

Dante Alighieri, c.1860's. Plaster, H.28 in. (71 cm).

Given the Athenaeum's ongoing mission to provide literary access, this plaster bust of the medieval Italian poet Durante degli Aighierei, simply called Dante [1265-1321], is a meaningful addition to James Phalen's earlier 1840 donation of ten busts to the library. An advocate for the importance of his native language, Dante promoted Italian as a respected, literary dialect, thereby revealing the world of poetry and "high" literature to a wider, and entirely new, general audience.

A fellow writer in the Italian vernacular, Giovanni Boccaccio [1313-1375], described Dante as "always clad in the most seemly attire...His face was long, his nose aquiline, and his eyes rather big than small."¹ The Athenaeum's bust faithfully adheres to Boccaccio's description; Dante's large and expressive eyes appear under a deeply furrowed brow, and his aquiline nose and chin protrude sharply. Although described as having a black, untamed beard at one time of this life, Dante is portrayed here with an air of well-groomed elegance, his face freshly shaven and hair tucked out of sight beneath a laurel wreath.²

Modeled from medieval Italian paintings and sculpture, portraits of Dante reflect a predictable, even canonical, set of features. One of the earliest portraits of the writer, and possibly one of the most influential, is a Giotto di Bondone fresco painted between 1334 and 1336, nearly fifteen years after the poet's death.³ In this work, Giotto introduced three notable traits that would define Dante's subsequent image. First, he depicts Dante in a cloak with a high standing collar that covers the poet's neck (in paintings, this cloak is always red); second, he portrays Dante in an intensely veristic style, his face a map of sharp cheekbones, deep wrinkles, and large, expressive eyes; third, Dante wears a head covering that conceals his hair and the side of his face. Although not seen in the Giotto fresco, another element that has become standard in Dante's depictions – including in the Athenaeum bust is a crowning laurel wreath. This Greek, and later Roman, emblem symbolizing victory and glory – particularly for poets -- places Dante amongst the celebrated writers of antiquity.

Dante's epic poem, the *Divine Comedy* (*Divina Commedia*), written between 1308 and 1320, is widely considered the greatest literary work composed in the Italian language and a masterpiece in world literature. The intended audience of his works seems to have been his peers: young, ambitious men fascinated by physiology, philosophy, and vernacular poetry (in essence, the very kind of young men whom the Athenaeum hoped to cultivate in the nineteenth century).⁴

The *Divine Comedy* is an epic poem divided into three parts: Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. In simple terms, the poem describes Dante's travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. On a deeper level, Dante details the soul's journey towards Gods, densely interweaving complex

¹ Richard Thayer Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante From Giotto to Raffael: A Critical Study, with a Concise Iconography* (London: Philip Lee Warner, Publisher, 1911), 16.

² Holbrook, *Portraits*, 17.

³ Rudolph Altrocchi, "The Present Status of Dante Iconography," *Italica* 12, no. 2 (1935): 107.

⁴ Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 8.

medieval Christian theology and philosophy.⁵ The mere density of reference and allusion, and its inventive architecture—as it is written in the distinctive terza rima rhyme scheme (aba, bcb, cdc)—constitutes one of the most consuming and momentous epics ever made.⁶

By promoting vernacular Italian in this work, Dante turned away from the scholarly preference for Latin – a language that was all but inaccessible to the uneducated, and one increasingly less emphasized by his coterie of young writers. Between 1303 and 1305 Dante focused his attention on his treatise, *De vulgari eloquentia* (“On Eloquence in the Vernacular”), which defends the use of vernacular language and urges that courtly Italian be enriched with components of spoken dialect to establish a form worthy of literary respect.⁷ Unfinished but influential, the treatise inspired a greater appreciation for the literary merits of spoken Italian. The *Divine Comedy*, made available to the public in separate installments beginning in 1314, and written entirely in the Italian vernacular, showcased this new approach, capturing the devotion of laypeople and clergy alike.⁸

Despite his widespread popularity in Europe, Dante was at the beginning of the nineteenth century virtually unknown in the United States (indeed, by the century’s start, Henry Boyd’s 1785 translation of the *Divine Comedy*, published in England, was the only available English-language version).⁹ Dante’s American reputation would rise in the decades leading up to the Civil War, largely due to his celebration by American poets and writers such as Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, and the Athenaeum’s own Edgar Allan Poe – all of whom admired the *Divine Comedy* and referenced it in their work.¹⁰ Dante’s literary influence in America would reach a high-water mark in 1867, when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow [1807-1882], the most popular American poet of the time, produced his own translation of the *Divine Comedy*.¹¹

New interest in the Italian poet inspired a kind of cottage industry in Dante representation in the nineteenth century – a trend that apparently followed the 1840 Phalen gift to the Athenaeum. Of those original ten busts, only classical Latin writers (Homer, Socrates, Demosthenes, and Cicero) and later, English-speaking authors (William Shakespeare, John Milton, Sir Walter Scott, and Lord Byron) are included in the Phalen “canon.” Although it is unknown when the library’s Dante bust was given or acquired, its presence speaks both about the rise of Dante’s star in America and the increased appreciation, in a more general sense, for the literature of a modern foreign language (though strangely, given the importance of the French Enlightenment to the Athenaeum’s founders, the library owns no busts of French writers).

⁵ William Anderson, *Dante: The Maker* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 245-272.

⁶ Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 18.

⁷ A. Ewert, “Dante’s Theory of Language,” *The Modern Language Review* 35, no. 3 (July 1940): 355.

⁸ Hawkins, *Dante*, 26-27.

⁹ Joshua Steven Matthews, *The American Alighieri: Receptions of Dante in the United States, 1818-1867* (University of Iowa, 2012), 3.

¹⁰ Matthews, *The American Alighieri*, 3. See also Joseph Chesley Matthews, “Did Poe Read Dante?” *Studies in English*, no. 18 (1938): 123-136.

¹¹ Matthews, *The American Alighieri*, 3.

Today, Dante's representation at the Athenaeum might be said to reinforce ideals the library has held from its founding, for his innovative approach to the vernacular summons the Athenaeum's goal to provide democratic access to literature, art, and poetry. Given the storied history of Italian immigration to Providence in the nineteenth century, moreover, the poet's portrait reminds us of the rich linguistic heritage these men and women brought with them; indeed, in 1921 a group of Italian-American donors gave a colossal bronze bust of Dante to Brown University's John Hay Library, just a block away from the Athenaeum. Created by sculptor Pablo S. Abbate [Italian, 1884-1973] and installed in 1921, the bust commemorated the sixth centenary of Dante's death.¹² Fiercely emotive and bearing his laurel crown, Abbate's Dante, too, emblemizes scholarship and literary innovation.

¹² "From Martha Mitchell's *Encyclopedia Brunoniana*," Brown University, http://www.brown.edu/Administration/News_Bureau/Databases/Encyclopedia/search.php?serial=D0030, 1 April, 2016.

Notes:

1. Question: what does his clothing symbolize? You said: *is this meant to signify the clothing of a scholar? Let me know what you find out in this regard.*

I researched this for quite a while and for whatever reason, could not find the direct meaning of his red cloak that he is always represented wearing. I have found descriptions of the cloak; but not the meaning.

2. With closer inspection, the bust seems to be plaster, not marble.