

Dante's *Inferno*: Going through Hell with David Wallace

Description

2021 marks the 700th anniversary of the death of Dante Alighieri, regarded down the centuries as the greatest poet of the west. His entire life and poetic career pointed to the *Commedia*, and the *Comedy* itself considers all aspects of human life: inability to change (*Inferno*); change and progress (*Purgatorio*); enjoyment (*Paradiso*). In this course, over four classes, we will read ourselves deep into the *Inferno*, meeting some of Dante's most memorable creations. We will generally prepare for and read four cantos per class (about 600 lines of poetry), beginning in the "dark wood" (*selva oscura*) where Dante comes to himself in mid-life, having lost the plot. He cries out in desperation to Virgil, embodying the mature wisdom of ancient and Roman civilization, and Virgil leads him through Hell. We will read not just for plot, but for poetry, using Mandelbaum's excellent translation in parallel text; Dante's Italian is not wildly difficult, and keeping an eye on it greatly augments understanding and enjoyment. We will note how other readers down the centuries, from Geoffrey Chaucer and William Blake to T.S. Eliot and Gloria Naylor, draw inspiration from Dante; we will see artists attempting to visualize his scenes. Having noted how Dante gets into this mess (cantos 1-3) and meditated upon the status of those who lived well, but are not chosen (4), we will see how successive sins, or states of being, are represented, from lust (Paolo and Francesca, 5) through gluttony and money-grubbing to violence and fraud. We leave Dante and Virgil in canto 17, halfway down, riding Geryon, that complex creature of deception and make-believe ridden by every artist.

Required Text

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, translated by Allen Mandelbaum (Bantam, 1982), dual language (parallel text) edition, ISBN 0553213393

Schedule of readings:

Sep 16: *Inferno*, cantos 1-4

Oct 21: cantos 5-8

Nov 11: cantos 9-13

Dec 9: cantos 14-17

About the Instructor

David Wallace, sometime President of the Medieval Academy of America, has been Judith Rodin Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Penn, where he regularly teaches courses on Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and his afterlife, since 1996. He is Director-in-Chief of Bibliotheca Dantesca, and he has taught several courses for Rosenbach on Dante's greatest English admirer, Geoffrey Chaucer.