



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

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 (13th-14th 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 *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. *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. *The Franciscan Order and the Origins of Italian Literature (2): Dante*

4 October

- **Daide 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. *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. *Friars' books and education in the late Middle Ages*

1 November (tbc)

- **M. Michèle 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
- } vs heretical
pauperistic groups

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

¹ L. Olier, “Mendicant Friars”, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York: Appleton Co., 1911 [retrieved April 16, 2012 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10183c.htm>].

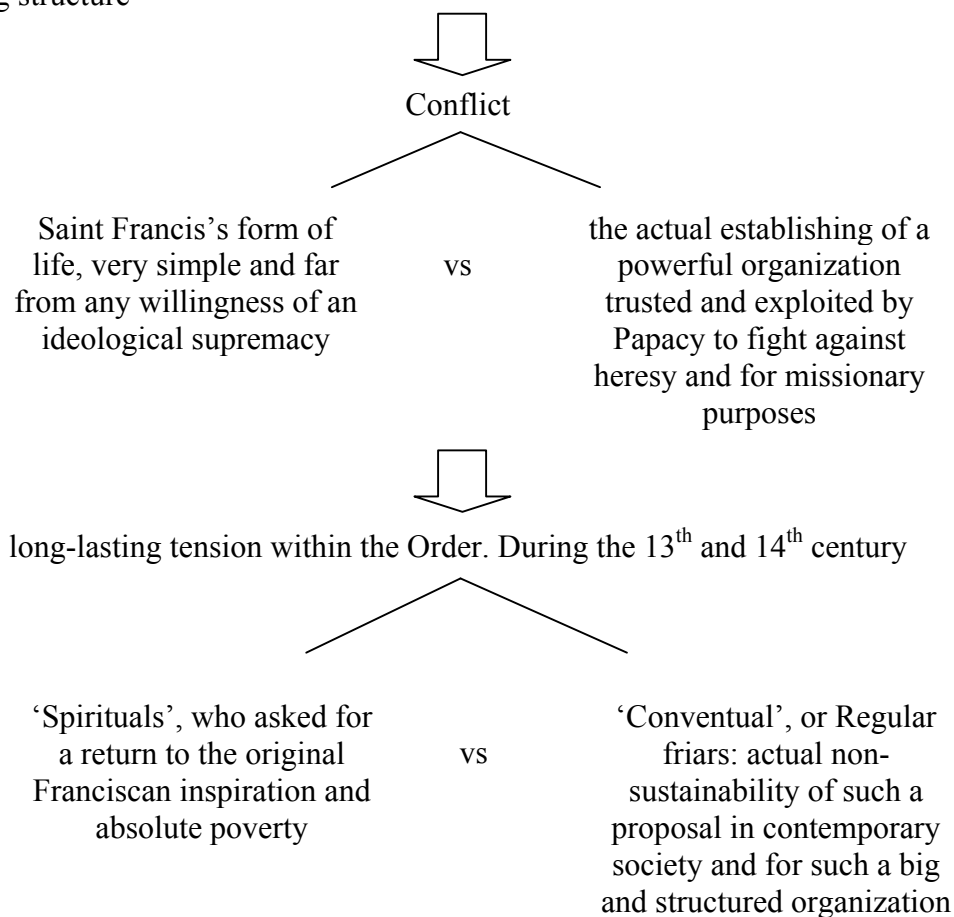
² Luigi Pellegrini, ‘*Che sono queste novità?*’. *Le religiones novae in Italia meridionale (secoli XIII e XIV)*, 2nd ed. (Napoli: Liguori, 2005), 28 [my transl.].

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



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».³ Influenced by/influent on the genre of short story ('novella')

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

³ J. Le Goff in Claude Bremond, Jacques Le Goff, and Jean Claude Schmitt, *L'Exemplum*, «Typologie Des Sources Du Moyen Age Occidental», fasc. 40 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1982), 38 [*my transl.*].

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 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».⁴

Altissimu, onnipotente bon Signore,
Tue so' le laude, la gloria e l'honore et onne
benedictione.

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

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

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

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

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.

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

How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his
splendor!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

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

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

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

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.

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

All praise be yours, my Lord, through
Sister Water,
So useful, lowly, precious and pure.

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

All praise be yours, my Lord, through
Brother Fire,
Through whom you brighten up the night.

⁴ *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 5.

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.

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

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

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.

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

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.
All praise be yours, my Lord, through those
who grant pardon
For love of you; through those who endure
Sickness and trial.
Happy those who endure in peace,
By you, Most High, they will be crowned.

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.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him
thanks,
And serve him with great humility.⁵

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 lifteth 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.

⁵ Translation by Benen Fahy, O.F.M., from *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, ed. Marion A. Habig (Franciscan Herald Press 1973).

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,
 eo 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 soffrire
 de volerm'adiutare.

Donna, la sufferenza
 si mm'è pericolosa,
 lo mal pres'à potenza,
 la natura è dogliosa;
 siatene cordogliosa
 de volerme 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.

Non aio pagamento,
tanto so' annichilato;
fatt'è de me stromento,
servo recomparato.
Donna, 'l prezzo c'è dato,
Quel c'avisti a lattare.

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 pay⁶.

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 tremando muta,
e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.

Such noble and decent my lady appears
when she salutes, that lips can only
tremble into silence, and eyes dare not
attempt to gaze at her.

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

Moving, benignly clothed in humility,
untouched by all the praise along her
way, she seems to be a creature come
from Heaven to earth, to manifest a
miracle.

Mostrasi sì piacente a chi la mira,
che dà per li occhi 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.

Miraculously gracious to behold, her
sweetness reaches, through the eyes,
the heart (who has not felt this cannot
understand), and from her lips it seems
there moves a gracious spirit, so deeply
loving that it glides into the souls of
men, whispering: "Sigh!"⁷

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

⁶ H. Henry, 'Iacopone the Hymnodist', *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, LXVII (1922), 183-93, 188-9.

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.

Suggested reading: *Paradiso* 11-12, transl. and commentary by Durling & Martinez, Oxford UP, 2011.

⁸ Lino Pertile, 'Dante', in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, 55.

5) Domenico Cavalca (Pisa, c. 1270-1342) and Giovanni Boccaccio (Certaldo, 1314-)

The Dominican friar Domenico Cavalca is the author of the vernacular translation he *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».⁹ 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.



Hermits in the desert.

⁹ C. Delcorno, ‘Cavalca, Domenico’, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 22 (Roma: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 1979) [my transl.].



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». ¹⁰ They will spend two weeks in a pleasant villa with a nice garden telling stories.



re-interpretation of the fresco:

~~meditation on death~~ → revaluation of “storytelling in the garden” as a noble cultural and social activity vs condemnation and contempt of the mundane world¹¹

¹⁰ Pamela D. Stewart, ‘The Trecento’, in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, 76.

¹¹ See Lucia Battaglia Ricci, *Ragionare nel giardino: Boccaccio e i cicli pittorici del ‘Trionfo della Morte’* (Roma: Salerno, 1987).

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