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VAGLIAMI IL LUNGO STUDIO E IL GRANDE AMORE

Valentine Giamatti's Dante Collection at Mount Holyoke College

ABSTRACT: My paper focuses on Valentine Giamatti's collection of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* editions at Mount Holyoke College. The son of Italian immigrants, Giamatti (1911-1982) followed a path that was unusual in the Italian-American community at that time, graduating both from Yale (B.A.) and Harvard (Ph.D.). He joined the faculty at Mount Holyoke in 1940, at a very delicate moment in the USA-Italian political relations. Giamatti's collection of Dante editions originated from a wedding gift. Over the years it grew to include over two hundred volumes in many languages. It contains rare editions (including the first Florentine edition of the *Commedia* with drawings after Botticelli, and the first edition with the adjective 'Divina' in print) and curious ones (such as *L'Inferno di Topolino*). Seven centuries after Dante's death, the Giamatti collection is the perfect gateway for a reflection on his life, his collecting style, and on the immense relevance of Dante's poem in north-American culture.

KEYWORDS: Dante Collections, Divine Comedy, Giamatti, Toynbee, Fiske, Zahm, Mount Holyoke College, Italian-American Relations.

Beginnings: Valentine John Giamatti¹

Vagliami il lungo studio e il grande amore
che mi ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.²

In his 1933 essay *Dante vivo*, Giovanni Papini famously wrote that “per intender pienamente Dante ci vuole un cattolico, un artista e un fiorentino” (Papini 1933, 14). Valentine John Giamatti (1911-1982) was not a Florentine; he was born in a working-class area of New Haven from Italian immigrant parents from the Benevento province (Proto 2020, xv).³ As far as we know, he was also not a poet, but he devoted a great part of his life to the study, teaching, and collecting of the most famous poem in the Italian

¹ I wish to extend my special thanks to Deborah Richards and Leslie Fields, the current and former Head of Archives and Special Collections at Mount Holyoke College, and to archivist Micha Broadnax. This paper would not have been possible without their generous help and infinite patience.

² Giamatti chose these lines from *Inferno* I (83-84) for his bookplate.

³ They were originally from San Lorenzello, and their name was Giammattei.

language: Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Finally, to Papini's first point, Giamatti's relationship with the Catholic church was problematic. According to Neil Proto, the author of an exhaustive biographical volume on Giamatti's eldest son – A. Bartlett 'Bart' Giamatti⁴ – Valentine had been disappointed by the Church already as a very young man:

[Val Giamatti] didn't bring the formal practice of Catholicism into his marriage, only the cultural heritage that imbued the Italian immigrant experience that he'd come to know. His departure loosened Val to explore the writings of Dante and others who treated Christianity as related to life, choices, and values explored without the constraint of faith, with the Church and clergy as symbols, icons representative of something more than the Church defined. ... There also was the quintessential virtue of departure, closely connected to the values he had witnessed that became central to his life and, later, to his son's: fairness in dealing with people, openness in dealing with ideas. (53)

Valentine Giamatti's story is a success story. He moved from his modest Italian-American upbringing to Yale and Harvard;⁵ he married a daughter of Massachusetts' upper class – Mary 'Peggy' Walton (1914-2006) – and had a distinguished academic career at the oldest institution of higher learning for women in the United States, Mount Holyoke College, founded by a visionary teacher and entrepreneur – Mary Lyon (1797-1849) – in 1837. At Mount Holyoke, "the Giamattis ... gave vent to a family definition of the public duty of the private life, borne foremost in experience and values, now nurtured and encouraged by the historical culture created by the college's founder" (Proto 2020, 103). Another Bart Giamatti biographer, Robert Moncreiff, wrote that Valentine

was a teacher first and foremost. His published output was slim: an introductory Italian grammar...; a visual rendering of the schematics of Dante's *Divine Comedy* entitled 'Panoramic Views of Dante's Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise'; a few translations. His family believes that the small quantity of written scholarship reflected a kind of writer's block in English, which he had begun to learn only when he was a young second-generation immigrant schoolboy in New Haven. Whatever the reason, his intellectual curiosity expressed itself in other ways. He was an ardent collector; of illustrated editions of the *Divine Comedy*...; of Etruscan pottery; of Roman coins. (6-7)

Eclipsed by his son's fame,⁶ today Valentine Giamatti is not remembered for the words he wrote, but for the words he collected, for his Dante Collection, which he donated to Mount Holyoke College shortly after his retirement. In the following pages, I discuss Valentine Giamatti's life and collection in the wider context of Dante collections and Dante's fortune in the United States. I argue that it was partially through his collection that Giamatti, the son of immigrant parents, was able to promote Italian

⁴ Bart Giamatti was an accomplished literary scholar, Yale University's first non-Anglo-Saxon President (1978-1986), and the seventh Commissioner of Major League Baseball.

⁵ Proto talks at length about anti-Italian discrimination at Yale and at other Ivy League universities (61-76).

⁶ And, in recent years, by his grandson, actor Paul Giamatti.

language and culture in north America and to be accepted into American academic and social circles.

The Making of a Bibliophile

Similar to the British passion for Dante, the American fervor around the *Divina Commedia* is mostly a nineteenth century phenomenon. A history of Dante's popularity in the English-speaking world is beyond the scope of this paper but, to provide some context, we can outline a few relevant cases. In an article about Dante's popularity at Oxford, Diego Zancani stresses how, in England, interest around Dante was inspired, in part, by celebrated Italian exiles, in primis poet Ugo Foscolo and journalist and activist Giuseppe Mazzini: "If Dantism, before 1830 'bore a distinctly political character', later the emphasis may have become religious and nationalistic. Dante is seen as the poet of freedom, as much as the poet of love, but also as the poet of exile. And the Italian exiles in London were numerous in the nineteenth century" (Zancani 2013, 324). The American bibliophile Willard Fiske (1831-1904) would agree with Zancani. In Fiske's words:

exiles from Italy had given an impulse to the study of Dante in so many foreign regions – ..., Baretti, Boschini, Foscolo, Mazzini, Panizzi, Rossetti, Emiliani-Giudici and so many others in England, ... and Da Ponte and Botta in America. ... Equally worthy of remark did I find it that so many foreigners should have entered the service of Dante... (Fiske 1898-1900, XI)

Fiske also stressed how a writer's importance was often measured abroad:

Worldwide fame ... is decided by a man's standing outside of his own country, or what, in the case of the writer, is the same thing, beyond the limits of his own speech. ... In English there are twenty separate and distinct translations of the *Divine Comedy* ... one of which has appeared in more than thirty editions. I cannot find that those of the epics of Homer much exceed a baker's dozen... (VIII)

A few decades later, American scholar Robert Clements, among others, pointed out that both the Romantic movement and modern philology (which, according to Clements (248), was "the greatest advance in literary scholarship since humanism") were responsible for the interest around Dante's poetry in the Anglo-American world. It was the nineteenth century British and American renaissance that produced a great number of translations, commentaries, and a new enthusiastic passion for collecting. Clements first delivered his paper at Ravenna on 27 April 1965, on the occasion of Dante's seven hundredth birthday. In his talk, he also declared that "Dante came into his own in the nineteenth century. He was not only popular, he was influential" (249). Clements concluded: "Dante now holds an international passport. *Civis mundi*" (251).

The same year, Valentine Giamatti traveled to Italy to take part in the Dante celebrations. At that point, his collection was well-established and relatively, if only locally, well-known. Unsurprisingly, the Italian trip was also an opportunity to hunt for more books. In a letter from Florence's Pensione Pendini addressed to a member of Mount Holyoke's Press Bureau, Elizabeth Green, Giamatti wrote: "The illustrated D.C.s I am bringing back are beautiful editions. I can't wait to show them".⁷ Giamatti's voyage, one of several sabbatical leaves during his thirty-three-years at the College, received a lot of attention in Massachusetts:

During the second semester of 1965, Mr. and Mrs. Giamatti attended the Dante celebrations in Florence, Italy. While there Mr. Giamatti was able to acquire many beautiful limited editions of the *Divine Comedy* which are now part of his collection. During the first semester of the present academic year some of these books were exhibited at the Smith College Museum of Art as well as at the Robert Frost Library at Amherst College. For five weeks during the second semester Mount Holyoke College Art Department held an exhibition of the Rauschenber (sic), Dali, and Lebrun prints and lithographs which Mr. Giamatti had purchased in 1965.⁸

Giamatti and his future wife Peggy Walton met in 1933 on their way to Italy aboard the Italian-built SS Rex (Proto 2020, XIII-XVII). By the summer of 1934, Valentine had traveled to many parts of Italy, and to France. It was during this eventful trip that he became familiar with the eighteenth-century Florence-born French aristocrat Louis de Cambray-Digny, a soldier and engineer who had been in friendly terms with, among others, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson (Proto 2020, 79-83). Neil Proto argues that the unique mix of Italy, France and the United States that marked so much of de Cambray-Digny's life inspired Giamatti to make it the subject of his Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard.⁹

Valentine and Peggy married in 1937. The seed for his Dante collection seems to have been planted already on their wedding day: "The newlyweds exchanged books as a wedding gift; ... her gift to him ... was a seventeenth-century Italian-language edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy*" (Proto 2020, 86). Only three editions of the *Divine Comedy* were issued in the seventeenth century, one published in Vicenza in 1613, one in Venice in 1629, and one in Padova also in 1629 (Pirovano 2016, 23). To this day, the only volume in the collection that dates from the 1600s is an abridged copy of the "Compendio della Comedia di Dante Alighieri divisa in tre parti Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso per la filosofia

⁷ Letter dated 19 May 1965. Valentine Giamatti Papers, LD 7092.8, Folder 3, Correspondence, 1945-65. Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA.

⁸ Valentine Giamatti, *Annual Report to the President*, 10 June 1966. (LD7092.6 Italian Language and Literature Department, Folder 2, Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA).

⁹ "[Giamatti's] Ph.D. dissertation, which blended European heroism and intellect into the cause of American freedom" (Proto 2020, 102). Also see on p. 82. Giamatti never published his research on de Cambray-Digny. He donated his dissertation manuscript and related documents to Mount Holyoke.

morale, ...”¹⁰ We do not know if this is was the wedding gift, nevertheless it is a precious volume based on the two most popular commentaries of the sixteenth century, Cristoforo Landino’s and Alessandro Vellutello’s. Furthermore, this is not an edition but a commented prose summary of the poem published in Venice by Girolamo Albrizzi in 1696. Giamatti’s copy is almost identical to Paul de Colomb de Batines’ description: it contains three full page woodcuts which, according to Colomb de Batines, “sono copiate dall’edizione di Venezia, Marcolini 1544” (233),¹¹ which is also part of Giamatti’s collection.¹² In his own notes, Giamatti writes that Marcolini’s was “the first edition with Vellutello’s comment. The woodcuts are three full-page cuts at the beginning of each cantica and smaller cuts for each canto. Some of them are repeated. These illustrations are entirely different from those published in earlier editions with Landino’s comment.” (Giamatti 1957, 3). Recently, Donato Pirovano shed light on the great innovation of the 1544 Marcolini edition:

La struttura della *Nova esposizione della Commedia*, stampata in quarto, è molto limpida: Ogni cantica è preceduta da una descrizione topografica, ... basata su una ricostruzione minuziosa del viaggio dedotta dai versi della *Commedia*. Il commento vero e proprio è svolto canto per canto L’editore Marcolini seppe ben evidenziare questa impostazione esegetica utilizzando un carattere corsivo più grande per i versi di Dante e più piccolo per il commento. ... la *Nova esposizione* inaugurò una nuova fase di successo editoriale della *Commedia*, che durò una decina d’anni con ben nove edizioni. Tra queste un legame diretto con Vellutello è rappresentato dalle stampe lionesi di Guglielmo Rovillio ... (20-21)

A quick glance at Giamatti’s collection reveals the presence of three out of the total four French Rovillio editions (1551, 1571, and 1575), together with the first official French edition, the 1547 Jean de Tournes with Landino’s commentary. The latter, according to Pirovano,

È la prima edizione ufficiale della *Commedia* stampata in Francia, perché la stampa lionese di Balthasar de Gabiano e Barthelemy Troth, del 1502 circa, è una contraffazione della contemporanea aldina. Si tratta di edizione annotata alquanto curiosa, perché, mentre i canti dell’Inferno e del Paradiso prevedono brevi introduzioni e note marginali, il Purgatorio non ha alcun commento. Questa scelta singolare potrebbe rispondere a motivazioni di tipo religioso e autorizza a pensare che l’edizione sia stata prodotta in ambiente riformato dove si negava il Purgatorio. (21)

Most of the above-mentioned editions were early entries in Giamatti’s collection. Their presence in his library already in the 1950s is proof both of his enthusiasm for his

¹⁰ For full references for Giamatti’s collection, see “The Valentine Giamatti Dante Collection” at Mount Holyoke College:

<https://lits.mtholyoke.edu/archives-special-collections/asc-research/rare-book-collection/dante-collection>. For information about “The Valentine Giamatti Lecture,” see

<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/italian/giamatti-lecture>

¹¹ Publisher Francesco Marcolini (Forlì, XVI cent.-Venice, 1559).

¹² See Colomb de Batines 1845, 83.

collection, and of his careful planning behind it. In *Among the Gently Mad*, Nicholas Basbanes explains bibliophiles' habits in part with their strong desire "to having direct contact with ... these writers as human beings, to be able to feel, if only in a visceral sense, the bursts of energy that had flowed from their creative spirit onto paper" (53).¹³ However, with writers like Dante and Shakespeare, collectors cannot obtain manuscripts in the authors' hand, but only books published after their death. In Dante's case, collectors covet the oldest editions, whether they are precious manuscripts, one of the known fifteen incunabula¹⁴, or one of the famed *cinquecentine*.¹⁵ In Shakespeare's case, *ça va sans dire*, it is the 1623 folio edition:

As for the Shakespeare, I noted that in lieu of any known manuscript material ... much of what we have of his work derives from this printed book ... if you accept that in the case of Shakespeare, this is the most important book ever printed in the English language, then you can begin to understand how it is that someone with the means to buy such a book would not hesitate to spend whatever it takes to acquire it ..." (Basbanes 2003, 53-54)

Giamatti at Mount Holyoke College: Promoting Italy through Dante

Throughout his life, Valentine Giamatti was unusually generous with his collection. Over the years, his books have been on show several times, at Mount Holyoke and beyond.¹⁶ Giamatti was eager to share them with his community, and was often photographed at his South Hadley home, where he occasionally taught, surrounded by his *Commedia* editions and by his students, who used to refer to him affectionately as Mr. G.

For Valentine Giamatti Dante was much more than a research and teaching topic, and his collection was much more than a pastime. Dante's poem presented a means to establish a connection between the New England of his birth and the Italy of his family's

¹³ The author is referring to William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*.

¹⁴ See the British Library's "Incunabula Short Title Catalog:"

<https://data.cerl.org/istc/_search?query=divine+comedy&from=0>

¹⁵ For a detailed study of the *Commedia* incunabula, see Mecca 2010.

¹⁶ Giamatti often lent his books for exhibitions to several local colleges, including Amherst, Smith, and Trinity Colleges. In 1978, the Mount Holyoke Art Museum organized a show called *Illustrated Dante Editions: 1481-1971. Selections from the Valentine Giamatti Dante Collection*. The show was held in the Art Museum's Print Room on 23 October-27 November, 1978. The Program's introduction offers some insights into Giamatti's collection: "In his sojourns [in Europe] in 1947-48 and again in 1954-55, during travels in Italy, France, Spain and England, he acquired many important illustrated works. He hastens to add that he also found some of his most important examples on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, from dealers who had been fortunate enough to find rare examples brought here during the nineteenth century. Finally, Professor Giamatti was able to buy several of the recent suites of illustrations while he was in Florence during the seven hundredth anniversary of Dante's birth when these suites became available for the first and only time."

past. Giamatti understood that his passion for Dante could bring together the North-American social and economic superiority with a non-threatening, even envy-inducing, Italian culture in opposition with the struggles of the millions of (mostly) southern Italian immigrants – a group that white Americans barely tolerated.¹⁷

Giamatti was hired at Mount Holyoke in 1940, at a delicate time for Italian-American political relations. He was a self-declared anti-fascist and a strong defender of Italian reputation abroad.¹⁸ Soon after his arrival at the university, he started planning for a *Sala Italiana*, a campus space where students and faculty could gather to discuss Italian literature and culture. The *Sala Italiana* took twenty years to realize. It opened in 1961, in what became the new quarters of the Italian Department, hosted in a space attached to Mount Holyoke's beautiful nineteenth century greenhouse.¹⁹ The *Sala Italiana* was the result of a patient effort that exemplifies Giamatti's involvement with his students, with the university, and with the community beyond it. As an Italian professor, Giamatti had one objective in mind: promoting Italy, its language and its literature. His plans for the Italian Department and for the *Sala Italiana* went hand in hand with his career and his Dante collection, which came into being during the three decades he spent at Mount Holyoke. Giamatti's annual reports to the college President are rich with details about his teaching and his current and future projects. With the help of his wife Peggy, he organized several annual community events, including a fundraising fair to aid Florence after the flood of 1966, and annual fundraisers to benefit Italian war orphans. Dante was always present, in his teaching as well as in his community efforts.²⁰ In his 1945 annual report, he wrote:

¹⁷ For Dante's enduring popularity in Italy and beyond, see, among (many) others, Keen 2019.

¹⁸ In a 24 September 1943 article from the *Holyoke Daily Transcript*, we read: "Criticism of the Allied practice of continually urging the Italians not to fight and then branding them as cowards in news articles, in pictures and on the radio, was voiced by Prof. Valentine Giamatti, head of the Italian department at Mt. Holyoke college (sic), Prof. Giamatti, of American birth and Italian extraction, is a member of the American anti-Fascist society. ... He outlined Italian history showing that a long succession of foreign tyrants and broken promises makes the Italian of today cynical and uncertain as to which way he should turn in the present conflict in Italy."

¹⁹ "The Department of Italian Language and Literature is happy to announce that the Italian Room is now a reality. It is situated in the south end of the Greenhouse It is furnished with Italian Renaissance furniture and the walls are adorned by two flags of the famous festival, the Palio of Siena, one of the two existing bronze masks on Enrico Caruso, and two student paintings inspired by the "Divine Comedy" of Dante. Various student sculptures also decorate the room. During the second semester of this year opera sessions were held once a week in the new room and were greatly enjoyed by those on campus who came to participate in the listening periods." Annual Report, May 1961, 1. (LD7092.6 Italian Language and Literature Department, folder 2, Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA).

²⁰ From Giamatti's 1946 Annual Report: "The Dante course in English numbered twenty-four this year and thirty-six are already enrolled for it for the coming one. A Dante club was formed the second semester and its constitution was approved by the faculty." (LD7092.6 Italian Language and Literature Department, folder 2, Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA).

The hope of the Department to have an attractive *Sala Italiana* will someday be realized. ... already the Department has received three contributions – a table from the parents of a student, a large bronze bust of Dante from another, and an alabaster bust of the famous Italian Renaissance poetess, Vittoria Colonna ...

And four years later, in 1949: “Five additional pieces of Italian furniture have been acquired by the Department. It is hoped that some day they will have their proper setting in a *Sala Italiana*.” On 2 May 1947, the Mount Holyoke News published an article titled “Enthusiasm for Italian Makes ‘Sala Italiana’ Necessity. Mr Ham and Trustees Back Italian Department Members” where Mount Holyoke President Ham was quoted as saying that “any funds raised ‘would have many times their actual value in strengthening Italian’.” In 1952-53, the department received an anonymous gift of a thousand dollars to be used towards the *Sala Italiana*. Giamatti’s expanding Dante collection was a suitable medium to promote a certain ‘Italianness’ that was both accepted and desirable in American academic and social circles. Thanks to the (by then) well-established Dante myth in American culture, and through his collection, Giamatti built a solid Italian program, and created a successful Italian community in South Hadley.

Valentine Giamatti started promoting his Dante collection early on. In 1957, he compiled an annotated catalog of his illustrated editions. In his brief foreword he wrote:

This brochure represents a listing of the illustrated editions of the *Divine Comedy*, of illustrated books on Dante, and of photographs, original paintings, and music inspired by the poet to be found in my collection. I have not included in this listing the illustrated editions of the *Vita Nuova*, non-illustrated editions of the *Divine Comedy*, and non-illustrated editions of the latter in translation. Anyone interested in this material for exhibiting or research may contact me at Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts.” (Giamatti 1957)

The 1957 catalog contains 107 editions of the *Divine Comedy*, dating between 1491²¹ and 1956,²² in various languages (English, French, Spanish, German, Russian, Welsh, Portuguese, Greek, and Danish), together with eighty-two additional items (music, art, and other works by Dante). He accompanied most titles with brief annotations. More or less twenty years into his collection, Giamatti owned three incunabula (1491, 1493,²³ and 1497²⁴); the already mentioned 1544 Marcolini edition; the miniature rare 1516

²¹ “[La comedia] At end: Et Fine del commento di Christoforo Landino Fiorentino sopra la comedia di Danthe poeta excellentissimo. E impresso in Vinegia per Petro Cremonese dito Veronese: Adi xviii di novembrio. MCCCCLXXXI. Emendato per me maestro piero da fighino.” (Giamatti 1957, 1)

²² “*La Divina Commedia* con commento di Giovanni Roatta e introduzione di Silvano Gratilli, with Emma Mazza’s illustrations, Torino SAIE, 1956.” (Giamatti 1957, 20)

²³ The Matteo Capcasa (Chodeca) edition with Landino’s commentary. Giamatti’s “copy has initials hand-painted in yellow, red, and light blue.” (“The Valentine Giamatti Dante Collection”)

²⁴ This is the Pietro di Giovanni de Quarengi edition, with Landino’s commentary. It is a reprint of the Capcasa 1493 edition.

Alessandro Paganini edition;²⁵ the 1529 Jacopo da Burgofranco per Lucantonio Giunta edition that includes a full-page portrait of Dante, “The first edition to have a good representation of Dante” (Giamatti 1957, 3); the 1564 Giovan Battista Sessa edition with Landino and Vellutello’s commentaries, the first one containing both. It includes a portrait of Dante “con gran naso.”²⁶ Finally, Giamatti had already acquired his favorite volume, the 1555 Ludovico Dolce edition published by Gabriele Giolito de Ferrari in Venice. Shortly before his death, Giamatti was quoted to be “particularly fond on the 1555 edition in which the word ‘Divina’ appeared for the first time as part of the title of what would henceforth be known as the *Divine Comedy*” (Mount Holyoke Choragos 1981, 12).

The Giamatti Gift

Upon his retirement, in 1973, Giamatti donated his collection to the University. The official Deed of Gift is dated 2 January 1976. The nine-page list that was originally attached to the Gift was lost, but in 1992, Special Collections librarian Nancy Birkrem compiled a *Hand List to the Dante Collection of Mount Holyoke College Library*. While, in Birkrem’s own words, “Those who come to this list looking for full collations will be disappointed”, her list, expanded from Giamatti’s 1957 catalog, is a precious tool to understand how the collection grew during the following decades. According to Birkrem, Giamatti donated 263 editions of the *Divine Comedy* amid other objects such as art, critical works on Dante, photographs, a *Divine Comedy* postcard collection, and commemorative medals from the 1965 celebrations. Needless to say, the most important objects are the illustrated editions spanning several centuries in twenty-nine languages.²⁷ Never a book snob, Giamatti’s collection also includes inexpensive publications, such as *L’Inferno di Topolino*,²⁸ and a paperback copy protected by an *Inferno*-inspired crochet cover, the gift of one of his students in 1972. On 3 March 1976, Mount Holyoke President David Truman (1913-2003) wrote a thank you note to Giamatti saying that he was “proud and grateful to have the Giamatti Dante Collection at Mount Holyoke” and promised “before many more months go by we shall have completed our arrangements

²⁵ Alessandro Paganini (XV cent.-1538) (known for the mystery around his supposed publication of the *Koran* in Arabic) was clearly inspired by Manuzio’s revolutionary book-printing. His *Commedia* is not dated, but scholars have concluded that it was most probably printed in 1516. See Giamatti’s own comments (Giamatti 1957, 2). According to Luca Rivali (and others), there are two sets of this curious edition, one with Arabic and the other with Roman numerals, that could indicate different publication dates. Giamatti’s copy has Arabic numerals. (Rivali 2017, 351-354).

²⁶ Colomb de Batines 1845, 92.

²⁷ Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, English, Esperanto, Finnish, French, Gaelic, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Korean, Latin, Japanese, Neapolitan, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovak, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish, and Welsh.

²⁸ First published in *Topolino* 7-12, 1949-1950. Giamatti’s reprint is Milano, Mondadori, 1971.

to locate the Collection in a secure but accessible and appropriate place in the Library. It is a jewel in Mount Holyoke's crown ..."²⁹

While we still do not know much about Valentine Giamatti's book dealers, and about the various routes most of his books took before arriving to him, we know that he acquired most of his books during his travels. Apart from the already mentioned 1965 letter, Mount Holyoke retained a message Giamatti wrote Elizabeth Green from Rome in 1954, where he unofficially announces his collection: "Life is very busy here in Rome. Besides studying I have enjoyed myself immensely rummaging in old book stores for illustrated *Divine Comedies* – of which I am making a collection. Thus far I have found several in Italy and three in France."³⁰ By the 1960s Giamatti had acquired numerous important pieces that included four precious incunabula: the 1481 first Florentine edition, the 1491 Cremonese edition, the 1493 Matteo Capcasa edition, and the 1497 Quarengi. His collection also included the 1578 Giovanbattista Sessa edited by Francesco da Sansovino (1521-1586).

The 1481 Incunabulum

The crown jewel in Giamatti's collection is the ninth edition of the *Commedia*, the first Florentine edition by Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna published in 1481 with illustrations after Sandro Botticelli (Furlong 2015, 92).³¹ According to Willard Fiske, the strategist behind Cornell University's renowned Dante collection, this was also

the first edition – and indeed the first book – liberally illustrated with engravings executed on metal. Many of these remarkable earliest products of a new-born art were unfortunately planned to be inserted adhesively, after the printing of the text, so that hardly a copy of the edition is now to be found with a perfect series. (Fiske 1898-1900, XII)

²⁹ David Truman to Valentine Giamatti, letter dated 3 March 1976. (David B. Truman President Records, Correspondence 1975-1977, Box 13, Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA). Special Collections were later moved to a designated space located off the main reading room, a space that some faculty and students affectionately called the "Dante room," given the prominence of the Dante Collection, which was visible to the public. In the early 1990s, they moved to their current location in Dwight Hall, where they can be consulted upon request.

³⁰ Letter dated 23 October 1954, Via Rubicone 42, Rome. Valentine Giamatti Papers, LD 7092.8 Folder 3, Correspondence, 1945-65. Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA.

³¹ "The *Comento di Christophoro Landino fiorentino sopra la Comedia di Danthe*, printed in Florence by Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna and completed on 30 August 1481, as the colophon tells us, is a folio edition, printed on Royal paper imported from Fabriano, consisting of 372 leaves, and containing illustrations of episodes from the *Comedia* designed by Sandro Botticelli and engraved on copper-plates by Baccio Baldini." (Dante 1481. Printing Revolution 1450-1500). The Printing revolution website has a copy of the original contract for this book.

Also according to Fiske, the rarity of this edition is “in the matter of its engravings, nineteen or twenty in number, of which the first two or three were printed with the text and the others, separately printed, inserted in spaces left for the purpose at the commencement of each canto. There are very few copies having all the engravings – not many, in fact which have more than two or three” (Fiske 1898-1900, XVIN.).

At the time, the tradition of illuminated copies of Dante’s poem was almost two centuries old. As Rachel Owen reminds us,

There are well over five hundred codices of the poem from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which contain some form of illumination. ... The earliest illustrated *Commedia* with a precise fate was produced in Florence in 1337 (Milan, Biblioteca dell’Archivio Storico Civico e Trivulziana, MS 1080). ... These illustrated copies from the early Trecento represent the beginning of a tradition of *Commedia* illumination, one which culminated in Botticelli’s designs for the poem, produced during the 1480s and 90s. (83)

The 1481 incunabulum remains a famous if not a rare edition, given that almost two hundred copies survive from the original print run of 1125.³² Giamatti’s acquisition date is unknown, but it is certainly post-1957, as this volume is not present in his 1957 catalog. He acquired it from the collection of Dr. Charles Lemuel Nichols (1851-1929) in nearby Worcester.³³ Donato Pirovano wrote at length about the fanfare around this first Florentine publication:

Lo stampatore Nicolò di Lorenzo della Magna (dunque tedesco) licenzia una monumentale edizione della *Commedia* con un nuovo, ampio commento firmato da Cristoforo Landino, professore di retorica e poetica presso lo studio di Firenze. A distanza di nove anni dalle tre citate editiones principes, Dante viene per la prima volta stampato a Firenze, dopo che la geografia tipografica si era tenuta lontano dalla ‘gran villa’, descrivendo idealmente un arco che va da Milano a Venezia, tocca Mantova e Foligno e scende fino a Napoli. Per questo ingresso, o ritorno, del suo poeta, la signoria fiorentina non lesina spese e chiama all’impresa artefici illustri: Landino e Nicolò Tedesco appunto, ma anche, in posizione più defilata ma altrettanto importante, Marsilio Ficino e Sandro Botticelli, ciascuno chiamato a dare il proprio contributo. Più che evento tipografico è evento politico. ... La valenza pubblica di questa impresa editoriale è testimoniata dalla cerimonia cittadina che, ... fu organizzata a Firenze. ... Bastava poi compulsare le prime carte per cogliere questa dimensione politica: non il classico e familiare accessus ad auctorem, ma 14 capitoli che introducevano non tanto al poema, al suo autore, alla sua materia, quanto piuttosto alla città di Firenze, ... (18)

This edition established Landino’s commentary over other commentaries, a domination that will last for almost the entire sixteenth century; in Giamatti’s collection alone we find eight sixteenth-century editions with Landino’s commentary.

³² According to the contract, “the print-run of the edition was to be 1125 copies” (Dante 1481. Printing Revolution 1450-1500). A normal print run in the 1400s would have been of about 400 copies (Alma Wolf 2021, 3).

³³ As per Nichols’ book plate. Also see “Dante 1481. Printing Revolution 1450-1500,” <https://data.cerl.org/mei/02141614>.

Paget Toynbee, Willard Fiske and John Zahm's Dante Collections

The Oxford Dante Society started its meetings on 24 November 1876 (Zancani 2013, 326), the American one was “founded in 1881 through the leadership of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, and Charles Eliot Norton, who in turn served as its first three presidents.”³⁴ Among the members of both societies there were scholars, translators, and bibliophiles whose collections are now, like Giamatti's, part of a university library. Although comparing Giamatti's Dante collection to all other Anglo-American ones would be too ambitious a project for the limited space at my disposal, in the last pages I would like to briefly acknowledge three collections – one British and two American – that have much in common with Giamatti's: a love for Dante, an unusual passion for collecting, and a clear pedagogical intent.³⁵

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the influential English scholar and bibliophile Paget Toynbee (1855-1932) donated his Italian literature books (including several hundred editions of the *Divine Comedy*) to Oxford's Bodleian Library (Zancani 1998, 506).³⁶ His collection of *Divine Comedy* editions fits perfectly within the collecting trends of the Anglo-American world of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, from the magnificent Rylands' collection at the University of Manchester,³⁷ to Norton's collection at Harvard, Macauley's at the University of Pennsylvania, and the most

³⁴ “The Dante Society of America,” <https://www.dantesociety.org/about-society>.

³⁵ Natale Vacalebri recently pointed out that “L'enorme valore storico e culturale di queste raccolte risiedeva soprattutto nella volontà dei fondatori di raccogliere per le biblioteche della propria istituzione accademica anche quei volumi che, per le loro caratteristiche materiali, non incontravano i gusti dei bibliofili del tempo. Di fatto, ancor oggi, le collezioni dantesche delle università statunitensi possiedono non solo manoscritti e stampati esteticamente impeccabili, ..., ma anche manufatti ‘poveri’, in molti casi adornati da quelle postille e annotazioni manoscritte aborrite dai più raffinati collezionisti ottoneovescenteschi ma che per gli studiosi odierni sono più preziose dei diamanti ...” (36).

³⁶ Toynbee was Secretary of the Oxford Dante Society between 1916 and 1928 and was elected Accademico della Crusca in 1918. (497) Also see p. 499 n.12.

³⁷ The Rylands collection is one of the best Dante collections outside of Italy. “The nucleus of this collection, including the rarest and most important early printed editions, comes from George John, 2nd Earl Spencer (1758-1834), acquired by Enriqueta Rylands in 1892 through her purchase of the Spencer collection. This includes all but one of the 15 incunable editions of the *Divina Commedia* (Naples, about 1478), but does offer all three 1472 editions. ... The bulk of the collection are 19th-century texts and commentaries. The majority of the critical works were collected by Count Giuseppe Lando Passerini (1858-1932), librarian of the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence and renowned Dante scholar. His collection was purchased by Mrs Rylands in 1906.” (“Dante Alighieri Printed Works” <https://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/rylands/special-collections/exploring/a-to-z/collection/?match=Dante+Alighieri+Printed+Works>). For a detailed description of this collection, see Speight 1961-62.

prominent pair, Willard Fiske's at Cornell and John Zahm's at the University of Notre Dame.

Diego Zancani studied Paget Toynbee's Oxford gift, which was, at least partially, driven by a pedagogical intent. According to Zancani, already a decade before his death, Toynbee explicitly talked about leaving his collection to the Bodleian Library "come parte di un piano per incoraggiare gli studi danteschi a Oxford" (Zancani 1998, 498-499). In a manner similar to the already mentioned President Truman's thank you note to Valentine Giamatti, the Bodleian wrote to Toynbee to assure him that "i libri verranno spostati nella sala più importante della Biblioteca, lo 'Auctarium', e saranno ben visibili, 'very conspicuous to every one who walks through the room'" (Zancani 1998, 502). Giamatti also followed his illustrious predecessor when he compiled his own catalog. Indeed, unlike Giamatti, Toynbee left several *quaderni* with plenty of details of his purchases, such as "l'anno e la località d'acquisto, il prezzo in lire sterline, franchi italiani o lire, franchi francesi e marchi tedeschi" (Zancani 1998, 505-506).

Fiske was "Cornell's first University Librarian, an outstanding linguist and an enthusiastic book collector. Fiske began collecting Dante almost inadvertently in April 1892 and initially had no intention of pursuing such an enterprise. He records that 'the charm of the chase got hold of me;' the rest is bibliographic history. The Dante Collection Fiske assembled between 1893 and 1896 was celebrated in its own time and, to this day, remains almost incomparable in America as a repository of Dante imprints."³⁸ Fiske's contemporary John Zahm (1851-1921) was "a priest and ambitious young vice-president of the university during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, had set out to assemble a Dante collection for Notre Dame on the principle that great universities are built on great libraries, and his corollary premise, that a great Catholic university should possess a great collection of the great Catholic poet" (Dupont 2009, 2).

Zahm assembled his collection quickly also thanks to a significant purchase from an Italian collector who found himself in dire straits, Giulio Acquaticci. Acquaticci's library included several hundred Dante editions that Zahm eventually purchased at a bargain price.³⁹ Towards the end of his life, after Notre Dame inaugurated a new library with "a special Dante room to house the collection" (Dupont 2001, 447), Zahm declared "his desire to see a Dante chair at the University" (447). It is clear from Zahm's words that he meant his collection to have a pedagogical function within the university and "that he intended his Dante collection to serve as the foundation of an academic program" (481).

Willard Fiske talks at length about the relative ease with which his collection came about, given what he refers to as

³⁸ <https://rare.library.cornell.edu/the-fiske-dante-collection/>.

³⁹ For the intriguing story of this purchase, and for other materials that shed light on Zahm's "underlying prejudice towards Italians," see Dupont 2001, 464. Also see pp. 459-472.

the comparative absence of rival collections. The interest awakened by the celebration in 1865 of the sixth centenary of Dante's birth led to the formation of various private Dante collections, and to liberal purchases of Dante books by public libraries. Since those festivities a quarter of a century had gone by, and ardent hunters after Dante book-treasures were few. As a consequence, the shelves devoted to Dante in the antiquarian book-shops were again full. (Fiske 1998-1900, XVII)

Fiske wrote about how his long stay in Italy helped him realize both Dante's greatness and the lack of Dante literature "heretofore accessible to the professors and students of Cornell" (Fiske 1998-1900, III). Clearly, these early American collections of *Divine Comedies* filled a large void. As Dupont reminds us, "It wasn't always so easy to get an Italian book when you wanted one. George Ticknor once complained prior to leaving for his first European trip in 1815, that he had ... 'made several attempts to read Dante, and found it not only difficult to get a copy, but impossible to get help in reading'" (Dupont 2009, 5). By the mid-twentieth century, "fifteenth century European books ... were no longer considered merely extravagant items reserved to a restricted circle of privileged experts and members of the elites" (Alma Wolf 2021, 8) but, rather, they were recognized as important pedagogical tools that should be part of American collections.

Giamatti's Collection after the 1965 Dante Anniversary

Following his 1965 trip to Italy, Giamatti's collection grew substantially. At the time of writing, we do not have a precise listing of what he purchased, but the collection contains sixteen editions printed in 1965, including Rauschenberg's *XXIV Tavole per l'Inferno di Dante*⁴⁰, signed by the artist and issued in just 250 copies, and a new issue, illustrated by several contemporary artists and printed on handmade paper, of the 1865 Tommaseo edition, which Giamatti also owned.⁴¹ Finding rare editions and incunabula in the 1960s would have been challenging, especially during an important anniversary year. Dupont points out that already in the mid 1800s it had become hard to assemble a collection as comprehensive as the "Trivulzio family in Milan, which remains today the only collection that can claim to include copies of all sixteen (sic) incunabula editions of the Comedy" (Dupont 2001, 461). For complete collections, they would have had to be "started earlier" and "had greater wealth behind them" (461). In this light, Giamatti's collection, born only in the late 1930s, acquires a new importance.

When Giamatti retired, in 1973, and prepared his collection for Mount Holyoke, he owned four incunabula, seventeen *cinquecentine*, including the 1516 Paganini miniature edition that used to be part of Ukrainian-French bibliophile Horace de Landau's library.

⁴⁰ Milano: Marcorini 1965. Giamatti's copy is 82/250. The original drawings are in New York's Museum of Modern Art.

⁴¹ *La Commedia di Dante Alighieri nel testo e nel commento di Niccolò Tommaseo*. Milano: Martello 1965. Giamatti's copy is 151/500.

Additionally, Giamatti owned *Divine Comedy* translations in twenty-nine languages; a rare edition illustrated by a woman, Sofia Giacomelli (1779-1819),⁴² and several luxury editions illustrated by important artists, from Salvador Dalì (1963-1964), to Renato Guttuso (1970), to the already mentioned Rauschenberg. He also owned all relevant commentaries, and all early English translations, from Henry Francis Cary's elegant editions,⁴³ to Boyd's (1807) and Longfellow's (1867). A special volume for him must have been Clara Stillman Reed's translation, published in 1962 and inscribed "to Peggy and Val."⁴⁴ Stillman Reed (1879-1976) was a close friend of the Italian program at Mount Holyoke. In his reports, Giamatti often mentioned her visits and lectures.⁴⁵

Endings: Valentine and Bart

Looking carefully through the collection we discover a 1919 school edition published in Milan by Trevisini, the *Manuale dantesco per le scuole: vita e opere di Dante* that Valentine received as a birthday present from his sixteen-year-old son Bart. It is inscribed "To Babbo, on his Birthday, February 9, 1955, From Bart." It must have been a special present, from son to father.

In the early 1980s, Yale President Bart Giamatti was invited to edit a volume of essays by celebrated Dante scholars: *Dante in America. The First Two Centuries*. It contains well-known essays by, among others, Da Ponte, Longfellow, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Singleton, Bergin, Freccero, and Hollander. At the end of his concise introduction to the volume – written shortly after his father's death, in 1982 – Bart Giamatti wrote: "American culture has itself been an effort in translation; through its reaction to Dante, we can see a culture grappling with a concern crucial to itself, as it was to Dante, the timeless and deeply human problem of fashioning the 'parlar materno'" (XII). It was this challenge to translate, to understand, and to communicate that took so much of Valentine Giamatti's effort in life, and that, in death, his collection continues to promote. Significantly, the "parlar materno" was also at the center of Bart Giamatti's eulogy for his father, delivered at Mount Holyoke on 15 April 1982:

⁴² Paris: Salmon 1813.

⁴³ Giamatti owned at least four Cary translations, some of them are not dated: Philadelphia, Altemus with Doré's illustrations (1880s?); two New York, Cassell copies also with Doré's illustrations. He also had Cary's first full (unillustrated) translation (London & New York, Frederick Warne & Co.).

⁴⁴ *Divine poem*, translated by Clara Stillman Reed, published in Wilbraham, Mass. and privately printed (Stinehour Press).

⁴⁵ Clara Stillman Reed graduated from another women's college, Vassar, in 1901. Her translation "may be considered something of a novelty. ... was not widely circulated, with only 300 copies printed. Yet it signals a refreshing new approach in Dante translation, to be adopted by just a select few translators after her. It is written in a pleasant novelistic narrative prose." (Smith and Sonzogni 2017, 46).

He was a great teacher for two reasons, I think: first, because of his passion for connecting ideas to the way we live our lives; and, second, because he found, as he inevitably would, the right, the appropriate, the precisely fitting poet to think about and to cherish and to talk about every day – Dante. Dante is the most exacting intellect in western literature, whose system and intellectual constructs are meant to be a criticism and a guide to everyday, ordinary, felt life. ... That poet and this teacher spent a man's lifetime together conversing in their 'parlar materno,' that mother tongue, doing what the poet said and the teacher knew must always be done – going finally beyond the words into deeds, going beyond the perfect text into our imperfect life and trying to make it better, or at least more interesting and worthwhile, for others.⁴⁶

Bart Giamatti's eulogy describes a model teacher and citizen whose life was shaped by a poem that has become the symbol of an entire culture. Pressed by hardship, Valentine Giamatti's ancestors had to leave Italy, but through Dante's poetry he was able to develop his own 'Italianness.'

On the Mount Holyoke campus, in a secluded spot close to the location where the *Sala Italiana* used to be, there is a small granite bench.⁴⁷ It is known as "Babbo's Bench." Inscribed on the bench, there are three lines from *Purgatorio* XV:

The more on earth there are of loving hearts
The more worth loving, and the more the love,
Which, like a mirror, each to each imparts. (73-75)

"Babbo's Bench", with the fitting lines about love, was a retirement gift to Valentine Giamatti. For many years, it was in the garden of his son Dino's hotel in Maine. In 1987, Peggy Giamatti requested for it to be moved to the campus, "in the vicinity of Val's office where a multitude of students heard about *La Divina Commedia*."⁴⁸ Giamatti shared his love of Dante with his students and nourished them with it, teaching them "the delight of the free play of the mind among ideas that are stimulating and beautiful" to make their "living ... more pleasant and worthwhile."⁴⁹ His memory lives on through his collection.

⁴⁶ Eulogy for Valentine John Giamatti, April 15, 1982. LD7092.6, Italian Language and Literature Department, Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA.

⁴⁷ On the Yale campus, there is a Giamatti Bench dedicated to Bart (Proto 2020, 265).

⁴⁸ "Giamatti Bench," President Elizabeth T. Kennan Papers, Box 9, Folder 19. Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA.

⁴⁹ Valentine Giamatti, *Annual Report to the President* 1960. (LD7092.6 Italian Language and Literature Department, Folder 2. Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA).

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