

SYLLABUS FOR ITL. 410: DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

Mon/Wed 11:30-12:50 Instructor: Lee Foust Tel: (366) 526-4723 e-mail: leefoust@gmail.com

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course we will undertake a close reading of the first two of the three canticles of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*. We will focus our in-class discussions upon specific episodes (in bold on the calendar below) in order to draw out and explore the contemporary significance of this complex text from our Occidental culture's Medieval past. We will seek to uncover the ways in which the poet blends elements of classical pagan literary culture with his own medieval literary traditions and Christian beliefs in order to create a text that still generates interest today, poetically, ethically, politically, historically and simply as a pleasurable read. Our study of the *Commedia* will be supplemented with several catabatic precedents from classical mythology and medieval mystical literature in an effort to illuminate the literary backgrounds of the medieval Christian catabatic poem.

PROCEDURES AND REQUIREMENTS

The calendar below represents the reading for which you will be responsible for each class session; it also tells you, above each assignment, the topic I would like to discuss about the passage. The numbers in bold represent specific *canti* upon which I would like to focus the in-class discussion—although questions and/or comments on the other *canti* are also welcome and we can be flexible if there is a general consensus to discuss episodes other than those that I have chosen. This course is a seminar and therefore I urge you strongly to take notes while you read and come to class prepared to ask questions, comment, complain about, trip on and explore the day's reading assignment without wasting our time with pointless trivia or lengthy personal digressions made solely to help your participation grade.

Beyond regular attendance, participation in the class discussions, and the completion of the requisite reading, students will be expected to complete two (5-7 pp.) writing assignments. These papers will deal with 2 different *canti/loci/topics/critical stances/historical interpretations* or what have you of your own choosing which approach the *Commedia* in some way. The first paper will be due on April 21st (no later than the end of that day's class session) and the second no later than the end of our session on the final day of class.

Grades will be based on the written work with positive or negative considerations for attendance and participation in the class discussions: roughly that's 40% for each paper and 20% for participation and attendance. Note: A student who does not complete one of the written assignments or who exceeds 6 absences will not receive a passing grade regardless of the percent values of the individual assignments on the grounds that they have not completed the course requirements.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Dante Alighieri, *The Commedia: Inferno and Purgatorio* (Any translation is acceptable as all have strengths and weaknesses. Generally speaking, the more foot and/or endnotes the better; a facing page translation that includes the original text also doesn't hurt. Most importantly, however, is the readability of the translation—read a few lines of the different translations that you find and buy the one that sounds best to you. If you want to try reading the whole or sections in Italian—for which indulgences will be given—get a scholastic (high school) edition with lots of helpful historical, literary and linguistic notes and commentary, e.g. Bosco/Reggio or Sapegno.)

In my humble opinion the best *Inferno* translation is that of Pinsky, but he hasn't yet done the other canticles. More recently Robert Hollander had translated the whole of the *Commedia* in single editions that have exhaustive notes and bibliographies. Both Mandelbaum and Ciardi's translations are far superior to Musa's and are comparably inexpensive, however, none of these translations have much in the way of scholarly apparatus.

Charles Singleton's exhaustive English-language commentary is also usually available at Paperback Exchange.

Texts marked 📄 are available as a photocopy packet at *copisteria* Ma.Be.

CALENDAR

Feb. 22: **Course Introduction.**

Feb. 24: **Backgrounds in Classical Epic Poetry**

Virgil, *Georgics*, Book IV (Excerpt)

March 1: **Backgrounds in Classical Epic Poetry**

Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XI 📄

Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI 📄

March 3: **Backgrounds in Medieval Folklore and Classical Epic Poetry**

Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI 📄

Anonymous, *Tundale's Vision* 📄

March 8: **Backgrounds in Medieval Folklore**

Anonymous, *Tundale's Vision* 📄

March 10: (Southern Italy Field Trip)

March 15: **Medieval Allegory**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I - III, I & II

March 17: **Lytic in the Epic**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto IV-VII, V

March 22: **Structure in Medieval Didactic Texts/Aristotle's *Ethics* Personified**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto VIII-XI, XI

March 24: **Epic Motifs and the *Contrapasso***

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XII-XIV, XIII

Virgil, Excerpt from *The Aeneid* 📄

March 29: **Medieval Exempla and Sins Personified**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XV-XIX, XV

Excerpts from *The Gesta Romanorum* 📄

March 31: **Post-Virgilian Epic and the *Contrapasso* (Lucan and Ovid)**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XX-XXV, XXV

Easter Break (April 2-11)

April 12: **Intellectual Autobiography? (Ulysses vs. Augustine/Public vs. Private)**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXVI-XXVIII, XXVI & XXVII

John Freccero, "Dante's Ulysses: from epic to Novel" 📄

April 14: **End Intellectual Autobiography? & the *Contrapasso* Revisited**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXIX-XXXI, XXVII/XXVIII

April 19: **New Religion Over Old: Isaac and the Father replace Oedipus and Jupiter**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXXII-XXXIV, XXXII/XXXIII)

☛ April 21: **The Place Between: Purgatory and Religious Folklore**

Jacobus De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, “The Commemoration of All Souls” ☞

Allegory, Exodus, Ulysses and the Aeneid: the Journey to Freedom

Purgatory I-III, I & II ll. 1-51. (First paper due.)

April 26: **Exercises in Rhetorical Style**

Purgatory IV-VI, V

Geoffrey of Vinsauf, excerpt from *Poetria Nova* ☞

April 28: **Classical Stories and Medieval Allegory: The First of Three Dreams**

Purgatory VII-X, IX

May 3: **Politics, Rivers and Envy**

Purgatory XI-XIV, XIV

May 5: **Half Way Home: Theology, Love and the Christian Epic**

Purgatory XV-XVIII, XVII & XVIII ll. 1-75

May 10: **Another Allegorical Dream and the Sins of Earthly Attachment**

Purgatory XIX-XX, XIX

May 12: **Status, textual Interpretation and the Christianization of Epic Poetry**

Purgatory XXI-XXIII, XXI/XXII

May 17: **The Last Word on Lyric Poetry**

Purgatory XXIV-XXVI, XXIV & XXVI

May 19: **The Bible Triumphs as the Aeneid Fades Away: the Return of Beatrice**

Purgatory XXVII-XXXIII, XXX

☞ Final exam class (date TBA): Summary or make-up class. **All** written work is due before the end of this session.

A NOTE ON METHOD

I do not believe that I—or anyone else—can coerce or cajole any passive student into “learning.” Rather I believe that intellectual progress is made through the sharing of ideas and interpretations. Therefore this course will be conducted as a seminar, and will be totally dependent upon your contributions and courtesy during the class sessions. It is therefore necessary that each of you take control of your own education—not only for your own sakes but also in accordance with your responsibility to the rest of the participants in this course. You must both keep up with the reading and begin the process of digesting the material by coming to class with something either to say or ask about it. **I strongly recommend that you take notes while reading** and that you come to class prepared to challenge and/or benefit from the group’s discussion. You cannot depend on me to lecture on material that you have not read, nor will I accept the role of monitor for your reading or policeman for discourtesy to the group during discussions. Concerns of this kind should be voiced and dealt with by the community during class sessions. Remember that I am only one of a group of people here to explore and learn from these interesting and challenging texts.

That said, I am extremely available both in class and out to offer my expertise and experience to help you experience, digest and write about this material. (I also have a lot of experience living, studying, and teaching in Florence and I offer a sympathetic ear to culture shock concerns as well!) This semester I will be available to discuss the course, its work or your cultural concerns from the time the class sessions end until around three PM, or via telephone or e-mail the rest of the time. I’m also always open to addressing both my methods and the materials of our study during the in-class discussions if the group as a whole is in agreement as to the utility and feasibility of altering anything. All of this is said only to clarify from the start my particular approach—based on the assumption that we are each mutually dependent individuals demanding of respect and ultimately responsible for our own intellectual progress—and to allow the greatest flexibility in our proceeding so that the most appropriate and useful materials and methods are addressed in this course.

Attendance Policy

This course is a seminar based upon the idea that your thoughts, opinions and learning are dependent upon your physical presence and participation in the discussions, therefore attendance, as in all CSU courses, is mandatory. Based on the time-tested observation that s**t happens, three absences during the semester will have neither a negative nor positive effect upon your final grade. Fewer than three absences will insure that a borderline grade will be rounded up (in my experience this is a frequently used recourse in courses such as this one which have only two graded written assignments) and one or fewer absences will earn your grade a step up. Four of five absences will result in the rounding down of a borderline grade, six will lower your grade a step and seven, without a damned good excuse and permission from the program director, will result in a grade of U (unexcused withdrawal) for the course.

In order not to disrupt the class, punctuality is required. Students are expected to be in class at the beginning of the class hour; any delay exceeding ten minutes will be considered an absence.

Dates of mid-term and final exams *can not* be changed for individual travel plans or personal needs. Students should take note of the dates and hours of the midterm and final exams and plan their trips *after* the last exam. It is important to inform friends and relatives about these exam dates so that no tickets are purchased for you that will interfere with these exam dates. Missing the midterm or the final exam will mean failure of the course.

Also

Photocopies and other material may be distributed in this class by the instructor. Students who were not in class are responsible for getting the material from their classmates and making their own photocopies.

To avoid distracting those interested in the class discussions, neither eating nor sleeping is allowed in this class. Please also try to attend to all bathroom needs before we begin and therefore avoid getting up and down and disturbing our seminar discussions. Please also remember to **turn off** your cell phone before we begin. I allow open computers for taking notes but, in the interest of keeping the class discussions lively and your own attention on the topics at hand, please confine your internet browsing to matters that might be salient to the matters at hand—no games, chats, Bookstalking or Skype calls please!

Look on the bright side, no dress code will be enforced.