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*Divine Markets:
Producing, Selling and Reading
Dante's Commedia in the Early 1470s*

The system of trade fairs played a crucial role in the intricate economic circuit of fifteenth-century Italy. These mercantile meetings, which regularly brought together businesspeople from all over Europe, often influenced the publishing choices of some of the first printing companies in the Italian peninsula. A case in point are the adventures of the first printed editions of Dante's *Commedia*, which seem linked to commercial enterprises related to some of the most important Italian periodical fairs of the Renaissance. By bringing into dialogue published documentary sources, provenance evidence and paratextual features, in this article, I will first reconstruct the state of the art on the early 1472 printed editions of Dante's *Commedia* (Foligno, Mantua, and Iesi/Venice). At the same time, I will offer some considerations on the direct influence of some trade fairs of the peninsula on the origins of two of the *Commedia's editiones principes*

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and their circulation among the variegated fifteenth-century Italian audience.

1. «*Nel mille quattro cento sette et due*»: *the Foligno editio princeps*

One evening, in Rome, in a store on Via delle Coppelle, the *Folignate* met a little man from Cologne who was wearing a fur coat red as his beaklike beard and a long hat that fell on his delicate eyes to protect them from the overwhelming light. He touched the paper from Pale with three blackened fingers that left a trace in the white. From time to time, he would put his hand on his stomach to keep something up: a leather bag full of warm oil, which he carried for his illnesses according to the Aristotelian custom. He was the printer Johann Neumeister.¹ [my translation]

With these words, the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938) described, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the encounter that would have changed the history of Dante Alighieri's fortune. A cultured bibliophile, D'Annunzio had imaginatively reconstructed that meeting after reading in the journal *La Bibliofilia* an article by Michele Faloci Pulignani on Foligno's ancient paper mills (situated in the nearby village of Pale).² According to Faloci Pulignani, the direct connection of Pale's paper industry with Foligno's economic environment was the reason that made the Magontine printer Johann Neumeister decide to open a printing shop in the Umbrian city. While a paper mill was an important factor in developing a business dedicated to the production of books, this was not enough by itself to determine the

¹ «Or una sera, a Roma, in una bottega su la via delle Coppelle, il Folignate s'incontrò con un omaccino di Colonia che portava un pellicciotto rossigno come la sua barbuccia di becco e una berretta lunga che gli ricadeva su gli occhi delicati per proteggerli dalla luce soverchia. Costui tastava la carta di Pale con tre dita annerite che lasciavan la traccia nel bianco. Di tratto in tratto si poneva una mano su lo stomaco per rattenere e risollevar qualcosa che lo gravasse: un sacchetto di cuoio pien d'olio caldo, ch'ei portava per suoi malanni all'usanza aristotelesca. Era lo stampatore Giovanni Numeister» (D'Annunzio 1962, p. 609).

² Faloci Pulignani 1909.

creation of a printing company. In Neumeister's case, many elements contributed to the printer's decision to establish his activity in a secondary urban center such as Foligno.

This small town in central Umbria is halfway on the road between Perugia and the ancient city of Spoleto, not far from Assisi. In the Roman epoch, it was known as *Fulginium* and considered a major commercial center among those crossed by the Flaminian Way – one of the great consular roads that connected the ancient *Caput Mundi* with Northern Italy. After the fall of the Roman Empire and the advent of Christianity, that same road became a key route for pilgrims who traveled to visit the most important Italian religious sites, including the sepulchers of the apostles Peter and Paul in Rome and the tomb of St. Francis in his birthplace, Assisi. Between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, during the Trinci family's government, Foligno thrived considerably, as the rulers' patronage supported both the city's economic and cultural development.³ Under the noble house's guidance, numerous artists, craftsmen, and businessmen decided to settle in the Umbrian town. The Trinci's glory was exalted in a Quattrocento Italian vernacular poem, the *Quadriregio* by the bishop of Foligno Federico Frezzi, a work inspired by Dante's *Commedia*.⁴ The city's economic stability and cultural splendor continued even after the end of the Trinci dynasty (1439). After Foligno was conquered by the papal army, the governors nominated by the pontiff to guide the city were always scholars and humanists.⁵ The new administrators were surrounded by literati and intellectuals coming from the whole of Italy. Artists and literati such as the painter Niccolò Alunno and the renowned *gramaticus* Giovan Battista Cantalicio gave their services to Foligno's most prominent families, contributing to increase the city's prestige. In that small Umbrian town, the humanism that flourished

³ See Sensi 1994. On Foligno's economy between the fourteenth and fifteenth century, see Bettoni 2010.

⁴ Frezzi 1914.

⁵ Sensi 1994, p. 72-73.

in the cities of center-northern Italy found an excellent ground to grow and develop. It was during the fifteenth century that Foligno also became a key center of Italy's paper production and was able to compete even with Fabriano's most famous paper mills.⁶ Foligno's prosperous economy increased further thanks to the liveliness of the great fair that was held every year for seven days during the feast of the Annunciation, and that guaranteed the city excellent commercial exchanges with Naples, Rome, Tuscany, and the trading centers of Northern Italy.⁷ In the mid-fifteenth century, Foligno was not only a significant humanistic center where intellectuals and artists could exhibit and cultivate their genius; it was also a thriving commercial city that attracted workers and businessmen from the entire peninsula.⁸

The combination of these favorable economic and cultural circumstances made Foligno a remarkable destination also for printers. Already in 1463, some *moguntini calligraphi* (copyists from Mainz) had settled there, constituting a *societas in arte impressionis litterarum* (a company for printing letters).⁹ These were the scribe Johann son of Peter (known as Papa), Stephan of Mainz, a craftsman who designed a tool «to cast letters for printing books», and the punch-cutter *Crafto* (Kraft) *de Moguntia*.¹⁰ The fact that these artisans from Mainz were in Foligno just one year after the plundering of their city of origin suggests that in the early 1460s, there was a mobility of workers between Germany and central Italy, or at least a consolidated network of trade exchanges that would have favored the emigration of the *calligraphi* shortly after bishop Adolph of Nassau's invasion of Mainz in 1462.¹¹

⁶ In the sixteenth century, the director of the Vatican Printing House, Angelo Rocca, declared that the paper produced in Foligno/Pale was unmatched in terms of quality and strength. See Fumagalli 1905, p. 159.

⁷ On the fair of Foligno see Metelli 1995, 2002, 2005.

⁸ Bettoni 2010; Metelli 2005, p. 100.

⁹ See Rossi 1868, p. 22-4, doc. 13.

¹⁰ Faloci Pulignani 1899, p. 286-287.

¹¹ On the mobility of printers between fifteenth and seventeenth centuries see Santoro - Segatori 2013.

As Andrea Del Cornò suggested, the presence of a group of compatriots may have played a key role in Johann Neumeister's decision to settle in Foligno and establish his printing workshop there.¹²

Neumeister was born in Treysa, in the State of Hesse, in the 1430s. In 1454 he attended the University of Erfurt and a few years later moved to Mainz, where he became one of Gutenberg's disciples. After Adolph of Nassau occupied the city, Neumeister fled to Bavaria and then Vienna. The exact date of his arrival in Foligno is still to be determined.¹³ What is certain is that he was in the Umbrian town as early as the end of 1469, when he set up a printing company with the brothers Emiliano and Mariotto Orfini, who provided him with substantial economic and technical support. Neumeister established his workshop in the Orfini palace. Here he printed two works destined for an audience of humanists: Leonardo Bruni's *De bello Italico* (1470), and Cicero's *Epistolae ad familiares* (1471).¹⁴ The Orfinis were an ancient family of Umbrian goldsmiths. Emiliano, the most enterprising of the brothers, worked as an engraver and medallist in his father's workshop before moving to Rome and becoming the pontiff's official Mint Master. Together with his brothers Mariotto and Antonio, he was also involved in many trading activities, favored by Foligno's geographic position and commercial traffic: the family had mills for oil production, managed the city's tax collection, and owned lands in the vast territory of the municipality. To them, the new *ars imprimendi* was one more investment in their wide range of commercial interests. Emiliano's encounter with Neumeister was, therefore, a valuable opportunity to expand the family's business activities. The brothers purchased the paper from two merchants who owned a paper mill in Pale, obtained the metals necessary to cast type, and made

¹² Del Cornò 2014, p. 78.

¹³ On Neumeister, see Faloci Pulignani 1899; Valenti 1924b, 1926; Ricciarelli 1970; Geldner 1979; Menichelli 1990; Scapecchi 2002, 2013. See also the brief online essay Needham 2019.

¹⁴ ISTC, ib01234000; ISTC, ic00507000.

available their own house to the printer to produce their publications. Together with Neumeister, the Orfinis worked hard to reach the book-obsessed humanist public and satisfy their innate hunger for manuscripts. Emiliano was right. The publication of Bruni's work was a sensational commercial triumph, as witnessed even today by the many surviving copies, countless examples of which are surrounded by dense fifteenth-century manuscript annotations.¹⁵ The success of the first publication convinced the Orfinis to print two hundred copies of their second typographic product. However, after the publication of Cicero's work, something went wrong. Perhaps the *Familiares*' sales did not meet the investors' expectations, or perhaps the Orfinis decided to abandon the printing business to devote themselves to their main commercial activities; the fact is that the third – and last – work printed by Neumeister in Foligno does not seem to have been sponsored by the family, which, until then, had contributed decisively to the German printer's success.

At this point in our story, a new character enters the scene, very different, in professional terms, from Emiliano and Mariotto Orfini. Evangelista Angelini was a notary from Trevi who had established his business in Foligno. On November 22, 1471, in his hometown, he purchased one hundred and thirteen pounds of tin *in litteris colatis* (printing types) and a printing press after the local printer Johann Reinhard had ceased his activity.¹⁶ The types purchased by Angelini were recast to create the new type case employed by Neumeister to print the work that would have made him famous in the centuries to come – the first edition of Dante's *Commedia*.¹⁷

Although it was likely Angelini who suggested to Neumeister that

¹⁵ On the *De bello italico*'s surviving annotated copies, see the digital reproductions listed on the online page of the Incunabula Short Title Catalogue: <https://data.ceul.org/istc/ib01234000>.

¹⁶ Valenti 1924, p. 127.

¹⁷ On the Foligno edition of the *Commedia*, see Valenti 1924b; Casamassima 1972; Rusconi 1989; Lai [et al.] 1994-2004; Scapecchi 2002; Vacalebri 2021.

he should embark on this enterprise, the mastermind behind the publishing project of Dante's poem is still a mystery. Certainly, Foligno was an excellent place to undertake this kind of publication. The Umbrian town had been linked to the *Commedia's* tradition for a long time and could offer many copies of the poem for the printers' use. In the late fourteenth century, Ugolino III Trinci had sponsored an intense literary activity at his court. One of the most famous literary men who participated in this lively cultural environment was Federico Frezzi, Dominican friar and author of the *Quadriregio*.¹⁸ The poem is dedicated to Ugolino III, and Frezzi does not miss the opportunity to exalt in his work the Trinci dynasty, descendants, according to him, directly of the Trojan hero Tros, founder of Foligno. Frezzi's devotion to Dante and his hometown's rulers was materially manifested in the commission of an illuminated manuscript of the *Commedia*, which the religious gave to Ugolino.¹⁹

Located not far from Tuscany and its literary centers, crossed by a famous trade route and seat of an important commercial fair, Foligno offered indeed the best conditions to produce the text most read by the Italian bourgeoisie of the era. Angelini and the mysterious investors of the "Dante project" were aware of the potential of such an investment. That is why, in addition to the typographic materials, in December 1471, the notary also purchased six hundred parchment bifolios.²⁰ These materials would have been used to print at least five luxury copies of the poem, probably destined to powerful aristocrats who could have become the publication's patrons. Neumeister started working as soon as he had the opportunity to recast the types that Angelini had provided him. Once he created the new type case, he

¹⁸ Frezzi 1914; Laureti - Piccini 2020.

¹⁹ The codex is located today in the Cambridge University Library and is the only surviving manuscript of the poem among the many that were once preserved in Foligno. Petrocchi 1965, p. 213-214. On Frezzi's identification as the codex's commissioner, see Improta 2019.

²⁰ Messini 1940.

put the three presses he owned into operation. Very likely, the printer and Angelini had in mind to finish the publication in time to sell their product at the Annunciation fair. This trade event represented a golden opportunity for the peninsula's entrepreneurs, especially for those of Foligno. The foreign merchants who traveled to the fair did not have to pay any toll or fee in order to sell their goods. The only major logistics expense they had was the rent of the shops to expose their products. The local merchants, had besides the privilege to sell their goods to the retail, which was not allowed to the businesspeople who came from outside Foligno.²¹

Unfortunately, the work of Neumeister's printing shop encountered some technical difficulties. Shortly after the beginning of the production process, an accident that damaged the first quires so far printed forced the typographer to change the page setting and to compose the text afresh.²² However, even if the publication time lengthened considerably, it seems that the edition was completed in time to be offered for sale during the fair's crucial days. The edition's colophon (fig. 1) subscribed by Neumeister – but probably written by an Italian author – consists of six hendecasyllables in alternating rhyme that recite:

Nel mille quatro cento septe et due
nel quarto mese adi cinque et sei
questa opera gentile impressa fue
Io maestro Iohanni Numeister opera dei
alla decta impressione et meco fue
El Fulginato Evangelista mei

In the year one thousand four hundred seven and two,
in the fourth month, on day[s] five and six
this beautiful work was printed.

²¹ Metelli 2002, p. 63-65.

²² Scapecchi 2002, p. 59-61. Emanuele Casamassima suggests that, a few weeks after the beginning of the printing cycle, the partners decided to increase the edition's print run, and this would have forced Neumeister to change the page setting. Casamassima 1972, p. 44-45.

I, Master Johann Neumeister, worked
on this publication and was helped
by my assistant from Foligno, Evangelista [my translation].²³

In the first part of the colophon, the anonymous author uses a cryptic numerical combination to build his hendecasyllables. While the first verse's meaning is very clear («in the year 1472»), the second line is harder to decipher. The first part of the verse explicitly tells us that the publication month is the fourth—April. Scholars have traditionally interpreted *cinque et sei* as the sum of the numbers 5 and 6, that is, 11.²⁴ Consequently, the conventional publication date of the Foligno's *Commedia* is understood as April 11, 1472. However, when we analyze the hendecasyllables' structure, there is something that does not square up. The chain of rhymes of the *sestina* is based on the first two verses' last words (*due* and *sei*). While *due* is an easy rhyme, which the author satisfies by using in verses 3 and 5, the third-person singular of the past tense of the verb 'to be' (*fue*), the use of the rhyme *sei* appears much more intricate. Indeed, to satisfy the rhyme, the author utilizes in verses 4 and 6 two infrequent poetic licenses such as an archaizing and unusual form of the first singular person of the past tense of the verb 'to give' (*dei*), and the Latinism *mei* as a substitute of the possessive adjective *mio*.

The first question that arises after this cursory analysis is: why did the anonymous author want to complicate the poem using these unusual words? It is evident that the *sestina* is written in hendecasyllables because this was the meter of the *Commedia*. Therefore, the author wanted to show a stylistic continuity even in the part of the edition reserved for the subscription of the product's material makers. However, one must indeed wonder why the publisher (or whoever was in charge of writing the colophon) wanted to complicate significantly a

²³ Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia*, Foligno, Johann Neumeister, 1472. ISTC, id000220003, fol. [h10^r].

²⁴ Faloci Pulignani 1900, p. 32.

part of the text traditionally thought to be functional-explicitly made to communicate the completion of a production cycle. Perhaps other synonyms of “eleven” were even more challenging than «cinque et sei»? Or perhaps the author *had* to use those two numbers?

According to a new hypothesis, the answer lies in the chronology related to the 1472 Foligno’s fair.²⁵ Typically, the fair began three days before the Annunciation, which is usually celebrated on March 25, and lasted for seven days. However, in 1472 that date corresponded to the Wednesday of Holy Week, and the solemnity of the Annunciation was postponed, according to the custom, to the Monday after the Sunday *in albis* (the first Sunday after Easter), i.e., April 6.²⁶ It is very plausible that the printing enterprise’s promoters had calculated that the fair would be held that year at the beginning of April. Consequently, it is also highly probable that they did everything in their power to ensure that the edition would be ready to be sold during the most important trade event of the year. If we consider that Neumeister had at his disposal, as we have seen, no less than three presses and that the *Commedia*’s production cycle must have started as early as the beginning of December 1471, we can hypothesize that his printing workshop managed to publish the first copies of the edition between the end of March and the beginning of April 1472. We can therefore legitimately suppose that the author of the edition’s colophon wanted to connect the publication of the *Commedia* to the holiest days of that celebration, the Sunday *in albis* and the feast of the Annunciation, i.e., April *cinque et sei* – two days that must have seemed highly propitiatory to both the enterprise’s investors and the printer himself. Besides anticipating the printing of Neumeister’s *Commedia* by ten days, this hypothesis would also explain the writing of a colophon as articulated as that of Neumeister and prove that behind the production process of the *Folignate*, there was a solid managerial planning aimed at releasing and marketing a

²⁵ On the actual date of the Foligno edition see Vacalebri 2021.

²⁶ Cappelli 1930, p. 50.

prestigious publishing product during the most relevant trade week of the year.

Once the printing process was completed, the final product did not fail to meet both producers' and readers' expectations. In all respects, the *editio princeps* of the *Commedia* is a printed version of an elegant humanistic manuscript (fig. 2). Fifteenth-century manuscripts were the only models that early printers had at their disposal to produce their books. Consequently, the new artisans of the written word were inspired by these objects in terms of graphics, layout, and often decoration. It would have been bizarre and counterproductive for Neumeister and Angelini to design an edition of Dante's poem using a gothic typeface and a small-size page – characteristics traditionally associated with devotional books or grammar manuals. This kind of book would have been unrecognizable by an audience accustomed to reading Dante's verses in the elegant quarto or folio manuscripts produced by the famous Tuscan or Emilian writing workshops. A work such as the *Commedia*, traditionally incorporated in a very specific type of book, had to be offered using those material and visual characteristics that immediately communicated to the readership the semantic nature of the text contained in the codex they were supposed to buy and read.²⁷ Not surprisingly, therefore, Neumeister and his assistant opted for a book in folio "piccolo", containing a text printed in a Roman typeface – traditionally used to produce classical literary texts – inspired by the *littera antiqua* used by the proto-typographers Sweynheym and Pannartz for their publications. The text was arranged in one column positioned towards the center of the page with large blank margins for the insertion of notes and comments. Furthermore, the publishers added a series of explanatory rubrics at the beginning of each *canto*. In other words, they produced a perfect replica of a fifteenth-century humanistic manuscript of the *Commedia*.

The poem's text in the Foligno edition is taken from a manuscript

²⁷ On the humanistic manuscript tradition of the *Commedia* see Bertelli 2007.

belonging to the textual tradition of the so-called Tuscan *Cento* group.²⁸ After an accurate philological analysis, Emanuele Casamassima established a direct relationship between the text in Neumeister's book and the tradition of the codex Lolliano 35, preserved today in the Library of the Gregorian Seminary of Belluno.²⁹ A copy of this manuscript was probably the *exemplar* used to print the *Commedia*. Indeed, the *editio princeps* faithfully reproduces the numerous textual variants as well as the few omissions of the Lolliano (just like the manuscript, the printed edition does not include the verses of *Paradiso* XX, 49-54 and XXI 46-48).³⁰ Moreover, the poem's text appears to be influenced by many elements of the Umbrian dialect, which suggests that the *princeps*'s compositor/editor was actually Evangelista Angelini who, as testified in the colophon, was Neumeister's technical assistant. Consequently, it is fair to assume that the edition did not go through a textual correction and editing process supervised by a true proofreader. On the contrary, it is highly plausible that the *princeps* is simply a faithful transcription of the presumably lost manuscript used by the compositor to arrange the pages to be printed. Despite the lack of any philological ambition and the presence of numerous errors and textual gaps, Neumeister's edition of the *Commedia* conveys a good version of the poem's text, intelligible to a broad audience and, as said, organized according to the visual features that made the book a highly desirable product for the Italian readers of the time.

Because of the popularity and favored place of Dante's poem among his contemporaries,³¹ it is presumable that Neumeister and his partners planned a print run for the *Commedia* that was higher than that of the two editions of Brunetti and Cicero. The remarkable number of surviving copies (36) and provenances still visible in the pages of several exemplars testify that the Foligno edition had considerable

²⁸ Boschi Rotiroti 2004, p. 78.

²⁹ Casamassima 1972, p. 61-83.

³⁰ Mecca 2010, p. 38-42.

³¹ Boschi Rotiroti 2004, p. 1-57.

commercial success and a wide circulation among fifteenth-century readers.³² After having analyzed some copies of the *princeps* preserved in Italy, Armando Petrucci advanced the hypothesis that a miniaturist was engaged by the publishers to embellish the initials of each *cantica* with ornamental decoration, as well as to fill the empty spaces in the opening of every *canto* with turquoise initials (fig. 3).³³ Although there is still little evidence to support this hypothesis, there is no doubt that the Foligno edition was designed for a sophisticated reading public and that Angelini and the other investors had planned a high-level circulation of their product.

Indeed, the purchase of parchment sheets intended to print luxury copies suggests a whole distribution scheme aimed at exporting the Neumeister edition to the rich Tuscan cultural centers where sale possibilities were high and wealthy bourgeois families still kept the cult of Dante alive. Moreover, if we consider that the *princeps* was published and distributed during the most intense days of the Foligno fair, we can suppose that the first copies sold by Angelini and his partners circulated immediately in the commercial markets of central-southern Italy. Merchants coming from Siena, Florence, Arezzo, Bologna, Ancona, Rome, Naples, and Apulia attended the Annunciation fair every year, selling their products and buying new ones to sell when they returned home. Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine that many of those businessmen – especially the Tuscan ones – loved the idea of reselling at a good price in their own commercial areas elegant and well-made copies of a book which was likely considered one of the greatest Italian bestsellers. This hypothesis can be corroborated by the significant number of surviving copies contain-

³² According to Ennio Sandal, the number of surviving copies of a fifteenth-century printed edition is around 10%. Consequently, we can hypothesize that the print run of the *Commedia's editio princeps* was about 350-400 copies. Sandal 2018, p. 139. A completely different opinion on the print runs of fifteenth century editions is offered by White 2012.

³³ Petrucci 2017, p. 381.

ing fifteenth-century Tuscan provenances, which testify to a definite circulation of the edition in that geographic area at a very early stage of its distribution.³⁴

In the Kingdom of Naples, the Neumeister edition had a very high-level circulation. Two of the surviving volumes belonged, indeed, respectively, to the personal library of the Count of Sarno, Francesco Coppola (Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, Inc. 56), and to the Aragonese Library of King Ferdinand I (Paris, BNF, Res. Yd. 178).³⁵

Although many of the typographic products conceived by Neumeister during his long career can be considered excellent examples of the early typographic technique, none can ever match the edition of the *Commedia* for historical importance and bibliophilic prestige. Neumeister's technical commitment and the far-sightedness of his investors unintentionally contributed to the foundation of Dante's future fame. Even if Foligno provided good economic-cultural conditions for producing a printed edition of Dante's poem, that typographic product was certainly not intended for the local audience, and the publishers knew that. The Annunciation fair and its many merchants constituted the primary vehicle for the distribution and sale of what Neumeister and his associates knew to be the first printed edition of the "divine poem" – a work (and a material object) that could easily tickle the desires of the increasingly powerful wealthy readers of the Italian bourgeoisie and aristocracy. That simple yet elegant edition published in a workshop in central Italy not only inaugurated the golden age of the *Commedia*'s printed production but was also the

³⁴ Rome, Biblioteca Corsiniana, 51.G.24; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, *Banco rari* 98; New York (NY), Morgan Library, *CbL1027*; Princeton (NJ), Princeton University, Scheide Library, 40.2 (<https://dpul.princeton.edu/gutenberg/catalog/9s161b505>); Oxford (UK), Oxford University, Bodleian Library, *Auct. 2Q 2.18* (<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/53f5a87b-cfde-46b5-b6d8-c159c05cb-c8c/>).

³⁵ For a description of King Ferdinand's copy see *Catalogue des incunables* 1.3, 621: D-8.

evidence that the book market and the readers of the fifteenth century were ready to welcome Dante's masterpiece through the medium of a new material design that was rapidly growing in popularity throughout Europe. And, as we will see, the Dantean adventure of Foligno was not the only one to see the light in that bright *Anno Domini* 1472.

2. Humanists and Technicians: the 1472 Editions of Mantua and Iesi/Venice

Communication routes have always played a crucial role in the socio-economic history of the Italian peninsula. The great roads built by the foresight of the rulers and administrators of imperial Rome managed to connect a varied and challenging territory that went from the harsh paths of the southern alps to the fertile lands of Sicilian Greek colonies. Together with the primitive and uncertain river networks, these ancient roads continued to comply with their original purpose even after the Goths, Lombards, Normans, and other not exactly peaceful heirs of the empire had redefined the peninsula's geopolitical landscape. This significant Roman heritage, combined with the strategic geographical position of the peninsula, was one of the elements that, especially between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, contributed to the birth of the major Italian commercial companies that were based in cities such as Venice, Florence, Pisa, Genoa, and Naples.³⁶ In those years, the flourishing of commerce brought about a radical change in the peninsula's economic scenario and the daily relationships between the Italian varied social classes. The connections between urban centers evolved further in the fifteenth century. Especially in the southern Po Valley area, favored by a dense network of roads and fluvial routes, trade exchanges and the creation of new mercantile enterprises fostered an increase in direct connections be-

³⁶ On this topic see Lanaro 2003.

tween the merchant class and other segments of urban society in that lush region. Those years of economic prosperity also led to a massive immigration of artisans and merchants from other parts of Italy and often from other European countries.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, some of the most important cities in northern Italy not only developed a flourishing economy but also experienced an extraordinary cultural period.³⁷ Starting in the 1460s, Mantua became one of the most prestigious Italian political and artistic centers of the Renaissance. Between 1460 and 1472, anyone who walked the central streets of Mantua could easily have come across two of the most extraordinary geniuses of the Italian Renaissance. In those years, indeed, Leon Battista Alberti and Andrea Mantegna worked side by side to renew the city of the Gonzagas. Soon, architectural and pictorial masterpieces such as the Basilica of Sant'Andrea and the *Camera degli Sposi* made Mantua one of the jewels of the new Renaissance culture. The city became a destination for artists and scholars, as well as for professionals of culture such as teachers, scribes, and printers, each of them attracted by the new economic and cultural possibilities that the Gonzaga court promised.

In the autumn of 1471, some German printers crossed Mantua's walls to meet the person who convinced them to try their luck in that city. Pietro Adamo de' Micheli was a cultivated and enterprising young man belonging to a wealthy Mantuan family. In the spring of 1471, he had contacted two printing masters settled in Verona, Paulus de Butzbach and Georg of Augsburg, and proposed that they move their business to Mantua. In fact, the two German craftsmen had to teach the young Pietro their new technique to produce independently the volumes included in his publishing plan.³⁸ Pietro's project was to print juridical texts, as well as works intended for a wider public. The humanistic culture that developed in the Po Valley courts such as

³⁷ On the development of the Northern-Italy courts see Lazzarini 2003.

³⁸ Signorini 1983, p. 57-58. On the introduction of the printing press in Mantua see Fattori 2005; Canova 2008, 2014.

Ferrara, Parma, and, specifically, Mantua had gradually opened up to the Tuscan vernacular literature and its fundamental authors: Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Cultured readers, literati, and scholars re-discovered the fourteenth-century Tuscan literary tradition, grafting it onto the classical education provided by humanist intellectuals in order to produce a completely new courtly literature.³⁹ The public eager to read the works of the great vernacular authors of the previous century had grown considerably, as had the demand for books containing those texts. At the end of 1471, Pietro Adamo de' Micheli wrote to Marquis Luigi Gonzaga, asking to borrow his personal copy of the *Decameron* and publish it. Not long afterward, the first Mantuan edition of Boccaccio's masterpiece (1472) was delivered into the hands of the city's first readers.⁴⁰

After revealing the secrets of Gutenberg's art to their Mantuan benefactor, Butzbach and his partner decided to open their own printing workshop. In mid-1472, the two printers were engaged in the publication of their first Mantuan printed edition. It was precisely the enormous popularity that the texts of Tuscan literature were enjoying at the Gonzaga court to prompt a cultured local humanist, Colombino da Verona, to embark on the publication of Dante's *Commedia*.⁴¹

Dante's poem was already known in Mantua as early as the second half of the fourteenth century. The poet Bonamente Aliprandi (1350 ca.-1417) had composed in that period a *Cronica de Mantua in terza rima*, in which he told how he got lost in a *silva* and was helped by a woman (the Memory) who guided him to a «beautiful place».⁴² Despite the considerable success that Dante's poem enjoyed amongst the

³⁹ Dionisotti 2008, p. 203.

⁴⁰ ISTC, ib00725400.

⁴¹ Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia*, Mantua, Paulus de Butzbach and Georg of Augsburg, for Colombino Veronese, 1472. ISTC, id00023000. On the Mantuan edition of the *Commedia* see Pescasio 1972; Manfrè 1973, p. 57-74; Coglievina 2001, p. 335-340; Montecchi 2005, p. 197-216.

⁴² Savino 1970, p. 812.

Mantuan literary community,, there is no doubt that the key episode that binds Mantua to the story of Dante's fortune is the publication of the second *editio princeps* of the *Commedia*. Unlike Neumeister's book and the following Iesi/Venice edition, the Mantua edition was designed and produced under the supervision of a cultured editor like Colombino. Despite being almost entirely unknown today, Colombino was a highly appreciated humanist at the Gonzaga court.⁴³ A simple *grammaticus* who exercised his profession in the service of the city's wealthy families and in the public *studium*, Colombino soon managed to enter into the good graces of Luigi Gonzaga, who entrusted him with many diplomatic tasks as well as the education of his children.

In visual terms, the edition constitutes, once again, a re-statement of an elegant and sober fifteenth-century codex of the *Commedia*. As in the case of the Foligno edition, Mantua's printers chose to use an in-folio format and a Roman typeface, smaller than that of the *princeps* but far more elegant and balanced (fig. 4). Unlike Neumeister's *Commedia*, the Butzbach edition shows a page layout with the text arranged into two columns, each of which provides a text block of forty-one lines. This element, combined with a smaller typeface, makes the Mantuan *Commedia* considerably shorter, in terms of physical length, than the monumental volume printed in Foligno.

The publication of the *Commedia* seems to have represented a fundamental stage in Colombino's path of social elevation. The edition opens with a long *capitolo* that Colombino composed dedicating the book to a prominent member of the court of Mantua – Filippo Nuvoloni.⁴⁴ A cultivated scholar and poet, as well as a warrior fighting against the Ottoman invaders of Northern Italy, Nuvoloni was a fascinating figure of Italian humanism. His father, Carlo, had completed numerous diplomatic missions on behalf of the Gonzagas, bringing to a successful conclusion some important economic agreements in favor of his lord. Like Carlo, Filippo traveled far and wide through the

⁴³ On Colombino see Perpolli 1918; Romani 1982; Fattori 1995.

⁴⁴ On Nuvoloni see Cracolici 2009, 2009a.

Italian princely courts, which allowed him to become acquainted with the finest of the peninsula's Renaissance culture. Marquis Gonzaga had so much respect for Nuvoloni and his literary skills that he chose him to give the official speech in honor of King Christian I of Denmark on his visit to Mantua. Colombino was aware that if he wanted to improve his social status and gain a prominent place in the circle of intellectuals surrounding the Marquis, he had to find an influential protector who appreciated and promoted his talents. And who better than the most cultured scholar of the court, an early imitator of Tuscan poets, could be useful for this purpose? To dedicate the "first" printed edition of the *Commedia* to Nuvoloni meant not only paying homage to an important figure in Mantua aristocratic society but also binding the name of the dedicatee to the most excellent author of fourteenth-century vernacular literature. Nuvoloni's prestige would have grown more and more in the eyes of both the court and the Italian literary world, and the dedicatee would undoubtedly have been grateful to the architect of this enhancement of his glory. Moreover, such a homage to an influential – and wealthy – figure could even suggest that Nuvoloni may have sponsored the *Commedia's* publication and that perhaps he was the mysterious financier who "suggested" to Colombino to connect the publishing enterprise to his name. What is certain is that a couple of years later, Nuvoloni himself entered the circle of the new Mantuan printing industry by publishing with Butzbach the text of the aforementioned oration in honor of the King of Denmark on his visit to the court of Luigi III.⁴⁵

Colombino's *Capitolo* is an extended eulogy to Nuvoloni's literary achievements. Out of the one hundred and fifty-seven verses composed by Colombino, only the last thirty-seven concern Dante's work. The first one hundred and twenty glorify the dedicatee and his extraordinary gifts as a poet who was able to combine the spirit of the ancient authors of the classical age with the new (courtly) vernacular literature

⁴⁵ ISTC, in00279000.

(ll. 70-72). Leaving aside Nuvoloni's praise, let us briefly analyze the verses that Colombino dedicates to the description of the *Commedia*, constituting the first example of a printed literary paratext of a Dantean work. After the exhortation to read and study Dante's masterpiece, the author offers Nuvoloni a description of the three *cantiche*, giving ample space to the description of *Inferno* (ll. 124-144) and only a few allusions to *Purgatorio* (ll. 145-153) and *Paradiso* (ll. 154-157). As Carlo Dionisotti emphasized, these few verses impeccably depict the image of the *Commedia* that emerged in the minds of the educated readers of Renaissance Italy, trained through a humanistic education.⁴⁶ The elements that Colombino highlights are those linked to classical mythology used by Dante in the first *cantica*: Cerberus with sparkling teeth, Minos the judge of all evil, the giant Tityus, among others. These episodes brought the *Commedia* closer to the taste of humanistic culture and the canons of the new vernacular courtly literature developing throughout the peninsula in that same period. The Dante glorified by Colombino was a poet as close as possible to Virgil, worthy of being elevated to the levels of the immortal authors of Rome and Greece. The omniscient theologian, praised by the fourteenth-century public, gave space to the poet-prophet of the new vernacular literary season that blossomed in the courtly circles of fifteenth-century Italy.

Let us now enter Paulus de Butzbach's workshop and take a look at how Colombino worked in the printing house. As Emanuele Casamassima pointed out, the Mantuan edition of the *Commedia* displays an extraordinary typographic accuracy, which is reflected both in the visual uniformity and in the layout.⁴⁷ Behind this refined precision, there was an expert hand that intervened in the printing product's technical execution, but above all, took care in the detail of both the accuracy of the text and its visual organization. This hand was obviously that of *magister* Colombino, who, as the colophon testified, was the actual proofreader of the work (*adiuvante*) and an active col-

⁴⁶ Dionisotti 2008, p. 202.

⁴⁷ Casamassima 1972, p. 10.

laborator during the production process. In the *capitolo*, the editor proudly states that he was excited and happy to have printed and edited the work of the poet who made famous the city (and the language) of Florence (ll. 55-57). From a textual point of view, the Mantuan edition is partly derived from the manuscript tradition linked to the codex Vat. Lat. 3199 donated by Boccaccio to Petrarch and from the tradition inaugurated by Boccaccio through his autograph manuscripts of the poem.⁴⁸ The majority of these volumes belonged to the tradition of the Cento group. On the contrary, the exemplar of the *Commedia* compiled by Colombino and used in Butzbach's workshop was the product of a collation that the editor carried out starting from a manuscript strongly corrupted by the textual traditions of Boccaccio and the Vatican workshop, compared with another manuscript derived more solidly from the Boccaccio group. With this material at his disposal, Colombino was able to nimbly edit the poem's text, interpolating it with those textual variants that he considered more appropriate to the language of the new vernacular courtly literature. The final result was excellent, and Colombino's *Commedia* can be considered the more philologically correct edition of the century.⁴⁹

The Mantuan edition of the *Commedia* was likely released into the local book market in late 1472. According to the percentage estimates made on the exemplars today kept in worldwide libraries (16), the edition's print run should have been about 150-200 copies. Despite the testimony constituted by Colombino's *capitolo*, it is still challenging to reconstruct who were the first clients and ideal recipients of the work. To date, there are no archival documents that testify to the first circulation of the volumes printed by Butzbach and Georg of Augsburg. However, the few surviving copies could help us to understand the environment in which these books circulated immediately after their publication. A fairly certain fact is that the edition did not have an extensive extraterritorial circulation. Ten of the sixteen sur-

⁴⁸ Vallone 1976.

⁴⁹ Mecca 2010, p. 45-47; 55-63.

vived copies are richly decorated and have provenances connected with the aristocratic environment of the Italian Renaissance. At least six copies exhibit large initials in gold with white vine decoration on grounds of blue, green, and purple dating back to the fifteenth century.⁵⁰ These volumes were probably decorated in the workshop of a Mantuan illuminator who collaborated with Butzbach's printing house to embellish the copies destined to enter the libraries of the aristocratic clients of Luigi Gonzaga's court. Another copy, kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and which belonged to the Jesuit college in Paris before entering the library of the Duke of Lauraguais, is beautifully decorated with rich late fifteenth-century illuminated initials at the beginning of each *cantica*.⁵¹ Similarly, the copy of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève of Paris displays illuminated capitals in red and blue, while the copy of the Biblioteca Capitolare of Padua is the only one showing humanistic illuminated initials of Tuscan execution.⁵² Unique cases are those of the beautiful copies of the John Rylands Library in Manchester and the Biblioteca Trivulziana in Milan.⁵³ The first contains an illuminated eighteenth-century portrait of Dante, together with an elegantly illuminated miniature.⁵⁴ The second volume opens with a splendid polychrome frame with floral motifs

⁵⁰ Cambridge, University Library, *Inc. 3.B.18.2*; Milan, Biblioteca Trivulziana, *Triv. Inc. Dante 8*; Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, *Ink 6.D.4*; New York (NY), Morgan Library, *ChL1263*; Verona, Biblioteca Civica, *Vetr.24*; Rome-London, Philobiblon Auctions (Nuvoloni's copy: http://www.dantecollection.com/index.php?id=1496&tx_ttnews%5Bcat%5D=23231&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=6392&tx_ttnews%5Btag%5D=23241&cHash=5ac1bde646ac0e61ff-6d449fc1332004).

⁵¹ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *Rés. Yd. 11. Catalogue des incunables 1.3*, 621: D-9.

⁵² Paris, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, *OEXV 102 RES*; Padua, Biblioteca Capitolare, *A/1 (12)*. On the Paduan incunable see Fumian 2014, p. 113-114.

⁵³ Milan, Biblioteca Trivulziana, *Triv. Inc. Dante 8*; Manchester, John Rylands Library, *Incunable Collection 7495*.

⁵⁴ <https://manchesterdante.wordpress.com/tag/1472-mantua/>.

that embraces and separates the text's two columns, accompanied by a vignette that contains a finely painted coat of arms.⁵⁵

The existence today of several decorated exemplars (63% of the total surviving copies) emphasizes that the book edited by Colombino was probably designed for an aristocratic clientele, who sought the volume to enrich their library with an object that could symbolize the social prestige of their lineage. A book more to show than to read, then – a volume created to be displayed on a lectern in its owner's *studiolo*, rather than neatly placed on the shelves of an organized library.

Created in a courtly environment for an educated public with humanistic aspirations, the Mantuan edition of the *Commedia* is still considered a fundamental milestone in the complex Renaissance publishing history of Dante's poem. This beautiful volume indeed embodies the evidence of a strong cooperation aimed at creating an exclusive typographic product, which would not make wealthy customers regret the sophistication of the most elegant humanistic manuscripts. In contrast to the Foligno production, this edition was the outcome of a collaborative effort that contained in itself all the elements of what thirty years later, through Aldo Manuzio's experience, would typify modern humanistic publishing: entrepreneurial audacity, technical expertise, and philological grounding. There is no doubt that even if it was perhaps Nuvoloni to give the idea of publishing the *Liber Dantis*, it was Colombino Veronese who made this edition a success. He was the editor-philologist who elaborated with such excellent results the very complicated work of textual collation, thereby creating an extraordinary literary work that sought to be as faithful as possible to Dante's original language. In other words, it was the first philological printed edition of the *Commedia*.

All the technical and philological aspects that characterized the Mantuan edition are unfortunately missing in what is considered, in terms of textual prestige, the third *editio princeps* of Dante's poem

⁵⁵ A description of this decoration is available in the database *Material Evidence in Incunabula* (MEI): <https://data.cehl.org/mei/02007438>.

– the one published by the Veronese printer Federico de' Conti in 1472.⁵⁶ Although scholars have debated for over two centuries about the place in which this edition was printed, even today it is still impossible to determine whether the printer published his *Commedia* – officially titled *Liber Dantis* – in wealthy Venice or in Iesi, an ancient town in the Marches, not far from the central Adriatic coast. Prior to the publication of this mysterious edition, very little is known about Federico de' Conti.⁵⁷ As many scholars have pointed out, he was undoubtedly one of the first Italians to learn the technique of printing. However, the place where he was trained and the craftsmen who introduced him to the new art are still unknown. Some scholars suggest that his training took place in Rome, perhaps in the workshop of Sweynheym and Pannartz; others believe that Federico learned the rudiments of the new technique in his hometown, Verona; others still argue for an apprenticeship in Venice.⁵⁸ The few pieces of certain information about this craftsman are provided by some legal documents, and the few editions certainly ascribed to him. The first documentary traces regarding de' Conti date back to a dramatic period for central Italy. In 1467 the March of Ancona was devastated by a violent epidemic of plague that decimated the local population. The city of Iesi, about eighteen miles away from Ancona, was among those most affected by the disease. When the governors of Iesi realized that the city seemed on the verge of extinction, they tried to remedy the situation by carrying out an impressive repopulation campaign. In 1471 the local authorities sent heralds and messengers throughout northern Italy. These envoys were in charge of spreading a proclamation promising lands and privileges to all the “Lombardi” (a term that indicated all the inhabitants of the regions north of the Po River) who had the will to move to Iesi to live and bring their working ac-

⁵⁶ Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia*, Iesi/Venice, Federico de' Conti, 1472. ISTC, id00024000.

⁵⁷ Procaccioli 1983; Marcattili 2013.

⁵⁸ Giuliani 1865, p. 295-296; Annibaldi 1877, p. 11-15. Scholderer 1932.

tivities there. The first one hundred new citizens from Lombardy and Veneto arrived in town in August 1471, while another thirty arrived in December. On September 25 of the following year, two months after the publication of his edition of the *Commedia*, Federico de' Conti – «magister librorum in forma», formally asked the local authorities to grant him citizenship of Iesi. Such a request was usually processed within six months. In the printer's case, the application was formalized that same day, and de' Conti officially became a citizen of Iesi.⁵⁹ As Severino Ragazzini pointed out, this circumstance suggests that the printer had already been living in the city for quite some time and that he may have arrived in the March of Ancona in December 1471 with the second group of Lombard migrants. The record of the session of September 25, 1472, indicates, indeed, that the main reason for granting citizenship concerned the great virtues of de' Conti, as well as the exceptional talents he had demonstrated in the practice of his art.⁶⁰ In other words, the printer was granted a sort of fifteenth-century “Einstein visa”, so to speak. Everyone in Iesi knew *mastro* Federico, and everyone had had the opportunity to appreciate his qualities as a craftsman. But how did these talents materialize in the eyes of the city's public? What product had the Veronese master created to build a reputation as an excellent printer in this small town in the Marche? The answer would seem obvious: an edition of Dante's masterpiece. And yet, many points in the history of this edition remain to be clarified.

As mentioned before, the dispute about the place of printing of the “third” *editio princeps* of the *Commedia* has been going on for centuries.⁶¹ Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Italian and European bibliographers agreed that Iesi was the city where the

⁵⁹ Annibaldi 1877, p. 19.

⁶⁰ «libentissime recipiatur [...] consideratis suis virtutibus et optima eius arte et exercitio» (Ibidem).

⁶¹ For the most up to date overview of the Iesi/Venice *querelle*, see Ledda - Rivali 2014-2015.

work was published. In 1932, the director of the library of the British Museum, Victor Scholderer, proposed Venice as the place where de' Conti's *Commedia* was printed. Based on an approximate study of the above-mentioned record of citizenship and the analysis of the typefaces used in the poem's edition, Scholderer claimed that it was impossible for de' Conti to be in Iesi before September 1472 and therefore to publish the *Commedia* there in July of that year. Excluding Iesi, the bibliographer proposed Venice as the place of publication of the *Liber Dantis*. This theory was based primarily on the fact that the typefaces with which the works «sine loci» attributed to de' Conti were printed had many characteristics of the early Venetian printing. Consequently, Scholderer claimed that the Veronese printer must have learned the printing technique in the Most Serene Republic, where he had probably already published some editions. These included: the *De homine* by the humanist Galeotto Marzio, Tibullus's *Elegiae*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the works of Propertius. According to Scholderer, the last of de' Conti's "Venetian" editions was precisely the *Commedia*.⁶²

The "Scholderer version" was accepted by most bibliographers of the past century, and the major bibliographical repertories worldwide adopted this interpretation. However, in the 1970s, the "Venetian" thesis was partially refuted by Severino Ragazzini, director of the Dante Center of Ravenna. He analyzed extensively the documents collected in the nineteenth century by Giovanni Annibaldi and cited by Scholderer as documentary evidence in favor of his thesis. His interpretation that completely overturned the thesis of the British bibliographer. Thanks to the meticulous study of all the paragraphs of the document, Ragazzini was able to prove exhaustively that de' Conti must have been in Iesi for at least six months before the granting of citizenship and that, therefore, he would have had plenty of time to develop the production process to publish Dante's masterpiece in that city. Furthermore, by analyzing the watermarks contained in all six

⁶² Scholderer 1932, p. 111-113.

surviving copies of the edition and comparing them with the others published by de' Conti in Iesi and (perhaps) in Venice, Ragazzini was able to prove that the paper used in the *Liber Dantis* was the same as that used in the editions that the printer published in the Marches in the years following 1472.⁶³ While this evidence is not sufficient to establish with certainty that de' Conti published his edition of the *Commedia* in Iesi, it indicates that this publication's history cannot be fully reconstructed and that the "game" between Venice and Iesi is still open. If he did indeed undertake his technical apprenticeship in Venice and there print his first editions with the same Roman typeface used later for the *Commedia*, there is no reason why he could not have brought the printing materials with him when he went to live in the March of Ancona. This would explain why the *Commedia* is precisely the last edition in which he used those old typefaces (by that time quite worn) before switching to a new typecast certainly created in his new workshop in Iesi.

According to Alessandro Scarsella, de' Conti had planned to publish his edition of Dante's poem when he was still in the lagoon, but he had completed it in Iesi following his relocation to the Marches.⁶⁴ Obviously, such a project, in order to succeed, needed, above all, an adequate marketing plan. To print the *Commedia* in Venice, the most flourishing mercantile center in Italy, might seem far preferable comparable to a small town in the Papal dominions. In the Most Serene Republic, where the art of printing had already developed exponentially, there were, of course, many more possibilities of selling and exporting a sought-after typographic product, such as an edition of Dante's poem. However, even the smallest of villages, if placed in a strategic position on the complex Italian Renaissance mercantile map, might be a perfect place to undertake a typographic adventure.

Iesi is just twenty-two miles from Recanati, a city that, during the

⁶³ Ragazzini 1974, p. XXVI-XXXV.

⁶⁴ Scarsella 2004.

Renaissance, hosted the largest and most important trade fair in all of Italy.⁶⁵ Since the fourteenth century, merchants from Milan, Venice, Rome, Naples, Messina, and even France, Flanders and the Germanic lands met in that town in the Marches to sell and buy the most disparate goods.⁶⁶ The fair lasted thirty days and initially took place from the 1st to 31 August. Since the middle of the fifteenth century, it was postponed, and until the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was held from August 15 to September 15.⁶⁷ If we compare these dates with the date of publication of de' Conti's *Commedia* (July 18), we can see that the edition was completed in perfect time to market it during the most important Italian mercantile event. Now, if we accept the thesis that the *Commedia's* publication project developed in Venice and was materially completed in Iesi, we can hypothesize that the printer and the financiers of the edition (probably some of de' Conti's fellow "Lombards") planned to publish the poem precisely with a view to selling it during the Recanati fair, an unmissable commercial event that took place just half a day's journey from their new hometown.⁶⁸ Once again, the fairs seem to prove to be a key to understanding the development of typography and explaining the creation of printing companies in peripheral places of the Italian peninsula. These places, although far from the economic development of flourishing cities such as Venice, Florence, or Milan, were nevertheless able to offer stable conditions for business development thanks to events of great commercial attraction such as the annual fairs celebrated in cities like Foligno, Recanati and, further south, Lanciano.⁶⁹

Let us now turn to the material history of the edition. Each of the

⁶⁵ On the fair of Recanati see Zdekauer 1916-1917, 1920; Moroni 1985.

⁶⁶ Zdekauer 1916-1917, p. 248.

⁶⁷ Leopardi 1945, p. 416, quoted in Moroni 1985, p. 140.

⁶⁸ On the presence of booksellers at the fair of Recanati in the Renaissance see Marciani 1968; Rhodes 1978, p. 83-86; Nuovo 2013, p. 302-308; Nuovo - Pani 2021.

⁶⁹ Nuovo 2013, p. 301-312.

surviving copies testifies that de' Conti's *Commedia* is an imperfect typographical product. As Ennio Sandal has observed, the production of the Iesi/Venice edition was undoubtedly a hasty operation, probably arranged in order to offer as soon as possible a sufficient number of copies to compete with the only other edition of the *Commedia* already circulating on the Italian market – that of Foligno.⁷⁰ From a typographical and editorial perspective, out of the three *editiones principes* of 1472, de' Conti's edition is certainly the least accurate. When we open the pages of any copy of this edition, we immediately notice the typical elements of frantic typographic work and its irremediable consequences: dozens of typos and errors, omissions of verses, repetitions of *terzine*.⁷¹ It is not difficult to imagine therefore that, whether they worked in Venice or Iesi, de' Conti and his assistants tried in every way to complete the printing cycle as quickly as possible, driven by their need to earn (or survive).

Besides the low typographical accuracy, a crucial element in understanding the publishing significance and the de' Conti edition's actual circulation immediately after its publication is given by the current state of the surviving copies. First of all, it is essential to remember that only six copies of this complex edition are known today. As already seen for the cases of Foligno and Mantua, this element would suggest a low print run, between fifty and one hundred copies. This factor would play in favor of the Iesi-thesis: a book produced in great haste with worn material, in a number of copies sufficient to be sold within a short time, perhaps during a commercial event such as the great fair of Recanati. Although the number of surviving volumes is meager, it is nevertheless possible to glean some interesting information about this edition's first readers. First of all, it is crucial to note that none of these books is complete. All six of them present, to different degrees, mutilations that, at first glance, communicate the scant

⁷⁰ Sandal 2018, p. 136.

⁷¹ For a complete list of the de' Conti edition's typographical errors see Ragazzini 1974, p. XX-XXVI.

consideration that the public had for such an obviously “defective” object over centuries.⁷² The only valuable information about the circulation of this edition comes from the almost total lack of ownership notes relating to a cultured or aristocratic audience. Another interesting piece of evidence concerns the decoration of the volumes. As we have seen above, the numerous (sometimes richly) decorated copies testify that both the Neumeister and the Butzbach editions circulated widely among the aristocratic or upper-class public of the fifteenth century. Conversely, the presence of two decorated copies (fig. 5),⁷³ which undoubtedly belonged to noble families, seems to suggest that the de’ Conti edition circulated both among aristocratic and bourgeois circles. Most of the known exemplars do not display any decoration, nor any trace of rubrication, even if most of the copies contain reading marks dating back to the fifteenth century – evidence that definitely testify to a circulation and use of these volumes in the period immediately following the edition’s release.⁷⁴

Certainly, these few pieces of evidence are not sufficient to exhaustively outline the history of the first circulation of the de’ Conti edition, even if it is not difficult to imagine that this typographical product must not have had a circulation comparable to that of the other two *editiones principes* of the *Commedia* printed in that same year. The typographical inaccuracy and the numerous defects did not make the volume printed by de’ Conti an attractive product for the educated (and wealthy) public looking for good copies of Dante’s work. Nonetheless, these few pieces of information are useful elements for the reconstruction of the first dissemination of the *Commedia* in the early typographic age: a process that began in Foligno in April 1472 and gradually developed throughout the Italian peninsula until it

⁷² Ivi, p. XXII-XXVI.

⁷³ The University of Manchester, The John Rylands Library, *Incunable Collection* 9380; Ravenna, Library of the Dante Center, *Inc. A32*.

⁷⁴ Milan, Biblioteca Trivulziana, *Triv. Dante Inc.9*; Ravenna, Library of the Dante Center, *Inc. A32*; Rome, *Casa di Dante* (no call number).

reached extraordinary formal and artistic results when the Venetian printing industry monopolized the production of the works of Italian vernacular literature.

Conclusions

The early publishing history of the *Commedia* reveals a great deal. Specifically, the cases of de' Conti's and Neumeister's editions show us that at times the origin of the publishing fortune of an important Italian vernacular literary text was utterly unrelated to the influence of Renaissance cultural circles, as well as to the agenda of the peninsula's early major printing industry. Unlike the *Commedia* printed in a flourishing cultural center such as Mantua, intended for relatively limited circulation, the history of the Foligno and Iesi/Venice *Commedia* shows that at times the printing houses that sprang up in Italy's minor centers right after the introduction of the printing press constituted sustainable manufacturing enterprises and not improvised business ventures. The stability of these young printing companies was not based on the presence of an educated public that demanded the production of a given book but rather on the commercial potential of a specific urban center, as seen by its proximity to at least one of the peninsula's trade fairs. In some cases, like that of Foligno, the city itself was the seat of a significant fair. Other times, like in the hypothetical (but very probable) case of Iesi, it was near a place where a mercantile event took place. Through the fifteenth-century fairs system, the editions produced by the early printers in minor Italian centers could circulate among the readers of the entire peninsula. Precisely because of their status as periodic events that attracted businesspeople from all over Italy, trade fairs were the best occasions to give rise to commercial exchanges centered on refined and relatively new products such as printed books. The early publishing fortune of Dante's masterpiece is inextricably linked to this complex yet effective trade system. A work like the *Commedia*, whose success in the fourteenth century was

unparalleled in the sphere of vernacular literature, could enter the publishing world thanks to the solid economic and commercial premises guaranteed by the network of trade fairs that developed and consolidated in fifteenth-century Italy. The early printers who produced the *Commedia* sought to create a book that would meet the tastes and aesthetic needs of the fifteenth-century Italian public, and that could be marketed through the sales channels that Italy's commercial geography made available to them. The Tuscan, Neapolitan, and Lombard merchants who attended the major Italian commercial events detected the "printed Dante" business and were able to distribute the *Commedia's* first printed copies all over the Italian peninsula. In this way, they not only contributed to the material dissemination of the poem but also decreed its success both among the variegated public of Italian readers and among the bookmen of major printing centers such as Milan and Venice. Thanks to the strength of the most solid and well-established commercial networks of the time, they soon began the large-scale production of Dante's poem, making the *Commedia* an increasingly refined publishing product capable of attracting and satisfying the interests of the broad international public.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ I would like to thank all the friends and colleagues who have contributed to the development of this article: Edoardo Barbieri, Eva Del Soldato, Ann Moyer, and Piero Scapecchi.

FIGURES

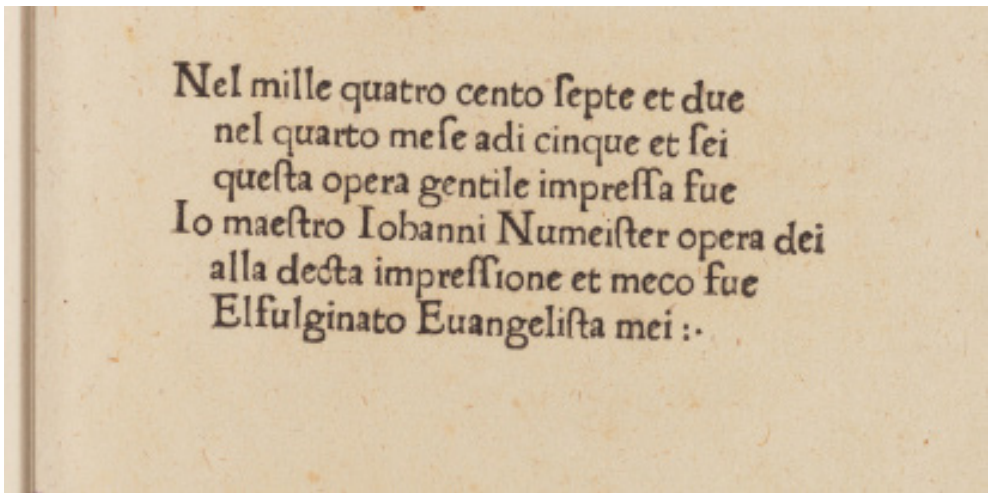


Figure 1. Colophon, Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia*, Foligno, Johann Neumeister, 1472, fol. 3[h10^r]. Princeton University, William H. Scheide Library, 40.2.

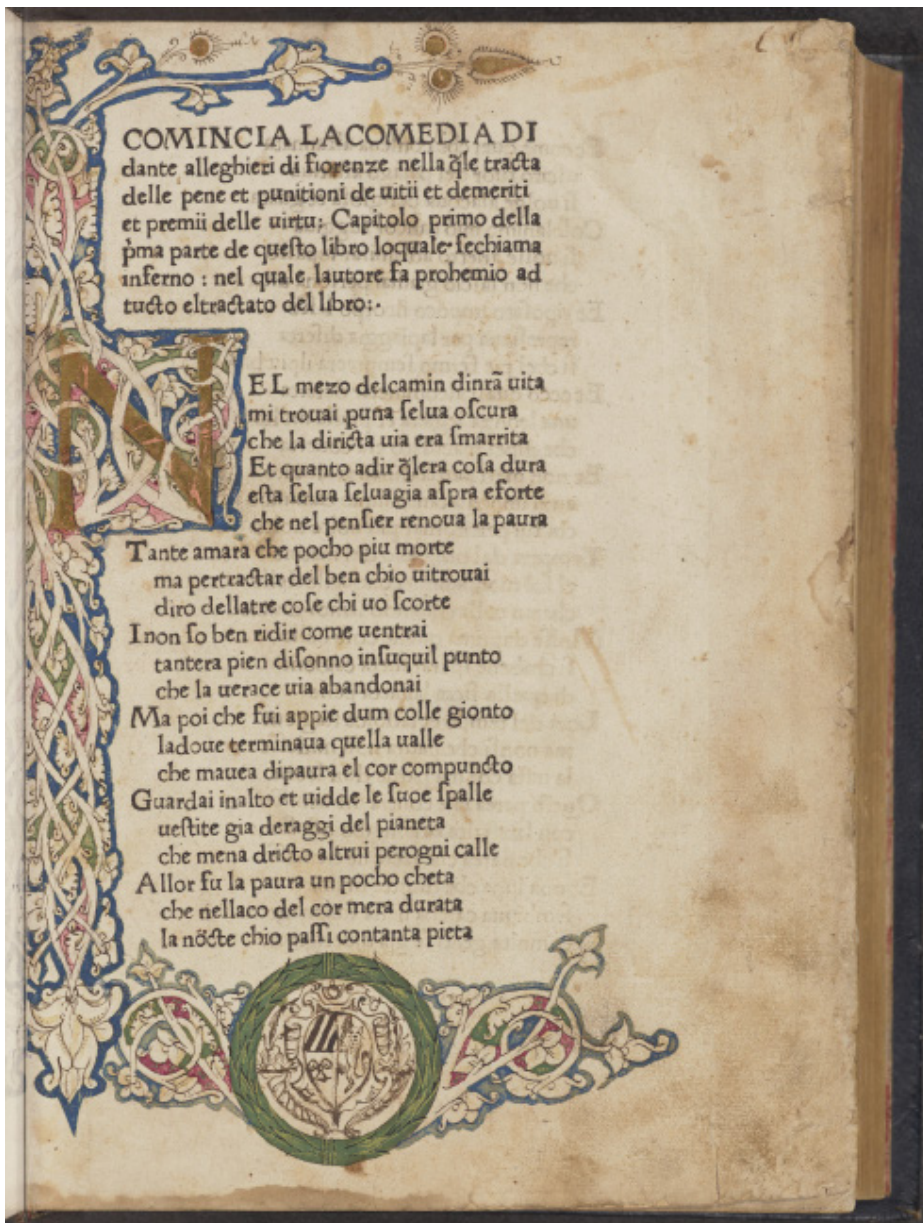


Figure 2. Title page, Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia*, Foligno, Johann Neumeister, 1472, fol. 1[a1r]. Princeton University, William H. Scheide Library, 40.2.

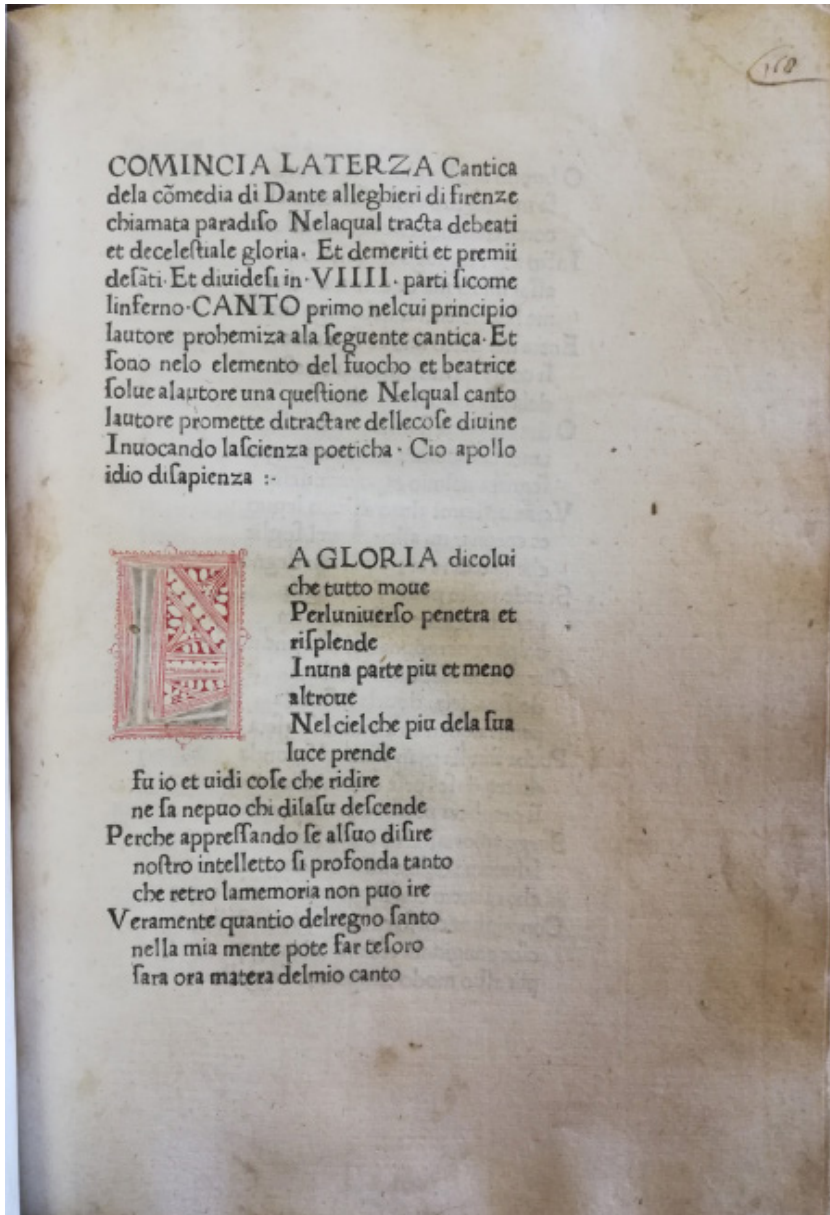


Figure 3. Decorated initial (*Paradiso*), Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia*, Foligno, Johann Neumeister, 1472, fol. 3[a1r]. Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, *Banco Rari* 98.

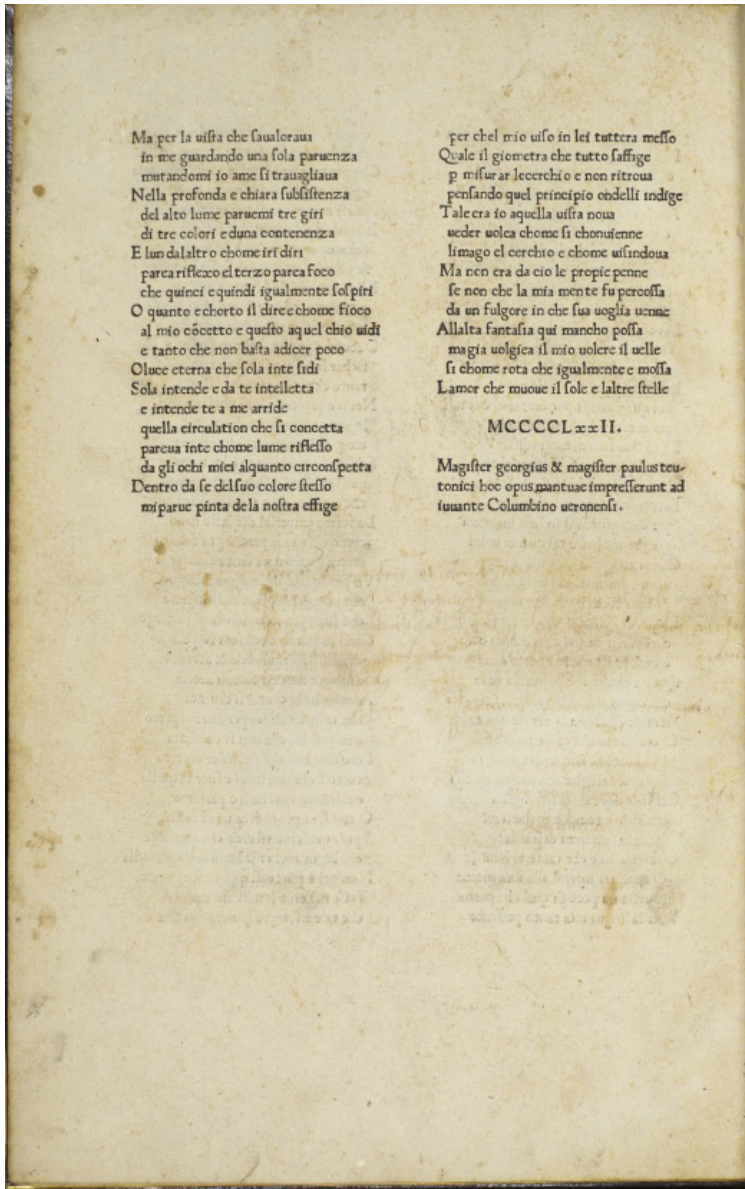


Figure 4. Colophon, Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia*, Mantua, Paulus de Butzbach and Georg of Augsburg, for Colombino Veronese, 1472, fol. [16v]. The University of Manchester, The John Rylands Library, *Incunable Collection* 7495.

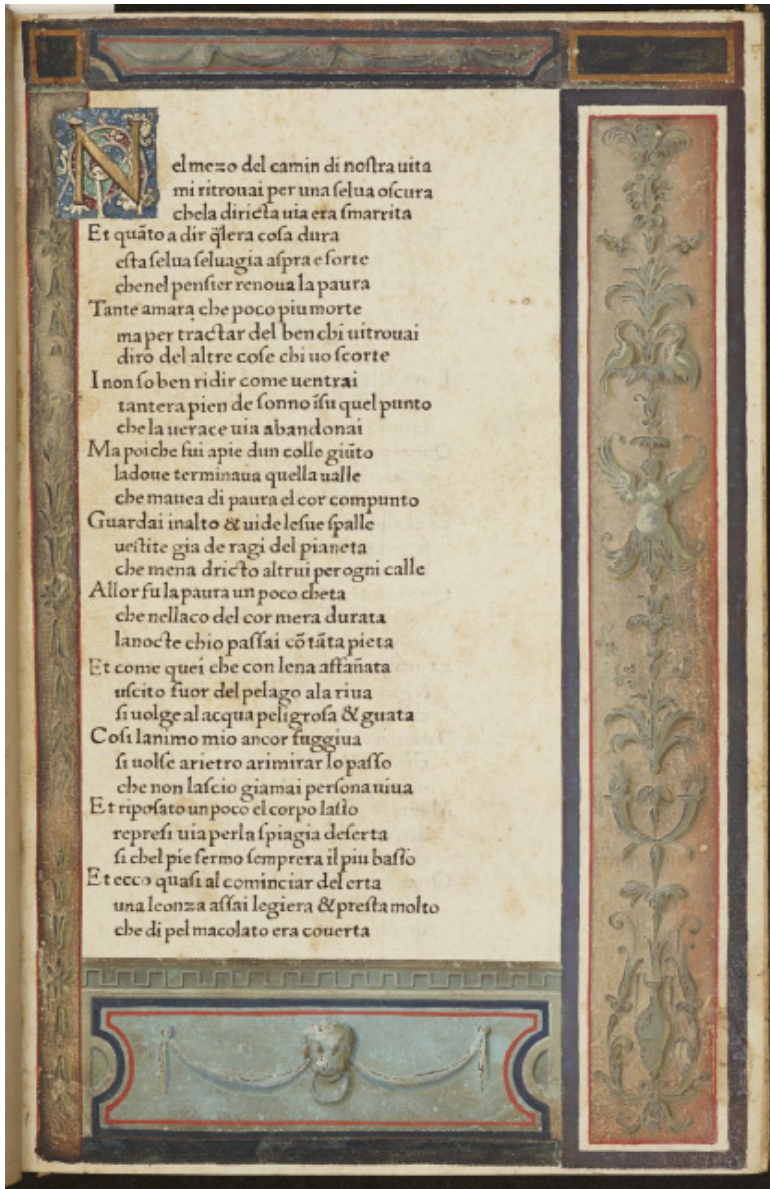


Figure 5. Illuminated title page, Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia*, Iesi/Venice, Federico de' Conti, 1472, fol. [a1r]. The University of Manchester, The John Rylands Library, *Incunabile Collection* 9380.

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Abstract

L'articolo prende in considerazione la storia delle prime tre edizioni a stampa della Commedia dantesca (1472; Foligno, Mantova e Iesi/Venezia) analizzandone le rispettive vicende dal punto di vista economico-sociale. In particolare, attraverso un'analisi congiunta della letteratura accademica pregressa, della storia socioeconomica locale e delle provenienze materiali registrate all'interno di numerosi esemplari, il saggio intende mettere in evidenza in che grado e forma eventi commerciali come le fiere regionali influenzarono lo sviluppo e la distribuzione dei prodotti tipografici negli anni Settanta del Quattrocento in Italia.

Incunaboli; Divina Commedia; Dante; Johann Neumeister; prototipografia; fiere; Federico de' Conti

The article examines the history of the first three printed editions of Dante's Commedia (1472; Foligno, Mantua, and Iesi/Venice), analyzing their respective vicissitudes from a socio-economic perspective. Specifically, through a joint analysis of the relevant academic literature, the local socio-economic history, and the material provenances recorded within numerous copies, the essay intends to highlight to what degree and form commercial events such as regional fairs influenced the development and distribution of typographic products in Italy in the 1470s.

Incunabula; Divine Comedy; Dante; Johann Neumeister; Early print; fairs; Federico de' Conti