

Other Epicureans: Dante Alighieri's Friend and Late Foe - Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti & Manente Degli Uberti

Post by "Charles" of November 24, 2019 at 11:21 PM

In my search for little-known Epicureans throughout history, some of the first and most enigmatic I had come across were the ones who had crossed paths with Dante Alighieri.

Introducing: Manente Degli Uberti, commonly known as Farinata Degli Uberti



A 13th century aristocrat who was the military leader of the Ghibelline Faction (supported the HRE over the papacy) within Florence, he was often accused of being a heretic. Though we have little information about his philosophy, his ideas, or anything else aside from his military accomplishments in retaking Florence and single-handedly, prevented its razing. It's still worth mentioning him, since the time period in which Epicurean Philosophy is perhaps at its most misunderstood, was during the middle ages prior to the re-discovery of De Rerum Natura.

In fact, 19 years after his death, an Inquisition led by the Franciscans investigated the claims of his "heresy" and they exhumed the corpse of him & his wife, and submitted them both to a posthumous execution. Later, he is found within Canto X of the Divine Comedy within the sixth circle alongside Epicurus & his followers. Boccaccio wrote in a commentary on Dante, about why Farinata was included in the Divine Comedy and the actions of the Inquisition:

"He was of the opinion of Epicurus, that the soul dies with the body, and maintained that human happiness consisted in temporal pleasures; but he did not follow these in the way that Epicurus did, that is by making long fasts to have afterwards pleasure in eating dry bread*; but

was fond of good and delicate viands, and ate them without waiting to be hungry; and for this sin he is damned as a Heretic in this place."

* While this definitely isn't close to describing the life & actions of Epicurus, we have to give Boccaccio the benefit of the doubt here, as this was the middle ages and Epicureanism was nothing but a shadow of itself until Poggio Bracciolini re-discovered Lucretius.

Secondly, we have a banker and the father of a close friend of Dante: Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti

Cavalcante was a wealthy Guelph-aligned banker and alleged Epicurean Philosopher, whose son Guido Cavalcanti was actually a close friend of Dante. Not much else is known at all about him other than that he shows up in Canto X of the Divine Comedy in the sixth circle of hell. What's noteworthy about him is that his son, Guido; the famous poet and friend of Dante, was arranged in a marriage with the daughter of Farinata Degli Uberti.

I've always been meaning to make a thread about these two, and now that my living situation is a bit more stable, I think I can put in the time to share some more of my findings.

Post by "Cassius" of November 25, 2019 at 6:00 AM

Fascinating. Thanks Charles!

Post by "Joshua" of November 25, 2019 at 4:57 PM

Good stuff, Charles! That whole scene from the tenth canto is simply bizarre. Actually that reminds me of one of my favorite specimen of "famous last words";

Quote

"All right, then, I'll say it: Dante makes me sick." — Lope Félix de Vega Carpio (1562—1635), Spanish dramatist and poet. On being informed he was about to die.

Post by “Joshua” of December 1, 2019 at 7:46 AM

I came across something that might interest you, Charles; although it's likely you've already found it yourself.

In a footnote to the Loeb edition of Lucretius there was mention of an influence upon Byron's *Childe Harold*, which I went to read. (We read passages from this work in college, but I could remember nothing). Byron adapts Lucretius' description of Mars vanquished by Venus (IV:LI), and then goes on to panegyryze several Italian renaissance figures—Angelo, Alfieri, Galileo, Machiavelli, Dante, and Petrarch. He then praises the "bard of prose...he of the Hundred Tales of Love".

This turns out to have been a reference to Boccaccio and his *Decameron*. I knew the title but had never read it. Upon reading the wikipedia article I found reference to your Guido Cavalcanti!

This is a roundabout way of saying that the ninth story of the Decameron touches on Cavalcanti, and is worth a look.

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 11, 2022 at 7:37 PM

I just finished reading *Dante and Epicurus: A Dualistic Vision of Secular and Spiritual Fulfillment* by George Corbett and came across a number of interesting anecdotes (In particular, I am found of being called a "gastrimargi"):

“The foremost channel for Dante’s second-hand reception of Epicurean theses was Cicero. From direct citations, we know that Dante certainly read De finibus, the first two books of which are devoted to Epicurean ethics, and De natura deorum in which Cicero creiticizes at greater length Epicurean natural science. Just these two Ciceronian works would have sufficed to provide Dante with a substantial, if biased, account of Epicurean ethics and natural philosophy.” (Corbett, *Dante and Epicurus* 9)

“A further potential influence on Dante’s understanding of Epicureanism emerges from the scholastic commentaries of the thirteenth century. As one might expect, the scholastics appear to have generally held the correct view with regard to Epicurean ethics. The followers of the flesh are humorously nicknamed, as Albert the Great notes, ‘gastrimargi’ [stomach-madmen]” (*Ibid.* 16)

"In line with Cicero's treatment in De finibus, Dante elects the noble Roman Torquatus as the advocate for Epicureanism in his prose works, the Convivio and the Monarchia. Aside from the pagan Torquatus, Dante identifies four thirteenth-century magnates as 'disciples' of Epicurus in Inferno X: the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, the influential Ghibelline Cardinal Ottaviano degli Ubaldini, and the Florentine statesmen Farinata and Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti. To this list we may add Guido Cavalcanti who is indirectly associated with Epicureanism and named in the canto. All five of these thirteenth-century personages appear to have been accused of Epicureanism or of the denial of personal immortality during their lives and, by extension, of irreligion and a sceptical attitude towards Christian revelation." (Ibid. 42)

"Pope Gregory IX accused Frederick II of gross impiety: 'He said that the whole world has been taken in by three impostors: Jesus Christ, Moses, and Mohammen'. The Pope's account is borne out by countless anecdotes about Frederick II's religious scepticism. Cardinal Ottaviano was infamous for his Epicurean sympathies: [...] [in his acts and his words he was an Epicurean]. His doubt of the soul's immortality is illustrated by his self-damning epitaph: [...] [who used to say frequently during his life: 'if the soul exists', speaking sceptically, 'I have already lost it for the Ghibelline cause']. Farinata and his wife Adaletta were posthumously condemned for heresy by Salomone da Lucca: 'The sentence [...] held them both guilty, and ordered the separation of their bones from those of the faithful, and the confiscation of their goods'. Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti, or so the early commentaries would have us believe, wholly followed the Epicurean sect and unceasingly persuaded others of his mortalist convictions [...]. Guido Cavalcanti, as Dante implies in Inferno X, was infected by his father's notorious Epicureanism" (Ibid. 42-43)

"The four Epicureans named in the course of the canto are Farinata (c. 1210-64), Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti (c. 1210-80), Frederick II, the Holy Roman Emperor (1194-1250), and the Ghibelline Cardinal, Ottaviano degli Ubaldini (c. 1210-73)." (Ibid. 70)

"He [Cavalcante] wholly followed the sect of the Epicureans, always believing and persuading others that the soul would die together with the body: therefore he often had on the tip of his tongue this saying of Solomon: 'For the dissolution of man and of beast is one, and their condition the same'." (Benvenuto da Imola, gloss to Inferno X. 52-54)

Post by "Cassius" of July 11, 2022 at 8:30 PM

Wow thanks for that Nate!

"appear to have been accused of Epicureanism or of the denial of personal immortality during their lives and, by extension, of irreligion and a sceptical attitude towards Christian revelation."

It's interesting to me that they were focusing well on core issues that are in fact core, rather than arguing about things like gluttony vs asceticism which are almost side issues, but which seem to consume all the attention today.

Post by "Cassius" of July 11, 2022 at 8:47 PM

More idle chatter from me::

To me personally I have always focused on this issue of mortality of the soul as more than enough - alone - to justify devotion to Epicurean philosophy. For someone who is convinced firmly that you only live once, how could you possibly NOT want to get as much pleasure as you can out of the limited time you have?

So it has always seemed to me as someone truly convinced of personal mortality of the soul that any hint of "asceticism" is little more than absurd and ridiculous, and would have been ruled out of court immediately by Epicurus just as fast as he ruled out gluttony and overindulgence.