The Editio Princeps of Boccaccio’s Commentary on the Divine Comedy*

The story of the first edition of Boccaccio’s commentary has been variously told. To begin with, the work itself was issued with the false imprint of Florence 1724, but no one saw a copy of it until late 1725, and then it was common knowledge that the two volumes had not been published in Florence but in Naples by Lorenzo Ciccarelli, better known to his contemporaries by his anagrammatic pseudonym of Cellenio Zacclori. However, long before the book could be examined directly, interested scholars began to speculate on the identity of the person responsible for that very important editorial accomplishment. Apostolo Zeno, for example, whose opinion carried considerable weight amongst Italian scholars and bibliophiles, wrote from Vienna that the entire credit for the imminent publication belonged to the Florentine Anton Francesco Marmi, who was thought to have supplied Ciccarelli with the recently discovered manuscript of Boccaccio’s work. But when the edition did finally appear, everyone could read a statement by Ciccarelli himself to the effect that his printed text of the commentary — which was to be much maligned by all of the subsequent editorial tradition for its numerous errors of transcription — was based on a manuscript sent to him jointly by Marmi and the celebrated philologist Anton Maria Salvini, the latter of whom had also provided him with a set of brief glosses, which Ciccarelli published as an appendix to the second volume; but Salvini in turn introduced his annotations by saying that he had been enabled to study the commentary by Marmi, who had generously lent him the manuscript for that purpose. Soon after the publication of the anxiously awaited edition, a reviewer for the Giornale de’ letterati d’Italia attributed the “pregiatissima opera” equally to Marmi and Salvini. This opinion was then repeated without variation by the most important nineteenth-century editors of the commentary, Ignazio Mou-tier and Gaetano Milanesi. Things changed, however, in 1921,

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when Paget Toynbee argued only for Salvini, and then again in 1926, when Domenico Guerri responded by quickly tipping the scale in favour of Marmi, even doubting that Salvini had had any direct part in the transcription of the manuscript.\(^7\) The question has again been considered by Boccaccio’s most recent editor, Giorgio Padoan, who, in an effort to put an end to the age-old debate, has carefully re-examined the known evidence — which in reality does not amount to very much — and has concluded in favour of Salvini: “È dunque il Salvini e non il Marmi quello che fornisce il MS all’editore napoletano.”\(^8\)

Actually the facts are quite different. The real protagonist of the story is neither Marmi nor Salvini, but Anton Maria Biscioni, who is not even mentioned in this connection by any of the scholars just cited, while many of the frequently denounced errors are deliberate modifications of the text resulting from an attempt to improve its philological status. It is the purpose of this paper to provide evidence for this thesis and to trace at the same time the hitherto imperfectly known circumstances of publication, as recorded both in manuscript and in printed sources which have escaped, either totally or in part, the notice of Boccaccio editors and historians of criticism. It will be shown that while several people were involved in the production of the first edition of Boccaccio’s commentary, the credit for its realization and the responsibility for its philological form belong principally to Biscioni.

A first justification of this attribution may be found in the contemporary bio-bibliographical profile of Biscioni in Gli scrittori d’Italia by Giammaria Mazzucchelli, who includes the first edition of Boccaccio’s commentary among Biscioni’s published works.\(^9\) Of course, Mazzucchelli’s list by itself does not constitute proof of the thesis, but his usual thoroughness is sufficient to cast doubts on all other attributions, none of which has taken his claim into account. Mazzucchelli is therefore a good starting point since he forces us to concede that the issue is not yet closed and that a more rigorous study of all the pertinent documents is still in order.

Given this point of departure, the next logical step in tracing Biscioni’s possible involvement in the first edition of the commentary is to analyse his unpublished letters, searching them for the kind of information that was used by Mazzucchelli in compiling his biography.\(^10\) And here, in Biscioni’s private correspondence with Giovanni Gaetano Bottari, preserved in a thick codex
of the library of the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome, we find irrefutable proof of his editorship as well as revealing details concerning the commentary's rather long and troubled period of editorial gestation. At the time of publication of Boccaccio's work, Bottari was in Rome but he had frequent occasions to go to Naples. In a letter dated 2 May 1725 Biscioni wrote to Bottari:

Desidero, per mezzo delle di lei corrispondenze, sapere alcuna novità del Commento del Boccacio ch'io mandai là [i.e., Naples] per istamparsi. (f. 28r-v)

Besides demonstrating that it was neither Marmi nor Salvini but Biscioni who sent the manuscript to Ciccarelli, this letter also shows that the commentary, which is dated 1724, had not yet been issued in May 1725. Indeed from another letter we know that the work was still not ready for distribution on 2 October 1725. In the letter that bears this date Biscioni states:

Sento che sia terminato in Napoli il Commento del Boccacio e che fin ora siano stati ad aspettare la prefazione del Sig. Canonico Salvini. (f. 55r)

We have here the introduction of another major character, whose importance in the story of Boccaccio's commentary is second only to Biscioni's: Salvino Salvini, much less famous than his older brother Anton Maria but a scholar of great distinction nonetheless. Seven years earlier, sometime before 4 October 1718, when volume XXX of the Giornale de' letterati d'Italia was ready to go to press, Salvino Salvini had sent to the literary editor of that periodical an announcement that he would soon issue in print a commentary by Boccaccio on the Divine Comedy through the well known Florentine publishing concern of Tartini and Franchi, and that he had already submitted to the board of censors the entire work, including an introductory study that he had just finished writing. The project was aborted, however, when it reached its final stage, since at that time — the precise date is not known — a more complete manuscript of Boccaccio's commentary was discovered by Anton Francesco Marmi. Salvino Salvini's introductory study, entitled "Del Boccacio espositore di Dante," is still unpublished in the Marucelliana library of Florence. In this document he relates that he was the one to purchase the manuscript for his family library, that it begins with the literal exposition of Inferno V, 137, that both he and Anton Maria had at
first ascribed it to the copyist Maestro Grazia mentioned in the initial rubric of the codex, but that he was finally able to attribute it with certainty to Boccaccio. He furthermore states that since his efforts to find a complete manuscript had been unsuccessful, he had resolved to publish the one he had, convinced that even fragments are worth printing if they aid us in studying the great authors of the past:

Né perché egli sia manchevole nel principio mi ha rimosso dal pubblicarlo, sapendo che anche i frammenti degli ottimi scrittori sono preziosi, a guisa de’bordi e de’rottami delle antiche statue, che si conservano, dagli intendenti, tralle cose piú rare. (f. 256v)

To Boccaccio’s text, Salvino had appended some marginal notes prepared by Anton Maria “a maggior intelligenza d’alcune antiche parole e d’alcun luogo” (f. 256r).

Before hearing of Marmi’s manuscript, interested literati were eager to see in print Salvino Salvini’s promised volume, in spite of the fact that it was to be based on an incomplete manuscript, as could be surmised from the announced title of the intended publication: Comento di Giovanni Boccaccio sopra alcuni canti dell’Inferno di Dante. Testifying to the general approbation of the scholarly community is a letter of Apostolo Zeno, who on 11 January 1719 wrote to Salvino from Vienna that the announcement of his imminent publication was received by all of his acquaintances “con applauso e con lode.” But Marmi’s good fortune marked the demise of Salvino’s editorial project, which he now had to abandon altogether. And so he yielded his place of prominence in the scholarly news to rumors, more or less well founded, regarding plans to publish immediately the entire commentary.

From an article in the Giornale de’ letterati d’Italia for the year 1727 we learn that the Marmi manuscript was originally found in Magliabechi’s library, and that Marmi had intended to publish it himself in Florence until he was dissuaded by Donna Aurora Sanseverino, duchess of Laurenzano, who was keen — for undisclosed reasons — on having Lorenzo Ciccarelli publish it in Naples. News of Marmi’s discovery and changing editorial plans travelled far in the scholarly world, but it got predictably distorted along the way. When it reached Apostolo Zeno in Vienna, it concerned not the first seventeen cantos of the Inferno but the entire commedia. Consequently Zeno, who had seen the now lost Grandi manuscript of the commentary and who had corre-
sponded with Salvino Salvini on Boccaccio’s work, expressed great scepticism. “Staremo a vedere,” he wrote to his brother Pier Caterino on 22 August 1722, “cosa sarà questo commento del Boccacci che si vuole stampare in Napoli sopra tutta la Commedia di Dante.”19 Word reached him that Marmi had arranged for the Neapolitan publication and he wrote to his brother, on 4 November 1724, that he was now afraid that too many unwarranted corrections might disfigure the text of the commentary.20

At about this time Marmi, Salvino and Anton Maria Salvini, and Biscioni must have decided to collaborate — each assuming a specific responsibility — in publishing the complete text of the commentary. In fact, the editio princeps that was finally issued was made possible by Marmi’s manuscript and, as we have learned from Biscioni’s correspondence, was to include a study by Salvino Salvini on the whole work. But for some mysterious reason, when this new and more important editorial venture was practically at its end, Salvino Salvini decided not to write the promised introduction. On 2 October 1725 Biscioni wrote to Bottari that Salvino Salvini had just reached that decision and had withdrawn altogether from the project: “Ella dee sapere che egli a questi giorni,” reported Biscioni, “si dichiarò di non voler far altro; che però potrebbero darlo [i.e., the commentary] fuori” (f. 55r). From these words it may be inferred that the Neapolitan publisher had been waiting for Salvino Salvini’s prefatory study and was otherwise ready to release the work. On the other hand, Anton Maria did not deny his collaboration and provided the publisher with annotations to Marmi’s manuscript, essentially extending and revising the glosses that he had prepared for his brother’s intended publication a few years earlier. Biscioni’s responsibility was to co-ordinate the project and, more importantly, to transmit the correct text to the publisher.

These men were, of course, eminently qualified for the different tasks with which they had been entrusted. None of their contemporaries could entertain serious doubts about their ability, although one could hardly deduce this from modern histories of literary and textual criticism. The current, unprecedented popularity of early Settecento studies is principally due to philosophers, literary historians and literary critics, who naturally restrict their field of view to philosophical and literary texts. Historians of scholarship, who alone could provide the conceptual categories in which figures like Biscioni and the two Salvinis could emerge
in all their significance, have paid scant attention to the early eighteenth century. This is especially true with respect to Tuscan scholars. Consequently a myriad of supposedly minor men, who then played a determining role in the production of culture, unjustly disappear in the great shadow of Vico or in the somewhat smaller ones cast by Gravina, Muratori, Maffei and Conti. Familiarity with their studies and with the network of professional relations that united them to one another and to others such as Bottari, Rosso Antonio Martini, Marcantonio de' Mozzi, Angel Maria Ricci and Anton Francesco Gori — to mention only a few of the prominent Tuscan scholars of the post-Magliabechi generation — would modify and enrich our view of the age by forcing the conclusion that literary scholarship, far from having sunk into stagnant erudition, had then reached a mature stage of development and was capable of impressive sophistication. Collaborative projects, of which the Cruscan dictionary is the great archetype, were not uncommon. The unpublished correspondence of Martini and Bottari, for example, describes important details of a plan to issue in print Francesco da Buti's commentary with the co-operation of Martini, Biscioni and Bottari.  

Biscioni was therefore not new at this kind of work. His personal qualifications were of the highest calibre. Here we need only recall that once he was appointed custodian of the library of San Lorenzo, he transcribed and put in order many ancient manuscripts that otherwise would by now probably be lost. By the time of Boccaccio's commentary he had to his credit, among other things, the first critical edition of the *Vita nuova* and of the *Convivio*, accompanied by a long introduction, which is the first systematic allegorization of Beatrice, and by annotations that contain, expressed in unequivocal language, some basic principles of the later discipline of textual criticism current until the bold innovative perspective of Michele Barbi.  

Given such a background it is astonishing to read that the copy of the commentary that Biscioni had sent to Naples was thought to bristle with errors. The news that the philological accuracy of his work was under attack came as a great surprise to him as well. On 5 May 1725, he wrote to Bottari:

*Non intendo come la copia del *Comento* del Boccaccio sia molto scorretta. Che lo scritto non sia buono, lo confesso ancor io; ma è però tale che si può facilmente leggere da chi intende qualcosa. L'originale prestatomi dal Sig. Cav. Marmi non era squisito: la furia che faceva il medesimo di*
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riaverlo era incomportabile: il mio nipote che lo copiò non ha buon carattere, ma sottosopra intende tanto a ragione gli scritti antichi, ch'io mi volli fidare più di lui che d'altri. Collazionai tutta la copia da me medesimo, e la corressi, e ridussi (come a me pare) alla buona ortografia, siccome ho fatto delle novelle di Franco Sacchetti: e di più, parendomi d'aver operato bene, mi sono sottoscritto appiè della medesima copia. (f. 30v)

Quanto ho detto risguarda la prima parte, o voglia dire porzione del noto commento, giacché, come V.S. sa, la seconda porzione fu copiata antecedentemente alla prima, non essendosi ancora ritrovata quest'altra. La seconda porzione, ha di bisogno d'esser ridotta all'ortografia della prima, perché veramente fu copiata per appunto siccome stava nell’esemplare del Salvini. (f. 31r)

These two paragraphs contain several significant pieces of information:

1. Marmi, who was apparently very jealous of his manuscript (now known as F¹), lent it for a brief time to Biscioni so that he might make a copy of it.23 However, from the preface that Anton Maria Salvini wrote to his annotations, we know that Marmi also lent it to him and that he, in turn, immediately started to gloss it. “Alcune piccole annotazioni e correzioni, perché possa uscire dalle stampe più netto e più emendato” is Salvini’s own description of the nature and purpose of his work on the manuscript.24 From these words Padoan must have concluded that it was Salvini who had sent the copy to Naples after having altered the text in an attempt to improve it.25 Given the documentation contained in the letters, it is more probable that Salvini here refers to textual corrections indicated in his glosses and not to changes performed on the actual text that was later printed. A few examples will suffice to support this statement: Agellio, rugali, Fumone and Sentra according to Salvini should have read respectively Aulo Gellio, rurali, Salmone and sentirà, as he explained in his notes.26 In the text, however, they were printed as they were in the manuscript. Contrary to what Padoan believes, the errors in the printer’s copy of the manuscript were not the intended corrections of Salvini but changes introduced by Biscioni. Salvini’s corrections were simply indicated in his annotations.

2. The printer’s copy was made by Biscioni’s nephew under his uncle’s supervision. Biscioni, furthermore, collated the two copies and signed the one he sent to Naples. This manuscript, which contains the first part of F¹, is not listed by either Branca
or Padoan;\textsuperscript{27} if it is still extant, Biscioni’s signature would be the surest and easiest way of identifying it. Being itself an eighteenth-century copy, it would not affect Padoan’s superb critical text of the commentary, but it would fully explain the textual peculiarities of the first edition. In fact, Biscioni says in his letter that, having collated his nephew’s copy and the original borrowed from Marmi, he changed the spelling of some words in order to make it conform to his criteria — which, however, he does not describe — of “la buona ortografia.”\textsuperscript{28} This accounts therefore for some of the orthographic oddities that later editors of the commentary have signalled as errors of transcription from Marmi’s manuscript.

3. The second part of the commentary, beginning with the literal exposition of \textit{Inferno} V, 137, was copied by Biscioni, or by someone else for him, prior to the discovery of Marmi’s manuscript, which contained also the first part. This copy was signed and dated 14 September 1714 by Biscioni\textsuperscript{29} — it is known as F\textsuperscript{2}. In his letter of 5 May 1725 Biscioni states that the printer’s copy, the second half of which was based on Salvini’s original, was not collated with the manuscript that also contained the first part. This confirms with external documentation Padoan’s conclusion, which was derived mostly from internal evidence, that the first edition was based on Marmi’s manuscript for the first part and on Salvini’s for the second.\textsuperscript{30} It was Biscioni’s opinion, and his implicit recommendation to the Neapolitan publisher, that the second part of the manuscript should be made to conform to the orthographic characteristics of the first part, but this was apparently not done.

4. The writing of the entire copy sent to Naples was very difficult to read for anyone unfamiliar with the ideas discussed by Boccaccio. Many errors are therefore attributable to the printer’s inability to decipher the copy and not to the copy itself. But critics of the first edition did not make such distinctions. Most of them probably agreed with Apostolo Zeno, who felt that inaccuracies in the final product were frequently the result of hypercorrections by the editors. “La maggior parte dei saccenti correttori moderni,” he wrote to his brother regarding the commentary, “vogliono aggiustare, o più tosto guastare l’ortografia degli antichi a lor fantasia.”\textsuperscript{31}

Word somehow reached Anton Francesco Marmi that the printed commentary was full of errors, and he, in turn, reprimanded the
editor, Biscioni, rather than the publisher or the printer. In a letter dated 2 October 1725, Biscioni wrote to Bottari:

Una sola cosa voglio dire a conto de' tanti spropositi che dicono vi siano dentro, avendomi sopra di ciò fatto una lunga dicería anche il Sig. Cav. Marmi. A me dispiace infinitamente il non poterne far riscontro sulle mie copie (mie, cioè fatte fare da me, ma da me rivedute) con questa edizione. Se pure V.S. stími cosa fattibile, avanti ché questo comento esca fuori, il dargli. Ella un'occhiata alla sfuggita, e notate le imperfezioni più essenziali, farmene partecipe; io potrei allora prontamente riscontarle su questi esemplari, rimandarle le correzioni, da mettersi poi dallo stampatore nel fine dell'opera. Mi rimetto in tutto e per tutto al di lei prudente giudizio. (f. 55r)

It is not known if Bottari did what Biscioni asked him to do in this letter. Soon afterwards the edition did appear, but without the corrections, without the introduction by Salvino Salvini, and without mentioning at all Biscioni's key role in the project.

It is not very difficult to imagine how bitter Biscioni must have felt upon seeing the printed work. The attribution of the edition to Marmi, whose only contribution consisted in lending for a short time his manuscript so that it might be copied (in part) and glossed, and to Anton Maria Salvini, who had only compiled a few quick notes on it, seems in effect an outrageous violation of professional ethics — unless, of course, it was Biscioni himself who, much like Salvino Salvini, decided at the last moment to have no part in the publication. But this is a very unlikely possibility to say the least. However numerous the textual errors — including those that he regarded as improvements of the text, those that resulted from the fact that the two source manuscripts were not harmonized with one another, and those introduced by his unlearned printer as well as an expectable number of purely typographical errors — and however serious their immediate consequences might be for Biscioni, Boccaccio's commentary was too important a publication for him to disclaim it altogether. We are left only with the possibility that the publisher, annoyed by the bad publicity that Biscioni had unwittingly caused him with his co-ordination and editorship, left his name out of the book. It was no doubt the unfair treatment that Biscioni received from the Neapolitan publisher that caused him to write a set of Lezioni contra Cellenio Zacclori o sia Lorenzo Ciccarelli32 — but these, needless to say, were never published.

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NOTES

* A version of this paper was presented to the Canadian Society for Italian Studies at the Learned Societies Conference in Guelph, June 1984.
1 Del comento di M. Giovanni Boccacci cittadino fiorentino sopra la Commedia di Dante Alighieri con le annotazioni di Anton Maria Salvini (Firenze: 1724).
2 For an example of his pseudonym see his edition of Dante’s Divina Commedia (Napoli: Nella Stamperia di Francesco Larino, 1716), p. [3r], in which Ciccarelli signs his name as Celenio Zacclori in his epistle dedicatory to Tommaso Farina.
3 Apostolo Zeno, Lettere (Venezia: Valvasense, 1752), II, p. 347. The observation is made in a letter addressed to Pier Caterino Zeno and dated 4 November 1724.
4 Cf. Giorgio Padoan, “Per una nuova edizione del ‘Comento’ di Giovanni Boccaccio,” Studi danteschi XXXV (1958), 137-38, where relevant statements by Ciccarelli and Salvini are quoted from the first edition of the commentary.
5 See the unsigned bibliographical review “Novelle letterarie d’Italia fino all’anno MDCCXXVI,” Giornale de’ letterati d’Italia XXXVII (1925, but printed in 1726), 471.
9 Giammara Mazzucchelli, “Biscioni (Antonio Maria),” in Gli scrittori d’Italia (Brescia: Bossini, 1760), vol. II, part 2, p. 1276. From a bibliographical point of view, this is still the most complete biography of Biscioni. A. Petrucci, “Biscioni, Anton Maria,” in Dizionario biografico degli italiani, X (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1968), pp. 668-71, is the most recent biographical sketch of Biscioni, but as far as his works are concerned Petrucci refers the reader to Mazzucchelli’s account (p. 670).
10 Mazzucchelli’s study of Biscioni is also heavily indebted to an even earlier profile by Andrea Giulianelli published in Florence in 1756, as Mazzucchelli himself states on p. 1273, n. 1.
11 The codex is numbered Cors. 1905 (44.E.16) and titled “Lettere autografe d’Antonmaria Biscioni scritte a Monsignor Gio. Battari dai 17 gennaio 1712 ai 4 gennaio 1752.” Further references will be given by folio number. Aldo Vallone, “Minori aspetti dell’esegesi dantesca nel Settecento attraverso testi inediti,” Letteratura e filologia XII (1966), 141, mentions in passing Biscioni’s key role in the publication of the commentary.
12 This observation is also made by Amelia Cosatti in her catalogue of an exhibition of works by and on Dante, La riscoperta di Dante da Vico al primo Risorgimento (Roma: Accademia Nazionale dei Lineei, 1967), p. 93.
13 Giornale de’ letterati d’Italia, XXX (1718), 393. The announcement also said that his was the only known manuscript of Boccaccio’s commentary.
14 “Del Boccaccio espositori di Dante,” Biblioteca Marucelliana (Florence) MS A.179.30, fols. 229-57. Subsequent references will be given by folio number.
15 Giornale de’ letterati d’Italia XXX (1718), 393.
16 Zeno, II, p. 31.

18 On the Grandi manuscript and on Zeno’s acquaintance with it see Vittore Branca, Tradizione delle opere di Giovanni Boccaccio (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1958), I, p. 20.

19 Zeno, II, p. 262.

20 Ibid., p. 347.

21 See the Accademia dei Lincei codex numbered Ms. Cors. 1896 (44.E.7) and titled “Lettere autografe di Rosso Antonio Martini scritte a Monsignor Gio. Bottari dai 11 ottobre 1721 ai 23 novembre 1734.” In his letter dated 18 March 1725, Martini wrote to Bottari:

Io approvo la stampa del commento di Francesco da Buti sopra Dante, e credo che il Giovannini [the copyist] dopo che averà fatto un poca di pratica, che per verità non ne ha molta, dell’antica scrittura potrà esser capacissimo di far la copia di un antico esemplare del sud. o commento, per il quale mi sento ancor io inclinato a prescrivere quello della Crusca perché è antico e ben tenuto, benché da un pisano copiato apparisca. Ma per meglio stabilire sopra di ciò quel che sia da risolvere ho convenuto col Sig. Biscioni di portare il sud. o MS nella libreria di San Lorenzo per ivi confrontarlo con quei testi che ve ne sono, e poi far il simile con qualcun altro, per così meglio assicurarsi della bontà sua. (fols. 160r and v)

Francesco’s commentary is again mentioned in a letter dated 28 January 1732. The publication had not taken place. Martini found himself with “una montagna di quaderni” (f. 236r) containing the commissioned copy of the Cruscan manuscript, partly checked for accuracy of transcription, but no longer awaiting an imminent publication. “Voi poi mi direte,” he wrote to Bottari, “che cosa io debbo fare di questi quaderni quando gli avrò terminati di collazionare” (f. 236r). What happened to these notebooks is not known; the commentary was not published for over another century.


23 Cf. Padoan, “Nota al testo,” p. 716; the MS is described in detail on pp. 713-714. A longer description is given in “Per una nuova edizione,” 131-32.


25 Cf. “Per una nuova edizione,” 138, where Padoan also states: “Alcuni tra i più patenti errori furono corretti dal Salvini stesso.”

26 See Milanesi’s edition of the commentary, volume I, pp. 373 (Aulo Gellio), 84 (rurali), 267 (Sulmone), 483 (sentirá). In his critical text Padoan reads respectively Agellio (p. 234), explained as Aulo Gellio in a footnote (P, 840, N, 332), rurali (p. 4), explained as rurali (p. 768, n. 22), Fummon (p. 150) and sentirá (p. 320).


28 On Biscioni’s edition of Sacchetti, which is cited in the letter as an example of his concept of “buona ortografia,” see Michele Barbi, La nuova filologia (Firenze: Sansoni, 1938), p. 95.


30 Ibid., 138.
