



Bodleian Libraries
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Illustrating Dante's *Divine Comedy*

Voltaire Room, Taylor Institution Library, University of Oxford

October – December 2021

Introduction

Dante completed the text of his great poem shortly before his death at Ravenna on 14 September 1321. He did not call for illustrations: none the less, the idea of enriching the text with pictures – whether as marginal decoration, as substantive commentary, or as visual conversation with the verse – spread rapidly. Of the 800 manuscripts of the poem which survive from before 1500, some 150 contain significant illustrations. Although there have been voices raised against either the appropriateness or the very possibility of illustration, the *Comedy* has continued to attract artists until the present day. This display of books in the collections of the Bodleian Libraries (primarily the Sackler and the Taylor Institution libraries) is a celebration of the wealth of that illustration, in the 700th anniversary of the poet.

The facsimile of one of the earliest and most important manuscripts of the *Comedy*, in the Trivulziana Library in Milan, demonstrates the incorporation of pictures from the 1330s. The scribe, Francesco Barberino, had probably been a friend of Dante in Florence. Born a short distance to the south of the city, Barberino's Tuscan was close to that of the poet, and the text has been significant for the establishment of an authentic version. By 1395, the date of the manuscript copy of the poem with the commentary of the Pisan Francesco da Buti, the explanatory exegesis was growing, lending the *Comedy* the appearance of holy scripture: the similarity of layout was not accidental.

Two facsimile sheets (Berlin, 1887) from the complete series of drawings for each canto of the *Comedy* by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) may be seen as the climax of the manuscript tradition. They were made for a luxury edition on vellum of the text, with the drawings facing their respective cantos. Because Botticelli's work was also drawn upon for the landmark Florentine printed edition of the *Comedy* of 1481, he can also be seen as the point of origin of all printed and illustrated versions. The commentary written to accompany that edition, by Cristoforo Landino, was re-used in successive imprints through the 16th century. Alessandro Vellutello, whose expanded mid-16th-century commentary depended heavily on Landino, is represented here in a Venetian edition of 1564.

While Venice produced many of the early editions, Florentines increasingly pressed their claim to own the poet who had died in forced exile from his homeland. Under the Medici princes of the later 16th century, scholars worked on a new edition of the text while various artists were recruited to provide illustrations for engravings of the *Comedy*, including

Federico Zuccari (1540/41-1609) and the northerner Giovanni Stradano (also known as Johannes Stradanus of Jan van der Straet, 1523-1605), both of them represented here. These projects were not fully realised, but it is evident that Dante – ironically, given his detestation of tyranny – was being called into service as the cultural figurehead of the Medici state.

The *Comedy's* reception has fluctuated over the centuries, without ever going out of currency altogether. The 18th century witnessed some Enlightenment distaste for Dante's realism; but even in this context the poem found its advocates. The mid-century Venetian edition by Antonio Zatta, illustrated in excellent engravings after pictures commissioned from diverse artists, was much appreciated. The editor intelligently dedicated the work to the Empress Elizabeth of Russia, shown in the first frontispiece. The second, displayed, shows a parallel image of Dante Alighieri, on his last embassy for the ruler of Ravenna to the doge of Venice.

Romantic appreciation of Dante as a poet of the sublime would elevate his popularity by the end of the 19th century to the level of a mania. The restrained, neoclassical images of John Flaxman (1755-1826) would accompany several European editions of the poem as its readership grew, until the arrival of engravings by Gustave Doré (1832-1883), which changed not only the *Comedy* but the status of the illustrated book, to which Doré's Dante brought a new respect. For many, even today, Doré's dramatic, *chiaroscuro* images have been the first point of encounter with the poem and a filter through which it has been read.

Modern artists coming to the *Comedy* have had to reckon with the persistent influence of Doré. A number, including the North American artist Leonard Baskin (1922-2000) who is represented here, have liberated themselves from illustration of the narrative, turning instead to the creation of images which in some way resonate with the themes and reverberations of the text. The poem continues to generate new and provocative images in the minds of both its readers and its artists.

Gervase Rosser
Professor of the History of Art
& Ertegun Director
University of Oxford

Exhibition Handlist

Works on Display and Works Considered for Inclusion

The below list gives an indication of the range of translations and commentaries -- and their images -- that we considered when selecting materials for inclusion in this display. For many of the works, we've added thumbnails as an indication of the range of imagery artists have used to illustrate Dante's *Divine Comedy*. We encourage readers to look at the works we've listed – as well as many others!

(*** = Works on display)

Manuscript items

*****1337** (Facsimile)

Luigi Rocca, ed. *Il Codice trivulziano 1080 della Divina commedia. Riprodotto in eliocromia sotto gli auspici della Sezione milanese della Società dantesca italiana nel sesto centenario della morte del poeta* (Milano: Hoepli, 1921)

*****1395**

Dante Alighieri. *Paradiso: With Commentary by Francesco da Buti*. (MS. 8° It.3) Manuscript completed 11 June 1395 (indicated on last page). Binding: Arms of Pope Pius VI (Braschi: 1775-99). Companion volumes (*Purgatorio*; *Inferno*) possibly lost when the papal library was raided by the French, 1798-99.

Publications 16thC – 21stC

Antonio Manetti, *Dialogo al sito, forma et misure dello Inferno di Dante* (Florence: Giunta, 1506)

Dante Alighieri, Alessandro Vellutello. *La Comedia di Dante Aligieri con la nova esposizione di Alessandro Vellutello* (Venice: Francesco Marcolini, 1544)



***Dante Alighieri, Cristoforo Landino, Alessandro Vellutello, *La Comedia di Dante con l'espositione di Christoforo Landino, et di Alessandro Vellutello* (Venice: Giovambattista Marchio Sessa et fratelli, 1564)



Dante Alighieri, Daniello Bernardino. *Dante con l'espositione di M. Bernardino Daniello da Lucca, sopra la sua Comedia dell'Inferno, del Purgatorio, & del Paradiso* (Venice: Pietro da Fino, 1568)

***Dante Alighieri. *Opere di Dante Alighieri: Dedicata alla sagra imperial maesta di Elisabetta Petrowna, imperatrice di tutte le Russie ec. ec. ec. dal conte Don Cristoforo Zapata de Cisneros*. Illustrated by Francesco Fontebasso, Gaetano Zompini & others (Venice: Antonio Zatta, 1757)



***Giovanni [John] Flaxman. *La Divina Comedia di Dante Alighieri: Il Paradiso*. Engraved by Tommaso Piroli (Rome: Flaxman, 1802)

***Dante Alighieri. *L'Enfer de Dante Alighieri, avec les dessins de Gustave Doré; traduction française de Pier-Angelo Fiorentino* (Paris: Hachette, 1868).

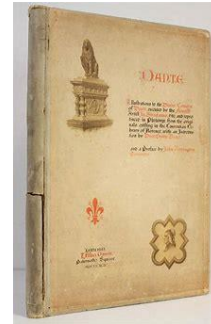


Dante Alighieri. *The Vision of Hell [Dante's Inferno]*. Translated by Henry Francis Cary; illustrated by Gustave Doré (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1872)

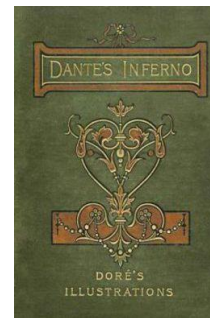
***Friedrich Lippmann. *Zeichnungen von Sandro Botticelli zu Dante's Goettlicher Komoedie: nach den Originalen im K. Kupferstichkabinet zu Berlin* (Berlin: G. Grote'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1887)



***John Addington Symonds. Dante: Illustrations to the Divine Comedy of Dante Executed by the Flemish Artist Jo. Stradanus, 1587, and Reproduced in Phototype from the Originals Existing in the Laurentian Library of Florence (London: Unwin, 1892)



***Dante Alighieri. The Vision of Hell [Dante's Inferno]. Translated by Henry Francis Cary; illustrated by Gustave Doré (London: Cassell, 1892)



Dante Alighieri. *La vita nuova di Dante: con le illustrazioni di Dante Gabriele Rossetti* (Turin: Roux e Viarengo, 1902)

Dante Alighieri. *Die Göttliche Komödie*. Translated by Otto Gildemeister; illustrated by Franz von Bayros (Zürich: Amalthea, 1921)



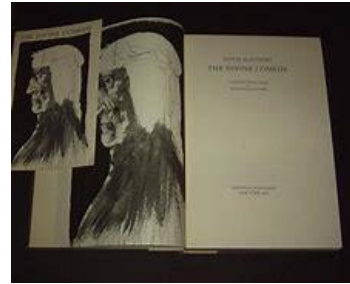
Emery Walker. *Illustrations to the Divine Comedy of Dante by William Blake* (London: National Art-Collections Fund, 1922)

100 Aquarelles pour la Divine Comédie de Dante Alighieri par Salvador Dali (Paris: Musée Galliera, 1960)



Dore Ashton. *The Dante drawings of Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964)

***Dante Alighieri,(), *The Divine Comedy*.
Translated by Thomas G. Bergin; illustrated
by Leonard Baskin (New York: Grossman,
1969)

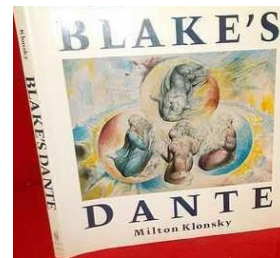


Il Dante di Guttuso (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1977)



Larry Niven, Jerry Pournell. *Inferno* (London: Allan Wingate, 1977)

Milton Klonsky. *Blake's Dante: The Complete
Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (New York:
Harmony, 1980)



Guttuso e Dante (Milan: I.D.E.A. Studio, 1982)

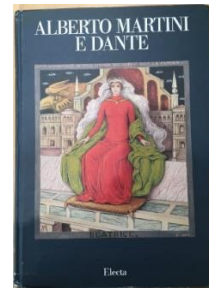
Tom Phillips. *Dante's Inferno* (London: T. Phillips,
1983)



Corrado Gizzi. *Sassu e Dante* (Milan: Mazzotta,
1987)



Corrado Gizzi. *Alberto Martini e Dante* (Milan: Electa, 1989)

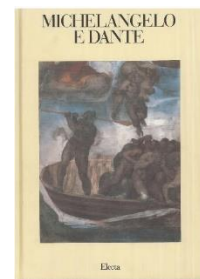


***Corrado Gizzi. *Federico Zuccari e Dante* (Milan: Electa, 1993)

John Pope-Hennessy. *Paradiso: The Illuminations to Dante's Divine Comedy by Giovanni di Paolo* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993)

***Corrado Gizzi. *Giovanni Stradano e Dante* (Milan: Electa, 1994)

Corrado Gizzi. *Michelangelo e Dante* (Milan: Electa, 1995)



Corrado Gizzi. *Pinacoteca dantesca 'Fortunato Bellonzi'* (Milan: Electa, 1995)

Corrado Gizzi. *Francesco Scaramuzza e Dante* (Milan: Electa, 1996)

Corrado Gizzi. *Salvador Dalì e Dante* (Milan: G. Mondadori, 1997)

Marco Lorandi. *Figurae: Franz von Bayros per Dante* (Viareggio: Mauro Baroni, 1997)

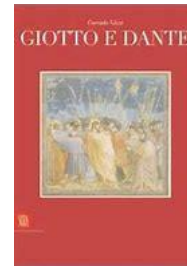
Charles H. Taylor, Patricia Finley. *Images of the Journey in Dante's Divine Comedy* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1997)

Corrado Gizzi. *Amos Nattini e Dante* (Milan: Giorgio Mondadori, 1998)

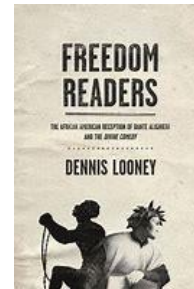


Dante Alighieri. *La Divina Commedia*. Illustrated by Lorenzo Mattotti & Milton Glaser (Milano: Nuages, 1999)

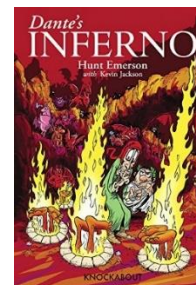
Corrado Gizzi. *Giotto e Dante* (Milan: Skira, 2001)



Dennis Looney. *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011)



Hunt Emerson, Kevin Jackson. *Dante's Inferno* (London: Knockabout, 2012)



Dante Alighieri. *Inferno*. Illustrated by Henrik Drescher (Minneapolis: Gray Wolf Press, 2013)



Philip Terry. *Dante's Inferno* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2014)



Eduard Fornés. *Dalí illustrator* (Paris: Les Heures Claires, 2016)



Ed Krčma, *Rauschenberg/Dante: Drawing a Modern Inferno* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2017)



Dante Alighieri. *Dante's Divine Comedy: Englished in Prosaic Verse by Alasdair Gray*. 3 vols: *Hell – Purgatory – Paradise* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2018)



La Divina Commedia. Commentary by Sergio Risaliti, Riccardo Bruscalgi; illustrated by Mimmo Paladino (Florence: Forma, 2021)

Dante Alighieri. *Purgatorio*. Translated by Mary Jo Bang (Minneapolis: Gray Wolf Press, 2021)

