

An Academic Sin: The Use of Ser Brunetto Latini in *The Divine Comedy*

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Abstract

On his journey through The Inferno, Dante Alighieri is shocked to encounter his beloved former teacher, Ser Brunetto Latini, in the third ring of the seventh circle of Hell where Latini is eternally tormented with other men of his ilk—academics, poets, and learned men of rhetoric—are punished as sodomites. The question then, is why has Latini been placed there and what can be inferred about Dante’s understanding of the nature of medieval sodomy as academic blasphemy? The findings presented here indicate that one of the most offensive readings of sodomy is an unsexual one. Sins of fleshy sensuality are presented blatantly in both the Inferno and Purgatory, but I argue that Dante places Brunetto among the eternally damned not only to privilege the rhetoric of humility but to serve as a cautionary tale on how our teachers fail us. Dante’s disassociation with Latini’s need for cerebral acclaim forms the foundational pad for which Dante cautions himself against the ultimate heresy of pride, while Latini continually presses the immodest approach for both himself and his pupil. Intellectual sodomy is a crime that is valued higher in Dante’s penal hierarchy than any sexual sin is, with less chance for redemption, as is shown with the direct bridging of desexualized sodomy in *Inferno* 15 with the explicitly sexualized sodomy of *Purgatory* 27. The fact that Inferno XV does not contain obvious allegory or simply stated sins renders it one of the most enigmatic cantos. The position that Brunetto’s sin is hubristic supports Dante’s conflicted relationship with his own pride—the sin on which Dante dedicates his journey.

Keywords: Dante, *Divine Comedy*, *Inferno*, Brunetto Latini, sodomy, *Purgatory*

Is love a powerful enough force to exonerate us from the errors we have made in life? Does affection redeem? It is a mark of Dante Alighieri’s conflicted Christian obedience that leads him to explore his personal theological inclinations through the divine ordination or damnation of those he knew in life. In particular, it is a curiosity that Dante’s former instructor, Ser Brunetto Latini, is found in *Inferno*. The fact that he is suffering his eternal punishment in the third ring of the seventh circle of Hell is at the crux of the matter and demands a definition for figurative sodomy over a forthright biblical reading of sexual sodomy. The surface reading of *Inferno* XV indicates Latini’s eternal

punishment is for the sexual sin of sodomy, which is a supposed affront to God’s natural order; yet nowhere in the canto is the crime stated explicitly. In *Purgatory* XXVI, the lustful heterosexuals and homosexuals have their sins made plain. The company of sodomites in *Purgatory* XXVI complicates the nature of Latini’s sin, the nature on which both Latini and Dante are silent. I argue that Dante uses Latini as a cautionary tale and condemns him for professional and intellectual sodomy—a perversion of God-given wit. Latini’s contemporaries, Priscian, Francesco D’Accorso, Andrea De’ Mozzi and other “respected men of letters of great fame” (*Inf.* XV.107), accompany him in the

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endless footrace. There are so many illustrious men in the third ring that Latini cannot name them all, save to inform the Pilgrim that they were also instructors and clerks of note. The tie between sodomy and the student/teacher relationship, be it sexual or intellectual, is on display in *Inferno* XV. Latini prophesies greatness for his former pupil but makes a request for Dante to remember him and his literary legacy: "Remember my *Trésor*, where I live on, / this is the only thing I ask of you" (XV.118-120). Unlike modern sodomy, understood as relating to a physical and sexual act, medieval sodomy was a catalogue of various sins. Save for unsavory associations regarding the power dynamic in the teacher-student relationship,¹ there are no confessionals or evidence of sexual sin in *Inferno* XV. Latini's—and by extension, Dante's—transgression is professional. As Dante the Pilgrim cannot yet fully recognize this fault within himself, he *cannot* understand why Latini is in Hell, nor can he properly accuse his instructor of sin for, if he does, the Pilgrim will have to reconcile with his own professional sin(s); Dante is not ready to damn himself just yet. There is a clear perversion of the natural order of intellectualism as Latini attempts to scribe his words over his student—"Remember my *Trésor*" (XV.118-120)—then dashes off to a fruitless and sterile victory. Dante is left to continue in self-reflection. The meeting with his father-figure and teacher, damned to eternal torment brought forth from intellectual sodomy and professional pride, becomes a cornerstone for Dante's introspective journey regarding the appropriate and divine use of one's creative gifts.

While a surface reading (that of a physical or sexual act) actively connects to a contemporary understanding of sodomy, Dante engages *Inferno* XV cautiously and equivocally. Sexual sodomites blaspheme God via their lack of natural reproduction, but Latini did have children conceived within marriage, as did Dante. As both Dante and Latini did have legal children,² the argument that Latini resides Hell for the *infertility of his wit* is thereby strengthened. Ser Brunetto Latini embodies worldly philosophies of immortality and fame, a reoccurring theme with which Dante struggles. That both men had unmentioned, and perhaps arguably, *unimportant* families gives pause as to the motive for Latini's placement in eternal damnation. Within Dante's medieval discourse, sodomy itself was not a crime dark enough to condemn one forever to Hell, as sodomites occupy Dante's highest plain of Purgatory. Dante the Poet denounces the importance of legal progeny by invoking the dead heirs of Ugolin. Dante

states that, as they died without continuing the patriarchal line, they will not taint their father's immortal legacy: "O Ugolin de' Fantolin, your name / is safe – since there's no chance it will be stained / by the degeneracy of future heirs" (*Purg.* XIV.120-123). Indeed, they are not alive to do so, but the Pilgrim has effectively declared that natural heirs are problematic. Using this perspective, inorganic offspring, such as literary bibliographies, and chosen father-figures, over familial relations, become elevated over earthly, mortal methods of reproduction and continuance. What traditions are being represented by these apparently opposing viewpoints? Is Dante participating in the religious ideologies of his time by damning Latini as a sodomite to burn in a biblical understanding of Hell? Or is Dante at odds with the devotional culture of his day by elevating the fleshly sins of the lustful, heterosexual and homosexual alike, to Purgatory and damning Latini to Hell for unsensual reasons? In *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, Ruth Mazo Karras observes that "the idea that sexual pleasure is in itself evil, that sex even in marriage is somehow polluting, comes to us from early Christianity via the Middle Ages, even if it was not a view universally held either then or today" (29). Karras, however, is careful to note that the medieval perspective of sexuality is just as nuanced as a contemporary one, thereby defying a "vision of total repression" (1), for "in the Christian world a normative religious discourse taught that sexuality was something sinful and evil, and yet large segments of the society chose to ignore that teaching" (27). In *Kings and Favourites: Politics and Sexuality in Late Medieval Europe*, Henric Bagerius and Christine Ekholst report that "it was common to connect, or even equate, sexual transgressions with deviant beliefs, and therefore it was often assumed that sodomites were heretics" (302). Dante does not spare those he holds in apparent esteem; Latini—here, a heretic—is relegated to the fires of *Inferno*, a placement that holds equal parts honour and condemnation. In the words of the church through holy representative St. Augustine, Dante would have known that "none but great men have caused heresies" (Cassell 18), which afford Latini a great honour, if a dubious one.

Further compounding Dante's representation of Latini as a Freudian shadow-self—an unconscious aspect of one's identity, often identified as the same sex as the self, who embodies traits that the ego either actively or passively suppresses—is the relative silence of *Inferno* XV's given blasphemy, a sin no one there yet voices. The sins of other cantos are loudly and viscerally proclaimed throughout

¹ There was a cultural association linking anal sodomy with posts involving instruction by sheer virtue of men's easy access to young students. A modern association of similar bend is the connection between clergymen and choirboys: "Brunetto says that all the others in his group were clerks and distinguished men of letters, implying a relationship between sodomy and these professions" (Lansing 773).

² Before his exile Dante had three children with his wife Gemma; any children after exile are unknown. Brunetto's marriage produced three or four children.

Inferno and in *Purgatory*; the Pilgrim is not often confused and can logically connect a sinner to their *contrapasso*. He is, however, stunned to find his old teacher in the seventh circle of the *Inferno*: "Is this really you, here, Ser Brunetto?" (Alighieri *Inf.* XV.30). In *Inferno* XV, Dante the Poet and Latini quietly infer sodomy—a sin that beggars no introduction or explanation. *Inferno*'s sodomites are all the more unique for their noiseless perversion as their bedfellows, the sodomites of *Purgatory*, loudly proclaim "with cries that fit each of their penances" (*Purg.* XXVI.48). If the "sin that cannot be named" (Boswell 283) maintains its customary namelessness in *Inferno* XV, then why do *Purgatory*'s sodomites proclaim their sin so lustily? The answer would be in the divine nature of self-awareness, as one cannot be spiritually placed in *Purgatory* unless this condition is present. Dante observes that the lustful sinners on the seventh terrace are able to engage in critical self-examination and continue to clarify their sins. The host spirit whom the Pilgrim engages with, Guido Guinizelli, is kind enough to explain to Dante about the nature of their sins in life and the divine purification required for them:

The [sodomites] were marked
by that same sin for which Caesar as he
passed in triumph heard himself called a 'Queen';

and that is why you hear 'Sodom!' cried out
in self-reproach, as they ran off from us;
they use their shame to intensify the flames.
(Alighieri *Purg.* XXVI.76-81)

Dante's production of *Purgatory* XXVI is a clear one and Latini's presence in *Inferno* XV is ultimately unexplained. It is interesting to note that both the "respected men of letters" (*Inf.* XV.107) in *Inferno* and the lustful sodomites of *Purgatory* are perpetually engaged in competition; in *Inferno*, the endless footrace; in *Purgatory*, "each one tries to shout out the other's cry" (*Purg.* XXVI.39). If "sexual issues are connected with other transgressions" (Lansing 773) then Latini is an appropriate interlocutor for figurative sodomy, as his placement in the seventh circle of the *Inferno* appears non-sexual. No direct connection is made to tie Latini with sexual sin while the sexual offenders of *Purgatory* voice their sins with great ardor.

Latini's placement in *Inferno* as an intellectual sodomite accents the different treatment of symbolic elements in *Inferno* XV and *Purgatory* XXVI. The sodomites of *Inferno* differ from their Purgatorial brethren in many ways, particularly with fire. *Purgatory*'s sodomites are

unmistakably sinners of the sexual class; their fire is present as a ritual for purification and baptism. *Inferno*'s sodomites are not sensual but instead cerebral. Their fire, is a blasphemous perversion of nature, raining downward upon them in punishment for their offences, rather than rising upward as is the natural order of fire: "And over all that sandland, a fall of slowly / raining broad flakes of fire showered steadily" (Alighieri *Inf.* XIV.28-29). In the underground, Latini is burned nearly beyond all proper recognition. Not only is he perpetually kept in a burnt state of lifeless sterility, but *Inferno*'s rain of fire is punishing and disfiguring; a significant blow to the pride of an author, such as Latini or Dante himself, whose immortality pivots on recognition. Dante further damns his former teacher by remarking on how distorted he is:

And I/...
straining my eyes, saw through his face's crust,
through his burned features that could not prevent
my memory from bringing back his name
(*Inf.* XV.25-28)

Latini is nearly unrecognizable and all but unrelatable to Dante, a representative of the forward-thinking contemporary poet; Latini is a vulgar author of past days. The Pilgrim's placement is also no accident, as he walks higher than his teacher and is only able to converse with Latini by looking down upon him. As blasphemous pride in professional work is Dante's sin, he symbolically walks on a ledge, observing that which he fears for himself but at a safe distance.³

Latini is placed in Dante's path as a cautionary tale, a footnote that Dante writes to himself. In truth, Latini is an excellent representative of Dante's personal vision of unchecked, blasphemous pride; the two men share much in common. The emphasis of fire in Latini's *contrapasso* harkens back to Dante and Latini's similarities, as both men were exiled in their mortal lives and laboured over their works in exile. Those who are caught returning from exile are doomed to be burned alive in medieval cultural tradition (Mazzeo 21), rendering fire as both punitive and inspirational. In literature, it appears that Latini was unable to avoid the punishing flames. The similarities between Dante and Latini connect Latini's placement in Hell to Dante's anxiety over his own blasphemous pride. Dante uses father-figures in *The Divine Comedy* to explore a progression of his journey with this pride; Latini, who is damned for pride in his work; Dante the Pilgrim, who confronts his own pride (with varying degrees of sincerity); Guido, who turns aside

³ While affectionately indebted to his former teacher, Dante also felt he had surpassed him: "[Dante] found fault not only with the mechanical nature of the compositions [and with] the absence of true feeling [and with] their diction... Brunetto Latini, he maintains, [is], strictly speaking, municipal (or, as we should say, provincial) rather than national" (Snell 78).

from pride to let better poets speak; and Cacciaguida, who has risen above earthly pride. These poetic father-figures⁴ guide Dante's passage through conceit. The Pilgrim's conflicted feelings over Latini's *contrapasso* are Dante's conflicted feelings over his own life's work. Fine writing, good poetry, and academic success make one noticeable and in both realms of the sodomites—a sin that houses a large contingency of blasphemous sins. Dante is ogled and noticed by the sodomites. First, in *Inferno* for his clothing, the mark of luxury and civilization: "I was recognized by one of them, who grabbed / my garment's hem and shouted: 'How marvelous!'" (Alighieri *Inf.* XV.23-24). Next, Dante is noted in Purgatory for his flesh, feeding into Purgatory's sexual reading of sodomy: "He seems to have a body of real flesh! / Then some of them toward me began to strain" (*Purg.* XXVI.12-13). There is an uneasy tension in this gaze as Dante understands fame to be damning and blasphemous. Latini is a blasphemer and this sin arises from pride in Christian dogma. Blasphemy is defined as an "offensive sound or word" (Lansing 108) and is a vice of the tongue while heresy is a vice of the pen. Informed conjecture on Dante's intentions suggests that Latini may be in Hell because he abused his intellect; his virtue was not a true virtue and was not for the glory of God but the glory of himself and his immortal legacy. He was inhospitable with his professional gifts, truly tying him to sodomy as the term, in its largest sense, is the sin of blasphemy (Jordan 43). Pride marks a turn towards *oneself* instead of God and makes one a blasphemer. St. Gregory defined the very "place of heresy as pride itself" (Cassell 18). The historical Brunetto Latini had his own views on pride from *Chapter CXXXI* of the *Trésor*: "For pride engenders envy, and envy engenders lying, and lying engenders deception, and deception engenders wrath, and wrath engenders malevolence, and malevolence engenders enmity, and enmity engenders warfare, and warfare sunders the law and lays waste the city" (313). His words on pride mark it as the sin that instigates the devastation of civilization itself—a very tangible connection to the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah. Latini's literature easily allows Dante to connect his former teacher to Sodom and the fall of great cities, as Dante's anxiety over the fate of Florence becomes more prominent in his thinking and literary works. The next father-poet in pride's hierarchy, Guido, has already shown some humility by indicating that Arnaut Daniel is the superior poet: "My brother, I can show you now," he said / (he pointed to a spirit up ahead), / 'a better craftsman of his mother tongue'" (Alighieri *Purg.* XXVI.115-117). Guido's modest step aside is an act of humility that Latini was not shown to possess. Guido's presence as an evolved author indirectly serves Latini a scolding: "[Fools]

judge by reputation, not by truth" (*Purg.* XXVI.121). Devoid of God's love, self-reflection or truth, there is nothing left for Brunetto Latini except reputation. Latini accepts Dante's praise, tries to outrun his fellows, and endeavors to have the last word by furthering his enduring legacy. Guido is closer to the divine and natural order; he does not try to out-do his fellows but instead he steps aside "to make room for someone else" (133). Purgatory's lustful are described as having "noble heart[s]" (72), but Latini cannot hold claim to this; Dante has written him as a character possessed of affection but not of generosity.

The power of the Latini encounter is found within Dante's shock, creating a moral tension. Dante appears to accept Latini's placement in the blasphemous seventh circle of Hell; indeed, he must, for while Dante the Poet may have placed Latini here, Dante the Pilgrim is an observer with no power over the post-mortem placement of those whom he encounters. Dante's incredulity, however, also quietly challenges Latini's placement. Instead of acceptance over God's judgment, Dante gives into shock and Latini offers no satisfactory explanation. While conflicted, Dante continues his condemnation of his former instructor by exalting his other father-figures. That the other fathers and inspirations in Dante's life should be worthy of Paradise, Purgatory, or even Limbo, while Latini is placed in endless suffering is a powerful statement of damnation and fear. Latini was eulogized as a "great philosopher and a supreme master of rhetoric" (Lansing 127) and was said to have civilized Florence. Perhaps much of that extolment may have been hyperbolic, as the departed tend to be posthumously aggrandized. Still, such praise is dangerously close to the kind of greatness that may have been an affront to God and Latini, the anthropomorphized cautionary tale, flies too high towards greatness. Here, Dante has invoked the Icarus story. In *Inferno* XV, there is present the pride and fire of Icarus, but Dante has reversed the roles. The teacher, Latini, is now Icarus who foolishly brought forth his downfall from flying too close to the sun. Worse than any flame, Latini's pride reduces him to a lower literary standing. In dialogue with Dante, Latini grasps at the possibility of future glory once thought lost. He identifies that Dante will surpass him and prophesies: "Your destiny reserves such honors for you" (Alighieri *Inf.* XV.70). Dante, once the pupil, is now Daedalus, surpassing his teacher and learning from direct observation of his mistakes. The flight of Icarus was a common medieval allegory for the consequence of arrogance. In *Paradise*, Dante's justification of faith over pride occurs and Daedalus completes his flight. Dante, destined for greatness, ends a journey that Latini never will. While the sin of *Inferno* XV is not made overtly known, the merits of the sinners certainly

⁴ Virgil is excluded from the poetic father-figure list as his role within *The Divine Comedy* is larger nor does he fit into the journey's hierarchy of "encountered fathers."

are, for the sodomic sinners of Hell are great, learned men—heretics and teachers of heresy. Dante attempts to save himself from a similar fate by adopting the modest guise of a humbler poet, perhaps here to avoid Latini's fate. It is Dante who is rewarded with the "port of glory" (56) that Latini is shown to have desired for himself.

Inferno XV does not contain obvious allegory or simply stated sin and remains the most enigmatic canto in *Inferno*. Is Latini there because his sin of pride is an extension of Dante's engagement with pride—truly a sin of unsexual sodomy for both poets? The separating line between Dante and Latini is the former's inclination towards *Opus Dei* and the latter's fixation on worldly and literary immortality. In a clever stroke, Dante rejects worldly immortality, pursues God's greater glory and gains both. Unlike the Purgatorial sodomites, the sinners of *Inferno XV*, Latini in particular, are punished for their blasphemous infertility, either professionally or poetically. Post-medieval sodomy, as a word, has attached itself exclusively to a sexual reading; medieval sodomy was a larger, stigmatizing catalogue that umbrellaed many blasphemies and heresies. Dante's admonitory interpretation of Latini marks him as a man whose pride and unapologetic mastery of rhetoric led to damnation, however, this fictional Brunetto Latini is but a substitute for Dante's own hubris. The teacher suffers in place of the student and Dante is able to choose his path with more care: "I did not dare step off the margin-path / to walk at his own level" (*Inf.XV.43-44*).

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