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INTERVIEW

TEACHING DANTE'S 'DIVINE COMEDY' IN 21ST-CENTURY AMERICA: A CONVERSATION WITH KRISTINA MARIE OLSON

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Kristina Marie Olson is Associate Professor of Italian at George Mason University in Virginia. She is a member of the editorial board of *Bibliotheca Dantesca* and the President of the *American Boccaccio Association*. Together with Christopher Kleinhenz, she edited the volume *Approaches to Teaching Dante's Divine Comedy*, which follows a first edition in 1982, edited by Carole Slade.

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MS: *In 1982, when the first edition of this book came out, many of the current scholars and students of Dante were very young or not even born yet. How do you think scholarship and teaching on Dante have evolved in these 38 years?*

KMO: I think it has changed in numerous ways. If you look at the table of content of the first edition, Christopher Kleinhenz is there, but many top Dante scholars today are not even featured in that volume. When I approached Chris Kleinhenz with the idea of doing a new edition of this volume in 2013, he immediately said yes. As a side note, working with Chris has been an excellent apprenticeship. I've learned so much from working with Chris over the years on this project. Chris does not even contemplate the possibility of procrastination: he is faced with a task and he does it immediately. He is tireless.

Now, back in the era of the first volume, cultural studies and many other fields that were emerging had not impacted Dante Studies yet. They had yet to be integrated into our approaches to teaching and analyzing the poem. Formalism, branded as philology,

dominated. We are now way on the other side of those “new” theoretical approaches, and, in my opinion, we’re still playing catch-up. We are not only way after Judith Butler’s first publications on gender theory, for instance, but we still refer to her ideas of gender as performance as new to our reading of the *Comedy* – if we talk about gender at all. Moreover, we need also to integrate the resurgence in material philology, and all the progress that has been made in studies of manuscript traditions, without allowing it to dominate over even newer approaches. We have to reckon with digital humanities as another theoretical area for exploration: not just what digital instruments can do to help us access the poem online, but also the scholarship in digital humanities that allows us to approach the poem in new ways. On another note, profound changes in entertainment and media also took place, obviously, since 1982. Many of our students come to our classes because they have played the videogames; this clearly would not have happened in 1982. As a result of the videogame as well as other references to Dante in popular culture, Dante has become a household name in the past 35 years. High school curricula have changed: in America, at least, the composition of the literary canon is questioned, and chronological and racial coverage have changed in radical ways. The demographics of our classes are different, with more diverse populations—depending upon the institution, of course.

All these elements have changed the way we approach our teaching. We are talking about two very different worlds. The 1982 edition is a good snapshot of what it meant to teach Dante then for a select group of scholars.

MS: *I find that the idea of ‘approaches’ in the title is both fascinating and revealing. It seems to convey the idea that teaching the Comedy is an enterprise with many obstacles. What do you think are the main challenges of teaching the Divine Comedy?*

KMO: The word ‘approaches’ in the title is directly connected to the MLA series. It reflects the MLA’s desire that every volume illustrates good teaching practices for pluralistic and diverse student populations. After all, if you do not have a plurality of approaches you will leave some students behind. The challenges today are numerous. Before addressing them, individual teachers of Dante should assess who is studying Dante in their classroom, and why. This is not as simple as it sounds. Higher education is changing, and student demographics are changing faster than diversity in the

professoriate. It is no longer the students of English literature who come to Dante as undergraduates. My students are general education students. They study criminology, and come to Dante because they want to study ethics and systems of justice and punishment. Or they are game designers, and they've played the game. Or they are students in biology, management, etc.; people who simply have to fulfill the requirement, and they've heard of Dante and he sounds cool. The audience is diverse, and we cannot rely upon baseline familiarity with Vergil or Ovid, with the Bible. We cannot rely on the knowledge of Middle Ages and medieval history. When Chris and I surveyed the MLA members, we found that among the biggest challenges of teaching Dante, the top responses were the historical differences between our times and Dante's, as well as the historical references within the poem. I would agree to that—to a certain extent. There is a way you can get around the large amount of historical references: you can use annotations, guides, such as Guy Raffa's *Danteworlds*. What you cannot give them is a guide to is the theology within the poem; at least, not for a general education course. We are still figuring out how to talk about religious difference in the classroom in ways that are respectful and nuanced. Historical differences can be surmounted much more easily than the many passing references that are much harder to gloss. How do we even get beyond the preconception that Dante is the Catholic medieval poet, on top of views of him as antisemitic, homophobic, Islamophobic? Students often do not know how innovative Dante was regarding these themes, on multiculturalism, on Otherness, in respect of his contemporaneous. But how can we reach them if they have not started reading the poem? I've had students tell me that they won't study Dante because they've heard that he was Islamophobic. When they come into the classroom, you are still working to challenge those preconceptions. That works either way: I still encounter Catholic students who believe we are going to read a poem that is entirely concerned with God, and is completely reverent and not heterodox at all. There is a special forum on these particular challenges coming out in the 2019 issue of *Dante Studies*, by the way.

MS: *I absolutely agree with you. When I taught Dante last semester, I had a small riot when students read the episode of Piccarda, outraged by what we would call victim-blaming. But in general, there had been several moments in which our sensibility is very different from what could have been at Dante's times. How do you*

think the students react to those instances and how do you—as a teacher—reconcile the material with the reality of 2020?

KMO: I talk about this a little bit in my essay in the volume: the Piccarda episode is surely one of the toughest ones, and I feel very lucky when I don't teach *Paradiso* and I can focus on how wonderful and revolutionary Beatrice is! But with Piccarda, I have to admit that I won't push it. It's not always about reconciling the material, I think, because it's a disservice to force the poem to be different from what it is. You cannot use terms such as feminist, or proto-feminist, or anything like that, in teaching Dante. But if we historicize these contentious moments, we can demonstrate how Dante was different and original when it comes to women, as in many other issues of racial and religious identity. This is where Teodolinda Barolini's urge to historicize the poem creates possibilities for our teaching. Let's take Piccarda. Dante sounds like he is blaming the victim, through our modern lens. However, this canto is an extreme articulation of the sanctity of vows. In that instance, we must separate for a moment the idea that we are talking about the abduction of a woman and instead look at it on the matter of the breaking of the vow. These are the passages in which we must help our students to enter the medieval mind a little bit better, and into Dante's mindset. Dante is so black and white on many aspects – and this canto is a prime example of it. Yet in his rigidity, there are loopholes and nuances, and teaching Dante is all about teaching the student how to discern and profit from those distinctions. In the case of Piccarda, we can also ask: "What does it mean to have Piccarda speak in the poem?", and remind our students of Dante's unprecedented move in having contemporary historical women, women from a leading political family, speak in an epic poem. Accept all emotional reactions, but then calibrate your students' expectations for Dante's times, Dante meets our expectations even more than—let us say—Petrarch, in my opinion, so let's think how innovative Dante is.

For example, instead of only talking about Piccarda, let us not forget Rahab! I mean, there is a prostitute in Heaven. There are these ways in which we are surprised by what Dante does. We must accentuate these radical moves as incredibly different from how medieval moralists, medieval preachers, were talking about women. Beatrice speaks; she is a philosopher, a theologian, and so forth. This is the importance of historicizing the poem.

MS: *This is also the debate surrounding Boccaccio, whether he is a feminist or not, the one-million-dollar question. Next year, 2021, is going to be the 700th anniversary of Dante's death. Why is the *Commedia* still part of the curriculum?*

KMO: Let us first recognize that there are people who do not want it to be part of the curriculum. This allows me to bring up something that is coming out in a few months. I edited a Forum in *Dante Studies*, called "Ideology and Pedagogy: The Tensions of Teaching Dante." It comes from the thinking of the MLA volume—Teaching Dante—but in a more provocative way. I gave the participants the statement by Gherush92, the Human Rights NGO, that a few years ago called for the erasure of Dante from the high school curriculum, because they saw him as Islamophobic, antisemitic, etc. The forum participants considered how and why we should keep him in the curriculum. This is why I don't want to repeat what they say, but to the question "why is he still around?" I would answer that a reason is for the cultural capital, at least in America. Think of the names engraved around Butler Library at Columbia University, from Homer onwards. Dante belongs to their core curriculum, which is based upon the notion that cultural capital that makes you part of an elite. I sometimes have students say that you cannot call yourself an educated human being if you have not read Dante. Now, I don't feel I can agree—surely it makes you a much better reader of poetry and so forth, but I bristle at the idea that one single poet might be the key to being an educated human, or that you cannot have an education from a series of other great works of literature. This is where I stand on the de-colonizing spectrum of the curriculum. Yet, I think that Dante's poem allows us to conceive of our mortality, the afterlife, and the right way to live on earth, in ways that few other texts allow us to do. We go back to Auerbach and the idea of Dante as the poet of the secular world. Reading Dante is a reflection about our life on Earth, in a way that is not just Christian but also very secular; this is the appeal in the university classroom today. We can be spiritual in this humanistic way by reading the *Comedy* and talking of things like life and death while not being religious. This is very much the appeal for my students as well. There is also the linguistic aspect: how many times do we refer to Dante's Hell, the rings of Hell? Dante's conception of the afterlife determines how we think of the afterlife even if we have not read his poem for many students. I am still drawn to Dante by its suggestion that we can communicate with anybody, living or dead, in time and space; I find comfort in the idea that we

are never separated by death from those people you love or even those you hate. A conversation is always possible. There is great comfort and relief in that fantasy. We read of Dante having these conversations and we put ourselves in his shoes, thinking what we would have said or thought. It gestures towards unlimited self-expression and community.

MS: *What do you think are the most relevant differences in teaching the Divine Comedy in the US, compared to Italy or other parts of the world?*

KMO: This brings me back to the question of reading it today—after all, for America, the *Comedy* is not too ossified in pedagogical traditions. Here in the US we can be experimental: one could offer a course on Dante and pop culture, or Dante and videogames. In Italy, Dante carries a great pedagogical burden and expectation. I mean, in Italy in high school students are force-fed Dante—and then often they flee from him after that.

MS: *Something I have indeed appreciated of Dante studies in the US is exactly this freedom of discussing themes that often in Italy are seen with suspicion. So, once could say that ‘experimentation’ is the big perk of the American studies of Dante.*

KMO: I would say the freedom of experimentation. When I trained with Teodolinda Barolini, it was very clear that you need to know the text extremely well before making any claims or integrating new approaches or disciplinary perspectives from outside of the poem. In this way, my training with her was the best of two worlds. She is someone who could respond to tradition and depart from tradition with all the erudition and authority that *dantismo* can carry.

Another aspect that I appreciate about teaching Dante in the US is the great student interest outside of the university classroom; it is in high schools, sure but also very prevalent among lifelong learners. I often teach Dante at OLLI (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute), which has an affiliation with George Mason University. We have the post-World-War-II generation in the US who still see great value in learning and are using their retirement to study Dante. And they love him. And they are great students. I am not sure we would have this kind of pedagogical encounter in Italy, given that everybody has already been so heavily exposed to him in high school.

MS: *We were talking about your experience with Barolini, so I want to ask your opinion on the issue of the Dantista. For years, especially in the big universities, one could find the figure of the Dantista among the necessary scholars in an Italian department. Having in mind the difficulties in which the humanities find themselves in, and they will probably be even more so after this pandemic—do you think that the importance of the Commedia will still hold? And will the figure of the Dantista still be a thing?*

KMO: I wish I knew the answer. I surely hope so—it also depends a lot on the institution. I feel there is still the expectation of having a *Dantista* in an Ivy League institution or institutions with graduate programs. Of course, these decisions are made by higher administrators based upon their knowledge of the humanities, and they do not always know how to appreciate the place and the value of a *Dantista*. At my institution, the fact that I could teach Dante was of course good because this is still a name that attracts students. George Mason is an institution that gained the R-1 Carnegie classification; in colleges that have an endowed chair in Dante Studies like Dartmouth, Berkeley, any of these, I think the role of the *Dantista* is very protected. I don't know what will happen in the future, but the demand for Dante scholars has not disappeared entirely. There are then moments in which Dante becomes very popular, as now it is the case for Boccaccio when people suddenly realize that they need students to study the *Decameron*. We cannot predict what will happen—I mean, we could have never predicted what is happening now with the interest in Boccaccio and projects on the *Decameron*.

MS: *Speaking of Boccaccio, you have been recently appointed President of the American Boccaccio Association. Coincidentally, nobody could have foreseen such an explosion in the interest around the Decameron, due to the current situation. How was Boccaccio before the pandemic? Was he a part of the curriculum in your institution?*

KMO: After I proposed a course on Boccaccio he was. He is hardly part of any high school curriculum, probably because the scandalous nature of some stories overshadows everything else. It is in the core curriculum of some colleges. His place in the curriculum is

not as strong as Dante's, but who knows how things will evolve. For now, there are all these associations between the Black Death and Covid-19 which drives interest. Even more so, when you think that there is hardly any plague in the *Decameron*: this is a text on the aftermath of a pandemic, the idea of rebuilding a society.

MS: *Finally, let us talk about the future. What kinds of approaches will we read in the third edition of your edited volume in 2058?*

KMO: Tough question. If we are all still around, at that point, we will probably even be beyond studies of post-humanism. One of the things I do not believe we have dealt with in the poem is a geographical, topographical approach; have we thought of the environment of Dante's poem, for instance? It will also depend on where we will be with climate change; the more the world will look apocalyptic to us, the *Commedia* may be read as an apocalyptic text. The nature of human intelligence is another theme. Dante as being a genius, and incredible mind, in our studies of cognitive sciences and Dante's great ability of memory, synthesis, encyclopedism, all aspects that might provide new directions. So, we will see.

MS: *Perhaps we should leave it at that. Thank you.*