

DANTE SYMPOSIUM

NOVEMBER 17, 2021
9.30 – 12.15, ONLINE

In the light of the 700th year of Dante's death in 1321, the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences (TSHD) announces a half-day symposium on Dante and his multi-faceted literary work on November 17, 2021.

Next to the *Divina Commedia*, contributors will show how Dante's broad spectrum of literary work can be used as a vivid empirical ground for the different disciplines housed in our School. In so doing, they will be furthering the dialogue between the human and the digital.

PROGRAM

- 09.30 – 09.35 Welcome by TSHD **Dean Boudewijn Haverkort**
- 09.35 – 09.45 Brief introduction to Dante's Journey by Max Spotti
- 09.45 – 10.15 **Matteo Colombo** (DFI)
Dante and the Woke: Some Recollections
- 10.15 – 10.45 **Giovanni Cassani** (DCA)
Dante's Linguistic Creativity: A Review of Computational Methods to Study Neologisms, Expressive Language and Sound Symbolism
- 10.45 – 11.00 Coffee break
- 11.00 – 11.30 **Max Spotti** (DCU)
The Myth of Standard Language: Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia* in Times of Superdiversity
- 11.00 – 12.00 **Sander Bax** (DCU)
Teaching the *Divina Commedia*
- 12.00 – 12.15 Closing by **Vice-dean for Research Marjolijn Antheunis**



ABSTRACTS



Dr. Matteo Colombo (DFI)

Dante and the Woke: Some Recollections

My teenage niece Thais once asked me why her school was named after Dante. She'd heard Dante was sexist, homophobic and racist, and if Dante was alive today and tried to publish any of his writings, he would be met with a mix of silence, offense and overwhelming criticism. (In fact, Thais had also heard contemporary translators from progressive countries censored certain passages in Dante's work to avoid 'unnecessary offense.') I did not know how to answer Thais's question, but I suspected many of the folks in her circles had a poor sort of memory that only worked *forwards*.

Thais and I tried to remember various aspects of Dante's life, relationships, writings and historical context. Our remembrance of things past touched upon the situation of women, homosexuals, Jews and Muslims in the Italy of the Late Middle Ages. While we did not explicitly answer Thais's original question, our chat helped us to better understand Dante's life and work in context. In this talk, I will revisit some themes from that chat.



Dr. Giovanni Cassani (DCA)

Dante's Linguistic Creativity: A Review of Computational Methods to Study Neologisms, Expressive Language and Sound Symbolism

Dante's linguistic creativity: a review of computational methods to study neologisms, expressive language and sound symbolism (1) Pape Satan, pape Satan aleppe! (Inferno, Canto VII, v. 1). (2) Cagnazzo, Farfarello, Scarmiglione and other devils' names (Inferno, Canti XXI – XXIII). (3) S'io m'intuassi, come tu t'inmii (Paradiso, Canto IX, v. 81). (1), (2), and (3) are three among many examples of the linguistic creativity that pervades Dante's *Commedia*, which countless scholars have studied from a literary perspective. However, these linguistic phenomena are also interesting to study language creativity, use and change, even though their rarity poses a challenge. This is especially the case for state of the art computational methods, whose efficacy depends on the availability of rich and informative linguistic contexts, by definition scarce for hapaxes and linguistic innovations. Nonetheless, recent methods developed in computational linguistics and psycholinguistics [1, 2, 3, 4] can help us to study the examples above and answer several questions about how words are created, interpreted, and used. How well do the names in (2) fit a devil? How transparently do *inmii* and *intuassi* denote the process of two souls interpenetrating each other? Can we find out whether there are linguistic reasons why these words did not stick? What could an expression with no immediately recognizable meaning, such as (1), evoke in the reader? Dante's work is a testament to what linguistic creativity can achieve and to its long-lasting influence on the evolution of a language: computational approaches should learn to focus more on what is rare and innovative, because that is, ultimately, what moves our thinking and all our languages.



Dr. Max Spotti (DCU)

The Myth of Standard Language: Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia* in Times of Superdiversity

Shortly after his exile from Florence in 1302, Dante (1265-1321) began working on a treaty entitled *De vulgari eloquentia* (On Eloquence in the Vernacular). While Dante planned to devote four books to this theme, he did not get beyond the first two books. More specifically, Book I opens under the title: "The noble vernacular" and its opening reads as follows: "Since I find that no one, before myself, has dealt in any way with the theory of eloquence in the vernacular, and since we can plainly see that such eloquence is necessary to everyone – for not only men but also women and children strive to acquire it, as far as nature allows – I shall try, inspired by the Word that comes from above, to say something useful about the language of people who speak the vulgar tongue, hoping thereby to enlighten somewhat the understanding of those who walk the streets like the blind, ever thinking that what lies ahead is behind them." (Botterill 1996:1)

Taken from the perspective of the emancipatory approach perpetrated in linguistic anthropology (Hymes 1974; Blommaert & van der Aa 2011), Dante's oeuvre' above appears to function as forerunner of a linguistic ethnographic monitoring endeavour that from 1970s onwards drew a line between what language is, what languaging means and what meta-pragmatic implications languaging has for the identities of its users versus the language of grammarians and of language policy makers.

In the light of the ongoing debate on language and integration of newly arrived migrants in the Dutch language continuum across the Netherlands and Flanders, my contribution dives into the languaging taking place in the super-diverse neighbourhood of Antwerpen Berchem. In doing so, I try to show how the languaging of the vulgus still holds a form of eloquence that is used for constructing urban conviviality helping to transcend ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic boundaries going beyond the 'Dutch only' approach as the only viable option for fostering civic integration.



Dr. Sander Bax (DCU)

Teaching the *Divina Commedia*

Dante's *Divina Commedia* (1321) is one of the important classical texts that is on the program of the course 'Cultural History', that is part of the bachelor Online Culture and of the Pre-Master for the Teacher Training Program in Dutch Language and Literature. Every year, I take the students with me on a travel with both Dante and Virgil from Inferno, through Purgatorio, towards Paradiso. I try to show the students how brilliantly composed this text is and how richly embedded the text is within the cultural context of the Late Middle Ages. I also try to show how Dante's text has inspired many writers and artists from later days.

It is easy to say that the *Divinia Commedia* is a gift to everyone teaching literary history. In my presentation during the Dante Symposium, I will reflect on this specific craft of teaching literary history. We all know perhaps the literature teachers from our childhood, the ones who could

tell stories for hours on end. It is fair to say that today's students need something more and something different to get inspired to dive into the literary historical canon themselves. In discussions about secondary education in the Netherlands, we often hear reports of a devastating decline of motivation from students for reading books in general and for reading classics.

Over the last years, I have worked with several colleagues (Erwin Mantingh from Utrecht University and Renate van Keulen from Tilburg University in particular) and a lot of secondary school teachers in so-called Teacher Development Teams (*Docentontwikkelteams*) on new educational designs for teaching literary history in secondary education. In doing so, we created the principle of 'literary historical reasoning', in which students learn to set up argumentations and reasonings around complex literary-historical issues and in which they perform and develop high-order thinking skills like comparing, analyzing, interpreting, contextualizing and framing. In the presentation at the Dante Symposium, I will use some fragments from the *Divina Commedia* as a starting point to give you an idea of the type of assignments we could create to have the students actively involved in conversations about Dante's masterpiece. And along the way, hopefully, we will learn something about this wonderful book as well.
