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'Reading Dante with Images: A Visual Lectura Dantis.' Matthew Collins, ed. Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2021.

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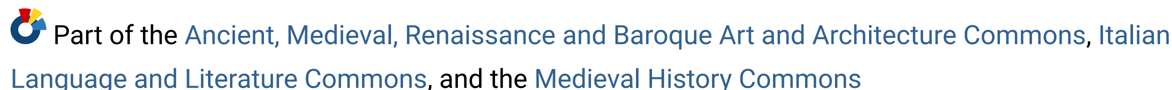
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Reading Dante with Images: A Visual Lectura Dantis
Matthew Collins, ed.
Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2021. 410 pp. $ 145.

Scholarship investigating text and image relationships have a storied place in the humanities. As countless exhibitions, public programs, and events across the globe celebrating the seventh centenary of Dante Alighieri's death have demonstrated, artistic engagement with the *Divine Comedy* in a variety of media has been integral to our understanding of the poem since its completion. The visual arts, especially, have a celebrated place in the history of Dantean reception. Arguably, the imagining in the popular mind of the *Commedia* has as much to do with its visual representation across centuries as the text itself, from manuscript illumination to woodblock illustration accompanying printed editions of the poem, to standalone graphics, three-dimensional sculpture, and, more recently, new media such as film.

Reading Dante with Images: A Visual Lectura Dantis, edited by Matthew Collins, features twelve essays by scholars and artists alike who consider the relationships and reception of the *Commedia* in the visual arts since the fourteenth century. Yet this is not a traditional edited volume of essays; nor is it one-directional in its approach to reception. The editor, Matthew Collins, introduces the task in an introductory chapter, "Experimenting with Traditions." In it, he lays out the central organizing principle of the following studies (some of which were presented in a preliminary conference at Harvard University in 2019): the essays and the book as a whole combine two investigative traditions of Dantean commentary—the visual representation by artists of the *Commedia*, and the practice of the Lectura Dantis. Rather than separating the critical visual/verbal divide that has characterized much modern scholarship, the essays in this hefty volume embrace the difficult task of exploring methodologies from multiple disciplines—literary analysis, art history, codicology, and others—and investigate the results of such an endeavor in discreet case studies. Indeed, the combining of two forms of commentary that forms the organizing backbone of the book—visual exegesis and the Lectura Dantis—themselves are the subject of combined commentary by these authors through a variety of scholarly approaches.

The authors adopt a variety of methodological strategies that address the questions of relationships between Dantean text and image. The volume is divided unevenly into two sections. In the larger first part, scholars (primarily specialists of Italian literature, but also at least one art historian) across eight chapters each explore a single *canto*—*Inferno* 1, 6, 10, 26, 33; *Purgatorio* 2, 5; and *Paradiso* 28—and consider examples of visual engagement with that *canto*. In the first chapter, "*Inferno* 1: Openings and Beginnings," K.P. Clarke addresses a critical framing inquiry: would Dante himself want his poem illustrated? Did he envision his text to be represented with images? Clarke probes this idea with some of the earliest manuscript illuminations of the text, including the famous Palatina Parmense 2385 and Chantilly MS 597, as well as addressing their intersection with Guido da Pisa's commentary (contained in the latter). Meanwhile, Gianni Pittiglio, in "*Inferno* 6: *Una fiera crudele e tanto diversa*. Cerberus Illustrated in the Early Manuscripts and

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Incunabula of the *Divine Comedy*," invokes Erwin Panofsky in an iconographic study of representations of the underworld's polycephalic guardian, exploring diverging visual traditions of dogs, monsters, and Lucifer across manuscripts and early printed books.

Michael Papio, Christian Y. Dupont, and Silvia Argurio all survey visual representations of *Inferno* 10 and 33 and *Purgatorio* 2, respectively, taking a long look across centuries of imagining heretics in fiery tombs, political traitors, and sailing angels. Modern artistic renditions—ranging from Jonathan Richardson's illustrations of Count Ugolino to Freidrich Murnau's *Nosferatu* and Robert Rauschenberg's transfer drawings and contemporary photographic collages by Ma0 Studio—lend a lasting power to the reception of the text in recent times by these scholars. Peter S. Hawkins, too, explores the work of contemporary artist Sandow Birk, who lends his own perspective later in the volume. Hawkins and Dario Del Puppo, each investigating *Inferno* 26 and *Purgatorio* 5, adopt yet a different approach, "call[ing] to mind the more aesthetically meditative element of the Lectura Dantis" (p. 24). As Del Puppo explains, such an investigation focuses "on the suggestiveness of the poet's text rather than on any direct visual sources" (p. 206). In examining the works of artists William Blake, John Flaxman, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and others, Del Puppo helps the reader to reflect on the nature of visual interpretation of literature.

In a comparative visual investigation that recalls the brilliance of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne* project, Arielle Saiber in "*Paradiso* 28: Entruthing the Image" explores the question of how Dante's luminous vision and organization of the last zone of material spheres (the Primum Mobile) can, and has been, pictured by artists. Across seventeen comparisons of artworks over seven centuries (notably including the remarkable impasto paintings of contemporary artist Kateřina Machytková), and in some places invoking the corona and halo effects of light radiating from the sun and moon, Saiber effectively presents an art historical perspective in defining visual elements of *Paradiso* 28's God-point (such as the use of gold leaf by Giovanni di Paolo or the sfumato of Machytková). Such a visual comparison helps the reader understand various aspects of Dante's vision for this last passage of Heaven.

The book's much smaller second part invites three contemporary artists who have engaged in representing the *Divine Comedy* visually—Sandow Birk, Robert Brinkerhoff, and Barry Moser—to speak to the task of illuminating Dante's poem as an image. Each artist approaches the task of picturing the *Commedia* in a different manner. For Birk, the setting is transposed to contemporary America, while Brinkerhoff's graphic images call upon art history, and Moser's illustrations for Mandelbaum's edition of the *Comedy* have their own interpretive strength. This inclusion of two types of thinkers in the same volume—scholars and artists—is remarkable, as it reflects a welcome attitude that multiple formats of exegesis with a work of art have much to say. Indeed, such a combination of scholarly and artistic voices echoes the very investigation of the dual traditions this volume strives for.

Reading Dante with Images is a lavishly illustrated experimental work for which scholarship should be grateful. This endeavor is by no means a survey; it is an exploration in discreet case studies of what this type of combining of commentary traditions looks like. It recognizes, as Del Puppo aptly asserts, that "we all bring our own knowledge and experience to viewing art and reading literature, whatever

our previous exposure or formal education, [and as such] interpretation is always subjective and it is a creative act" (p. 230). An advantage to a collection of essays organized in this manner is that future scholarship from a multitude of perspectives can be scaffolded—much like the structure of the *Commedia* itself—to effectively include new contributions. The representation of additional *canti* could be explored in a future volume, and could easily adapt to study and produce new art forms including contemporary cinema and interactive videogames that draw upon the *Divine Comedy*.

Joseph Kopta, *Temple University*

Laura Banella.
Rime e libri delle rime di Dante tra Medioevo e primo Rinascimento.
Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2020. 211 pp. €28.

Only relatively recently has the material turn begun to attract attention of Dante scholars in America, as the currents of "new philology" and book history have begun to reshape Dante Studies in the last two decades. In the Italian academy, however, the material reality of the book has never been absent from the study of medieval culture, thanks to a continuous emphasis on ecdotics. In *Rime e libri delle rime di Dante. Tra medioevo e primo rinascimento*, Laura Banella brings together three studies on Dante's lyric poetry that combine these different visions of philology, offering a compelling vision of Dante, his textual reception, and his status as an author and vernacular lyric poet, from the years following his death up to the mid-fifteenth century.

In the first of these three studies, "*Aï faus ris*: Dante tra sperimentalismo e canone", Banella investigates the representation of Dante as vernacular poet by examining a text that the manuscript record frequently either associates with Petrarch or leaves unattributed: the trilingual *canzone* "Aï faus ris", that alternates between Italian, French, and Latin. Building on the work of Furio Brugnolo and Domenico De Robertis, Banella argues in favor of the text's attribution to Dante by examining a range of manuscripts from the fourteenth century onwards. This first study offers an innovative formulation of Dante as author: Banella successfully brings Foucault's notion of the author as a stylistic unity into dialogue with the experience of reading the manuscript anthology, with its many contingencies. In so doing, Banella demonstrates that the process of ordering and selecting texts within an anthology produces competing visions of poets and their corpora, including Dante. As a multilingual text, "Aï faus ris" does not conform to the stylistic expectations placed on Dante's corpus, yet Banella sees this as an experimental move on Dante's part to surpass the division of Latin and the vernacular. The chapter traces the increasing association of the *canzone* with Dante from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries: the earliest witnesses of "Aï faus ris" do not ascribe the text to him, yet, by the end of the fifteenth century, things had changed. The 1491 printing of the Landino

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