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**ODYSSEY OF
THE WEST III**
*A Classic Education
through the Great Books*

THE MEDIEVAL WORLD
COURSE GUIDE



Professor Timothy B. Shutt,
KENYON COLLEGE, *Series Editor*
Featuring Professors Thomas F. Madden
and Monica Brzezinski Potkay

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The Medieval World

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Monica Brzezinski Potkay



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Executive Producer
John J. Alexander

Executive Editor
Donna F. Carnahan

RECORDING

Producer - David Markowitz
Director - Matthew Cavnar

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Course Syllabus

Odyssey of the West III: A Classic Education through the Great Books: The Medieval World

About Your Professors	4
Introduction.....	5
Lecture 1 St. Augustine of Hippo and the <i>Confessions</i> and <i>City of God</i>	6
Professor Thomas F. Madden	
Lecture 2 Constantine, Boethius, and the Fall of the Western Roman Empire	8
Professor Timothy B. Shutt	
Lecture 3 The Germanic North: <i>Beowulf</i> and <i>The Poetic Edda</i>	13
Professor Timothy B. Shutt	
Lecture 4 Byzantium and the Eastern Empire	17
Professor Thomas F. Madden	
Lecture 5 The Rise of Islam.....	20
Professor Thomas F. Madden	
Lecture 6 Monasticism.....	23
Professor Thomas F. Madden	
Lecture 7 Scholastic Philosophy and St. Thomas Aquinas.....	26
Professor Timothy B. Shutt	
Lecture 8 Troubadours and Celts in <i>The Lais of Marie de France</i>	31
Professor Monica Brzezinski Potkay	
Lecture 9 The Matter of Britain: Chrétien de Troyes	35
Professor Monica Brzezinski Potkay	
Lecture 10 Dante: <i>Vita Nuova</i> and <i>Inferno</i>	40
Professor Timothy B. Shutt	
Lecture 11 Dante: <i>The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso</i>	44
Professor Timothy B. Shutt	
Lecture 12 Gothic Art and Architecture	49
Professor Timothy B. Shutt	
Lecture 13 Late Scholasticism and Early Modern Science	53
Professor Timothy B. Shutt	
Lecture 14 Early Renaissance Culture	58
Professor Timothy B. Shutt	
Course Materials	62

About Your Professors

Photo courtesy of Timothy B. Shutt



TIMOTHY B. SHUTT has taught at Kenyon College, famed for splendid teaching, literary tradition, and unwavering commitment to the liberal arts for twenty years. No teacher at Kenyon has ever been more often honored, both by the college and by students, for exceptional skills in the classroom and as a lecturer. His courses in Kenyon's interdisciplinary Integrated Program in Humane Studies and in the Department of English alike have always been heavily oversubscribed, and he lectures on Homer, Plato, Aristotle, the Bible, the Greek historians, Virgil, and Dante every year to a packed house.

Photo courtesy of Thomas F. Madden



THOMAS F. MADDEN is a professor of history and chair of the Department of History at Saint Louis University. His numerous scholarly publications include *The New Concise History of the Crusades* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), *Enrico Dandolo and the Rise of Venice* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), and *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), coauthored with Donald E. Queller. He is a recognized expert on pre-modern European history, frequently appearing in such venues as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, National Public Radio, the Discovery Channel, and the History Channel.

Photo courtesy of Monica Brzezinski Potkay



MONICA BRZEZINSKI POTKAY is an associate professor of English at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, where she teaches Old and Middle English literature, the Bible and literature, and cultural studies. Her research interests include English and French literature, the influence of theological controversy and religious culture, the influence of classical texts, and the representation of gender and sexuality in literature. In addition to her published essays, Professor Potkay is coauthor (with Regula Meyer Evitt) of *Minding the Body: Women and Literature in the Middle Ages, 800–1500* (Twayne, 1997) and coauthor of the lectures in Professor Adam Potkay's *The Bible as the Root of Western Literature: Stories, Poems, and Parables* (The Modern Scholar series, Recorded Books, 2003).



Statues of the apostles from the front façade of Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris

Introduction

Odyssey of the West I and *II* explored timeless works from the ancient world that shaped, and continue to shape, the culture and philosophies of life today. In part three of this fascinating series, Professor Timothy B. Shutt of Kenyon College is joined by Professors Thomas F. Madden (Saint Louis University) and Monica Brzezinski Potkay (College of William & Mary) as they examine the most influential thinkers and works of the medieval world.

The *Odyssey of the West* series addresses in chronological sequence the works that have shaped—and indeed questioned—the ongoing development of Western thought both in its own right and in cultural dialogue with other traditions. Part three is a richly detailed look at St. Augustine, *Beowulf*, St. Thomas Aquinas, Arthurian legends, Dante, Gothic art, and other highlights of the period. Through the course of these lectures, it becomes apparent that the “dark” ages were in fact a time of immense achievement, and a time that richly rewards those who study its art and philosophies.

Lecture 1:
St. Augustine of Hippo and the *Confessions* and *City of God*
(Professor Thomas F. Madden)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*.

St. Augustine strides across two worlds—the ancient and the medieval. When he was born in 354 A.D., Christianity was already well on its way to becoming the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. But it was also still a world of Roman power and Greek learning. Augustine was infused with that learning. Although his mother was Christian, his father was a hard-nosed pagan who wanted Augustine to make a name for himself. Augustine agreed. He was a spiritual young man, but he longed for a spirituality that included solid, scientific truths.

Having gone to Carthage for schooling, Augustine soon fell in with a rough crowd. He became enamored of living on the edge, which included a libertine sex life. Before he was twenty he had already fathered an illegitimate son. As his mother, Monica, prayed for his conversion to Catholicism, Augustine instead converted to Manichaeism, a sect that drew liberally from Gnosticism and Zoroastrianism. Eventually, he moved to Rome, where he held professorships, and then to Milan, where he did the same thing. It was in Milan that he met Bishop Ambrose, who slowly brought him to his conversion to Catholicism. He returned to Africa and was ordained bishop of Hippo in 394.

In his early forties and at the start of his long ecclesiastical career, Augustine wrote his *Confessions*, what is widely considered the first autobiography in Western literature. As the name suggests, Augustine framed the work as a confession to God, describing his sins but more importantly his journey of faith. The book is important for the light it sheds on his own life as well as on the times in which he lived. Augustine continued to write throughout his life—an enormous volume of materials still survive. It is no exaggeration to say that he was one of the most important theologians in Christian history. Augustine wrote the *City of God* shortly after the sack of Rome in 410 A.D. Although he initially wrote the work to combat accusations that Christianity was to blame for Rome's problems, in the process Augustine constructed a new way of looking at history and the present that would greatly affect the medieval world. Augustine asserted that it was the history of the City of God—that is, salvation history—that mattered, not the history of the always temporary city of man.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How did the events of St. Augustine's life inform his writing?
2. How did St. Augustine's *City of God* reconceive the way in which history is viewed?

Suggested Reading

Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Aquilina, Mike. *The Fathers of the Church*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2006.

Lecture 2: Constantine, Boethius, and the Fall of the Western Roman Empire (Professor Timothy B. Shutt)

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are Boethius's *The Theological Tractates* and *The Consolation of Philosophy* and Peter Heather's *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*.

St. Augustine of Hippo was the most influential writer of late antiquity and, after St. Paul, the most influential Christian theologian of all time. Augustine began his life in Roman North Africa, in what is now Tunisia, in an empire that had already been—with a brief interruption during Augustine's childhood—at least nominally Christian for a generation and more. He died seventy-odd years later in his native North Africa as bishop of Hippo after the Western Empire had collapsed and as the Vandals were in the process of consolidating their hold on his native region. Augustine lived in "interesting times," and from one point of view his life bridges the great cultural transition from the end of antiquity to the beginnings of the "Middle" Ages.

Christianity

The Roman Empire had become officially Christian during the imperium of Constantine, who immediately before a battle against one of his rivals for the imperial purple—contested near the Milvian Bridge just north of Rome in the year 312—believed himself to have seen a vision instructing him that "*in hoc signo vinces*," that "in this sign you will conquer." The "sign" in question was Christian; Constantine took the vision seriously, proceeded accordingly—and duly won his battle. The Edict of Milan followed a year later in 313, and for the first time Christianity was officially and explicitly tolerated in an empire that Constantine would later make officially Christian. This did not mean, early on, that paganism was rendered illegal, but it did mean that the Church gained official imperial patronage and lots of it, and it did mean that those who didn't care much one way or the other found it increasingly politic to conform to the new order.

This sequence of events had a profound effect upon the future. Up until this time the Roman Empire—which, of course, controlled Greece, Egypt, much of the Middle East, and Italy, and thereby controlled nearly all of the regions that had served as cultural "hearths" to the West—had been hostile to Christianity. Now the Empire itself was Christian, which in and of itself encouraged (though by no means originated) the process by which the multi-faceted legacy of antiquity became increasingly subsumed and reinterpreted by an emerging culture at once Roman (and Greek) and Christian.

The so-called "Donation" of Constantine, in accordance with which Constantine putatively "donated" to the Church control over the lands that constituted the Western Empire, was a pious medieval forgery. But it reflected the state of affairs that developed after the Western Empire fell. What was "Roman" in the culture that arose was in large part preserved by and concentrated in the Church.

The Fall of Rome

The fall of the Western Empire, or the “Fall of Rome,” is one of the great historical touchstones, and it has generated an immense amount of commentary and controversy. For much of the last half-century, as the notion of “colonialism” fell out of favor, the prevailing argument was that the Germanic “barbarians” weren’t really that barbarous—barbarians by whose standard, after all?—and things didn’t change all that much when Goths or Vandals or whoever took over. More recently, scholars have suggested that, in fact, the change would have been unmistakable, and for Romans at least, strikingly unpleasant, as standards of living and urban life began precipitously to decline.

The roots of the problem stretch to long before matters reached a crisis. Problem one was the rise of Parthia, centered in what is now Iran, as a viable and dangerous rival to Roman power. Containing Parthia was costly and stretched Roman resources thin. Problem two was the Huns, Turkic-speaking nomadic warriors from the steppes of Central Asia who pressured the Germanic-speaking tribes to the north and east of the Roman frontier as they had not been pressured before. The Germans wanted in—with Roman permission and cooperation if they could get it, by any means necessary if not. All of which put immense pressure on the Roman frontier defenses at a time when they were already under both financial and military stress. In the end, they simply broke, though the process took a century or more.

And in one mode or another in they came—Visigoths, Ostrogoths, and Vandals; Franks, Alemanni, Burgundians, and Lombards, a whole panoply of peoples whose descendants populate the Continental West to this day. By and large they didn’t want to destroy things. They wanted to enjoy them. But the skills of organized, peaceful, and prosperous urban life are not easily mastered. They are not, in fact, even easily *perceived*.

From about 350, the Huns were pressing the Goths and the Alans in the area north of the Black Sea in what is now Russia and the Ukraine, and in 378, after a complicated series of events and negotiations, the Ostrogoths defeated and killed the emperor Valens at the battle of Adrianople in what is now European Turkey. A generation later, in 406, the Vandals, Alans, and Suevi flooded over the Rhine frontier, which the Romans had held since the days of Augustus. In 410 came the unthinkable—Alaric and the Visigoths sacked Rome. It was relatively gentle, as sackings go, and the Visigoths soon enough moved on, but the point was made. The balance of power was shifting, and the Empire was not what it was. Shortly thereafter, by the early 410s, the legions abandoned Britain to attend to more pressing problems nearer home.

Western Roman armies had long depended heavily on Celtic and Germanic auxiliaries, and by this time the legions were largely composed of folks who in language and ethnicity were very much like those who were now making their way across the Rhine. Beyond that, Roman policy had long been generous in awarding citizenship to provincials, and it was a strikingly mixed force of Romans, Burgundians, Visigoths, and Franks that finally put paid to Attila and the Huns at the Catalaunian Fields. Nonetheless, the change was real. In the 420s and 430s, the Vandals and Alans made their way into North Africa, and

in 468, resources almost exhausted, a final coalition effort on the part of both the Eastern and Western Empire attempted to dislodge them. But the effort failed, and by 476 Odoacar of the Ostrogoths deposed the last Western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, and respectfully returned the imperial vestments to Constantinople, where the Eastern Empire was at least holding its own. The Western Empire, though, was effectively gone. And though a long stretch of hard times lay ahead, the final result of the fall of Rome was the reforging of Western culture as we know it.

The immediate effects, though, were a good deal less happy. Transportation became *much* more difficult, and this contributed to a sharp diminishment in trade, lower standards of living, and an all-around narrowing of cultural horizons as large-scale secular institutions and urban life began to collapse. One result was localism, a more nearly subsistence economy, and, to provide protection in the absence of the legal and military security that Rome had once afforded, the rise of small-scale strongmen and local warlords, and ultimately feudalism.

A Shift in the Cultural Center of Gravity

All of these tendencies in Western Europe were intensified by the rise of Islam, which within a century after the death of Muhammad in 632 had conquered all of North Africa, most of the Middle East, and most of Iberia as well, with the much-diminished Eastern Roman Empire reduced to what is now Turkey and the southern Balkans. Under Roman rule, the Mediterranean world had functioned as a cultural unit. After the rise of Islam and the loss—from a Roman perspective—of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, and the rest, that was no longer true, and in large part, it remains untrue to this day. This vast readjustment led, albeit slowly, to a long-term shift in the European cultural center of gravity—from the Mediterranean, to nowhere, to the Carolingian Empire, to France, to Italy again, back to France, to England (with Germany competing), and finally, perhaps, to the United States.

As secular institutions in the West collapsed, religious institutions managed to survive and took over at least some of the functions of the Empire that had been. That is the situation to which the “Donation of Constantine” responds. A major development of the time in the West was the rise of organized monasticism, building in a very Roman, systematic and orderly way, on the already-existing tradition of Eastern monasticism. Most noteworthy in this regard was St. Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–543), whose celebrated monastic *Rule* (the *Regula Sancti Benedicti*, ca. 529) established the Benedictine Order of monks who, with their compeers, did so much to preserve both Christian and classical culture, and who are very much with us to this day.

Boethius

Classical and Christian culture at the time, however, were not nearly so sharply divided as later historians have sometimes been inclined to consider them, as is strikingly exemplified in the career and writings of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, in a sense the last of the Romans and the first of the medievals. Boethius was born among the most aristocratic of Roman families about 475 to 480, and his official career illustrates many of the complexities and cross-currents of his times. The Western Empire no longer existed, and

yet, under Theodoric the Amal (or the Ostrogoth), many vestiges of the old order still held. Boethius accordingly served as consul in 510 and later as *magister officiorum*, an official of central importance in Theodoric's administration. He was likewise a polymath, to the extent that his times allowed. He planned a complete translation of Plato and Aristotle into Latin—and planned as well to demonstrate the final harmony of their thought. He completed the translations of Aristotle's works on logic, which formed a major foundation for scholastic thought, and wrote a commentary on Porphyry's *Isagogue*, which became the *ur*-text for the medieval discussion of universals, perhaps the most far-reaching set of issues addressed in medieval philosophy. He wrote highly influential works on arithmetic and music and wrote theological tracts as well.

He was most celebrated, however, for the last of his works, a work that he composed in prison while awaiting execution, after having run afoul of Theodoric. (And he was indeed executed.) Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae*, the *Consolation of Philosophy*, however, became, patristic and biblical texts aside, and probably Virgil and Ovid aside, the most beloved book of the Middle Ages. Dante knew Boethius well. Chaucer translated him. So did King Alfred. So did Queen Elizabeth I.

His work begins with Boethius understandably despondent. He has lost everything; he stands unjustly accused and unjustly condemned; he awaits a painful death. And in a sort of vision he is visited by Lady Philosophy herself, who gradually persuades him that anything that can be taken from you—wealth, position, reputation, even love, even life itself—was not ever really “yours” to begin with. Possession of such things lies outside our control. What lies within our control are things like virtue, knowledge, and goodness. And these nothing can take from us. Rise above the goods bestowed by fortune, and fortune cannot harm you. Socrates and the Stoics would have said much the same thing. And so, from a slightly different perspective, would any number of Christian teachers, and teachers from other traditions to which Boethius had no access. But he argues his case with a particular charm and conviction, making use of alternating passages of prose and verse, and the *Consolation* remained a staple for a thousand years and more. Contemporary students, in my experience, find it a good deal more agreeable than they expect to. Some, indeed, have even found it helpful. Hard times, after all, are not confined to the end of antiquity, or even to the fall of Rome.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why is the fall of Rome such an important historical touchstone?
2. What is the main theme of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*?

Suggested Reading

Boethius. *The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*. New ed. Trans. H.F. Stewart, E.K. Rand, and S.J. Tester. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973.

Heather, Peter. *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Ward-Perkins, Bryan. *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Lecture 3:
The Germanic North: *Beowulf* and *The Poetic Edda*
(Professor Timothy B. Shutt)

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are *Beowulf* (translated by E. Talbot Donaldson) and *The Poetic Edda* (edited by Carolyne Larrington).

The Greeks and Romans called those who lived nearest to them “Gauls” and “Celts,” and those further north, and often further to the east, they called the “Germans.” The Gauls and Celts—in what is now France, in Iberia, in Britain, and in other regions, spoke a variety of Celtic languages, and those who lived in what is now Ireland and Scotland aside, they had by the fall of the Empire in the West lived for generations under Roman rule and become so Romanized that French and Spanish and Portuguese are to this day Romance rather than Celtic languages.

The Germans

The case with the Germans was different. In cultural terms, when they appear on the historical stage—which is when they were first encountered by the literate Graeco-Roman world—they were not all that different from the Celts, a little less dependent on agriculture, prone to live in smaller woodland settlements, perhaps, but on the whole animated by analogous concerns, and living, if in some respects in a less sophisticated way, at much the same cultural level. They spoke Germanic languages, the ancestors of German, English, Dutch, and others. And to Mediterranean eyes they seemed even bigger, paler, and fiercer than the Celts, who were big, pale, and fierce enough themselves.

The major difference was that Rome never lastingly conquered their homelands. Indeed, the Germans, or some of them, conquered a good deal of theirs. There had been contact before that, and the Germanic tribes, to varying degrees, had come under Roman influence. But not enough to transform their culture out of recognition, and as the cultural center of gravity began gradually to shift northwards, Germanic ideals and concerns enduringly affected the new cultural synthesis that was the result.

At the end of antiquity various Germanic tribes entered and ultimately overcame the lands of the Western Roman Empire. The Franks, the Burgundians, and the Lombards found their way to the lands and regions to which they have bequeathed their names, and other less familiar groups made their way elsewhere. Britain, for instance, had been a Roman province for the better part of four centuries when the legions departed early in the 400s, leaving behind a more or less Christianized, largely Celtic-speaking population, which within a generation or so confronted as best they could their own incursion of Germanic-speaking invaders, Angles, Saxons, Frisians, and Jutes from across the North Sea and the Channel on the coastlands in what are now Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands. They too bequeathed a name—to

the land of the Angles, now known as England. And finally, beginning late in the 700s, another group of venturesome Germanic-speaking marauders and settlers made their presence felt—in Sicily, in Normandy, in East Anglia, in Ireland, in Russia, in Iceland, in Greenland, and the smaller islands of the North, all the way to Newfoundland and beyond in one direction and to “Miklagard,” the “big city” of Byzantium, and beyond in the other. They were, of course, the Vikings of Scandanavia, Norse, Swedish, and Danish.

These Germanic-speaking groups made their presence felt, then, in the regions beyond their cold homelands in a series of waves and incursions that continued with varying degrees of intensity and impact for more than five hundred years and in the process significantly altered the cultures with which they came in contact and, often enough, came to dominate.

In one sense, the thoughtworld of old Germanic culture is by no means unfamiliar—it is, if not precisely the world of Tolkein, the cultural background upon which Tolkein drew in composing his *Lord of the Rings*. That is where the elves, dwarves, orcs, and dragons, and the vast, dark woodlands (if not the hobbits) come from. Tolkein was himself a lifelong specialist in Old English and Old Norse literature. It is a world of beer, beef, and butter rather than a world of wine, olives, and grain, a world of clouds and cold and damp rather than a world of clear skies, sun, and summer heat, and the grim thoughtworld of traditional Germanic culture reflects the difference. Imagine spending the year on a Greek island—and then spending a year on one of the Orkneys, in the seas to the north of the Scottish Highlands, or on the Danish coast. Climate does not determine culture, or not absolutely, but it clearly affects it.

Germanic culture valued courage, the unflinching, calm, uncomplaining acceptance of pain, difficulties, and death. This state of mind finds reflection at all levels, from the high valuation of grim, sardonic, understatement so characteristic of Old English and Old Icelandic culture alike, to the notion that in the end even the gods themselves will be overcome by the forces of cold and dark. It finds rich expression in the deeds and sayings of all the old Germanic heroes, from Beowulf and Sigurd, dragon-slayers both, to Gunnar and Njall and Skarphedin in *Njal's Saga*, the greatest of the sagas of the Icelanders. On such a view, in the last analysis, every story has the same conclusion. There simply are no long-term winners. Which leaves a choice—make the best of things, knowing the worst, or scream and shout. Every culture values courage at least to some extent, but the Germans valued courage if not with a unique intensity, then in a unique modality. The idea was that in the end you would be destroyed. But you didn't have to cooperate in the process. You could—and should—maintain your personal integrity as long as there was a person to maintain. And the reward for that, to use the Old English word for the concept, was “*lof*,” or deserved praise. The notion is similar to the Greek idea of “*kleos*,” or glory, which motivates Achilles. But if the Greeks hoped for little, the Germans seem to have hoped for less. Even the heroes purportedly selected for Valhalla were honored at last by the opportunity to go with the gods themselves to defeat.

In the Meadhall

As it comes to us in the surviving literary remains—Old English and Old Norse or Icelandic—the culture put a high valuation on loyalty as well. The

situation is clearest, perhaps, in *Beowulf*, the great Anglo-Saxon, composed, by reasonable guess, sometime in the 700s. The responsibilities of a lord or king are to provide his band of thanes or retainers—in Latin, his “*comitatus*,” in Old English, his “*duguth*”—with wealth and, in particular, at least in story, with rings (hence *The Lord of Rings*, though the rings in question seem in fact often to have been torques or armbands), to provide for them fellowship, regard, upkeep, and feasting. The focal point of the world of *Beowulf* is the meadhall, where ceremonial feasting and drinking work as a token for the society itself. In return, a thane owes his lord loyalty and courage—the courage to fight for him to the death.

It happened sometimes in real life. One of the latest Anglo-Saxon poems commemorates the Battle of Maldon, fought, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, between local strongman Byrhtnoth and the Essex levy against a Viking raider band asking for “protection” money on the shores of the River Panta or Blackwater in August 991. The Vikings get the better of the fight, and some of the local levy flee, but Byrhtnoth’s warrior-band, or most of them, fight to the bitter end over his body, maintaining, as the poet puts it, speaking through an “old retainer”:

In modern English, something like “Courage must be harder, heart keener, determination greater, as our power grows less.” In other words, as a later and greater war leader put it, “We shall never surrender.” And they didn’t.

Another factor that seemed to differentiate these Germanic-speaking groups from the Mediterranean cultures of antiquity was their attitude toward women, which was, by Roman, or—even more so—by Greek standards, strikingly deferential and respectful. Women seemed to matter and to be taken seriously in ways that seemed puzzling and, indeed, disturbing to classical observers. And Germanic literature—Icelandic literature in particular—abounds in women of relentless determination and firmness, among them Signy, Brynhild, and Gudrun in the *Saga of the Volsungs* and Hallgerd and Bergthora in *Njal’s Saga*. It is hardly surprising that to this day the position of women is, by and large, freer and more influential in Germanic-speaking countries than anywhere else.

A society based in large part on courage and small-group or family loyalty tends to suffer from certain problems, not least an all-but-uncontrollable propensity toward revenge-killing and violence, and these too seem to have been characteristic of old Germanic life. The old tales and sagas are full of both, and historical records suggest that they do not greatly exaggerate.

The fall of Rome—and the triumph of the Germans—represented in most respects a sharp cultural decline. Living standards fell, agricultural productivity fell, trade withered, cities withered, literacy declined. There is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a rather postapocalyptic cast to much Old English literature in particular. Things were once better, and everybody knew it. But dealing with difficulty was a cultural strong suit for the Germanic world. And when at last something resembling peace and prosperity returned, they had left their indelible mark on the high medieval culture that at last emerged.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What was the major difference between the Romans and the Celts?
2. How is old Germanic culture represented in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*?

Suggested Reading

Beowulf. Trans. and notes E. Talbot Donaldson. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975.

Larrington, Carolyne, ed. *The Poetic Edda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Sturluson, Snorri. *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson: Tales from Norse Mythology*. Trans. Jean I. Young. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.

Lecture 4:
Byzantium and the Eastern Empire
(Professor Thomas F. Madden)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Cyril A. Mango's *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*.

The Byzantine Empire is a modern term, created during the Enlightenment (eighteenth century) to describe the Roman Empire after the fall of Rome in the West (476 A.D.). Today most historians consider that the history of Byzantium dates from Diocletian or Constantine. Although the name is modern, it does describe a change that occurs in the empire at about that time. With the loss of the western provinces, including Rome itself, the Roman Empire became increasingly Greek in culture. It was also intensely Christian. The core of the Byzantine Empire was the capital city of Constantinople, founded by Constantine in 330, and it played a crucial role in preserving the Greek East as well as the Latin West. It was also given its own patriarchate, putting it on par with Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

The emperor Justinian (527–565) began a massive program of renewal for the empire. He sent fleets and armies to the West under the command of Belisarius and successfully restored North Africa, southern Spain, and all of Italy to Roman (Byzantine) control. He patronized a great deal of art work and building construction. The most impressive example of this was the construction of Hagia Sophia, the most beautiful and largest church in Christendom for a thousand years. Justinian also ordered a codification of Roman law, the *Corpus iuris civilis*. But even as he worked to restore the West, Byzantium was turning away from it. Justinian was the last emperor to speak Latin as his mother tongue.

Much of the empire was lost to Persian and then Muslim invasions in the seventh century. After that, Byzantium was reduced to little more than Asia Minor and Greece. But it remained vibrant and quite wealthy. The Iconoclastic Movement caused great tumult and the loss of much artwork in the eighth century. When it had settled in the ninth century, it was a new, confident Byzantium that sent missionaries to the Slavs.

As time progressed, the Byzantine East and Latin West became estranged. The patriarch in Constantinople resented the pope's claims of supremacy and Byzantines in general viewed Europeans as boorish and stupid. But they were the only Christian powers left in the world and the emperors needed their help. In 1071, the Turks captured Asia Minor. Emperor Alexius Comnenus asked the pope for aid, which led in short order to the Crusades. Overall, the Crusades helped the Byzantines to survive, but they also brought the two cultures into close proximity, which only led to more frictions. In 1204, a Crusade was diverted to Constantinople, where it became mired in Byzantine politics and ultimately captured and sacked the city. It was not until 1261 that Michael VIII restored the city to Byzantine rule, but the city restored was by then a

dilapidated and poor Constantinople. The Byzantine Empire limped along for two more centuries, largely at the mercy of the ever expanding Turks. In 1453, the last vestige of the ancient Roman Empire was snuffed out when Sultan Mehmed II conquered Constantinople and made it his new capital.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What influence prevailed in the Roman Empire after the loss of the western provinces?
2. What effect did the Crusades have on the Byzantines?

Suggested Reading

Mango, Cyril A. *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*. Reprint. Sheffield, UK: Phoenix Press, 2005.

Other Books of Interest

Ostrogorsky, George. *History of the Byzantine State*. Rev. ed. Northvale, NJ: Marlboro Books, 1990.

Treadgold, Warren. *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.

**Lecture 5:
The Rise of Islam
(Professor Thomas F. Madden)**

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Bernard Lewis's *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople: Volume 1: Politics and War*.

Islam began in Arabia in a world dominated by two great empires—the Byzantine (Roman) Empire and the Persian Empire. The Byzantines were Christian and the Persians were Zoroastrian. Jews could be found throughout both empires. Mohammed, an Arab merchant and resident of Mecca was greatly affected by these religions, but was led in other directions. He opposed the native religion of the Arabs centered on Mecca. Mohammed and his followers believed that in 610 he began receiving divine revelations which continued throughout the remainder of his life. For twelve years Mohammed preached in Mecca, gaining him the enmity of the ruling aristocracy. In 622, Mohammed and his followers left Mecca to take over the government of Medina. This *Hegira*, or flight, serves as the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Mohammed waged wars against Mecca, finally conquering it in 630. By his death in 632, he was the ruler of all Arabia.

Islam as a faith has its roots in Judaism and Christianity. Mohammed believed that he was a prophet of the God of Abraham. Mohammed's recitations were later collected together into the Qu'ran, which Muslims believe is the perfect Word of God. A firmly monotheistic faith, Islam had no mediation between God and man. The Muslim faithful were required to pray five times daily, to give alms, to fast during Ramadan, and, if possible, to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during one's life. The concept of holy war, or *jihad* (literally "struggle"), was born during Mohammed's wars and was further developed during his successors' subsequent military conquests. Mohammed preached that the "greater *jihad*" was the internal struggle to live a good and pious life. The "lesser *jihad*" referred to wars against non-Muslims.

After Mohammed's death Muslim armies stormed out of Arabia seeking to conquer other lands and thereby expand the *dar al-Islam*. By 640, they had conquered Christian Syria and Palestine. In 642, they conquered Christian Egypt. By 644, Muslim armies had swept through Zoroastrian Persia, conquering the entire empire. The Christian Berbers in North Africa put up a good fight, yet by 695 the Muslims had conquered the whole region. Crossing into Europe at the Strait of Gibraltar, the Muslim armies conquered Christian Spain and then crossed over the Pyrenees into France, finally being halted at the Battle of Poitiers in 732.

Succession disputes in the seventh century caused the split between the Sunni and Shiite Muslims—a split that persists to this day. The victorious Umayyad dynasty moved the capital to Damascus, but in 750, non-Arab Muslims helped the Abbasids to power, who moved the capital to Baghdad. Islam and its empires continued to grow in strength, wealth, and learning. It

was only in the eleventh century that the Christian West was in a position to defend itself with the Crusades. Yet even then, the defense was ultimately ineffective.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What are the greater and lesser *jihads*?
2. What caused the split between the Sunni and Shiite Muslims?

Suggested Reading

Lewis, Bernard. *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople: Volume 1: Politics and War*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1987.

Other Books of Interest

Berkey, Jonathan P. *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Hawtin, G.R. *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661–750*. London: Routledge, 2000.

**Lecture 6:
Monasticism
(Professor Thomas F. Madden)**

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is C.H. Lawrence's *Medieval Monasticism*.

At first glance, Christianity might not seem a likely religion to embrace a monastic ideal. Christ had commanded his followers to serve others, not to cloister themselves in monasteries. However, Christ had spent forty days in the desert and had also enjoined his followers to give up all they had to follow him.

In its first three centuries, the practice of Christianity was difficult, made doubly so by persecutions. The end of the persecutions and the embracing of Christianity by most Romans meant that opportunities for martyrdom or other acts of Christian heroism were severely limited. Christian monasticism began in Egypt, with holy men who sought solitude, separating themselves from a sinful world, in order to come closer to God. They would go into the desert, living in caves or other makeshift dwellings of one sort or another. Their reputation for holiness attracted many visitors, who sought out their wisdom or knowledge of God's will. It was taken for granted that the words of these holy men were divinely inspired, and so they were collected into books. Antony is the most famous of these holy men, although he was by no means the first. Born in the mid-third century into a well-off family, Antony later took on the discipline of a hermit. Another hermit, Pachomius, instituted the "coenobitical" form of monasticism in a community near the Nile around 318. Monks in these communities lived in common, sharing everything, engaging in manual labor and prayer. They were engaged, above all, in an enterprise to save their souls. The community was organized along military lines with barracks and a superior to whom all owed obedience. Pachomius founded eight such monasteries during his life.

Aside from these regularized form of monasticism, there was an abundance of irregular forms. Wandering hermits could be found almost anywhere. They acquired a reputation for troublemaking in some areas. Unregulated asceticism often led to bizarre forms of competition. Symeon Stylites (390–459) lived in Syria, where he quickly gained a reputation as a holy man. Crowds flocked to his various caves and huts. In order to remove himself from the crowds, he built a column on which he lived. Subsequent columns became larger, until he was living fifty feet above the crowds. Column dwelling became a popular devotion in the East for centuries.

As an eastern phenomenon, it took some time for monasticism to make its way to the West. It came in the form of lives of the Desert Saints. These models of Christian piety were picked up by hermits in Europe, who went to the hills and forests. Monasteries of one sort or another sprang up. Benedict of Nursia (480–543) came from a noble family in Rome, but soon became disillusioned by life in the big city. Benedict became a hermit for three years, gaining

a reputation as a holy man. After agreeing to become superior of a monastery in need of reform, he resigned after several of the monks attempted to poison him. Benedict began founding his own houses, establishing a Rule, or constitution, based on other rules current at the time. These monasteries were for laymen who wished to save their souls. The Rule enjoined manual labor, prayer, obedience to the superior, and moderation. Although at the time the Benedictine Rule was just one of many forms of Western monasticism, its subsequent adoption by the Carolingians would give it extraordinary preeminence.

By the tenth century, many monasteries were both wealthy and corrupt. It was at one monastery, Cluny, that new ideas for monastic reform and the reform of the Church grew. Cluniac reforms spread across Europe, changing monasteries and their patrons. By the twelfth century, the Cluniacs were so powerful that they also needed reforming. New reform orders were born, including the Cistercians and the military orders such as the Templars.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why would Christianity seem an unlikely religion to embrace a monastic ideal?
2. Where did column dwelling originate?

Suggested Reading

Lawrence, C.H. *Medieval Monasticism*. 3rd ed. Boston: Longman, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Chapman, John. *Saint Benedict and the Sixth Century*. Reprint. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971.

Duckett, Eleanor Shipley. *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965.

Lecture 7:
Scholastic Philosophy and St. Thomas Aquinas
(Professor Timothy B. Shutt)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Thomas Aquinas's *Selected Writings* (translated and edited by Ralph McInerney).

Scholastic philosophy has had bad press. Generations of would-be reformers, humanists, and empiricists, in the Renaissance and later, devoted their energies to execrating the “crabbed schoolmen” and the “philosophy of the schools” who confined themselves to arcane trivia and theological fatuities utterly out of touch with human needs and anything resembling useful or reliable knowledge. (The legendary question supposedly characterizing their endeavors is, “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”) But such a characterization is one-sided, tendentious, and more or less deliberately unfair, and thus profoundly misleading. The most capable and enduring of the scholastics were in fact vastly better and more sophisticated philosophers than their critics, a great many of whom disliked not only the scholastics, but philosophy simply, and in some cases, any sort of writing that did not aim at rhetorical suavity and Ciceronian elegance. The scholastics engaged important issues, above all in logic and metaphysics, and, perhaps even more far-reaching, in epistemology and ontology—the study of how we know what we know and of what there might be to know, of what in fact exists. These are by no means trivial matters, and they came up with answers of perennial importance and relevance.

Grand Ambitions

We cannot consider the scholastics, however, without considering the distinctive institutions in which they flourished, for the development of universities is a high medieval innovation. This is not the sort of innovation we might at first be inclined to attribute to the Middle Ages. But so it is—at Bologna, Montpellier, Oxford, and, above all, at Paris for philosophy, the high Middle Ages saw the development of ongoing, organized institutions devoted not only to training young candidates for learned careers, but to the systematic pursuit and development of knowledge. Few cultural developments have worn so well or proved so valuable, and few have been adopted with such sustained enthusiasm worldwide. Antiquity had nothing much like them, and despite the monastic *scriptoria* and study houses and cathedral schools that preceded them and from which in large part they developed, neither did the early Middle Ages.

It was here that scholastic philosophy came to be and flourished, as the name itself suggests. Scholastic philosophy is the philosophy of the “*scholae*” or of the “schools,” where it was formulated and debated with a relentless precision and rigor and a tireless enthusiasm that matches the intellectual energy and ingenuity devoted to any subsequent academic discipline.

The ends of scholastic philosophy could hardly have been grander or more ambitious: to understand, to the extent of human abilities, all that existed—and to understand the truths of faith in rational terms. The first is an end that we whole-heartedly share. The latter, however, may well seem a quixotic, if not a perverse and unnecessary complication. What, after all, has faith to do with reason? Isn't faith what some folks choose to believe *in spite of* reason? So to us it often seems. To the scholastics, though, it seemed otherwise, despite their vast efforts, despite their learning, and despite their brilliance. And that is perhaps the major gulf separating us from them.

How could this be so if the scholastics were trained and sophisticated intellectuals? The answer is that they worked in at least one crucial respect from significantly different presuppositions about how the world worked. Grant the presuppositions, and the scholastic worldview makes sense. Proposition one is that God made the world and everything in it, the human mind included. And not only that, God made the world in accordance with the divine ideas that from late antiquity had been conflated with Plato's form of all forms, or Form of the Good. The world is thus the tangible expression of God's plan expressed in space and time. And because the world reveals God's plan, it also reveals at least something of the divine nature. The conclusion follows that the world is revelation, and all knowledge is knowledge of God, or knowledge of at least some expression of the divine nature.

Our innate capacities for reason and understanding are likewise expressions of the divine ideas, indeed, on scriptural grounds, a divine image. So in two ways, from inside and outside alike, in *how* we know and *what* we know, all knowledge is knowledge of God, who, from this perspective *is* truth (as revealed inside), and who *is* the source of being and hence of truth (as revealed inside and outside alike).

From this point of view it is easy to see why the early and high scholastics saw no fundamental conflict between faith and reason. They ultimately stemmed from and revealed the same Source. If God made the world and God made the mind, and made both in accordance with the divine ideas, then any real knowledge that the mind could obtain of the world must necessarily be in accord with the divine ideas. The idea was that we could, through natural reason and systematic study, come to know a great deal about the world and about God. Not everything, but as far as we could get, we were on safe ground, and in Scripture and otherwise God had made known to us the things we had to know that we could not figure out on our own. Reason could see far, faith could see farther. But in the same direction. That was the guiding assumption.

This point of view led to a certain happy wholeness in the medieval view of things that had not been so prevalent in antiquity and which we have, by and large, since lost. All aspects of human life and aspiration were in theory subsumed within a single explanatory rubric. Things fundamentally made sense. That is not to say everything was knowable, and still less is it to say that people behaved much better (or all that much worse) than before or afterward. It was simply that the parameters were different. The assumption was that at the divine heart of things lay a coherence which in its full grandeur lay infinitely beyond our apprehension, but which, we could in some real measure

understand. All of our yearnings and apprehensions, intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and affective alike, were foreseen and could and should be subsumed within it.

The enterprise, in the words of St. Anselm of Canterbury, was a matter of “faith seeking understanding,” and it drew not only upon the Bible, but on a long tradition of more or less systematic speculation beginning with Plato and Aristotle, and more directly, with Plotinus and the Christianized Neoplatonic tradition, as exemplified in the so-called “Cappodocian fathers,” most notably St. Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–95), the Pseudo-Dionysius, and, above all, St. Augustine. The early cast of Christian philosophical thought in the West, then, was predominantly Platonic, though Platonic at second hand because most of the works of Plato himself were unavailable during the heyday of high scholastic thought.

Reconciling Faith and Reason

During the 1100s, though, the enterprise changed in complexion in responding to what could be seen as a challenge to the received theological verities. For during the 1100s, most of the Aristotelian corpus was translated into Latin. The challenge was that the works of Aristotle contained an immensely sophisticated, attractive, and capacious vision of things that, while more or less theistic, was most emphatically not Christian and at several points contradicted Christian teaching. The intellectual quality of Aristotle was so dazzling that the medieval scholars took to referring to him simply as “the Philosopher,” as if there were no other, but the very impressiveness of his offerings suggested a possible contradiction between faith and reason.

The process of translation was a complicated one, much of it undertaken in Spain and in Sicily, frontier zones between Christendom and the Islamic world, and more often than not the translations were undertaken from Arabic or even Syriac versions of Aristotle rather than from the original Greek. Likewise translated were the works of various learned commentators from the Islamic world, most notably the Persian Ibn Sina, known to the West as “Avicenna”; Ibn Rušd from Moorish Spain, known to the West as “Averroes”; and Moses Maimonides, known at least to St. Thomas Aquinas as “Rabbi Moses,” who during his career made his way from Spain to Cairo.

The problem such works posed was a problem of reconciliation. Could the manifest intellectual advances that such works revealed be incorporated into existing Christian tradition without destroying it? Could faith and reason live in happy harmony after all?

That is the work that the greatest of the scholastics, St. Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–1274), set for himself, and his immensely detailed, utterly lucid, and painstakingly systematic answer was a resounding yes, thoroughly exemplified in his own vast works. He was by birth a Norman nobleman from southern Italy, a big man whose nickname was the “Ox of Knowledge,” and his family early on was horrified not by his ecclesiastical career—they had placed him as a child in the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino—but by his choice to enter the Dominican order. He did much of his most influential work at the University of Paris, where the Dominicans and their Franciscan rivals long dominated in theology and philosophy alike. And in his *Summa contra*

Gentiles and his *Summa Theologica*, he not only succeeded to his own calm and careful satisfaction in answering the challenge that he set for himself, but composed one of the most impressive and coherent bodies of philosophical and theological work ever completed by anyone ever and bequeathed to Catholicism the intellectual muscle and sinew to answer its critics for centuries to come.

He addressed, inevitably and invariably, with an unhurried and magnanimous confidence, an immense variety of questions, but one set of them proved to be of particular importance to posterity. Arguably the central issue of medieval philosophy was the problem of “universals,” almost unbearably obscure on the face of things, but almost unimaginably far-reaching in its consequences.

The discussion, so far at least as the Middle Ages were concerned, begins with Boethius’s commentary on the *Isagogue* of Porphyry, who was, as you may recall, a disciple of the great Neoplatonist, Plotinus. “Universals” are, in effect, Platonic forms, what it is or may be that differentiates cats, say, from canaries—or wisdom teeth, oak trees, or birthday cakes. The question, then, is what is their status, and this takes several forms. Are they beings or concepts? Or conceptual or “noetic” beings, that is to say beings apprehensible not to the senses, as such, but to the mind? Are they material or immaterial? Is there, in fact, such a thing as an immaterial being? Are universals immanent, existing only in physical things, or are they transcendent, existing apart from things as well?

There are two major kinds of answers that have been proposed to such questions. One is the “realist” answer, which means not what we might at first expect, but rather that universals are *real*, in some sense or in some array of senses universals actually exist. The nominalist answer, by contrast, maintains that universals are only conceptual, only names or “*nomina*,” and implies that they have their origin not in the world around us, but in our minds. Universals, on such a view, do not exist as such outside the mind.

Aquinas was a moderate “realist,” and his whole project of reconciling faith and reason seems at least in retrospect to have depended to his giving a realist answer to such questions. As we shall see, others thought otherwise, and soon made their views felt.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What were the scholastics trying to achieve?
2. What problem did Aristotle pose for Christian thinkers?

Suggested Reading

Aquinas, Thomas. *Selected Writings*. Trans. and ed. Ralph McInerny. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Knowles, David. *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*. Vintage Books. New York: Random House, 1962.

Lecture 8:
Troubadours and Celts in *The Lais of Marie de France*
(Professor Monica Brzezinski Potkay)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Marie de France's *The Lais of Marie de France* (translated by Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante).

While both ancient Greece and Rome produced verse epics—especially Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*—that represented classical civilization's cultural, social, and political values, the Western European Middle Ages created a new genre that epitomized its ideals: the genre of romance. Romances chronicled the adventures of knights and their ladies; they dealt with the values of chivalric society as lived at an aristocratic court—especially love. Romance, although a genre invented in the Middle Ages and very representative of medieval courtly values, draws on and remodels previous traditions, including classical Latin poetry, the mythology of the Celtic peoples, and the “courtly love” first extolled by the troubadours of southern France.

Marie de France

The works of Marie de France, written in French verse between 1160 and 1190, like much medieval literature, draw on preexisting traditions. Her works include *St. Patrick's Purgatory*, a translation of a Latin religious treatise, that tells how an Irish knight travels through Purgatory, is tortured by demons, and then is saved by his faith and *The Fables*, a collection of Aesopian animal fables translated from English. Here Marie names herself, writing “My name is Marie, I am from France.” Marie possibly lived in England at the court of King Henry II. The most celebrated of her works, however, are the *Lais*, Marie's masterpiece, a collection of twelve Breton *lais*, or short romances, unified by a prologue in which Marie declares her authorial intentions.

The *Lais* typify the genre of romance. The term “romance” originally designated a work written not in Latin but in one of the *romance* languages. The first romances were translations of Latin epics; as a group, these are called “the romances of antiquity” or “the Matter of Rome.” They include, among others, *The Romance of Aeneas*, based on Virgil's *Aeneid* (ca. 1155); *The Romance of Thebes*, based on Statius's *Thebaid*, relating the civil war between the sons of Oedipus (1150–1155); and most influential, Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Romance of Troy* (1160–1165).

Eventually, though, “romance” came to designate a tale of knightly adventure. The typical plot concerns a knight on a quest for his identity. This identity is dual. A knight has, first, a social, or external identity—a knight should fight only to serve society. But a knight also has a personal, or internal identity, the knight's personal fulfillment, his growth in mind and heart, which characteristically comes about through love of a woman.

That chivalric social and personal identities are often in tension is a major theme of much romance and of many of the *Lais*. In the first lai, for example,

Guigemar's pursuit of knightly honor keeps him from loving, and then love causes him to betray his feudal lord. Again, the apparently illegitimate birth of *Le Fresne* ["the ash tree"] precludes her from marrying her noble lover. Marie devotes many of the *lais* to female protagonists, torn between a social role as wife and an extramarital love life. Adultery in romance reflects a medieval social reality—aristocrats usually married to consolidate rank and wealth, not for love. In the last lai, *Eliduc's* chivalric duties take him from his wife and lead him into bigamy. The romantic triangle is resolved when all of its members enter convents. Here Marie suggests that the demands of society and of individual desire cannot be reconciled in this world.

Generically, the *Lais* are not strictly romances but "Breton *lais*"—short romances that claim to translate a Celtic source or that are set in Brittany. Marie's prologue claims they are translations of stories told orally by the Bretons: the Celtic-speaking inhabitants of Great Britain and the French region of Brittany. The Celts in Great Britain, Arthur's people, were displaced by the Anglo-Saxons, retreating into Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and the French province of Brittany, and clearly the *Lais* draw on Celtic folklore and mythology. Extant medieval Celtic literature includes the *Mabinogion*, an anthology of Welsh mythological tales of various dates (tenth through thirteenth century), some about Celtic gods, others about Arthur and his court, and also the works of Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales* and *The Description of Wales*. Celtic motifs common in medieval romance include the journey to the Otherworld, or the appearance of otherworldly fairies and animals in this world. In Marie's *Lais* the Otherworld is often an escape from the problems of human society, the only place a lover can find happiness. *Guigemar*, for example, begins his adventure when cursed by a magical hermaphroditic talking deer; he voyages to another world via a marvelous ship. Again, Arthur's knight *Lanval* is granted wealth by a fairy mistress. And the mother of *Yonec* is impregnated by a fairy prince who takes the form of a hawk.

Another story originating in Celtic folklore is the adulterous love story of Tristan and Iseult, a couple doomed to tragic, obsessive passion because of a magical potion. This tale appears in several versions, prominent among them the French-language Tristan romances by Beroul (1155) and Thomas of England (1173)—the English aristocracy of the time spoke Anglo-Norman, and the German *Tristan and Isolde* by Gottfried von Strassburg (1200–1210), which is the source of Wagner's 1865 opera. Marie's *Chevrefoil* ("Goat-Leaf"), in its turn focuses on one episode in the Tristan and Iseult story as an ideal of romantic love and mutual understanding.

The Tradition of the Troubadours

Marie's depiction of romantic love draws in large part upon another tradition as well, the courtly love tradition of the troubadours. The troubadours were lyric poets and composers writing in *langue d'oc*, also called Occitan or Provençal, from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, and are best known for their *cansos*, songs that celebrate "courtly love" or "*fin'amor*." "Courtly love" is a fitting name, because this love was sung about at aristocratic courts. The courtly lover typically woos a woman of higher social rank who is apt to reject him. His song dwells on his emotions as he both desires

and fears the lady. The term “*fin’amor*,” “refined love,” points to both the source and the effects of this love—only a person who is refined in birth and spirit can love this way. And loving refines the lover, giving him all social virtues, especially eloquence, or “courtesy”—a useful, even necessary, quality for members of a court. Courtly love spread geographically through the works of the *trouvères*, poets of Northern France and England and generically from lyric poetry to romance—both genres are concerned with courtiers as social creatures possessing an intense emotional life.

In her *Lais*, Marie combines these different strands of literary tradition—classical poetry, Celtic motifs, and courtly love—to produce something new and unique: the Breton lai as an enigmatic, even obscure, story emphasizing the passionate feelings of lovers. To illustrate this mixing of traditions, we’ll look at *Laüstic*, a lai about an adulterous flirtation in which a lady sends her lover a nightingale killed by her suspicious husband. Marie claims a Breton source for the story, gives it a Breton name, and locates the action in St. Malo, a town in Brittany. The nightingale is akin to the magical animals of the other lais that suggest an otherworldly realm of happiness. The nightingale, in troubadour and *trouvère* poetry, is likewise associated with the joy of courtly love. The lai’s Lady recalls this tradition. *Laüstic* also draws on the story of Philomela from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; the bird here reminds us of an uncourtly world of violent barbarity, especially toward women, and also of the role of the female poet. Marie herself, like Philomela, is a woman who communicates through “weaving” together strands of various traditions. *Laüstic* brings these cultural strands together to produce a poetic gem: a brief yet intense story that makes us feel the complex strangeness of love, and love is always at the heart of the tradition of romance.

Medieval mores and the church did not allow for adulterous courtly love. The love Marie depicts, therefore, is clearly fictional. It could be happily practiced only in the imaginary realm of the Otherworld, or in fiction itself. The *Lais* therefore are escapist literature in which medieval readers could take refuge from their real-life problems.

In summary then, during the mid to late twelfth century, a new literary genre, the courtly romance, was born when poets translated classical epics into Romance languages. Later romances turned for subject matter away from the classical hero and toward the story of the knight questing for adventure. These chivalric romances tended to focus on a new kind of love, the so-called “courtly love” first celebrated in the songs of Provençal troubadours. Marie de France’s *Lais* explore the sentiments of knights and ladies who love in the courtly mode as they live adventures based on stories drawn from Celtic mythology: Marie’s characters often travel to the Otherworld or interact with fairies and animals who have traveled from that world to this one—because falling in love is often like visiting a strange and even alien realm full of marvels and wonders, and because the desires of love are often incompatible with the duties of the real world.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why might the first vernacular works written in French be translations of classical epics? Why would medieval knights be interested in this material? What might they have found alien in classical culture?
2. The mythology of the Celts was disseminated orally in the early Middle Ages and not written down for centuries. What problems might there be in reconstructing the original stories?

Suggested Reading

France, Marie de. *The Lais of Marie de France*. Trans. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1991.

Other Books of Interest

Beroul. *The Romance of Tristan*. Trans. Alan S. Fedrick. New York: Penguin, 1970.

Eneas: A Twelfth-Century French Romance. Trans. John A. Yunck. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.

France, Marie de. *Fables*. Ed. and trans. Harriet Spiegel. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987.

———. *The Lais of Marie de France*. Trans. Glynn S. Burgess and Keith Busby. New York: Penguin, 1986.

———. *St. Patrick's Purgatory*. Trans. Michael J. Curley. Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Texts, 1993.

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Gottfried von Strassbourg. *Tristan; with the Surviving Fragments of "The Tristan of Thomas."* Trans. A.T. Hatto. New York: Penguin, 1960.

Kehew, Robert, ed. *Lark in the Morning: The Verses of the Troubadours: A Bilingual Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouvères: An Anthology and a History. Trans. Frederick Goldin. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1983.

The Mabinogion. Trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones. New York: Everyman's Library, 1993.

The Story of Troilus. Trans. R.K. Gordon. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978.

Lecture 9:
The Matter of Britain: Chrétien de Troyes
(Professor Monica Brzezinski Potkay)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Chrétien de Troyes's *Arthurian Romances* (translated by William W. Kibler).

The most famous and influential of all medieval romancers was Chrétien de Troyes. One of the greatest of medieval poets, Chrétien is known for his verbal artistry, his mastery of narrative structure, and the psychological depth he gives his characters. But he is best known for his almost single-handed creation of what was called in his day “the Matter of Britain,” what we call Arthurian Literature. It was Chrétien who invented the fundamentals of the story of Arthur and his knights that most of us know today. It was Chrétien who first located Arthur’s court at Camelot, who first told of the passionately adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere, and who first told the story of the search for that elusive and mystical object we call the Holy Grail. Chrétien’s poems were widely disseminated, translated, and imitated in his own day. Through a number of intermediaries, the characters and themes he treated have come down to us today, when Arthurian literature and film still fascinates readers and viewers.

The prologues and epilogues of Chrétien’s five romances in French verse (1160–1190) provide us with what little we know about him. He signs each with the name “Chrétien,” and in the first, *Erec and Enide*, he calls himself “Chrétien de Troyes,” referring to the chief city of the French county of Champagne. He dedicates *The Knight of the Cart*, about Lancelot, to his patron, Countess Marie of Champagne. His last romance, *Perceval*, also called *The Story of the Grail*, is dedicated to Phillip, Count of Flanders.

Arthurian Romance

The prologues to the romances tell us much about Chrétien as an author. The prologue to *Cligés*, about one of Arthur’s knights who becomes the Byzantine emperor, shows that, like Marie de France, Chrétien draws together preexisting traditions with an eye to creating something new: the Arthurian romance. This prologue lists Chrétien’s influences. First among these is Ovid, and Chrétien indeed highlights his translations of Ovid’s works. His knowledge of Latin poetry reveals that Chrétien is a clerk, someone of higher learning. A clerk often functioned as an administrator of a court, and so, presumably, did Chrétien. He is in the court but not of it. Like Ovid, Chrétien is a poet with a style that is witty, humorous, and ironic. The romances are often funny, the characters often ridiculous. Again, from Ovid’s amatory works *The Art of Love* and *The Remedies for Love*, Chrétien inherits an interest in the psychology of love. In Chrétien, we have direct access to the minds of his characters as they analyze their emotions. Because of his psychological realism, Chrétien is sometimes dubbed “the father of the novel.”

But Ovid is by no means Chrétien’s only source. He draws on Celtic material as well.

Chrétien is fascinated by the Tristan and Iseult story. He reacts against the courtly adulterous tradition to show that courtly love can be made, though with difficulty, compatible with marriage. In *Erec and Enide*, for example, both the bride and the groom of the title learn that marriage does not absolve them of social responsibility. In *The Knight of the Lion*, Yvain learns that he must use his knighthood to protect his wife and her possessions.

Chrétien often makes the Celtic journey to the Otherworld a metaphor for psychological self-discovery. Removed from civilization, the knight explores the otherworld of the mind.

This mental landscape is also a Christian one: the Celtic otherworld is cross-fertilized here with the Christian afterlife, so that it is also the realm of conscience and moral judgment. *Lancelot*, for example, attempting to rescue Guinevere from her abductor, travels to the land of Gorre, a landscape allegorical of a mind obsessively in love—and in Hell.

Chrétien calls many of his works translations. But the medieval notion of translation is more like adaptation or transformation. Chrétien's translations suggest that medieval France is the heir to the civilization of Imperial Rome, and Chrétien himself the heir to Virgil and other Latin poets. He claims to be their equal, even their better, partly because he is a Christian. The name "Chrétien," in fact, means "Christian," and our poet often puns on his name.

Despite his manifest debt to them, though, Chrétien combines his varied sources to produce something new, the template for what we call Arthurian romance. The subject matter itself is new—and would prove immensely influential. These romances revolve around the Arthurian court at Camelot—and not classical Rome—as a symbol of an ideal civilization.

The central character, Arthur himself, is probably in some sense at least historical, celebrated as a warrior in Welsh poetry and folklore and treated straightforwardly as a historical figure, the greatest of British kings, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (ca. 1136).

For Chrétien, Arthur's court is the crowning achievement of Western society, the perfect civilization, and the epitome of courtly culture.

Yet Chrétien's Arthurian romances focus not on Arthur, who is a static, even ineffectual figure in the romances, but typically on the adventures of a single knight who exemplifies the institution of chivalry. Indeed, the romance genre, by definition, focuses on a single knight who goes on a voyage of self-discovery. Chrétien's works also communicate a series of morals about chivalry; they examine and critique the institution. Chrétien claims in the prologue to *Erec and Enide* to teach his audience something about knighthood. Yet Chrétien does not preach explicitly, because direct moralizing would be uncourtly. He teaches obliquely—Chrétien's romances, like Marie de France's *lais*, are often puzzling and implicitly ask the reader to derive the moral.

This obscure style is also something new. Chrétien's romances are marked by features that he intends to be invitations to interpretation, but precisely what he intends can often be maddeningly hard to fathom. But here too Chrétien proved influential. A reader is apt to find that most Arthurian romances are written in a similar enigmatic style. Another stylistic peculiarity of Chrétien's work is the odd fact that the prologue often seems to have little connection to the narrative, yet manages, even so, obliquely to communicate

a romance's themes. The prologue to *Cligés*, for instance, suggests that translation and cultural transformation are this romance's themes. The prologue to *Erec and Enide* suggests that courtly speech is one of its subjects: Enide must learn to use tact in dealing with her husband.

Another peculiarity is that although we know that a knight's social and emotional development is represented by his journey, that journey is often hard to keep in view because, in the first instance, romances tend to be episodic. Different scenes seem self-contained. But we are invited to compare these scenes with each other to discover their full meaning. Erec, for example, first is attacked by a violent dwarf but is later saved by a good one. Raising the obvious question, what, then, might dwarves represent?

A given knight's path will generally intersect with that of another in a pattern called "interlace"—we're invited to compare the two knights and their values. Almost all of Chrétien's heroes, for instance, cross paths with Arthur's nephew Gawain, who represents the acme of knightly courtesy, the ideal knight.

Unrealistic characters, of whom there are many in Chrétien, including supernatural creatures and animals, can be interpreted as psychological aspects of the main character.

Yvain's lion points to his bravery—he is "lion-hearted." Erec's adventure begins when he is beaten by an evil dwarf and ends when he defeats a giant; these creatures seem to represent, respectively, his undeveloped inner life and his tendency toward pride. Chrétien often conveys additional psychological information about his characters by means of other kinds of symbols. Erec and Enide frequently change clothing and horses, and these exterior changes seem to suggest interior transformation.

Enigmatic Qualities

Chrétien's two greatest, most influential romances are also the most puzzling. What does *The Knight of the Cart*, the story of Lancelot's love for Guinevere, say about courtly yet adulterous love? Gaston Paris in 1883 used this romance to define courtly love, arguing that Chrétien applauded Lancelot's nearly religious devotion to Guinevere—love is what gives Lancelot his strength and skill. More recent readers, by contrast, are apt to argue that Chrétien makes fun of courtly love, showing that it damages society and the person who engages in it. Lancelot is painted as a traitor, a fool, and as a dishonorable knight—the cart of the title is a vehicle used to convey criminals to execution. We see that Lancelot, because of his adultery, is a criminal, indeed, a traitor.

The relation of chivalry and Christianity is one that Chrétien indeed raises elsewhere, and nowhere more prominently than in *The Story of the Grail*. The hero of the romance, Perceval, must learn to balance knightly service not with courtly love but Christian love of God and neighbor. The questions raised by this romance coalesce around the mysterious symbol of the grail; yet we never learn its full meaning because the romance is incomplete. The biggest puzzle in the work, what the grail represents, is left for us to interpret.

Chrétien's enigmatic quality, however frustrating, probably helped to ensure his lasting influence. Later authors almost obsessively rewrote and reinter-

preted his work. The thirteenth-century prose Lancelot-Vulgate cycle, for example, crafted a single story of the rise and fall of Arthur's kingdom around the tales of Lancelot and the quest for the grail. The cycle blames adultery for the fall of Camelot and transforms Chrétien's grail into the Holy Grail, the vessel Jesus used at his Last Supper. And the story of Camelot has repeatedly been popularized for English-language readers, in the first case, by Sir Thomas Malory in *Le Morte D'Arthur* (published 1485), in Victorian times by Alfred, Lord Tennyson in *Idylls of the King* (1885), and more recently by T.H. White in *The Once and Future King* (1958).

In summary, the greatest of medieval romancers and one of the most gifted medieval poets is Chrétien de Troyes, author of five romances set in the Arthurian court. Chrétien's genius can be seen in the style of his works, which are carefully crafted narratives designed to engage the active interpretation of their readers. Chrétien's enigmatic style was often imitated, yet he was even more influential in his subject matter: Chrétien celebrated Camelot as the acme of political and social culture; he invented the story of the love triangle that pits Lancelot against Arthur for the love of Guinevere, and he originated the story of a knight's quest for the tantalizing grail. Chrétien therefore is the creator of the Arthurian legend as most of us know it, the paradigmatic story of the rise and fall of a great civilization.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. We know very little about Chrétien de Troyes, just as we know little about other medieval authors. Does knowledge of an author's biography help or hinder our understanding of a work?
2. Chrétien is admired by many of his readers for his descriptions of the thoughts and emotions of his characters. How does his interest in the workings of the human mind differ from modern ideas of psychology?
3. The idea of Camelot as the portrait of a perfect society has had enormous vitality; what makes knighthood generally and Arthur's court specifically so attractive as ideals?

Suggested Reading

Chrétien de Troyes. *Arthurian Romances*. Trans. William W. Kibler. New York: Penguin, 1991.

Other Books of Interest

Chrétien de Troyes. *Cligés. Erec and Enide. Lancelot, or the Knight of the Cart. Perceval, or the Story of the Grail. Yvain, or the Knight of the Lion*. Trans. Ruth Harwood Cline. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985–2000.

———. *Erec and Enide*. Trans. Carleton W. Carroll. New York: Penguin, 1991.

Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Trans. Lewis Thorpe. New York: Penguin, 1966.

Lacy, Norris J., ed. *The Lancelot-Grail Reader*. New York: Garland, 2000.

Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003.

Tennyson, Alfred. *Idylls of the King*. Ed. J.M. Gray. New York: Penguin, 1983.

White, T.H. *The Once and Future King*. New York: Ace, 1996.

Lecture 10:
Dante: *Vita Nuova* and *Inferno*
(Professor Timothy B. Shutt)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Dante Alighieri's *Vita Nuova* (translated by Mark Musa).

In the first canto of the *Paradiso*, the glorious concluding cantica of his *Commedia* or *Divine Comedy*, Dante writes the following:

“Le cose tutte quante
hanno ordine tra loro, e questo è forma
che l’universo a Dio fa simigliante.”

“All things whatsoever have order among themselves, and this is the form that makes the universe resemble God.” (1.103–05)

This little passage functions as a sort of theme statement for the *Commedia* as a whole, the most radiant expression of the all-embracing high medieval vision and the single greatest literary work ever composed. For the subject matter of the *Commedia* is the whole of human life, all space and all time imaginatively subsumed within a single vision.

In his *Letter* to Can Grande, Dante's host and patron in his later life (a letter whose attribution to Dante has been questioned by some critics but accepted by most), Dante writes of the *Commedia*: “The object is to remove those living in this life from their state of misery, and lead them to a state of happiness.” The *Commedia* is in that sense a many-leveled allegory of salvation, an examination of how one moves from toil and trouble to eternal bliss. And eternal bliss, despite the fame of the *Inferno*, is the goal that Dante believes lies open to all of us. It is the divinely sanctioned *telos* of human life. We can refuse to accept it, we can willingly go wrong, but we are not supposed to and do not have to. That is, above all, why the *Commedia* is called a comedy.

Levels of Allegory

The allegory is richly multifaceted. The first level is the literal, the actual story that Dante tells us, which operates, on level two, as a sort of spiritual autobiography, the story of Dante's own journey from the “dark wood” of near despair to the divine presence. On a third level, though, the story suggests the salvation history of humanity as a whole, from creation to last judgment. Most significantly, on yet another level, the *Commedia* evokes the salvation of the human soul, including the soul of the reader, so that as you proceed you read not only about Dante's salvation, but your own. In that sense, the *Commedia* is designed to function as a potential “Beatrice” or “bringer of blessings” in its own right.

To understand the full weight of such a claim, and to understand the *Divine Comedy*, we need to know a bit about Dante's life. Dante was born in Florence in 1265 to a faded minor noble family, moderately prosperous, and

he lost his parents relatively young. He was betrothed early to Gemma Donati, whom he later married and with whom he had several children. He lived in a time, however, when marriages were arranged, and the unconsummated love of his life was the daughter of one of the most prominent banking families in Florence who lived nearby, Beatrice Portinari. He first saw her, so he tells us in his *Vita Nuova*, or “new life,” when he was nine and she nearly so, and Dante, on his own account, fell utterly and irrevocably in love with her. That moment is the beginning of the “new life” that gives to the *Vita* its title. The *Vita* itself is a collection of poems, for the most part devoted to the praise of Beatrice, clearly influenced by the traditions of troubadour poetry, with accompanying commentary. Dante perfected what he and his contemporaries termed the “*dolce stil nova*,” or “sweet new style,” and the poems of the *Vita* made him by the time he was thirty the most famous poet in Italy, the most famous, indeed, in generations.

Beatrice herself, however, had meanwhile married the scion of an even more prominent banking family, fallen ill, and died. No matter. Dante’s devotion continued unabated, or so is suggested in the *Vita*, where he praises her in extravagant terms, suggesting that for him at least, and by implication for others as well, she is nothing less a revelation of God in the flesh. Her presence is morally and psychically transformative. She is literally a “bringer of blessings,” which is, in fact, what her name means. Such ideas in mind, he associates her at some length with the number nine—three times three—or, in numerological terms, a three-dimensional expression of the Trinity. After a final “miraculous vision,” Dante vows at the conclusion of the *Vita* “to say no more about this blessed one” until he is capable of writing “that which has never been written of any other woman” (XLII). It is a promise that he kept. Dante’s guide from the Earthly Paradise through the *Paradiso* in the *Commedia* is none other than Beatrice herself.

What are we to make of this? Dante has taken an existing tradition of love poetry into new, seemingly all-but-blasphemous realms, attributing powers to his beloved ordinarily associated with the most sanctified figures, not far from those of God himself. The idea—as I take it, genuinely arising from Dante’s experience—is that God can efficaciously reveal himself anywhere, not just in scripture, not just in sacraments, but anywhere. In the case of Dante himself, in the beauty and character of a real-life young girl, dressed for a party, as he puts it, “in the most noble of colors, a subdued and decorous crimson” (II). And why not? For as Dante tells us in the *Paradiso*, the “glory of him who moves all things” shines everywhere, “in one part more and in another less” (1.1–3). Revelation or efficacious grace can come to us by any means and from anywhere, and it is our personal “Beatrice,” whatever or whoever it might be, that can bring about in us the “new life” that will at last bring us to bliss. That is, in effect, what Beatrice means—efficacious revelation, personal revelation, revelation not in general or in the abstract, but revelation for you.

These conceptions curiously echo another set of ideas at the time, the teachings of the abbot Joachim of Fiore, who argued that the world had seen two “ages,” and was yet to see a third. The First Age, according to Joachim, was the age of Father, and of the Hebrew Bible and of the Law. The Second Age was the age of the Son, and of the New Testament and of the Church. But

coming was the Third Age, the age of the Spirit, or of individual revelation, and it would be characterized by an “Everlasting Gospel,” never to be superseded, and there are those who believe that Dante hoped that his *Commedia* might prove to be just that. Whether that is the case or not, the figure of Beatrice as she appears in the *Commedia* has a distinctly Joachist cast.

Exiled

The other factor in Dante's life that decisively affects our reading of his *Comedy* is his response to the political conditions of his time, which were marked by chronic party strife. The central players were the Guelfs, supporters of the political ambitions of the papacy and, by and large, of the French monarchy as well, and the Ghibellines, supporters of Holy Roman Empire, centered in what is now Germany. Northern Italy was at the time dominated by the so-called communes, more or less independent city-states over whom both the papacy and the empire claimed some sort of sovereignty. Florence had for a generation or more been dominated by the Guelfs, who accordingly split into factions: the “Black Guelfs,” more inclined to support traditional Guelf allegiances, and the “White Guelfs,” not Ghibellines, precisely, but certainly more favorably disposed toward the Empire than their Black Guelf peers.

Dante was a White Guelf, and in 1300 he became one of the “priors” of Florence and was sent, in 1301, on a mission to Rome, during which Charles of Valois supported a successful Black Guelf *coup d'état* in Florence that resulted in Dante's being exiled and ultimately to his being sentenced to death *in absentia* on trumped-up charges of corruption in office. He lost everything, and never again returned to Florence, dying at last in Ravenna in 1321.

In the meantime, though, he wrote the *Divine Comedy*, the concluding cantos of which were found by his son after his death, and the *Commedia* famously begins with Dante lost in a “dark wood,” where the “straight way was lost” (1.1–3), the fictional counterpart of the situation that he so strikingly encountered after his exile.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What does Beatrice represent in Dante's *Commedia*?
2. How are the circumstances of Dante's life reflected in his work?

Suggested Reading

Alighieri, Dante. *Vita Nuova*. Trans. Mark Musa. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Other Books of Interest

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. 3 vols. Trans. John D. Sinclair. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939.

Lecture 11:

Dante: *The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso* (Professor Timothy B. Shutt)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Dante's *Divine Comedy* (translated by C.H. Sisson).

As Dante and his guide in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, the shade of the great Roman poet Virgil, enter the inferno itself in the first cantica of the *Commedia*, Virgil tells Dante that he will there see “*le genti dolorose / c’hanno perduto il ben dell’intelletto*” (“the woeful people who have lost the good of the intellect”) (3.17–18). This is a surprising way to characterize those confined in Hell. We tend to think of their defining characteristic as something more like inveterate sinfulness or consistent, willed malignancy than any sort of intellectual deficiency. But Dante thinks otherwise. For him, as in their way for Plato and Aristotle long before him—and for much Christian tradition as well—the highest goal of human life, the most complete fulfillment available to us, is the full employment and enjoyment of our most distinctive human capacities. And what is highest and best in us according to Plato, Aristotle, and medieval Christian tradition alike, is *intellectus* or *noesis*—the capacity that we share, by medieval teaching, with angels for immediate, intuitive apprehension of truth, or indeed, of Truth. Which is to say that *intellectus* is not only a mode of knowing in the usual sense of the term, but also a mode of mystic apprehension, of religious experience. The act of knowing is a sacral act, and a profoundly joyful act. That, above all, is what makes us human, and that, to the limit of our infinitely varied individual capacities, is not only the divinely sanctioned goal of human life but the greatest and most enduring source of pleasure, indeed, of bliss, available to us.

Evil Is Diminishment

It need hardly be said that a good many people have over the years found the claims of other pleasures more compelling. In Dante's view, no one does anything save in pursuit of some good. But they are not the best things available to us, and in making them our first priority, we inevitably diminish ourselves and become less than we could and should be. If we go far enough down this road, as Dante sees it, we in effect worship false gods and wind up in Hell as a result.

Not all false gods, though, are equally destructive. Some, like love, including—and including prominently—sexual love, political loyalty, and the love of deserved fame, are clearly less diminishing than others. And the structure of Dante's *Inferno* is designed to reflect precisely such ideas.

Dante's hell works as a sort of extended physical metaphor. The fundamental conception comes from Plato and Augustine, who argue that in the end there is no such thing as “pure” evil. Evil is, in the most literal sense, nothing—a diminishment of what could and should be. The degree to which someone or something falls short of being what it should be is the degree to

which it is corrupted. Dante makes this point unequivocally at the center of his *Inferno*, where we encounter not what we might expect, a seductive, articulate Mephistophelian Satan and white-hot flames, but rather cold and silence. Dante's Satan is mute, dull, and stupid. At the heart of the *Inferno* lies not evil energy and intelligence, but something a hairsbreadth away from absolute nonentity.

The overall design of Dante's Hell is a hollow, inverted cone, extending, presumably, from just beneath the surface of the earth to the center of Dante's geocentric (and Satanocentric) cosmos. The further down you go, the more confined and diminished you get.

Dante evidently began the poem with the intention of organizing the *Inferno* in accordance with the traditional "seven deadly sins"—in order of increasing seriousness and toxicity: lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, anger, envy, and pride. After he got through the first few, however (even then altering things not least by including "virtuous pagans" like Virgil, Plato, and Socrates among the unbaptised infants in "Limbo"), he seems to have rethought his program. When we get to canto 8, Dante suggests that we are working from a new template, and shortly thereafter we encounter the "City of Dis," where Dante deepens and reconfigures his analysis of moral failure. The City of Dis is devoted to heresy, but Dante defines heresy in an interesting and unusual way. He highlights two heretical attitudes and suggests that they are the keynote to all the sins lying below—the notion that there is no God and the notion that there is no afterlife. The point is sharply to differentiate sins of "losing it"—sins of being swept away by one's desires—and sins of "choosing it"—sins of self-conscious malice aforethought. The idea is that you wouldn't give way to sins of straightforward malice if you hadn't already decided that there is no God and no afterlife, whatever you might imagine that you believe.

In discussing the City of Dis, Dante asymbolically confronts the sin of despair and suggests that at this point reason cannot help much. Reason can't prove that God exists or that we will live forever. For that you need religious experience; you need grace.

As we go deeper, into the realms of violence, fraud, and treachery—sins of self-conscious will, and sins that make use of reason and intellect not as instruments of blessing, but rather as weapons—we descend farther and farther, only to emerge at last into Purgatory, quite literally on the other side of the world.

Purgatory

Purgatory was ordinarily considered as something like an annex of Hell for temporary residents, but Dante's conception is entirely different. Dante's Purgatory is an island precisely antipodal to Jerusalem, in the middle of the ocean in the Southern Hemisphere, on the other side of the world. It is a cone-shaped mountain, by design the precise obverse in terms of shape, if not size, of the hollow subterranean cone that is Dante's hell. And as the shape of the *Inferno* typifies the increasing constriction and diminishment of sinfulness, so the shape of Dante's Purgatory typifies the ever-expanding horizons and ever more profound fulfillment that he attributes to the process of purgation and salvation.

When he emerges from the pain, stench, and darkness of the underworld, Dante finds himself on a beach at dawn, on Easter morning, traditionally the time of Resurrection. Those whom he encounters are, in many instances, overwhelmed with surprised joy at their salvation—a keynote here is divine generosity. Humans were, after all, made for bliss.

As Dante makes his way up the mountain, he travels through realms devoted to the purgation of the seven deadly sins. Two terraces are particularly noteworthy, those devoted to envy and to lust. We don't ordinarily consider envy all that serious a failing—simply wishing for things that others have. For Dante, though, it is "*invidia*," or ill-will, or malice, delight in the misfortunes of others. As such it is the precise opposite of the greatest of the virtues, charity or love. Envy is accordingly for Dante the most damaging of sins, and he places his treatment of envy and its antidote, good-fellowship and love, at the very center of the *Purgatorio*, and hence, at the very center of the *Commedia*.

His treatment of lust is another matter. Dante did not consider himself particularly susceptible to envy. Pride and anger, though, and above all lust, he acknowledged as ongoing problems, but his treatment of lust, of "the last wound," goes well beyond autobiography. He depicts lust as being purged by a raging fire through which all penitents must pass before completing their purgation and mounting to the Earthly Paradise, the garden of Eden where according to Genesis Adam and Eve themselves once lived. Here, however, Dante balks. Reason alone cannot persuade him to go through the flames. The implication seems to be that sexuality is so intimately linked with our sense of ourselves that overcoming lust poses unique challenges. It is the hardest of tests. It is love for Beatrice that at last motivates Dante to go through the fire, which is even so no easy task, and his love for Beatrice survives the burning. Indeed, Dante goes out of his way to suggest when he ascends to the Earthly Paradise that there most emphatically is such a thing as non-lustful sexuality. But even Dante doesn't know what it looks like until he makes his way through the fire.

The Earthly Paradise

The Earthly Paradise is centrally important to Dante's political views and to his whole view of human life. Dante (following his great teacher in such matters, Aquinas) is adamant that humans have been made not just for happiness in the life beyond, but for happiness in this life. That is what the Earthly Paradise represents—and that is why we need not just the Church and Papacy, but the Empire.

In the Earthly Paradise, Dante meets once more with Beatrice, who becomes his guide in the *Paradiso*. Virgil, his guide thus far, falls away—to the consistent sadness of my students and doubtless many other readers. Reason can take you to the Earthly Paradise and all that it represents, so Dante implies, but beyond that you need revelation. And that Beatrice soon provides.

Purgatory and Hell are invisible to ordinary mortals during life, but the skies reveal themselves day and night. If, as he believed, the world itself reveals the divine nature, Dante was not at liberty to make up his own version of the heavens, and in fact the cosmos through which Dante and Beatrice together rise is in its essentials the cosmos in which the best-informed scholars of the

day believed. The planetary spheres appear in their proper (geocentric) order and Dante ascends through them accordingly, first to the Moon, then Mercury and Venus, then to the Sun, then to Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, then to the stars, then to the Aristotelian *primum mobile* or crystalline sphere, which in Dante's geocentric vision accounts for the daily rotation of the sun and stars, and finally to the "empyrean," the true heaven, outside of space and time, in effect, the divine mind itself.

When Dante at last ascends to that point, though, something astonishing happens (and happens in canto 27, line 100— $3 \times 3 \times 3$, 10×10 , perfect numbers in Dante's numerology). The cosmos in effect turns inside out. Dante sees a series of angelic circles revolving around a point of infinite brightness, "*depende il cielo e tutta la natura*," the heavens and all of nature, the entire spatio-temporal cosmos (28.42). Dante is seeing the Platonic form of the entire universe. But in the form God is central and the spheres appear in reverse order, largest and farthest as smallest and closest. At this point of transition Dante moves from a world in which the earth and Satan stand at the center and God just beyond the margins, to a world in which God stands at the center and Satan trails off into nonentity. One implication is that is what full salvation means—precisely that transition, here expressed in deft, three-dimensional terms.

The *Paradiso* ends with the beatific vision—Dante sees God, in effect, face to face, but that, as he freely confesses, lies beyond his powers of expression, and he concludes the *Commedia* merely by noting the effect of the vision: "now my desire and will, like a wheel that spins with even motion, were revolved by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (33.142–45).

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is, for Dante, the highest goal of human life?
2. What happens to the cosmos when Dante ascends to the “empyrean”?

Suggested Reading

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. Rev. ed. Trans. C.H. Sisson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Other Books of Interest

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. 3 vols. Trans. John D. Sinclair. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939.

———. *Vita Nuova*. Trans. Mark Musa. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Lecture 12:
Gothic Art and Architecture
(Professor Timothy B. Shutt)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Michael Camille's *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions*.

The Gothic artists and architects of the high Middle Ages did not think of themselves as “Gothic” any more than they thought of themselves as living in the “middle ages.” The contemporary terms for the artistic style that they developed were “*opus modernum*,” “modern work,” or “*opus francigenum*” or “French work.” Indeed, the heartland and point of origin for the Gothic style was northern France. The term “Gothic” was a dyslogistic put-down of such work as “barbarian” on the part of Italians who had few fond memories of the long-ago days of Gothic domination in Italy. No matter, though. As time passed such critics were surely in the minority, and at present, probably the most universally admired legacy of the high Middle Ages is the Gothic cathedral. The cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, the cathedrals at Chartres, at Cologne, and at Salisbury, among others, seem to speak powerfully and directly to virtually everyone privileged to see them.

High Medieval Culture

It was not just the modern, Gothic style that began in France during the high Middle Ages. It was, in a deep sense, high medieval culture in all its fullness, scholastic philosophy, courtly romances, and all the rest. All seem to have been focused, in their origins at least, in the cultural area centered on Paris and environs (troubadour poetry aside, which came from the south of France), and to have spread from there to culturally affiliated nearby regions—to the rest of France, to southern England (where the aristocracy still spoke Anglo-Norman, a variety of Old French), to what we now know as the low countries, and to what is now western Germany.

As the French monarchy rose in prestige and in power under the Capetian dynasty, it gradually turned into something that at the time didn't even have a name—the first effective nation-state—and high medieval culture developed with it. France and environs are, in fact, the high medieval heartland; what we think of as the Middle Ages effectively took place here—knights and ladies, tournaments and castles, friars and philosophers, the whole cultural package. And on just that account, the high medieval culture of France is also the immediate point of origin for what we now know as Western culture in all its fullness. Rome and Greece, the cultures of the ancient Near East, the Celtic and German cultures of the north—all made their contribution, which crystallized into something new in the Gothic age, and did so above all in the Ile de France and the valley of the Seine.

In 1144, Abbott Suger dedicated the new choir at his abbey of St. Denis, just outside of Paris—effectively the first structure completed in the Gothic style. St. Denis was the patron saint of the French monarchy—and the abbey

enjoyed rich royal patronage. The dedication was accordingly a gala occasion, with King Louis VII and Eleanor of Aquitaine in conspicuous attendance. And the St. Denis choir was a revolutionary building. Abbott Suger's goal was to construct a building that recalled the gateway to the Heavenly Jerusalem, which, indeed, recalled paradise itself—a building, insofar as possible, constructed of light. The keynote was windows, the largest and richest windows that could be made. The signature pointed “Gothic arch” was designed to work, as Abbot Suger put it, in service of the “wonderful and uninterrupted light” of precisely those “most luminous windows.”

The preceding style dominant in France was the “Romanesque,” derived from Roman architecture—thick-walled and sturdily built, and featuring the rounded Roman arch. The Gothic style marked a striking departure, designed right from the outset and developed with ever-increasing technical skill in service of a metaphysics of light attributed, incorrectly, to St. Denis himself, by misidentification with the Christian Neoplatonist known to the Middle Ages as “Dionysius the Areopagite.”

Between the Worlds of Flesh and Spirit

Medieval Latin was a language unusually attentive to the various modalities of light. *Lux* was light issuing directly from a light source, from a fire, the stars, or the sun—or altered and colored, issuing from a stained-glass window. *Lumen* was the light itself, the beam of light flowing through space. And *splendor* was reflected light in all its varied forms, the rich colors of the natural world, the light glittering from a sunlit stream, the sheen and sparkle of reflective metals—and of jewels. The Gothic masters loved all of it, but especially *lux*. Was not *lux* God's first creation? (“*Fiat lux*.” “Let there be light.”) Light is massless and ageless, light is uncorruptive and clean, light makes all things visible. It is, of all things in the physical world, seemingly the nearest to spirit. From the time of Plato, if not before, light is the physical expression of what is so revealingly termed divine “illumination.”

Light speaks to us deeply and directly. The Gothic masters did not know, as we do, that in one mode or another light is the source of life and energy for virtually all that lives on earth. But from practical experience and religious teaching alike, they seem to have sensed it. And they devised, out of yearning and by means of ever more precise rule of thumb, the Gothic cathedral as a permanent (in its structure) and ever-changing (with the light) interactive multimedia show working by all possible means to evoke spirit by means of light. In this aim, they succeeded as no one has before or since. A Gothic cathedral was designed to be an ongoing tangible interface between the world of flesh and the world of spirit. Everything was designed to reduce mass and to maximize light. Hence the soaring verticality of Gothic architecture—itsself a physical expression of upward yearning and aspiration. Hence the flying buttresses. Hence the interlaced vaulting and the arches. Hence the “reduction of sheer mass” and its “replacement with intricately framed voids”—to be filled, of course, with light.

The first full-scale Gothic cathedral was constructed at Laon, to the north-east of Paris, between about 1160 and 1205. Cathedrals represented an

immense investment of resources and energy and ordinarily took a generation or more to complete. Indeed, most—Laon included—were never completed according to plan. Cologne Cathedral, begun in 1248, was in this respect an exception, but Cologne too remained incomplete for centuries, and was only completed in the nineteenth century, though in accordance with the then recently recovered original plans.

Over the course of a century and more of experience and development, the interior vaulting grew ever higher, 80 feet at Laon, 107 feet at Notre Dame in Paris (begun in 1163, and brought to its present state of completion, for the most part, between 1215 and 1250), 118 feet at Chartres (more or less complete by 1220), 144 feet at Amiens (ca. 1220–1270), and finally 157 feet at Beauvais, begun in 1272, where the vaults collapsed in 1284, with the result that Beauvais looks a bit like the back half of a cathedral.

The Gothic masters also devoted a great deal of energy and skill to the sculptural adornment of the cathedrals, which in the most elaborate cases, as in the West or Royal Portals at Chartres, take on a sort of encyclopedic function, evoking in elaborate iconic terms the whole sweep of salvation history and the whole created order and round of life. In a slightly different mode, some Gothic sculptors by the late 1200s, particularly in what is now Germany, were working toward a naturalism in sculpture not seen since Roman times. Particularly impressive in this regard are the so-called *Bamberg Rider* from Bamberg Cathedral and *Ekkehard and Uta* (*Uta* especially) from Naumburg Cathedral.

The emphasis, though, remained on windows and stained glass, and the crowning masterpieces here (at least among those that survive—many were destroyed during the fiercely anti-clerical French Revolution), are the famous rose window of the north transept at Notre Dame (1240–1250), designed by the master Jean de Chelles, and Sainte Chapelle, built by Louis IX or St. Louis (1243–1248), likewise in Paris. Sainte Chapelle comes as close to being entirely stained glass as was technologically feasible—about three-quarters of the surface area—and the windows are the largest ever made up to that time, nearly 50 feet tall and 15 feet wide. Here, if anywhere, the metaphysic of light was triumphantly embodied in physical form.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How does Gothic architecture represent high medieval culture?
2. In what ways can light be viewed as divine?

Suggested Reading

Camille, Michael. *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

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Mâle, Émile. *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*. Trans. Dora Nussey. New York: Harper, 1958.

Panofsky, Erwin. *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*. Latrobe, PA: Archabbey Press, 1951.

Lecture 13:
Late Scholasticism and Early Modern Science
(Professor Timothy B. Shutt)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100–1600* (edited by Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, Jan Pinborg, and Eleonore Stump).

Even as Dante was in the process of completing the *Paradiso*, the Christian Platonist, high medieval world and worldview came under an odd sort of assault from within. We spoke earlier on of the celebrated problem of “universals,” or, in effect, of Platonic forms, the conceptual categories that we employ in making sense of the world around us and which differentiate one sort of thing from another (for instance, to use a favorite scholastic example, people from donkeys). The question was, What is the status of universals? What sort of thing are they? Are they in any meaningful sense “things” at all?

The Thoughts of God

There were several varieties of traditional answers to such questions. Plato had maintained that the forms or the ideas—his own terms for universals—were not only real, but in some deep sense the most real. They, unlike physical beings, individual cats, canaries, or donkeys, did not change and did not die, and to know being, to know what really existed, was to understand them.

Plato’s pupil Aristotle responded by maintaining that universals did exist, but they did not exist in the transcendent sense proposed by Plato, but rather in an immanent sense, within the beings which they “informed.”

Later in antiquity other thinkers, Christian and non-Christian alike, attempted to reconcile these two views, maintaining that the immanent forms, expressed or reflected with varying degrees of fullness, the eternal transcendent forms that defined the type. Such ideas often found expression in a theistic context. The transcendent forms were in some sense the “thoughts” of God, the divine ideas, at least insofar as those ideas had to do with created things, and the immanent forms were more or less what Aristotle said that they were, the forms that made each individual thing what it was.

In perceiving the world around them, people recognized the immanent forms of things and built in their minds an analogue to the world without. The form within, the human idea, matched the immanent form without, which in its turn reflected the divine idea. This is quite clearly the way things work in Dante’s *Commedia*, and Dante’s radiant vision of a sacramental world or theomorphic, “God-shaped” cosmos depends on such ideas. That is why, for Dante, intellect is also a mode of mystic apprehension—to know the forms of things is to know God’s thoughts and hence to know God, at least in part. That is in large part why for Dante and Aquinas there could not be any final disjunction between faith and reason. In the end, they revealed the same things, or aspects at least of the same things.

Nominalism

This set of ideas is in a philosophical sense a mode of “realism,” maintaining that in some sense universals are real. At almost precisely the time that Dante was finishing his lifework, however, in the early 1300s, another view of things began to gain currency. This is the view called “nominalism,” which maintains that universals are in the last analysis concepts, only names or “*nomina*.”

A major factor encouraging the rise of nominalist ideas was the intense focus of the early-level university training of the time upon logic. Aristotle’s logical works had never been lost to the West, even when the rest of the Aristotelian corpus resided unavailable to Latin speakers in Greek or in Arabic and Syriac translations. And Aristotle’s logical works are most impressive. He more or less single-handedly invented the discipline of logic, and in many respects no significant advance was made on his logical works until the development of symbolic logic during the nineteenth century. Medieval students accordingly studied him with care, and in the process became almost obsessively concerned with the structure of logical argument—not so much with *what* was said, but with *how* it was said. The formal name for a major aspect of such studies was “proposition theory,” which studied at full-power focus, the logic of propositions—once again, of logical argumentation. The focus is on modes of connection, not on what is connected, which is in symbolic logic, reduced as close to nonentity as possible, and traditionally symbolized by a single letter simply as “a” or “b” or whatever.

This is the seedbed—so we are told—from which nominalism arose, and the fundamental impulse of nominalism was to regard the entities deployed in logical manipulations as simply another sort of concept, as “a” or “b” or whatever else might prove convenient.

There is a certain plausibility in this. Whatever else universals may be, they are most certainly names or concepts. And as has been clear to pretty much everybody who ever thought about such things and left a record of it, you can’t go out and look at “horse.” You can only look at horses. And that raises an immensely far-reaching question. Are those horses really horses, or is “horse” just a category that for whatever reason we decide to impose upon them—or indeed upon whatever random group of whatever that we choose to designate as “horses.” To put the matter in another, more sharply pointed way, are we divvying up the perceptual field more or less at random, or are we constrained in some strong way by what is actually out there? Do we know anything or don’t we?

If universals are just “names,” if there is nothing whatsoever which constrains us to identify things as we do, then it is hard to avoid concluding that we don’t know anything about the world around us, that the conventions by which we sort cats as cats and canaries as canaries are conventions and nothing more. Some postmodernists, for polemical reasons and reasons of ideology, are willing to take things to this limit—wishing to “deconstruct” gender concepts and the like, which are perceived, incoherently, as structures of oppression (incoherently because if all perceptive categories are constructs and nothing more, then so too, is the notion of “oppression,” which can accordingly have no more claim on us than any other construct).

What immediately motivated the medieval nominalists, or so some of them claimed, was the notion that “real” universals or divine ideas, many apprehensible to human perception, in accordance with which God made the world, could be construed as all but blasphemous, as an impudent and impious conceptual constraint on God’s in fact absolute freedom. A “realistic” philosophical position on such a view amounted to little less than conceiving of God in human terms, in accordance with human cognitive habits, and accordingly to a serious misapprehension and diminishment of divine power.

On such a view it is both inaccurate and presumptuous to assume, as does Dante, that we can come to know at least something of God through ordinary natural knowledge of the things that exist in the world. If there are no universals in accordance with which things are made, then they most assuredly cannot express the thoughts of God, which we have no natural way of knowing. Reason and ordinary apprehension of the world around us have nothing to do with such things. We have Church and Scripture—what God has revealed to us and has told us that he has revealed to us—and that is all. God told us to love him. He could just as well have told us to hate him. There is no logic to the matter at all. Or so the argument runs. (There is a certain incoherence here as well—to know even what God has revealed to us by his chosen means we still have to be able to know, an effectively impossible project on hard-core nominalist presuppositions, if we assume that God was an actually existing entity outside the self.)

Such a set of ideas, if one accepts them, quite clearly poses two choices.

Choice one: God left us the Church and the Bible, and even though none of it makes much sense, and in fact could not make much sense, we can just believe. Or, choice two, we can conclude that the whole religious view of things has nothing to do with knowledge as we ordinarily think of it and is simply nonsense. Or choice (or non-choice) three, no doubt then and now the most popular option, we can pay no attention to such arcane thinking and simply blunder on as before.

As time passed and nominalism came to dominate the universities, non-choice three remained popular, but both the fideistic—faith alone—and the atheistic option gained adherents in what came to be known as the “Reformation” and the “Enlightenment.” At the time of the greatest of the nominalist thinkers, the immensely shrewd and combative William of Ockham (c. 1290–1348/9), along with Aquinas the other first-rate philosopher of the Middle Ages, neither full-scale fideism or atheism was an option. But both would come soon enough and would transform the Western world for good and for all.

Modern Science

Within the universities and outside, studies were undertaken that marked the beginnings of what would become modern science. In one sense, nominalism may have encouraged such developments, for if there are no universals, then maybe the best course is to look closely at what is going on in front of your nose. But how do you know that the terms by virtue of which you analyze empirical phenomena are not themselves mere “*nomina*”? Be that as it may, empirical studies of one sort or another were undertaken, if for the most part

on a practical level, by folks who were innocent of the philosophical disputes that embroiled the schools (the later middle ages, contrary to what is generally believed, were a time of highly productive anonymous technical innovation).

One of the most enduringly transformative innovations of the time was undertaken outside the universities altogether by Leonardo Fibonacci of Pisa, engaged in international trade, who learned in Muslim North Africa of “Arabic” numerals, and at once recognized their utility for commercial purposes. His *Liber Abaci*, composed early in the 1200s, introduced decimal notation to the Christian West. It took generations for such an innovation to catch on in the universities, but then as now, folks engaged in business were competing for money, not for reputation and prestige, and they took to the new notation quickly. (In all fairness, counting boards operating on the principle of the abacus were already familiar and widely used, but the notation was still a huge advance.)

Finally, the first steps toward the transformative vision of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo were taken by the so-called “impetus theorists.” A leading assumption of Aristotelian physics (another interest of the dazzling Greek pantomath) was that movement required a mover. The heavenly bodies moved steadily. They therefore required a steady, unmoved mover—in fact, Aristotle’s god. But what if, once the initial force was provided, once a body gained “impetus,” it continued to move because of that? You wouldn’t need an unmoved mover any more. An interesting speculation and one that would, in the generations to follow, be taken up with genuinely revolutionary—and quite literally world-moving, if not exactly world-shaking—results.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What were Plato's and Aristotle's thoughts on "universals"?
2. How could nominalism have encouraged the steps that led to modern science?

Suggested Reading

Kretzmann, Norman, Anthony Kenny, Jan Pinborg, and Eleonore Stump, eds. *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100–1600*. New ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

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Lecture 14:
Early Renaissance Culture
(Professor Timothy B. Shutt)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (translated by George Bull).

The Middle Ages in Italy were quite different from the Middle Ages farther north. The odd case of Milan Cathedral aside, the Gothic style never took hold in Italy. The Roman legacy, perhaps, was too strong, and so too the legacy of Byzantium. Medieval art in Italy often has a strikingly Byzantine feel. Rather than stained glass, the Byzantines favored mosaic—reflected “*splendor*” rather than *lux*. And the Italians themselves favored fresco, walls of plaster and paint rather than walls of light.

The Revival of Italian “Communes”

But there were other, more far-reaching differences as well. Both Gothic art and the art of Trecento—or what we would call fourteenth-century Italy, the 1300s—presupposed the prosperity to support them, and both northern France and environs and northern Italy were relatively prosperous. But prosperity and the return of cities and city life came more quickly to Italy than to regions farther north—from the 1000s in Italy. Towns and cities began to revive, and trade too began to revive, particularly trade in wool and textiles and ultimately finance as well. By the 1300s, northern Italy was far more urbanized than anywhere else in Europe, or in the world, and Italian cities began to develop in their own unique way.

The Italian “communes,” to employ the term that they used, were not so much like modern nation-states as like the Greek *poleis* of antiquity, Athens, Sparta, and Corinth, and their peers. Like the *poleis*, they were relatively small. Like the *poleis*, they included city and countryside. And like the *poleis*, they were to varying degrees independent and often fiercely independent. The most prominent among them were probably Florence, Milan, and Venice, with places like Siena, Pisa, Genoa, and Bologna not too far behind, though there were many others as well. Rome and Naples were likewise important, Naples affiliated with Sicily and whoever dominated in Sicily, Rome, of course, dominated by the Papacy.

The way of life fostered by these cities was in several ways different from that which seemed to prevail beyond the Alps. The vast energies subsumed by the cathedrals were in large part focused upon the sacred. The life of the Italian cities seems to have been more sharply focused on earthly concerns, upon the amenities made possible precisely by the “*vita civile*”—by civilized, sophisticated, urban life, and all that entailed. Trade encouraged such an orientation. Oligarchic, rather than monarchical government, did so as well. Politics mattered, and a relatively wide proportion of the populace were often involved. So too did the legacy of Rome, and, as time passed, the first Italian

humanists began scouring monasteries for ancient texts and devoting their attentions to writers like Cicero, Seneca, and Livy.

Even so deeply and pious an author as Dante was consistently and explicitly committed to the importance of earthly life, not just as a preparation for the life to come, but in its own right. For Dante, both Church and Empire, both worship and government, have their divinely sanctioned sphere. And it was precisely that distinction, and the rivalries arising from it, that did so much to compromise the independence of the communes and to ensure chronic turbulence of Italian political life. For both Church and Empire claimed a sort of universal hegemony—and both found their supporters. The Guelphs, often supported in one sense or another by France, tended to support the claims of the Papacy. The Ghibellines, by contrast, supported the Empire. And the communes aligned themselves in acrimonious and frequently shifting patterns, which often reinforced their own local enmities.

Siena and Florence were long-standing rivals for predominance in Tuscany and beyond—both very rich, proud, and powerful communes—Sienna traditionally Ghibelline in sympathy, Florence more often Guelph, but generally at odds with each other in any event.

Nonetheless, it is in Florence and Siena that we see the beginnings of a “renaissance” or “rebirth” in art (and for that matter in scholarship, in literature, and even in government as well).

Toward Renaissance

Early *tercento* painting, especially in Sienna, has a distinctly Byzantine cast. Byzantine models were accessible and impressive, most noteworthy among them, perhaps, the famous mosaics dating to the time of Justinian and Theodora in the sixth century at San Vitale in Ravenna. And the rather icon-like “*maniera greca*” was the prevailing style. The figures painted in this sort of work occupied a symbolic space or transcendental space, often against a gold background. The point was less to show what they looked like and where they were than to indicate what they meant, to suggest their spiritual importance.

This begins to change with the works of Duccio di Buoninsegna, a Siennese who flourished at the end of the 1200s and on into the early 1300s. Among his works, appearing on the so-called *Maestà* altarpiece is a *Betrayal of Jesus* painted around 1310 in which the figures strikingly depart from the formal, hieratic frontal depictions of the “*maniera greca*,” adopting much more realistic poses. The background, however, remains in large part the traditional gold.

In Florence, Giovanni Cimabue was at work in not too dissimilar a mode. The work of Giotto di Bondone (ca. 1266–1337), however, presumably the pupil of Cimabue and a generation younger marks a real departure. Giotto’s own contemporaries thought of his work as breathtakingly, astonishingly realistic. They do not generally strike untutored modern viewers as so. But nonetheless, taken in conjunction with the work of Giotto’s forebears, the magnitude of the changes that he introduced is unmistakable. Giotto’s most striking departure from earlier practice is the way in which his paintings imply a fixed and naturalistic point of view *for the spectator*, thereby including, at

least by implication, the spectator *within* the space of the painting. In a scene painted by Giotto, figures often appear not only from the side, but from the rear, as they in fact would if we ourselves were part of the scene, real viewers of the events depicted. This, I suspect, is what so bedazzled Giotto's contemporaries. It lent an immediacy and power to his paintings the likes of which they had never seen. They were, in some sense, actually there as witnesses at, say, *Death of St. Francis*. Giotto's figures too, and the spaces they inhabited, were depicted with naturalistic verve and plausibility unprecedented for a millennium, if not indeed unprecedented simply (it is in fact difficult to tell, so little ancient painting has survived).

All of these transitions worked, if indirectly, to enforce a theological point, and to imply that the events of sacred history had truly taken place within an earthly here and now in which we could have participated, and could and should still participate by virtue of pious imagination and reflection.

The Lorenzetti brothers of Siena, students of Duccio, made further advances, Ambrogio Lorenzetti in particular. The latter's most celebrated work, his allegory of *Good Government*, appears in the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena. Both the site and the theme of Lorenzetti's masterpiece are revealing. The Palazzo Pubblico was not a church, but rather the seat of the Sienese government, and Lorenzetti's elaborate allegory testifies to the importance that the Sienese attached to the *vita civile*. Beyond the central allegory are depictions of the city at peace and the countryside at peace—the fruits of good government—both, despite their symbolic import, are as naturalistic as Lorenzetti can make them. The depiction of the countryside at peace is in fact the first surviving instance of landscape painting since the ancient world.

The early Renaissance, though, was by no means confined to the visual arts, despite the merits of Giotto and his compeers. Dante himself was very nearly Giotto's exact contemporary, though Dante died at an earlier age, and in the next generation, Petrarch, Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1312–1375) transformed Italian literature and gave a rich foretaste of things to come.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What was the focus of life in the Italian cities?
2. What was Giotto's most striking departure from earlier practice?

Suggested Reading

Vasari, Giorgio. *Lives of the Artists*. Rev. ed. 2 vols. Trans. George Bull. New York: Penguin, 1987.

Other Books of Interest

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Croix, Horst de la, and Richard G. Tansey. *Gardner's Art through the Ages*. 8th ed. New York: Harcourt, 1986.

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Suggested Readings:

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