

Breaking (and Making) the Mold: Women in Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch



Course Overview

When you think of the 14th century, do you think of female readers and teachers, queens of expansive kingdoms, or witty women who challenge the status quo? Probably not. But such images of women can be found throughout early works of Italian literature. This course will analyze varying representations of women focusing on the most famous works of this period (Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Petrarch's *Canzoniere*), as well as lesser-known texts by authors such as La Compiuta Donzella and Guido Cavalcanti. Examining the diverse representations of women across texts authored by both men and women – as well as later readings and rewritings of them – will allow us to consider how ideas about gender were formed and contested, and how they have been interpreted up to the present day. We will also consider the relevance of these representations for contemporary feminist issues. How do these texts reflect or challenge our modern notions of gender? In what ways are they still pertinent today?

This class requires intense reading and writing. Sessions will include short lectures and discussions of the materials assigned for the week. Course taught in English. A preceptorial component is available for students who are interested in reading select texts and participating in a weekly discussion in Italian.

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Office Hours:

Course Objectives

By the end of this course you will be able to:

- Identify and describe how authors craft representations of women and men that are gender-specific
- Describe and analyze trends and themes regarding representations of men and women across texts
- Analyze a literary work using close reading techniques
- Evaluate competing claims and interpretations of a literary text
- Synthesize scholars' interpretations and compare them with your own interpretation of a text

Format and Procedures

The class will be built around weekly lectures, readings and discussions. Students are expected to do the readings before class and to participate actively in class discussions.

Course Readings

Required texts:

- Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Decameron*.
 - I recommend the English translation by Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella, or the one by G.H. McWilliam.

All other readings will be available on Sakai. For those interested in the Italian text, the edition of the *Decameron* published by Einaudi and edited by Vittore Branca is useful.

Assignments

- I. **Participation (20%).** You are expected to actively participate in class discussion with comments and questions. You will be evaluated not only on what you contribute but also on how you engage with your peers.
- II. **Summary of a secondary source (15%).** You will be expected to write a 2-page (double-spaced) summary of one of the secondary sources on the syllabus. You should turn in the summary no later than 2 weeks after the class for which the text was prepared.
- III. **Short Responses (2) (40%).** You will choose one text from the first half of the course, and one from the second half, and write your own 2-3 page close reading (double-spaced), analysing the text and the way it portrays women/men or uses gendered language. You should pay careful attention to language, context, and connections across the text or to other texts. While you may incorporate outside material, the goal of these responses is to articulate your own perspective rather than to summarize others'.
- IV. **Final Essay (25%)** A 7-8 page essay expanding one of your previous responses, including at least two of the texts we read in class. The topic should be developed in consultation with the instructor.

Academic Integrity

Duke University is a community dedicated to scholarship, leadership, and service and to the principles of honesty, fairness, respect, and accountability. Citizens of this community commit to reflect upon and uphold these principles in all academic and non-academic endeavors, and to protect and promote a culture of integrity. You are expected to uphold the [Duke Community Standard](#):

- I will not lie, cheat, or steal in my academic endeavors;
- I will conduct myself honorably in all my endeavors; and
- I will act if the Standard is compromised.

Accommodations for students with disabilities

We welcome all students with differing abilities and are happy to provide accommodations as needed. Please visit one of the two centers during the semester: the [Academic Resource Center](#) (in the Academic Advising Building on East Campus) or the [Student Disability Access Office](#) to

seek documentation that will inform your professor of any needed accommodation. Check with the ARC or SDAO regarding deadlines and requirements for accommodations.

Inclusivity Statement

We understand that our members represent a rich variety of backgrounds and perspectives. The Romance Studies Department is committed to providing an atmosphere for learning that respects diversity. While working together to build this community we ask all members to:

- share their unique experiences, values and beliefs
- be open to the views of others
- honor the uniqueness of their colleagues
- appreciate the opportunity that we have to learn from each other in this community
- value each other's opinions and communicate in a respectful manner
- keep confidential discussions that the community has of a personal (or professional) nature
- use this opportunity together to discuss ways in which we can create an inclusive environment in this course and across the Duke community

Preferred Contact

Please do not hesitate to contact instructor via email (alyssa.granacki@duke.edu) with any questions or comments. Expect a response within 24 hours (or one business day) of email delivery.

Tentative Course Schedule (*May change to accommodate guest presenters & student needs*)

Week	Topic	Readings
1	Introduction: Why women? Why medieval literature? Why Italy?	
1		Representations of Dido (Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Elena Ferrante)
2	What is a Woman? Identities in Question	Simone de Beauvoir. Introduction, History, and Myths in <i>The Second Sex</i> . (1949)
2		La compiuta donzella, <i>Sonetti</i> . Toril Moi "I am not a Woman Writer" (2008)
3	Boccaccio's <i>Decameron</i>	<i>Decameron</i> , Proem, Introduction to Day I
3		<i>Decameron</i> , II.3, II.7, II.9, II.10 Barolini, Teodolinda. "Le parole son femmine"
4		Introduction to Day IV, IV.1, IV.5, IV.9
4		Excerpts from Christine de Pizan <i>The Book of the City of Ladies</i> Woolf, Virginia. <i>A Room of One's Own</i> , excerpt.
5		V.10 Eisner, Martin and Marc Schachter. "Libido Sciendi"
5		VI.1, VI.7, VII.1, VII.2
6		VIII.7

		<i>Il Corbaccio</i> , excerpt.
6		XI.1, XI.2, XI.3
		X.10 Petrarch, <i>Seniles</i> 17.3
First Short Response Due		
7	<i>Dolce stil novo</i> and Dante	Guido Cavalcanti, <i>Donna me prega</i> Guido Guinnizelli, <i>Al cor gentil</i>
7		Sections 1-10, <i>Vita Nuova</i>
8		Responses to <i>A ciascun'alma presa</i> Visual representations of VN and Beatrice
8		<i>Rime Petrose</i> Ovid, <i>Amores</i> , 1.1, 1.7
9		Joan Kelly, "Did women have a Renaissance?" (1977)
9	Dante's <i>Divina Commedia</i>	<i>Inferno</i> 1-4 Boccaccio, <i>Esposizioni</i> Inf. 4
10		<i>Inferno</i> 5 Boccaccio, <i>Esposizioni</i> Inf. 5 Representations of Francesca da Rimini
10		<i>Purgatorio</i> 1-5
11		<i>Purgatorio</i> 25-33 Matilda of Canossa
11		<i>Paradiso</i> 1-5 Teodolinda Barolini, "Notes Toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature" (Beatrix Loquax)
Second Short Response Due		
12	Petrarch's Laura	<i>Canzoniere</i> 1, 3, 23, 52 Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i> , Diana and Actaeon
12		<i>Canzoniere</i> 122, 221, 266, 271, 364 Gaspara Stampa, <i>Rime</i> , selections
13	Boccaccio's Famous Women	<i>De mulieribus claris</i> , (Camilla, Penthesilea, Julia). Adriana Cavarero, <i>Relating Narratives</i> , excerpts
13		<i>De mulieribus claris</i> (Joan, Dido, Cornificia, Joanna, Laena)
14	Concluding discussion/Potential essay topic presentations	
14		
FINAL ESSAYS DUE		