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'Dante's Library': Reconstructing Dante's Material World

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**‘DANTE’S LIBRARY’:
RECONSTRUCTING DANTE’S MATERIAL WORLD¹**

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Introduction and Methodology

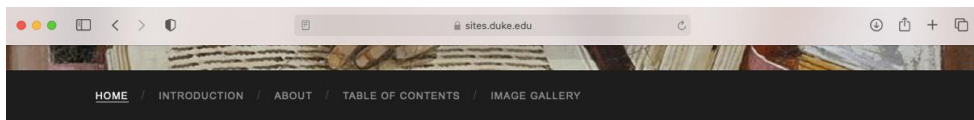
From the “libello” of the *Vita Nuova*’s opening lines to the volume “legato con amore” in *Paradiso* 33, Dante often alludes to the forms of books themselves. In *Inferno*, Virgil is associated with the “volume” (*Inf.* 1.84) through which Dante knew his poetry, and Francesca famously condemns “l libro e chi lo scrisse” (*Inf.* 5.137). Inspired by Dante’s own attention to the book, our digital project seeks to recreate “Dante’s Library” by gathering images from manuscripts that audiences might reasonably expect to find in Dante’s library. Through encyclopedia-style entries, the site contextualizes and analyzes the physical characteristics of these manuscripts and offers preliminary conclusions about how they may have influenced Dante’s reading. We also recognize that Dante’s repository of knowledge was not solely textual; his understanding of the world was shaped by the images found in the architecture, sculpture, and other visual arts around him. As such, Dante’s Library uniquely foregrounds materiality as an entry point into Dante’s literature, incorporating both non-manuscript objects and written texts, creating a holistic experience of Dante’s material world.

[Dante’s Library](#) is an open-access website hosted by Duke University and managed by Martin Eisner, Professor of Italian, who serves as its Editor-in-Chief, and myself, the Managing Editor. As of June 2022, Dante’s Library has published fourteen entries with thirty-four related images. Each entry brings together a material object and a specific textual moment from Dante’s oeuvre in order to reconsider what the relationship between physical form and content might tell us about Dante’s texts. We embrace a capacious definition of materiality and consider a plethora of material characteristics from the size and composition of a book or its paratextual

¹ Material found throughout this article is adapted from the Dante’s Library site, especially the [Introduction](#) by Martin Eisner.

elements like rubrics, indices, and illustrations, to the arrangement of frescoes in a church or specific architectural structures and their position in a city. While we accept that a two-dimensional website can never recreate a three-dimensional world, we typically include two or three images of the object(s), usually photographs, as well as textual descriptions in each entry. The images are placed within the body of the text (usually 500–2000 words) to spotlight the material object.

When visitors arrive to the site, they are greeted by a landing page which encourages them to read the project's Introduction, browse the Table of Contents, or explore the Image Gallery.



Welcome to Dante's Library



Have you ever wondered about the books Dante read, the works of art he saw, or the places he visited? Dante's Library recreates the material world Dante would have known in one hundred objects, offering a unique glimpse into Dante's cultural and intellectual heritage.

Begin by reading an **Introduction** to the project, exploring the site's **Image Gallery**, browsing the **Table of Contents**, or using the search bar below.

These pages provide users with diverse paths into the site's various entries. They can search for specific topics or simply peruse images. The published pages include an exploration of how copies of the Lancelot prose romance ([Paolo and Francesca's Book](#)) highlight the relationship between Guinevere, Gallehaut, and Lancelot through paratextual elements such as rubrics and illustrations. In the entry on [Virgil's Aeneid](#), users can observe the musical notation that may have accompanied and inflected Dante's reading of the classical poem. Other pieces, such as the one concerning the church of [Santi Quattro Coronati](#), reveal how Dante's knowledge of events—in this case, the Donation of Constantine—was mediated by visual representations. Additional entries explore [Ovid's Metamorphoses](#), [Giotto's frescoes](#), [Ugucione da Pisa's Latin dictionary](#), and the

[Garisenda Tower](#), to name a few. Since each entry is rooted in the individual author's research interests and conception of materiality, it concludes with a selected bibliography to facilitate further research and orient readers in the various disciplines. Dante's Library is therefore always looking for scholars with fresh points of view who would be interested in writing for the site and broadening its horizons.

By collecting and synthesizing existing scholarship and minimizing the use of jargon, Dante's Library aims to make Dante—and questions of materiality—accessible to an audience other than academics. As users encounter image and text together alongside curated annotations, they can begin to grasp a new set of relationships between text and object. Gathering these diverse artefacts in a single place, Dante's Library also crosses disciplinary boundaries to create a single archive of books, visual arts, and architecture, open to everyone from students encountering Dante for the first time to scholars who have spent their careers studying the *somma poeta*. Dante's Library therefore joins a number of digital projects that help make Dante more comprehensible to students and more available to scholars, like Guy Raffa's Danteworlds at the University of Texas, the Dartmouth Dante Project's collection of *Commedia* commentaries, and Columbia's Digital Dante which provides both an edition and a commentary.² With the same spirit of openness, our project seeks to offer visitors a more comprehensive understanding of Dante's world and the concerns of art, literature, religion, and politics that defined it. Yet Dante's Library is distinctive in utilizing materiality as a lens to shed light on Dante's work.

I must admit that reconstructing Dante's library has an obvious problem: there is no historical evidence of the contents of such a collection. Nevertheless, scholars have meticulously hypothesized what books may have been available to Dante.³ Exhibits like the

² For a comprehensive overview of the intersection of Digital Humanities and Dante see Akash Kumar, "Digital Dante" in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, ed. Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerdon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³ Giuseppina Brunetti and Sonia Gentili, 'Una biblioteca nella Firenze di Dante: I manoscritti di Santa Croce,' in *Testimoni del vero: Su alcuni libri in biblioteche di autore*, ed. by Emilio Russo (Rome: Bulzoni, 2000), pp. 21–48; Luciano Gargan, *Dante, la sua biblioteca e lo studio di Bologna* (Rome: Antenore, 2014); Raffaella Zanni, 'Una ricognizione per la biblioteca di Dante in margine ad alcuni con tributi recenti,' *Critica del testo*, 17 (2014), 161–204.

1965 *Mostra di codici ed edizioni dantesche* and the more recent *La Biblioteca di Dante* (2021) at the Accademia Nazionale Lincei in Rome have compiled the kinds of manuscripts that Dante could have reasonably been familiar with.⁴ Even if Dante did not read these exact codices, they likely share characteristics with others produced around the same time and place. Building upon a robust tradition of manuscript study, as well as the work of scholars who have established the significance of the physical forms in which texts circulate, Dante's Library takes these codices as a fruitful starting point for envisioning how Dante read and studied his sources.⁵

It can be easy to forget that the authors whom we merely know from the pages of books, the code of websites, or the pixels of e-readers were once living individuals who experienced the material world for themselves. Privileging materiality is crucial because knowledge does not exist, nor has it ever existed, in a vacuum, divorced from context or circumstance. Ideas are stored in specific media and shared in space with others; today, we scroll Instagram posts and download e-books on our Kindles; our medieval counterparts gazed upon frescoes during Mass and may have been able to borrow manuscripts from their wealthier friends. When we ask *what* Dante knew, we should also ask *how* he knew it. They are distinct but complementary questions. For those of us who have been lucky enough to walk the streets of Florence, to breathe the cool air of a medieval church, or to hold a thirteenth-century codex in our hands, we may overlook the fact that such experiences are not the norm for most people who read Dante. Dante's Library

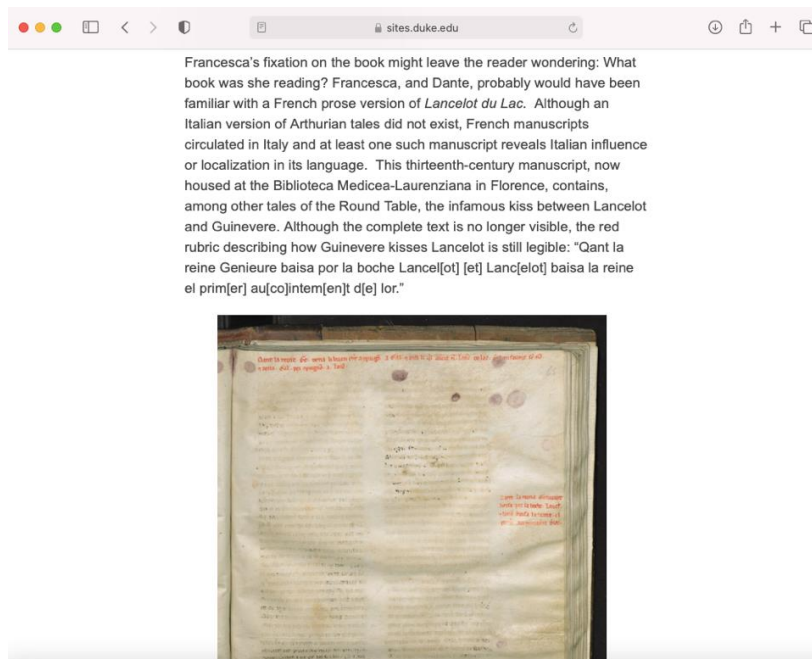
⁴ Comitato nazionale per le celebrazioni del VII Centenario della nascita di Dante, ed., *Mostra di codici ed edizioni dantesche* (Firenze: Edizioni Remo Sandron, 1965). Roberto Antonelli, Ebe Antetomaso, Marco Guardo, e Lorenzo Mainini, *La biblioteca di Dante* (mostra). Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, 2021.

⁵ Armando Petrucci, *Scrivere e leggere nell'Italia medievale* (Edizioni Sylvestre Bonnard, 2008). William Robins, ed., *Textual cultures of medieval Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011). Keith Busby and Christopher Kleinhenz, "Medieval French and Italian Literature: Toward a manuscript history," in *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural approaches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp.215-242. Jelena Todorović, *Dante and the dynamics of textual exchange: authorship, manuscript culture, and the making of the Vita nova* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). Justin Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante: Urban readers and writers in late medieval Italy* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007). D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Gerard Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext," in *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 261-72.

strives to communicate with its visitors the experience of those material elements and their significance both to Dante and to understanding his literature.

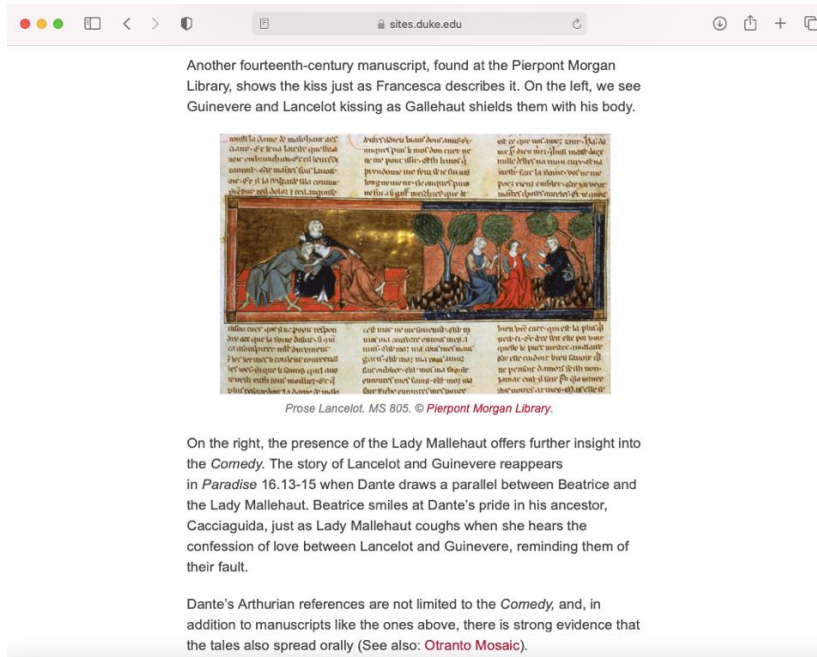
User Experience

Imagine you are a student taking a class on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. You chose the course because it satisfies a curriculum or general education requirement and because you had heard of the *Inferno*. You have little to no background knowledge about the poem or the medieval world. You don't read Italian and what you know about this period comes from a single week in an AP European History class that you took three years ago. In addition to the notes in the back of your book (which, let's be honest, you don't usually read because flipping back and forth is annoying), Google has become your best friend as you try to make sense of Dante's poem. This week, while reading *Inferno* 5, you wonder what Francesca means when she says the book was a "Galeotto," so you type into a search engine "paolo francesca book dante." The Dante's Library page entitled "Paolo and Francesca's Book" will likely be one of the first results. When you follow the hyperlink to the page, you find an opening paragraph that quickly and glosses the passage for you, followed by two images of manuscripts accompanied by descriptions and explanations.



The first image doesn't seem special, so you scroll past it. The second catches your attention, and you stop to read the description.

Another fourteenth-century manuscript, found at the Pierpont Morgan Library, shows the kiss just as Francesca describes it. On the left, we see Guinevere and Lancelot kissing as Gallehaut shields them with his body.



Prose Lancelot, MS 805, © Pierpont Morgan Library.

On the right, the presence of the Lady Mallehaut offers further insight into the *Comedy*. The story of Lancelot and Guinevere reappears in *Paradise* 16.13-15 when Dante draws a parallel between Beatrice and the Lady Mallehaut. Beatrice smiles at Dante's pride in his ancestor, Cacciaguida, just as Lady Mallehaut coughs when she hears the confession of love between Lancelot and Guinevere, reminding them of their fault.

Dante's Arthurian references are not limited to the *Comedy*, and, in addition to manuscripts like the ones above, there is strong evidence that the tales also spread orally (See also: [Otranto Mosaic](#)).

You learn that the image on the left shows Gallehaut using his body to shield Guinevere and Lancelot as they kiss. You envision how Dante—or Francesca—could have been struck by an illustration like this. Or, in your mind's eye you watch Paolo and Francesca move closer, just like Guinevere and Lancelot, as they leaned over the book, perhaps reading a rubric that mentioned the infamous kiss. You even start to comprehend what a medieval book looked like: not printed but written by hand, likely accompanied by rubrics and maybe even illustrations. You return to the *Comedy* with a better grasp of the scene and a fuller vision of what the 'book' could have meant for both Francesca and Dante.

Imagine, alternatively, that you are a scholar who is interested in Dante's use of the Arthurian tales. You arrive at Dante's Library via a search engine, or if you are already familiar with the site, you browse the Table of Contents looking for pertinent entries. The one on Paolo and Francesca's Book provides you with information concerning two relevant manuscripts, Plut.89 inf.61 at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (identified by the *Mostra di codici*) and MS 805 at the Pierpont Morgan Library, as well as direct links to further information on their respective library sites. Unlike the student, you may be intrigued by how the rubrics of

the first manuscript, transcribed in the entry, describe the kiss between Lancelot and Guinevere as well as the meeting between the lovers and Gallehaut. You may come to compelling conclusions by comparing this language to Dante's or to other versions of the Lancelot prose romance with which you are familiar. You may also be drawn to the linked entry on the Otranto Mosaic, which proposes that the Arthurian tales likely also spread orally in Italy. You might continue your research by consulting the selected bibliographies at the end of the entries or redirect your focus to the oral transmission of these stories on the Italian peninsula. You leave the site with new questions about Dante's access to the Arthurian tales or the versions he may have known.

These two divergent use cases reveal how Dante's Library can appeal to a range of users and why materiality is germane to many different readers of Dante. Whether the entry provides an excess of information or only a starting point, the material object has the power to shift perspective and deepen knowledge. In the case of the student, the visitor gains new information about the medieval book which was likely not their primary purpose in accessing the site; that is, the entries can answer a particular question (i.e. what does Francesca mean when she says "Gallehaut was the book") and simultaneously introduce students to the material world behind the answer. The researcher, on the other hand, likely finds informative scholarship and possible inquiries that either complement or complicate an existing interest. Even if they do not use materiality as their primary interpretive lens, the questions raised by Dante's Library can still inform their avenues of research.

History, Progress, and Challenges

Dante's Library began in 2015 with a Mellon Humanities Writ Large and a team comprised of Professor Eisner, myself, and four other graduate students (Laura Banella, Alexandra Dodson, Joseph Williams, and Matthew Woodworth—all of whom went on to earn Ph.D.s from Duke). Having a large, interdisciplinary team from the outset allowed us to produce content quickly and efficiently; by the end of the summer, we had six completed entries for the site with relevant images. But we quickly realized that content production would not be the primary challenge in getting our project off the ground.

It was the website. With support from two staff members of the Duke University Libraries who specialized in digital projects, we learned that the site needed to be hosted by Duke for security and storage reasons. Yet without an already established project and audience, the only option available for creating and hosting a webpage was Duke's WordPress, Sites@Duke. While WordPress itself has substantial flexibility and functionality, this more secure, institutional version essentially offered only blog-style webpages. Although we had originally hoped to create a dynamic site that blended text and image, we decided to forgo complexity in the initial stages. We used Sites@Duke to produce an operative site that would be available to the public.

In the following years, the site's development was relatively stagnant. The initial group of graduate students involved in the project completed their dissertations and graduated. Although I wrote a few more entries, from 2016–2018 we were primarily dedicated to maintaining the site and organizing material. By 2018, I was the only graduate student of the original team who was still at Duke, and I became the project's Managing Editor. As a fellow in the Franklin Humanities Institute's Lab in Digital Knowledge in 2018–2019, I had planned to overhaul Dante's Library by moving it to a different platform. Again, however, I ran up against problems regarding security and storage, and I resolved instead to focus on ensuring the site's usability and longevity with the technology available from Sites@Duke.

As part of my postdoctoral research, I have undertaken significant project maintenance and expansion. Dante's Library is still hosted by Sites@Duke, but we have manipulated and updated the blog-style template in a way that allows visitors to navigate the site more easily, via the Table of Contents, Image Gallery, and landing page. The project now boasts fourteen completed entries with another five in development. I have also begun to recruit scholars—from Duke and beyond—whose expertise and research interests contribute to the project. As we have expanded (and continue to expand), the need for standardization has also increased. For that reason, Dante's Library now has its own entry guidelines and style guide. With the goal of preparing the project for the next Managing Editor, I have organized and catalogued the existing texts, images, and image permissions from the site and preserved them in a

separate cloud-storage database to guarantee long-term conservation.

Next Steps

Over the past seven years, we have opted for functionality and simplicity over advanced technologies. As we look to the next phase of Dante's Library, the project has three goals. The first objective is to continue expanding the network of scholars and students who both write for and utilize the site. We are beginning the process of applying for an ISSN, which would make documenting and cite entries more straightforward. This step would also allow the context and curation being produced on the site to be recognized, rightly, as knowledge in and of itself. Through this work, we hope to eventually reach one hundred entries as a representative, if not exhaustive, glimpse into Dante's material world. Second, as a project which focuses on the relation between content and form, we plan to restructure the site and move it to a new platform to provide better text and image integration, as well as additional functionality such as image annotations, timelines, and mapping. A further benefit of migrating the site to a new platform is that we will then be able to take full advantage of data tools like GoogleAnalytics (currently limited on Sites@Duke), so that we can better optimize our pages for both search engines and audiences. Finally, a key focus as we move forward is guaranteeing accessibility for as many visitors as possible by updating the AltText for our images. While all the images on the site have a basic AltText description, enhancing our AltText will be essential for users who experience difficulty viewing image files or who use screen-reader software. Our project is and always has been envisioned as open-access, and our next steps will make that vision even more true by bringing Dante's material world to an even broader public.