Mendicant Orders and Literature in Italy (13th-14th Centuries)

Handbook

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INTRODUCTION

The seminar series on 'Mendicant Orders and Literature in Italy (13\textsuperscript{th}-14\textsuperscript{th} centuries)' aims to provide a general and systematic overview of the origins of Italian literature from the point of view of its relation to the Mendicant Orders. Since its very earliest stages, in fact, Italian literature is closely related to medieval religious life. In particular, it is bound up with the emerging Mendicant Orders, primarily the Franciscan and the Dominican Orders. It is emblematic that the best known of the very earliest texts of Italian literature is the \textit{Cantico di Frate Sole}, composed by St Francis of Assisi.

The topic will be enquired from a broader perspective, that will involve not only Italian Studies, but also Medieval History, History of the Book and History of Education. Italian Literature, in fact, stems as a complex, eminently textual phenomenon, that deeply and immediately involves religious aspects, not only as regards contents. This intertwined relationship involves also poetic and formal aspects, affecting both production and reception of texts. The new-born Mendicant Orders, that immediately engage with problems regarding textuality, education and communication, are absolute protagonist of this process from its earliest steps.

SEMINARS PROGRAMME

Introductory lecture
19 April

1.  \textbf{The Franciscan Order and the Origins of Italian Literature (1)}
26 April – 5-6.30 pm, Baines Wing SR (G.23)
   • Giuseppe Mazzotta (Yale University): St Francis' works (videoconference)
   • Matteo Leonardi (independent scholar): the lauda and its practice among confraternities, with special regard to Iacopone da Todi

2.  \textbf{The Franciscan Order and the Origins of Italian Literature (2): Dante}
4 October
   • Davide Bolognesi (Columbia University): Ubertino da Casale and Dante
   • Nick Havely (University of York): Franciscans, Dante and England (discussing Ruggiero d'Eraclea and Giovanni da Serravalle)

3.  \textbf{The Dominican Order and the Origins of Italian Literature}
26 October
   • Nicolò Maldina (University of Pisa): Preaching and Dante
   • Lina Bolzoni (Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa): the Dominican Order and Trecento Italian Literature

4.  \textbf{Friars' books and education in the late Middle Ages}
1 November (tbc)
   • M. Michèlle Mulchahey (Toronto Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies): Dominican Educational System
   • Rene Hernandez-Vera (University of Leeds - IMS): the Franciscan book
MENDICANT ORDERS

The earliest Mendicant Orders are:

1. Preachers, or Dominican Friars (ordo praedicatorum, OP): officially established in 1215-6
2. Friars Minor, or Franciscan Friars (ordo fratrum minorum, OFM): the Order received papal approbation and developed its own Rule through 1209 to 1222
3. Carmelites (ordo fratrum beatissime Mariae Virginis de Monte Carmelo, OCarm): previously founded in Palestine, the Order established itself in Europe and received papal approbation through 1210 to 1226
4. Hermits of St Augustine (ordo eremitarum sancti Augustini, OESA): 1256

Definition:
«Mendicant Friars are members of those religious orders which, originally, by vow of poverty, renounced all proprietorship not only individually but also (and in this differing from the monks) in common, relying for support on their own work and on the charity of the faithful. Hence the name of begging friars. There remain from the Middle Ages four great mendicant orders, recognized as such by the Second Council of Lyons, 1274 [...] — the Order of Preachers, the Friars Minor, the Carmelites, and the Hermits of St. Augustine. Successively other congregations obtained the privilege of the mendicants».¹

The «mendicant “quadrilogy” represented the last and classic expression of medieval organized religious life».²

Main features:
1. poverty
2. theological orthodoxy
3. obedience to the Roman Church and to the Pope
4. choice of an active life, that engages with every-day life and urban society:
   a. ‘houses’ in cities vs hermitic monasteries (e.g. Benedictines, Cistercians)
   b. commitment to preaching

Immediate dissemination: by 1230, both Franciscans and Dominicans had houses and schools across all Europe.

² Luigi Pellegrini, ‘Che sono queste novità?’. Le religiones novae in Italia meridionale (secoli XIII e XIV), 2nd ed. (Napoli: Liguori, 2005), 28 [my transl.].
St Francis (Assisi, 1181/2 – 1226)
Form of life based on the radical idea of "following Christ":
• absolute personal poverty
• commitment to the poorest and humblest in society
• communion with all God’s creatures

Immense echo; rapid growth of the fraternity → need for a Rule, a hierarchy and a governing structure

Conflict

Saint Francis’s form of life, very simple and far from any willingness of an ideological supremacy
the actual establishing of a powerful organization trusted and exploited by Papacy to fight against heresy and for missionary purposes

long-lasting tension within the Order. During the 13th and 14th century

‘Spirituals’, who asked for a return to the original Franciscan inspiration and absolute poverty
‘Conventual’, or Regular friars: actual non-sustainability of such a proposal in contemporary society and for such a big and structured organization

Studying and preaching

In order to preach effectively and to fight heresy, studying was the first task of every Dominican friar:
• creation of an articulated scholastic system inside the Order
• enhancement of research textual tools (partially developed before):
  - Division in chapters
  - Indexes, both of single works and thematic indexes, covering for instance the whole complex of patristic texts
  - Concordances of the Bible, both lexical and thematic
  - Collections of sermons that served as models
  - Dictionaries
• production of
- encyclopaedias (e.g. Vincent de Beauvais' *Speculum maius*)
- collections of hagiographical texts (e.g. Iacopo da Varazze's *Legenda aurea*, Domenico Cavalca’s transl. of the *Lives of Holy Fathers*)
- anthologies of various texts
- vernacular translations of religious, devotional texts
- collections of 'exempla': the *exemplum* is «a brief story told as real and ready to be embedded in a speech (usually a sermon) in order to persuade the audience through an edifying lesson».

Influenced by/influences on the genre of short story ('novella')

System shortly adopted by the other Orders and by Universities; textual practices immediately widespread.

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AUTHORS & TEXTS

1) St Francis of Assisi, *Cantico delle Creature* (Song of Brother Sun), c. 1225

After a painful illness, St Francis composed the *Song of Brother Sun*, *of Creatures* (the Latin title is *Laudes creaturarum*), which «starts by singing the praises of God for creating the sun, moon and stars, then after thanking Him for the four elements, concludes in gratitude for patience in suffering and for Death itself. […] Francis pantheistic celebration is written in assonantal prose, with what was an originally marked Umbrian timbre ennobled by biblical turns of phrase and notions of Latin rhetoric. The use of vernacular [*rather than Latin*] was, of course, linked to the essentially popular nature of this new piety».

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Altissim, onnipotente bon Signore,  
Tuc so’ le laude, la gloria e l'honore et onne benedictione.

Ad Te solo, Altissimo, se konfano,  
et nullu homo ène dignu te mentovare.

Laudato sie, mi' Signore cum tucte le Tue creature,  
spetialmente messor lo frate Sole,  
lo qual è iorno, et alluminu noi per lui.

Et ellu è bellu e radiante cum grande splendore:  
de Te, Altissimo, porta significacione.

Laudato si', mi Signore, per sora Luna e le stelle:  
in celu l'ài formate clarite et pretiose et belle.

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per frate Vento  
et per aere et nubilo et sereno et onne tempo,  
per lo quale, a le Tue creature dài sustentamento.

Laudato si', mi Signore, per sor'Acqua.  
la quale è multo utile et humile et pretiosa et casta.

Laudato si’, mi Signore, for frate Focu,  
per lo quale ennallumini la noite:  
ed ello è bello et iocundo et robustoso et

Most high, all-powerful, all good, Lord!  
All praise is yours, all glory, all honor  
And all blessing.

To you alone, Most High, do they belong.  
No mortal lips are worthy  
To pronounce your name.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all that you have made,  
And first my lord Brother Sun,  
Who brings the day; and light you give to us through him.  
How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendor!  
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars;  
In the heavens you have made them, bright  
And precious and fair.

All praise be yours, My Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,  
And fair and stormy, all the weather's moods,  
By which you cherish all that you have made.  
All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water,  
So useful, lowly, precious and pure.  
All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brother Fire,  
Through whom you brighten up the night.

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forte.
Laudato si', mi Signore, per sora nostra matre Terra,
la quale ne sustenta et governa,
et produce diversi fructi con coloriti fior et herba.

How beautiful is he, how gay! Full of power and strength.
All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Earth, our mother,
Who feeds us in her sovereignty and produces
Various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Laudato si', mi Signore, per quelli che
perdonano per lo Tuo amore
et sostengono infmitate et tribulatione.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through those
who grant pardon
For love of you; through those who endure
Sickness and trial.

Beati quelli ke 'l sosterranno in pace,
ka da Te, Altissimo, sirano incoronati.

Happy those who endure in peace,
By you, Most High, they will be crowned.

Laudato s' mi Signore, per sora nostra
Morte corporale,
da la quale nullu homo vivente pò skappare:
guai a quelli ke morrano ne le peccata mortali;
beati quelli ke trovarà ne le Tue sanctissime voluntati,
ka la morte secunda no 'l farrà male.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through
Sister Death,
From whose embrace no mortal can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
Happy those She finds doing your will!
The second death can do no harm to them.

Laudate et benedicete mi Signore et
rengratiate
e serviateli cum grande humilitate.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks,
And serve him with great humility.  

2) Psalm 147 (King James Bible)

The model for any kind of lauda (song of praise) is the final section of the biblical book of Psalms.

Praise ye the Lord: for [it is] good to sing praises unto our God; for [it is] pleasant; [and] praise is comely.
The Lord doth build up Jerusalem: he gathereth together the outcasts of Israel.
He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.
He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by [their] names.
Great [is] our Lord, and of great power: his understanding [is] infinite.
The Lord lifeth up the meek: he casteth the wicked down to the ground.
Sing unto the Lord with thanksgiving; sing praise upon the harp unto our God:
Who covereth the heaven with clouds, who prepareth rain for the earth, who maketh grass to grow upon the mountains.
He giveth to the beast his food, [and] to the young ravens which cry.

He delighteth not in the strength of the horse: he taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man. The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy. Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem; praise thy God, O Zion. For he hath strengthened the bars of thy gates; he hath blessed thy children within thee. He maketh peace [in] thy borders, [and] filleth thee with the finest of the wheat. He sendeth forth his commandment [upon] earth: his word runneth very swiftly. He giveth snow like wool: he scattereth the hoarfrost like ashes. He casteth forth his ice like morsels: who can stand before his cold? He sendeth out his word, and melteth them: he causeth his wind to blow, [and] the waters flow. He sheweth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and [as for his] judgments, they have not known them. Praise ye the Lord.

3) Iacopone da Todi (Todi, 1230/36– Collazzone, 1306), O Regina cortese (O Queen of all courtesy)

Iacopone is the most important and famous author of laude. He was a lawyer, who had a sudden conversion to penitence after his wife’s death. For about ten years he lived as a wandering ascetic; in 1278 he joined the Franciscan Order as tertiary (lay brother). He was very close to the group of the Spirituals. He was imprisoned and excommunicated by Pope Boniface VIII in 1298.

O Regina cortese,
e o so’ a vvui venuto,
c’al meo core feruto
deiate medecare!
Eo so’ a vvui venuto
com’omo desperato;
perduto onn’altro adiuto,
lo vostro m’è lassato;
s’e’ nne fusse privato,
farime consumare.

Lo meo cor è feruto,
Madonna, no ’l so dire;
et a tal è venuto
che comenza putire;
non deiate suffrire
de volerm’adiutare.

Donna, la sufferenza
si mm’è pericolosa,
lo mal pres’à potenza,
la natura è dogliosa;
siatene cordogliosa
de volerm’er sanare!

O Queen of all courtesy,
To thee I come and I kneel,
My wounded heart to heal,
To thee for succour I pray –
To thee I come and I kneel,
For lo! I am in despair;
None other help can heal,
Thou only wilt hear my prayer:
And I should lose thy care,
My spirit must waste away.

My heart is wounded more,
Madonna, then tongue can tell;
Pierced to the very core;
Rottenness there doth dwell.
Hasten to make me well!
How canst thou say me nay?

Madonna, so fierce the strain
Of this my perilous hour,
Nature is turned to pain,
So strong is evil’s power;
Be gracious, O Ivory Tower!
My anguish touch and allay.
The religious genre of lauda clearly shows how the boundaries between religious and lay literature are quite difficult to trace. There is an ongoing exchange of patterns, themes and rhetorical devices. On one side, the religious lauda frequently adopts some linguistic pattern of love poetry, to describe the longing for a mystical union with God. On the other side, love courtly poetry exploited the concept of praise and some patterns of the lauda genre to develop the praise of the beloved woman.

4) Dante Alighieri (Florence, 1265 - Ravenna, 1321)

Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare

Dante Alighieri is probably the most famous Italian poet. He was born in Florence in 1265 and died in Ravenna in 1321. The following sonnet is an example of the so-called 'praise-style', totally devoted to an unselfish description of his lady’s exceptional virtues, that tends to spiritualize through poetry a profane experience of love.

Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
la donna mia quand'ella altrui saluta,
ch'ogne lingua deven treman do muta,
e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardarare.

Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,
benignamente d'umiltà vestuta;
e par che sia una cosa venuta
da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.

Mostrasi si piacente a chi la mira,
che dà per li ochi una dolcezza al core,
che 'ntender no la può chi no la prova:
e par che de la sua labbia si mova
un spirito soave pien d'amore,
che va dicendo a l'anima: Sospira.

All that I had is spent:
In nothingness am I drest;
Make me Thy instrument,
Thy servant ransomed and blest:
He Who drank from Thy breast,
Madonna, the price will pay.

Paradiso, XI-XII

Dante’s most famous work is a poem called the Divine Comedy, Commedia in Italian, probably written between 1306 and 1321.

«The Commedia claims to be the true account of a journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise which the poet Dante undertook, by the explicit will of God and through the

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7 Transl. Mark Musa 1965, partially modified by myself.
intercession of his beloved Beatrice, when he was thirty-five years of age in the year 1300 – a year of crucial significance not only in marking the beginning of a new century and the first Holy Year declared by Pope Boniface the VIII […] The journey starts on the night of Good Friday and ends a week later, coinciding thus with the liturgical recurrence of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. It leads to the salvation of its protagonist and to the making of a ‘sacred poem’ whose purpose is the salvation of the whole world». \(^8\)

Some key-points:
- Prophetic tone, apocalyptic perspective
- Emphasis on the need for a renewal of the Church, inspired by the Franciscan ideal of poverty (close to Spiritual Franciscans)
- *Summa* of medieval culture: science, theology, ethics, everything directed to a spiritual, edifying goal

*Paradiso* 11-12: these two cantos are devoted respectively to St Francis and St Dominic, whose life-stories are told by St Thomas Aquinas and St Bonaventure.

\(^8\) Lino Pertile, ‘Dante’, in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, 55.
The Dominican friar Domenico Cavalca is the author of the vernacular translation he \textit{Lives of Holy Fathers} (c. 1330), the most ancient collection of monastic hagiographic texts. This work is part of a larger enterprise of “vernacularization” and popularization of Latin culture.

«Texts translated by him, crossing the boundaries of convents, impose themselves on and dominate the imagination and devotion of the laity. The ‘volgarizzamenti’ made by him and his fellow workers are the most successful moment of that programme of popularization of religious culture, that the Mendicant Orders pursue through vernacular preaching and the translation of the most important monuments of sacred literature».\footnote{C. Delcorno, ‘Cavalca, Domenico’, in \textit{Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani}, vol. 22 (Roma: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 1979) [my transl.].}

Cavalca’s prose is a masterpiece of Italian literature and was considered as a model even in the 19th century.

Cavalca has also been recognized as the designer of some frescoes in Pisa’s Camposanto (prob. c. 1336-1342), painted by Buffalmacco.

\textit{Hermits in the desert.}
The triumph of Death.

The fresco has to be read as a meditation on death, that triumphs on every one, never mind his social status. The courtly form of life, represented by the young brigade in the garden on the bottom right, is destined to be overcome by the plague.

1348: Black Death.

Post-1348: Giovanni Boccaccio writes his Decameron, a collection of 100 short stories (‘novelle’) told by a brigade of ten young men and women. At the beginning of the narrative framework, we are being told that during the Black Death they meet in the Dominican Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella and «decide to retreat to a villa in the nearby hills to escape not only the disease, rampant in the city, but also the moral corruption and civic decay it has engendered». They will spend two weeks in a pleasant villa with a nice garden telling stories.

re-interpretation of the fresco:
mediation on death → revaluation of “storytelling in the garden” as a noble cultural and social activity vs condemnation and contempt of the mundane world

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Bibliographical suggestions


M. Michèle Mulchahey, "First the Bow Is Bent in Study": *Dominican Education Before 1350*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998)


