

“But Virgil Was Not There”: The Lasting Impact of Dante’s Homosocial Hell

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Abstract

At the intersection of Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy* and literary analysis of sexuality, scholarship has often focused on the sodomy cantos. Dante’s treatment of the homoerotic prompts investigation into the ways sodomy is depicted in Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. However, scholarship rarely focuses on the way Dante himself becomes entangled in the homoerotic, chiefly through his relationship with his guide, Virgil. This paper builds on existent scholarship on Virgil’s role in the *Divine Comedy* as well as analyses of Dante’s depiction of sodomy to investigate Virgil’s role as a connection to the homoerotic and homosocial realm of Hell. With an analysis grounded in the Dante-Virgil relationship, Virgil’s absence from Paradise becomes a signal of departure from the homosocial bonds of Hell and a mark of Dante’s transition out of Purgatory.

Keywords: Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, homosocial relationships, Virgil, sodomy

Purgatory is a space of transitions in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. The eternal torment of Hell gives way to the ever-striving movement of souls who have a new sense of time as they progress towards Heaven. The lack of responsibility of the sinners turns into a thoughtful, self-reflexive understanding of how sin hurts self and others. And for the pilgrim himself, his journey is radically changed: Virgil, who has been his guide and companion, fades into the background to make room for Beatrice. Although Virgil’s inability to progress beyond Purgatory can be attributed to his pagan status, he also comes to represent a homoerotic and homosocial form of bonding that must be left behind in

order for Dante to become a citizen of God’s city. Dante-poet’s engagement with homoeroticism and homosocial bonds locates these interpersonal connections as part of the natural community building in Hell. Brunetto Latini is the most notable figure in the canto of the sodomites, and his connection to Virgil plays on the Middle Ages’ understanding of the emotional and sexual bond between student and teacher. Further, Virgil as a historical figure is implicitly homoerotic. The historical Virgil’s relationships with men and boys emphasize his fictional counterpart’s ties to the homosocial community building in Hell. Dante and Virgil’s relationship develops into a micro-community reflection of

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Hell's etiquette and knowledge. While this relationship is invaluable within the realm of Hell, once the two men progress into Purgatory, Virgil's citizenship in Hell becomes something that holds Dante back, which leads to Virgil freeing him from their relationship and the community ties to homoeroticism and Hell that it entails. Virgil's disappearance from the *Divine Comedy* in Purgatory signals Dante's transition from the homosocial, homoerotic community building of Hell to the less intimate but nonetheless necessary citizenship in the community of Heaven.

Dante's depiction of homoeroticism and of homosocial bonds is grounded in an understanding of deep, interpersonal, one-on-one relationships. This paper will use the term "homoerotic" to describe implied or explicit sexual or romantic attraction or behaviour between men, to distinguish from the concept of "homosexuality" as a self-identity. Further, this paper will use "homosocial" to refer to communities made up of intimate relationships between people of the same gender. Homoerotic relationships and interpersonal connections are both phenomena distinctly connected to Hell. Dante's depiction of Hell is notably homosocial. With the exception of Francesca di Rimini, there are no prominent women characters who speak directly or significantly to Dante within Hell. Further, the intensity of the homosocial relationships in Hell informs the punishment of the individuals there. Connections with other shades can be part of the punishment of a sinner, like in the case of Ugolino and Ruggieri, "two souls / frozen together in a single hole" (*Inferno* XXXII 124-125). Dante observes Ugolino attacking Ruggieri "as a man with hungry teeth tears into bread" (*Inferno* XXXII 127). However, the shades who are condemned together can also provide a kind of resistance to punishment by way of community. Significantly, the canto that presents the most closely-knit community in Hell is *Inferno* XV, which depicts the sodomites. Brunetto Latini refers to the sodomites as his "family," the only time that word is used to refer to relationships formed within Hell during the course of *Inferno* (*Inferno* XV 41). Rather than being paired off like the heterosexual lustful in *Inferno* V, the sodomites have a homosocial network not focused on sexual partnership but on community. In his article "Sodomy in Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*," Joseph Pequigney links the grouping of the sodomites in *Inferno* to the historical context of homosexual men: "Dante presents no homoerotic lovers ... probably because he wished to depict another aspect of homosexual experience. That aspect is the practice of going out looking for sexual objects alone or, as here, in the company of like-minded companions" (29). Although their experience is characterized "more with yearning than with gratification," the sodomites in *Inferno* have the distinction of not going through their punishment alone, like many of the other lustful besides Paolo and Francesca do (Pequigney 29). Unlike the other lustful spirits, the sodomites have

community, linking together the homosocial and the homoerotic.

Brunetto Latini is the figure most associated with sodomy (and therefore homoeroticism) in the *Inferno*. His pre-existing relationship with Dante fuels their conversation, which foregrounds him in *Inferno* XV. Virgil's connection to Brunetto Latini shapes Virgil as a homoerotic character. Virgil and Latini are set up as rival teachers of Dante, and seem to express jealousy of one another, such as when Latini asks, "And who is this one showing you the way?" (*Inferno* XV 48). In his commentary on the text, Mark Musa notes this potential for jealousy when he states that "The Pilgrim fails to answer Brunetto's second question, possibly because naming Virgil, who has become his second 'teacher' might offend Brunetto" (211n48). However, the historical significance of the teacher-student relationship as perceived in the medieval period adds important context to this feud. In his article "Dante and the Sodomites," John Boswell posits that the connection between scholars, clergy, and homoerotic relationships is so strong that Latini's "reference to *cherici* alone would clue in his audience about the meaning" (67). Peter Hawkins further asserts that "The idea [...] *pedagogus ergo sodomiticus* – 'teacher, therefore sodomite' – was commonplace in the Middle Ages" (62-63). Given the context, what Musa identifies as Dante's fear of giving offence could instead be Dante's way of avoiding romantic or sexual jealousy. Latini and Virgil are further linked to each other, and to the idea of transgenerational sexual relationships between men, through paternal imagery. For example, Dante recalls Latini through the phrase "my mind is etched (and now my heart is pierced) / with your kind image, loving and paternal" (*Inferno* XV 83-84). The representation of Virgil as a paternal figure stretches to the very end of his depiction in Purgatory, where Dante mourns his loss: "Virgil, sweet father" (*Purgatory* XXX, 50). Likewise, these transgenerational relationships are further confirmed when both Virgil and Latini refer to Dante as "my son" (*Inferno* III 121, *Inferno* XV 31).

Dante the poet's choice of Virgil as a guide of such prominence is complicated by the connotations of Dante-pilgrim and Virgil's student-teacher relationship and by Virgil as a historical actor. Virgil as a character is implicitly homoerotic, if not explicitly so. This depiction of Virgil may have been influenced by Dante-poet's knowledge of the historical Virgil's sexual preferences. According to the *Vita Virgilii* or *Life of Virgil*, "With regard to pleasure, he was partial to boys... He loved Cebes and Alexander most of all. Alexander was a gift to him from Asinius Pollio; the second poem of his *Bucolics* refers to him as 'Alexis'" (Donatus). Pequigney's analysis of textual availability in the medieval period supports the idea that Dante the poet would likely have known about Virgil's attraction to men and boys through the *Vita Virgilii*: "The oldest and most authoritative account of his life reveals that he was attracted to boys ... [the *Vita Virgilii*] was well known during the Middle Ages"

(37). Significantly, information about Virgil's death and burial incorporated into *Purgatorio* comes from the *Vita Virgilio* (Pequigney 37). Pequigney draws from this the idea that "the record of Virgil's homoerotic temperament did not disturb Dante, [and] did not prevent his idolizing and idealizing the Roman poet" (38). In addition to the homoeroticism of the historical Virgil, the text of *Inferno* links the circle of the virtuous pagans and the realm of the sodomites through the sense of sight. In *Inferno* IV, Dante finds himself "staring hard" to determine his whereabouts (5). In *Inferno* XV this role is reversed: he and Virgil become the stared-at: "[The sodomites] strained their eyebrows, squinting hard at us, / as an old tailor might at his needle's eye" (20-21). Virgil is connected to homoerotic and homosocial bonds through his historical precedence, his connection to Latini, and thematic links between his home realm and the realm of the sodomites. Virgil's homoeroticism, when combined with the setting of Hell, contributes to a deeply important and central relationship in the *Divine Comedy*: that between Virgil and Dante. This relationship has its own parameters that establish the two men as a micro-community.

Dante and Virgil's relationship is intimate and creates its own social code within Hell's understanding of the world. Their relationship reflects the implied homoerotic ties between people in Hell by invoking teacher/student roles as well as developing in a way that increases emotional and physical intimacy. Dante relies on Virgil for comfort and safety, a theme echoed by the terms he uses to refer to Virgil, which include "master" "father" and "guide" (*Inferno* VIII 70, 97, 110). Dante also expresses his trust in Virgil by turning to him in times of need; in Purgatory, when Dante only sees one shadow and believes Virgil is gone, he becomes very afraid: "I quickly turned around, seized by the fear / that I had been abandoned" (*Purgatory* III 18-19). When Dante recognizes that he is not alone, he refers to Virgil as his "Comfort" and is deeply reassured (*Purgatory* III 22). Additionally, Virgil provides a source of hope for Dante. Mowbray Allen notes that despite Virgil's lack of optimism for his own future, he provides hope for his companion: "Most of *Inf.* II is concerned with the failure of Dante's confidence and with Virgil's restoring it. Then, in Canto VIII, repulsed from the gates of Dis and threatened with having to retrace his way alone, Dante again loses all hope, except hope in Virgil's help" (195). Additionally, Dante and Virgil's relationship becomes grounded in the physical when Virgil bodily carries Dante out of *Inferno* and toward Purgatory. Guy Raffa's commentary reflects the multilayered and complex nature of Virgil and Dante's relationship: "Dante and Vergil's union of wills again becomes a union of bodies in the final stages of their infernal descent. Vergil embraces Dante so that ... the two men form a single physical unit, with Dante wrapping his arms around Vergil's neck, for the climb down (and then up) Lucifer's shaggy body" (8). The grounding of this relationship in the physical serves to further contrast their relationship mode as very different

from the disembodied, spiritual relationships present in Paradise. Even in Purgatory, shades are unable to touch one another, as demonstrated when Dante reunites with Casella: "Three times I clasped my hands around his form, / as many times they came back to my breast" (*Purgatory* II 80-81). Although the depth of Virgil and Dante's love for one another is moving, Dante's attachment to a relationship style that is incompatible with that of Purgatory is limiting. Dante's fear of being without Virgil is overpowering, as exemplified in his distress when he finally recognizes Virgil's absence: "All the delights around me ... / could not keep my cheeks, / once washed with dew, from being stained with tears" (*Purgatory* XXX 52-54). Dante's distress distracts him from his own purgation process, as Beatrice notes: "Dante, though Virgil leaves you, do not weep ... for you shall have to weep / from yet another wound" (*Purgatory* XXX 55-57). In order to allow Dante's progress, Virgil has to leave so that Dante can pursue relationships more ordered with the ideals of Purgatory and Paradise.

Dante and Virgil's intimate relationship forms its own small community, but it is also influenced by the community status of both Dante and Virgil. Virgil is firmly a citizen of Hell. Because of the focus on Dante as protagonist, Virgil's relationships to other shades in Hell are not explored in depth, and yet it is clear that he has relationships with his peers. When Virgil returns to the circle of virtuous pagans in Hell, he is welcomed home by his community: "Now let us honor our illustrious poet / his shade that left is now returned to us" (*Inferno* IV 80-81). While Virgil is a citizen of Hell, Dante cannot be, as a living being. Virgil also cites their separate religious traditions, further separating his own identity from Dante's: "their great worth alone / was not enough, for they did not know Baptism, / which is the gateway to the faith you follow" (*Inferno* IV 34-36). By aligning himself with the other virtuous pagans, Virgil admits his own inability to pass through the "gateway" to Dante's faith. While Dante's spiritual journey will continue, Virgil cannot achieve purgatory or paradise for himself without the Christian faith: he is restricted to Hell. Indeed, Virgil belongs to Hell, but as Dante progresses in his pilgrimage he finds that "the narrow ways, the steep, are far below" (*Purgatory* XVII 132). As the mountain of purgatory geographically separates Hell and Heaven, Dante's destination excludes him from permanent membership to the community he has formed with Virgil.

As he progresses through Purgatory, Dante learns that citizenship in the city of God surpasses all other citizenship. For example, when Dante asks if any of the souls on the terrace of Envy are Italian, Sapia corrects the assumption underlying his question: "My brother, all of us are citizens / of one true city. You mean is there a soul / who was a pilgrim once in Italy?" (*Purgatory* XIII 94-96). Just as Dante must release the way he thinks of himself as a Florentine or an Italian to progress towards the city of God, he must also renounce his lingering connection to Hell, which is maintained through his relationship with Virgil. Virgil's

(and, therefore, Dante's) connection to Hell is made clear by the way that the etiquette of Hell is no longer applicable in Purgatory. Strategies Virgil used for interacting with the shades in Hell no longer produce the desired effect when used with those in Purgatory, because the protocol for interpersonal engagement has shifted. The changing rules of engagement become apparent when Virgil attempts to sway Cato's opinion of himself and Dante through appealing to his connections in Hell: "I come from that same Round where the chaste eyes / of your dear Marcia still plead with your soul" (*Purgatory* I 78-79). This appeal to personal connection does not move Cato, who instead is satisfied by the divine sanction authorizing Virgil and Dante's presence in Purgatory: "But if a heavenly lady, as you say, / moves and directs you, why your flattery? / Ask in her name, there is no need for more" (*Purgatory* I 91-93). As a citizen of Purgatory, Cato is no longer bound by his earthly relationships, the way so many are in Hell. Instead, Cato is motivated by the authority of Beatrice, because of her proximity to God. Additionally, the long-held pattern of Dante's relationship with Virgil begins to shift in Purgatory: Virgil no longer has all the answers. In *Inferno* he was able to confront obstacles, such as the "slimy Cerberus" which Virgil stops: "he grabbed up heaping fistfuls of the mud / and flung it down into those greedy gullets" (*Inferno* VI 22, 26-27). Instead, Purgatory presents Virgil seeking help from other shades, such as when he asks those on the terrace of the prideful "where the mountain slopes enough / for us to start our climb" (*Purgatory* III 75-76). Virgil is out of place in Purgatory, and his inability to master his environmental context signals the ways in which his role of guide will come to be taken on by Beatrice. Significantly, Dante's relationship with Virgil, once the central relationship in the *Divine Comedy*, becomes less important in the face of his burgeoning reconnection with Beatrice.

Throughout Purgatory, Virgil begins to direct Dante away from their relationship in order to allow Dante to progress on his pilgrimage and minimize the ways that Virgil's presence ties Dante to the homoerotic and homosocial nature of Hell. Significantly, Virgil's presence as Dante's guide, which has been a role only filled by him up until this point, is challenged by the addition of supplementary guides throughout Purgatory. For example, once Statius is introduced, he and Virgil have their individual identities erased to be referred to collectively as Dante's "two poets" and "two guides" (*Purgatory* XVII 68, *Purgatory* XXVIII 146). After *Inferno's* exclusive focus on Virgil and Dante's strong interpersonal relationship, this shift away from the intimate one-on-one connection can also be seen as a shift away from Virgil, and from the homoerotic relationship dynamic he represents. Additionally, Virgil's role as guide is challenged by his decreased knowledge. In Purgatory he regularly defers to the authority of other characters, most notably Beatrice, such as when he admits his inability to explain the intricacies of love and desire as

related to the actions of the soul: "I can explain to you / as much as reason sees; for the rest, wait / for Beatrice – it is the work of faith" (*Purgatory* XVIII 46-48). In his work on sodomy in Dante, Hawkins notes that in Dante's depiction of sodomites in *Inferno* "we have Dante at once showing his attraction to the homosocial world of Sodomites he treats with such reverence and affection *and* making it clear that there is a Beatrice waiting for him at the end of the road" (63, emphasis original). Following the implications of Hawkins' analysis for Virgil's departure, Virgil's leave-taking signals to the reader that a heterosexual union with Beatrice is in Dante's future. Virgil's appeals to Beatrice are important because Beatrice is separate from the homosocial and homoerotic nature of Hell. Unlike in Hell, where the teacher-sodomite role and the rivalry of Latini and Virgil implicate Dante in their homoerotic relationships, Dante's love of Beatrice is appropriately ordered and far removed from the influence of Hell. When Beatrice is first mentioned through Virgil, he recalls that she told him "God gave me such a nature through His Grace / the torments you must bear cannot affect me, / nor are the fires of Hell a threat to me" (*Inferno* II 91-93). Just as Beatrice tells Virgil that she cannot be impacted by Hell, she is also immune to the customs and the homosocial nature of Hell. Interestingly, the "fires of Hell" that cannot affect Beatrice are linked to the sodomy cantos, where shades suffer from "the wounding flames" (*Inferno* XV 39). Directly preceding Virgil's exit from the *Divine Comedy*, Virgil, Statius, and Dante pass through the terrace of the lustful, where homoeroticism is made explicit: "The shades that do not move with us were marked / by that same sin for which Caesar as he / passed in triumph heard himself called a 'Queen'" (*Purgatory* XXVI 76-78). In his commentary on this canto, Musa notes that this is a specific reference to "[Caesar's] supposed relationship with Nicomedes, king of Bithynia" which resulted in his being "hailed as 'Regina' by some of his men" (286n78). As a specific reference to not just a figure linked to homoeroticism but the source of that connection, this passage marks an acknowledgement of homoerotic relationships. As Virgil, Statius, and Dante pass through the fire, which is associated with the sodomites in *Inferno* as well as in Purgatory, Virgil makes appeals to his past relationship with Dante: "If I / took care of you when we rode Geryon, / shall I do less when we are nearer God?" (*Purgatory* XXVII 22-24). Virgil's language here recalls the central aspect of their relationship, which is his continued care for Dante. However, Virgil's logic doesn't work on Dante; nor does his appeal to their relationship: instead, it is Virgil's conjuration of the redeeming woman figure of Beatrice that persuades Dante to walk through the flames. At this point of transition, appeals to the relationship that helped Dante survive Hell are insufficient. Dante passes through the wall because Virgil tells him it is the "only thing keeping you from Beatrice" and Dante makes a mutually exclusive choice to prioritize his

relationship with Beatrice and pursue his faith down a path that Virgil cannot follow (*Purgatory* XXVII 36).

Sapia has already instructed Dante that to join the kingdom of God means renouncing other citizenship. Therefore, Dante must renounce his membership in the community he created in Hell and Purgatory, which centers on his relationship with Virgil. Virgil's language use signals this release from community: "Now is your will upright, wholesome, and free, / and not to heed its pleasure would be wrong; / I crown and miter you lord of yourself!" (*Purgatory* XVII 139-142). Virgil "crown[s] and miter[s]" Dante as an almost ritualistic gesture of severing their relationship, enforced by his claim that Dante should "expect no longer words or signs" of his existence (*Purgatory* XXVII 139). It is through Virgil's recognition of Dante's reliance on him, and work to remove that reliance, that he can free Dante to be in no community at all; to be "lord of [him]self." Only by being without a community can Dante prepare to join a new community in Paradise.

Virgil's disappearance from the *Divine Comedy* facilitates Dante's progress by severing his link to a homosocial, homoerotic community linked to the etiquette of Hell so that Dante can pursue a new kind of community. Through his characterization of Hell, especially the circle of the sodomites, as a homosocial community, Dante-poet creates a connection between the relationships built in Hell and Hell itself. By positioning Brunetto Latini and Virgil as rival teachers within the context of a society where teachers were linked with homoeroticism, and by drawing on the historical Virgil's homoerotic leanings, Dante connects Virgil to homoeroticism and to Hell itself. Virgil remains a connection to Hell in Purgatory, as his methods of problem solving are no longer effective, and his knowledge shifts to make way for Beatrice. Virgil's indication towards Beatrice represents not only a Christian conversion, but a departure from the homosocial and homoerotic relationship building in Hell. Finally, Virgil ends his relationship with Dante in terms that make it clear that Dante is free to join the new community in a way he would not have been had Virgil not granted him authority over himself by bringing their community of two to a close.

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