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## **Ambrogio A. CAIANI**

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In 1900, Edmond Rostand wrote and produced on stage his remarkable play *l’Aiglon* (Eaglet). Its protagonist was Napoleon’s heir, the Duc de Reichstadt, portrayed by Sarah Bernhardt at the height of her thespian powers. The work is a late romantic exploration of the vagaries of fate and impossibility of erasing the glory of Napoleonic memory. The young Napoléon-François cannot overlook his father’s legacy and the dreams of empire, despite the best endeavours of Metternich and his minions to consign the Eaglet’s heritage to oblivion. Hauntingly, in Act 3, scene 8, Metternich alone with Napoleon’s bicorne hat plunges into a ‘hamlet-like’ dialogue remembering in horror the dead Emperor. The unlucky imperial heir of France’s first Emperor remains a romantic figure to present day. There are several very fine biographies of this modern Hamlet. The best ones are by Jean Tulard and, more recently, Laetitia de Witt. They unpack deftly both the realities and posthumous images of the ‘Eaglet.’

Riccardo Benzoni’s recent book whose title translates into English as: “God grant him a son” is of a different order and distinguished by unprecedented originality. The author’s work is brimming with erudition and constitutes a master class in how to do archival research. Benzoni has mined the national and provincial archives of France & Italy uncovering hitherto neglected sources

about the ill-fated son of Napoleon and Marie-Louise. This book is neither a biography nor an attempt to understand commemorations of *l'Aiglon*. It is rather a study of how the imperial administration sought to use the birth of a Bonaparte heir to recharge the batteries of legitimacy and to some extent the sacrality of the fourth dynasty (the Bonapartes). It emerges in this work how the Minister of the Interior, the comte de Montalivet, and the Grand Master of the University, the marquis de Fontanes, were akin to impresarios of legitimacy.

This book is divided, eminently sensibly, into five chapters. The first examines the historical imaginary deployed to legitimate Napoleon from 1804-1809. It focuses rightly on the Constitution of Year XII and its rather muddled description of imperial succession. The subsequent chapter examines the marriage, in 1810, to Marie-Louise and the baptism of the king of Rome in 1811. What is particularly innovative here is the attempt to understand the festivities beyond Paris and the heartlands of the dynasty. Benzoni uses departmental reports to great effect in appreciating the way the imperial authorities sought to project the power and legitimacy of the dynasty beyond France into Belgium and Northern Italy. What results is an unprecedented deep analysis of Napoleonic power as seen in semiotics, discourse, and patronage. Indeed, the decision to endow poor girls with dowries to enable them to marry well, in honour of the newborn imperial infant, demonstrates the determination to endear the child to public opinion. Even more astounding was the plan to give an education to some indigent newborns simply because fate had decreed that they would share Napoléon-François' birthday (20 March 1810) and to provide these children with subsistence at the state's expense, directing that they would eventually form a personal guard for the empire's heir. This chapter highlights just how seriously the Empire took the matter of bestowing legitimacy and public favour on the king of Rome.

Benzoni's third chapter investigates the visual, textual and ceremonial culture deployed to celebrate the continuance of the

“quatrième race”. It covers ecclesiastical tributes, literary elegies, masonic celebrations, and iconographical portrayals which were prodigally showered on the child that embodied the continuity, legitimacy and aspirations of the Napoleonic regime. There are fascinating sub-chapters too, on how the university and schools of the Empire competed with each other to ceremonialise and commemorate imperial succession.

The fourth chapter offers an in-depth exploration of how a positive consensus surrounding the birth was never achieved as it coincided with the captivity of Pope Pius VII in Savona and the *concile national* in Paris of 1811. Catholic clergy and laity often used celebrations of the baptism of the king of Rome as a moment subtly to manifest their indifference at best, or active hostility at worse, to the regime. This was particularly the case in Rome where the imperial authorities struggled to elicit much warmth from the local population towards the eternal city’s ‘new king.’ The birth of Napoléon-François came at an important crossroads in the fortunes of the empire and showed just how brittle imperial legitimacy could be.

The final chapter is a fascinating examination of how, despite three years of a sustained charm offensive, the peoples of France and Italy failed to show much affection for the dynastic principle at the heart of the Napoleonic Empire. Indeed, Napoleon even contemplated coronations for his wife and heir in 1813 to renew his subjects’ devotion to his dynasty. The Malet affair and the abdications of 1814 & 1815 demonstrated that the constitutional principles of year XII did pave the way for a smooth dynastic succession. Yet as Benzoni astutely notes the story did not end there; *l’Aiglon*, until his premature demise in 1832, incarnated the hope of a Bonaparte restoration. This is high compelling conclusion to the book’s seamless interpretative thrust.

All, both dilettantes and experts, can read Benzoni with much profit. Whether the Empire’s political culture owed more to the *ancien régime’s* monarchical tradition or was something new is treated particularly well in these pages. The author makes it clear

that Montalivet and Fontanes examined many ceremonial precedents for the birth of dauphins and the ‘churching’ of queen-consorts. Yet at no point was pre-1789 aulic culture simply resurrected. Napoleon’s legitimacy sought to blend the Roman, Carolingian and Bourbon past into an elaborate, though somewhat unstable, pastiche.

At the end of the day, as Thierry Lentz has argued elsewhere, Napoleonic ceremonial and claims to legitimacy possessed unprecedented sophistication in semiotic and ceremonial terms. Yet, when it came to promoting a clear message of dynastic succession it proved too elaborate to be wholly convincing. Audiences probably felt, to paraphrase the Bard, that: ‘the [*Emperor did*] protest too much.’ Benzoni’s has produced a masterpiece and one that will give not only experts on Napoleonic history much food for thought but will appeal as well to anthropologists and political scientists working on modern processes of legitimation. It is a book that will become a staple of undergraduate and graduate reading lists for many years.