

INTRODUCTION

AN OVERVIEW

The first problem facing any editor of Dante's *Commedia* is the richness of the manuscript record – around 600 copies if we count only complete texts of the poem, more than 800 if we include partial and fragmentary copies.¹ Confronted with this mass of material, Giorgio Petrocchi, who prepared the Edizione Nazionale of the poem to mark the seventh centenary of Dante's birth in 1965, took a bold decision: to base his edition on early manuscripts only.² More precisely, he chose to use only manuscripts he believed to be securely datable before 1355 – just 24 manuscripts in all, in his view, plus three fragmentary copies, making a total of twenty-seven witnesses he collated in their entirety. This editorial strategy was not simply a pragmatic response to the vast size of the surviving tradition; on the contrary – he insisted – it was imposed by the transmission history of the text itself. Petrocchi's edition marked a historic step forward in Dante studies, both for its theoretical take on the complexities of the textual tradition and the text which resulted from his approach: not simply *La Commedia* (the poem as

¹ Other vernacular ms. traditions are less rich: for example, 80 or so copies survive of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Marcella Roddewig in her census of *Commedia* manuscripts lists 844 items: *Dante Alighieri. Die göttliche Komödie: vergleichende Bestandsaufnahme der Commedia-Handschriften*, Stuttgart, Hiersemann Verlag, 1984.

² A similar approach had been suggested many years before by Carlo Negrone in *Sul testo della Divina Commedia. Discorso Accademico*, Torino, Appresso Carlo Clausen Libraio della R. Accademia delle Scienze, 1890, but Negrone's argument was based on two fallacious assumptions: that mss. copied before 1350 were free of textual degradation, and that once these mss. had been identified a simple numerical majority of witnesses would guarantee the authenticity of the text at any given point.

Dante wrote it), but *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata* (the poem as it circulated in the three and a half decades after the poet's death).³

1355 was no arbitrary cut-off date. Petrocchi's decision had a robust theoretical underpinning, based as it was on the conviction that after 1355 textual transmission became so contaminated that beyond that point no editor could rationalise or give a coherent account of manuscript relations. The cause of that contamination was easily pinpointed in the enthusiastic scribal and editorial activity of one of Dante's greatest admirers, Giovanni Boccaccio. Boccaccio copied the whole *Commedia* three times in the years between 1357 and 1373. These Boccaccio copies, in the order in which they were produced, are now to be found in libraries in Toledo, Florence and the Vatican City, and are conventionally referred to with the sigils To, Ri and Chig.⁴

All three Boccaccio copies demonstrably have as their base copy another Vatican manuscript (Vat), which Boccaccio had ordered from a Florentine scriptorium for his friend Petrarch.⁵ But far from copying this illustrious exemplar as faithfully as he could, Boccaccio consulted other

³ Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, a cura di Giorgio Petrocchi («Le opere di Dante Alighieri. Edizione Nazionale a cura della Società Dantesca Italiana», vol. VII), 4 vols., Milano 1966-67); henceforth in the text and notes vol. I *Introduzione*, vols. I-IV *EN*.

⁴ To Toledo, Biblioteca del Cabildo, ms. 104 6.

Ri Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, ms. 1035.

Chig Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms. L VI 213.

The ms. sigils used here and in what follows are those used by Petrocchi in the *EN*. 1357 is the earliest date suggested by scholars for To, but Petrocchi believed it to date from at least 10 years later (*Antica tradizione* 13): in his view there is thus a substantial chronological break between the earlier tradition and the Boccaccio *editio*.

⁵ Vat Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms. Vaticano latino 3199.

We do not know for certain if Boccaccio ordered one or two copies of the poem; he may have sent this copy to Petrarch and himself copied from a 'manoscritto gemello' obtained from the same source at the same time; see Petrocchi *Introduzione* 89-90; Pomaro *Codicologia dantesca* 364-65.

copies, and in the course of transcribing incorporated into his own copies plausible or attractive variants from these other manuscripts. Nor was this a once-and-for-all procedure: he continued actively to seek out and introduce new readings in the later copies; as a result his second and third copies differ both from the first copy and from one another.⁶

Contamination, as it is called – the process by which a strict vertical line of descent is subverted when variants are introduced laterally from manuscripts other than the principal exemplar – is not something which started with Boccaccio. The earliest securely-dated surviving manuscript of the *Commedia*, known as the Landiano (La)⁷, which dates from 1336, is already demonstrably contaminated over its entire length, with many readings scraped away and others substituted for them (some of the original readings are recoverable with the help of an ultra-violet lamp).⁸ An even earlier manuscript of 1330-31, which does not itself survive but of which we have detailed knowledge, was likewise already contaminated. In 1548 the Florentine humanist Luca Martini made a scrupulous collation of this manuscript, using as his base text a 1515 Aldine printed text. The lost manuscript can be reconstructed from the composite testimony of the printed text on which Martini made his collation, where that text has not been amended, and Martini's hand-written substitute readings which replace a

⁶ For a list of variants reflecting Boccaccio's editorial activity, see Petrocchi *Introduzione* 20-40. Petrocchi summarises the situation: 'To si distingue per una maggiore osservanza delle lezioni di Vat; con Ri si accentua il processo di distacco, che trova la sua soluzione più libera nella veste di Chig.'

⁷ La Piacenza, Biblioteca Comunale Passerini Landi, ms. 190. The 1336 dating of La is undisputed; whether it really is the earliest surviving manuscript has recently been questioned, as we shall see.

⁸ Petrocchi, *Radiografia del Landiano*, SD XXXV (1958), 5-27. The corrections were made c.1350; see Petrocchi *Introduzione* 71.

significant part of it. The copyist of this lost manuscript, in a prefatory notice which Martini faithfully transcribed, shows that he was clearly aware that there are corrupt readings in circulation and tells how he chose what seemed to him to be the best readings among those available: '... liber lapsus est quam plurimum in verborum alteratione et mendacitate. Ego autem ex diversis aliis respuendo que falsa, et colligendo que vera vel sensui videbantur concinna ...'.⁹

Indeed contamination predates even this very early witness; the evidence of the earliest commentaries on the poem – those of Jacopo Alighieri (1322), Graziolo Bambaglioli (1324), and Jacopo della Lana (1328) – and the fragments of text they cite shows that the process dates from the earliest copies made of the poem in the years immediately following its author's death.¹⁰ But in Petrocchi's view the scale of contamination in the Boccaccio copies is something new, and for an editor of the *Commedia* attempting to make sense of the surviving manuscript tradition, non-negotiable.

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⁹ Mart Milan, Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, Aldina AP XVI 25.

¹⁰ Edward Moore, *Contributions to the textual criticism of the Divina Commedia*, Cambridge University Press 1889, vi; Petrocchi *Introduzione* 15. Cfr. Petrocchi *Proposte* 340: 'L'alterazione del testo della *Commedia* risale ... ai primissimi amanuensi'; 'il singolo amanuense dovè lavorare, nella più parte dei casi, su diversi testi, non su un solo'; and *Introduzione* 365-66: 'l'inquinamento del testo della *Commedia* ebbe ad iniziarsi subito dopo la morte del poeta (per le prime due cantiche anche a partire dal 1316-1317).'