

Reading Dante's *Comedy*: Text and Context

Module aims:

I expect your father has been reading Dante': thus, the memorable reply from Cecil Vyse in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View*, upon hearing George Emerson repeat his father's assertion 'that there is only one perfect view—the view of the sky straight over our heads, and that all these views on earth are but bungled copies of it'. Cecil Vyse assumes that a knowledge of Dante is simply part of the cultural baggage of any literate gentleman. Very few authors from the medieval period have so pervasively influenced writing in so many European languages across successive centuries right down to the present day. Arguably, a knowledge of the work of Dante remains a vital part of the cultural baggage of any literate, critical reader. Medievalists find in the poem a philosophical, theological, political and literary synthesis of much that is crucial in their period, but Renaissance scholars, Romanticists, Victorianists and modernists all find many concerns of their respective periods worked out in response to the poem.

The *Comedy* can, however, be a daunting poem, and risks being cited more often than it is read. This module will introduce readers to this masterpiece of European literature. The poem will be read in English translation, assuming no prior knowledge of Italian.

The aim of the module is to introduce students to Dante's *Comedy*, setting the poem in its cultural and literary context; students will be introduced to the poem's structure and moral architecture, and the module will proceed with close readings of some of its most famous *canti*, such as (amongst others) *Inf.* 5 (Paolo and Francesca), *Inf.* 10 (Farinata and Cavalcanti), *Inf.* 26 (Ulysses), and *Par.* 11 (St Francis of Assisi).

Module aims include:

- To give students the opportunity to develop a sound understanding of Dante's *Comedy*
- To give students a knowledge of major trends in modern Dante scholarship
- To enable students to develop their skills in close-reading

Module learning outcomes:

Students will be able to —

- undertake a research-led essay project addressing the aims of the module
- undertake with confidence a close-reading of relevant parts of the *Comedy*
- speak and write with confidence on a variety of aspects of Dante, his context and his great poem.

Academic and graduate skills

- Students will demonstrate advanced skills of writing appropriate to a postgraduate degree
- Gain a set of skills which will complement the core-courses for a variety of MA programmes offered by the Department of English and Related Literature

Key texts:

There are several single-volume translations, but particularly useful is that of Allen Mandelbaum (Everyman, 1995). Parallel translations will prove particularly useful, enabling comparisons with the Italian as well as keeping an eye on rhyme words, line endings, and the appearance of key words; the best is the translation and facing-text prepared by Robert M. Durling and Ronald M. Martinez, 3 vols (OUP, 1996-2011), which has superb notes; there is also the excellent facing translation of Robin Kirkpatrick, 3 vols (Penguin, 2006-2007).

Frequent reference will be made to Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the Bible. Readers will find useful having a translation to hand of Dante's early work, *La Vita nuova* ('The New Life'), available in many translations (those of Barbara Reynolds and Mark Musa for example).

Secondary reading:

John A. Scott, *Understanding Dante* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); Stephen Bemrose, *A New Life of Dante* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000); Rachel Jacoff (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Nick Havely, *Dante* (Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

Further contextual bibliography:

John Larner, *Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch, 1216-1380* (London: Longman, 1983); Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (London: Allen Lane, 1980); and on Dante's reception in English, see now: Nick Havely, *Dante's British Public: Readers and Texts, from the Fourteenth Century to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).