

The sodomites of the *Inferno* (cantos 15 and 16) are seen running under a rain of fire, condemned never to stop if they wish to avoid the fate of being nailed to the ground for a hundred years with no chance of shielding themselves against the flames. Having recognized Dante, Brunetto Latini called him to speak with him, voicing an important prophecy of Dante's future. In describing his fellow sufferers, Latini mentioned a number of famous intellectuals, politicians, and soldiers.

In the *Purgatorio* (canto 26) the sodomites appear in a different context—together with lustful heterosexuals. The two categories travel in opposite directions, yelling out the reason for their punishment.

How can one account for the striking deference and sympathy that Dante shows for the sodomites? This matter began to puzzle commentators only a few years after the poet's death.

Dante's education took place in the thirteenth century when Italy was beginning to change its attitudes toward homosexual behavior. Conduct which had been a transgression condemned by religion but viewed with indulgence by everyday morality assumed increasing seriousness in the eyes of the laity. For Dante it was still possible—as it had commonly been through the first half of the thirteenth century—to separate human and divine judgment with respect to sodomy. As a Christian Dante placed those who were guilty of that crime in Hell, but as a man of his time he did not deem the behavior grave enough to blot out the admiration that he retained for some of those guilty of it. Hence Dante vouchsafed to the sodomite Latini, and not to others, the prophecy that has been mentioned.

This approach became simply incomprehensible only a generation after the poet's death. For Dante's commentators sodomy was a sin of such gravity that it was inconceivable for them to treat with respect men seared with such "infamy."

How then could Dante's own attitude to be understood? How could one explain his placement of a man he respected and admired, Brunetto Latini, in such a circle of infamy?

There were few who, like Francesco da Buti (1324–1406), one of the most esteemed of the older commentators of Dante, saw that for Dante "the vicious man who is guilty of some sin may have virtue in himself, for which he merits honor and respect," and that Dante, with regard to Brunetto, had "honored the virtue that lay within him, disregarding the vice."

Over the centuries, in an effort to reconcile what appeared to later readers irreconcilable the commentators set forth a series of very odd explanations. That Dante had spoken of Brunetto Latini and the sodomites with too much sympathy because he too shared their feelings was the conclusion of one anonymous commentator of the fourteenth century. Another wild suggestion is that the shameless Latini had made an attempt on Dante's own virtue, and that hence Dante's gentle words are in reality sarcasm that must be understood "in the opposite sense" (Guiniforto dei Bargigi, 1406–after 1460?). Then, foreshadowing a thesis that would be favored by medical opinion in the twentieth century, it was suggested that there were two types of sodomites, those by "choice" and those who are such by "necessity." The latter were less savage than the former, having sinned only because they had no other possibility of having sex, and it is of these that Dante speaks in the *Inferno*. (This last is the thesis of an anonymous commentator who wrote between 1321 and 1337.)

The debate on Dante's motives has continued until our own day. In 1950 André Pézard devoted a whole book, *Dante sous la pluie de feu*, to an effort to show that the sin for which Brunetto and his companions were being punished was sodomy not in the usual sense, but in an allegorical one: *sodomie spirituelle*, which

in Brunetto's case meant having used the French language as a medium for one of his works.

Opposed to this attempt to "cleanse" the *Inferno* of homosexuals was Giuseppe Aprile. His 1977 book, *Dante, Inferni dentro e fuori*, offers a "psychoanalytic reading" of Dante's poem that takes up the old thesis of Dante's personal homosexuality: it was their common predilection that made the poet treat the sodomites so gently.

The authoritative *Enciclopedia Dantesca* has sought to bring the conflict to an end, taking adequate account of Dante's indulgent judgment as the correct key for solving the supposed "enigma" of the band of sodomites. As regards the reason for Brunetto Latini's presence among the sodomites, Avalle D'Arco's recent confirmation of the attribution to him of a long love poem directed to a man, "Se' o son distretto innamoramento," shows that it was probably on the basis of facts that were publicly known in Dante's time that he was consigned to Hell.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Giuseppe Aprile, *Dante, Inferni dentro e fuori*, Palermo: Il Vespro, 1977; Silvio Avalle D'Arco, *Ai luoghi di delizia pieni*, Milan: Ricciardi, 1976; Giovanni Dall'Orto, "L'omosessualità nella poesia volgare italiana fino al tempo di Dante," *Sodoma*, 3 (1986), 13-35 (with further bibliography); *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1976, vol. 5, pp. 285-87; André Pézard, *Dante sous la pluie de feu*, Paris: Vrin, 1950.

Giovanni Dall'Orto

DAUGHTERS OF BILITIS

See Bilitis.

DAVID AND JONATHAN

The biblical story of David (ca. 1012-972 B.C.) and his loving friend Jonathan has long been a source of inspiration for Western homoerotic art and literature, and has been construed as the one episode in the Judeo-Christian scriptures which

affirms at least passionate attachment between two males, if not an outright homosexual relationship. The nature of this friendship, however, can only be glimpsed through a veil of legend.

David himself ranks as a central figure in the Judeo-Christian tradition, revered by Christians as an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Jesus is described as of the "House of David," in accordance with an Old Testament prophecy regarding the Messiah, and his title "Christ" means "the Anointed One," reflecting back on David who was anointed King of Israel. Thus Jesus is given royal ancestry in addition to his divinity. Jews admire him as Israel's greatest king and national hero, ruler of an impressive Near Eastern empire at the turn of the first millennium B.C., and (putative) author of the Psalms.

Sources. The earliest sources about David are often judged to stem ultimately from the reign of his successor Solomon and in any case probably predate the Babylonian Exile of the sixth century B.C. The key early material on David's life, a compilation of sometimes conflicting narratives, appears in the Old Testament books of Samuel; a later version treating only his reign is found in the books of Chronicles. Later Jewish and Christian traditions magnified his role as a cultural, political, and spiritual hero.

The youngest son of a wealthy Bethlehem landowner, David is first seen as a shepherd, a cunning musician, and valiant, if underage, warrior, who rose to the position of armor-bearer and soothing harpist for Israel's first king, Saul, who "loved him greatly" (I Samuel 16:21) at first sight. In combat with the giant Goliath, the boy vanquished the champion of the Israelites' arch-enemies, the Philistines, with a stone from a slingshot. This deed caused Saul, who in this text seems unacquainted with David, to bring the boy into the royal household, where he came to enjoy a close relationship with Saul's son, Jonathan. They forged a compact of some sort, and Jonathan doffed his clothes