

**Incunable Venetian printing of Dante's epic *Divine Comedy*, with wood engravings after Matteo da Parma.**

Dante Alighieri. *Divina commedia*. Impressa in Venetia : Per Piero de Zuanne di Quarengii da Palazago Bergamasco, del. M.CCCC.LXXXXVII. Adi. XI. octubrio [11 Oct. 1497]. 12 5/8 inches (320 mm), [10], CCXCVII, [1] leaves.

Dante's (1265–1321) epic poem, beyond all dispute the greatest work of Italian literature, meditates on divine justice and the order of the Christian cosmos in all its splendors and miseries. It takes the form of an allegorical description of a pilgrimage: Virgil acts as Dante's philosophic guide through Hell (**Spreads 14–146**) and Purgatory (**Spreads 147–233**), his beloved Beatrice through Paradise (**Spreads 233–308**) to a vision of God. *The Divine Comedy* opens in a dark wood, *una selva obscura* illustrated at **Spread 14**, and ends with the poet having attained at last to *Lamor che muoue el sole & laltre stelle* (**Spread 308**)—"the Love that moves the sun and other stars." This tale of wandering was, appropriately, written by a man who had been condemned to perpetual exile from his native city at the age of 37. The poem was begun five years later, in 1307; the finishing touches were added only shortly before Dante's death in 1321.

*The Divine Comedy* was circulated in many manuscript codices, some of them beautifully illuminated. When printing arrived in Italy, it was inevitable that the poem would be one of the earliest vernacular texts to be published. The first edition appeared at Foligno in 1472, with neither illustration nor commentary—two features that the poem, with its large cast of historical figures and elaborate celestial topography, would almost seem to demand. *The Divine Comedy* had in fact been immediately recognized as a masterpiece requiring exegesis. Two of Dante's three sons themselves wrote commentaries on their father's book. The earliest of them, Iacopo Alighieri's *Chiose all'Inferno*, covered only that first book. Composed in the year after his father's death, the text remained in manuscript until printed in 1848.

The first commentary to be published was Iacopo della Lana's (written in 1324–28), which appeared (as though written by Benvenuto da Imola) in Venice in 1477,

together with the first printing of Boccaccio's life of Dante. The most popular commentary, however, with 27 editions before 1601, was composed by Cristoforo Landino (1424–1504). Designed as a counterweight to Lana's, it was intended to assist Dante's native city to reclaim its banished poet and to bask again in his fame. Landino's patriotic exercise opens with a preface singing every possible praise of Florence, from its beautiful situation to its eminent poets, scholars, musicians and artists, its great families and the impressive architecture. His commentary (which is reprinted in this edition) first appeared in the 1481 Florentine edition of *The Divine Comedy*, the first (and only 15th-century) edition to be published in the city. It was also the first to be illustrated, albeit in erratic and perfunctory fashion, with plates after sketches by Botticelli. Venice, however, was the leading producer of illustrated incunables. Seven editions were published in Venice in the 15th century, all but two of them illustrated.

The 1497 Venetian edition reproduced here is the last of the fifteen incunable editions of *The Divine Comedy*. Its 99 wood-engraved illustrations are copied from the blocks used by Matteo da Parma for his *Divine Comedies* of 1491 and 1493. These two Venetian editions established an enduring iconographic standard: Pietro Quarengi was their first imitator, but he had many followers. Although versions of the designs were to be used until the mid-16th century, they preserved many medieval features, notably the convention of representing a traveler on his journey more than once in a picture, in time-lapse progression—see, for example, Dante and Virgil (indicated by initial letters by their heads) on the road at **Spreads 23, 47, 51 and 57**. Another vestigial feature of the manuscript book is the abrupt way in which the book begins. Early title-pages (like this one) tend merely to raise the curtain on the opera, without an overture. Ours (**Spread 3**) simply states the author's name: "Danthe Alighieri Fiorentino." Title, publisher, and date appear only in the colophon at the end (**Spread 308**), along with the editor's name, Piero da Figino. Although Dante was called the "divine poet" in several early editions, the epithet (attributed to Boccaccio) was not applied to the poem itself until the Venetian edition of 1555, by which time title-pages had become very much more informative.

A Credo, a Pater Noster and an Ave Maria conclude the book at **Spreads 308–9**: they have long been considered to be apocryphal. The volume has been rebound in a luxury binding of full red crushed morocco gilt by the prominent Parisian craftsman and

dealer Léon Gruel (1841–1923)—his label is affixed to the corner of the front pastedown at **Spread 2**. The earliest surviving marks of ownership, dated 1620 (**Spreads 3** and **14**) and 1740 (**Spread 3**) have been obliterated. The book was most recently in the collections of the Italian émigré banker Giorgio Di Veroli (1890–1952) and the Italian musical bibliophile Giorgio Fanan, whose St. George and the dragon bookplate appears on **Spread 2**.