The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Rethinking the Italian Renaissance

In this course we explore the intellectual achievements of the Italian Renaissance. We inquire into the rediscovery and emulation of classical civilizations. We analyze the ways in which the study of antiquity fundamentally changed the literatures, arts, philosophies, and politics of Italy at the dawn of the modern era. We reexamine the notions of beauty, symmetry, proportion, and order. We also unveil often-neglected aspects of Renaissance counter-culture, such as the aesthetics of ugliness and obscenity, and practices of marginalization (misogyny, homophobia). In a pioneering quest for the fulfillment of body and soul, self-determination, glory, and pleasure, Italian scholars, philologists, poets, playwrights, and prose writers contributed to the development of new and increasingly secular values. Through a close reading of texts by authors such as Francesco Petrarca, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Michelangelo, we will investigate continuities and ruptures between their quest for human identity and ours.

* Fear not! Course conducted in English. All primary and secondary sources in English.
** This syllabus is tentative.

Course Objectives

1. To acquire in-depth understanding of Italian Renaissance literature in its historical and social context.
2. To understand the intersections between literature and other disciplines.
3. To establish meaningful formal and thematic connections between texts.
4. To develop the ability to apply theoretical arguments to the historical conditions that shape the production of literature.
5. To solidify command of academic writing and sound composition by means of thesis-driven analytical prose.
Course Assignments and Grades

Preparation, Attendance, Discussion Questions, Participation (30%)

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 strictly mandatory and will be enforced. You might make two unexcused absences. After that, 2% will be taken off the final grade for each additional absence, unless an appropriate medical documentation is submitted. With a total of five 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, and arrive with a handful of points for discussion. Bring your reading notes to class.

Quizzes (15%)

Three quizzes that cover class discussions and readings (texts and secondary materials) will be given during the semester. These quizzes will ask questions regarding plots, characters, and other basic matters of comprehension. Their format will be announced during the second week. Missed quizzes may not be made up. Extra-credit points are granted to those students who turn up for the quizzes dressed in animal onesies.

Presentation (10%)

One presentation (15 minutes) on a primary source.

Midterm Paper (15%)

A short report (2 pages, single spaced) on one of the texts we read in class. Due Friday of week 7 by email.

Critical Essay (30%)

4 pages (single spaced). Your paper should discuss a single question/argument/issue arising from the texts read in class. Thinking of a genuine, original question is one of the hardest parts of being a literature scholar: so, start planning early. You are strongly encouraged to meet with me to discuss your ideas prior to starting the paper. Abstracts of your final paper (300 words, in Byzantine Greek) due via email Sunday of week 14, 5 PM. The abstract should contain the following information: a clear initial statement of purpose; a summary of the argumentation; some examples to be used in the argumentation. We will discuss your abstracts in the last class meeting. Therefore, be ready for a five-minute presentation of your proposed work, followed by a five-minute discussion. Final paper due via email Friday of Finals week, 5 PM. No extension will be granted. Don’t even ask. Dura lex, sed lex.
Week 1 (January 26-27) – Introduction to the Course

Friday

Introduction to the course. Reading of the syllabus. The Background of the Renaissance.

Week 2 (January 30 – February 3) – Renaissance?

Monday


Friday

F. Petrarca, Epistolae familiares (a. to Lapo da Castiglionchio on the scarcity of copyists; b. to Marcus Tullius Cicero; c. to Giovanni Boccaccio on humanist education; d. the Ascent to Mont Ventoux)

Week 3 (February 6-10) – Fragments of the Self

Monday

F. Petrarca, Secretum (book 3); P.K. Kristeller, Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance (“Petrarch”)

Friday

F. Petrarca, Rerum vulgarium fragmenta (selections); P. Hainsworth, “Rerum vulgarium fragmenta: structure and narrative”

Week 4 (February 13-17) – Homo Faber

Monday


Friday

M. Ficino, Five Questions Concerning the Mind; P.K. Kristeller, Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance (“Ficino”)

Week 5 (February 20-24) – How To Do Things with Words

Monday – Quiz 1*** P.P. Vergerio, The Character and Studies Befitting a Free-Born Youth; L. Bruni, The Study of Literature

Friday

L. Valla, On the Donation of Constantine; J. Burckhardt, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (“The Revival of Antiquity”)
Week 6 (February 27 – March 3) – Rinascimento and Anti-Rinascimento

Monday
L. ARIOSTO, Mad Orlando (cantos I, XII, XXII-XXIII, XXXIII-XXXIV); S. ZATTI, The Quest for Epic, pp. 38-59

Friday
TEOFILO FOLENCO, Baldus (books I, IV-VI)

Week 7 (March 6-10) – Birth and Rebirth: Renaissance Art

Monday
E.H. GOMBRICH, “The Conquest of Reality” (161-168);

Friday
G. VASARI, Lives of Famous Artists (“Life of Michelangelo”)
E.H. GOMBRICH, “Tradition and Innovation” (pp. 177-194), “Harmony Attained” (pp. 209-236);

Weeks 8/9 – Midterm recess
*** Reading of B. CASTIGLIONE, The Book of the Courtier (books 1 and 3)
Please plan accordingly: this text is neither easy nor short! You are expected to complete the reading, take notes, and meditate over the text by the first day of post-recess time.

Week 10 (March 27-31) – Life and Scandal at Court

Monday
B. CASTIGLIONE, The Book of the Courtier (books 1 and 3);

Friday
P. ARETINO, The Stablemaster

Week 11 (April 3-7) – How to Kill Your Enemies: Renaissance Politics

Monday – Quiz 2***
N. MACHIAVELLI, The Prince (1-13); C. CELENZA, Machiavelli: A Portrait (“The Prince”) 

Friday
N. MACHIAVELLI, The Prince (14-26); G. SAVONAROLA, On the Rule and Government of the City of Florence

Week 12 (April 10-14) – Boys Just Wanna Have Fun

Monday
N. MACHIAVELLI, The Mandrake

Friday
G. BRUNO, The Candlebearer

Week 13 (April 17-21) – Girls Just Wanna Have fun

Monday

**Week 14 (April 24-28) – Orthodox and Heretical Petrarchisms**


**Week 14 (April 24-28) – Ex officina Aldina: The Triumph of the Book**

Friday  *** Visit to Olin Library’s Special Collections & Archive  
A. MANUTIUS, “Prefaces” (selections); M. LOWRY, *The World of Aldus Manutius* (selections)

**Week 15 (May 1-5) – Education and Mis-Education**

Monday – Quiz 3***  G. DELLA CASA, *Galateo: Or, the Rule of Polite Behavior*  


**Week 16 (May 8-10) – The Bonfire of the Books: Twilight of the Renaissance**

Monday  G. BRUNO, *The Ash Wednesday Supper*  
T. CAMPANELLA, *The City of the Sun*

Friday  Contemporary Humanists at Wesleyan University  
Paper presentations and conclusions

**Bibliography**

***All texts will be provided in .pdf format except for the ones below (available at Broad Street Bookstore):***

BALDESAR CASTIGLIONE, *The Book of the Courtier*  
NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *The Prince*
Students with disabilities

Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a documented disability as defined by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and provide documentation of the disability. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Disability Resources as soon as possible.