The Cosmos of Dante’s *Comedy*

This course provides an in-depth introduction to Dante Alighieri’s 14th century masterpiece as a point of entry to the history of Western literature, philosophy, and science. The course combines a close analysis of Dante’s literary strategies with exercises in critical writing and in multimedia translation and adaptation, aimed at prompting critical reflection on the ways in which present cultural practices are built upon the practices of the past. The core of the course consists in an intensive study of Dante’s encyclopedic poem in relation to the culture and history of Medieval Europe. Major topics include: concepts of modernity and antiquity in the Middle Ages; shifting notions of authorship during the 13th and 14th centuries; vernacular poetics and the medieval genre system; medieval manuscript culture; gender and genre in Dante and the 12th-14th century lyric; intertextuality and imitation; classical and medieval language theory; Virgil and Ovid in the Middle Ages; Dante’s concepts of universal monarchy; myth and theology in Dante’s Christian poetics; the reception history of Dante’s work, 14th century to present.

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

**Course Objectives**

1. Acquire knowledge of the *Comedy* and its historical and cultural context.
2. Develop skills in analyzing the structure, themes, and ideas of the *Comedy*.
3. Develop the ability to construct coherent critical arguments concerning the form and content of the *Comedy*, and the ability to understand and respond critically to arguments put forward by others.
4. Incorporate dynamics of writing and reading in manuscript culture into the understanding of pre-modern texts.
5. Investigate the literary system of the late Middle Ages in the Romance cultures.
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.

Bibliography

Required Texts


Reference Works (on reserve)


Digital Dante

http://www.dantesociety.org/
http://dante.dartmouth.edu/
http://www.danteonline.it
http://www.mediasoft.it/dante/index.html
http://dante.ilt.columbia.edu/
http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/index.html
http://www.italnet.nd.edu/Dante/index.html
http://www.lieberknecht.de/dante/welc_old.html
http://domino.leonet.it/sdi/bibliografia.nsf/pgHOME
http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/
http://www.danteide.net/
http://www.worldofdante.org/
http://www.iath.virginia.edu/dante/
Course Assignments and Grades

Course Citizenship: Preparation, Attendance, Participation (25%)

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, 3% 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. When you read the *Comedy*, never omit going through the endnotes to each canto. Endnotes give you life.

Response Papers (20%)

Two pieces of analytical prose (2 pages each, single space) that cover class discussions and readings (texts and secondary materials) will be assigned during the semester. These papers will answer critical questions regarding plots, characters, and other basic matters of comprehension. Their format will be announced during the first week. **Due in class (no email) on 02/27 and 04/03.**

Curatorial Work (15%)

The critical annotation of one canto of *Paradiso*, following medieval practices of exegesis, compilation, rewriting, and illumination of Dante’s poem. Guidelines will be provided in the first weeks of class. **Due online 04/24.**

Oral Presentation (10%)

A brief (10 minutes) in-class presentation of 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.
Digital Dantethon (30%)

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 best, most imaginative Comedy-inspired project. Projects will be developed in teams of three/four, 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. A presentation session for the projects is scheduled for Thursday, May 3rd (including the presentation ceremony for the Bedeviled Dante Prize for the best student project). **Due 05/03.**

Lectura Dantis Wesleyana I: “Dante and Islam”

*Lectura Dantis,* from the Latin meaning “a reading of Dante,” indicates the public exegesis of Dante’s works. The readings have enjoyed centuries-old attention and popularity. Indeed, they date to Giovanni Boccaccio’s public readings of *Inferno,* in Florence’s Orsanmichele church on October 23rd, 1373. The Italian Section of the Department of Romance Languages & Literatures will host a lecture by Professor Andrea Celli (UConn) on the relationship between Dante Alighieri and Islam, the influence of Islamic culture on the *Divine Comedy,* and the encounters among religious traditions in the Mediterranean basin in the Middle Ages. The lecture will take place on April 10th at 4:30 PM in the RLL lounge. Light refreshments will follow. The lecture will be in lieu of our regular meeting. **The attendance to this lecture is, therefore, strictly mandatory.** This event is made possible through a grant from the Thomas and Catharine McMahon Memorial Fund.

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**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 Accessibility Services as soon as possible. If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact Accessibility Services, located in North College, rooms 021/022, or call 860-685-5581 to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. The procedures for registering with Disabilities Services can be found at: [http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/disabilities/index.html](http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/disabilities/index.html).
Syllabus


Week 1: January 25 – January 26

Thursday
Introduction to the course
Lecture: Dante, the man and the works

Week 2: January 29 – February 2

Tuesday
Lecture: What’s love got to do with it?
DANTE, Vita Nova (especially: I-V, X-XI, XIV, XIX-XX, XXVI, XXXIV-XXXV, XLI-XLII)
R. HARRISON, “Approaching the Vita Nuova” (CCD)

Thursday
Lecture: The Comedy: the name and the thing
Inferno 1-5
L. PERTILE, “Introduction to Inferno” (CCD)

Week 3: February 5 – February 9

Tuesday
Inferno 6-10
E. AUERBACH, “Farinata and Cavalcante” (in .pdf)

Thursday
Lecture: The moral architecture of Inferno
Inferno 11-15

Week 4: February 12 – February 16

Tuesday
Inferno 16-20
J. FRECCERO, “Allegory and autobiography” (CCD)

Thursday
Lecture: Allegory, symbol, figura
Inferno 21-25
K. BROWNLEE, “Dante and the classical poets” (CCD)

Week 5: February 19 – February 23

Tuesday
Inferno 26-30
P. GREENAWAY – T. PHILLIPS, A TV Dante (on YouTube)
Thursday       Lecture: The Birth of Purgatory  
*Inferno* 31-34, *Purgatorio* 1  
J.T. SCHNAPP, “Introduction to *Purgatorio*” (*CCD*)

**Week 6: February 26 – March 2**

**Tuesday**  
*Purgatorio* 2-6  
*** Response paper #1

**Thursday**  
Lecture: Dante’s languages  
*Purgatorio* 7-11

**Week 7: March 5- March 9**

**Tuesday**  
*Purgatorio* 12-16  
A.R. ASCOLI, “From *auctor* to author: Dante before the *Commedia*” (*CCD*)

**Thursday**  
*Purgatorio* 17-21

*** Weeks 8 and 9: March 9 – March 26 ***  
Mid-Semester Recess

**Week 10: March 26 – March 30**

**Tuesday**  
Lecture: Dante’s poets  
*Purgatorio* 22-27  
T. BAROLINI, “Dante and the lyric past” (*CCD*)

**Thursday**  
Lecture: Materiality and Textuality of the Comedy  
*Purgatorio* 28-33  
P.S. Hawkins, “Dante and the Bible” (*CCD*)

**Week 11: April 2 – April 6**

**Tuesday**  
*** Session to be held at Olin Library Special Collections  
J. AHERN, “What did the First Copies of the Comedy Look Like?” (in .pdf on Moodle)  
*** Response paper #2

**Thursday**  
*Paradiso* 1-3  
R. JACOFF, “Introduction to *Paradiso*” (*CCD*)
Week 12: April 9 – April 13

Tuesday  
*** *Lectura Dantis Wesleyana I:* “Dante and Islam”
RLL Lounge | 4:30 PM (You miss it, you die)
L. Girón-Negrón, “Islamic and Jewish influences” (in .pdf)

Thursday
Lecture: Dante’s politics
Paradiso 4-8
W. CAFERRO, “Empire, Italy, and Florence” (E-Reserves)

Week 13: April 16 – April 20

Tuesday  
Paradiso 9-13
J. J. ANNAUD, *The Name of the Rose* (on Moodle)

Thursday
Lecture: Dante's Church
*Paradiso* 14-18

Week 14: April 23 – April 27

Tuesday  
*Paradiso* 19-23
*** Curatorial work

Thursday  
*Paradiso* 24-28
A.N. WILLIAMS, “The theology of the Comedy” (*CCD*)

Week 15: April 30 – May 4

Tuesday
Lecture: Dante’s critical fortune
*Paradiso* 29-33

Thursday
*** Digital Dantethon – 1

Week 16: May 7 – May 9

Tuesday
*** Digital Dantethon – 2
Ceremony for the Bedeviled Dantethon Prize
Final discussion

[…] e poi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.

[…] thence we came out, and saw again the stars.