice and peace, but as a new Messiah” (d’Entreves 1952, 51). However, rather than seeing this as strategic or tongue-in-cheek, d’Entreves writes off Dante’s inversion of political justice as mere enthusiasm.

Although varying in the strength of their claims, these authors all seem to be in agreement that justice is key to Dante’s political theory. However, despite the importance they afford to justice, none, with the possible exception of d’Entreves, discusses how unconventional the conception of political justice presented in *Monarchia* really is. Most seem to assume that the Aristotelian notion of justice as described in the *Convivio* permeates the rest of Dante’s work as well. The text of *Monarchia*, however, says something quite different. In this work, Dante never discusses Aristotelian ethics, nor does he argue that the monarch must be educated in the virtues in order to be a just ruler, even though he had done this explicitly in the *Convivio*. Rather than assume that Dante abandoned his previous commitment to Aristotelian ethics, we suggest that Dante’s description of universal monarchy is best understood as a satirical critique of papalist arguments. If his argument for an all-powerful monarch in *Monarchia* is read as a satire, then his discussion of political justice is no longer at odds with the emphasis on Aristotelian virtues found in the *Convivio*.

Dante and Medieval Satire

Although until recently satire as a genre in the Middle Ages had been largely dismissed, current scholarship has demonstrated that classical satire was studied, imitated, and expanded upon during this period. Satire was considered to have an educative effect both in terms of learning grammar and verse as well as moral instruction. As Vincent Gillespie has established, satire was taught during the Middle Ages following a basic introduction to grammar. This was done to teach students to be virtuous and avoid vice (Gillespie 2005, 223). The main classical satires encountered by the medieval reader were “Persius, Juvenal and, perhaps above all, Horace” (Gillespie 2005, 223-24).

Satire in the Middle Ages followed general norms in form and content, though these norms were not always strictly followed. In terms of form, medieval satires typically followed the classical tradition by most often being composed in verse and using similar literary devices to those employed by

Horace and Juvenal (Classen 1988, 113). However, as John Yunck (1961) has described in his work on medieval satires on Rome, there is evidence of satirical commentary in both verse and prose, and also in both Latin and the vernaculars. As far as content is concerned, this paper focuses on three norms of medieval satire. First, although the language of satire could often be crude or insulting, the primary intent of the work was typically some form of moral edification. As Gillespie explains, “[t]he common *materia* of satirists is vices, addressed either singly or as part of a survey of society. The common intent of the satirist is to reprehend vice and persuade or commend virtue either in a particular sub-group or in society at large” (Gillespie 2005, 226). As was the case with classical satires, the objects of these works usually made reference to actual people or historical events, and the subjects ranged from personal, social, religious, and political critiques. A new form of satire developed during the Middle Ages as well that focused less on specific ‘sinners’ and instead focused on more general problems or vices (Gillespie 2005, 227). Insults, parody, and profanity were utilized, but the aim was the restoration of a good social or ethical order. Satirists viewed themselves as holding the moral high ground, and the rough language being used was aimed at *benefitting* the target in the long run by correcting moral failings.

Related to this first norm, satire also focused on what was wrong with society. It identified faults, often with biting critique, and laid them bare for public viewing. Satire does not highlight heroes and good deeds but the corruption and villainy lurking in society. Harkening back to the first point, the satirist hopes that exposure of these moral failings will be the first step in bringing about their correction (Miller 1998). Although this could often take the form of highlighting physical corruption or decay, disease, or scatological humor, it also focused on moral failing, in particular, unnatural levels of greed or lust for power that polluted once venerable institutions, such as the Church.

The third satirical norm we highlight is that of inversion. According to Ambrogio Camozzi-Pistoja, “the world where the satirist lives appears to be turned upside down. A profound injustice allows the evil to trample on the good, whereas the just are exiled, mistreated, isolated” (Camozzi-Pistoja 2016, 176). Satirists are both responding to inversions of justice in their own world (in Dante’s case, the pope’s interference in temporal governance) and using the trope of reversal and inversion (the image of a temporal ruler making similarly unlimited claims of power) to highlight flaws in society. Camozzi-Pistoja examines satirical inversion in the *Comedia*, showing Hell to be an upside down image of Heaven. He also makes the cases that Dante is

fully aware of his use of satirical forms. Dante even includes images of satyrs (mistakenly believed to be the etymological origin of satire in the Middle Ages) in the passages where these inverted critiques are displayed.

The three norms listed above are not intended to be a definitive definition of satire in the Middle Ages. As scholars, such as Ben Parsons (2009) and Martha Bayless (1996), have shown, satire could have broad outlines. For example, while moral correction was perhaps the most common or at least well discussed aim of satire, this is not the exclusive aim of satire in this period. However, we find that they provide useful signposts for the presence of political satire. By showing that Dante's work contained all three of these satirical norms, we make the case that reading *Monarchia* as a satire is a useful approach.

Given the prevalence of satirical texts that were available during the time that Dante was writing and the inherent moral, religious, and even political overtones of those works, it is unsurprising that Dante would have incorporated those elements into his own writings.³ Moreover, given that commentators of the *Commedia* as far back as Guido da Pisa explicitly discussed that work in terms of being a satirical piece, it is clear that Dante was recognized as an author who knew and used those themes in his own writing. Although *Monarchia* is a different work than the *Commedia*, being written in prose and vernacular rather than verse and Latin, it takes up similar themes of exploring the place of morality and justice in the world. Moreover, we contend that the *Monarchia* mimics arguments that are made by Giles of Rome, James of Viterbo and Pope Boniface VIII supporting the investment of immense power in the hands of the pope. As with the *Commedia*, Dante blends genres together to make a strong moral and political argument. In the next section we turn to the discussion of justice that is presented in *Monarchia*, examining both the logic and presentation of the argument for political justice. Here Dante combines wit, irony, parody, and satire to demonstrate the dangers of unbridled political power rather than support it.

³ For excerpts from specific satirical texts that would have been available during Dante's lifetime, see Suzanne Reynolds (1995a). See also Reynolds [1995b] discussion of Dante's use of the term satire in the *Inferno* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*.

Monarchia

To understand the satirical force of Dante's arguments favoring universal monarchy, and how it offers a critique of his contemporary papalists, it is necessary briefly to reconstruct his argument. By doing so, we demonstrate the contradictions concerning Dante's own argument within this work as well as contradictions with other works. However, if these contradictions are read as satirical arguments rather than as a literal endorsement for an all-powerful monarch, then these contradictions can be resolved. Dante divides *Monarchia* into three books that respectively inquire into three questions concerning universal monarchy: the necessity of universal monarchy, the role of the Roman Empire in world monarchy, and the foundation of temporal power. It is in Book I that we find the greatest evidence of Dante's use of satirical arguments to critique the papalists, with the second and third books providing more nuanced and straightforward responses to arguments favoring absolute power. In this section we treat each book separately, demonstrating how his arguments actually oppose rather than support the investment of absolute power in a solitary authority.

Beginning with a treatment of universal monarchy, understood as a solitary sovereign set over all other authorities, Dante addresses Book I to this question: "Is temporal monarchy necessary to the well-being of the world" (Dante, *Monarchia*, I.5.2)? To answer this, Dante constructs the argument from first principles, namely by identifying the common purpose that unites all humanity. He contends that our purpose, that is what separates humanity from all other species and gives direction and fulfillment to our lives, is constantly to actualize the full intellectual potential of humanity (Dante, *Monarchia*, I.3.6-8) The realization of this potential is not easy as humanity is best able to engage in the exercise of our intellect when we are at rest without the concern of work or worldly matters to divide our attention. What is ultimately required is universal peace, and according to Dante, a universal monarch is the only way to ensure this universal peace.

Dante draws upon several sources to support his conclusion, including religious, philosophical, and historical arguments. He begins with the contention that a universal ruler is most natural - as a single God rules over the universe, so should a single monarch rule over all humanity. Likewise, he claims that Aristotelian principles also lead to the conclusion that one ruler is most natural. Lastly, he contends that the only historical instance of universal peace was achieved under Augustus, the sole example of a

universal monarch according to Dante. For the monarch to be truly just, he must be all-powerful in two senses: he must be free from greed, and he must be able to execute his will fully. Consequently, Dante argues that the man who owns everything and has the power to do anything will want for nothing and thus have the capacity to be perfectly just. Thusly situated, the omnipotent monarch will be able to reproduce his will among humanity, uniting everyone in a concord of ideals, and universally directing them towards just ends. Dante concludes that a universal monarch is thus necessary for the wellbeing of the world as this is the only way to ensure universal peace.

Many readers of *Monarchia* have noted Dante's reliance on Aristotelian arguments, especially the syllogistic style of argumentation, to bolster his conclusions (see Gilson 1949 and Shaw 1996, ix-xxxiv). This has been taken as evidence that Dante is using an Aristotelian framework to develop his argument for world monarchy. The ways in which Dante employs Aristotelian arguments, however, are curious given that he uses them to bolster conclusions Aristotle himself never reached. Dante first draws upon Aristotle in Chapter V to support the idea that "when a number of things are ordered to a single end, one of them must guide or direct, and the others be guided or directed" (Dante, *Monarchia*, I.5.3). Although Aristotle does discuss this point in Book I of the *Politics* in regards to the ordering of rulers over subjects, he does not extend this to suggest there should be a single ruler.

More interesting is Dante's invocation of Aristotle in Chapter X, when he quotes Aristotle as saying "Things do not wish to be badly ordered; a plurality of reigns is bad; therefore let there be one ruler" (Dante, *Monarchia*, I.10.6). Dante argues that Aristotle was explicitly advocating world monarchy in this passage, though in fact, Aristotle was not. One interpretation is to suggest that Dante is knowingly misusing Aristotle because he wishes to provide evidence of a philosophical basis for his argument at any cost. In fact, the misquotation of classical sources to bolster philosophical support for one's argument was not uncommon in the Middle Ages. If we take Dante's use of Aristotle in this case as earnest, we would have to acknowledge that he is not only bending but also actually breaking with Aristotle's overall political conclusions. This is not entirely convincing though as Dante's audience would surely recognize that Aristotle never explicitly advocated world monarchy in the *Politics*. Rather, this direct misappropriation may be a form of parody and suggest that Dante was

knowingly misrepresenting Aristotle as a way to draw attention to the flaws of the argument favoring a single world ruler.

The greatest evidence that the proposal for world monarchy contained in Book I is satirical is the unusual argument made in Chapter XI concerning justice. It is here that Dante outlines his vision of political justice, one that differs radically from his arguments favoring moral and divine justice, both of which focus explicitly on the necessity of virtue for sustaining justice. In *Monarchia*, Dante explains that justice can exist to a greater or lesser degree, and it is at its strongest when it is least opposed. There are two primary impediments to justice that Dante notes. The first is related to disposition, such that "where the will is not entirely free of all greed," justice cannot reach its fullest expression (Dante, *Monarchia*, I.11.6). Greed influences one's judgment, making it difficult if not impossible to render judgment that is free from the influence of passion and emotion. Similarly, Dante argues that justice can be impeded by a lack of power, such that "if someone does not have the power to give to each person what is his, how will he act in accordance with justice" (Dante, *Monarchia*, I.11.7)? Consequently, power is necessary to ensure that justice can be enacted.

On the surface, these arguments appear reasonable. Few would contend that greed does not impair one's ability to render fair judgment or argue against the idea that an adequate level of power is required to enforce justice. What is unusual is the conclusion Dante draws from this discussion: "Justice is at its strongest in the world when it resides in a subject who has in the highest degree possible the will and the power to act; only the monarch is such a subject; therefore justice is at its strongest in the world when it is located in the monarch alone" (Dante, *Monarchia*, I.11.8). In this model, justice originates and emanates solely from the monarch, who is so completely invested with power that he will never be tempted to act unjustly.

That justice can and should only be located in a single world monarch endowed with complete power is a most unexpected conclusion from an author who is typically concerned with the role of virtue in a life well-lived. Under this arrangement, Dante creates a standard of political justice entirely devoid of any need for virtue. Rather than encouraging the monarch to exercise moderation or resist the influence of greed, a world is constructed in which it is impossible for the monarch to experience greed: "where there is nothing which can be coveted, it is impossible for greed to exist...there is nothing the monarch *could* covet, for his jurisdiction is bounded only by the ocean" (Dante, *Monarchia*, I.11.11-12). This argument technically solves the

problem of greed, but it does so by creating a farcical situation. If the monarch has complete possession of everything that lies within his kingdom, then it is true that there should be nothing for him to covet, but that does little for those citizens living under his rule who no longer have a claim to their possessions should the monarch choose to relieve them of those possessions. It may be technically correct to say that under this system the monarch would not have acted unjustly if he took the property, livestock, or even children of one of his subjects given that they are all wholly under his jurisdiction, but it is difficult if not impossible to explain how anyone could believe the subject had been treated justly. Likewise, the monarch is free to execute and enforce laws as he sees fit, and given that he is the embodiment of justice, the decisions of the monarch cannot be challenged. Moreover, this argument flies in the face of the argument made in the *Convivio* (IV.17), where he used the framework of Aristotelian ethics, arguing that a truly noble ruler would need to be educated in the virtues over his lifetime, avoiding both deficiencies and excesses. In *Monarchia*, the ruler need not be concerned with developing virtuous behavior, only being freed from the vice of greed.

To take Dante's argument concerning political justice seriously, it is necessary to posit that because the monarch has complete power and jurisdiction that he will never behave in an unjust way despite having no institutional check upon his power nor any reason to exercise virtuous self-restraint. In fact, the monarch is capable of justice because he is logically incapable of vicious behavior. Since the monarch will not face the problem of the vices, there is no need to ensure that the prince is properly educated in the virtues. So dubious is the idea that Dante would offer up the proposal that virtue is irrelevant in the matter of political justice, abandoning the argument he had made only a few short years earlier in the *Convivio* expressing the necessity of being educated in the Aristotelian virtues, that the earnestness of his argument must be questioned.

A more probable explanation, and one that is consistent with the discussion of justice in his other works, is that Dante is actually engaging in a satirical critique of papalist thinkers of the time. By making an exaggerated version of arguments favoring expansive power for the papacy as a means to ensure justice, Dante is demonstrating the absurdity of this line of reasoning if it is pursued to its fullest conclusion. Rather than making an endorsement of absolute power, Dante is cleverly pointing out the complete lack of protection from injustice that will be suffered by those subjected to such domination. These hyperbolic arguments for complete political power

mirror the claims made by the papacy and its supporters in Dante's lifetime. For example, Giles of Rome's treatise *De ecclesiastica postestate* parallels *Monarchia* in significant ways. However, where Dante is contending for a secular monarch with unlimited powers, Giles claims that this universal political rule belongs to the pope by right. Like Dante, Giles argues that the Supreme Pontiff not only has authority over all matters of human life but is actually the rightful owner of all earthly goods:

And since temporal goods are never well ordered unless they are ordered toward spiritual ends... it follows that, when a prince or any man possesses temporal things, those temporal possessions are not goods for him unless he orders them toward spiritual ends... And so since, of themselves, temporal things are appointed to spiritual ends and must obey spiritual things and serve them, it is clear that the Supreme Pontiff, who has lordship of spiritual things universally within the Mystical Body, also has lordship of all temporal things: that he is lord of temporal things inasmuch as they are temporal, because temporal things as such are the servants of spiritual ends (Giles of Rome 2004, 91).

Giles goes on to present several more arguments supporting the premise that the pope is both the spiritual and temporal lord of the whole world, including that Jesus' instruction to "Feed my sheep" also entails looking after their material well-being (Giles of Rome 2004, 93-95).

Similar contentions are made by James of Viterbo in *De regimine Christiano*. Like Giles, James makes sweeping claims about the fullness of the pope's authority, particularly in relation to that of political rulers. James makes it clear that the pope is the supreme ruler in both the spiritual and temporal realms: "The Vicar of Christ is, however, nonetheless said to have fullness of power, because the whole of the power of government which has been communicated to the Church by Christ – priestly and royal, spiritual and temporal – is in the Supreme Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ" (James of Viterbo 1995, 131).

Parallel to Dante's assertion that the emperor is the rightful owner of all material goods, James likewise argues that the pope has the right to revoke the property rights of any individuals who "possess temporal goods unworthily" (James of Viterbo 1995, 109). The basis for this claim is an argument that humans only gain material goods through God's will; anyone who does not acknowledge and submit themselves to this

will loses said goods. The pope, of course, acts as judge and jury. Although he is acting on behalf of God, this gives the Pontiff an unfettered right to seize and/or reallocate property in a way almost identical to the claims Dante makes on behalf of his monarch.

In Book II, Dante presents a more complicated and nuanced argument that focuses on whether the Roman people acquired their empire by right or by force. If it can be sufficiently proven that Rome achieved its empire by right, then it follows that a historical basis can be provided to legitimate the project of establishing a powerful temporal authority. While there are moments where he clearly exhibits a wryness in his arguments, it is unclear to what degree the argument should be taken as a serious endorsement of the Roman Empire as sanctified by God. Dante uses three lines of argumentation to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Roman Empire - historical, philosophical, and theological. The first of these draws upon the testimony of Virgil to demonstrate that the Roman people were the most noble of their age and consequently had a right to rule over those of lesser nobility. Similarly, Dante draws upon the work of Cicero to show that the primary aim of Rome was to work for the benefit of the community, and this dedication to the public good is the greatest political good an empire can achieve.

Although he appeals to rational principles, many of Dante's arguments aimed at legitimating the Roman Empire are circular in their logic. Consequently, it is difficult to discern whether he is serious in his conclusions or if there is a hint of facetiousness to his arguments concerning Rome's right to rule. For example, he claims that "the Roman people won the race against all its rivals competing for world domination; therefore they won by divine judgments, and consequently they obtained it by divine judgment; which means they obtained it by right" (Dante, *Monarchia*, II.8.15). Similarly, he argues that in a trial by combat, "justice cannot fail to triumph," such that "what is acquired through trial by combat is acquired by right" (Dante, *Monarchia*, II.9.6). In essence, Dante seems to be arguing that we know the Roman Empire was obtained by right and not by some illegitimate means because they won in combat; had it been illegitimate, they would not have won. His appeal to the authority of Virgil, Livy, Cicero, and Ovid, however, suggests that although his premises are perhaps overly simplistic, he appears to be serious in his suggestion that Rome held legitimate power, which he later uses as a precedent for his arguments in Book III concerning the separation of secular and temporal power.

In Chapter X, Dante turns from rational principles to those of the Christian faith to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Roman Empire.⁴ This is necessary, he argues, because the greatest opponents of Roman authority have been Christians. He then lambastes the Church for squandering its resources, caring only for its own wealth, failing to care for the poor, and shutting out the temporal ruler. These critiques expose the corruption of the Church as an institution and more broadly of the subsequent societal corruption that has followed. He concludes his diatribe against the church with one of his most outright tongue-in-cheek responses in the book: "But perhaps it is better to return to our thesis, and wait in reverent silence for help from our Savior" (Dante, *Monarchia*, II.10.3). Of course, Dante does not wait in silence as he shortly returns to an outright critique of the Church and claims for the supremacy of papal authority in Book III.

Dante also argues from Christian principles to demonstrate that the authority of Rome had to be legitimate, lest, he argues, Christ's sacrifice would not have atoned for the sins of humanity. To begin, he argues that Christ acknowledged the legitimacy of Rome by participating in the Roman census at the time of his birth: "Christ chose to be born of his Virgin Mother under an edict emanating from Roman authority, so that the Son of God made man might be enrolled as a man in that unique census of the human race; this means that he acknowledged the validity of that edict" (Dante, *Monarchia*, II.10.6). The fact that Christ was as yet unborn when this decree for a census was made by Caesar Augustus does not seem to be of importance for Dante, who may in fact be making this argument in jest, though it is difficult to say with certainty. Subsequently, he argues that the legitimacy of the Roman Empire is proven because Christ had to suffer under a legitimate authority:

Thus if Christ had not suffered under an authorized judge, that penalty would not have been a punishment. And no judge could be authorized unless he had jurisdiction over the whole of mankind, since the whole of mankind was punished in that flesh of Christ...And Tiberius Caesar, whose representative Pilate was, would not have had jurisdiction over the whole of mankind unless the Roman empire had existed by right (Dante, *Monarchia*, II.11.5).

⁴ Michael Richter has noted that in the *Monarchia* Dante argues the Roman Empire at the time of the birth of Christ had God's sanction. This argument does not appear in the *Convivio* (1981, 179).

Hence, Dante's arguments are aimed at establishing that Rome ruled by right because it was necessary for Christ to be judged by an authorized, temporal power. Dante begins Book II with two primary goals: to "disperse the fog of ignorance from the eyes of kings and princes who usurp control of public affairs for themselves, falsely believing the Roman people to have done the same thing" and to "make all men understand that they are free of the yoke of usurpers of this kind" (Dante, *Monarchia*, II.1.6). Given the many subtle and sometimes explicit arguments Dante makes, especially in the last chapters, regarding the corruption of the Church, it seems appropriate to conclude that Book II is intended as a warning against overarching, illegitimate power, whether temporal or sacred. In this way, Dante exposes the corruption and villainy lurking in society and the unnatural levels of greed or lust for power that have polluted the Church. By exposing the moral corruption of society and institutions, Dante adheres to the norms of satire and also prepares his reader for his ultimate conclusion in Book III that justice is best ensured when power is balanced. In Book III of *Monarchia*, Dante directly addresses the issue of the relationship between the pope and the emperor. This book, more than either of the others, could stand alone as a statement of Dante's political beliefs. Dante begins by stating his purpose: "The point at issue is whether the authority of the Roman monarch, who is monarch of the world by right... derives directly from God or else from some vicar or minister of God, by which I mean Peter's successor" (Dante, *Monarchia*, III.1.5). While Book I offers a satirical take on papal claims to authority, and Book II offers the history of the Roman Empire as a counterpoint to the tradition of the See of Peter, Book III provides a more straightforward account of the political debates with which Dante was dealing. Here, Dante directly attacks the claims made by his opponents. He points out that the pope is not the successor of Christ, but of Peter, calling those who profess otherwise either ignorant or malicious. Dante then argues that it is illogical for the Church to cite its own traditions as justification for its authority. Having thus dismissed these two bases for papal power, Dante takes aim at papalist scriptural interpretations.

The first papalist argument that Dante attacks is the "two suns" analogy: Firstly they say, basing themselves on *Genesis*, that God created 'two great lights' - a greater light and a lesser light; these took in an allegorical sense to mean the two powers, i.e., the spiritual and the temporal. They then go on to argue that, just as the moon... has no light except that which it receives from the sun, in the same way the temporal power

has no authority except that which it receives from the spiritual power (Dante, *Monarchia*, III.4.2).

Dante then uses multiple tactics to show that this reasoning is invalid. First, he claims that the "two lights" could not be intended to represent types of human authority because they were created before God created man. Furthermore, Dante argues, "If man had remained in the state of innocence in which he was created... he would have had no need of such guidance; [spiritual and political power being] remedies for the infirmity of sin. Therefore since on the fourth day, man was not only a sinner but did not even exist, it would have been pointless to produce remedies" (Dante, *Monarchia*, III.4.14-15). As to why an omniscient God would not prepare in advance for man's fall, Dante is unclear.

Finally, Dante explains why, even if one were to accept the "two suns" analogy, it would be incorrect to conclude that the spiritual power should institute the temporal. Dante points out that the moon does not owe its existence to the sun, nor its basic function. However, the light it receives from the sun allows it to better light the night sky. Likewise, "The temporal realm does not owe its existence to the spiritual realm, nor its power (which is its authority), and not even its function in an absolute sense; but it does receive from it the capacity to operate more efficaciously through the light of grace... which the blessing of the supreme Pontiff infuses into it" (Dante, *Monarchia*, III.4.20). Having thus refuted the "two suns" analogy, Dante goes after several other interpretations of scripture offered by the supporters of papal power. These include Samuel's deposition of Saul and the presentation of gifts by the Magi at the birth of Jesus (Dante, *Monarchia*, III.6-7). Dante also contends that when Peter was told "whatsoever thou shalt bind..." the "whatsoever" was not meant to be taken too literally. If this was the case, then "Peter could... also loose a wife from her husband and bind her to another while the first was still alive; and this he certainly cannot do" (Dante, *Monarchia*, III.8.7).

Perhaps the most notable of Dante's attacks on the papalists in Book III is his refutation of the "two swords" analogy. For centuries, supporters of papal political power had been citing Luke 22:38 (But they said: Lord, behold, here are two swords. And he said to them: It is enough) to justify their claims. The interpretation of this passage which they followed was taken from a letter by Bernard of Clairvaux addressed to the pope: "If that sword [the temporal] in no way belonged to you he would not have answered, 'That is enough,' but, 'That is too much,'... Both swords, that is, the spiritual and material, belong to the Church; however, the latter is to be

drawn for the Church and the former by the Church” (Bernard of Clairvaux 1976, 118). While other medieval thinkers, such as John of Paris, had attempted to defend the separate origins of the temporal sword and criticize popes who tried to wield it, Dante rejects Bernard of Clairvaux’s reading of *Luke* altogether. He argues that Jesus actually instructed the apostle to obtain twelve swords (one for each), and “here are two” was simply Peter’s hasty and un insightful reply. Here Dante takes a stab at the papacy by calling its founder “simple and ingenuous” (Dante, *Monarchia*, III.9.9). In Dante’s view, the two swords do not stand for spiritual and temporal power at all, but rather for words and deeds, the two means by which Jesus’ disciples were to spread the Gospel (Dante, *Monarchia*, III.9.18-19).⁵

With specific reference to the “Two Swords,” Giles of Rome, like Dante, addresses Bernard of Clairvaux’s interpretation of The Gospel of Luke, but whereas Dante found Bernard’s reading to be lacking, Giles endorses it whole-heartedly:

From these statements [Luke 22:38], therefore, it can be inferred that the Church has not only the spiritual sword, but the material also. The first is what the Lord said to Peter. For if the material sword was signified by the drawn sword, then, when the Lord said to Peter, ‘Put up your sword in its sheath’ or ‘into its place,’ He plainly gave us to understand that the material sword was Peter’s and that the material sword belongs to the Church (Giles of Rome 2004, 263).

Thus one can see that Dante’s arguments for a secular world government not only contradict Giles’ papalist claims but also parallel his style of argument. This form of paralleled argument both in style and content was typical of satirical parodies in the Middle Ages.

Dante uses Book III of *Monarchia* to take direct aim at the papacy’s theological claims to political power. This is where the *intentio* of moral

⁵ Dante also takes aim at the “two swords” analogy in his *Divine Comedy*. There, Dante puts the words in the mouth of Thomas Aquinas, whom he meets among the wise in Paradise. Aquinas warns against those who seek truth hastily and without art. Among those he lists as guilty of this crime are “these fools who were to the Scriptures like swords that give back the natural face distorted” (Dante, *The Divine Comedy 3: Paradiso*, XIII:16). It is surely not a coincidence that Dante chose to use the word “sword” in a passage rebuking writers who twist the meaning of scripture for their own purposes. The *Comedia*’s Thomas Aquinas takes a subtle, but clear, stab at Bernard of Clairvaux’s understanding of Luke 22:38.

correction to the problem of the pollution of the papacy by its political activities becomes most clear. Dante does this most effectively by deconstructing the allegorical interpretations of scripture proposed by papal supporters. Based on Book III of *Monarchia*, as well as the abundant political commentary found in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante's ideal political system seems to be one where spiritual and temporal authority balance each other and work in harmony (see Sistrunk 1987). This notion of cooperation is at odds with the unchecked political system presented in Book I, if one takes its contents literally. However, if Book I is instead seen as an inversion of extremist papalist claims, meant to mock those who would invest any single individual (and particularly the pope) with unlimited earthly authority, then Books I, II, and III form a more coherent argument.

Although, Dante's claims for the monarch may sound overblown when read literally, they mirror the pope's claims to power almost exactly. In a series of papal bulls written between 1296 and 1302 Boniface VIII outlined the rights of clergy in the temporal realm and offered a resounding response to Phillip the Fair's attempts to tax Church property. In *Ausculda Fili*, Boniface tells the clergy that: "God has set us over kings and kingdoms, and has imposed on us the yoke of apostolic service to root up and to pull down, to waste and to destroy, to build and to plant in his name and according to his teaching (*cf.* Jeremiah 1:10)" (Boniface VIII 1988, 185-86). Although the laity still falls under the jurisdiction of the Church, clergy cannot be held accountable to secular law courts. This position is further elaborated in the 1302 Bull *Unam Sanctam* (Boniface VIII 1988, 188-89). Boniface makes explicit that kings and princes are subject to the Church, lower members of the clergy are subject to the pope, and the pope is subject to no one but God: "Therefore, if the earthly power errs, it shall be judged by the spiritual power, if a lesser spiritual power errs it shall be judged by its superior, but if the supreme spiritual power errs it can be judged only by God not by man" (Boniface VIII 1988, 188-89). Under Boniface's system, there is literally no earthly being or institution that can check the pope's power in any way.

Between the writings of Boniface VIII and his supporters, one can see that the papalist claims of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries bore a remarkable resemblance to Dante's list of monarchical prerogatives. Both can make lawful claims on the property of others. Both have authority over all lesser functionaries in both the temporal and spiritual realms. And neither is subject to any form of earthly

judgment. Those who feel they have been wronged by the Pontiff/Monarch have no recourse. In fact, under both schemes, the ruler's power is so unbounded that it is hard to imagine a scenario in which a subject could even *claim* to have been mistreated. In this way, *Monarchia* was intended to display an inverted papalist tract, in which all power was placed in the hands of a *secular* ruler and religious leaders could only serve at the discretion of the monarch.

This is all the more remarkable because, although Dante was not alone in favoring imperial power over papal power, his arguments bear little to no resemblance to other imperial writers (See John of Paris 1971; William of Ockham 1995; Piccolomini 2000). Where these authors stress the importance of imperial authority as a check on papal power (and vice versa) and the separate and independent origin of political power, Dante goes in an entirely different direction in Books I and II of *Monarchia*. Instead of stressing the need for two equal and separate types of authority, each being in a position to check corruption in the other, Dante argues for a single unrestrained and limitless ruler. In this way, his writing in *Monarchia*, particularly Books I and II, more closely resembles the arguments of his papalist adversaries than that of any other supporter of imperial power. The form and content of Dante's arguments follow the satirical tradition of the Middle Ages, providing parallel and exaggerated arguments of those authors he wishes to critique. In doing so, he draws attention to the lack of justice in their arguments, hence emphasizing their moral deficiencies.

Conclusion

Although *Monarchia* has traditionally been treated in a straightforward manner as Dante's vision for universal monarchy, we contend that this approach is unsatisfactory. Best known for his work on virtue and particularly justice, it would be truly unexpected for Dante to craft an argument for political power in which justice has no foundation in virtue, where the monarch is in no way encouraged to cultivate virtuous behavior, and where the only check on the monarch's power is the absence of avarice. Even if we assume that the monarch will be motivated to act virtuously, it is still exceptionally unusual that Dante would completely abandon his concern for the noble to be trained in Aristotelian virtue as he argued in the *Convivio*. Although previous accounts of *Monarchia* have treated it simply as an extension of Dante's previous Aristotelian arguments, a careful

examination of this work reveals no concern for cultivating the virtues in the monarch.

Rather than taking *Monarchia* as Dante's unqualified and idealistic endorsement of world monarchy, a more coherent reading of this treatise and its place in Dante's broader theories of justice is provided by interpreting it as a work of political satire. Dante uses inversion and exaggeration to mimic the style used by supporters of a broad expansion of papal power in order to show the flaws of those arguments. In so doing, he explicitly calls attention to the vices and corruption present in the Church, and thus attempts to offer a corrective to this corruption. By reading Book I as a critique of arguments for expansive papal power, his arguments in Books II and III that stress a historical, philosophical, and theological foundation for temporal power as a separate but equal counterpart to the papacy are more intelligible. If Book I is taken literally, then the expected conclusion to the work would be for the unchecked precedence of temporal power in all matters, as the only means of achieving universal peace. This is not the conclusion Dante offers; rather, he says: "Let Caesar therefore show that reverence towards Peter which a firstborn son should show his father, so that illumined by the light of paternal grace, he may the more effectively light up the world, over which he has been place by Him alone who is ruler over all thing spiritual and temporal" (Dante, *Monarchia*, II.16.18). Hence, Dante concludes with two important points. First, the temporal ruler owes some measure of respect towards the power of the papacy, and that power must be honored, or at least humored. Secondly, he notes that only God has power over both the spiritual and temporal realms. In their earthly manifestations, these two realms of power must be balanced. It is this balance that is key to the pursuit of universal peace, not absolute temporal power. Reading *Monarchia* in this way demonstrates that Dante is in fact making a coherent argument favoring the balance of temporal and spiritual power, and an argument that complements rather than challenges his treatment of justice in his other works.

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