



## Printed Riddles in Early Modern Italy Traditional Perspectives and New Approaches\*

Marco Francalanci

University of Alcalá (<marco.francalanci@uah.es>)

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*O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani,  
mirate la dottrina che s'asconde  
sotto 'l velame de li versi strani.*

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, IX, 61-63

### Abstract

The purpose of the article is to draw attention to Italian riddles of the Renaissance. This publishing and literary genre has been studied especially from ethnological or literary perspectives. What is completely lacking, however, are studies that deal with how this literature was produced, how it circulated and who printed it. These perspectives are highly relevant: they make us realise that such texts were not only produced by the likes of Cervantes, Bembo or Shakespeare, but that riddles were often written, performed and printed by men who are now forgotten, sometimes not fully literate and often not from elites. The intention here is to place these writings in a methodological and historiographical framework that may lead to more in-depth study in the future.

**Keywords:** Authorship, History of historiography, Popular literature, Renaissance Studies, Riddles

### 1. An Unintentional Solution to the Most Famous Italian Riddle

*Se pareba boves alba pratalia araba & albo versorio teneba & negro semen seminaba:*<sup>1</sup> one of the earliest known vernacular texts is a riddle.

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<sup>1</sup> (He led oxen in front of him & he ploughed a white field & he sowed a black seed). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

This is, of course, the famous *Indovinello veronese* (*Veronese Riddle*), a postilla found in a manuscript written in Spain during the eighth century and now preserved at the Biblioteca Capitolare in Verona. The story of the discovery and dating of the postilla is well known and can be found in any Italian literature textbook. We will briefly go over some of the details.

The credit for the discovery of the *Indovinello*, which was not immediately recognised as a riddle, belongs to Luigi Schiaparelli. In 1924 he produced a commentary for the *Orazionale mozarabico* of the Biblioteca Capitolare, the codex in which the postilla is contained, from a purely palaeographic and codicological point of view. Schiaparelli also expressed himself on the provenance of the postilla, claiming that it would have been added to the *Orazionale* by an unknown hand in the city of Verona at the end of the eighth century (Schiaparelli 1924).<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after the publication of the aforementioned article, Nino Tamassia opened the real debate on the postilla in a piece written together with Michele Scherillo (1924), entirely transcribing and identifying it as a semi-vernacular text, an excerpt of a larger composition. Between 1924 and 1926, many scholars returned to the subject, reflecting on the linguistic identity and meaning of the postilla, but systematically failing to identify it as the mere riddle it actually was.<sup>3</sup>

The famous philologist Vincenzo De Bartholomaeis, who had spoken of the postilla – defining it as a *ritmo* (rhythm) – in a collection he edited in 1926, had moved along the same lines. It was during one of his lectures at the University of Bologna that the issue was put into a whole new light: Lina Calza, a first-year university student, pointed out the similarity of the text to some verses she had heard sung by common people and which alluded to the act of writing. She then advanced the idea that it might be an ancient variant of the same riddle, which was still performed in the rural area of the Apennines during the early twentieth century. The association was immediately accepted by De Bartholomaeis, who quickly found traces of other variants in the writings of historians of folklore and popular culture.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the true nature of the postilla was identified and the debate on the *Indovinello veronese*, still considerable, finally found a clear direction after the publication of the discovery (De Bartholomaeis 1927).<sup>5</sup>

There is, however, an unknown story that runs alongside the one just reported and that interests us closely. In fact, before De Bartholomaeis, and following a completely different path, a sixteenth-century version of the riddle and its solution were published in the journal *La Bibliofilia* (1924, vol. 26, 179-188). The solution itself was not acknowledged by the author of the contribution and went completely unnoticed, arousing no interest among scholars who dealt with the postilla.

The key to solving the problem was contained in an article on sixteenth-century popular culture by the philologist Guido Vitaletti. In this essay (1924), Vitaletti transcribed part of the *Indovinello nuovo*. The article contained a collection of riddles in a question-and-answer form and mottos printed in Milan for Pandolfo Malatesta at the end of the sixteenth century (*Indovinello nuovo* [c. 1594]). This work contains a brief riddle that reads: ‘Campo bianco, semenza negra, doi la guarda e cinque la mena’.<sup>6</sup> Next to it is the solution, which

<sup>2</sup> However, these assessments have been criticised by Armando Petrucci and Carlo Romeo in two different contributions. They suggest dating the postilla to the 830s and place its drafting in Pisa (Petrucci and Romeo 1992 and 1998). The hypothesis has been confirmed through further elements provided by other scholars (Bartoli Langeli 1995).

<sup>3</sup> For a complete overview of the early phase of the debate, see the bibliography offered in Rajna 1928 and Presa 1957.

<sup>4</sup> For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century Carlo Piancastelli published a study in which he commented on a variant of the same riddle. Piancastelli’s work is now collected in a recent anthology (in Bellosi 2001).

<sup>5</sup> On the debate, see the biographical summary offered in Frank and Hartmann 1997.

<sup>6</sup> (White field, black seeds, two are watching and five are carrying it).

is also given in Vitaletti's transcription: 'La penna da scrivere'<sup>7</sup> (Vitaletti 1924, 183).<sup>8</sup> It is clearly a variant of the most famous riddle in the history of the Italian language, which circulated at the height of the sixteenth century in several other collections and was well known during the modern age.

This story is significant. It not only allows us to reflect upon a curious coincidence, but also demonstrates the existence of a bias that has affected the study of riddles for a long time and continues to this day. Indeed, literary scholars have traditionally dismissed these literary forms, considering them merely minor productions. The case of the *Indovinello veronese* has certainly demonstrated the opposite.

It is therefore necessary to look at the studies produced on this literature as well as the paths outlined by historiography within the study of popular literature.

## 2. Popular Literature Between Ethnology and Literary Studies

Since the nineteenth century, in fact, various intellectuals had studied riddles relating to popular culture, essentially approaching it from two different directions that soon turned out to be complementary in their interests and methods: literary and ethnological studies. These research perspectives provided the methodological premises for later studies on riddles.

Giuseppe Pitrè, the Sicilian doctor who first introduced ethnological studies in Italy, was especially important.<sup>9</sup> He had already begun to take an interest in popular traditions in the 1860s and continued to collect, publish and discuss the traditions and culture of the common people throughout his life. His work, which first focused on his native Sicily, soon involved the entire peninsula, and in the 1890s he founded the *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari* with his friend Salvatore Salomone Marino. The journal, which lasted until 1909, was truly a national and international point of reference for studies of this nature and set the stage for a fruitful season of ethnological research.<sup>10</sup>

Equally important was the *Biblioteca delle tradizioni popolari siciliane*, a collection of 25 volumes that Pitrè published between 1871 and 1913: here, the customs and traditions of the Sicilian people were recorded and extensively discussed. The *Biblioteca*, recognised as Pitrè's great masterpiece, represents the first systematic attempt at an ethnological collection in Italy and had a very singular cultural influence. Each study is introduced by an extensive essay by Pitrè, who comments on the subject and offers an accurate overview. One of these volumes (regarding the most diverse themes, such as songs, fairy tales, proverbs, etc.) was even dedicated to riddles. The essay, although dated, still represents a solid starting point for those interested in the subject from an ethnological point of view (Pitrè 1897).

<sup>7</sup> (The writing pen).

<sup>8</sup> Guido Vitaletti was interested in popular culture, folklore and Italian literature (his works on Dante were particularly significant). His life was marked by family bereavements and an unstable financial situation (Bottini 1936). The fact that Vitaletti did not identify the coincidence before publishing should not be surprising: in fact, the publication of the article at the end of 1924 coincided with the publication of the transcription of the text, and perhaps, even preceded it by a few months (Tamassia and Scherillo 1924). If anything, it is more significant that no later intellectuals (including Vitaletti) noticed it when the text of the *Indovinello veronese* became known following the publications at the end of 1924.

<sup>9</sup> On Pitrè's experience as a scholar, see the rich biographical profile by Dei 2015.

<sup>10</sup> For Solomon Marino's experience and his role in the dissemination of ethnological studies in Italy, see his biographical profile (Bellantonio 2017).

In the same years, however, especially thanks to Alessandro D'Ancona, literary studies were also beginning to consider the texts of popular literature. D'Ancona's research touched on these themes on several occasions, coming ever closer to the fledgling ethnological studies. In 1878, when his *Poesia popolare italiana* was published in Livorno, a new phase of literary studies began. D'Ancona, following in the footsteps of illustrious literary scholars – Niccolò Tommaseo above all – placed these studies on a whole new level, bringing philological and literary research into dialogue with the newly born ethnological studies, which was very much in tune with Giuseppe Pitrè (D'Ancona 1878).<sup>11</sup>

One of D'Ancona's undoubted merits is that he stimulated some of the first reflections on the census and organisation of popular documentation (Brambilla 2004, 31-32). One of his pupils, Francesco Novati, took up these themes and made them the subject of several publications.<sup>12</sup> It is to him and the work of Arnaldo Segarizzi that we are chiefly indebted for the renewal of such studies: the two intellectuals, who were also informed by D'Ancona, began to consider the editorial format of the documents together with the texts, opening up one of the most complex fields of study revolving around the study of popular literature (and one that is still a topic of debate for historians and philologists today).

In 1906, Novati delivered a speech at the Società Bibliografica Italiana that has remained famous: *La storia e la stampa nella produzione popolare italiana* (1907). Novati insisted on the relationship between popular literature and the art of printing, emphasising the need for further study. In this respect, Italy was lagging far behind France and Germany, where the relationship had been studied in depth for years. He closed his speech with an appeal, which was, as we shall see, partially heeded. He hoped to be able to start collecting and taking a census of examples of popular literature, which he said were scattered in libraries and inaccessible to scholars, who were often unaware of their existence precisely because of their lack of visibility in the collections of conservation institutions.<sup>13</sup>

Taking up the invitation was Arnaldo Segarizzi, Novati's friend and collaborator. Segarizzi's name is linked to the city of Venice, where he worked as a librarian first at the Marciana Library, then at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia (Pellegrini 2018). Just two years after Novati's appeal, Segarizzi published an important study, *Saggio di bibliografia delle stampe popolari della Marciana di Venezia* (1908), in which he set forth the rules that librarians should follow in cataloguing popular literature, thus offering a sort of model for producing comparable catalogues and bibliographies.

This essay was, however, only the first step for Segarizzi, who immediately afterwards devoted himself to composing his great work, the *Bibliografia delle stampe popolari italiana della r. Biblioteca nazionale di S. Marco di Venezia*, published a few years later (1913). This volume, sponsored by the Società Bibliografica Italiana, directed by Novati, was intended to be the first in a series that was ideally supposed to map the entire Italian heritage. In reality, the venture stopped at this first, very important volume. In fact, Novati, who died in 1915, found no heirs willing to support his project and with his passing the project came to an end. The *Bibliografia*, which was rooted in the historiographical tradition of the nineteenth century, was nonetheless a modern and unique tool for Italy in the early twentieth century.

<sup>11</sup> D'Ancona had in fact worked with Pitrè for years. The two were also in correspondence and D'Ancona systematically reviewed Pitrè's works in the journal *Nuova Antologia* (Benedetti 2012, 482). For a general study on the contacts between Pitrè and literary circles, see Benedetti 2012. Other relations between Pitrè and philological circles can be found in the broad-ranging and well-documented essay 'Il silenzio e la memoria' (Brambilla 2004).

<sup>12</sup> For a complete bibliography of his writings, see the references in Brambilla 2004, note 4.

<sup>13</sup> On this text, see the thorough Introduction by Barbieri 2004a.

Although the work was not completed, the fruits of the collaboration were certainly valuable. In fact, the volume came out with a foreword by Novati himself, in which he reaffirmed the importance of such works and reflected upon the significance of the collected material. For the first time, an Italian library – the Marciana National Library in Venice – was striving to single out popular works in its collections that it wanted to valorise and have studied by scholars and ethnologists.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. *Early Italian Studies on Riddles and Michele De Filippis*

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, alongside the new ethnological and literary studies about popular literature – and because of these –, research was also being conducted on the particular literary genre of riddles. Among the first to deal directly with the genre was the philologist Vittorio Cian (Treves 1981). He wrote an erudite study in 1888 in which he analysed some of Bembo's *Motti*, relating them to popular poetry. Thanks to these compositions, Cian was able to make some initial inroads into a field of study that up to that point was practically untouched: the study of riddles and mottos (1888). Despite his observations, however, the focus of the study remains on Bembo: the information that the scholar offers on the popular literature served to better situate Bembo's work and to 'justify' the vulgar and obscene language that he used.<sup>15</sup>

Giuseppe Rua then focused more directly on the riddles of the modern age, initially looking at those associated with Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* and then broadening his perspective to the more general phenomenon of the genre's production (Rua 1890 and 1898).<sup>16</sup> Especially in his second contribution, Rua intervened by bringing some order to the material available in Italian libraries, mentioning the main sixteenth-century collections and considering the debts of some producers to others. It is significant that, in his studies, Rua connected the witnesses of ancient texts explicitly to those that were still common in rural areas in his time, still showing the integration between literary history and ethnology.

This was, for instance, the environment in which Guido Vitaletti studied: he arrived at riddles through the study of popular prints and appreciating the works of D'Ancona, Pitrè and

<sup>14</sup> However, a problem of definitions arose: what were popular works? This was a difficulty that led Novati and Segarizzi to extensive debates (Petrella 2004). The arbitrariness with which the identification was adopted, based on both extrinsic and intrinsic characteristics, is perhaps one of the greatest limitations of the bibliography (Segarizzi 1913, 8). In addition, this is not the only criticism that could be levelled at the work: above all, the second part of the volume (which was supposed to contain the indexes) never came out, making it really difficult to navigate and consult. The entries are in fact arranged topographically (in order of shelf mark) and there is a lack of apparatus to relate the different entries. But if these are problems arising from the lack of continuity in the undertaking, important criticisms have also been made from a structural point of view (Barbieri 2004b). Indeed, the entries consistently lack careful descriptions of the bibliographic characteristics of the pieces, which do not describe notes of provenance of the documents and other signs of possession or use. Despite these problems, this was the first truly supportive tool for scholars wishing to tackle the analysis of popular prints, and its features were drawn on in the production of other works concerning further Italian libraries. It was only later that works similar to the *Bibliografia delle stampe popolari italiana* were produced, but in a cultural climate that had by then changed and was far removed from these early efforts by Novati and Segarizzi, who nevertheless intended to continue their work and endeavour. To mention only the main ones, it should be remembered that the bibliography of popular prints of the National Library in Florence dates back to the 1950s (Angeleri 1953). The bibliography of the Trivulziana library, which only dealt with popular works of a secular nature (Santoro 1964), did not come out until the 1960s. For similar efforts produced for the holdings of other libraries, see Angeleri 1953.

<sup>15</sup> Apart from this article, it is interesting to emphasise that Cian (1890) was no stranger to the world of ethnology and cultivated sensibilities as a scholar of demology. In fact, he dealt at various times with traditional songs and popular culture and had a particular interest in Sardinia. He edited above all the *Saggio di canti popolari logudoresi*.

<sup>16</sup> On Straparola, see the biographical profile by Pirovano 2019.

Novati. In the early 1920s, he began to research popular literature, realising, however, that the planning and structuring that had distinguished the efforts of Pitrè and the Società Bibliografica Italiana were fading away, both due to the death of the promoters and the outbreak of the First World War. In 1923 he published an impassioned article in the journal *Cultura*, in which he perhaps tried to carve out a role for himself that was never recognised by the Italian academic system (Vitaletti 1923). Vitaletti hoped for the resumption of Pitrè's projects (the *Biblioteca* had stopped in 1913) and of Novati and Segrizzi's bibliographies, which he said had come to a premature end. He then argued perceptively that studies had not come to a complete halt, but lamented that everyone was now working without coordination (Vitaletti 1923). He therefore put forward the idea of a project with both ethnographic and bibliographical aims, which was to be based on the collaboration of intellectuals from very different disciplines, capable of returning popular culture studies to their pre-war splendour.

Vitaletti's remarks were not out of place. The concerted work of the early years of the century was over, and certainly, if there had been more points of reference, historiographic production would have benefited from it. Yet this project never took place, and Vitaletti himself lamented it, declaring in another article that the call had gone unheeded and that he intended to continue the exploits of the great masters on his own, claiming that 'non avendo alcuno studioso di buona volontà risposto al mio invito, mi accingo senz'altro da solo all'ardua fatica' (1924, 179).<sup>17</sup> The arduous task thus began with the description of some popular prints in the library owned by Leo S. Olschki, of whom Vitaletti was a collaborator; it also dwelt on the description of the *Indovinello nuovo*.

Up to the 1920s these were the only essays discussing the complex and interesting riddle production of the early modern period. From Cian and Rua's studies to Vitaletti's, literature and ethnology had thus often moved together, sharing aims and even publishing venues. This consonance is also present in a subtle way in the work of the scholar to whom the historiography on Italian riddles owes the greatest debt, Michele De Filippis.

He was born in Rome in 1891 and moved to the United States in 1915. In America, he enrolled in university, taking courses in Italian literature and Romance languages (first at Brown University, then at the University of Michigan). He received his Ph.D in the early 1930s from the University of Berkeley with a thesis on the sixteenth-century poet Giovanni Battista Manso, to whom he devoted several studies (De Filippis 1936 and 1937).<sup>18</sup> In the 1930s, he became Assistant Professor at the same university and remained there until the end of his career in the 1960s.<sup>19</sup>

At Berkeley he met Archer Taylor, a Germanist who at that time was working on folklore studies (proverbs and riddles in particular), and who in 1940 had founded the California Folklore Society.<sup>20</sup> Taylor's work had a great influence on De Filippis, who took up the study of riddles on Taylor's advice and succeeded in developing a research project in three volumes, published between the late 1940s and the late 1960s (De Filippis 1948, 1953 and 1967).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> (Since no scholar of goodwill has responded to my call, I shall certainly undertake the arduous task alone).

<sup>18</sup> On Manso, see the brief biographical profile by Calitti 2007.

<sup>19</sup> For more on De Filippis's life, see Fucilla's biography (1975).

<sup>20</sup> Above all, Archer Taylor had published *The Proverb* (1931) and *A Bibliography of Riddles* (1939). He returned to these themes on several occasions during his career. For more on Archer Taylor, see Hector H. Lee's biographical essay (1973). It is also thanks to these studies by Taylor that a broad interest in these literary forms has spread in the Anglo-American sphere. Of the many recent publications, see for instance a work on riddles in music (Schiltz 2015) and an essay on literary theory (Pagis 1996).

<sup>21</sup> In 1948, when the first of De Filippis' volumes was published, *The Literary Riddle Before 1600*, by Archer Taylor, came out. De Filippis refers to this work in his preface to introduce his topic (1948, III).

To understand the spirit in which De Filippis worked and the perspectives in which his research was embedded, it is useful to look at the introduction to the first volume, in which the guidelines of the work are stated. His efforts are directed above all towards systematisation and anthologisation (De Filippis 1948, III-IV). Noting the complexity of navigating through the mass of manuscript editions and copies of riddles that circulated in the modern age, De Filippis first states his intention to order the material. His narrative therefore proceeds in chronological order and he cites and comments on every known instance of literary riddles, skilfully moving between different sources.

De Filippis' approach, however, focuses on literary manifestations and is almost antagonistic to the ethnologists' focus on the popular forms of riddles, to which he was, through Taylor, also indebted.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, he is not interested in the very fertile relationship identified by Novati between popular texts and the press and does not even mention Novati's and Segarizzi's work in his oeuvre. De Filippis' focus on texts is always philological and never includes considerations concerning the uses of texts and the dynamics of their production and circulation or their social functions.<sup>23</sup> The focus always favours famous authors and chooses to give greater prominence to the more literary compositions. Thus, the first volume is, for example, almost entirely devoted to the study of Straparola's riddles, citing other collections almost exclusively in order to relate them to the riddles that were later included in *Le piacevoli notti* or, conversely, to prove that Straparola had not used them.

This attribution work is always carried out with extreme care and prompts De Filippis to reflect on the debt of foreign authors to Straparola. Studying the relationship with Pierre de Larivey, among the first French translators of *Le piacevoli notti*, De Filippis constructs tables of correspondences, showing where Larivey made use of Straparola's riddles and where he drew instead on other sources (1948, 30-71).

De Filippis' work, even if its methodological horizons have now been partly surpassed, remains invaluable. This is not only because he was the first scholar to touch upon a field of study that had practically never been dealt with before (apart from the few forays already mentioned), but also because of the collecting work he did in addition to the critical one. The volumes are in fact accompanied by extensive indexes, arranging the cited riddles by subject and author. These volumes thus offer a valuable basis for those wishing to analyse this production, making it easy to reflect on the recurrence of the same themes in the compositions, of the same riddles in different contexts and helping to shed light on the relationships between authors and texts.

#### 4. *From De Filippis to the Present*

De Filippis' work, as Beatrice Corrigan noted, was essentially the first historiographic study on the subject of Italian riddles in the modern age.<sup>24</sup> More than fifty years after the publication of the third and final volume of the series, we can say that it has remained the only one. This histo-

<sup>22</sup> Significantly, the bibliography within which De Filippis orients himself is very small. In total, between sources and literature, he cites no more than 80 works.

<sup>23</sup> De Filippis immediately makes it clear that he did not want to deal with popular riddles (identifying these with prose compositions), concentrating only with literary witnesses, often in sonnets, sometimes in octaves, but always in verse (1948, 8).

<sup>24</sup> 'Curiously enough, there has been hitherto no history of the literary riddle in Italy, Pitre having concerned himself with the riddle in general, and principally with the folk riddle. Yet it is an important subject for the light it throws on the reading and social tastes of the ages in which the riddles appeared, on literary style, and on the dissemination abroad of Italian literature' (Corrigan 1950, 188). Corrigan also reviewed, and praised, the second volume (1954); the third was reviewed in particular by Lena Ferrari (1969).

riographical gap is filled in part by works that have moved to the margins of the topic at hand and that today offer those who wish to deal with these texts useful tools with which to proceed.

In the years in which De Filippis was writing, a bibliography of riddles was published by Aldo Santi, a bibliophile and passionate puzzler (Santi 1952). However, it was not the work of a bibliographer, and it presents serious problems: for instance, the author does not always refer to catalogues or to the institutions that preserve the documents he cites. In addition, the bibliography is too vast and has the ambition of surveying riddles from all over the world, and from the fifteenth century up to the twentieth. The perhaps overly optimistic bibliography cannot be considered an exhaustive or perfect work, but it does offer an initial tool from which to start if one wants to approach the subject.<sup>25</sup>

A few articles have also been written in the field of literary studies, in particular an essay by Andrea Torre on the riddle production of Giulio Cesare Croce. The subject, which deserves special attention, has never been explored in depth in studies of the Bolognese *cantastorie*, and Torre's piece is the only one available today for those who wish to delve deeper into the subject (Torre 2006). Other studies relate to the translations of Giovan Francesco Straparola's literary work, with particular attention to the rendering of riddles. The topic had already been addressed by De Filippis – and previously sketched out by Rua (1898) – but modern scholars make no reference to these two authors, ignoring their role and merits. Attention has been drawn to Spanish translations of Straparola's enigmas (Federici 2011; Resta 2021) and the French version, first translated by Jean Louveau, then by Pierre de Larivey (Iounes Vona 2020 and 2021).

In short, the historiography is decidedly scarce. Not only has the topic been the subject of very few studies (especially when compared to the medieval age, for which the *Indovinello veronese* has stimulated an extensive literature), but it has also been treated from purely literary perspectives.<sup>26</sup>

##### 5. *Unseen Perspectives on the Margins of Known Paths*

Riddles, with the documents that allowed them to circulate, have not been studied from the perspective of modern book history, which has been profoundly renewed since the 1980s as a result of impetus from subaltern studies.

This trend of studies flourished in Italy especially from the 1960s, grafting on Ernesto De Martino's researches and drawing strength from Gramsci's theories.<sup>27</sup> Similar attention, which, as Arnaldo Momigliano noted, heavily characterised an entire historiographical season, gradually changed, leaving however an important inheritance: the understanding that even the subaltern classes are capable of producing or elaborating original cultural phenomena, not only by acquiring them passively, but also by sharing them with the hegemonic classes.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Santi, however, ignores the work of De Filippis, though he knows and praises the work of Taylor. On the other hand, a divulgative work is *Storia dell'enigmistica* (Rossi 1971), which offers a bird's-eye view of the history of the production of puzzles. The latter work, stemming from a popularising intent, at least has the merit of having taken up De Filippis' studies and adapted them to the different communicative context, thus offering accurate and documented information.

<sup>26</sup> For a bibliography of studies on the *Indovinello veronese*, see note 3. See also a recent volume on riddles in the oeuvre of the great authors of early Italian literature (Lazzerini 2010).

<sup>27</sup> The role of De Martino (Angelini 2008) and Gramsci (Hobsbawm 1995; Vacca 2002) was remarkable. In spite of their influence abroad, their role was especially relevant in Italy. In fact, as Roger Chartier noted in a very lucid essay in a volume on the history of historiography edited by Philippe Poirrière, cultural history, although moving from international trends and taking on super-local characteristics, expresses its own features depending on the area of production, connecting to the historiographic tradition of each place (2010).

<sup>28</sup> Momigliano wrote that: 'la caratteristica più pervasiva della storiografia degli ultimi quindici anni è forse l'attenzione ai gruppi oppressi e/o minoritari nell'interno delle civiltà più avanzate: donne, bambini, schiavi, uomini



Historiography arrived at such acquisitions thanks to works carried out on several fronts by leading historians (Ginzburg, Zemon Davies, Darnton and Chartier above all). Their research undermined the widespread idea that the subaltern classes could not produce autonomous cultural phenomena but were destined to receive passive nourishment from the culture of the elites. Especially since the 1980s, historians have therefore been able to show the relationships that existed during the modern period between 'high' and 'low' culture, breaking the logic of inclusion/exclusion that informed the previously produced historiography on popular literature.<sup>29</sup>

In the history of books, more and more space has therefore been given to publishing genres considered to be minor (such as almanacs, gazettes, devotional books, etc.), which for centuries attested to a shared culture, participated in by the popular classes but also read by the elites (Braidà 1989).

Even within this research, however, riddles have been almost completely ignored. And while some mention has been made of these materials (Castillo Gómez 2010), a comprehensive analysis of who produced them, who printed them, how they circulated and how they were used is lacking. Such a study would help to better understand the world of cities and the countryside in the early modern age, shedding light on dynamics and actors that often remain in the shadows and are instead typical of cultural and social contexts.

As historiography has shown, it was in fact around writings like these that almost the entire reading experience of the common people revolved, writings that were often much more akin to pamphlets and broadsheets than they were to books (Chartier 1988). On the other hand, looking at the production, this literature was vital to the business of dozens of printers and publishers, who were able to finance expensive and demanding publishing projects precisely thanks to the very frequent sale of small books of this tenor.

## 6. *Shaping a Literary and Publishing Genre*

Summarising, riddles have not yet been studied by modern book history for any geographical area or cultural context. The work to be done is therefore challenging and here, in addition to raising the issue, we intend to suggest some useful approaches for future research.

Among the first questions that should be clarified is that of the definition of the object of analysis. What in fact is a riddle? As often happens, this process of recognition is not simple. Adopting rigid identification criteria might clarify the field of analysis, yet it would certainly impoverish it. Moreover, given the ambiguous nature of this production, the path of rigour seems even less opportune. It would undoubtedly lead to artificial selections, unconnected with the way such texts were conceived, produced and consumed in the context of the modern age.

In fact, riddles are texts with a long tradition: during the Middle Ages and the early modern age, different types of riddles were already known, which had different functions and users. Riddles circulated in verse (initially mainly in the sonnet, then increasingly in *ottava rima*), or in prose, or in dialogue form. Riddles were produced in vernacular and in Latin, and there were some with figurative parts and other wholly textual ones. Each of these riddle typologies has its own history,

di colore, o più semplicemente eretici, contadini, operai' (1977, 596). (Perhaps the most pervasive trait of historiography in the past fifteen years has been the focus on oppressed and/or minority groups within the most advanced civilizations: women, children, slaves, men of color, or more simply heretics, peasants, workers).

<sup>29</sup> For a theoretical framework useful to retrace the main phases of historiography on these themes, see the overview offered by Lodovica Braidà (1989). On the subsequent developments in the history of the book we refer instead to a more recent essay by the same author (2010).

and each of these histories is intertwined with the others, making it difficult to make clear distinctions. Instead of the rigid definitions sometimes offered in studies, we prefer here to adopt a more flexible principle, capable of adapting better to the variety of literary production in the modern age.<sup>30</sup>

It is therefore useful to look at the definition offered in the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* of the term *enigma*, which is eloquently associated with the term *riddle*, testifying once again to its semantic fluidity of the sixteenth century. According to the *Vocabolario*, a riddle is an allusive question to be presented to someone so that they can find the solution.<sup>31</sup> This simple definition allows us to delimit the field of study (excluding, for example, rebuses and figured games, which were very common in sixteenth-century Italy) and is sufficient to introduce the perhaps most significant element accompanying these texts: their social nature.

During the modern age, these games were not usually meant to be read in solitude, to test one's intuition or analytical finesse (as happens today). Rather, they were literature to be shared, to be read aloud in convivial moments and company, or to be performed in public squares especially to amuse.

These characteristics are denoted by the very titles and subtitles of the collections that were sold in short, paltry dossiers, which often alluded to the uses for which they were intended. One reads, for example, on the title page of the *Indovinello nuovo*, that its contents would be 'soggetti da indovinare per trastularsi in compagnia. Cosa molto ridicolosa per dar piacere a ogni convito' (*Indovinello nuovo* [c. 1594]).<sup>32</sup> Similar allusions can also be found in other publications, for instance in *Indovinelli. Opera piacevole et ridicolosa per trattenimento d'huomini & di donne su le veglie* (1590); and, in general, almost all the pamphlets printed in the sixteenth century feature frontispieces with similar phrases. These were therefore texts that were read in collective moments of leisure, but also of learning, which, during the modern age, sometimes represented an opportunity to encounter literature and remained central to the associative life of European communities until the mid-twentieth century.<sup>33</sup>

Something useful for identifying these texts and the ways in which they were disseminated can also be understood through their authors. Usually, those who produced these compositions and promoted their circulation came from that peculiar world of street poets, singers, charlatans and common people who managed to connect the world of the court and that of the public square, to entertain both learned and illiterate people. Among the major riddle writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, are two of the most characteristic figures of the period: Angelo Cenni, a Siense blacksmith better known by the name of *Resoluto* and founder of the *Congrega dei Rozzi*, and Giulio Cesare Croce, a blacksmith in his youth who gradually converted to the profession of *cantastorie*.

<sup>30</sup> In Italian historiography, a very strict distinction is made between 'riddle' and 'enigma': an enigma is supposedly a literary composition, while a riddle is a simple question that is obscure, allusive or difficult to solve (Pitrè 1897, xvii). For a definition of the various riddle games, see Rossi 1971, 43.

<sup>31</sup> 'Dicesi anche indovinello, ma più propriamente indovinello, è una proposta oscura, fatta ad altrui, acciocch'egli abbia ad assottigliar lo 'ngegno, per cavarne il vero senso'. (Also called riddle, but more specifically, a riddle is an obscure proposition made to others, so that they have to sharpen their wits in order to grasp the true sense of it). The entry in the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, printed in Venice in 1612, can be found at: <<https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/contenuti/vocabolario-1612/7449>>, accessed on 1 February 2024.

<sup>32</sup> (subjects to guess at in company for fun. A very ridiculous thing to give pleasure at every banquet).

<sup>33</sup> On similar issues in the modern age we refer to the work of Marina Roggero, who has acutely highlighted the practices of collective reading and circulation of literature (especially leisure and chivalric-themed) in Italy (2006 and 2021). However, traces of such practices can also be found throughout the nineteenth century up to the first half of the twentieth century (Revelli 2016, 33-34).

In the early sixteenth century, it was especially the Congrega dei Rozzi who produced this literature in sonnets (often *caudati* or *bicaudati* [tailed or two-tailed sonnets]) and collected it over the century in various editions. Subsequently, it was above all Croce, who used to read them in the piazza, accompanied by his music, who produced an astonishing number of them, often in *ottava rima*, saturating the Italian market in the early seventeenth century. The literary production and practices that characterise the Congrega dei Rozzi on the one hand, and Croce on the other, together with the number of editions in which these riddles were collected, in themselves demonstrate the breadth of the audience to which they appealed, the reasons why they were produced and the aims they pursued.<sup>34</sup>

To identify the extent of the phenomenon of interest to us here, it is now appropriate to look directly at the documents. There were many editions of riddles, which appeared under the most diverse titles during the sixteenth century. In addition to the presence of riddles and similar compositions in the margins of works of a literary nature or of the most disparate genres – which were very frequent and served to embellish other texts – one finds, especially from the 1530s onwards, a vast number of collections of riddles. These collections seem to share at least material characteristics with each other, making the object of study extremely homogeneous from this point of view. The texts in question here are collected in very poor editions of a size that is anything but large (often in 8°, in other cases in 16°, sometimes in even smaller formats). In the printing houses they were produced without effort and had no decorative motifs at all. Although it is difficult to go into detail in this respect, they were very cheap and could be purchased at very low prices, as evidenced by their small size and poor state.

### 7. *Research Problems and Future Paths*

But how can these documents be studied? Firstly, it is worth reflecting on the retrieval difficulty that still characterises the genre. The material characteristics described above lead to a first problem, the fact that such editions are often not preserved or have suffered serious damage.<sup>35</sup> They are therefore very hard to study, both because they are often not preserved, but also because, when preserved, they are difficult to find in catalogues. Extremely significant in this regard is the case of Angelo Cenni's *Sonetti*. The *editio princeps*, the first printed collection of vernacular riddles, was thought to have been lost and only very recently has it been possible to find a surviving copy (Francalanci 2023).

In fact, editions, often bearing incomplete bibliographical data, are not easy to find in online catalogues. The author is often omitted, and the printer and the date of printing hardly ever appears. To find a trace of them, one must therefore carefully sift through catalogues (both Italian and foreign, since book collectors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century took many editions abroad), searching by keywords for the titles of the works. The task is not easy and often the search does not yield the desired results. Bibliographies produced in the spirit of Segarizzi's are therefore useful, and though they do not offer complete tools, they continue to be solid bases from which to proceed.

<sup>34</sup> Even though Cenni and Croce are among the most studied figures of the time, there are very few studies devoted to this particular branch of their production. And yet their works were extremely successful, leading to imitations and contributing to the construction of a true publishing genre. For now, see the biographical entries on these figures (Calabresi 1979; Strappini 1985).

<sup>35</sup> The relationship between materiality of documents and preservation histories, which Novati also noted, is now a classic theme of book history, on which historiography has questioned itself on several occasions (Tavoni 1997; Rozzo 2008).

Among the problems that early twentieth-century historiography took into consideration and then completely abandoned are issues relating to the materiality of documents. In this field, historiography made significant progress during the twentieth century, moving beyond the study of extrinsic features and examining the social functions of documents, the types of use made of them and the ways in which they were used (Petrucci 1979; McKenzie 1986). It would be possible to completely reconsider the production of riddles from these very same approaches, which have never been used to look at riddles.

Like the documents in which it was written, this literature was not considered prestigious. The authors used to hide their names behind pseudonyms or promote their works as anonymous.<sup>36</sup> The issues of authorship and anonymity are today at the centre of historiographical debate, and an analysis of these texts from this perspective would undoubtedly add important elements to our knowledge of the world of modern literature (Braida 2019).

In this sense, one of the most interesting editions is the *Accademia di enigmi in sonnetti di Madonna Dafne di Piazza*, first printed in Venice in 1552 for the bookseller and publisher Stefano Alessi (Di Piazza 1552). A debate as to the identity of the author was already under way in the nineteenth century. In his *Dizionario di opere anonime e pseudonime*, Gaetano Melzi, who was only familiar with the second edition of Piazza's work (1561), retraces some of the hypotheses that were put forward regarding the identity of Madonna Dafne, attempting to bring some order to the confusion that had arisen around the attribution of this work (Melzi 1848, 272). Melzi reports Crescimbeni's opinions, who in his *Istoria della volgar poesia* (1698) attributed some of Madonna Dafne's sonnets to Antonio Alamanni, thus making their identity coincide. Melzi notes that Giovanni Mario Crescimbeni's analysis is based on the study of an edition of sonnets that contains not only Alamanni's work, but works by other authors as well, including Burchiello and Angelo Cenni (1568). The sonnets identified by Crescimbeni would appear to have been by Cenni, and Melzi was already inclined not to identify Alamanni as the true author of the *Accademia di Enigmi*.<sup>37</sup>

Adding to these notes the considerations contained in De Filippis' work, which highlights the correspondence between the riddles of Madonna Dafne and those collected in *Le piacevoli notti*, one hypothesis that emerges powerfully is that Dafne Di Piazza was a compiler more than an author. It seems highly probable that the texts collected came largely (and perhaps exclusively) from other collections, perhaps no longer known today.

It is necessary to introduce one of the features that most characterised this production of riddles and that probably made it difficult to claim the works as one's own in the Counter-Reformation context. The texts we are looking at are in fact constellated with vulgar and offensive allusions, filth and obscenities of every kind, which were intended to generate laughter and merriment among bystanders in order to meet with the highest possible approval.<sup>38</sup> It is likely that these characteristics of the riddles hindered the printing of the poems (especially in the years of the Counter-Reformation, when control over book circulation became more stringent), compromising their preservation.

<sup>36</sup> Even in the second edition *Dialogo de' Giuochi che nelle vegghie sanesi si usano di fare* by Girolamo Bargagli, who appears on the title page with the name he assumed within the Accademia degli Intronati, namely *Materiale*, we find some interesting testimony. The printer, in his foreword to readers, publicly apologised, complaining that his edition had not been revised by the author and was therefore not as correct as it could have been. In fact, *Materiale* had taken up the legal profession by this time and no longer wanted to recognise the work as having been produced by him, fearing it would discredit him (Bargagli 1574, A2r-A2v).

<sup>37</sup> For more about Alamanni, a Florentine poet famous for work in the style of Burchiello, see his biography (Ricci 1960).

<sup>38</sup> Giuseppe Pitre also stresses these characteristics, which seem to be common to riddles produced in cultures all over the world (1897, xxii).

Through this literature, one can also learn more about the publishers and printers who lived off these works, and in this context it is necessary to mention a particularly obscure figure: Damon Fido Pastore. Not much is known about him, and he is sometimes identified as a travelling printer (Bertolo 1997, 361), and in other cases (probably more accurately) as an itinerant publisher (Ricca 2013, 324).

In his case, however, one can speak of a true specialist in the publishing genre of the riddle collection. Damon Fido's collections, published in four editions and printed in three different cities, represent 50 per cent of his known output today.<sup>39</sup> Although we are clearly not dealing with one of the most prolific publishers of the period, the figure is significant. It becomes even more so when considering that Damon Fido used to add riddles at the foot of works containing other texts, probably in an attempt to entice buyers and diversify the offer within a single edition (*Opera nuova* [1540-1560]).<sup>40</sup>

In short, figures such as Damon Fido show that in addition to the literary aspects of riddles, one must also bear in mind the more strictly editorial ones, which carried their own weight for those in sixteenth-century society who were dedicated to printing these works and had to sell them. These considerations can tell us something about the agents of the circulation of this literature and help shed some light on the large number of half-forgotten publishers and printers who populated the cities of sixteenth-century Italy.

But if riddles in verse served to ensure the livelihood of printers and publishers such as Damon Fido, even more useful must have been the collections of riddles in question-and-answer form, which in the sixteenth century enjoyed a very wide circulation. A simple search of online catalogues shows that similar collections were widespread, being printed in several editions and several times over. In addition to the *Indovinello nuovo* already mentioned at the beginning of this work, the collection *Indovinelli, et riboboli* is also interesting in this regard. Many editions (with additions and subtractions from time to time) were produced of this collection of riddles, proverbs and tongue twisters. The first of these (*Indovinelli, et riboboli. Opera piacevole* [1550]) must date back to the 1550s, the last known to us (*Indovinelli riboboli* 1615) is from the seventeenth century.

Let us return now to Giulio Cesare Croce. It is important to emphasise a correspondence, unknown to historiography, between the Florentine collection just mentioned (*Indovinelli riboboli*) and *Le sottilissime astuzie di Bertoldo*, Croce's masterpiece, published in 1606.<sup>41</sup> In the amusing dialogues that Bertoldo has with King Alboin, we see exchanges of jokes in the form of a question and answer between the sovereign and his interlocutor. Among these are many passages derived precisely from the popular culture that Croce nurtured.

In some cases, however, there is a repetition of motifs already present in the Florentine collection *Indovinelli riboboli*. For example, in its first edition there is a riddle that plays on the ambiguity of the term 'fiore', which means 'flower', but in the agronomic lexicon also identifies

<sup>39</sup> As The National Census of Sixteenth-Century Italian Editions (Edit16) reports, there were four editions of riddle collections by Damon Fido (*Artificiosi et dilettevoli sonetti* 1541; *Enigme volgari* 1543; *Sonetti fatti da indovinare* 1543; *Sonetti molti artificiosi* 1543).

<sup>40</sup> This strategy was not original, and similar cases were found very frequently. A related example is that of the Florentine collection *La pastorella* (1576), which, on the sidelines of several amusing vernacular texts with an amorous theme, includes two riddles in sonnets. An investigation of these hybridisations might certainly lead to original results showing how this literature circulated.

<sup>41</sup> On this work by Croce, see Camporesi's essay introducing the edition of the text (1978). The bibliography on Croce is vast. Despite the profusion of writings, only one study is known to have been devoted to his enigmas (Torre 2006), though they are briefly mentioned in a study about the presence of images in popular Italian editions of the sixteenth century (Carnevali 2019).

a particular mould. The riddle reads: ‘Qual è quel fiore che l’huomo à più a noia? Quel del vino perché la botte si è vota’ (*Indouinelli, et riboboli. Opera piacevole* [1550], A2r).<sup>42</sup> We find the same theme in one of Bertoldo’s *sottigliezze*. The following is an excerpt from a dialogue between Bertoldo and King Alboin, in which we read:

*Re.* Qual è il più tristo fiore che sia?

*Bertoldo.* Quello che esce dalla botte quando si finisce il vino.<sup>43</sup>

The exchange between King Alboin and Bertoldo continues in this vein for several pages, drawing on motifs already present in different collections.

The case is certainly not isolated, as Giovan Francesco Straparola also seems to draw material from lesser-known collections of more humble authors, copying especially from the Angelo Cenni’s collections. It is therefore worth returning to the correspondences between the printed collections of mottos and riddles – with which, as we have said, modern cities must have been awash – and the literary production of some of the most famous writers of the sixteenth century, who, if they did not belong to ‘high’ cultural circles, were certainly among the protagonists of the literary scene in Renaissance cities.<sup>44</sup> The likes of Giulio Cesare Croce and Giovan Francesco Straparola, imitators and imitated, used and heard this literature of ridiculous riddles on a daily basis and drew material from it for their works.

In some cases, the work of comparison has already been carried out by De Filippis, who mapped the presence of the poems in various collections. The methodological tools available to us today and the new sensibilities of historical studies, however, permit a deeper analysis. Above all, it would be worthwhile to connect literary riddles to prose riddles to reflect on the intermingling of different genres and to explore the themes of the history of communication, connected to that of literary production. The transmission of these texts, both in verse and prose, took place thanks to complex media interactions, which enriched the communicative scope of the compositions and which allowed these writings to be placed within one of the most flourishing currents of study today, the reflection on the outcomes and dynamics of media plurality.<sup>45</sup> Often, in fact, works that were printed in dossiers comprising just a few, paltry sheets, also circulated in manuscript copies, perhaps written in haste while being read by a *canterino* in the public square or privately put into writing, with mnemonic efforts that led to reworkings that were sometimes even important.

In the introduction to the recent volume, *Crossing Borders, Crossing Cultures*, the authors pick up on themes dear to the historiography of the 1980s and 1990s, and emphasise the need felt by historians and book historians today to consider popular writings no longer from a localist perspective, but from a broad and integrated perspective. Such a view, they point out, bears in mind that each text lives many lives (Rospocher, Salman and Salmi 2019).

<sup>42</sup> (What is the flower that most annoys man? That of wine, because the cask is empty).

<sup>43</sup> For the transcription, we have relied on the text edited by Piero Camporesi (Croce 1978, 35). We also refer to Camporesi’s essay introducing the work of Croce (Camporesi 1978, ix–lxii). (King. Which is the saddest flower? Bertoldo. That which comes out of the cask when there is no more wine).

<sup>44</sup> Of continuing pertinence today is an observation made by Carlo Ginzburg forty years ago, when he warned of the need to study the relationship between high culture and popular culture without opening them out and considering both to be part of the same cultural system.

<sup>45</sup> Above all, Anglo-American historiography has been active in this regard in the last decade, repeatedly questioning the interaction between different media in the transmission of official and unofficial information in the sixteenth century (Degl’Innocenti, Richardson and Sbordoni 2016; Dall’Aglia, Richardson and Rospocher 2017).

The brief notes offered so far, however, are only meant to raise some of the problems that these riddles pose and that deserve in-depth analysis. The relationships between the texts of different collections; the relationship between street poetry and auteur poetry (and *vice versa*); the editorial strategies with which the collections were promoted; the agents behind the distribution; the relationship with censorship. These are questions that have not been addressed by historiography, at least regarding this category of texts, and it is work that we hope to pursue in future publications.

If this proposed analysis were to be conducted in a systematic manner, it would undoubtedly benefit historical and literary studies, the network of publishing production could be better understood, and we could shed light on men, women and document types that have so far remained at the margins of book history.

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