

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

CSUIP Florence, Spring 2011

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

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

In this class we will undertake a close reading of the first two of the three canticles of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*. We will focus our 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 an adventure story that makes for a pleasurable read. Our study of the *Commedia* will be supplemented by the reading of several catabatic precedents from classical mythology and medieval mystical literature in an effort to illuminate the literary backgrounds of the medieval Christian poem recounting a journey through the land of the dead.

## **COURSE 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 reading assignment during that class session. The Roman numerals 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 class 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 comments 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** described above, students will be expected to complete two (5-7 pp.) critical writing assignments. These two essays will deal with 2 different *canti/loci/topcs/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 18<sup>th</sup> (no later than the end of that day's class session) and the second no later than the end of our to-be scheduled session during final exam week.

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 Divine Comedy* (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 reads 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 notes and commentary, e.g. those edited by 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 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 usually available at Paperback Exchange.

Texts marked ☞ are available as a photocopy packet at Ma.Be., just across the street from Cal State, FI.

## 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. Therefor this course will be conducted as a seminar, and will be totally dependent upon your contributions and courtesy during the class sessions. It is therefor 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 digest and write about this material. (I also have a lot of experience living, studying, and teaching here in Florence and I offer a sympathetic ear to culture shock concerns as well!) Although I have no official office hours this semester, I'm always available by appointment and very open during the in-class discussions to address both my methods and the materials of our study if the group as a whole is in agreement as to the utility and feasibility of altering them. 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.

## CALENDAR

Feb. 21: **Course Introduction**

Feb. 23: **Backgrounds in Classical Epic Poetry**

Virgil, *Georgics*, Book IV (Excerpt)

Feb. 28: **Backgrounds in Classical Epic Poetry**

Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XI

Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI

March 2: **Backgrounds in Medieval Folklore and Classical Epic Poetry**

Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI

Anonymous, *Tundale's Vision*

March 7: **Backgrounds in Medieval Folklore**

Anonymous, *Tundale's Vision*

March 9: **Medieval Allegory**

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

March 14: **Lyric in the Epic**

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

March 16: Southern Italy field Trip: no class

March 21: **Structure in Medieval Didactic Texts/Aristotle's *Ethics* Personified**

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

March 23: **Epic Motifs and the *Contrapasso***

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

Virgil, Excerpt from *The Aeneid*

March 28: **Medieval Exempla and Sins Personified**

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

Excerpts from *The Gesta Romanorum*

March 30: **Post-Virgilian Epic and the *Contrapasso* (Lucan and Ovid)**

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

April 4: **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 6: **End Intellectual Autobiography? & the *Contrapasso* Revisited**

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

April 11: **New Religion Over Old: Isaac and the Father replace Oedipus and Jupiter**

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

April 13: **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.

April 18: **Exercises in Rhetorical Style**

*Purgatory* IV-VII, V

Geoffrey of Vinsauf, excerpt from *Poetria Nova* ☰

April 20: **Classical Stories and Medieval Allegory: The First of Three Dreams**

*Purgatory* VIII-X, IX

**SPRING BREAK** (April 22-May 1)

May 2: **Art, Writing and Fame—the Proud**

*Purgatory* X-XII, XI

May 4: **Politics, Rivers and Envy**

*Purgatory* XIII-XV, XIV

May 9: **Half Way Home: Theology, Love and the Christian Epic**

*Purgatory* XVI-XVIII, XVII & XVIII ll. 1-75

May 11: **Statius, textual Interpretation and the Christianization of Epic Poetry**

*Purgatory* XIX-XXII, XXI/XXII

May 16: **The Last Word on Lyric Poetry**

*Purgatory* XXII-XXVI, XXIV & XXVI

May 18: **The Bible Triumphs as *the Aeneid* Fades Away: the Return of Beatrice**

*Purgatory* XXVII-XXXIII, XXX

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