



The Cosmos of Dante's *Comedy* [Dante's *Divine Comedy*]

In 1321, Dante Alighieri completes the final cantos of the *Comedy* and breathes his last. After 700 years, the *Comedy* has not finished saying what it has to say. This course provides an in-depth introduction to Dante's masterwork as a point of entry to the history of medieval literature, philosophy, and science. The core of the course consists of an intensive study of Dante's encyclopedic poem in relation to the culture and history of Medieval Europe. We examine the poem as both a product and an interpretation of the world it describes. We also observe how the *Comedy* casts its long shadow on modern culture: for instance, in Primo Levi's description of the horror of Nazi concentration camps, or in Amiri Baraka's fragmentary representation of America's infernal racist system. We investigate the challenges that Dante's text elicits when it migrates to visual and cinematic arts (from medieval illuminations to Robert Rauschenberg to David Fincher), continuously camouflaging and adapting to different media. Major topics of this course include: representations of the otherworld; the soul's relation to the divine; Dante's concepts of governance and universal peace; mythology and theology in Dante's Christian poetics; the role of the classics in the Middle Ages; intertextuality and imitation; genres and genders in medieval literature; notions of authorship and authority during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; the culture and materiality of manuscripts in the Middle Ages; and the reception of Dante's work from the fourteenth century to the present.

*** *Fear not! Course conducted in English. No previous knowledge of Italian required.*

*** *This syllabus shall not be taken to preclude flexibility, adaptation, and adjustments.*

Course Objectives

1. Read a medieval text in its historical and cultural context
2. Develop skills in analyzing the structure, themes, and ideas of a pre-modern literary work
3. Investigate the literary system of the late Middle Ages
4. Incorporate notions related to the dynamics of writing and reading in manuscript culture into the understanding of pre-modern texts
5. Develop the ability to construct coherent critical arguments concerning the form and content of a literary text, and the ability to understand and respond critically to arguments put forward by others
6. Develop close reading skills and construct arguments supported by textual or contextual evidence
7. Develop communication skills and the ability to interact with others effectively while discussing topics related to literary works
8. Start a Dante cult at Penn

Academic Support and Accessibility

The Weingarten Center offers resources to support all Penn students in reaching their academic goals. All services are free and confidential. To contact the Center, call 215-573-9235. The office is in Stouffer Commons, 3702 Spruce Street, Suite 300.

Learning consultations and learning strategies workshops support students in developing more efficient and effective study skills and learning strategies. Learning specialists work with undergraduate, graduate, and professional students to address time and project management, academic reading and writing, note-taking, problem-solving, exam preparation, test-taking, self-regulation, and flexibility.

Undergraduates can also take advantage of free on-campus tutoring for many Penn courses in both drop-in and weekly contract formats. Tutoring may be individual or in small groups. Tutors will assist with applying course information, understanding key concepts, and developing course-specific strategies. Tutoring support is available throughout the term but is best accessed early in the semester.

The University of Pennsylvania is committed to the accessibility of its programs and services. Students with a disability or medical condition can request reasonable accommodations through the Weingarten Center website. Disability Services determines accommodations on an individualized basis through an interactive process, including a meeting with the student and a review of their disability documentation.

Students who have approved accommodations are encouraged to notify their faculty members and share their accommodation letters at the start of each semester. Students can contact Disability Services by calling 215-573-9235.

Classroom Behavior

Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, creed, politics, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, age, physical or mental health status, socioeconomic status, and nationality. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name. I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records.

Bibliography

Required Texts

DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Vita Nova (The New Life)* – any unabridged edition (ed. A. Frisardi, recommended; ed. M. Mousa; ed. Ch. Norton).

DANTE ALIGHIERI, *The Divine Comedy* – any complete edition of the three canticles (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*) with commentary (eds. R. M. Durling and R. L. Martinez, recommended; ed. R. Hollander; ed. Ch. Singleton).

*** All other texts will be made available through Canvas.

Reference and 'Introductory' Works

BARAŃSKI, Zygmunt and Simon GILSON (eds.), 2019. *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's Commedia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BARAŃSKI, Zygmunt and Lino PERTILE (eds.), 2015. *Dante in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BOSCO, Umberto (ed.), 1978-1978. *Enciclopedia dantesca* (6 vols., in Italian). Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana.

GRAGNOLATI, Manuele, Elena LOMBARDI, and Francesca SOUTHERDEN (eds.), 2021. *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

JACOFF, Rachel (ed.), 2011. *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

LANSING, Richard (ed.), 2000. *Dante Encyclopedia*. London & New York: Routledge.

TOYNBEE, Paget Jackson. 1968. *A Dictionary of Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sitography

[Bibliotheca Dantesca: Journal of Dante Studies](#)

[Canto per Canto: Conversations with Dante in Our Time](#)

[Dante Online](#)

[Dante Society of America](#)

[DanteWorlds](#)

[Dartmouth Dante Project](#)

[Digital Dante \(Columbia University\)](#)

[Illuminated Dante Project](#)

[Princeton Dante Project](#)

[The World of Dante](#)

Course Assignments

Course Citizenship: Preparation, Attendance, Participation (20%)

You are expected to arrive in class on time having closely read the texts assigned for that week. We start immediately, and any quizzes given at the beginning of the period and missed due to tardiness may not be made up. Attendance is mandatory. You may have two unexcused absences. After that, 3% will be taken off the final grade for each additional absence, unless appropriate documentation is provided. With a total of **three** unexcused absences, I will discuss with you the possibility of dropping the course.

Read and re-read. Then read again. Make notes, underline and circle words and phrases: in short, be an active reader. Complete the reading before each session. Read and be prepared to respond to the discussion questions. Arrive with a handful of points for discussion. Bring your reading notes to class. **When you read the *Comedy*, never omit going through the footnotes/endnotes to each canto.**

Response Papers (15% + 15%)

Two pieces of analytical prose (4-5 pages each, double-spaced) that cover class discussions and readings (primary *and* secondary texts) will be assigned during the semester. Guidelines will be provided through the course Canvas.

Due in class (paper copy) on 10/02 and 11/01.

Oral Presentation (10%)

A brief (12 minutes) in-class presentation on a single canto of *Purgatorio* or *Paradiso*. This will include a synopsis of the canto, the collocation of the canto within the moral and literary architecture of the *Comedy*, the presentation of major figures appearing in the canto, the analysis of major events occurring in the canto. Guidelines on the course Canvas. In order to assign cantos and dates, we will appeal to cleromancy and cast lots accordingly. Presentations will start mid-October. A calendar will be made available on Canvas by the end of September.

Midterm Exam (15%)

The test—on *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*—will ask critical questions regarding plots, characters, and other basic matters of comprehension. **In class, on 10/18.**

Digital Dantethon (25%)

A multimedia project that playfully reworks a segment of the *Comedy* in contemporary terms, to be presented to the class during the Digital Dantethon. This will be one of the highlights of the semester: an in-class competition for the most imaginative *Comedy* inspired project. Projects will be developed **in teams of four students**, working in consultation with me, and may make use of digital platforms and/or social media. Projects may be philological, satirical, comic, or political in character, but, however humorous or playful, must demonstrate a substantial engagement with Dante's text and the questions it confronts. **Project will be presented during Finals Week (date TBD).** The ceremony for the Bedeviled Dante Prize for the best student project is scheduled for the same day.

Syllabus

Week 1

08/30 Introduction to the course
Lecture: The Literary Context of Dante's Work

Week 2

09/06 *Vita Nova*
T. BAROLINI, "Dante and the lyric past"
[R. P. HARRISON, "Approaching the *Vita nuova*"]
Lecture: Dante: Life and Works

Week 3

09/11 *Inferno* 1-3
L. PERTILE, "Introduction to *Inferno*"
[Virgil, *Aeneid* 6; Paul, *2 Corinthians*]
Lecture: The *Comedy*: The Name and the Thing

09/13 *Inferno* 4-6, 8
E. AUERBACH, "Farinata and Cavalcante"
Lecture: The Moral Architecture of *Inferno*

Week 4

09/18 *Inferno* 10-11, 13, 15
O. VUONG, "Seventh Circle of Earth"

09/20 *Inferno* 16-17, 18 (vv. 1-18), 19-20
F. BERTOLINI, A. PADOVAN, G. DE LIGUORO, *L'inferno* (YouTube)

Week 5

09/25 *Inferno* 21, 23-25
T. PHILLIPS and P. GREENAWAY, *A TV Dante* (YouTube)

09/27 *Inferno* 26-28
Book of Muhammad's Ladder (excerpts)

Week 6

10/02 *Inferno* 30, 32-34
*** **Response Paper 1 due**

10/04 *Purgatorio* 1-2
J. SCHNAPP, "Introduction to *Purgatorio*"
Lecture: The Birth of Purgatory

Week 7

10/09 *Purgatorio* 3-6
S. BECKETT, "Dante and the Lobster"

10/11 *Purgatorio* 8-11

Week 8

10/16 Lecture: The Materiality of Dante's Text
P. SHAW, "Transmission History"
J. AHERN, "What did the First Copies of the *Comedy* Look Like?"
*** **Meeting to be held at the Kislak Center (Van Pelt Library, 6th floor)**

10/18 *Purgatorio* 12-13, 15-16
*** **Midterm Exam**

Week 9

10/23 *Purgatorio* 17-19, 21
D. FINCHER, *Se7en* (Amazon Prime Video)

10/25 *Purgatorio* 22-25
S. MARCHESI, "Classical Culture"

Week 10

10/30 *Purgatorio* 26-29

11/01 *Purgatorio* 30-33
Lecture: Symbol, Allegory, *Figura*
*** **Response Paper 2 due**

Week 11

11/06 *Epistle* xiii (excerpts)
Paradiso 1, 3
R. JACOFF, "Introduction to *Paradiso*"

11/08 *Paradiso* 4-7
W. CAFERRO, "Empire, Italy, and Florence"
Lecture: Dante's Politics

Week 12

11/13 *Paradiso* 9-12
Lecture: Dante's Church

11/15 *Paradiso* 14-15, 17-18
J. M. NAJEMY, "Dante and Florence"

Week 13

11/20 *Paradiso* 19-22
A. N. WILLIAMS, "The theology of the *Comedy*"

Week 14

11/27 *Paradiso* 23-26
Lecture: Dante's Languages

11/29 *Paradiso* 27-30

Week 15

12/04 *Paradiso* 31-33

12/06 P. LEVI, *If This Is a Man* (excerpts)
L. JONES [A. BARAKA], *The System of Dante's Hell* (excerpts)

Week 16

12/11 L. GOODISON, “*Inferno 1*”, “*Inferno 15*”
Final Discussion and Conclusions

Finals Week (12/14 – 12/21)

Date TBA *** **Final Project Presentations**

... e poi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.

... thence we came out, and saw again the stars.