

## Boccaccio's 1475 *Teseida*: Este Partisan and John Rylands Library Ghost

### *The Teseida as Este Partisan*

In his envoi to the *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*,<sup>1</sup> Boccaccio declares his great hopes for this modern version of a classical epic. Alluding to Dante's observation in the *De vulgari eloquentia* that, while Italian poetry treats of love and of morality, it still lacks an epic that treats of valour in arms, Boccaccio proposes that the *Teseida* embodies the martial work that Dante had described.<sup>2</sup> It is, he announces, the first to sing of the affairs of Mars, which have never before been witnessed in the Italian vernacular ("nel volgar lazio più mai non veduti").<sup>3</sup>

Despite its author's hopes, however, the *Teseida* has suffered the most unfortunate publication history of all of Boccaccio's literary creations, a fate that has rendered it one of the least known of the master's works. As a result, the *Teseida* was largely marginalized and little studied for four and a half centuries after its first printing in 1475, making no significant contributions to the development of Italian literature. In fact, because Boccaccio's epic

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<sup>1</sup> *Teseida* 12.84–86. Boccaccio 1964, 661–62.

<sup>2</sup> Noting that the proper subjects for vernacular literature are "armorum probitas, amoris accensio, et directio voluntatis" 'valour in arms, love's enkindling, and moral rectitude,' Dante had pointed out that, while Cino da Pistoia had written of love and he himself had made moral rectitude the subject of his *Commedia*, he had not yet found that any Italian poet had written of arms: "arma vero nullum latium adhuc invenio poetasse" (*De vulg. eloq.* 2.2).

<sup>3</sup> *Teseida*, 12.84.8: *nel volgar lazio*: the vernacular of Lazio (i.e., of Rome and its province: the fourteenth-century term for the Italian language). In the lines preceding this claim for the *Teseida*, Boccaccio alludes to Dante's observation about the muses already having inspired poets to treat virtuous discourse (*onesto parlare*) and love (*in amoroso*) (*Tes.* 12.84.4–5 and glosses).

was Chaucer's most important Italian source,<sup>4</sup> and subsequently, via Chaucer, served as source of Shakespeare and John Fletcher's *Two Noble Kinsmen*,<sup>5</sup> the *Teseida* can just as well be characterized as being more important for medieval and renaissance English literature than it has been for Italian literature. As for Italian literature from the advent of printing until the early twentieth century, the most apt observation about the *Teseida* would be that of the eighteenth-century philologist Anton Maria Salvini: "[...] chi cita la stampata, che pure è Opera grande, non cita il Boccaccio, ma un fantasma" 'whoever quotes the printed edition, which is a fine enough work, is not quoting Boccaccio, but rather a phantasm.'<sup>6</sup>

Unhappily for the *Teseida*, the first incunabulum edition (Ferrara, 1475) was not published to honour the fame of Boccaccio, but was instead appropriated in order to serve the political and dynastic aspirations of the Este rulers of Ferrara. The first printing of the *Teseida* was based on a version of the poem produced in the 1430s by Pietro Andrea de' Bassi, a courtier at Ferrara, to honour the marquis of Ferrara, Niccolò III d'Este (1383–1441). De' Bassi first reproduced much of Boccaccio's preface ("Come che a memoria... Et, come appare, i due giovani"); he then relocated the last third of the introduction, containing Boccaccio's summary of the poem and his prayer that the narrative would convince Fiammetta once again to become his beloved lady,<sup>7</sup> to the end of the poem. In its place, he substituted an extended account dedicated to Niccolò III ("Perché, preclarissimo principe") that highlights the history, achievements, and virtues of the Este dynasty. (See Fig. 1.) As for the poem, de' Bassi's edition is not based on a single manuscript or a related group of manuscripts. Rather, it is an arbitrary composite: a mixed text combining *alpha* and *beta* readings of the *Teseida*, with de' Bassi's often questionable emendations and without reference to a set of

<sup>4</sup> Besides serving as the primary source of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, the influence of the *Teseida* is evident in the *Parliament of Fowls*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Franklin's Tale*, *Anelida and Arcite*, and the *Legend of Good Women*.

<sup>5</sup> The play begins with a prologue that acknowledges its source: "for I am sure / It has a noble breeder and a pure, / A learned, and a poet never went / More famous yet 'twixt Po and silver Trent. / Chaucer, of all admir'd, the story gives; / There constant to eternity it lives" (1.Prologue.9–14).

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Mazzuchelli 1762, 2.3:1362 n. 272.

<sup>7</sup> The incunabulum edition varies in certain minor details: the fifth folio, with the dedication to Fiammetta, is blank in some copies and the publication date in the colophon appears either as M<sup>o</sup>.CCCC<sup>o</sup>.LXXIII<sup>o</sup> or as M<sup>o</sup>.CCC.LXXV. See the Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke: <<http://gesamtkatalogderwiegendrucke.de/docs/GW04499.htm>> and *British Library Incunabula Short Title Citation*: <<http://data.cerl.org/istc/ib00761000>>.

consistent editorial principles.<sup>8</sup> Finally, de' Bassi composed a commentary for the *Teseida* which praises the character, virtues and good judgment of Theseus, the Duke of Athens, implying that Niccolò III was a modern embodiment of the Athenian ruler.

In addition to the *Teseida*, de' Bassi created a second narrative: the *Fatiche d'Ercole* ("Labours of Hercules"). Just as the *Teseida* was reworked to celebrate Niccolò III and the Este dynasty, the *Fatiche d'Ercole* was created to celebrate the birth and good health of his only surviving legitimate son, Ercole d'Este (1431–1505). The *Fatiche* is best understood by reference to the *De regimine principum* ("On the Education of Princes") tradition; that is, it was intended to serve in the education of a future ruler. Celebrating the varied feats and virtues of the mythical Hercules, the narrative implies that the classical deity can serve as a model for the boy who would one day rule Ferrara. The luxury manuscript containing the *Teseida* and the *Fatiche d'Ercole*<sup>9</sup> was copied by the famed Biagio Bosoni da Cremona,<sup>10</sup> and deposited in the Biblioteca Estense,<sup>11</sup> which housed many of the scribe's other illuminated and calligraphic works.

Besides serving in the education of Ercole d'Este, the *Teseida/Fatiche d'Ercole* manuscript served the politics and statecraft of the Este family. In April 1471, when Ferrara was recognized as a papal fief and its ruler, Borso d'Este, became the first Duke of Ferrara, the event was memorialized with a splendid series of frescos in the Palazzo Schifanoia and with the gift of a splendid pair of illuminated manuscripts to Galeazzo-Maria Sforza, fifth Duke of Milan. The frescos, in one of the city's great palaces, served to remind visitors that Ferrara, now ruled by a duke, had become a duchy. The gift of the two books, containing the mottos, medallions and symbols of the Duke of Milan, served a political purpose: it communicated that Ferrara and its ruler were now political equals to the Duchy and Duke of Milan. The two

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<sup>8</sup> Salvatore Battaglia, the editor of the first edition of the *Teseida* autograph, provides the following mordant observation about the 1475 incunabulum: "È l'edizione più fortunata del poema boccaccesco, quella che ha pesato sulle successive, perpetuando un testo corrotto e contaminato" 'It is the most fortunate edition of the Boccaccian poem, the one that has burdened its successors, prolonging a corrupt and contaminated text,' Boccaccio 1938, xxxvi.

<sup>9</sup> The manuscript also contained *Canzonetti* of Niccolò Malpigli with a commentary by de' Bassi; its inclusion might be explained if the manuscript is to be considered a textbook for the education of a future ruler.

<sup>10</sup> Bertoni 1918.

<sup>11</sup> At present, the manuscript is held in Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, cod. D, 524 inf. See Agostinelli 1985–86, 42–43.

manuscripts chosen to serve as ambassadors to the Duke of Milan were copies of de' Bassi's glossed *Teseida*, with its elaborate preface full of praise for the Este dynasty, and de' Bassi's *Fatiche d'Ercole*, with its implied praise of Ercole d'Este, who was destined to be the next Duke of Ferrara.<sup>12</sup> When Duke Borso d'Este died shortly afterwards, on 20 August 1471, and was succeeded on 26 October 1471 by the new duke, Ercole I d'Este, the message implied in the gift of the *Fatiche d'Ercole* became a fact.

If the two books could serve as a diplomatic exchange between two neighbouring dukes and duchies, they could also serve wider diplomatic and political interests. In 1475, four years after Ercole d'Este became Duke of Ferrara, a Ferrarese printer, Agostino Carnerio, published de' Bassi's *Teseida* and commentary (164 fols.) and his *Fatiche d'Ercole* (66 fols.). The two luxury folio volumes, in Roman type and with generous margins, were set up from de' Bassi's manuscript in the Este library, the layout of the text-pages reproducing that of the volume in the Biblioteca Estense. The two elegant volumes — in particular, the *Teseida*, with its preface celebrating the Este genealogy — were widely circulated in late fifteenth-century Italy and served the Ferrara court as useful tools in its efforts to establish the reputation of the city as a centre of the arts, and its rulers as patrons of humanistic culture.<sup>13</sup>

While de' Bassi's *Fatiche d'Ercole* was little read in subsequent centuries, his edition of the *Teseida* became the standard for the next 450 years, the nine subsequent editions of the *Teseida*, from the early sixteenth through the late nineteenth centuries, being corrected against the Ferrara 1475 incunabulum. Only after the autograph was finally identified in the late 1920s and published in Salvatore Battaglia's edition for the Accademia della Crusca (1938) did the flaws of the de' Bassi/Este *Teseida* become glaringly apparent. Having prepared the edition based on a study of the autograph and twenty-seven *Teseida* manuscripts in Florence and at the Vatican Library, Battaglia pronounced a withering judgment about de' Bassi and his edition:

non solo contaminando due e più testi, ma anche introducendo non poche varianti personali, ed esercitando nel complesso un'assai sospetta sorveglianza critica [...] P. A. de Bassi ne abbia fatto la infelice compilazione,

<sup>12</sup> The two manuscripts are held at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA: ms. Typ 227 (*Teseida*) and ms. Typ 226 (*Fatiche d'Ercole*).

<sup>13</sup> The other incunabulum of the *Teseida*, which was published ca. 1490 in Naples by Francesco del Tупpo, is the only witness of a no longer extant *alpha* copy. The edition was not widely circulated.

affidandosi troppo al suo discutibile gusto poetico e alla sua presunta dottrina umanistica.

not only contaminating two or more manuscripts, but also introducing not a few personal choices and exercising a rather suspect critical oversight of the project [...] P. A. de Bassi made a miserable pastiche of it, trusting too much in his questionable poetic taste and his presumed humanistic learning.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Teseida as John Rylands Library Ghost*

Salvini's remark about the 1475 incunabulum of the *Teseida* being a *fantasma* serves as a convenient introduction to another piece of misfortune to which the *Teseida* edition was subjected: that of being transformed into a bibliographical ghost. A "ghost" is a publication that was never published, a book that never was. Typically, a ghost is the product of a bibliographer who would describe an edition of a book, erring at some point in the description in a way that can be misunderstood. Once such a defective description is formulated and published, the shelf life of the book-that-is-not-a-book is often interminable. The erring or misunderstood description is eventually accepted and the ghost-book takes on a life of its own.

The ghost of the *Teseida* had its origin in the splendid, seven-volume catalogue (1814–23) of the circa 45,000 incunabula and rare books in the library of George John, the second Earl Spencer, at Althorp Park, Northamptonshire, which later became the nucleus of the rare books collection of the John Rylands Library. Published in four volumes (1814–15) plus a three-volume supplement (1822–23), the *Bibliotheca Spenceriana* is the product of the indefatigable efforts of one of the most prominent nineteenth-century bibliographers, the Rev. Thomas Frognall Dibdin (1776–1847).<sup>15</sup> In his introduction to the first volume of *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*, Dibdin makes a

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<sup>14</sup> Boccaccio 1938, xxxiv.

<sup>15</sup> The catalogue is available online (and in the public domain) via the Hathi Trust Digital Library: <<http://www.hathitrust.org>>.

point of emphasizing the care that went into the creation of the bibliography,<sup>16</sup> his own special concern for accuracy in describing the various books,<sup>17</sup> and the particular exceptional prestige of the publication.<sup>18</sup>

Three years after the publication of the final volume of Dibdin's Spencer collection catalogue, the German bibliographer Ludwig Hain, published the first part of his four-volume incunabula catalogue, the *Repertorium bibliographicum* (Stuttgart, 1826–38). As its Latin title suggests,<sup>19</sup> Hain's ideal was to examine systematically and accurately all books created from the development of the art of typography until the year 1500. Hain's *Repertorium*, which describes 16,299 fifteenth-century books, was a remarkable feat of persistence and erudition that inspired a field of bibliographical research. While Hain's work was emended and extended in W. A. Copinger's two-volume *Supplement*<sup>20</sup> and D. Reichling's six-volume *Appendices*,<sup>21</sup> the modern library catalogues continue to accept Hain as a starting point and reference point.

Like thousands of other entries in the *Repertorium*, the descriptions of the 1475 *Teseida* (Hain 3308)<sup>22</sup> and *Fatiche d'Ercole* (Hain 2706)<sup>23</sup> include the title, incipit, and line breaks at the beginning of the major sections of each work, plus the explicit with printer's name and date. These descriptions raise a few questions, however: (1) both volumes are described as having Boccaccio's "Come che a memoria" preface, which should be present only in the *Teseida*, and (2) the line breaks for the "Come che a memoria" preface differ in each work.

As for the location of Boccaccio's preface, this may reflect the conditions in the print shop during the printing of the *Teseida* and the *Fatiche*. The two works were set up from a larger manuscript, in which a different preface

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<sup>16</sup> "To escape errors, or avoid omissions, in a publication of this nature, is perhaps impossible; but every care has been taken to prevent the occurrence of either" (Dibdin 1814–23, 1:iv).

<sup>17</sup> "[The publication] may however boast of a comparatively near approach to accuracy" (Dibdin 1814–23, 1:v).

<sup>18</sup> "Of a Library, justly considered [...] to be the richest private collection in Europe, it was proper that the Catalogue of so material a portion as is contained in these volumes, should be equally splendid and accurate" (Dibdin 1814–23, 1:vi).

<sup>19</sup> Hain, *Repertorium bibliographicum in quo libri omnes ab arte typographica inventa usque ad annum MD typis expressi ordine alphabetica vel simpliciter enumerantur vel adcuratius recensentur*.

<sup>20</sup> Copinger 1895–1902.

<sup>21</sup> Reichling 1905–11.

<sup>22</sup> Hain 1826–38, 1.1:454.

<sup>23</sup> Hain 1826–38, 1.1:351.

(“Per Che preclarissimo principe”) introduced the *Teseida* and an abbreviated version of Boccaccio’s “Come che a memoria” was displaced to the end of the poem, becoming an epilogue. The second item in the manuscript was de’ Bassi’s preface to the *Fatiche* (“Li antiquissimi eccellenti passati”), followed by the text of the *Fatiche*. When this single manuscript was transformed into two incunabula, this eventually resulted in some confusion about the placement of the abbreviated form of Boccaccio’s “Come che preface.” Ultimately, Boccaccio’s preface appeared in four different formats:

- (1) *Teseida*:  
 (cc. 1–4) De’ Bassi preface: *Per Che*  
 (c. 5) Boccaccio preface: *Come che*
- (2) *Teseida*:  
 (cc. 1–4) De’ Bassi preface: *Per Che*  
 (c. 5) blank
- (3) *Fatiche*:  
 (c. 1) Boccaccio preface: *Come che*  
 (c. 2) De’ Bassi preface: *Li antiquissimi*
- (4) *Fatiche*:  
 (c. 1) blank  
 (c. 2) De’ Bassi preface: *Li antiquissimi*

The easiest way of explaining the variant arrangements and omissions of Boccaccio’s preface in the two works is to assume that they are the product of some sort of mix-up in Agostino Carnerio’s printing office in Ferrara. As for the other question listed above (Hain’s presenting variant line breaks in the setup of Boccaccio’s preface), this, however, offers no easy explanation. Since no variant texts of the *Teseida* and the *Fatiche d’Ercole* have been identified or are likely to be identified, the problem can best be resolved by seeking to examine Hain’s sources.

Although Hain’s goal was to examine all the books he lists in the *Repertorium*, it is clear that he was not able to accomplish this and had to depend in part on secondary sources. He, in fact, acknowledges this, using an indicator about which not all scholars are aware: an asterisk that prefaces many entries in the *Repertorium bibliographicum*. When an asterisk precedes the entry number in the catalogue, this serves as Hain’s indication that he has examined the book he is describing. Since neither Hain 2706 (*Fatiche d’Ercole*) nor Hain 3308 (*Teseida*) are identified with an asterisk, this indicates that the information in each catalogue entry arrived second-hand. The unacknowledged source of Hain’s information on the *Teseida* and the *Fatiche d’Ercole* is Dibdin’s *Bibliotheca Spenceriana* — and, in particular,

Dibdin’s conflicting descriptions of Boccaccio’s “Come che a memoria” preface.

In discussing the 1475 *Teseida* incunabulum, Dibdin describes the setup of the preface, reproducing three indented 43-space lines plus two 47-space lines:

[C] ome che a memoria tornandomi le  
felicita trapassate ne la miseria uedendomi  
douio sono mi sieno di graue dolore ma-  
nifesta cagione. Non me e p tãto discaro  
il reducir spesso ne la fatigata mente ecrudele  
(Dibdin 804)<sup>24</sup>

In describing the first page of the *Fatiche* as containing the same preface, Dibdin allows four indented 40-space lines plus two 50-space lines:

[C] ome che a memoria tornandomi le felicitã  
trapassate ne la miseria uedendomi douio  
sono mi sieno di graue dolore manifesta  
cagione. Non me e p tãto discaro il re-  
ducere spesso ne la fatigata mente ecrudele dona  
la piaceuole imagine de la uostra intera bellezza  
(Dibdin 805)<sup>25</sup>

Both these descriptions, however, differ significantly from the copies of the “Come che” preface in the John Rylands Library and in other library and rare books collections. In the incunabulum itself, the preface to the poem has seven indented 68-space lines and the rest of the page with 82-space lines:

[C] Ome che a memoria tornandomi le felicitã trapassate ne la mi-  
seria vedendomi dovio sono si sideno di grave dolore manifesta  
cagione. Non me e p tãto discaro il reducir spesso ne la fatiga-  
ta mente e crudele dona la piacevole imagine de la vostra intera  
bellezza ...  
humana figura essere cõ mecho delibero. Eche assai quello chio cõsidero sia  
il suo

The differences between the three representations of what is supposed to be the same thing lead us to the undeniable conclusion that, despite Dibdin’s claim of precision and exactness, his descriptions in the *Bibliotheca Spenceriana* are not always as accurate as he would have us believe.

<sup>24</sup> Dibdin 1814–23, 4:85–86.

<sup>25</sup> Dibdin 1814–23, 4:89.

This information about Dibdin's accuracy raises a further question about how some of the information and the statements in the *Bibliotheca Spenceriana* catalogue might have been misused. An examination of Hain's entries for the *Teseida* (3308) and the *Fatiche d'Ercole* (2706) reveals that the line breaks in the *Repertorium bibliographicum* are the same incorrect ones that Dibdin reported in the *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*. Misled by Dibdin's protestations of his care and accuracy, Hain had carefully quoted Dibdin, introducing an error into the bibliographical record. The incunabulum catalogues, as a result, have had to resort to suggestions of the existence of a version of the *Fatiche* that "marks the line-endings differently" and a rare version of the *Teseida* "with variants in the setting-up."<sup>26</sup> Hain's silent quotation of Dibdin's *Bibliotheca Spenceriana* thus resulted in the creation of two bibliographical ghosts. These were spirits that resided in the Spencer Library until Mrs. Rylands' purchase of the Spencer collection in the late nineteenth century, and then took up lodgings in the John Rylands Library until their recent exorcism during the *Locating Boccaccio* conference in July 2013.

### Conclusion

This paper has largely described two unhappy events in the history of the circulation of Boccaccio's *Teseida*: (1) a much less than perfect first edition that overshadowed other editions of the epic for more than four centuries, and (2) a mis-description of the first edition that further confused the early history of the text, engendering one or more literary ghosts in the process. I would like to close by proposing two remedies. The first is the recently published SISMELE edition of the *Teseida*,<sup>27</sup> which, thanks to comprehensive ultra-violet and infra-red photography, provides a completely restored version of Boccaccio's autograph. The second is the hope that, with Dibdin's *Bibliotheca Spenceriana* identified as a significant source of Hain's *Repertorium*, scholars can make use of it in resolving other questions concerning Hain's work.

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<sup>26</sup> British Museum 1930, 6:606–07.

<sup>27</sup> Boccaccio 2015.

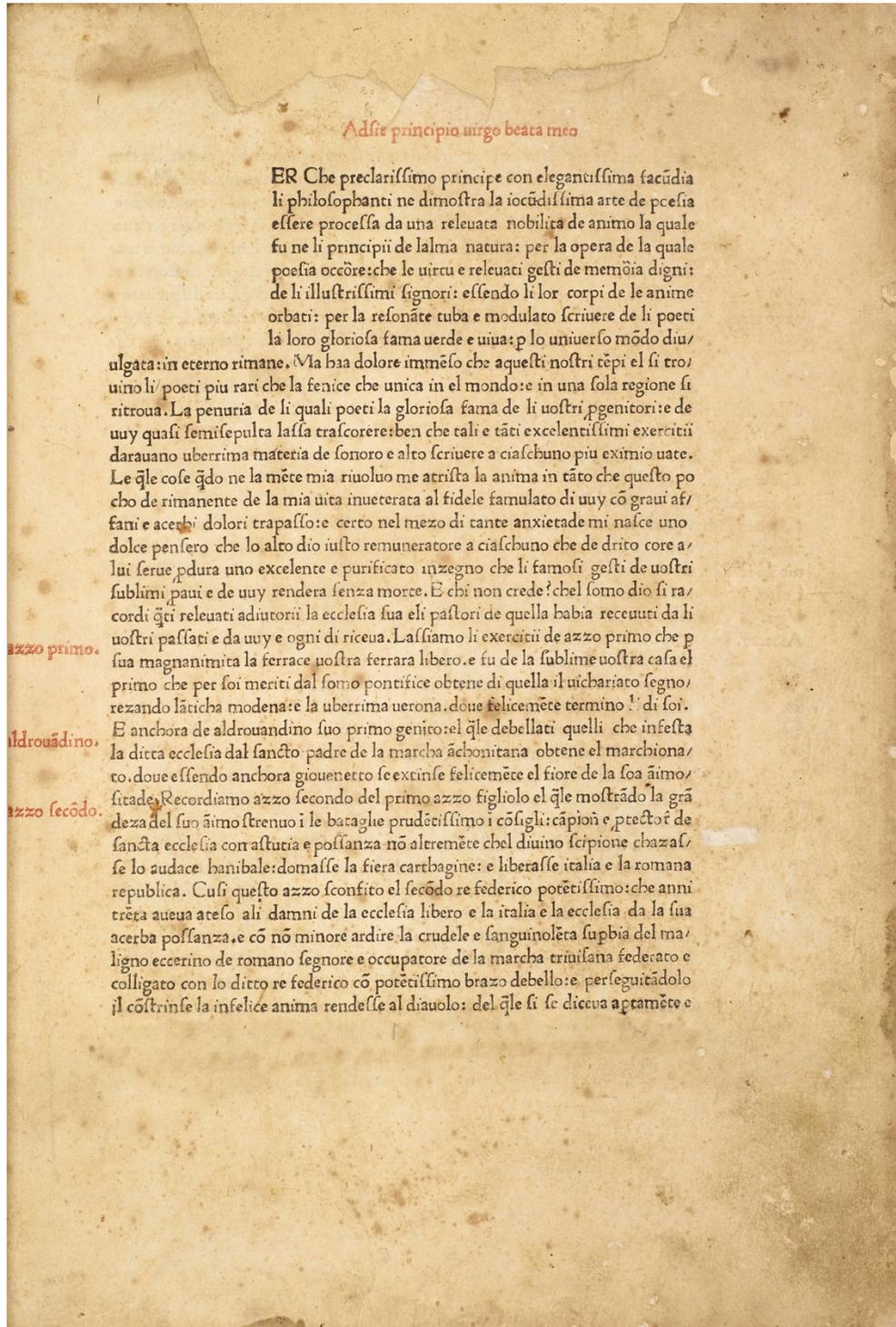


Figure 1.

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