One of the enigmas of the *Commedia*, beside the Veltro and the DXV, has been the status of Brunetto Latini and his supposed role as Dante’s teacher, and his punishment as a sodomite.\(^1\) In a way, we have always known an answer to these questions, despite good arguments to the contrary. Latini was never Dante’s teacher, there is no evidence that he was a sodomite. Furthermore, as many critics have noted, many parallels can be drawn between Latini and Dante: their career as poet-philosophers, their political life, their exile.\(^2\) Quotations from Latini’s works abound both in the *Convivio* and in the *Commedia*, and, as critics have shown, much of *Inferno* I is indebted to Latini, as most of the language seems right out of *Il tesoretto*. Still these questions continue to nag us because we do not really have a satisfactory answer as to why Dante would make those claims in the first place, why he would undermine the image of a man that in his lifetime was a well-known thinker and rhetorician, an esteemed man and politician. Latini is one of those characters that populate Dante’s *Inferno*, like Francesca and Ulysses, that we never expect to encounter, and that critics balk at finding in Hell and even criticize the poet for putting them there. Our confusion is above all critical when confronted with a canto which is full of contradictions and unexpected claims, and as some critics claim, is, in places, ironic.

As Mazzoni points out in his account of Brunetto Latini in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, Latini was never a favorite of Dante.\(^3\) Already in *De vulgari eloquentiae*, in criticizing the poets of his previous generation, Latini’s name is listed among the “municipal poets”:

Dopo questi vegniamo a li Toscani, i quali per la loro pazia insensati, pare che arrogantemente s’attribuiscano il titolo del vulgare Illustre; et in questo non solamente la opinione de i plebei impazzisse, ma ritruovo molti huomini famosi haverla havuta; come fu […] Brunetto Fiorentino, i detti de i quali, se si harà tempo di examinarli, non Cortigiani, ma propri de le loro città e essere si ritroveranno. (I, xiii, i).

These are strong words, the result of a strong opinion toward those whose
poetic language “per la greve corporisità delle imagini e dello stile” (Mazzoni), is dismissed as being far from the ideals of the ‘volgare illustre.”

In Convivio (I, xi, 1-2) as Mazzoni points out, there is, instead, an indirect reference to Latini in Dante’s invective against those who would promote the language of other countries over the Italian tongue.

A perpetuale infamia e depressione de li malvagi uomini d’Italia, che commendano lo volgare altrui e lo loro proprio dispregiano, dico che la loro mossa viene da cinque abominevoli cagioni. La prima è cechitade di discrezione; la seconda, maliziata escusazione; la terza, cupidità di Vanagloria; la quarta, argomento d’invidia; la quinta e ultima, viltà D’animo, cioè pusillanimità. E ciascuna di queste retadi ha sì Grande setta che pochi sono quelli che siano da esse liberi. (my emphasis)

Latini belongs to the second “setta,” the “maliziata escusazione,” which Christopher Ryan translates as “fraudulent self-justification”:

La seconda setta contra nostro volgare si fa per una maliziata scusa. Molti sono che amano più d’essere tenuti maestri che d’essere, e per fuggir lo contrario, cioè di non esser tenuti, sempre danno colpa a la materia de l’arte apparecchiata, o vero a lo strumento; sì come lo mal fabbro biasima lo ferro appresentato a lui, e lo malo citarista biasima la cetera, credendo dare la colpa del mal coltello e del mal sonare al ferro e alla cetera, e levarla, credendo dare la colpa del mal coltello e del mal sonare al ferro e alla cetera, e levarla a sé. Così sono alquanti, e non pochi, che vogliono che l’uomo li tegna dictori; e per scusarsi dal non dire o dal dire male accusano e incolpano la materia, cioè lo volgare proprio, e commendano l’altro lo quale non è loro richiesto di fabbricare. E chi vuole vedere come questo ferro è da biasimare, guardi che opere ne fanno li buoni artefici, e conoscerà la malizia di costoro che, biasimando lui, si credono scusare. Contra questi totali grida Tullio nel principio d’un suo libro, che si chiama libro di Fine de’ Beni, però che al suo tempo biasimavano lo latino romano e commendavano massimo grecita, per simiglianti cagioni che questi fanno vile lo parlare italic e prezioso quello di Provenza. (italics mine)

And Dante concludes:

Onde molti per questa viltade dispreggiano lo proprio volgare, e l’altrui pregiano; e tutti questi totali sono li
This paragraph alone would be sufficient to damn to Hell any of the people Dante is alluding to, let alone Brunetto Latini. As we are concerned only with the latter, we have in these quotations some important elements of which "loving to be thought as teachers, than being it" (amano più d'essere tenuti maestri che d'essere) is the key expression. It echoes Dante's depiction of Brunetti Latini in *Inferno* XV as "his" teacher he never was. What is being emphasized in this passage is the bad faith of these authors whose inability as teachers brings them to blame the "volgare" for their shortcomings. As a result, anything that is uttered by these "abominevoli cattivi d'Italia" is a falsehood, since it comes from the "bocca meretrice di questi adulteri." This quotation alone should suffice to prevent us from taking literally anything Brunetto Latini says in *Inferno* XV and, especially, anything that Dante the pilgrim says in reply to him.
The ironic treatment of Brunetto Latini is already clear from how the scene is constructed and how he is introduced. He is said to be part of a “family” of sodomites (“cotal famiglia”) (22) whose first distinguishing trait is their myopic sight: “e si ver noi aguzzavano le ciglia, / come l’vecchio sartor fa nella cruna” (20-21). Latini himself is hardly recognizable “per lo cotto aspetto” (26), making it difficult even for Dante to recognize him. The words chosen to indicate this situation point to something more than just difficulty in seeing: “sì che l’viso abbrusciato non difese / la conoscenza sìa al mio ‘intellette’” (27-28). The emphasis on “conoscenza” and “intelletto” already establishes the difference between Latini’s “myopic” knowledge, contained in his work, and Dante’s intellect. This difference is further underlined by the levels that separates them: Brunetto in the embankment (“argine”) below, and Dante with Virgil on the ridge. The result is that Dante has to stoop to speak to him, a gesture that some have seen as a sign of respect toward the “old teacher” (“com’uom che reverente vada”) (45), when it is really indicative of Dante’s superiority, in more than just the physical plane, which clearly requires that he stoop from his level to Brunetto’s below. The topographical distribution and the position of the two speakers is obviously intended to leave no doubt as to the power hierarchy in the canto, and to Latini’s very “low” importance. Despite what seems to transpire from the dialogue, this power structure is maintained throughout the canto, as Dante goes on (“va oltre”) and Latini follows behind (“ti verrò a’ panni”) (40).

Brunetto’s first question to Dante: “Qual fortuna o destino/ anzi l’ultimo di qua giù ti mena?” (46) is already significant if we compare it to a similar question by Cavalcante five cantos earlier: “Se per questo cieco/ carcere vai per altezza d’ingegno” (X, 58-59). Here Cavalcante’s question places emphasis on the intellect, on Dante’s ability to undertake the poetic journey by himself; in Latini’s case, however, it is a question of luck or fate. Intellect or poetic ability do not seem to come into play. Brunetto advises Dante to follow his stars: “Se tu segui tua stella” (55). The insistence on fate, luck or the stars exemplifies Latini’s myopic stella thinking and his attitude that such a journey can only be the result of chance, whereas, as Dante replies to Guido’s father, Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti, “Da me stesso non vegno:/ colui ch’attende là, per qui mi mena/ forse cui Guido vostro ebbe a disdegno” (Inferno X, 61-65). Dante reiterates his mandate that he is not there because of luck but invited by Beatrice and the “donna gentile,” Lady Philosophy, of which Virgil is the representative in the first two cantiche of the poem.9

But there is more at stake in this passage because the reference to luck, chance or fortune is a reference to Latini’s Il tesoretto5 and to the “voyage”
he undertakes in the poem:

\[ \begin{align*}
e & \text{ io presi carriera} \\
& \text{ per andare là dov'iera} \\
& \text{ tutto mio intendimento} \\
& \text{ e 'l final penamento,} \\
& \text{ per esser veditore} \\
& \text{ di } \textit{Ventur}e \text{ d'Amore.} \quad (2175-2180, \text{my emphasis})
\end{align*} \]

Only after he has repented and is ready to take up the journey once more, Brunetto appears not to care to continue his life of adventure: “io metto poca cura/d'andar a la \textit{Ventura},” (2891-2892, my emphasis).

This is not at all the case with Dante who has a very clear and a very definite objective. In fact, Dante the pilgrim takes Brunetto’s “prophecy” very cautiously adding that he will gloss his words with those of Beatrice who will know his future for certain (“saprà”):

\[ \begin{align*}
& \text{Giò che narrate di mio corso scrivo,} \\
& \text{e serbolo a chiosar con altro testo} \\
& \text{A } \textit{donna che saprà}, \text{ s'a lei arrivo.} \quad (88-90, \text{my emphasis})
\end{align*} \]

Dante is not afraid of what may lie in wait for him, and in reply he states that he is prepared for anything that chance, luck or the stars may bring his way:

\[ \begin{align*}
& \text{Tanto vogl'io che vi sia manifesto,} \\
& \text{pur che mia coscienza non mi garra,} \\
& \text{che alla Fortuna come vuol, son presto.} \\
& \quad (91-93)
\end{align*} \]

The verses that follow are strange and obscure, except for the light that Amilcare Iannucci has shed on the phrase: “e 'l villan la sua marra,” as a symbol of Time (96). To Dante’s line that he has heard it all before and that he knows of Fortune’s swing, Virgil replies even more obscurely: “Bene l’ascolta chi la nota” (99). The line is obscure if we go along with commentators and ignore the fact that Dante is echoing here a concept that Virgil expressed in \textit{Aeneid} V, 709-10.\footnote{Natalino Sapegno, for instance, in his commentary, writes that}
Non sembra verosimile invece che qui il maestro approvi Dante per avere assimilato e ripetuto in altra forma un concetto da lui altra volta espresso in *Aeneid* V. 709-710; e tanto meno che apponga una chiosa elegiaticiva al discorso del discepolo, come se dicesse (ma sarebbe veramente un singolare abbassamento di rispetto a quel che precede): ‘eccoa una bella sentenza e da prenderne notat”

In the episode in question, the Trojan women, tired of traveling, have set fire to the Trojan ships. When all efforts to put out the fires seem useless and everything seems lost, Aeneas prays to Jove to save the ships if the Trojans are to fulfill their destiny, or to strike him dead, and all the Trojans, with his lightenings. Aeneas has not even finished uttering these words when a storm breaks out and a downpour puts out the fire and all but four ships are saved. But Aeneas is still in doubt as to what to do. Should he settle in Sicily and forget his destiny or continue on to Italy? At this point old Nautes inspired by Athena comes to comfort him:

Goddess-born [Aeneas], let us follow our destiny, ebb or flow.
Whatever may happen, we master fortune by fully accepting it.

Old Nautes’ s advice to Aeneas, to follow his destiny whatever may happen because this is how one masters Fortune, is the essence of Dante’s reply to Brunetto. Virgil’s approval, therefore, is more than just a statement accepting the ills that Fortune may bring; it grounds Dante’s venture in certainty just as it happens for Aeneas who is being reassured by old Nautes, and later by a vision of his old father Anchises who reassures him that the gods favor his coming. Sapegno should not worry, therefore, that there may be a lowering of tone here in Virgil’s reply. This would be the case only if we believed in the fiction of the episode and in the solemn and respectful tone of the encounter between Dante and his “old” teacher. Since this is not the case, it is very appropriate that Virgil, Dante’s only and true “maestro,” should provide the gloss to counter Brunetto’s prophecy. But old Nautes’s intervention is even more appropriate than it appears at first since it is meant not only to be consolatory, but also to advise Aeneas to leave behind those who have lost heart in his enterprise, that is the old people and the women:

[Those] *Who have lost heart in your great enterprise and your fortunes: Let the oldest men fall out*, the women who are sick of voyaging. (714-15, my emphasis)
Thus Virgil's retort may not be as flippant as one may think, if we see in it an injunction not only to stand brave in front of adverse Fortune but also to "drop" those like Brunetto Latini who have no faith in his enterprise and, in addition, are "old." "Bene l'ascolta chi la nota" (99).

It is at this point that a major clarification may be in order. Following the example of the majority of commentators we have read Latini's recommendation "sieti raccomandato il mio Tesoro" (118) to refer to *Li livres dou Tresor*, Latini's major work in French. Contini in a note, argues, for instance, that even though Latini himself uses "Tesoro" in *Il tesoretto* to refer to this work, it should be understood that he could only refer to the treatise in French: "par da escludere che il ‘Sieti raccomandato il mio Tesoro, Nel qual io vivo ancora’ possa riferirsi ad altro che il trattato francese" (173). This view, shared by many critics, has been a great obstacle to an understanding of the episode." There seem to be good reasons for arguing that by "Tesoro" Dante alludes, in particular, to what we now call *Il tesoretto*. One of these reasons, as Contini points out, is that Brunetto in his didactic poem refers to the work as "Tesoro." The title *Tesoretto* was probably given by a copyist who wanted to differentiate between the two works (Sowell 65). The work Brunetto wrote in French, *Li livres dou Tresor*, he refers to as "gran Tesoro"(1351), of which *Il tesoretto* is the shorter poetic version:

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Di tutte e quattro queste [Cortesia e Larghezza e Leanza e Prodezza]
il puro sanza veste
dirò in questo libretto:
dell’altri non prometto
di dir né di ritrare:
*ma chi ‘l vorrà trovar*
*cercbi nel gran Tesoro*
*cb’io fat’ bo per coloro*
*c’hanno il core più alto;*
*là farò grande salto*
*per dirle più distese*
*ne la lingua franzese.* (1345-1356, emphasis mine)
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The "gran Tesoro" is an encyclopedic-didactic work that deals with history, natural science, a treatment of Aristotle’s *Ethics* expounded and commented, rhetoric, and a manual on the art of governing well. Latini wrote it in French because he was in France in exile at the time, and because the
French language was considered more universal and more pleasant: "perché noi siamo in Francia, e l'altra per ciò che la parlatura francesca è più diletttevole e più comune che tutti gli altri linguaggi " (L.1.8). This is a choice, as we saw, that Dante holds against Brunetto accusing him of having blamed the "volgare" for his own poetic shortcomings. Indeed, as Brunetto Latini makes clear here (1348-49), he has difficulties in putting some concepts into verse, something that Dante will have no difficulty with. There is no doubt, therefore, that if Latini were the author of the verses in Inferno XV he would choose the French Trésor to be remembered. But since it is not Brunetto who is writing the canto, but Dante, and since his choice is conditioned by the ironic portrayal of Brunetto, as we shall see, he could be referring only to the shorter and more didactic version of Il tesoretto.

Dante has Brunetto "recommend" his "Tesoro" in much the same way that the latter "recommends" it to the "valiant Lord ( "Al valente seignore") (1) in the introductory verses of Il tesoretto, and whose precise identity remains uncertain.9

Io Brunetto Latino,
che vostro in ogne guisa
mi son senza divisa,
a voi mi racomando (70-74, my emphasis)

Latini extols his own work and lavishes praises on his "Tesoro." He believes that the work is so precious that no man is really worthy of possessing it, or of reading it.

Poi vi presento e mando
questo ricco Tesoro,
che vale argento ed oro:
*si ch'io non ho trovato
omo di carne nato
che sia degno d'aver,
né quasi di vedere.
lo scritto ch'io vi mostro
in lettere d'inchiostro. (74-82, my emphasis)

Latini insists that the "segnore" should hold it dear ("tegnate caro") (85) and use it sparingly ("ne siate avaro") (86), because he fears that his "Tesoro" may not be appreciated. He has seen many valuable things go unappreciat-
ed ("viltenera a la gente/molto valente cose") (88-89), or fall into the hands of those who care very little for them ("che son graduite poco") (92). He knows that to hide such treasure will diminish its worth ("Ben conosco che ‘l bene/assai val men, chi ‘l tene/del tutto in sé celato") (93-95), but he knows by experience, from having shared with friends many of his great discoveries both in prose and in verse ("ho già trovato/in prosa ed in rima/to/cose di grande assetto") (99-101), and in great secret ("per gran sagretto") (102), that such works usually end up in the hands of incompetents ("in mandle’/i fanti") (105), are misused and come to nought ("e ra.semprati tanti/che si Rippe la bolla/e rimase per nulla") (106-108). If this were to happen to his beloved "Tesoro," he would rather see it ripped apart, page by page, and thrown to Hell:

S'aven così di questo,  
si dico che sia pesto,  
e di carta in quaderno  
_sia gettato in inferno. (109-112, my emphasis)

These quotations are evidence of the great importance and great value that Brunetto Latini attached to this work. This is evident, of course, in the title that he gave to both his works. It is useful to compare this view with Dante's in the first prologue canto of the Commedia when, speaking allegorically of the Veltro to come, he tells his readers that his poem will "feed" its readers "sapienza, amore e virtute" (104), and that his humble work will have covers lined with felt. Latini's boasting of his invaluable work is echoed, of course, by Dante in Brunetto's recommendation of his "Tesoro." The line, however, is to be read as ironically fulfilling Brunetto's "wish" that, if his work is not appreciated, it should be thrown to the flames of Hell.

Dante's irony in his treatment of Brunetto Latini is clear in the use he makes of Il tesoretto in Inferno I (for the sake of clarity I will continue using this title for Brunetto's 'Tesoro'), and elsewhere in the Commedia, as most critics have noted. This is stated, ironically, in the line that has created the misunderstanding that Latini may have been Dante's "teacher."

m'insegnavate come l'uom s'eterna:  
e quant’io l’abbia in grado. Ment’io vivo convien che nella mia lingua si scerna. (85-87, my emphasis)

These lines should be read, instead, as a condemnation of Brunetto Latini's
work and as an invitation to the reader to discern how much Dante did not like Latini’s work. The first thing that one can read in Dante’s language is that Brunetto and his “Tesoro” are in Hell. Furthermore, the use Dante makes of his work does not justify calling it a didactic instrument. Dante pilfers Latini’s work by using words, phrases, and perhaps ideas, from the *Il tesoretto* and even from the “gran Tesoro”: from losing his way (“perdei il gran cammino”) (188) to finding himself in a “selva diversa” (190), to his wanderings which occasion various encounters with figures like Nature, and become the pretext for Brunetto’s “teachings”. The use Dante makes of *Il tesoretto*, is precisely like that of works which are so badly copied (“resem-prati tanti”) that made Brunetto wish that his work would be better off in Hell. As we know from reading the *Commedia*, Dante not only obliges Brunetto, but he also shows that he has not learned from *Il tesoretto*, or from the “gran Tesoro,” how to become eternal.

As commentators have shown, the line “sieti raccomandato il mioTesoro/nel qual io vivo ancora” echoes a line from the “gran Tesoro” where Brunetto speaks of the glory that gives the brave man a second life: “gloria dona al prode uomo una seconda vita”. Brunetto explains that after a man’s death the renown that comes from his good works shows that he is still living, “ciò è a dire, che dopo la sua morte, la nominanza che rimane di sue buone opere, mostra ch’egli sia ancora in vita” (VII, LXXII, 479). Dante’s purpose in alluding to this line, or in having Brunetto recommend his work in which he still lives, is to denounce Brunetto’s pride and to undercut it, since what will be remembered of him now is not only that he is in Hell but that he is a sodomite. In the same chapter Brunetto speaks also of those who wish to gain glory on false pretenses:

Ch’è quegli che crede guadagnare gloria per false dimostranze, o per false parole, e per false sembianze di sua ciera [aperel] è villanamente ingannato, però che la vera gloria si radica e ferma; ma la falsa cade tosto come il fiore, però che nulla cosa falsa può durare lungamente. (481)

Those who would gain glory by false pretenses, or false words, will be rudely deceived since true glory makes roots and is steady, while false glory is like a flower that wilts because nothing false can last. This self-deception is precisely what Dante wants the reader to discern in Brunetto’s words, and just in case the reader did not get the point, he stresses it again by stating that although Brunetto may appear a winner, he is really a loser;
The interplay between appearance and reality characterizes the entire episode of *Inferno* XV and is responsible for much of the confusion that has been created around Latini. The appearance is the benevolent and paternal figure of Brunetto Latini who was one of Dante’s teachers, and who asks his former student the small favor of being remembered through his book(s). The reality, however, is that Dante not only viewed him as a “traitor” and a coward for blaming the vulgate for his own poetic shortcomings, but he also saw him as a pervert, and, by placing him in Hell, he tore the veil of pretense and secrecy behind which Brunetto was hiding, denouncing him as a sodomite instead of the great man of letters he claimed to be.

Was Brunetto Latini really a sodomite? This is the biggest enigma that leaves one “piuttosto perplessi,” as one critic puts it, 12 not only because there is no historical evidence for it, but also because Latini in *Il tesoretto* singles out precisely this sin as the most abominable that readers should guard against. “Ma tra questi peccati son vie più condannati que’ cbe son sodomiti: deb. come son periti que’ cbe contro natura brigan costa lusura!” (2859-2864, my emphasis). De Rosa argues that if Latini had been a sodomite, even though he may have had no choice but to condemn the sin, he would not have presented it as the worst sin of all! And if he had no choice but to condemn sodomy in *Il tesoretto*, where he gave an account of the seven deadly sins, he could at least have been silent about it in the *Tesor*, instead of mentioning it more than once (97). De Rosa believes that Brunetto would not have singled out sodomy and denounced it if he had really been guilty of it. He believes that there is a simpler solution, which is that Dante condemns Brunetto in order to make his critique of an entire generation more focused and poignant: “il poeta ba voluto la condanna di Brunetto, perché persona autorevole ed influente nella società fiorentina del suo tempo, e coinvolgendo una simile personalità mirava a rendere più acuto il biasimo d’una generazione!” (98, my emphasis)

For some critics, sodomy is not really an issue since Dante never discusses it explicitly, but only portrays Latini among sodomists. André Pézard, as we know, believes that Brunetto’s sin against nature is an intellectual sin, and that he is punished for writing the *Tesor* in French. For Elio Costa, instead, he is damned for his political ideas. For some critics, however, Brunetto was a sodomite. John Aherne, in a clever reading of line 66, “si di-
convien fruttare al dolce fico,” relies on early texts like Alan de Lille’s *De planctu naturae*, which describes sodomites grammatically as substantives of indeterminate or unstable gender to conclude that “fico” is an “heteroclite” or anomalous, deviant noun, pointing to Brunetto’s nature as a “defective” trope. “His ungrammaticality, clear in line 66, is a linguistic sign representing his sin” (82-83). There have been critics, however, who have gone out of their way to disprove that Brunetto was a sodomite. Taking up the analysis by D’Arco Silvio Avalle of two poems by Brunetto Latini and Bondie Dietaiuti, Peter Armour attempts to reverse Avalle’s conclusion that he had provided a “documented link between Brunetto (or at least his literary output) and the sin of homosexuality”(11). Armour chooses to read the poems as instances of their friendship, if the two poems are connected at all. “If taken together, therefore, the two *canzoni* become a small poetic record not of illicit love but of affection, friendship, and moral and patriotic values in the dire aftermath of Montaperti”(23). Armour finds many positive similarities between Brunetto and Dante and believes that learning how to bear the burden of exile is one of the things that Dante has learned from him. As for why Brunetto is among the sodomites, Armour does not much care: “Whatever the sin for which Brunetto is condemned to Hell, *his positive teaching* of Dante regarding ‘come l’uom s’eternna’ must have included this noble Stoic moralism, the preservation of true and lasting friendship amid sufferings [the lesson Armour derives from Latini’s and Dietaiuti’s poems][...] and love of Florence [...] to which both remained faithful despite persecution by their fellow-citizens” (26-27, my emphasis). Perhaps Armour is correct in his reading of the poems, though Avalle would object, but to ignore the reasons why Dante puts Brunetti in Hell, let alone among the sodomites, must surely make us wonder about the “positive” impact that Brunetto had on Dante.15 The key issue here is how we readers see it and how Dante saw it. Perhaps Armour is right in drawing many parallels between the two authors, but the point to be made, in reading Dante is to try to understand, to the extent that we can, his point of view, his reasons for his poetic representation, and not the way they may appear to us, or the way we want them to be.

As with many enigmas of the *Commedia*, the case of Brunetto’s sodomy will probably never be resolved to everyone’s satisfaction. Our approach to the problem is once again to take Dante’s invitation literally and seriously to discern in his language the “real” meaning of his words, and to take Brunetto’s recommendation of his *Tesoro* as Dante’s sign to the reader to look into this work, namely in *Il tesoretto*, for answers.
When we read Brunetto’s work, and even the *Tresor*, carefully, Latini’s place among the sodomites becomes all too clear. Not only does he condemn this sin but he also writes frequently of it to the point of leaving no doubt that he himself is guilty of it. This is not immediately clear, however, and as a result there is confusion among commentators, as well as in Dante’s strategy in *Inferno* XV. Latini never states in so many words that he is a sodomite. This comes as no surprise for, as Armour points out, it was extremely dangerous in Brunetto’s time to be known as a sodomite. People guilty of this sin were liable “to fines, mutilations, or even (for non-Florentines) the stake” (20). It is no wonder, then, that Brunetto makes a “secret” of it, and that Dante reveals it on purpose in *Inferno* XV in punishment, to make sure that he will be remembered eternally for what he ‘really’ was.

In *Il tesoretto*, in the section appropriately called “la Penetenza”, we have Brunetto’s “confession” of “le mie parole mondane” (2451):

*Or m’è venuta cosa*  
*ch’i’ non poria nascosa*  
*tener, ch’io non ti dica;*  

(2445-2447, my italics)

Brunetto’s confession is prefaced by a short introduction on the imperfection of the world and of man, and on the fact that everyone is destined to die:

*Non sai tu che lo mondo,*  
*si poria dir non-mondo,*  
*considerando quanto*  
*ci ha no-mondezza e pianto?*  
*Che trovi tu che vaglia?*  
*Non vedi tu san’ faglia*  
*che ogne cosa terrena*  
*porta peccato e pena,*  
*né cosa ci ha sì crera*  
*che non fallisca e pèra?* (2457-2466)

Brunetto’s invective against the vanity of all worldly things (“che ogne cosa mondana/ è vanitate vana”) (2505-2506), against amassing power and great wealth (“ammassa gran tesoro”) (2512) is directed as much against the read-
er as against himself. These words addressed to mankind, could as well be directed to himself.

Ahi om, perché ti vante,
vecchio, mezzano e fante?
Di’ che vai tu cercando? (2471–2473)

This indirect manner of self-deprecation and moralism is typical of Latini, but does not imply that he himself is without sin, quite the opposite. In fact, it serves here to prepare the reader for his confession:

Ond’io, di ciò pensando
e fra me ragionando
quant’io aggio fallato
e come sono istato
omo reo peccatore (2519–2523, my italics)

In the lines that follow, Latini confesses that he has offended God, and that in word and deed he has offended the Church:

si che al mio Creatore
non ebbi provedenza
e nulla reveenza
portai a Santa Chiesa,
anzi l’ho pur offesa
di parole e di fatto,
ora mi tegno matto,
ch’i’ veggo ed ho saputo
ch’io son dal mal perduto. (2524–2534, my emphasis)

He feels that he is lost (“matto”) and that his sin (“mal”) may damn him (“perduto”). This sense of loss convinces him that it may be time to do something about it, before he gets further into sin (“lo mal non m’avampi”):

E poi ch’io veggo e sento
ch’io vado a perdimento,
seria ben for di senso
s’i’ non proveggi e penso
come per lo ben campi
Re-Reading Brunetto Latini and Inferno XV

cbe lo mal non m’arampi (2533-2538, my emphasis)

So one day, in all secrecy ("di nascoso"), he goes to a monastery in Montpellier to confess his sins:

Così tutto pensoso
un giorno di nascoso
entrai in Mompuslieri,
e con questi pensieri
me n’andai a li frati,
e tutti mie’ peccati
contai di motto in motto. (2539-2550, my emphasis)

In confessing his sins, Brunetto obtains a better idea of the magnitude and seriousness of his sin.

Ahi lasso, che corrotto
feci quand’ebbi inteso
com’io era compreso
di smisurati mali
oltre che criminali!
ché’io pensara’ tal cosa
ché non fosse gravosa,
ch’è peccato forte
più quasi che di morte (2546-2554, my emphasis)

However, Brunetto’s confession to the friar leaves him repented and converted:

Ond’io tutto a scoverto
al frate mi converto
che m’ha penitenziato; (2555-2557)

His confession and conversion enables him to lead now a good and moral life, and his new found life becomes the basis of his teaching. "Now that I have changed," he says to his readers, "You can change too!" implying that the reader, too, like him, has his own hidden sins, and that now it is time to repent:
Here we have a number of important elements. Not only does Brunetto Latini confess his “secret” mortal sin but he feels that by the act of confession he is converted or changed (“mutato.”). As he writes a little later, now that he has repented he no longer cares for “worldly” adventure:

ché, poi che del peccato
mi son penitenzato,
e sonne ben confesso
e proscioltò e dimesso,
io metto poca cura
d’andar a la Ventura. (2884-2892, my emphasis)

In other words, with the absolution the confessor has given him, Brunetto feels he has nothing more to worry about, certainly not the burning fires of Hell, which he feared before, and where Dante finds or puts him. There is something strange in this self-assuredness on the part of Latini that a simple confession will wash away his “mortal” sin. One would be tempted to see in this conviction the sub-text of Augustine’s Confessions and the story of another confession that enables the author to leave behind his previous life of sin and walk away unscathed.

Whatever the case may be, it is safe to say that Dante does not believe Latini’s repentance or his full absolution from sin. This is the sense of Dante’s reply that, if it were up to him, Brunetto would not be banned from human nature: “Se fosse tutto pieno il mio dimando”./ rispuos’ io lui, “voi non sareste ancora /de l’umana natura posto in bando” (79-81), a line that Sapegno reads as “esiliato dal mondo, morto” an interpretation that makes little sense since Dante could not have prevented Brunetto from dying. The “banning” in question must surely be the result of his sin as a sodomite which, as a sin against nature, and as the most abominable sin one can commit, as Latini writes, would certainly and automatically ban him from human and civil society. The lines in question can be read as saying, rather, that if it were up to Dante the pilgrim, Brunetto would not have been condemned
as a sodomite, implying that the condemnation, of course, is the result of divine justice, which has obviously ignored the fact of his repentance. An added meaning brings into play the role of Dante as reader of *Il tesoretto* and, therefore, as Brunetto's "pupil." A sympathetic reader, or "caro amico," of his would not only have kept Brunetto's sin "secret" but would also have believed in his conversion. This reader would have learned from Brunetto the valuable lesson, truly to be "treasured," that the way to become "eternal" is to repent one's sins and be converted, never having to worry about the consequences of one's sinful life.16 This, we could say ironically, is the essence of Brunetto's "teachings," his fatherly and friendly way of advising his readers ("Or vedi, caro amico," 2865) to tell the truth and confess his sins, as Dante recalls in *Inferno* XV:

\[
\text{ché 'n la mente m'è fitta, e or m'accora,} \\
\text{la cara e buona imagine paterna} \\
\text{di voi quando nel mondo ad ora ad ora} \\
\text{m'insegnavate com l'uom s'eterna...}(XV, 82-85, my emphasis)
\]

Dante was not Brunetto's "student" but he certainly was one of his readers, and Brunetto's endearing ways and his "lesson" were also meant for him:

Or vedi, caro amico,
\[
\text{e 'ntende ciò ch'i' dico:} \\
\text{vedi quanti peccati} \\
\text{io t'aggio nominati,} \\
\text{e tutti son mortali;} \\
\text{e sai che ci ha di tali} \\
\text{che ne curiamo poco.} \\
\text{Vedi che non è gioco} \\
\text{di cadere in peccato:} \\
\text{e però da buen lato} \\
\text{consiglio che ti guardi} \\
\text{che il mondo non t'imbaridi.} \\
\text{(2865-2876, my emphasis)}
\]

The line "Se fosse tutto pieno il mio dimando" is, therefore, equally ironic. When read literally, as has been done, and translated, means: "If my prayer were all fulfilled" (Singleton), "O, if all I wished for had been grant-
ed” (Musa); when read figuratively and ironically, it suggests something quite different: “If my wish were full,” that is, “If I so desired,” with the implication that, of course, he, Dante, does not wish it, does not want to keep Brunetto’s secret, and has not chosen his method of fast conversion to wash away his sins and become ‘eternal.’

Dante reveals Brunetto’s secret by placing him in a canto with other sodomites but, as some critics have rightly observed, he does not denounce him directly, thus creating the ambiguity and confusion which have characterized readings of this canto. The reason is that Dante wants Brunetto to reveal himself, to give himself away in true contrapasso form. This revelation on the part of Brunetto occurs when he is talking about the other sodomites and is overcome, as one would expect, by his pride and by his desire to be known as a great and famous literary person. Sodomy is now no longer the abominable sin that it was in Il tesoretto, or in “il gran Tesor,” but what unites all great and famous literary people: “tutti fur cherici/e litterati grandi e di gran fama” (106-07). In associating sodomy with great fame and great literary reputation, Brunetto reveals, or is made to reveal, what he would not otherwise have revealed, and what had taken good care to conceal, out of pride and the desire to be associated with great and famous literary men. Of course, the line is also ironic, since “fama”, in Dante, means above all the “infamy” of being a sodomite that he shares with Priscian, Francesco d’Accorso, and the unmentioned and unmentionable Andrea de’ Mozzi. And we should not overlook the fact that Dante also includes the clergy (“cherici”) in this list of “famous” men, perhaps in order to include also the friar of Montpellier who absolved Brunetto. He must have been himself a sodomite, and because of his similar harangue against sodomy, a hypocrite. Brunetto reveals, in other words, what he had been very careful to conceal in his two works, by denouncing the sin of sodomy as the most aberrant and most abominable of sins, and by admitting to it partly when he states in Il tesoretto that now he is a changed man: “e poi ch’è son mutato./ragion è che tu muti./ché sai che sén tenuti/un poco mondanetti” (2558-2561, my emphasis). This explains the ambiguity of the canto and the critics’ understandable confusion when confronted with what is said there and the facts of Latini’s life. The ambiguity is inherent in Brunetto’s two works and is the result of Brunetto’s attempt to conceal his “secret” vice, possibly out of fear.

Highly ironic are also Brunetto’s final words to the reader in Il tesoretto. He tells his reader that he does not know when they will meet next time. As far as he is concerned he is ready to continue on the road that he has set
for himself ("di veder le sett'arti ed altre molte parti," 2883-2884, an indication of later chapters on the seven liberal arts that were never written), since, as I have indicated, he has decided to renounce "worldly" adventure.

Ora a Dio t'acomando,
ch'io non so l'or né quando
ti debba ritrovare:
ch'io credo pur andare
la via ch'io m'era messo...(20-77-2881)

Ironically, the next time Brunetto meets one of his readers, Dante, is in Hell, amongst the violent against nature, and the way in which he is headed is not that of the "seven arts," but the road he follows together with his "famiglia" (22) or "masnada" (41) of sodomites. This is an appropriate contrapasso for Brunetto who thought he could easily confess his sin and be rid of it, and teach others to do the same. He now has to pay for his sins ("male") in eternity: "piangendo i suoi eterni danni" (42)

A reading of Inferno XV and of Brunetto Latini is paradigmatic in an important way. It cannot be read satisfactorily unless we fully accept Dante’s premise that Brunetto Latini is in Hell and with the sodomites, regardless of how well we may think of the historical Latini from the chronicles that have come to us, 17 and second, the idea that Dante is ironic throughout in his treatment of Latini. A characteristic of most readings of this canto is a refusal to read what is patently there. This is not to be attributed to the failure of commentators but to the highly seductive power of Dante’s language and of his representation of Brunetto Latini, and to the subtlety and force of his irony.

NOTES

1. All references to Inferno XV are to the Petrocchi edition.
2. See Holloway’s “Introduction” to her translation of Il Tesoretto (xviii-xix), as well as her article on the chancery documents in which she discusses aspects that Latini and Dante have in common.
5. I have used Marcello Cicciuto’s edition of Brunetto Latini’s Il Tesoretto which takes into
account Contini’s edition. For the Italian version of *Li livres dou Tresor* I have used the standard Italian translation of *Il Tesoro di Brunetto Latini volgarizzato da Bono Giamboni.*

6. Iannucci, however, believes that the reference to Fortune is to Virgil’s discourse on Fortune in *Inferno* VII, and not to the *Aeneid.* See p.4.

7. Madison Sowell discusses the crucial question of which “Tesoro” Dante is referring to, and places all possible answers in five categories: 1) those who are for the *Tresor;* 2) those who are for the *Tesoretto;* 3) the “ambiguous or confused interpretations”; 4) those who think that Brunetto refers to either work; 5) those who give the “silent treatment,” that is who pass over the problem without comment. Sowell himself believes that “Tesoro” refers to both works, though he admits that “Ironically, it is the shorter of Brunetto’s two major works, *il Tesoretto,* that Dante recalls most pointedly in his poem” (64-65).

8. Although, the French *Tresor* seems to have been written earlier than the poetic version (Sowell 62), or almost contemporaneously (Ciccuto 23), it would seem that in a lot of ways the poem predates the prose work.


10. I refer the reader to my essay, “First Prologue: Dante’s *Veltro*” in *Of Dissimulation.*

11. Sowell, in an appendix to his paper, provides a list of lines and expressions from Brunetto’s poem used in the first thirty lines of *Inferno* I.

12. See Mario De Rosa *Dante e il padre ideale,* p. 97.

13. See Peter Armour, “The Love of Two Florentines: Brunetto Latini and Bondie Dietaiuti”. For Avalle, see *Ai luoghi di delizia pieni.*

14. The section “La penitenza” is part of *il Tesoretto* in Contini and in Ciccuto, but in Holloway who is decidedly pro-Brunetto and anti-Dante this section is separated from the text of *il Tesoretto* by the line “Qui è compiuto il tesoretto” (line 2426, Holloway 125) that does not appear in other editions. It is uncertain whether it belongs to the original manuscript.

15. This is the traditional reading of this line. See also the *Commentary* by Singleton for whom the line simply means “You would still be among the living, not banished from them by death.”

10. Although we have similar cases of repentance and salvation in Dante’s own poem, as in Manfred’s case, it is clear that the context is quite different.

17. A good example is Holloway’s attitude who, in the Introduction to her translation of *il Tesoretto,* in trying to defend Latini at all costs inveighs against Dante the pilgrim who “foolishly” says that Latini has taught him how man becomes eternal and then damn him to Hell (xxvi). Holloway’s dislike for Dante the pilgrim is even more serious: “If anyone has deserved to burn under the hail of fire, it is not Brunetto, but Dante himself, or rather that foolish pilgrim self, a boy who abuses the text, wrenching its pages out of context, and who perverts his Master’s teaching” (xxvii). She also criticizes him for misreading Virgil in the episode of Pier delle Vigne (xxvii). Fortunately, she believes that Dante the
poet has nothing to do with this and that he has “most sensitively read and understood the poems of Vergil and Latini” (xxvii).

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