The Pen and the Sword: Literature and Power in Early Modern Europe

What advice did the “murderous” Machiavelli give to the prince of Florence? Was the Renaissance courtier obliged to obey the prince even when asked to do shameful and dishonorable things? How do we protect ourselves from a bestial and cruel tyrant? Should we run as far as we can or should we fight back? Must we always tell the truth or do we have the right to hide our secret thoughts?

These are some of the questions addressed in this course, which focuses on the culture of the Italian Renaissance courts and the modern European national states. We will examine the complex relationship between literary creation and political power in an age that witnessed the origin of modern Absolutism in European history. How is poetry to preserve its inner freedom as well as its open access to truth in the context of absolute and ruthless political power? The dilemmas of caution and resoluteness, simulation and dissimulation, heroism and conformity will be considered as some of the forces shaping early modern European literature.

The goal of the course is to read some of early modern Europe’s most representative works, to understand them in their diverse historical contexts, and -- on a more general note -- to develop a critical approach to literary texts. We will study the cultural and political circumstances in which these works were produced and read, as well as the rhetorical and stylistic notions indispensable to an analytical understanding of them. A selection of relevant introductory and critical essays will also be discussed. In order to develop and exercise these analytical skills, the students will write three short essays, give an oral presentation, take five quizzes and a final exam.

Readings will include works by Dante, Ariosto, Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Castiglione, Della Casa, Montaigne, F. Bacon, Accetto, Gracián, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère and Alfieri.

Required Texts: N. Machiavelli, The Prince; F. Guicciardini, Maxims and Reflections; B. Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier; G. Della Casa, Galateo: A Renaissance Treatise on Manners. All other texts will be available in Oncourse.