EDITIONS OF DANTE IN BOOKSHOP INVENTORIES BETWEEN THE FIFTEENTH AND THE SIXTEENTH CENTURIES, A BOOKSHOP LEDGER AND A CONTRACT FOR PRINTING: SOME POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

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This essay compares three inventories (of warehouses and bookshops) and a ledger - all datable to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries - to assess the influence of the commentaries for the fortunes of Dante’s *Commedia* and the reading tastes of readers in Bologna and Ferrara. It will also provide a brief history of the reception of Dante’s works in this period.

Keywords: Book circulation; Dante reception; School and University programs; Vernacular culture; Classical culture; Bologna; Ferrara

The documentary sources on which this essay is based, well-known and for the most part already published, are three inventories and a ledger (or *libro mastro*) relating to as many bookshops, covering the period from 1484 to 1503. Given the complexity of the field under investigation, as revealed in the documents themselves, it should be stated at the outset that this essay will be limited to the proposal of hypotheses, together with observations on the data which has emerged from an overall analysis of the sources. These sources are in chronological order: 1) the inventory of the bookshop and warehouse of the Bolognese bookseller Sigismondo de Libri;\(^1\) 2) the inventory of the warehouse belonging to the Bolognese printer Francesco Platone de’ Benedetti;\(^2\) 3) the inventory

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of the bookshop of bookseller and stationer Domenico Sivieri in Ferrara. Finally, the Zornale of the bookseller Francesco de’ Madiis or Maggi in Venice – the critical edition of which is still in preparation – will be considered briefly alongside a contract drawn up for an edition of the Commedia accompanied by Cristoforo Landino’s commentary.

These sources clearly differ from each other, both in terms of their typology and the purposes for which they were created. The three inventories are a static record or snapshot of a collection and as such have nothing to do with the daily commerce of printed books? Instead the Zornale provides a daily record of transactions in de’ Madiis’s bookshop. Moreover, two are post mortem inventories drawn up for testamentary reasons (Sigismondo de Libri and Francesco de’ Benedetti); one was intended to advertise the bookshop’s stock (Domenico Sivieri); the Zornale is an administrative document, a ledger designed to record daily sales. Despite these differences, the sources can be usefully brought together since they are all essentially lists of books for sale or already sold, which respond and correspond to the tastes of contemporary readers. Furthermore this kind of document offers a wide range of information for which little or no other solid evidence survives, including the cultural tastes prevailing at the time, readers’ predilections, and a map of the supply and distribution of books. Any scholar interested in studying the life-cycle of printed books, to use Luigi Balsamo’s expression, would therefore do themselves a disservice by ignoring

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these important sources. They offer insights not only into the printing process but, as in the case here considered, the wider circulation and reception of books.6

The earliest document, dated 11 July 1484, is the inventory of the shop of the Bolognese bookseller Sigismondo de Libri, who had died barely a month earlier. The document, the earliest and most detailed inventory of the stock found in a warehouse and associated bookshop, has been published.7 Leaving aside an examination of the set-up and the internal organisation of this large stock, our focus here is on the content of this collection as it existed when the inventory was taken. It consisted of about 2,660 printed volumes, not listed in alphabetical order or in order of stock volume. No information is given on prices or the number of sheets in each edition. Sigismondo’s warehouse stock was made up in part of books needed to readily restore the shelves of his bookshop, but more importantly of editions which he had himself financed, either wholly or in part. Absences within such collections are usually significant, so it is important to point out that there was no edition of Dante among Sigismondo’s already slender offering of books in the vernacular. Sigismondo’s stock largely focused on books in Latin – especially legal and school texts – within which categories he seems to have attempted to expand and vary the offer to his clientele, connected with the University. Among the vernacular editions it is worth singling out Boccaccio’s Commedia delle ninfe fiorentine (Treviso, 1479; ISTC ib00707000) and the same author’s Teseide with a commentary by Pietro Andrea dei Bassi, the Ferrarese humanist from the school of Guarini (Ferrara, 1475; ISTC ib00761000);8 above all, however, there is Petrarch with no fewer than 84 copies of the Trionfi and the Canzoniere, with the commentary of Bernardo Lapini for the Trionfi and Francesco Filelfo for the Canzoniere (likely Bologna, 1475–76, ISTC ip00380000).9 The commentaries, especially Filelfo’s, belong to the approach described by Carlo Dionisotti as “semplificazione divulgativa a uso cortigiano della tradizione esegetica” [a popularising simplification of the interpretative tradition designed for courtly readers].10

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9 Trionfi and Canzoniere are almost always been paired in the same edition since the Bolognese princeps by Andrea Portilia (ISTC ip00398000).
to what had happened to the interpretation of Dante over the previous four decades. This tradition had in fact dwindled between Barzizza’s commentary on the *Commedia* in 1440 and the appearance of Landino’s commentary in 1481, indicating the likely declining fortunes of Dante’s work in this period, and a consequently lower demand for commentaries. Indeed Sigismondo’s clientele would seem to have had no interest in Dante, in contrast to the popularity of Petrarch.

The next document in chronological order is the well-known inventory of Francesco Platone de’ Benedetti’s warehouse, drawn up in April 1497 to calculate the inheritance after Francesco had died suddenly and intestate. The number of copies for each listed edition is noted, but the price is not given. Editions are listed in alphabetical order in the manner of a basic catalogue, though there are frequent errors.\(^1\) One copy of a *Dantes cum comento* (i.e. an edition of the *Commedia* with commentary)\(^12\) is noted by the compiler as number 130 in the list of *Libri in humanitate*. The work appears only at this point in the list while other titles are often repeated throughout the inventory. In other words, it would seem that de’ Benedetti had only one copy of the *Commedia* in his warehouse. Now it is certainly the case that booksellers tended to avoid keeping large numbers of copies of the same edition in stock in preference to the widest possible selection of titles, but it is also true that they always ensured they had a good number of copies available of those books which they knew would sell easily, such as textbooks for school and university use for example – Thus the fact that only a single edition of Dante listed in 1497 can be taken as an indication that his work was no longer much sought after by Bolognese readers in this period. De’ Benedetti’s large warehouse would seem to confirm this decline in interest, not just because the stock was designed to meet in as exhaustive a way as possible the requirements of Bologna’s school and university programmes, the *studia humanitatis* in particular, in which Latin played a far more important role than the vernacular.\(^13\) According to this inventory

\(^{11}\) To understand the organisation Francesco gave to the stock in his warehouse, consisting of more than 10,000 copies of roughly 500 editions, subdivided into the traditional commercial categories of *Libri in humanitate* and *Libri in iure civili et in iure canonico*, see Gatti, *Francesco Platone de’ Benedetti*, 203-218.


\(^{13}\) These *curricula* were already abreast of the new humanist standards for teaching; see Paul F. Grendler, *La scuola nel Rinascimento* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1991), 123-155. In this regard, it has to be pointed out that more or less 80% of the de’ Benedetti’s stock is in Latin as opposed to 20% in the vernacular.
prose literature in Latin dominates over works in verse, even genuine bestsellers like the *cantari* on chivalresque or Trojan subjects in *ottava rima* which were so fashionable in nearby Ferrara. This hypothesis is strengthened when we consider other titles which appear in the same list of *Libri in humanitate*, for example a likely copy of the edition of the *Historia Florentini populi* by Leonardo Bruni. His prose style was held up in the mid-fifteenth century as a model for Latin humanist scholarship, also open to Greek sources since Bruni had been a pupil of Manuel Chrysoloras. Both Bruni and the humanist school and humanist circles in general had many misgivings about the *Commedia* as too closely linked to the world of the lower bourgeoisie and far removed from Latin and high culture in the official sense. Once again the significant presence of Petrarch in Platone’s stock has to be taken: no fewer than 13 copies of the *De remediis utriusque fortuna* (Petrarch the Latin writer) in, perhaps, the 1492 Cremona edition with a commentary by Niccolò Lucari (ISTC ip00409000). But there are only extremely slender holdings of Petrarch’s vernacular works – a single copy of an edition of the *Trionfi* and *Canzoniere* with commentary – while Boccaccio is present with two copies of the *Filocolo* and one of the *Decameron* (probably both Venetian editions).

Let us come back again at the copy of *Dantes cum comento*. It can be stated with certainty that this was not an edition printed in Bologna since we know that no edition of any of Dante’s works was produced in the city in the fifteenth century. Since de’ Benedetti’s stock had been built up from the 1480s onwards, it is probable that this entry refers to one of the four Venetian editions of the *Commedia* published between 1484 and 1493, all accompanied by Cristoforo Landino’s commentary on the work. From its first appearance in 1481, and until as late as 1544, when the edition with Vellutello’s commentary came out, Landino’s commentary enjoyed an almost uninterrupted dominance superseding all earlier commentaries. Since the entry in the inventory makes no reference to the presence of illustrations – normally noted by the com-

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15 Ibid., 318.
16 Ibid., 322–323.
17 Ibid., 261, 266, 282, 284.
18 A pseudo–Dante work was printed, however, perhaps by Caligola Bazalieri (*I sette salmi penitenziali*; ISTC id00038500).
19 Edit 16, CNCE 1163. Vellutello’s commentary was reprinted only one more time, in 1554 (Edit 16, CNCE 1169).
piler, as we shall see, if only for the reason that they generally increased the value of the book – it seems that this copy was not one of the illustrated editions, such as the well-known 1487 Brescia printing by Bonino Bonini (ISTC id00031000) which has illustrations up to the first canto of *Paradiso*.\(^{21}\)

The inventory of the shop of the Ferrarese bookseller/stationer Domenico Sivieri can be dated to around 1503.\(^{22}\) The document came to light by chance in 1990 when it was found in the binding of an account book during a reorganisation and conservation of archival material in the State Archives in Modena. Like the de’ Benedetti list, it is a snapshot of the bookshop’s stock at a precise moment in time, though in this case it was drawn up to advertise the books. There are 436 entries listed alphabetically. No prices or number of copies held are noted, which means that this source is lacking an important and extremely valuable element of evidence for this study. Sivieri’s bookshop specialised in religious works and above all vernacular texts (contemporary works, translations and works in verse). It has two different Dante’s editions in stock. One is indicated as a *Danti instoria* [i.e. illustrated] *con comento*\(^{23}\) the other, surprisingly, as the *Convivio de dante*,\(^{24}\) extremely unusual this early in bookshops, referring to the sole edition printed in the fifteenth century: Florence, Francesco Bonaccorsi, 1490 (ISTC id00036000). The presence of the *Convivio* in Sivieri’s list is remarkable because two centuries after it was written the impact of Dante’s polemical and ideological ideas had faded to the point of seeming entirely remote from current concerns. And it is doubly remarkable to find a copy in Ferrara, where, as Sivieri’s list attests, vernacular culture was centred on contemporary lyrical poetry and on poetry in *ottava rima*, i.e. the Trojan and chivalric romances, which were less fashionable in Bologna, as we have seen.\(^{25}\)
Sivieri’s edition of the Commedia is likely to have been illustrated and commented and the commentary must have been Landino’s. There are at least six possible editions which could have been the one owned by Sivieri. As in the de’ Benedetti inventory, all of them were published in Venice, except for the 1481 Florentine edition by Nicolò di Lorenzo (ISTC id00029000) and the already mentioned Bonini edition. The presence of Dante’s poem in Sivieri’s bookshop is not surprising. First of all the Commedia – having a victorious though controversial revival from the 1470s onwards, – belonged to the canon like Petrarch, a combined edition of whose Trionfi and Canzoniere is also found, while on the other hand there are no works by Boccaccio at all. But it is also true that Dante’s poem reflects the bookseller’s core stock, vernacular literature, in all likelihood aimed at a reading public shaped by the tastes of the local court of the Este in Ferrara, which was a much greater enthusiast of vernacular translations and chivalresque epics in ottava rima than the Bentivoglio court in Bologna.27

26 It is a clear evidence of the main channels of supply and distribution which we can imagine underpinned a complex commercial network, as shown by Angela Nuovo, The book trade in the Italian Renaissance (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

27 See Samuele Giombi, Libri e pulpiti. Letteratura, sapienza e storia religiosa nel Rinascimento (Rome: Carocci, 2001), 12-13: “Proprio la fragilità della dinastia benti- volesca, culturalmente indebolita dalla concorrenza dell’Università e della Chiesa, pone dei limiti al peso di quella letteratura di corte che tanto spazio ha invece presso altre città con robusta tradizione signorile (si pensi solo, ad esempio, alla signoria estense per Ferrara, Modena e Reggio). Perciò quella “letterarietà” collegata alla tradizione cortigiana epico cavalleresca e volta soprattutto alla festevolezza affabulatrice del mito, alla sua natura di intrattenimento per un pubblico di corte, trascolora a Bologna in soluzioni simbolico-interpretative piuttosto che descrittivo-narrative, fatta eccezione per alcuni casi limitati quali le Porretane di Sabadino degli Arienti” [It was precisely the fragility of the Bentivoglio dynasty, weakened in cultural terms by the

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Now I should like to give a brief look at the *Zornale*, the ledger of transactions in his bookshop kept by the Venetian bookseller Francesco de’ Madiis (or Maggi), who worked in the city between 1481 and 1488, publishing ten or so editions. This is a highly complex document in terms of the range and quantity of the data it contains, providing a daily record of purchases, exchanges and other completed transactions in the de’ Madiis bookshop between May 1484 and January 1488. The details and structure of this document are not my focus here: an edition with commentary is being prepared by Cristina Dondi and Neil Harris. They have published various articles, among which a kind of miniature edition of the part relating to a single month, June 1484, on which the following observations are based. The de’ Madiis document records sold editions with prices and number of copies, in contrast to the other mentioned lists recording deposits of books without prices. This brief discussion of the *Zornale* focuses exactly on a couple of those prices. On 1 June 1484 de’ Madiis records the sale of a *Dante cum commento* for 1 ducat (this was probably the 1484 Ottaviano Scoto edition, published in Venice, with Landino’s commentary, ISTC id00030000) while on 12 June he sold the same book together with the *Quaestiones metaphysicae* by the Paduan doctor and philosopher Gabriele Zerbi (ISTC iz00027000) for the price of 1 ducat and 5 lire. Apart from the obvious observation that the *Commedia* was part of de’ Madiis’s stock, we can also speculate that the work was not in high demand, in contrast, for example, to the editions of the Latin classics present in far more significant quantities in the register. There is no indication that the edition contained illustrations or that it was printed *in carta bona*, i.e. on vellum, or was *ligato*, i.e. already bound – all factors which increased the retail price of a book. So the prices noted by de’ Madiis

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28 See note 4.

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would seem to reflect above all the presence of Landino’s commentary.\textsuperscript{31}

To draw some conclusions, let us consider more closely the Landino commentary, as all the editions cited thus far include this commentary. Its importance in the history of Dante interpretation is well known, as are the political circumstances underlaying the production of the 1481 edition in which the commentary first appeared. Even its subsequent editorial success is well documented by scholars: there were six fifteenth-century editions which used it, together with a further five editions which appeared over the course of the first half of the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{32} In addition to the political and celebratory aims of the Florentine edition, however, the venture also had a commercial dimension, which is no less significant for our purposes here. The contract for the printing of the edition – antedating the production of Landino’s contribution, and recently published with a commentary by Lorenz Böninger –\textsuperscript{33} is another important archival source, which completely differs from the kind of documents so far examined. The significance and ambition of the project can be already plainly inferred in the contract. Not only in the clauses which lay down rules for the modes and schedules of production but also in the names of the three signatories, all connected with the Medici \textit{élite} and with leading cultural circles in the city: the printer Nicolò di Lorenzo, Bernardo degli Alberti the humanist scholar who financed the project, and of course Cristoforo Landino. But other information the contract includes is also significant. First of all the planned print run (1125 copies!), reveals both the expected popularity of the edition and the

\textsuperscript{31} See Dondi, Harris, “Oil and green ginger,” 385: ‘Two copies described as \textit{Dante con comento dottauiano} are recorded in the initial stock trade. A copy is sold on 1 June 1484 for 1 ducat; another on 4 June, together with Gabriel Zerbus’s work on metaphysics, for d. 1 \textit{L} 5. It is interesting to note that the Dante rates are considerably more expensive than the Zerbus, despite being half the size, with 270 leaves against 512. The reason most likely lies in the prestige of the Landino commentary, one of the first genuinely new texts written explicitly for the printing press, and the fact that the still recent Venetian reprint was nevertheless cheaper than the Florentine \textit{princeps}. The higher quality of the Median and Super-royal paper stock probably also contributed to the price’.


\textsuperscript{33} Böninger, \textit{Il contratto per la stampa}, 97-118.
potential range of its distribution, with an implicit acknowledgement of the cultural and political interests supporting the project. The very burdensome rhythm of work in the printing shop should also be noted here, as the edition was printed on four presses simultaneously. We also find an obsessive concern for restricting knowledge of the contents – the three signatories were forbidden from distributing in any form or fashion gatherings as they came off the press before the publication of the edition – as well as for the scheduling of the work, especially for the correction of the proof sheets as these passed to and from every day between Landino and the printer and Alberti for a final revision. Yet while the different operations, including the financing, which made up the phase of production seemed to proceed without any particular hitches, problems began to emerge in the subsequent phase of the commercialisation of the finished product, showing the complexity of the commercial network into which the edition was launched. From the outset it was clear that the edition would be sought after; despite the fact that the conditions for its distribution and sale had been rigidly established in advance, Bernardo degli Alberti contravened what had been agreed on more than one occasion, by selling the edition in markets which had not been specified in the contract. Not only does this indicate who had the upper hand in the contract but it also shows the potential for distribution for an editorial product which was both so new but already seen as so important for its future influence.

Landino’s commentary was the culmination and transformation of the return of Dante into the canon which had begun, not without its contradictions, in the 1470s. Overcoming the prejudices and resistance of official humanist Latin culture and its scuola, Landino succeeded in bringing the Commedia into the spheres of high culture and university erudition, freeing it from its usual bourgeois readership of varying degrees of cultivation, which the Florentine intellectual élite so disdained. But in this new atmosphere of vernacular humanism, perfectly embodied in Landino’s undertaking, the Commedia – and even more Dante’s other works, which were no longer current in this period – remained excluded from the school and University, from both studia humanitatis (i.e. Latin curriculum) and vernacular curriculum, for which it was considered too ‘high’ when compared with the primers, chivalric

34 Ibid., 112.
35 Throughout fifteenth century in fact only the poetry of the ancient classical poets was included in studia humanitatis and therefore the Commedia had always been missing. See Grendler, La scuola nel Rinascimento, 256–265.
epics and all the other works which catered for the instruction of artisans and merchants. This is perhaps the reason why Bologna and its humanism, both deeply connected with university and schools, appeared not to welcome the ‘return’ of Dante to the canon, thus continuing the division between high and low culture. As we have seen no edition of the *Commedia* was printed in the fifteenth century in Bologna, where reading seemed to be largely confined to Latin and to prose.

Sivieri’s bookshop in Ferrara – where also, as in Bologna, no edition of the *Commedia* was printed – tells a different story. Here there was a different reading public from the one in Bologna, who read above all vernacular works and preferred verse and chivalric epic, which had always found in the *Commedia* an inexhaustible repertoire of style and inspiration. The fact that Sivieri’s list does not include the number of copies held for each edition means that we should be cautious in our conclusions, yet it seems that, despite the fluctuations in its fortunes, the influence of Dante’s poem endured. An influence the most important fruit of which was Boiardo’s *Orlando innamorato*.

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