

# QUADERNO CULTURALE

Queens College Italian Program Newsletter | Numero 3 | Department of European Languages and Literatures | Fall 2013

## Guida alla lettura: An introduction to Numero tre

Il terzo numero di *Quaderno Culturale*, bollettino del Programma di Italiano del Dipartimento di lingue e letterature europee, contiene informazioni sui corsi di italiano offerti dal Queens College, interviste a docenti e a studenti, un resoconto dal congresso AISLLI ed un articolo sulla premiazione dei migliori studenti di italiano. Dell'offerta didattica dell'autunno 2013 vengono evidenziati il corso comparativo sulle lingue romanze del prof. Haller, quello sulla rappresentazione delle donne nella letteratura italiana curato da Laura Visco e quello realizzato da Luisanna Sardu sulla mitologia nei capolavori del Rinascimento italiano. Il professore dal vivo incontrato da *Quaderno Culturale* è Karina F. Attar, coordinatrice dei corsi undergraduate di Italiano. La prof.ssa Attar ripercorre le tappe della sua formazione culturale poliglotta e della sua carriera professionale, iniziate in Italia e sviluppatesi in Inghilterra e negli Stati Uniti, ci parla dei suoi interessi di ricerca e delle sue prossime pubblicazioni. In *Career Quest*, lo studente di Master Vincenzo Cangemi racconta a *Quaderno Culturale* la storia della sua sempre crescente passione per la lingua e la cultura italiane, e il progetto di diventarne un docente. Del più recente congresso AISLLI si riportano gli interventi sull'"italicità" degli emigranti italiani e degli immigrati in Italia, e si dà conto dell'edizione critica del dizionario italiano-inglese di John Florio, a cura di Hermann Haller. Il numero presenta inoltre un articolo su un evento molto speciale: la cerimonia di premiazione al Consolato Generale d'Italia degli studenti migliori dello scorso anno accademico. E sono proprio le foto di quella cerimonia a costituire il filo conduttore del numero 3 di *Quaderno Culturale*.

Buona lettura!

The third issue of *Quaderno Culturale*, the newsletter of the Italian Program of the Department of European Languages and Literatures, provides information about Italian classes offered by Queens College, interviews with faculty and students, a report from the AISLLI conference, and an article about the Annual Students Awards. We highlight three Spring 2013 classes: *Languages of Europe: The Romance Languages* (Prof. Hermann Haller), *Representation of Women, Spirituality, and Eroticism in Italian Literature* (Ms. Laura Visco), and *Chasing Daphne: Tracing Mythology in Italian Renaissance Masterpieces* (Ms. Luisanna Sardu). For the section *Professori dal vivo*, we interview Prof. Karina F. Attar, Italian Undergraduate Coordinator. Prof. Attar traces her polyglot cultural education and professional career from Italy to England to the United States. She also talks about her research interests and updates us on her forthcoming publications. In *Career Quest*, graduate student Vincenzo Cangemi tells us the story of his ever-increasing love for Italian language and civilization, and how he is planning to make a teaching career out of it. Our report from the AISLLI conference focuses on presentations about the so-called "Italicity" of Italian emigrants as well as that of new immigrants in Italy; furthermore, it gives an account of the critical edition of John Florio's Italian-English dictionary, edited by Hermann Haller. This issue also contains an article about a very special event at the Consulate General of Italy: the Annual Students Award Ceremony, when prizes were given to the best students of Italian from the last academic year. This same event's pictures are in fact the underlying theme of *Quaderno Culturale's* third issue.

Buona lettura!

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# The Queens College Italian Program

**Morena Corradi\***  
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This semester, the Italian Program at Queens College offers 15 undergraduate courses at all levels, from elementary to advanced, and in different subjects: literature, cinema, business, and linguistics. There are 261 students enrolled in these courses.

To maximize their language experience, Queens College students can major or minor in Italian. Required and elective 200- and 300-level courses give them the opportunity to expand their knowledge. Advanced grammar, translation, business, literature, and culture across periods and gender are just a few of the topics covered in our courses.

Among the 200-level courses offered this semester is Commercial and Technical Italian (Italian 235), taught by Prof. Haller. This course introduces students to the Italian language as it is used in business and other specialized fields. Students get acquainted with the more formal uses of language in professional communication. They write resumes, job applications, and business letters, and practice dialogues for job interviews and business meetings. They also become familiar with the cultural differences of doing business in Italy and in the United States.

The Italian Program encourages Italian majors and minors to look into the Business and Liberal Arts (BALA) program.

Designed to bridge academia and the working world, BALA promotes critical thinking, problem solving, and effective writing and speaking—skills valued in any endeavor. Internships, professional mentors, and career-planning workshops are integral elements in this demanding, multidisciplinary minor. During the program's annual off-campus retreat, you can network with faculty members and corporate executives (learn more at <http://www.qc.cuny.edu/Academics/Degrees/DSS/BALA/Pages/default.aspx>).

BALA students, on the other hand, are encouraged to study LOTE, Languages Other Than English. (Barbara Sandler, director of the Business and Liberal Arts Program Honors Center, Temp 3, Room 6, ext. 72860.)



It is well known that the best way to achieve fluency in a foreign language is to live in the country where that language is spoken. Therefore, the Italian Program encourages students to participate in study abroad programs in Italy. The Universities of Perugia, Siena, and Chieti-Pescara can be a student's destination for a summer, a semester, or a year.

Let's focus here on our Summer Program in Perugia, which gives students the chance to study both Italian language and culture.

Offered by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute in collaboration with the European Languages and Literatures Department at Queens College and the University for Foreigners of Perugia, this is one of CUNY's most affordable summer programs, open to all students at CUNY. ELL and the University for Foreigners launched it in the late 1990s, under the supervision of Prof. Haller, ELL's chair at the time. Each year since then, the University for Foreigners has offered a scholarship to students of Italian at Queens College.

Perugia is a beautiful medieval city in the middle of Italy, not far from Rome. It is famous for its University for Foreigners of Perugia (Università per Stranieri di Perugia), Italy's oldest and most prestigious center of Italian language education—and the location for the summer study abroad program in Italian language and culture. Taught by University for Foreigners faculty, the courses focus on Italian language (including an intensive course) and civilization. They are divided into two summer sessions. For one month of summer study, students transfer 6 credits of Italian to QC.

Students apply to the program through the QC Education Abroad office (Joseph Grosso, program coordinator, at [joseph.grosso@qc.cuny.edu](mailto:joseph.grosso@qc.cuny.edu), Kiely Room 183), while ELL provides academic advisement (Prof. Haller is currently the adviser). Each

\* Thanks to Prof. Haller for his contribution to this page.

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year, ELL makes scholarships available to students on a competitive basis.

Students should plan their summer study early, by the beginning of the Spring semester. ELL usually holds an informative meeting in February to give interested students enough time to get everything ready for the April deadline. Three QC students have recently taken advantage of the summer program. Each year, this program also brings several students from Italy to Queens College and CUNY.

Finally, there is the CUNY/Italy Exchange Program offered through the Calandra Italian American Institute (Joan Migliori is coordinator, 212-642-2094).

The MA Program in Italian presents graduate courses for students who want to specialize in Italian. Every semester, students can register for two master's courses (700-level). After earning an MA in Italian, many graduates have been able to pursue an elementary or high school teaching career and/or an academic career as PhD students. The MA Program in Italian also offers an MA-level track in Italian American Studies as part of the MALS (Master of Arts in Liberal Studies). See <http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/calandra/education/courses/italian-american-studies-courses>.

This semester, the program offers three graduate courses: Italian 716, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and the Italian Novella, taught by Prof. Attar; IT 753, Nation, Glory and Memory in Foscolo and Leopardi, taught by Prof. Morena Corradi; and ItalAM 704, Italian/American Cinema: Representation and Production, taught by Prof. Anthony Tamburri.

## HIGHLIGHTS OF OUR FALL 2013 COURSE OFFERINGS

**Euro 202 | M, W 1:40-2:55**  
**Languages of Europe:**  
**The Romance Languages**  
**Prof. Haller**

This course will introduce the students to the wealth of Europe's multilingual landscape, with a focus on the Romance languages. We will describe the similarities and differences

of French, Italian, and Spanish, as well as of other languages and dialects deriving from Latin. Following a broad overview of Romance languages as they are used today, we will look at their structure and trace their origins and evolution through time. We will discuss questions concerning standard versus non-standard languages, language contact in past and present, the beginning of the written use of Romance languages in the Middle Ages, and their spread across the globe through colonization and migration. We will reflect on the role of Romance languages in the European Union vis-à-vis English as a global language, and on the impact of migration on language change and language use. Students will contribute with their own practice and knowledge of one or more Romance languages or dialects. By working on a semester project they will gain some comparative insight into various Romance languages and dialects. No previous courses in linguistics or Latin are required, but students should have some proficiency with at least one Romance language. The course counts toward the major and minor in French and Italian.

**Italian 41 | T, TH 3:10-4:25**  
**Representation of Women, Spirituality, and Eroticism in Italian Literature**  
**Ms. Visco**

The representation of women in Italian literature over the centuries has been characterized mainly by a dichotomy between the spiritual dimension, and the sensual, material one, without too many attempts to reconcile the two experiences—despite some important exceptions. The opposition between the figures of the “*donna angelo*” and “*donna fatale*” is one of the most recurrent topics in Italian literature. In this course we will explore how modern and contemporary Italian novelists and poets have dealt with this opposition, and we will seek to find patterns, developments, and breakthroughs in the treatment of this matter. Readings will include selections from novels and poems by Gabriele d'Annunzio, Dino Campana, Umberto Saba, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Antonia Pozzi, Alda Merini, Amelia Rosselli, Antonio Porta, Alessandro Manzoni, Antonio Fogazzaro, and Sibilla Aleramo.

**Italian 41W | T, TH 1:40-2:55**  
**Chasing Daphne: Tracing Mythology in Italian Renaissance Masterpieces**  
**Ms. Sardu**

During the thriving cultural moment of the Renaissance, scholars were more and more interested in recovering and studying Latin and Greek literary, historical, and philosophical texts. Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, in particular, was treated as source material. By participating in the philosophical debate concerned with reality and deceitfulness, such Italian poets as Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, as well as many others, utilized Ovid's work to express their concern with the nature of transformation. For example, Ariosto's epic treatment of Ruggero and Astolfo's education in *Orlando Furioso* involves not only the metamorphosis of the body, which crosses unexpected borders from human to plant, to animal, but also the alteration of the self. The scope of this interdisciplinary course will range from the literary treatment of the Ovidian *Metamorphosis* during the early modern age, to the artistic representation of transformation in paintings, sculptures, and cinema. Issues addressed in the course include the opposition of veracity/deceitfulness, man/nature, and fortune/virtue.

To learn more about our program, please visit [www.qc.cuny.edu/italian](http://www.qc.cuny.edu/italian) or contact us directly:

### Undergraduate advisors

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## Italian for a Teaching Career: An Interview with Vincenzo Cangemi



We speak today with Vincenzo Cangemi, a Queens College graduate who completed the Italian major and is now a student in the Italian MA program.

**You graduated from Queens College with a major in Italian. Why did you choose this discipline? Did you also select a minor?**

In the fall of 2006, I enrolled at Queens College as an undergraduate interested in learning the basics of the Italian language. As I continued working toward my college degree, my love for Italian culture, history, literature, and language grew and inspired me to complete a Bachelor's in Italian. My studies filled me with a passion to teach the language. I did not choose a minor as an undergraduate; however, as a graduate student I enrolled in the Adolescent Education program at Queens College's Secondary Education department. The two years leading toward initial certification have been difficult, but my appreciation for the Italian language enabled me to overcome the challenges of graduate work.

**What was your experience in the Italian Program of the Department of European Languages and Literatures? What did you learn and how is this knowledge useful to you now?**

First of all, I would like to thank all of the teaching staff of the Italian Program in ELL at Queens College. Their enthusiasm, passion, kindness, patience, dedication, support and challenges nourished my love for studying the Italian language. One day, with the same passion that the staff has nurtured in my heart, I wish to serve society as an instructor. I had a wonderful and enriching learning experience. In studying different works of Italian literature and elements of Italian grammar, I learned how to read more critically, communicate my ideas well in writing, and better understand Italian and European history.

**You are now continuing your studies with a Master's in Italian. Can you describe your experience in the Master's program? How is it different from the major/BA?**

I have been studying Italian at Queens College for seven years, and want to go beyond my initial goals by completing the MA program in Italian. Comparing my undergraduate and graduate years, I feel that the master's program explores Italian language, literature, and history in greater depth and gives students the possibility to think more critically about various works of literature and history. It feels as if the overall knowledge that I acquired as an undergraduate comes more to life in graduate school.

**After the master's, you want to teach Italian. At what level: elementary, middle, or high school? Why does this profession interest you?**

With the help of the secondary education department, I have acquired valuable skills for teaching language in both middle and high school settings, and I feel well prepared to teach at both levels. I'm interested in this profession because it gives me the opportunity to share my passion for Italian with other students who wish to learn it as a foreign language.

**Outside your studies, you have been working for several years as a technician for Radio Maria. Can you describe your working environment and your experience there so far? Will you continue this work part-time after you receive your teaching certification?**

I enjoy working as a radio technician at an Italian radio station because it gives me an opportunity to use my Italian language skills with callers and co-workers. I also get to meet new Italian speakers and help them broadcast their Italian programs across the United States through radio waves and the Internet. Radio Maria has become like my second home. As I begin a new career, I will consider working there part-time in the future.

**Do you have other interests or activities coinciding with your study of Italian that you would like to share with *Quaderno Culturale's* readers?**

I enjoy traveling and exploring new places. I'm particularly interested in exploring places in Italy. A few of my favorite hobbies are following the Italian Serie A soccer league, playing soccer, and reading different types of literature.

Thank you, Vincenzo, for speaking with us today. We wish you much success in your studies and in your future career as a high school Italian teacher!

## Dal Congresso AISLLI di Filadelfia – Italiani fuori d'Italia e nuovi Italiani: da John Florio alla letteratura transculturale

**Tiberio Snaidero**  
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Tra il 3 ed il 5 aprile 2013 si è svolto alla *University of Pennsylvania* di Filadelfia il XXI congresso dell'Associazione Internazionale di Studi di Lingua e Letteratura Italiana (AISLLI). Il tema dell'incontro, che ha cadenza triennale, è stato il seguente: *Italicity. The Language of Italy in the United States between Tradition and Innovation*.

Italici vengono denominati coloro che hanno scelto e scelgono la civiltà italiana come punto di riferimento culturale, anche quando appartengono ad altre etnie e/o comunicano attraverso codici linguistici diversi dalla lingua italiana. Oltre a tutti quelli che abitano da molte generazioni nella penisola italiana e che parlano principalmente in italiano (sui 60 milioni di persone), italici sono i discendenti – oramai almeno alla terza generazione – di quegli italiani che soprattutto tra la fine dell'Ottocento e l'inizio del Novecento emigrarono nelle Americhe, in Australia, e poi in altri stati europei (circa 200 milioni, secondo il *network italicos.com*). Italiche sono pure le persone che da più di trent'anni a questa parte hanno scelto l'Italia come terra dove lavorare e far crescere i propri figli: gli immigrati, o nuovi italiani, sono oggi secondo i dati ISTAT circa cinque milioni, quasi l'8% della popolazione. E italici sono infine i 150 milioni di persone che nel mondo si interessano alla lingua e alla cultura italiane.

Alla AISLLI Conference alcune presentazioni si sono concentrate sull'italianità esportata dall'Italia nel mondo, altre sulla produzione culturale degli immigrati in Italia, altre ancora, infine, su personaggi e fenomeni che a diverso titolo declinano il filone dell'italicità.

Per gli Stati Uniti, Joseph Luzzi ha riflettuto sulla ricezione in America del felliniano *La dolce vita*, film che lo studioso del *Bard College* ha voluto interpretare come una sorta di viaggio filosofico compiuto dal regista servendosi del linguaggio cinematografico. Carlo Vecce dell'"Orientale" di Napoli ha invece evidenziato i modi in cui il mito dell'Arcadia è stato nel Settecento recepito e trasformato dagli intellettuali americani entrati in contatto con gli illuministi italiani, ad esempio Benjamin Franklin e Gaetano Filangieri. Le altre presentazioni che hanno indagato l'"italicità" negli U.S.A. hanno preso in considerazione il contributo della letteratura degli italiani immigrati in America alla costruzione di un'identità italoamericana (Michela Valmori) o si sono soffermati sulla poetica di scrittori come Emanuel Carnevali (Andrea Ciribuco), Pietro di Donato (Tullio Pagano e Catherine Proietto) e Pascal D'Angelo (Emanuela Verdone e Renzo Ardiccioni).

Gli studiosi che si sono occupati dell'italicità in Paesi diversi dagli Stati Uniti hanno sottolineato come esista una letteratura italo-tedesca (Andrea Grewe), che ha fatto sì che l'italiano in Germania da lingua di migrazione si sia trasformato in lingua di cultura (Andrea Palermo); o come i valori culturali e politici dell'italianità venissero già studiati e interpretati nella Danimarca del diciannovesimo secolo (Ann Peters); come, infine, la presenza di italiani in Africa abbia di fatto contribuito al diffondersi di una cultura italica anche in Tunisia (Alfonso Campisi), in Egitto (Patrizia Raveggi), in Eritrea ed in Etiopia (Consiglia Recchia).

Vi è poi stata una serie di interventi focalizzati sugli italici di recente acquisizione, e ci riferiamo agli immigrati in Italia. Esempi di questi sono *Italicity in Italy* (Fabio Finotti), *Linguistic Migration and Innovation: Igiaba Scego's linguistic challenge* (Meriel Tulante),

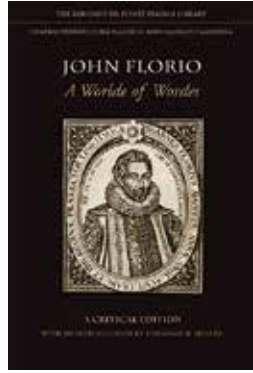
e *I confini dell'italianità. Accento nativo e costruzione dell'identità* (Anna De Meo). Tali e altri contributi hanno fornito un quadro di riferimento del fenomeno dei nuovi italiani, o italiani interculturali, che sempre più numerosi popolano il *bel Paese* e sempre più spesso si fanno produttori di espressioni letterarie in una lingua che non è la loro prima: l'italiano.

Mano a mano che il numero degli immigrati è andato aumentando e che l'Italia è diventata a tutti gli effetti una società multiculturale, come già l'Inghilterra, la Germania o la Francia, è infatti aumentato anche il numero dei libri pubblicati da scrittori di origine non italiana. La Banca Dati Scrittori Immigrati in Lingua Italiana BASILI dell'Università "La Sapienza" di Roma aveva nel 2006 schedato 425 opere, nel 2011 ben 1371. Sono libri scritti oramai in piena autonomia, senza assistenza linguistica, che non si limitano a testimoniare la propria condizione esistenziale ma che narrano storie che tendono verso una internazionalizzazione degli immaginari. È interessante notare che stranieri e "nuovi italiani", a partire dall'inizio degli anni Novanta, siano in Italia presenti sulla scena letteraria non solo come autori di opere ma pure come personaggi di racconti e romanzi pubblicati da scrittori che sono italiani da generazioni, come Edoardo Affinati, Elisabetta Lodoli, Fabio Geda e Domenico Scaglione, i cui personaggi o il cui narratore sono adolescenti. Voci narranti o personaggi ragazzini, adolescenti o giovani si trovano anche nella ricca letteratura prodotta dai nuovi italiani interculturali, per esempio nei romanzi e racconti di Melliti, Gangbo, Ghermandi, Kuruvilla, Scego, Mubyami e Wadia. Oltre al loro interesse letterario, le scritture transculturali – soprattutto quelle prodotte dai "nuovi italiani" – risultano adatte anche ad un uso didattico nella lezione di Italiano: sono infatti nuove linguisticamente, fresche dal punto di vista stilistico, e raccontano storie che aggiornano sugli aspetti reali della società italiana contemporanea. Testimoniano dunque la complessità dell'attuale Italia multiculturale, nella quale le identità milioni di persone, per parafrasare lo scrittore Carmine Abate, si sviluppano per addizione. Allo stesso tempo mettono in evidenza le difficoltà con cui

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l'Italia accetta che esistano degli italiani con credi religiosi diversi, o con la pelle nera. Si prestano egregiamente, infine, a stimolare la riflessione critica sui tratti della società studiata e di quella in cui gli studenti vivono, e dunque alla comparazione consapevole dei diversi modi in cui le persone e le istituzioni si rapportano alla sfide multiculturali.



La maggior parte degli interventi del congresso AISLLI ha quindi trattato l'italicità degli emigranti italiani e quella degli immigrati in Italia, essenzialmente esaminando le rispettive produzioni letterarie. Vi sono però state anche delle presentazioni che hanno preso in considerazione aspetti di carattere più prettamente linguistico, sociologico o lessicografico. Tra queste, corre l'obbligo di segnalare quella di Hermann Haller, che si è fatta apprezzare per la ricchezza di stimoli che il rigore filologico coniugato all'originalità della biografia del personaggio indagato ha saputo regalare all'uditorio. *An Early Italic: John Florio and his Contributions to Italian Abroad* ha dato conto della straordinaria figura e dell'opera dell'i-

talico ante litteram John Florio, autore nel 1598 del primo dizionario italiano-inglese degno di questo nome: *A Worlde of Wordes* (ora disponibile in un'edizione critica curata dello stesso Haller).

Nato a Londra nel 1553 da un frate francescano italiano convertitosi al protestantesimo e da madre inglese, fu portato dalla famiglia a Strasburgo all'ascesa al trono della cattolica Maria Tudor e trascorse poi l'infanzia e l'adolescenza tra la svizzera Val Bregaglia e la tedesca Tubinga. Di nuovo in Inghilterra nel 1570, ebbe qui inizio la sua carriera di insegnante di italiano di giovani aristocratici. Inglese prima per nascita e poi per scelta, la particolare formazione di Florio faceva di lui una sorta di straniero in patria, tant'è vero che lui stesso si considerava "an Englishman in Italian". Poliglotta convinto, promosse la lingua e la cultura italiane non solo in qualità di insegnante ma pure come lessicografo, scrittore e traduttore, e non solo dall'italiano: fece infatti – tra le altre cose – conoscere agli inglesi gli *Essais* di Montaigne.

L'opera per cui viene ricordato ha tuttavia decisamente a che fare con la lingua italiana: si tratta di *A Worlde of Wordes*, il più completo dizionario bilingue italiano-inglese mai pubblicato fino ad allora, contenente più di 46.000 lemmi italiani ed un numero ancora più elevato di voci inglesi. L'originalità dell'opera sta soprattutto nella scelta assai ampia e decisamente poco conformista delle fonti, che pone accanto alla produzione

letteraria di autori essenzialmente contemporanei (Tasso, Castiglione, Della Casa, Aretino, ma pure Boccaccio) tutta una serie di opere specialistiche appartenenti ad una grande varietà di campi del sapere e dell'agire umani: la zoologia, la botanica, la medicina, la mineralogia, l'astronomia, l'arte, la religione e la sessualità. Abbondano inoltre i proverbi e le espressioni idiomatiche, i gallicismi e gli ispanismi. Un'impostazione dunque tutt'altro che purista, che include anche voci di lingue regionali come il veneziano, il romanesco, il napoletano ed il lombardo. Anche la varietà dei registri sociolinguistici appare straordinaria: accanto ai termini scientifici trovano posto parole popolarmente connotate, che comprendono parecchi esempi di turpiloquio.

Si può in conclusione affermare che la personalità, l'attività e l'opera di Giovanni John Florio rappresentino la quintessenza dell'italicità, per come sono riuscite a coniugare tratti locali e globali. E che *A Worlde of Wordes*, in particolare, sia un'opera d'arte che ha conservato nel tempo la sua modernità, fatta di pluralità, cosmopolitismo, apertura culturale e consapevolezza sociolinguistica. Un insieme di qualità che costituiscono ancor oggi un esempio mirabile e insuperato di italicità.



Luis Gualpa • Caroline Ferrari  
Jeremy Forman • Anthony Romano  
Haewa Trakansook

**Undergraduate Students Awards (Elementary Course)**  
Josephine Caporusso • Giulietta Coppola  
Joanna Handras • Jx Yu Jin-Xiang  
Joseph Mineo • Marina Nebro  
Alexandra Scheck

**GKA National Italian Honor Society**  
Michael Allen • Jessica Colombo

the excellent level of proficiency that our students have reached, proving that the Italian Program at Queens College is one of the most prestigious in the New York area.

This year, the following students received awards:

**Graduate Students Awards**  
Vincenzo Avanzi • Luisa Stola

**Undergraduate Students Awards (Advanced Course)**  
Michael Allen • Peter Arfsten  
Jessica Colombo • Gabriella Conte

**Undergraduate Students Awards (Intermediate Course)**  
Abigail Bellomo • Jennifer Bostonian  
Rebecca Gagliardotto • Joelle Grosso

## Annual Students Award Ceremony

**Luisanna Sardu**  
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Every year, the Italian Studies Program at Queens College celebrates students' achievements in Italian. On May 17, faculty and honorees met at the Italian Consulate in Manhattan for the recognition ceremony. The students' families attended too, to applaud their achievements. Students of all levels, majors and minors, graduate and undergraduate, received nods of approval as well as valuable books by unforgettable Italian authors. Among the prizes were *Vita d'un Uomo* by Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Fiabe Italiane* by Italo Calvino, *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto, and many other important masterpieces and useful dictionaries. This ceremony is not only an annual tradition, but it is also an official acknowledgment of

## Professori dal vivo Interview with Professor Karina F. Attar



Karina Attar is Professor of Italian Language and Literature at Queens College, CUNY. She earned her BA in Italian and Russian from Cambridge University in 1994; thereafter, she worked in the editorial division of the Hutchinson imprint of Random House, UK. In 2005, Prof. Attar completed her PhD in Italian Studies at Columbia University. She is currently working on two books: *Scandalous Liaisons: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Italian Novella*, based on her dissertation; and a collection of articles on pedagogical strategies for teaching medieval and early modern literature in undergraduate and graduate studies.

### What brought you to New York City?

After completing my undergraduate studies at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom in 1994, I worked for two years as an editorial assistant for the Hutchinson imprint of Random House in London. I very much enjoyed my work there, but I could not see a future for myself in commercial publishing, not because there weren't opportunities for me to advance in that career, but because both the publishing industry and living in London were simply not the right fit for my personality. I realized that I needed to make a change and decided to apply to MA programs in Italian Studies in the United States. In 1996, I was accepted into Columbia University's Italian Department and, after completing the MA, I was offered a scholar-

ship to continue in the PhD program. I am so happy that I made this change, but I am also very grateful for the skills and experiences I gained in publishing. Among other things, the countless hours of proofreading and copy-editing authors' manuscripts served me well as I worked on my class papers and dissertation in graduate school, and continue to pay off today as I work on my publications and when I provide detailed feedback on my students' and colleagues' writing.

### How did your interest in Italian start and what has been your experience as a student of Italian Studies?

I have always loved studying language, literature, and culture. I had the good fortune of being born into a multicultural, multilingual family: Between them, my parents and grandparents exposed me to Arabic, English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. We also moved from London (where I was born) to Milan (where I attended a French elementary school and an Italian middle school) and then back to London (where I attended an English high school, but continued studying Italian through my A Levels, the British equivalent of the "maturità" or high school exit exams). Italy, the country of my childhood, and its culture, in all its past and current diversity, are very close to my heart, and they continue to be formative elements in my own intellectual and cultural development. It was both logical and natural for me to select Italian Studies for graduate school. My experience as a student of Italian Studies has been both challenging and rewarding. At Cambridge, I took courses on Dante and twentieth-century authors, such as Pirandello, Svevo, and Sciascia, as well as on Italian cinema. The British higher education system is much more specialized than in the United States; undergraduates there do not have to fulfill general education requirements across disciplines in addition to their major and/or minor areas of study. Instead, they usually study only one subject (for instance, history, or two modern languages, or mathematics), and sometimes just a few selected aspects of one subject, as in my case. There is both a gain (in-depth study of one's chosen subjects) and a loss (very limited, if any, formal exposure

to other fields). So, unlike Italian majors at Queens College today, I did not take a broad range of courses covering different periods and literary traditions, but focused almost exclusively on Dante and modern authors. It was only as a graduate student at Columbia University that I really discovered Petrarch and the lyric tradition; Boccaccio and the novella tradition; Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso and the epic romance tradition; and numerous other authors from the medieval and early modern periods, all of whom now play a central role in my research.

### You are now a professor of Italian Language and Literature here at Queens College. What would you recommend to others who are looking to take a similar career path in the future?

I would tell them that teaching what you love to study is both challenging and rewarding in ways you will never quite anticipate. I would encourage them not to be disheartened or alarmed by the recent downturn in academic positions in the humanities, and especially in a small field (relative to, say, History or Comparative Literature) like Italian Studies. I am known to friends as a bit of an eternal optimist, if not an idealist. But I hold to the belief that even if our disciplinary boundaries and our methods and tools of instruction drastically change over the next years and decades, we will always need good teachers, ones who remember what it is like to be a student and who remain generously and humbly committed to education. For Italian majors and minors thinking of applying to graduate school, I would recommend reading Italian literature as far and widely as possible beyond course assignments, and practicing writing and speaking daily, even for native speakers. For current graduate students in Italian MA and PhD programs, I would emphasize something I did not quite get until late in my graduate studies and that I sometimes still struggle to implement: developing and practicing a daily writing routine, and writing in both English and Italian. I would also suggest exchanging and discussing writing with fellow graduate students regularly—if possible, in a writing

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group that includes students at different stages in their graduate studies. Finally, it is crucial for graduate students to find a faculty mentor, whether at their home institution and department, or beyond, who is generous and frank.

**You wrote your dissertation on the Italian novella tradition. Can you tell us a little bit about it?**

My dissertation, titled *Dangerous Liaisons: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Italian Novella*, focused on representations of Christian-Jewish and Christian-Muslim amorous relations in a selection of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian novellas, from Masuccio Salernitano's *Novellino*, one of the first books printed in Naples in 1475, to Giambattista Giraldu's *Ecatommithi*, which appeared in 1565 and includes the novella that inspired Shakespeare's *Othello*. Romance, sex, adultery, unrequited passion, star-crossed love, marriage, and on occasion the birth of offspring from such unions—all of these are common narrative threads in the Italian novella tradition, which most narrowly defined spans the fourteenth through the early seventeenth centuries. By introducing the potential for assimilation, conversion, intermarriage, and miscegenation, novellas of intimate liaisons that cross religious, ethnic, and cultural boundaries complicate questions of cultural identity, doctrinal difference, and interfaith contact. I have always been fascinated by storytelling traditions, from fairy tales such as those collected by the Brothers Grimm to frame tale narratives like the *Arabian Nights*. I have also long been interested in the history of multiculturalism in all its manifestations. My dissertation gave me the opportunity to explore both as they pertain to early modern Italian history and literature.

**What is your most recent book about?**

I am currently working on two books. The first is based on my dissertation: I added a chapter on Christian-Muslim liaisons in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and a concluding section on the frame story of Basile's early seventeenth-century *Pentamerone*. I significantly expanded my analysis of all the novellas by taking a closer look at relevant Mediterranean historical and sociocultural contexts, including trade, piracy, and slavery; religious conversion and apostasy; diplomacy and armed conflicts; the shift from manuscript culture to the printed book; and the Counter-Reformation. Finally, I familiarized myself with the work of scholars outside my discipline (for instance, in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, critical race studies, and postcolonial studies) focused on interfaith and cross-cultural relations, and whose different objects of study and methodological approaches can complicate and enrich those of traditional literary analysis. The second book is a volume of collected articles, which I am co-editing with a colleague, on theorizing and offering practical pedagogical strategies for teaching medieval and early modern cross-cultural encounters in undergraduate and graduate classes. The volume includes articles from scholars/instructors specializing in a wide range of fields, including sociopolitical history, religious history, art history, and English, French, Iberian, Italian, and Theater Studies. I'm really excited about this project: It's the first time I am working on collected essays, and the first time I am working so closely with a colleague on writing (we are co-authoring the introduction) and editing essays. We are both finding it extremely inspiring and gratifying to collaborate with each other and with our contributors. It is a book theoretically and practically committed to

the idea that innovative research must find its way into the classroom and that—for students and instructors alike—the study of past cultures can illuminate our present, and vice versa.

**How do you integrate your research material into your language and literature classes?**

It very much depends on the type of course. For an intermediate language course, I sometimes select a story from the *Decameron*, giving students both the original and an adapted version. In an upper-level course surveying medieval prose literature, or in a course dedicated to the novella tradition, we usually focus on a selection of representative texts and spend quite a bit of time parsing through the genre's characteristically long-winded and convoluted prose, discussing thematic, structural, and rhetorical shifts across the tradition, and learning about the historical contexts in which the works were written. In my MA course on "The *Decameron* and the Italian Novella," and in courses on literature taught in translation (such as 41W and 45W), we read the *Decameron* from cover to cover, as well as selections from later collections. It is in these courses that I most frequently introduce the material from my research to date—Mediterranean cross-cultural and interfaith encounters—in more detail.

Prof. Attar, thank you for sharing your time with us. Surely, our readers will find your interview insightful and useful. We look forward to reading your works!

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