



A Journey into the Late Medieval Italy with *The Inferno*

On their first day of reading *The Inferno*, my students experience the third-century catacombs of Rome. In the semi-darkness, I encourage them to describe the sights, sounds and smells of the catacombs, to engage with those sensory experiences, and to put the space of the catacombs in contrast to the heat, noise, and commotion of the world above ground. I ask them to think of that contrast for someone living centuries ago, when the above-ground city of Rome was a much more intense sensory experience. Pushing further, we consider the ways that these Early Christian monuments are also ancient Roman monuments. I point to the Roman architectural forms such as columns and arches and the Latin names and inscriptions that mark the graves. I also draw their attention to the early Christian symbolism such as the images of fish and anchors, and the early images of New Testament figures. Students build on all of this evidence to consider the difference between sacred and worldly, and how this difference shaped the religious experience of early Christians, actual named human beings who lived centuries ago. Finally, we consider the emotional effect of this contrast and the way it might have reinforced the separation between this world and the next.

Bringing twenty-first century American students to a third-century Roman catacomb in order to begin the study of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy might seem strange. Tying these elements together through a fourteenth-century Tuscan text, Dante's *Inferno*, surely seems even more so. Yet, I have found that combining *The Inferno* with this imaginative, interdisciplinary, and multi-sensory approach provides an excellent starting point for my courses

on Italian history between approximately 1300 and 1550. The approach worked in an eighteen-day travel-learning course I co-taught in 2012 but proved equally effective in a traditional college classroom setting in the United States. It would also be suitable for the K-12 classroom, using the same multi-sensory and interdisciplinary approach to meet modified learning goals.

A major learning objective for any of my courses, whether taught as a study abroad course or in a regular classroom, is for students to understand the meaning and goals of primary sources—non-textual as well as textual—to the creators and their contemporaries. To meet this goal, students need to understand the historical context well enough to consider the sources in that context. This historical grounding is especially important when covering late medieval Italian history from 1300-1550, the period of the Italian Renaissance. Students generally enter the course with an understanding of the Renaissance as a chronological period different from and better than the period that preceded it, while also harkening back to the more enlightened time of classical antiquity. This interpretation is grounded in Jacob Burckhardt's nineteenth-century definition of the Renaissance as the birth of modernity, individuality, and secularism. It is also influenced by a Whiggish view of historical progress towards capitalism and republicanism. Without being aware of the theoretical approaches, students absorb these interpretations through popular historical narratives and bring them to the college classroom. Their preconceptions lead students to latch on to the classical or seemingly-modern elements of late medieval Italian culture while ignoring those elements that do not support their view of the time period. This selective approach inhibits their ability to understand the real motives and worldviews of late medieval individuals.

My approach to teaching the developments in the Italian city-states from approximately 1300 to 1550 stresses overall continuity with the Middle Ages, as well as elements of change. I

argue that the Renaissance was an intellectual and artistic movement that occurred in the Late Middle Ages. The movement was grounded in and a product of a society that remained deeply and traditionally religious and dedicated to group identity, even while the economic developments, the growing prominence of civic identity, and the competition that resulted from these factors led to bureaucratic development and fueled artistic and intellectual innovation. This statement should not be interpreted as a rejection of the numerous scholarly arguments in favor of significant change leading to a chronological Renaissance period.<sup>1</sup> Rather, this is a pedagogical stance grounded in a goal of encouraging students to acknowledge preconceptions of history and to be open to the reshaping of their opinions through study of primary source evidence.

Further, I emphasize the seeming incongruities of the period. Savonarola gained enough support to turn Florence into a repressive theocracy at the same time that Botticelli painted images of naked Roman goddesses; northern Italians highly valued republicanism and the rights of citizens to a voice in politics at the same time that the patronage and protection of wealthy individuals were seen as normal and necessary parts of daily life; Isabella d'Este and other women were powerful patrons of the arts and political figures at the same time that women were perpetual legal minors. Students find such incongruities or contradictions unsettling and difficult to understand. However, such incongruities exist in any culture and are something that historians must grapple with. Particularly, these inconsistencies are prominent in late medieval Europe and, in my opinion, are part of the beauty of the culture.

*The Inferno*, as a description of a place created by Christian theology, co-habited by damned Christians and non-Christian alike, and explored with a pagan guide, is consciously

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<sup>1</sup> See, for one recent example, Guido Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 15.

chosen to push students to wrestle with the incongruities of medieval and modern, intellectual/theological and material, Christian and Humanist, that are the hallmarks and foundational elements of late medieval Italian culture. It also challenges students' Burckhardian preconceptions of the Renaissance as a secular era divorced from medieval theology. While I can encourage students to accept that uncomfortable juxtapositions exist, facing and working through these issues in *The Inferno* and other primary texts helps students do so much more effectively. Students are often understandably resistant to my suggestion that their understanding of the period is not complete, their repeated experience with the primary source texts pushes them to ask questions and break down their assumptions about the period and their need for consistency. With a more open mind about the period, students are more willing to turn to primary source evidence instead of their preconceptions to answer questions related to the historical period.

Connecting *The Inferno* to non-textual primary sources—monuments, as they are referred to in the context of the course—enhances and reinforces the messages, as well as caters to different learning styles and disciplinary interests. These monuments range from individual paintings and sculptures, such as Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, to buildings, such as the Parthenon, to larger urban sites, such as St. Peter's Square in the Vatican. In addition to readings and site visits—whether real or, in a traditional classroom, virtual visits—students each have to make a presentation on one monument, chosen in advance from a list. They give the background and discuss the significance of the monument on its own. They also link the monument to the day's readings and themes. On a travel learning course, these presentations take place at the sites themselves, while students in the traditional classroom are responsible for locating and presenting images to the class using PowerPoint or a similar technology.

Including the presentation of a monument as a graded assignment makes the monuments an essential part of the learning experience. In their presentation, students point out the innovation, classical antecedents, and beauty of the monuments, and also mention the more recent medieval antecedents of the monument. Students comment on the function of the monument, specifically considering how the monument was designed to meet the religious, civic, and political needs of the contemporary society. For example, on a day on which we discussed how late medieval people experienced Rome, one student presented on the Parthenon. That student described the monument's architectural features and why they are unique and noteworthy. The student then moved to describe the use and importance of the monument to the ancient Romans who built it as a temple to traditional Roman gods, the late antique Christians who converted the structure to a Christian church, and then finally presented what he knew of the structure's use and meaning in the late medieval period. The assignment encourages students in the comparative thinking and cultural and historical relativity that we try to instill in all liberal arts students.

I first took this approach in May 2012, when I co-taught an eighteen-day travel-learning course, *Florence in the Age of Petrarch*, listed under both History and English. While I did not come up with the course title, my co-teacher and I did have the freedom to design the course in terms of both academics and travel. We set a syllabus to correspond with a trip including six days in Rome, ten in Florence, and three in Venice. We took a group of nineteen college students from Hanover College in rural Southeastern Indiana, a mix of History and English majors with a few who were simply interested in the travel aspect. I subsequently brought these same approaches to a classroom-based, full-semester course, *Italy during the Renaissance*, at Florida International University, in Miami, in Fall 2014. That course enrolled 45 students, the vast

majority of whom were history majors but without much background in premodern history. In the traditional classroom course, I worked to duplicate, as much as possible, the immersive and multi-sensory experience of travel through technology, sources such as maps and images, descriptive language, and by tapping into the memories of those students with travel experience.

Both the travel-learning and the traditional classroom course began with *The Inferno*, which was written at the beginning of the period covered by the course (1300-1550), captivates the students with its mixture of the fantastical and the grotesque, and touches on many of the important historical themes of the course.<sup>2</sup> One learning object was for students to gain a solid understanding of late medieval Italian history, specifically politics, economics, religion, and social relations. A second was to analyze the way that this history led to and shaped the artistic monuments, including literature, of the period, and the way that the artistic monuments served the society in which they were created. *The Inferno* thereby served as an introduction and starting point for discussion on those topics.

The Catacomb of S. Calisto, just south of Rome, was the class's first destination in Italy in May 2012. Descending into the catacombs themselves, we felt like we were entering an entirely different world: cool, dark, quiet, and musty. We explored the early Christian art, learned about the astounding labor and engineering that went into the catacombs, marveled at the material remains left behind by people nearly two thousand years ago, and were awed by the sheer number of tombs, as well as our ability to know something about the identities of the deceased through their tomb markers. These points also came across in a classroom in Miami in Fall 2014, where I used a PowerPoint presentation of still images of the catacombs, presented in

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<sup>2</sup> Since I was using *The Inferno* as a jumping off point for broader discussion rather than doing detailed textual analysis, I recommended the Penguin Press edition as one that was both cost effective and readable, as well as easily portable, but I was willing to allow students to use other editions if they chose. John Najemy's edited *History of Italy in the Age of the Renaissance* was also an assigned text in both classes.

the order that a visitor would experience the site. Unlike video, PowerPoint forces the students to interpret the images in light of my questions and what they have read rather than allowing them to listen and watch passively. In addition, showing the PowerPoint with the lights low and distractions minimized best mimics the calm quiet of entering the catacombs themselves. The few students in any class who have actually visited the catacombs serve as our experts, describing the smells and sounds, but the rest can easily imagine the cool darkness and echoing noises in this classroom recreation. In the case of either being in Rome or experiencing the catacombs in the classroom, the realization that historical actors were human beings is inescapable in such a setting.

The catacombs mesh well with the interlacing of Christian and Classical themes in the text, and particularly with the number of classical figures and places in the first few cantos. Such a juxtaposition challenges the disconnect students assume existed between the Christian /medieval, and the Classical/Pagan/Renaissance. How can Virgil, a pre-Christian pagan, lead Dante through the Christian Hell? How can Charon, the Greek ferryman of the dead, also serve in this Christian setting in the same capacity? How can pagans like Ovid, Socrates, and Homer be simultaneously placed in the first circle of Hell (Limbo) and praised? Seeing the connection between the classical and the Christian in the visual form of classical Roman images of Jesus and John the Baptist, portraits of early Roman Christians, and tomb inscriptions in Latin not only confirms the apparent inconsistencies in the text but also provides a historical explanation and antecedent. The evidence of the Catacombs reduces the distance students assume existed between the antique and the Christian.

These images and the text also provide the opportunity to have an extended discussion on the meaning and practice of Roman Christianity in the fourteenth century. Students are often

surprised and confused by religious differences between modern and late medieval Christianity. Discussion of the first few cantos of *The Inferno* largely consists of student questions on sin; heaven, hell, and purgatory; confession and forgiveness; and the role of the Church in salvation. This discussion contributes to a strong foundation in late medieval religion—and particularly popular piety—that is necessary for understanding not just *The Inferno* but late medieval Italian society and the monuments it created.

The next cantos in *The Inferno* correspond to the sins of the leopard, sins of passion such as wrath, lust, gluttony, violence, and heresy. During the travel course, students paired these topics with a visit to the Galleria Borghese. Although the Galleria and the art in the collection date from the early 1600s, the end of the chronological period covered by my course, both the site and the artwork correspond well with punishment of those who “betrayed reason for their appetite.”<sup>3</sup>

In the Borghese’s collection, much of which can be viewed online through databases like ARTstor, there is a repetition of the intermixing of the classical and religious from the previous day’s lesson and that is continued in the readings for this day, Cantos V-XII. In the text, Dido and Cleopatra appear side-by-side with Christian souls like Paolo and Francesca in Canto V, with both stories melded together into one narrative. In the Galleria, however, the Christian and the Classical are separate but juxtaposed unapologetically. For example, the Caravaggio masterpieces include both *St. Jerome* and *Sick Bacchus*, *Madonna Palafrenieri*—a Madonna and Child with St Anne—and *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, a decidedly secular image. Students see similar juxtapositions in the inconsistent treatment of lust by the various artists, including Dante himself. Although Dante places the lustful firmly in Hell, he also treats them with great pity and tenderness in Canto V. One could read a similar treatment in Bernini’s *Pluto and Persephone* or

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<sup>3</sup> Dante, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Penguin, 1982), V. 39.

*Apollo and Daphne*. Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* makes a more explicit comparison, contrasting the two female representations of love and leaving it unclear as to which is superior. This uncertainty creates rich materials for students to debate. Ultimately, however, students are left with little choice but to accept the seemingly contradictory treatment of extramarital sexual love, which was both condemned as sinful and celebrated as beautiful.

Finally, the Villa Borghese is an excellent location to introduce another juxtaposition, the theme of Church corruption. To modern students, the idea that the Church was both religious guide and extremely powerful political player is in itself incongruous. That people could simultaneously be devoutly Catholic and criticize Church corruption is even more so. Although the text uses as its very physical structure the theological teachings of the Church, Dante harshly criticizes individual clergymen, such as the clerical materialists who populate Dante's fourth circle of Hell in Canto VII in such large numbers that Dante the Pilgrim asks Virgil "What people can they be and all those tonsured ones there on our left—is it possible that they *all* were of the clergy?" prompting his guide to reply "These tonsured wraiths of greed were priests indeed, and popes and cardinals, for it is in these the weed of avarice sows its rankest seed."<sup>4</sup> The creator of the Villa Borghese, Scipione Borghese, could easily join this group. A Cardinal, Papal Secretary, and effective head of the Vatican government under his uncle, Pope Paul V (r. 1605-1621), Scipione acquired fabulous wealth, which he used to build what is now the Galleria and patronize his favorite artists, who in turn produced both religious and secular/ classical works. Even the most devout late medieval believers might criticize such use of Church money to create a private palace.

Although Scipione lived several centuries after Dante, his story prepares students for their trip to the Vatican the following day in conjunction with Cantos XIII-XIX, on the violent

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<sup>4</sup> Dante, *The Inferno*, VII. 37–39, 46–48.

(blasphemers, suicides and sodomites, among others) and some of the sins of fraud (seducers, flatterers, and simoniacs).<sup>5</sup> They will think of him as they read Dante the Pilgrim's address to the simoniacs upon seeing the long row of baptismal fonts with feet sticking out in Canto XIX. The section on the usurers in Canto XVII further ties into the idea of economic profit and is an excellent place to introduce the relationship between the papacy and the Medici. The experience of standing in the midst of St. Peter's Square, followed by a visit through room after room of material and artistic treasures, certainly brought the worldliness of the Renaissance papal court to life: one sees monuments such as Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, Raphael's *School of Athens*, and St. Peter's Square itself, designed by Bernini.

As a way to further tie the monuments to the contemporary society, students also explored the fact that the expensive and timeless artistic masterpieces that students see as the pinnacle of Renaissance achievement were funded with money that might alternatively have served as charity to the poor. Late medieval people, including Dante, condemned waste and luxury in the church. The same individuals, however, also strongly believed that the glorification of God and the Church was holy work and, in Rome and beyond, a point of civic pride. Today we also need to consider the incalculable permanent value—artistic and economic—of the monuments of the Vatican to art connoisseurs, tourists, and believers worldwide. These points lead to an interesting theoretical discussion with students, in Rome or in the classroom, encouraging them to think critically about the relative value of art and charity in the past and today, as well as the importance of tourism to the economy.

On our final day in Rome we visited some additional sites, including Capitoline Hill and the Forum, S. Maria Sopra Minerva, the Pantheon, and Piazza Navona, in conjunction with those

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<sup>5</sup> Students also read David S. Peterson, "Religion and the Church," in *A History of Florence, 1200-1575*, ed. John M. Najemy (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2006), 59–81.

parts of the eighth circle of hell including diviners, grafters, hypocrites, and thieves, who deceived themselves and others. Students were encouraged to visualize the modern spaces, whether in person or through images and maps, as they might have been in the late Middle Ages and to see the contradictions inherent in the use of space. For example, Piazza Navona was well known for the prostitutes who frequented it, but was also the site of the magnificent baroque Palazzo Pamphili, constructed by Pope Innocent X (1644-1655) to glorify himself and his family. Such a juxtaposition illustrates the sort of hypocrisy described in Canto XXII, where the damned souls wore “great cloaks cut to as ample a size as those worn by the Benedictines of Cluny. The enormous hoods were drawn over their eyes. The outside is all dazzle, golden and fair; the inside, lead, so heavy that Frederick’s capes, compared to these, could seem light as air.”<sup>6</sup> The monk-like habit of the hypocrites carries added significance in such a setting.

Our final chapters in Dante, Cantos XXVI to the end, stress the extreme importance of civic identity to late medieval Italians. This reading highlights the factionalism, hunger for power, and treachery that was a part of contemporary society and the degree of hatred for the disruption, cruelty, and betrayal of trust that such conflict engendered. These readings coincided with our journey to Florence itself. On that day, we sent students out with maps to identify key historical sites, such as the Duomo and the Palazzo Vecchio, for example, along with medieval towers and families’ coats of arms displayed in public. Students were asked to consider the meaning of the placement and proximity of such monuments, on their own and in relation to one another. For example, while we can see the large and elaborate cathedral, the Duomo, its impressive plaza, and its central position in the city, as a point of civic pride, it is also telling that the town hall, the Palazzo Vecchio, with its own large piazza, is distinct and separate. Meanwhile, both medieval towers—visual symbols of thirteenth and early fourteenth century

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<sup>6</sup> Dante, *The Inferno*, XXIII, 58–63.

rivalries between elite families and their supporters—and the ubiquity of Medici coat of arms remind one of the importance of group identity and family within the city. Travel learning students were also asked to find important tourist markers, such as the nearest bus stop or a mailbox. In a classroom setting, I have similarly asked students to work with modern tourist maps to identify the location of major civic landmarks and open spaces and consider the meaning of their placement and proximity. This exercise and the final section of *The Inferno* highlight factionalism and dissent in the city-states, but also the high value placed on civic unity and identity. The two elements set us up for the rest of the course, which quickly moved towards the struggle for power in republic and oligarchic city-states.

Dante's *Inferno* works well for a critical approach to the Renaissance that seeks to establish a strong foundation in the historical context. Finding in Dante and in other acknowledged masterpieces of the Renaissance both examples that uphold and that challenge their traditional sense of the Renaissance is jarring to students, and indeed that is the point. This sense of disquiet in students shakes their understanding of the Renaissance that is based almost entirely on modern teleology rather than historical context and details of the period. While I might tell students that they need to leave behind what they think they know and build a new understanding of the period based on textual evidence, that is difficult to do until they are confronted by differences and inconsistencies between a primary source text and what they believe they know. Being forced to confront these inconsistencies over and over and having time to ask questions and answer them leads students to a deeper consideration of the Renaissance. Such detailed explanation means that by the time they finish Dante, students will have not only studied and deeply understood numerous Renaissance masterpieces but developed a grounded understanding of the world of late medieval Italians. The knowledge gained puts students in an

excellent position to understand the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance for the rest of the semester.

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