

## Italian 359: Medieval Frauds: Fake news, counterfeits, and forgeries

Prerequisite: None  
T/Th  
3 credit hours

Approach: PH  
Connections: WB

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### Undergraduate Bulletin Description

This course will examine medieval Italians' preoccupation with fraud through literary and historical texts: its philosophical definition and taxonomy, its perceived threat to moral and social order, the hermeneutics of fraud detection, and strategies for bearing the burden of proof.

### Course Description

What can medieval texts teach contemporary readers about evaluating the truth claims of speech or writing? Two of the most important 14th-century Italian literary works fixated on fraud as a pervasive and grave threat to moral, civic, and social order. Drawing on Aristotelian and Ciceronian philosophy, Dante articulates ten types of simple fraud and four types of treacherous fraud in the *Inferno*, damning these most vicious of sinners to the deepest pits of Hell—even as he imagines that his poem could itself be construed as false. Boccaccio, on the other hand, undermines all truth claims in his *Decameron*, which we will approach as manual for detecting lies, tricks, and hidden motivations. In light of the hermeneutic tools provided by Dante and Boccaccio, we will examine a selection of historical cases of attempted, discovered, violent, and consequential frauds, including the ways in which medieval culture itself can be appropriated and distorted by extreme ideologies.

This course will be taught in English.

### Course Goals

Students will learn to analyze philosophical and moral arguments advanced through literary works, by analyzing the value inherent in particular aesthetic forms. The course will familiarize students with key features of the moral landscape of late medieval Italy, and introduce two of the period's most important thinkers. Students will also develop skills in verbal expression, with multiple chances to practice digesting material and then presenting it in an engaging way for their colleagues.

### Required Texts

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*. Ed. and trans. Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez. Oxford, 1996.  
Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*. Trans. Wayne Rebhorn. Norton, 2013.  
Additional materials to be distributed on Sakai.

### Course Policies

#### Absences

You are permitted three excused absences for any reason. You must notify the professor by email before missing class in order to be excused (do not include details about bodily fluids). Further excused absences will lower your discussion grade by half a day's credit. Any unexcused absence will lower your discussion grade by a full day's credit. Inform the professor at the beginning of the semester of absences you anticipate for religious observation and for authorized university activities.

### **Computers/ Cell Phones**

Cell phones must stay in bags during class time. Your professor can always tell when you are texting or reading the interwebs, and your discussion grade will suffer if you do these things.

### **Late Assignments**

Late assignments will be penalized a full grade for every day late.

### **Email/ Office hours**

I am generally available during business hours and will try to respond to emails within 24 hours. You are always welcome to stop by my office with any questions or concerns. If you plan to come when I don't have office hours, it's best to set up an appointment first.

### **Honor Code**

You are expected to abide by UNC's Honor Code as you complete your coursework. While you are encouraged to discuss/ debate your ideas about our readings with friends and classmates outside of class, your written work must be your own. See <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/plagiarism/> and <http://studentconduct.unc.edu/> for more information. Use MLA or Chicago citation style consistently. Web-based resources can be excellent or terrible; make sure any sources you use are trustworthy, and ask when in doubt.

### **Grade Distribution**

	B+	88-90	C+	78-80	D+	68-70	
A	92-100	B	82-88	C	72-78	D	60-68
A-	90-92	B-	80-82	C-	70-72	F	0-60

### **Course Components**

#### **Discussion – 20%**

We will strive for collaborative and productive discussion every day. You should read the assigned texts slowly and carefully. Bookmark a passage every day that you would like to discuss together, and prepare a question or a comment to get the ball rolling. Be in dialogue with the primary texts, critical essays, your peers, and your professor: great questions and comments cite what's been said already and build on it. You should try to contribute something to our discussions every day, and give your colleagues the opportunity to do the same.

#### **Presentation – 10%**

Each student will lead seminar discussion for 30 minutes at some point in the semester. Open with an overview of the day's readings and supply some topics for discussion. Try to anticipate your peers' responses to your questions, and plan follow-up questions/ comments accordingly.

### **Essays – 60%**

Essay topics must be approved with the professor three full days before their due dates, unless you earned an A- or better on your previous essay. Outline a problem, suggest a solution, and provide textual evidence for why your solution is better than other possibilities. 1000-1500 words; 12pt font, double spacing; use Chicago or MLA style consistently. In order to encourage improvement, essays will be weighted as follows:

- **Essay 1 - 17%**
- **Essay 2 - 20%**
- **Essay 3 - 23%**

### **Final Examination: 10%**

You will be asked to respond to one or more textual selections from our course readings in an essay.

## **Course Calendar**

### **Week 1 - Reading literature as philosophy**

- Introduction: "Love's Knowledge" - Martha Nussbaum
- Aristotle: from *Nicomachean Ethics*
- Cicero: from *De Officiis*

### **Week 2 - Dante's taxonomy of fraud**

- *Inferno* 16-17
- *Inferno* 18-19
- Baranski, "Language as Sin and Salvation"

### **Week 3**

- *Inferno* 20-21
- *Inferno* 22-23

### **Week 4**

- *Inferno* 24-25
- *Inferno* 26-27

### **Week 5**

- *Inferno* 28-29
- *Inferno* 30-31

## **Week 6**

- *Inferno* 32-34
- **DUE: ESSAY #1**
- [Fall Break]

## **Week 7 - Boccaccio: “fake news” and the *novella***

- *Decameron*: Author’s Preface, Introduction
- *Decameron* I.1-3
- *Decameron* II.5

## **Week 8**

- *Decameron* VII.1-5
- *Decameron* VII.6-10

## **Week 9**

- *Decameron* VIII.1-5
- *Decameron* VIII.6-10
- Olivia Holmes: “Beffocracy”
- **DUE: ESSAY #2**

## **Week 11 - Fraud 101 for the professions**

- Robert Carpenter: tips for farmers
- Pseudo-Bernard of Gordon: How to cheat your patients
- Christine de Pizan, advice for clever house managers (in *Treasure of the City of Ladies*)
- Martha Carlin: “Cheating the Boss”
- Gianna Pomata: from *Contracting a Cure*

## **Week 12 - Faith, forgery, philology: The Donation of Constantine revisited**

- *Constitutum domini Constantini imperatoris*
- Pseudo-Isidore, from the *Decretals*
- Nicolas of Cusa, “The properly ordered power of the Western emperor does not depend on the Pope”
- Lorenzo Valla: philological demonstration of the fraud

## **Week 13 - Blood libel**

- from *Wonderful Blood*, Carolyn Walker Bynum
- from *Medieval Blood*, Bettina Bildhauer
- *Trent 1475: Stories of a Ritual Murder Trial*, R. Po-chia Hsia

## **Week 14**

- *Trent 1475*

- *Trent 1475*

### **Week 15 - Defrauding the Middle Ages**

- David M. Perry, "What To Do When Nazis Are Obsessed With Your Field"
- Sarah E. Bond, "Hold My Mead: A Bibliography For Historians Hitting Back At White Supremacy"
- Twitter Feed: @medievalpoc
- **DUE: ESSAY #3**

**EXAM WEEK: FINAL EXAM**