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Hal Boyd

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## Revising Latini: A Survey of the *Divine Comedy's* Main Revisions of *Il Tesoretto* and *La Penetenza*

Hal Boyd

In the fourth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, Dante the pilgrim encounters Lucan, Horace, Ovid, and Homer. After deliberation they invite Dante to join them in their prestigious circle of great poets. Dante the pilgrim acquiesces sheepishly as if unsure whether he belongs in their midst. Yet, unlike the Pilgrim, Dante the poet is quite confident in the way he intertextually engages with these poets' works. Madison Sowell mentions in his article "Brunetto's *Tesoro* in Dante's *Inferno*" that "Dante remains the medieval poet *par excellence* of intertextuality" (60). He explains that Dante incorporates "previous poets' material into a newer (and presumably better) form or context" (61). Though this is true, Sowell fails to explore in his article another important point regarding the *Divine Comedy's* intertextuality. This oversight is that by borrowing his predecessors' works and reintroducing them into a new and better context Dante is, in part, participating in a revisionary process that Harold Bloom calls "poetic misprision." In explaining his theory, Bloom writes that the strong poet is similar to Oedipus, who "blind, was on the path to oracular godhood, and the strong poets have followed him by transforming their blindness towards their precursors into the revisionary insights of their own work" (Bloom 10). In other words Dante, on his journey to become a strong poet, similarly turns his poetic blindness to the works of his precursors and revises them in order to create his own *tour de force*.

Perhaps the aforementioned is nothing new for seasoned readers of the *Divine Comedy* who are familiar with its intertextual relationship with Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and many others. Yet even the experienced scholar of the *Divine Comedy* often overlooks its intertextual revisionary relationship with Brunetto Latini's works. Perhaps this is because the reader does not find Latini in the *Inferno* amidst Lucan, Horace, Virgil, Ovid, and Homer. Instead, the reader finds the Italian poet in *Inferno* XV, among the sodomites. Though Dante places Latini further down in hell than other great poets, it does not mean that Latini's works have any less influence on the *Divine Comedy*. By exploring Dante's plot, imagery, and phrasing as *clinamens*, *tesseras*, or *kenosises* of those same constructions in Brunetto Latini's *Il Tesoretto* and *La Penetenza*, this paper will reveal, in part, the intertextual relationship between the *Divine Comedy* and the works of Brunetto Latini.

In order to expound on the thesis, this paper provides concise explanations of Bloom's revisionary movements: *clinamen*, *tessera*, and *kenosis*. Bloom writes that the *clinamen*—for the strong poet—is the act of swerving from the precursor's poem “as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor's poem ... should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves” (14). In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante executes *clinamens* when he swerves away from Brunetto Latini's *Il Tesoretto* and *La Penetenza*. The idea of the *tessera* takes off where *clinamen* ends, meaning that *tessera* occurs in the *Comedy* when Dante completes what he has swerved. Bloom writes that the *tessera* is when the strong poet “completes his [precursor's poetry] ... as though the precursor had failed to go far enough” (14). Finally, after Dante swerves and completes certain aspects of Latini's Italian poetry, he then transcends these parts of his precursor's works with the *kenosis*. Bloom explains that this *kenosis* “is [the] movement towards discontinuity with the precursor” (14); or in other words it is the movement that empties the influence of the precursor and leads to poetic *innovatio*. *The Divine Comedy*, at varying points, goes through all of these aforementioned revisionary movements of Latini's *La Penetenza* and *Il Tesoretto*.

In order to justify reading aspects of the *Divine Comedy* as *clinamens*, and subsequently as *tesseras* and *kenosises* of Latini's work, I must first provide evidence that Dante actually saw a need to improve upon his precursor's poetry. Verdicchio and other scholars argue that since “quotations from Latini's works abound both in the *Convivio* and in the *Commedia*,” Dante has a special affinity for his predecessor's poetry (61). Though this may be true, it certainly does not restrict Dante from engaging in intertextual revisionism of Latini's work. In fact, in the *Convivio* and

the *Comedy* there is evidence to support Dante's disapproval of Latini's work. In the *Convivio*, Dante criticizes "those contemptible men of Italy who praise the vernacular of others and disparage their own" (*Convivio* I. 6). This statement of disapproval may include Latini since he, a native Florentine, composed his *Li livres dou Tresor*—"the first compendium of philosophy in the vernacular"—in French (Armour 127). Dante includes other critiques of Latini and his poetry in the *Divine Comedy*; the most striking example is when Dante places Latini and his *Tesoro* in Hell. Though Dante appreciates Latini's poetry enough to imitate it, he is not afraid to revise and critique it.

### Revising Plot

Parts of the *Inferno* and *Purgatory* are *clinamens* of Latini's plots in *Il Tesoretto* and *La Penetenza*. Also Dante writes *Paradise* in part as a *tessera* and *kenosis* of *La Penetenza*'s plot.

Dante begins to swerve the plot of *Il Tesoretto* from the outset of the *Inferno*. The *Inferno* opens, "when I had journeyed half way of our life's way, / I found myself within a shadowed forest [*selva*]" (*Inferno* I. 1–2). This opening draws on the plot of *Il Tesoretto*, which depicts Latini on the pilgrim road to Compostella as he gets lost in a "strange wood [*selva*]" (189). Holloway notes the strong connection between these passages and writes that "*Inferno* I echoes [*Il Tesoretto*'s] passage, thus placing the opening of the *Commedia*, by association, on the Compostella pilgrim road" (13). The fact that Dante borrows Latini's pilgrimage plot is important in understanding how he redirects it in his *Divine Comedy*.

In the *Inferno* and *Purgatory*, Dante swerves Latini's pilgrimage on the road to Compostella into a pilgrimage on the road through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Though Dante never directly mentions Compostella in his *Divine Comedy*, one must consider the connection of the word *stelle*—the last word of each of Dante's three canticles—and Compostella. One scholar notes that "the word [compostella] refers to the Star of Libredon, signifying 'The Field of the Star'" (Howes 145). Therefore, Dante seemingly revises Latini's plot of being a pilgrim on the road to Compostella (or Field of Star) and swerves it into a pilgrimage guided by the image of three *stelle* or stars—faith, hope, and charity. Dante's *clinamen* of Latini's pilgrimage is not one that leads the pilgrim to Mount Olympus, as in Latini's *La Penetenza*, but to *Paradise*.

Dante's plot structure in *Purgatory*, which draws on Latini's *La Penetenza*, is another example of a *clinamen*. Just as Dante makes a confession in earthly paradise after his ascent up Mount Purgatory, so Latini confesses his sins before his ascent up Mount Olympus:

[I] am well confessed  
 And absolved and dismissed ...  
 I refound myself  
 In time one morning  
 Upon Mount Olympus  
 Right upon its summit ...  
 For I saw the whole world (*La Penetenza* 2888–904).

Dante borrows this idea of having the pilgrim confess his sins in *Purgatory*. However, Dante swerves Latini's plot slightly by placing the confession on top of Mount Purgatory, as opposed to Latini who puts the confession before his experience on Mount Olympus. Also, Dante's absolution comes as the result of his baptism in the rivers Lethe and Eunoe. In addition to the confession at the end of *Purgatory*, Dante's Mount Purgatory is similarly a *clinamen* of Latini's Mount Olympus. In Latini's *La Penetenza*, Mount Olympus is the end of the pilgrim's journey, whereas Dante, swerving this idea, makes the mountain not an end but rather a means to reach *Paradise*.

Dante's swerving of Latini's plot leads into how Dante's plot of ascending to the seventh heaven in *Paradise* is partly a *tessera* of Latini's testimony of the seven planets as God's creation. Latini writes the following about God's creation of the seven planets:

I say well and truly  
 That almighty God  
 Made these seven planets  
 Each in its orbit ...  
 And it was his will  
 To give them power  
 Over all creatures  
 According to their nature. (*Il Tessoretto* 837–46).

Dante writes a *tessera* of this passage through the plot structure of his *Paradise*. In *Paradise*, Dante the pilgrim actually enters into each one of the seven "planets"—the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Since Latini mentions the seven planets in conjunction with his testimony of God's creation, Dante completes this testament by actually entering into each one of these planets as he continues toward the presence of God. Where Latini is able to testify that the planets are creations of God, so Dante actually experiences each planet, and through the verses of *Paradise* he is able to document a more complete testimony that these planets are in fact creations of God. Therefore Dante's *Paradise* can be read as the *tessera* of Latini's verses.

Dante's *Paradise* is also a *kenosis* of *La Penetenza* because it transcends and shows discontinuity with the plot of the poem. Latini's poem ends with Latini the pilgrim at the top of Mount Olympus, learning about the four elements from Ptolemy. Dante's poem does not end with his ascent to the top of Mount Purgatory but continues on to the seventh heaven. Thus, Dante's departure from *La Penetenza's* plot is an indication that Dante is ready to disengage with Latini's poetic plot influence and engage in poetic innovation. As a bold, strong poet, Dante creates daring new images that sometimes require neologisms to describe them. *Paradise* takes the plot further than the top of "High Olympus" (*Purgatory* XXIV. 15) and thereby performs a *kenosis* of it.

### Revising Images

Dante borrows Latini's images—figs, unbound leaves, eternal flames, a description of Ptolemy, and a view of the whole world—and revises them in his *Comedy*, once again assuming the structure of *clinamen*, *tessera*, and *kenosis*.

Dante makes a *clinamen* of Latini's image of the fig (an obscene gesture representing the female organ) by depicting Vanni Fucci with "his fists with both figs cocked" (*Inferno* XXV. 2). Here, Dante uses Latini's line, "he makes a fig" (*Il Tesoretto* 1719), and swerves, and perhaps completes it by having a sinner make this insulting gesture (*Il Tesoretto* 87).

In the beginning of Latini's *Il Tesoretto*, he pens a type of introduction to his work in which he describes his work falling into the hands of boys who ruin it; then he writes: "Let it [*Il Tesoretto*] be ripped apart, and unbound leaves be thrown into hell-fire" (*Il Tesoretto* 110–2). Jeff Richards argues that Dante steals the image from Latini and completes it in *Inferno* XV. Holloway similarly alludes to the idea that Dante, in *Inferno* XIV, completes the image of unbound page leaves or *folia* in Hell. She notes that in the canto prior to the *ser brunetto* canto, Dante gathers "up further fallen leaves, *folia*, restoring them to ... Pier delle Vigne. ... We find his poem paired with those of Brunetto Latini in the folios of a Vatican manuscript" (1). Though Holloway bases her ideas on circumstantial evidence, it is still clear that Dante does swerve, in one form or another, Latini's images in his own poetry.

Dante also uses Latini's image of the "eternal flames" (*Il Tesoretto* 590) and writes a *climamen*, *tessera*, and *kenosis* out of it in his *Divine Comedy*. Holloway notes that Dante curves this image by "plac[ing] his encounter with Latini amid a hail of flames" (33). Likewise, in the *Inferno*, Dante curves this image by not just having the sinner suffer surrounded by flames but *in* an eternal flame:

My guide, who noted how intent I was,  
 told me: "Within those fires there are souls;  
 each one is swathed in that which scorches him ...  
 Within that flame, Ulysses  
 and Diomedes suffer; they, who went  
 as one to rage, now share one punishment.["]  
 (XXVI. 46–8, 55–7)

Dante continues to revise this image in both *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. He presents the flames in *Purgatory* not as punishment but as purgation leading toward eternal life. The eventual *kenosis* of the image of "eternal flames" is in *Paradise* where Dante sees "many flames, / descending step by step ... at each turn, becom[ing] more beautiful" (XXI. 136–8). Therefore, this flame imagery is no more a swerving of Latini's image but is a *kenosis*: a new image of Dante's invention independent of Latini's influence. The "eternal flames" in *Paradise* are a reward rather than a punishment or purgation, and thus transcend the flames that are associated with Satan and Hell in *Il Tesoretto*.

Dante adopts Latini's image of Ptolemy from *La Penetenza* to describe Cato at the beginning of *Purgatory*. Latini describes Ptolemy as "a white vistage with a great beard that spread on his chest" (*La Penetenza* 2917–9). In a similar way Dante describes Cato in writing that "His beard was long and mixed with white ... and his hair spread down his chest" (*Purgatory* I. 34–6). Dante swerves Latini's imagery and uses it to describe Cato rather than Ptolemy. Dante also places this description of Cato at the beginning of his ascent up Purgatory rather than at the top of the mountain—another swerve of Latini's version of the description.

Additionally, Dante borrows Latini's image of viewing the world and writes a *clinamen*, *tessera* and *kenosis* of this image in his *Paradise*. When Latini is on top of Mount Olympus at the end of *La Penetenza* he writes:

I refound myself ...  
 Upon Mount Olympus  
 Right upon its summit  
 And here I leave off rhyming  
 To say more clearly  
 What I presently saw:  
 For I saw the whole world,  
 Just as round as it is  
 And all the land and sea.  
 (*La Penetenza* 2897–905)

As Dante's pilgrim is ascending to the seventh heaven near the realm of the fixed stars, he also purports to have seen a vision of the entire world:

My eyes returned through all the seven spheres  
and saw this globe in such a way that I  
smiled at its meager image . . .  
And all the seven heavens showed to me  
their magnitudes, their speeds, the distances  
of each from each. The little threshing floor  
that so incites our savagery was all—  
from hills to river mouths—revealed to me  
while I wheeled with eternal Gemini.  
(*Paradise* XXII. 133–53)

Dante's image of the world swerves Latini's version. Latini describes seeing the whole world "just as it is" and thus places the responsibility to interpret the world's image upon the reader. Dante's version provides an interpretation by depicting the world as insignificant and "scrawny." Dante perceives the world's image from a far greater distance than Latini and thus takes the image and completes it. By writing a *tessera* of this image, Dante revises the image as if Latini "had failed to go far enough" (Bloom 14). Dante takes this vision out of the realm of experience and creates a new image that is much different from Latini's—including a vision of "all seven heavens" alongside the vision of the earth.

### Revising Words and Phrasing

Dante's *Comedy* echoes words and phrases from Latini's *Il Tesoretto*, yet as Dante reintroduces them in his work, he swerves and completes them. Aside from Latini's *selva* and *valle* in the opening of the *Inferno*, Dante swerves and completes other words and phrases such as *mi ritrovai* and *tesoro* in the beginning of *Inferno* and *Purgatory*. Holloway notes that "Dante's use of the words 'mi ritrovai' of his own poem's beginning refer[s] back to [Latini's] earlier poem" (294). Here Holloway alludes to how line 2896 of Latini's *La Penetenza*, "I refound myself," [*mi ritrovai*] influences Dante's "I found myself" [*mi ritrovai*] in *Inferno* I, line two. Dante's use of this phrase is a *clinamen* because Dante places the phrase at the beginning of his poem while it appears at the end of Latini's *La Penetenza*.

Dante also writes a *kenosis* of the word *tesoro*. Latini integrates the word *tesoro* into the title of both his French *Li livres dou Tresor* and Italian *Il Tesoretto*. Dante, aside from placing *tesoro* in the dialogue with Latini in *Inferno* XV, uses the word five times in *Paradise*. Since the word



is only used seven times throughout the *Divine Comedy* (*Inferno* XV. 119, XIX. 90; *Paradise* I. 11, V. 29, X. 108, XVII. 121, XXIII. 133) and five of those seven times Dante uses it in *Paradise*, it strongly suggests that Dante is innovating on Latini's *tesoro* by breaking free or emptying out the past connotation associated with Latini's use of the word. In the new context Dante utilizes the word not to describe, as Latini does, a poem "worth silver and gold" (*Il Tesoretto* 76) but rather the incorruptible treasures in *Paradise*. The *Divine Comedy* contains many other examples of Dante's revisions of Latini's plot, imagery, words, and phrasing; but, for the purpose of this argument, what has thus been shown suffices in supporting the idea that many aspects of the *Divine Comedy's* intertextuality with *Il Tesoretto* and *La Penitenza* can be read as revisionary movements.

Through revising Latini's plot, imagery, and phrasing, Dante engages in a form of intertextuality that involves swerving, completing, and departing from the poetry of the precursor. Knowing this information gives greater insight into the intense process that the poet must undergo to become a strong poet and participate in revisionary intertextuality. Additionally, this process of poetic imitation and innovation with Brunetto Latini further elucidates a lesser explored influence of the *Divine Comedy* and helps the reader to understand more about the origins of Dante's master work. Most importantly, through the lens of Harold Bloom's theory, it is clear that this revisionary process is the means by which, like other strong poets, Dante is able to surpass his precursor's poetry and create his own *tour de force*.

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