

ACM Florence: Arts, Humanities, and Culture Program, Fall 2011



Dante's Divine Comedy and the City of Florence

Domenico di Michelino, “Dante Illuminating Florence with his Poem” (detail). Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence. Image available at the [Web Gallery of Art](#), created by [Emil Kren](#) and Daniel Marx.

Course Description and Goals

In this course we will study Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in the poet’s cultural milieu, in sites that nourished his creative imagination. We will approach the intricately woven poem the way we map a city: starting with its overall shape, the principles of its organization, the range of its characters, then exploring in analytical detail the barren expanses and dark alleys of *Inferno*, the artists’ workshops of *Purgatorio*, and the orderly, yet magical civic landscape of *Paradiso*. As Catherine Keen argues, “political ideas about the organization of human life into cities, kingdoms, that form so clear a strand in the *Commedia*, are communicated in a language, form and style that their author made immediately accessible and relevant to an Italian, urban audience.”¹ We will study this language and the poetic traditions it evokes and revises (Biblical and classical literature, medieval lyric, courtly romance, the allegorical tradition). We will also study the poem’s interfaces with the visual and literary art that its original “readers,” including those who heard it read aloud in the piazzas of Florence, would have been so familiar with (church art representations of religious themes such as the Last Judgment, saints’ lives, biblical narratives; panel paintings, etc.). Finally, we will discuss the *Commedia*’s commentary on the political divisiveness and turmoil of Dante’s era and its envisioning of imperial utopia.

The course will be taught in English, but we will use a bilingual edition of the *Commedia* and on occasion, will sound out Dante’s cadences. Every week, we will take our books to relevant sites

¹ Catherine Keen, *Dante and the City*, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing (2003), 11.

in Florence and nearby Tuscan cities to unravel significances generated at the intersection of locale and literary and artistic texts.

Texts (at the Paperback Exchange)

The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso. A verse translation by Allen Mandelbaum.

Course Requirements

Attendance/ Participation (20%): In every venue, energetic listening (including note-taking and thoughtful engagement with others' ideas) and culturally sensitive-behavior are assumed. In addition, you are expected to attend all class meetings and site visits; abide by the *10 Commandments of Study Abroad* and honor the needs of the group; arrive at destinations on time; treat with politeness and unselfishness all peers, lecturers, and staff at the sites.

A Dante “reflectory” (30%), in which you copy and briefly explicate passages from the assigned readings juxtaposed with relevant photos, clippings from tourist brochures, your own drawings, creative prose or poetry responding to the readings. This is both a treasury of intellectual discovery and book art. You will sign up to share with the class entries on three cantos (one from each canticle), but please bring your reflectory to all class meetings and make sure to refer to it in discussion. I will collect the reflectories halfway through the course to give you feedback; they will be graded holistically. What matters most is the quality of your engagement with Dante's poetry, including your creative effort.

Worksheets on each of the three canticles (15%).

Photos of five sites and/or objects contributing to the course's “Dante and the City” visual database, with a proper description and a detailed analytical explication of their relevance to specific passages of the poem (3 pages per photo). Feel free to expand on material from your reflectories (25%).

A final exam (10%), to include slides from Dante-relevant sites and objects, and an oral presentation on your contribution to the “Dante and the City” database.

Schedule

Week 1

1st class: Introduction to the course and Dante's poetic agenda (the *Commedia* as an epic, and as a geographic, moral, and historical cosmology). **Sign-up for presentations on your reflectory entries (one per canticle).**

2nd class: Keen, “Dante and His City: The Urban Example of Florence” (online); *Inferno*, I-IV. Class starts at Santa Maria Novella (*Commedia* frescoes in Cappella Strozzi di Mantova, “Harrowing of Hell” in Cappella Spagnuolo) and finishes at the Duomo.

Week 2

1st class: *Inferno* V-XI.

2nd class: *Inferno* XIII, XV-XVIII. Field trip to Sienna (Amrogio Lorenzetti, *Good and Bad Government* in Palazzo Pubblico; church art narratives at the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena).

Week 3:

1st class: *Inferno* XIX, XXI, XXII, XXIV-XXV.

2nd class: *Inferno* XXVI-XXVIII.

Week 4: Break (Buon viaggio!).

Week 5

1st class: *Inferno* XXXI-XXXIV. Class meets at the Baptistery.

2nd class: Guided visit to Biblioteca Riccardiana (and Boccaccio’s copy of the *Commedia*). [Hopefully.] **Due: worksheet on *Inferno*.**

Week 6

1st class: *Purgatorio* I-II, VI, IX.

2nd class: *Purgatorio* X-XII. Field trip to Pisa, Campo dei Miracoli (focus on Baptistery and Camposanto memorial shrines). **Turn in your reflectories for feedback.**

Week 7

1st class: *Purgatorio* XIII, XV-XVI.

2nd class: *Purgatorio* XIX, XXI-XXII.

Week 8

1st class: *Purgatorio* XXIX-XXXII. Class meets at Palazzo Medici-Riccardi to visit Cappella dei Magi.

2nd class: *Purgatorio* XXXIII, *Paradiso* I, III. **Due: worksheet on *Purgatorio*.**

Week 9

1st class: *Paradiso* VI, X-XI. Class meets in Santa Croce (Giotto and others on the life of St. Francis).

2nd class: *Paradiso* XV-XVII (with a walk of Cacciaguida’s 12th c. city, including a mini trip to the Amidei Tower, Chiesa di Santo Stefano, Ponte Vecchio).

Week 10

1st class: *Paradiso* XVIII-XX.

2nd class: *Paradiso* XXIII, XXV, XXXI-XXXIII. Return to Santa Croce (Dante memorial and Cappella Baroncelli).

Week 11

1st class: Review for the final exam and workshop of database contributions. **Due: worksheet on *Paradiso*.**

2nd class: **Oral exam** (identification of Dante-relevant sites and objects and presentation on your contributions to the “Dante and the City” database). **Due: a digital copy of your database project.**

Important note: This syllabus is very much a work in progress and will be finalized at the start of the fall 2011 semester. Some of the class visits will be arranged in conjunction with other ACM Florence courses.