

Italian studies

with Dr Matteo Soranzo

Talking points

Knowledge

1. What were alchemists trying to achieve?
2. What is textual criticism?

Application

3. Who do you think would have had access to 'scientific' knowledge, such as alchemy, in medieval Italy? How does this compare to access to knowledge today?
4. What aspects of Italian studies are you most interested in, and why? What skills do you already have that could help you work towards a career in Italian studies, and how could you develop skills that you do not yet have?

Analysis

5. Why do you think Cristoforo chose to write in everyday Italian, rather than in Latin like most scholars at the time?
6. How do you think the disciplines of textual criticism and history of science can benefit each other?
7. Why is it important that modern readers do not dismiss ancient beliefs, such as alchemy and astrology, as fiction?

Evaluation

8. Advances in AI mean that in future we might be able to instantly transcribe and translate ancient manuscripts into modern language using only digital tools, without needing to understand the ancient language and symbols ourselves. What advantages and disadvantages do you think such tools would have for analysing and understanding ancient texts?
9. Cristoforo appeared to believe that the benefits of alchemy should only be for poorer people, like Andrea. Why do you think he felt this way, and to what extent do you agree with him?

Activities

Role-play: Cristoforo and Andrea

In pairs, take it in turns to play the role of Cristoforo da Parigi or Andrea Ognibene. Imagine you are meeting for the first time in Venice, to talk through Cristoforo's ideas and thoughts about alchemy.

Whoever is playing Cristoforo should explain the concepts of alchemy to Andrea, using everyday language that he would understand. Whoever is playing Andrea should ask questions of Cristoforo, to support their understanding of the topic. Cristoforo and Andrea can also discuss topics such as everyday life in medieval Venice and their thoughts about the socio-economic circumstances of the time.

After the role-play, discuss the following:

- How easy was it to explain alchemy in an understandable way?
- How did it feel to put yourselves in the roles of Cristoforo and Andrea? Did it change the way you think about the issues they discussed?

Discuss: how today's culture shapes research priorities

"Research questions and methods do not come about in a vacuum but are shaped by the surrounding culture," says Matteo.

In small groups, brainstorm ideas about how modern-day issues and culture in your country or region shape the research questions that scientists and the public see as current priorities. For example, how do you think the COVID-19 pandemic changed medical research priorities?

In addition to topics in healthcare and medicine, you may want to think about social issues, environmental issues, modern industry and technology, and the impact of conflict.

Discuss the following points:

- How have these priorities changed in your lifetime, and in your parents' lifetimes?
- How do you think these might be different to the priorities in Cristoforo's time?
- To what extent do you agree with Matteo's statement above?

More resources

- The 'New Books in Italian Studies' podcast interviews scholars in the field about their work: newbooksnetwork.com/category/peoples-places/italian-studies
- Explore the Manus Online database, which contains details about manuscripts in Italian libraries dating back to medieval times: manus.iccu.sbn.it