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## ***DANTE [VIRTUALLY] AT DARTMOUTH***

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New Hampshire might not seem like the most obvious home for a medieval Italian poet, but Dante has always held a special place at Dartmouth. Beyond the college's deep-rooted dedication to liberal arts learning and its attention to the complete undergraduate education—world literature firmly included—there is something about the quiet woods that surround the campus, the introspective and inspiring nature of the place, that feel uniquely Dantesque. This atmosphere has alternately supported and been elaborated by the presence of a long chain of important scholars of Dante, whose teaching and research created a rich space in which to study the poet. In particular, and especially relevant to the current context, it gave rise to multiple digital humanities projects dedicated to Dante and his major work: the Dartmouth Dante Project, a searchable, full-text database of commentaries on the *Commedia* spanning from the fourteenth to the twentieth century, launched in 1988; and Dante Lab, a virtual workspace that permits the comparison of four texts simultaneously, including the *Commedia* in its original Italian, the Longfellow American English translation of the *Commedia*, and all of the commentaries that had been previously made available on the Dartmouth Dante Project, launched in 2013. Both platforms have been invaluable resources to students and scholars of the poet at Dartmouth and beyond over the years of their existence, and they continue to be accessed regularly. They are, however, in a moment of transition, and their future is uncertain. As technology advances and user expectation evolves, these digital humanities platforms can sometimes now appear at best quaint, at worst obsolete.

Yet there are many layers of value that include but exceed their continued immediate utility as databases that make the *Commedia* and its apparatus easily available and searchable. Indeed, some of their most rewarding aspects have only become clear with the passage of time. The move to accessing materials on handheld smart devices has meant that lighter, more agile sites that don't consume significant data or rely on large bandwidth have substantial

appeal to the everyday user, now expecting to have all their materials at the ready and at their finger tips in a highly mobile format. On the opposite end of the spectrum, nearly two years of rolling lockdowns and social distancing has been a profound if brutal reminder that virtual formats of all kinds have an inherently critically important place in a globalized world where public health crises may become more frequent. Perhaps most compellingly, the straightforward interface, simple presentation of information, and cost-free access that the Dartmouth Dante Project and Dante Lab can boast have made them some of the most effective tools for promoting inclusivity in the world of Dante studies today.

The Dartmouth Dante Project was born in tandem with and as an elaboration of the uniquely rich group of several of the most influential scholars of Dante who all found themselves at Dartmouth in the 1980s, in particular Professors Kevin Brownlee, Jeffrey Schnapp, and Nancy Vickers. These scholars were often joined by still other *Dantisti*, inspiring them to attempt to grow the community even more broadly. The project itself was spearheaded by Professor Robert Hollander, who spent summers as a visiting professor at Dartmouth between 1982–88. With the help of his co-director Stephen Campbell, a computer scientist at Dartmouth, and yet another noted Dantista Professor Simone Marchesi, Professor Hollander worked to create a searchable, digitized collection of the texts of the many commentaries on the *Commedia* using two large grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities along with further financial backing from sources as varied as the Dante Society of America and the AT&T Foundation. This required hand-scanning each text with early optical scanners and storing them on a dial-up server, with tech support provided by administrators Janet Stephens and Jonathan Altman. The site itself was designed by Campbell and Raymond Neff, then director of Academic Computing at Dartmouth. When it was made available to the public in 1988, digital platforms of its kind were relatively rare and accessing the many dozens of commentaries on Dante's major work simultaneously was difficult or impossible, not least since many existed in only barely modernized hard-copy form. In a best case scenario, individuals affiliated with a research institution might have several pre and early modern commentaries at their disposal in a special collection library alongside more recent purchases of still copyrighted modern commentaries, and might be able to supplement those further with an interlibrary loan system.

Anyone without such an affiliation would not have the luxury of such possibilities, and would be left with the discouraging, time-consuming, and likely expensive task of identifying publicly accessible copies of rare and recently published commentaries in both English and Italian. Bringing all of these commentaries together into one place was thus in itself a great accomplishment; having digital, full-text, open-access versions of them all in searchable format was truly innovative and exciting. The Dartmouth Dante Project became a critical resource for engaged readers of the poem, an invaluable tool for teaching, and a benchmark for later digital humanities projects in the relevant fields of medieval literature, Italian studies, and Dante studies.

The Dartmouth Dante Project was the foundation for the next Dante-focused digital humanities undertaking at Dartmouth: Dante Lab. Dante Lab took the wealth of raw material made available by the Dartmouth Dante Project and created a digital workspace in which the text of the *Commedia*, in original language and translation, could be compared next to the commentaries, allowing users to interact with the texts as they might at a traditional desk but without the challenge of actually sourcing and handling the physical books. The evolution into Dante Lab was a fully Dartmouth-sponsored undertaking in this case, funded by the college's Neukom Institute for Computational Science. A team of computer scientists and humanities scholars came together once again, beginning with Daniel Rockmore, director of the Neukom Institute, Professor Graziella Parati, then chair of the Department of French and Italian at Dartmouth, Laurence Hooper, a professor of medieval Italian, and Scott Millspaugh, a visiting scholar in Italian at the college. Stephen Campbell was once again a key player, helping with the migration of the content of the Dartmouth Dante Project to Dante Lab, and new computational support was provided by Mirksy Digital's Jennifer Mirsky, Liza Bouchard, and Charles Forcey, who brought the site up and running. Dante Lab was first unveiled at the Digital French and Italian Symposium in 2013, and thus in a contextualized circumstance that permitted its place in the larger landscape of digital humanities projects to be evaluated more clearly. Its user-friendly and appealing interface, multiple functionalities, and clever transposition of analog expectations into digital executions made it more than functional: it was a site that was enjoyably interactive and aesthetically pleasing.

The multi-text comparison feature proved exceptionally useful, as many similar digital humanities projects have confirmed adopting the same apparatus. Importantly, by building on the Dartmouth Dante Project both literally and figuratively, Dante Lab demonstrated the continued relevance of even an aging digital humanities platform, and pointed toward the way that some pertinent applications of these sites might unveil themselves only much later.

In the decade since the presentation of Dante Lab, Professor Graziella Parati has continued to give direction on the allocation of resources for maintenance from her position at Dartmouth, while Professor Simone Marchesi has made himself available from Princeton to address questions regarding the content on the sites. Stephen Campbell, now retired from Dartmouth, has fielded all manner of queries and challenges concerning tech support. Nonetheless, the lack of a steady presence of a Dantista at Dartmouth and the disjointed reality represented by two separate if related sites has left both the Dartmouth Dante Project and Dante Lab in somewhat precarious positions. Both sites have essentially been left to exist without intervention for some time, and there is no doubt that with each passing year they move closer to requiring some kind of attention. This is especially true of the Dartmouth Dante Project, now approaching its Dantean thirty-fifth birthday. Though Campbell redesigned the site in 2005, with the help of Kirt Johnson, moving over to an Oracle database and a GIT repository archiving system for storage, no significant modifications have been made to the site since. While the Dante Lab has a more advanced web design and greater flexibility, it too is now aging and will inevitably arrive at an inflection point shortly.

That said, and despite the passage of time, the continued utility of both sites cannot really be called into question. If they are dated or basic, they remain nonetheless extremely functional, and even the Dartmouth Dante Project, which has been subsumed to great extent into the Dante Lab, retains a purpose in as much as it delivers the only available simple accounting of all commentaries available up through the late twentieth century that is also easily searchable. If they are unimpressive aesthetically in terms of what web design capabilities are now available, the lightness of design makes them quick to load with very little bandwidth or data usage, meaning they remain attractive options for the student or scholar

traveling, teaching, or working with limited resources in any sense. If the audience for these Dante-dedicated sites is ultimately niche, in as much as they serve more or less exclusively the community of Dante students and scholars, they serve that community well and remain highly effective in opening up engagement with Dante's text to a wider, more diverse public. Indeed, the best evidence of their continued utility is also a reminder of how beneficial they are especially to students and scholars of Dante who work independently or in any case outside of a major research institution, as witnessed by Google analytics that reveal most users in fact do not have institutional email addresses and are accessing from IP addresses outside of the US and especially outside of major urban centers.

The question that remains then is, what should be done now? At the moment of writing, both sites continue to function properly at the user end, and both are maintained with relatively little effort and at a manageable cost at the institutional end. The technology is aging, but it is not yet malfunctioning, and migrating to a new platform would mean time, money, and the risk of lost data. To expand the capabilities of either or both sites would again require time and money, and would likely be more complicated in terms of copyright; as when the sites were conceived and launched, a team composed of computer scientists and scholars of Dante supported by a substantial outside grant and/or university funding would be necessary to improve or renew them. However, waiting until an urgent situation or malfunction prompts an immediate solution makes it likely that a fix will be slapdash or come in the shape of an unsustainable path forward; considered from another perspective, leaving them fallow already for this length of time and allowing that to continue suggests their inevitable obsolescence and almost guarantees it. It thus seems prudent to map out what might be done and begin work, making the most of what is already available: in the case of the Dartmouth Dante Project, its vast quantity of digitized original text; in the case of Dante Lab, its interactive comparative text application. This effort will have the luxury of exploiting the new apparatus for virtual interaction developed during the Covid-19 pandemic; that is, convening a scholarly committee, particularly a diverse group with complementary talents, is now a much less daunting task. Platforms for web design have similarly become easier to work with, less

expensive, and more versatile, meaning that the raw data already present on the Dartmouth Dante Project and Dante Lab can be redeployed in a context that feels fresh and newly useful even before new material is added or modifications are made at the content level. Given its home base at Dartmouth, it seems especially appropriate that Dartmouth students be involved in this effort, and indeed the most convincing option for ushering the sites into their next phase of life is that of dedicating an undergraduate seminar to the maintenance, elaboration, and promotion of the Dartmouth Dante Project and Dante Lab. Involving students at that level would be a practical pedagogical exercise imparting applicable skills that also permits the study of Dante in a dynamic and evolving context while taking advantage of the input from precisely the user group the sites would do best to develop and expand. This would be an opportunity to connect the two sites with other Dante-focused digital humanities projects that have arrived on the scene in the intervening years, thus giving rise to a lively and extensive network. With the support of Dartmouth, and ideally further outside sources that could also become partners in future growth, this seems both feasible and promising.

Their combined longevity and flexibility thus continue to define the Dartmouth Dante Project and Dante Lab as especially worthy of attention as digital humanities projects for *Dantisti*, but as they age it is perhaps surprisingly their would-be outmoded form and uncertain future that in fact makes them exciting loci of possibility, as their current form already makes them user-friendly and accessible, and without a plan for the next steps whoever takes the reins now will have the ability to control the direction they take next. These sites have been and continue to be a resource of special value to people who are not at major research institutions, who do not have significant individual funding, and who cannot expect to travel regularly to libraries or conferences. They might yet also become just two stars in a constellation of Dantesque resources available virtually that bring together an unlimited and unbounded community of readers and lovers of the poet. If Dante studies as a field wishes to become more conversant in the current moment and intends to open its borders to the widest possible audience, tools like the Dartmouth Dante Project and Dante Lab can, however unexpectedly, lead the way.