

A new understanding of Latin: the case of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*

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DANTIS ALIGERII

DE VVLGARI ELOQVIO,
sive idiomate,

LIBER PRIMVS.



V M neminem ante nos de vulgaris eloquētiæ doctrina quicquam inuenimus tractasse, atque talem scilicet eloquentiam penitus omnibus necessariam videamus, cum ad eam non tantum viri, sed etiam mulieres & paruuli nitantur, inquantū Natura permittit: volētes discretionem aliquam lucidare illorum, qui tanquam cæci ambulant per plateas, plerumque anteriora posteriora putātes: Verbo aspirante de cælis, locutioni vulgariū gentium prodesse tentabimus: non solūm aquam nostri ingenij ad tātum poculum haurientes, sed accipiendo, vel compilando, ab aliis potiora miscentes, ut exinde potionare possimus dulcissimum ydromel-

A

Proposal for a teaching session

- **Addresses:** undergraduate students with a knowledge of Latin
- **Content:** Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*
- **Methods:** textual and contextual analysis of the treatise
 - Independent preparatory work, collaborative teamwork in class, problem-solving activity, discussion time
- **Duration:** approximately two hours



Structure

Part 1

Setting the Scene – Latin Language and Literature in Fourteenth-Century Italy

(duration: 20 minutes)

1. Short lecture on Dante's life and literary production in the fourteenth century
2. Overview of the Italian socio-linguistic landscape
3. Composition and reception of the *De vulgari eloquentia*



Structure

Part 2

Textual Analysis and Problem Solving – Translating Dante’s Latin

(duration: 30 minutes)

1. Text excerpt from *De vulgari eloquentia* in Latin
2. Collaborative translation of the text
3. Problem-solving task

What is Dante’s purpose in his choice of phrasing?

In what ways does this work serve as both a theoretical and practical illustration of Latin?



Structure

Part 3

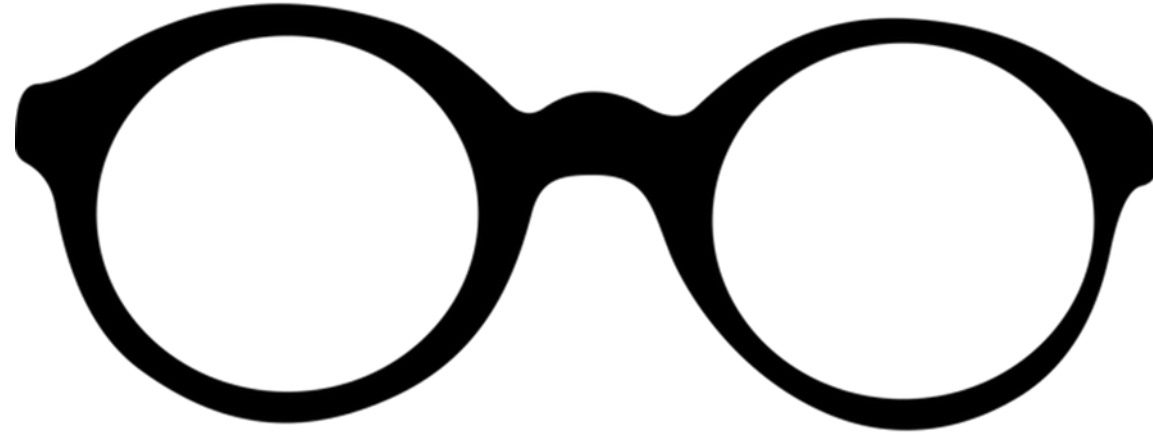
Literary Contextualisation and Discussion – Finding the Right Translation

(duration: 50 minutes)

1. Discussion on the translation proposals
2. Challenges and interpretive decisions in translating Dante
3. Contextual analysis: Dante's project of refining the vernacular language while using Latin



Objectives



Better understanding of:

1. Dante's contribution to Latin literature
2. Dante's role in the standardisation of the vernacular language using Latin



Preliminary readings

Primary source:

Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* (any English translation).

Secondary readings:

Regarding scholarly studies on *De vulgari eloquentia*:

- Shapiro, Marianne, *De Vulgari Eloquentia. Dante's Book of Exile* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990). Focus on the 'Introduction: Dante's Book of Exile' and 'Conclusion: Problems and Perspectives' (**required**, available at the Warburg Institute, SAS).

About the use of Latin and the socio-linguistic context of fourteenth-century Italy:

- Hall, Robert A. Jr., 'The Significance of the Italian "Questione della Lingua"', *Studies in Philology*, 39.1 (1942), 1-10 (**required**, available on JSTOR);
- Janson, Tore, *A Natural History of Latin* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Focus on 'Part II Latin and Europe' (**required**, available at the Institute of Classical Studies, SAS);
- Clackson, James and Geoffrey Horrocks, *The Blackwell History of the Latin Language* (Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007). Focus on 'Chapter VIII: Latin in Late Antiquity and Beyond' (**optional**, available at the Institute of Classical Studies, SAS).



Part 1
Setting the Scene – Latin Language and Literature in
Fourteenth-Century Italy



Dante Alighieri (1265-1321)

- Birth in Florence
- Studies in grammar, philosophy, and rhetoric
- Political and civic duties in Florence
- Exile for political reasons
- *Convivio*, philosophical encyclopaedia (1304-1307)
- *De vulgari eloquentia*, treatise about language and style (1304-1307)
- *Divina Commedia*, allegorical poem (1308-1320)
- Death in Ravenna



Dante in the context of the Latin literary tradition

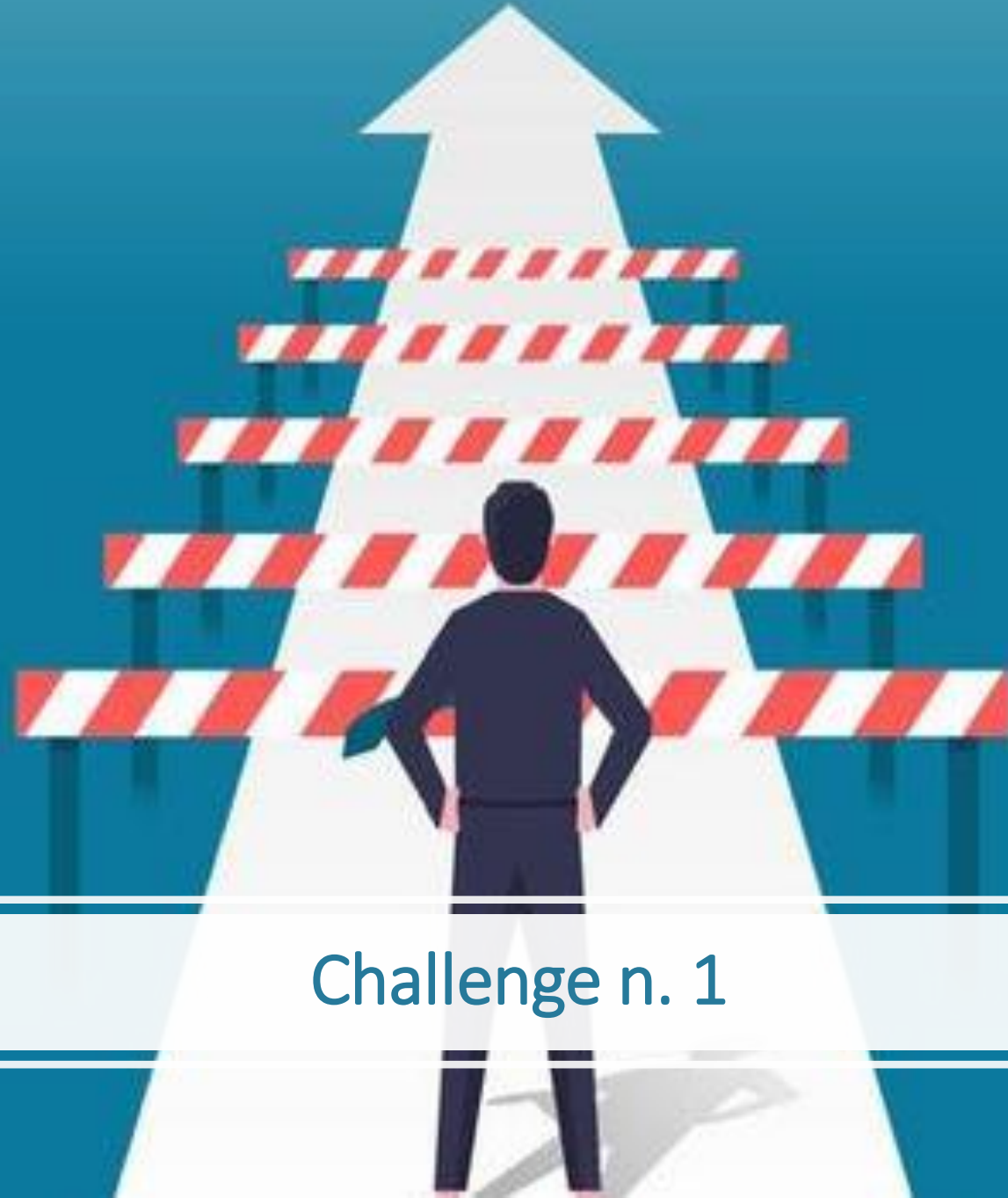
‘By “Neo-Latin,” we mean the Latin language and literature from around the time of the early Italian humanist Petrarch (1304–1374) up until the present day’

(The Oxford Handbook of Neo-Latin)

classical Latin > medieval Latin > humanistic Latin

Dante?





Challenge n. 1

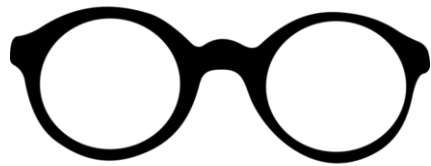


De vulgari eloquentia ('About vernacular eloquence')

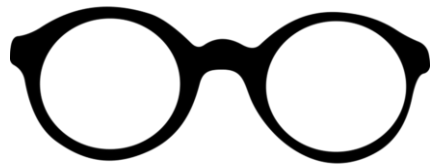
- **Composition:** between 1304 and 1307
- **Language:** Latin
- **Content:** vernacular eloquence
- **Structure:** four books (incomplete)
 - Book 1 focuses on specific linguistic phenomena
 - Book 2 talks about poetry
- **Motives:**
 1. enlighten all those who 'wander about like blind persons through the public squares,' offering them the fruits of his own learning but also adding the wisdom of others to produce 'the sweetest hydromel' (*DVE* 1, 1.1)
 2. bestow upon his treatise the same status as that of Latin grammars



Italian socio-linguistic landscape of the fourteenth century through the lenses of modern scholars



Theories of language
fragmentation
through Dante's lenses



Dantean concepts of Latin and vernacular

Latin	Vernacular
<i>Grammatica/locutio secundaria</i>	<i>Vulgaris locutio</i>
Artificial language	Natural language
Defined grammar and consolidated literature	No grammatical rules, no literary tradition
Educated elite in Western and Central Europe	Mankind
Law and philosophy, Church and State	Everyday matters



What makes Dante's understanding of Latin unique?

Dante examines Latin in the context of its dynamic relationship with the vernacular



DE LA VULGAR
E LOQUENZA.



Giovanni di Boccaccio da Certaldo, *ne la vita di Dante*.

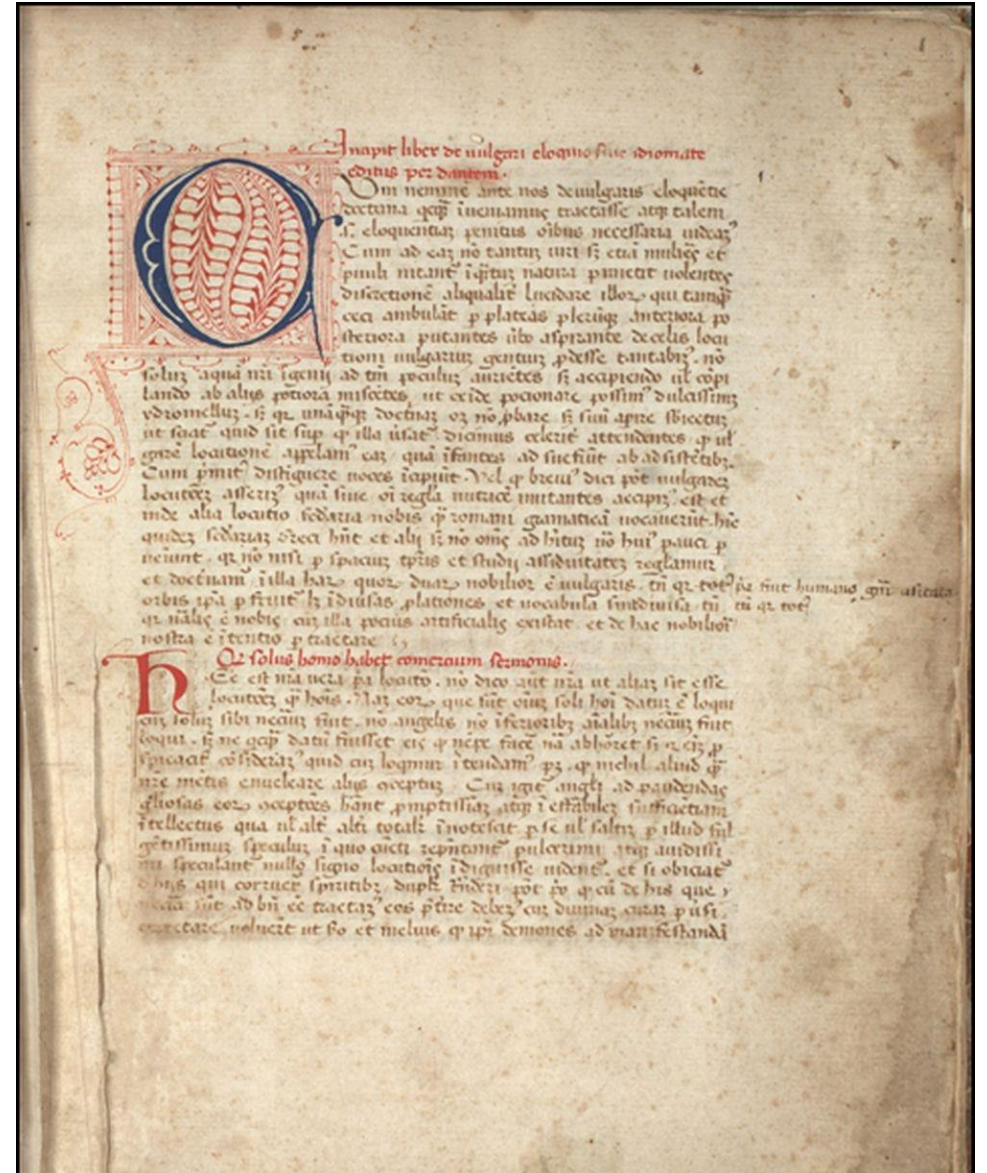
Appresso già vicino a la sua Morte compuse un Libretto in prosa latina, il quale el si intitulò. De vulgari Eloquentia; E come che per lo detto libretto apparisca lui havere in animo di distinguerlo, e di terminarlo in quattro libri, o che più non ne facesse da la Morte sua.

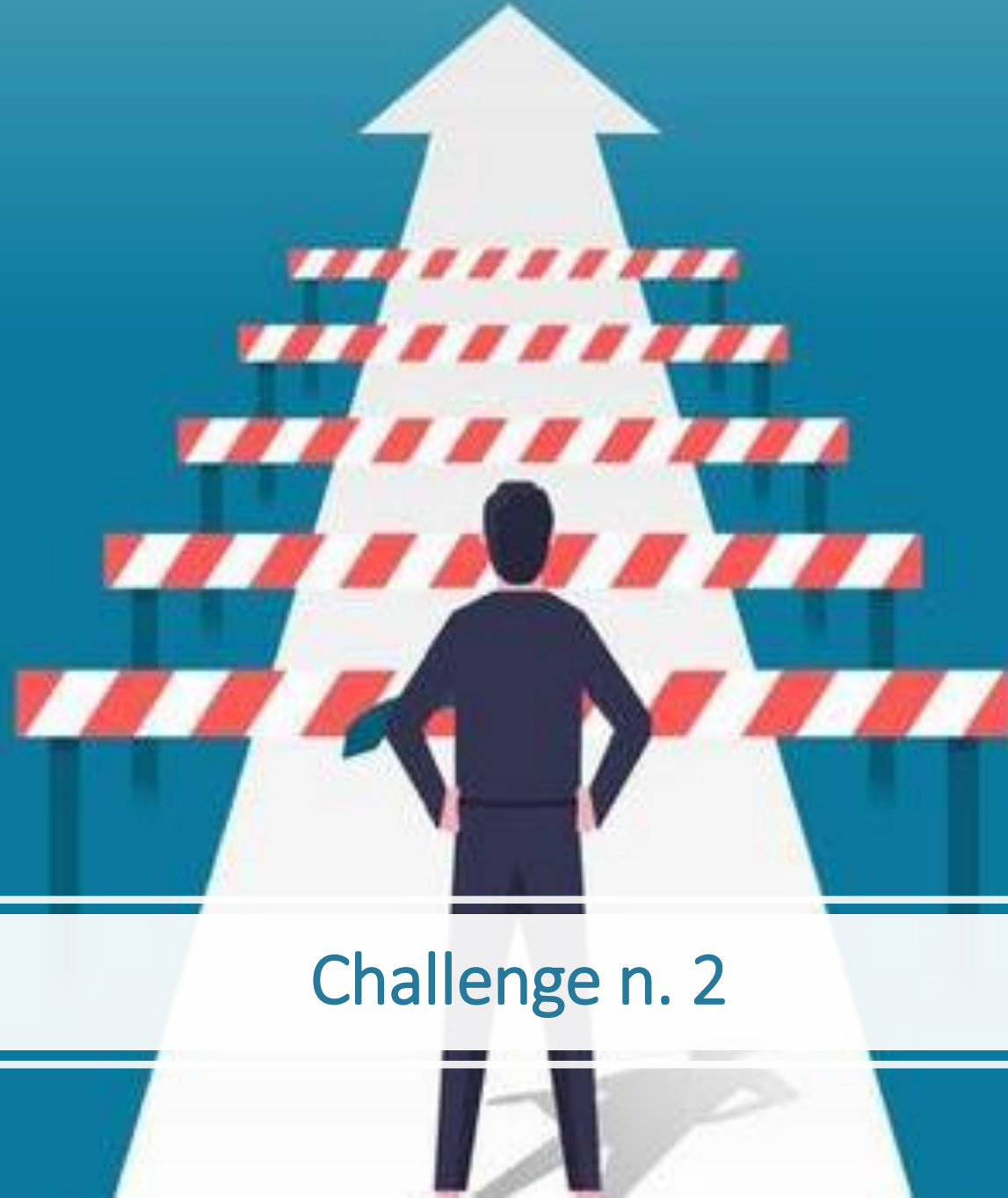
Part 2
Textual Analysis and Problem Solving – Translating
Dante's Latin



Textual analysis

- Exordium of the *De vulgari eloquentia* (1, 1-4)
- Presentation of the passage to the students: Dante highlights the uniqueness of his work, outlines his objectives, and articulates his theory on the relationship between Latin and the vernacular
- Team-work in pairs on a suitable translation of the text





Challenge n. 2



De vulgari eloquentia (1, 1-4)

[1] *Cum neminem ante nos de **vulgaris eloquentie doctrina** quicquam inveniamus tractasse, atque talem scilicet eloquentiam penitus omnibus necessariam videamus, cum ad eam non tantum viri, sed etiam mulieres et parvuli nitantur, in quantum natura permittit: volentes discretionem aliquantulum lucidare illorum qui tanquam ceci ambulant per plateas, plerumque anteriora posteriora putantes: Verbo aspirante de celis, locutioni vulgare gentium prodesse tentabimus; non solum aquam nostri ingenii ad tantum poculum aurientes, sed accipiendo vel compilando ab aliis potiora miscentes, ut exinde potiorare possimus dulcissimum ydromellum. [2] Sed quia unamquamque doctrinam oportet, non probare, sed suum **aperire subiectum**, ut sciatur quid sit super quod illa versatur,*



*dicimus celeriter attendentes quod **vulgarem locutionem** appellamus eam quam infantes adsuefiunt ab adsistentibus, cum primitus distinguere voces incipiunt; vel quod brevius dici potest, vulgarem locutionem asserimus, quam sine omni regula, nutricem imitantes, accipimus. [3] Est et inde alia **locutio secundaria** nobis, quam Romani **grammaticam** vocaverunt. Hanc quidem secundariam Greci habent et alii, sed non omnes. Ad habitum vero huius pauci perveniunt, quia non nisi per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatem regulamur et doctrinamur in illa. [4] Harum quoque duarum nobilior est vulgare: tum quia prima fuit humano generi usitata; tum quia totus orbis ipsa perfruitur, licet in diversas prolationes et vocabula sit divisa; tum quia naturalis est nobis, cum illa potius artificialis existat. Et de hac nobiliori nostra est intentio pertractare.*

Problem-solving task



What innovative claim does Dante make in his treatise?



What audience does Dante address?



In what ways do *vulgaris locutio* and *locutio secundaria* differ?



Who are the users of these two *locutiones*?



What subject does Dante promise to explore further?



Part 3
Literary Contextualisation and Discussion – Finding the
Right Translation



Translating and commenting on Dante

- *Locutio, -onis*: does Dante think of a ‘means of human expression’, as Tavoni (1987) argues, or ‘language’, as Marigo (1938) and Mengaldo (1979) claim?
- *Aperire*: how would you translate this verb? Would you use Marigo and Mengaldo’s translation, ‘to declare’, or Tavoni’s interpretation, ‘to unveil’? Do you have any other proposals?
- *Subiectum, -i*: does Dante mean ‘topic’, as Tavoni interprets, or ‘fundamental premise of the doctrine’, as Marigo and Mengaldo suggest?
- *Vulgaris locutio vs. locutio secundaria/gramatica*: how would you translate these concepts? What characteristics does Dante emphasise about them?



Reception of Dante's production

- **Last part of the session:** discussion of Dante's contributions to the theoretical discourse on language in Italy
- **Key takeaway:** Dante's pivotal role as a forerunner of modern linguistics
- **Acquired skills:** analytical tools to examine a Latin text in the context of fourteenth-century Italy

Why choosing the *De vulgari eloquentia* for a Neo-Latin course? Studying this text in a Humanities class is crucial, as it lays the groundwork for the following humanistic debate around the relationship between Latin and the vernacular.



Thank you for your attention!

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