Feo Belcari’s *Rappresentazione di Abramo* Offset in Phalaris’s *Epistolae*: Adventures of a Florentine Incunabulum

Nerida Newbigin

Late in 2010, I was browsing through entries in the on-line Incunabula Short Title Catalogue (ISTC) for Feo Belcari and *sacre rappresentazioni*, and was surprised to find the following entry:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Phalaris</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Epistolae [Italian]. Tr: Giovanni Andrea Ferabos, from the Latin version of Franciscus Griffolinus (Aretinus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprint</td>
<td>[Naples: Printer of Silvaticus, about 1474] Also recorded as [Arnaldus de Bruxella], and [Rome: Bartholomaeus Guldinbeck]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format</td>
<td>4º</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>Goff P570; CR 4736; Fav e Bres 93; Pell 9396 (9225); CIBN P-298; Hillard 1597; IGI 7706; Walsh 3269; Pr 6688; BMC VI 859; GW M32915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>Assigned to Arnaldus de Bruxella by Proctor and Fava and Bresciano, and to Guldinbeck in Pell Ms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locations</td>
<td><strong>British Isles:</strong> London, British Library (IA.29368. On some pages in quires [d-f] are offsets from an unidentified edition of Feo Belcari, <em>Rappresentazione di Abramo e Isacco</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>France:</strong> Paris BN [Rés Z.661], Mazarine [Inc 1261]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>U.S.A.</strong> Cambridge MA, Harvard College Library, Houghton Library [Inc 6691.10 (29.1)]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same information had, of course, long been available in the printed catalogue of incunables in what was once the British Museum and is now the British Library,¹ but I had not noticed it tucked away under ‘Naples’. I was now confronted with two interesting questions: how could text from Feo Belcari’s *Rappresentazione di Abramo*, first performed 1449, first printed in Florence c. 1485, have found its way into a book now generally believed to have been printed in Naples (or possibly in Rome, but certainly not in Florence) c. 1474, and was this evidence of an otherwise unknown non-Florentine edition?

¹ A. W. Pollard, assisted by A. J. K. Esdaile and others, *Catalogue of Books Printed in the XVth Century Now in the British Museum*, 8 vols (London, 1908-49; rpt. with annotations, 1963), vi (Italy: Foligno, Ferrara, Florence, Milan, Bologna, Naples, Perugia and Treviso), 859. The Italy volumes were largely the work of Victor Scholderer. I am grateful to staff of the British Library, the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence, and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France for their generous assistance in this study, and to John Goldfinch and Christina Duffy of the British Library, who made this research possible, and Neil Harris of the University of Udine for his particular expertise and counsel.
Offsets have long been of interest, ever since Roberto Ridolfi speculated that they might be useful in dating and attributing early incunable editions.\(^2\) Ridolfi’s study, like subsequent studies by Adolfo Tura and Edoardo Barberi, was based on the assumption that offsets occurred when books were produced at the same time in the same shop,\(^3\) but no such scenario could be devised for Belcari and Phalaris.

The earliest putative date for a printed Florentine rappresentazione is 1483, the year that appears on the title page of Antonia Pulci’s play of Santa Domitilla printed by Miscomini. The year 1483 is usually regarded as the date of composition although further research suggests that this may in fact be a date of publication.\(^4\) The earliest unequivocal date is found in Belcari’s Abramo printed by Bartolomeo de’ Libri in Florence on 24 October 1485. Belcari was assiduous in circulating his plays in manuscript, but he is not known to have seen any through the printing press before his death in 1484. He was not inimical to the art of printing: his Prato spirituale had been appearing regularly as a fifth part of Cavalcà’s translation of ‘Jerome’s’ Vitae Patrum since about 1474. But a printing of the Rappresentazione di Abramo by Feo Belcari in Naples in that year would be truly extraordinary. It was not, however, altogether implausible. King Alfonso of Aragon (d. 1458) and his successor Ferrante were enthusiastic followers of Florentine festive practices, and regularly drew on the resources of the ‘nazione fiorentina’ in Naples for triumphal pageantry.\(^5\) I began making arrangements to visit the British Library and examine IA.29368. For all the advances in digital reproduction and communication, nothing would rival holding the book in my hand, and looking and feeling.

The first time I leafed through the volume I saw nothing. I checked the description again, paid more careful attention to quires d to f,\(^6\) and managed to see the faintest offset text on ff. 32v and 33r (the central opening of quire d, between d4 and d5), ff. 43v and 44r (between e7 and e8), f. 46v (between e10 and f1), ff. 48v and 49r (between f2 and f3), f. 52r (the central opening of quire f, between f5 and f6), and f. 54v.\(^7\) There was nothing, however, that I could even begin to read. I sought the assistance of the British Library’s Curator of Incunabula, Mr John Goldfinch, and concluded that for the time being I could do no more.

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\(^4\) See ISTC ir00092680 / IGI 8283.


\(^6\) The quires bear no original identifying marks. They are now lettered in pencil a-g, and a tiny cross in the lower right-hand corner marks the central bifolium of each quire. The volume is collated a\(^{10}\) b\(^4\) c\(^4\) d\(^{10}\) e\(^{10}\) f\(^{10}\) g\(^2\) (lacking a1, which is blank in the Houghton copy) and foliated 2-64 in pencil below the text at the time of re-binding in, as we shall see, 1847.

\(^7\) On f. 54v, it is possible to measure three lines of the offset text at just under 16.5 mm, which would correspond to 110 mm for 20 lines, and categorize this as a 110 R type. The lines on fol. 54v correspond to the last four lines of the recto of the last folio (fol. 10v) of Belcari: ‘la mente sua si truoua radiata / da quella luce delsommo spladore / Quando ordinati sono tutti costumi / drento e difuori al nostro eterno dio’.
Feo Belcari’s *Rappresentazione di Abramo* Offset in Phalaris’s *Epistolae: Adventures of a Florentine Incunabulum*

Several weeks later, John Goldfinch forwarded three pairs of images from ff. 43v, 44r and 46v, taken using a multispectral imaging process by Dr Christina Duffy, Conservation Imaging Scientist at the British Library. The images were reversed so that the offset text was now readily legible (figs 1 1-2, 2.1-2 and 3.1-2). I was immediately able to confirm that the text came from three passages in Feo Belcari’s *Abramo*, although I still marvel that Victor Scholderer and the compilers of BMC vi almost a century ago noticed and identified the text in the first place.

The offset text is laid out in a style that was quickly superseded.⁸ It is set in a single column of large Roman type, a format used in only three known editions of Belcari’s *Abramo*, each of which survives in a unique copy:

1. the undated edition printed in Florence by Maestro Franco [Cenni] and traditionally viewed as the earliest, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, RES-YD-520:

   ISTC No. ib00297250. 12 cc. [a]⁴⁴. 28-29 lines. 207 × 138 mm.
   References H 2479; Rhodes (Firenze) p. 16; Krist 4d; Pell 2022; CIBN B-199 & Fig. 3; GW 3788
   Location Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, RES-YD-520.
   Inc. [c. 1r]: Qui comincia larapresente dabramo quando uolle fare ſacrifi cio diſac ſuo caro figliuolo. In prima uiene uno angelo chanuiṭia quello che fidebbe fare cofi dicendo. | Lochio fidece che lапrima porta | ... ... |
   Expl. c. [12r]: Ciaſcun fiparta con uoſtra licenza | Impreffà in firenze per.M.Franco.
   Type 112 R.
   Watermarks Three hills surmounted by cross, similar to Briquet 11,713, a6-7; and possibly scales (identification not certain), a4, a3-10.
   Binding Blue morocco; tooled; title on spine: MORALITA DABRAMO E DISACCO IN PERSONAGI. Provenance Gaignat (Supplément à la Bibliographie instructive, ou Catalogue des livres du cabinet de feu M. Louis Jean Gaignat (Paris, 1769), p. 511, no. 2082, liv. 24 s.1); La Vallière (Catalogue des livres de la bibliothèque de feu M. le duc de La Vallière contenant les manuscrits, les premieres éditions, les livres imprimés sur vélin & sur grand papier, les livres rares & précieux par leur belle conservation, les livres d’estampes, &c., dont la vente se fera dans les premiers jours du mois de décembre 1783, 3 vols (Paris, 1783), ii, 540, no. 3787, liv. 35 s. 19); Louis XVI.⁹

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⁸ After the earliest, rather handsome editions of plays produced by Miscomini (the anthologies ISTC ir00029680 / IGI 8283 and ISTC ir00029700 / IGI 8284), Bonaccorsi (im00427180 / IGI 6321), Bartolomeo de’ Libri (ISTC ib00297200 / IGI 1434), ‘the Printer of the Virgilius (C 6061)’ (ISTC ib00297300 / IGI 1435) and Franco Cenni (ISTC ib00297250 / CIBN B-199), the standard lay-out of printed rappresentazioni changed to two columns of smaller type, introduced by a title page with two woodcuts, one of an announcing angel (a very literal rendering of the ‘Angelo che annunzia’ [Angel-Prologue]), and the other of a key moment in the play. The single column lay-out returns in the cheap popular editions churned out by presses in Siena and Florence in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

⁹ On the identity of the printer (Franco [Cenni]) and the date, see Dennis E. Rhodes, ‘Il problema del GW 3788’, in his *Gli anni della tipografia fiorentini del XV secolo*, pref. Roberto Ridolfi (Florence, 1988), p. 16, and also p. 37, no. 85, where, like GW, he dates it ‘prima del 1485’, rather than ‘about 1485’. Bartolomeo de’ Libri’s edition of 24 October 1485 (see next no. 2 in text) does not depend on this edition. Another work signed by Franco Cenni is in the British Library: St Bernardino, *Della confessione regole xii* (Pescia, M. Franco Cenni Fiorentino, 28 February 1485/6), IA.35003. Franco Cenni (not Francesco Cenni, as recorded in BMC, or Franciscus de Cennis, as in ISTC), together with his brother Lorenzo, printed a series of eight juridical works, on the commission of Sebastiano and Raffaele di Ser Gherardo Orlandi di Pescia. The Latin colophon of his *Tractatus de insinuationibus excellentissimis strti. in doc. et magni practici domini Antonii de Canaro* reads: ‘Impressum Piscie impēsis nobilis filiorum Iacobi Cennis florentinorum opificem. sub annis incarnatiōis dńi nostri yesu Christi. M.CCCC.LXXXV .iuuenis Bastianii filii Ser Iacobi Gherardi de Orlandis de Piscia: opera presbyteri Laurentii et Franchi fratrum & filiorum Iacobi Cennis florentinorum opificem. sub annis incarnatiōis dńi nostri yesu Christi. M.CCCC.LXXXV .iunius decembris’.
Feo Belcari’s *Rappresentazione di Abramo* Offset in Phalaris’s *Epistolae*: Adventures of a Florentine Incunabulum

*Fig. 1.1.2.* Phalaris, *Epistole*, f. 43v, reversed. The ‘44’ visible below the text is offset from the pencilled 44 on the next folio, inserted probably at the time of the 1847 rebinding. Multispectral imaging: Dr Christina Duffy. Reproduced by courtesy of the British Library.

*Fig. 1.3.* Belcari, *Abramo*, vv. 333-336, f. a7r. Reproduced by courtesy of the Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo / Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence. Copyright.
2. the edition attributed to Bartolomeo de’ Libri and dated 24 October 1485, in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Palatino E.6.4.115:

Feo Belcari, *Rappresentazione di Abramo e Isacco*, [Florence: Bartolommeo di Libri], 24 October 1485. 4º. 10 cc. a10. 32 lines. 190 × 134 mm.

ISTC No. ib00297200. References: R 1137; Sander 6104; IGI 1434; GW 3789; Rh 86; BNCF 403.10

**Location** Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Palatino E.6.4.115.


**Inc.** Qui comincia larapreſentatione da | habram quando iddio gli comando | che gli faceſſi ſacrificio in ful monte | difiac fuo figluolo & prima uiene | uno agnolo che annuntia lafeſta | & dice queſte ſepte ſtāze che seguitano |

**Expl.** [c. 10v]: ciaſcun ſi parta con nostra licenza | Finita laſfeta dabrā compoſta p(er) feo bel|chari adi 24 doctobre M cccc lxxxv.

**Type** 97 R.

**Watermarks** Trefoiled cross in double circle, a1-10, a3-8, as in Briquet 5541 and Ridolfi, *Le filigrane nei paleotipi*, 6b; a5-6 glove.

**Binding** Crushed red morocco, French, 19th c.

**Provenance** Unknown. See discussion below.11

3. an edition dated unequivocally 1 April 1490, ‘in Fiorenza’, in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Palatino E.6.7.47:

Feo Belcari, *Rappresentazione di Abramo e Isacco*, Florence: [Printer of Vergilius, C 6061], 1 April 1490; also recorded as [Printer of Benignus, ‘Dialectica’]. 4º. 10 cc. a10. 31-32 lines. 192 × 130 mm.

ISTC No. ib00297300.

**References** H2750; Krist 4e; IGI 1435; GW 3790; BNCF 404, Ridolfi, p. 105; Tura, pp. 16-23.

**Location** Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Palatino E.6.7.47 (688). Library stamp of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, 1872, ff. a1r and a10v.


**Inc.** [c. a1r]: QVI Comincia la repreſentatione | di Habraam qh idio gli comando | che gli faceſſi facrifcio in sul monte di | difiac fuo figluolo. Et prima uiene uno | angelo che annuntia laſfeta et dice queſte | ſepte ſtanzhe che fequitan. | Locchio fidice che la prima porta | ... ... |

**Expl.** [c. 10v]: ciaſcun ſi parta con noſtra licenza | Qui e finita Laſfeta daBramo compoſta p(er) Feo Belcari Ciptdino A | di Primo Daprile Nel Mille quatrocēto Nouanta: INFIRENZE [with Z reversed].

**Type** 110 R.

**Watermarks** Bird in circle, similar to Briquet 12204, a5-6; and crossed hammers in cartouche, Briquet 11637, a4-7.

**Binding** Red morocco, with tooled spine and dentelles, minimal ruling on front and back boards, signed Bauzonnet-Trautz; marbled endpapers. Marked in pencil on the recto of modern flyleaf pasted to the marbled endpaper ‘1806 bis. Cat. Libri. fr. 152’ and in the top right hand corner ‘77’. The text measures 178 × 75 mm; heavy trimming at the bottom means that the text comes within comes within 3 mm of the lower edge, and the signature within 1 mm.

**Provenance** BNCF Banco Rari 188; Libri Sale 1847; see discussion below.11

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10 The notes to BNCF 403 (which should refer properly to BNCF 404) will be discussed below.

11 Examination under ultraviolet light suggests that the entire text has been washed; moisture stains appear on ff. a6 and a10. Text has possibly been trimmed away at the bottom of f. a1r, but nothing remains that is legible. Traces of numbering (2-10) remain in the top right hand corner of ff. 2-10.
Feo Belcari’s *Rappresentazione di Abramo* Offset in Phalaris’s *Epistolae*: Adventures of a Florentine Incunabulum

The ProQuest Early European Books facsimile of this third volume allowed me to establish that it is this edition of 1490 that is offset on the pages of the Phalaris (figs 1.3, 2.3 and 3.3). The last four lines of a heavily trimmed page of *Abramo* are offset in the ample space below the text in the *Epistolae*. We do not have, therefore, a previously unknown edition from the 1470s, but how did the offset text of Belcari’s *Abramo* get into Phalaris’s *Epistolae*?

* * *

It would be another year before I returned to London to hold the Phalaris in my hands again, but I gnawed away at this problem in idle moments, looking at type, at printing practices in Naples and Florence, and at Phalaris and his *Epistolae*. I was looking in the wrong place.

A breakthrough came when I re-examined Paul Colomb de Batines’s 1852 *Bibliografia delle antiche rappresentazioni*. The French bibliographer’s entry for our text of the *Abramo* reads:

— QUI comincia la representatione
di Habraam qni idio gli comando
che gli facessi sacrificio in sul monte di
Isaac suo figliuolo. Et prima viene uno
angelo che annuntia la festa et dice queste
septe stanze che sequitano.\(^{12}\)

in fine:
Qui e finita La festa da Bramo composta
per Feo Belcari Ciptadino fiorentino A
di Primo Daprile Nel Mille quatrocê
to Nouanta: INFIRENZA.
In 4.º

Edizione in carattere tondo, e 31 rigo per pagina, senza numeri nè richiami, di
ta carte con la segnatura a. La prima carta è ornata di due grandi iniziali. Nella
*Magliabechiana* vi era un esemplare di questa rarissima edizione, ed il Fossi lo aveva
descritto, ma ora è sparito. Quell’esemplare che si vede nel *Catalogo Libri* segnato di
N."\(^{13}\) fu comprato dalla *Palatina* di Firenze.

The guarded details of the last two sentences sent me back to Ferdinando Fossi’s printed
catalogue of incunabula in the Magliabechi collection, produced at the end of the eighteenth
century.\(^{14}\) The description corresponds exactly to the volume under consideration:

\(^{12}\) The first three editions, each of which is represented by a unique copy, are interesting in that they are the last to represent the manuscript tradition of the play, the first closely, the second two less so. The title would subsequently be simplified, and the exquisite detail of the *ballo tondo* at the end, namely that each member of Abraham’s household is accompanied by an angel, disappears.

\(^{13}\) Paul Colomb de Batines, *Bibliografia delle antiche rappresentazioni italiane sacre e profane stampate nei secoli XV e XVI* (Florence, 1852), p. 7. Colomb de Batines’s entries for *Abramo* are confused and confusing. His first entry for this play corresponds to Bartolomeo de’ Libri 1485 (ISTC ib000297200); his second and third, citing Bartolommeo Gamba, *Serie dei testi di lingua*, 4th ed. (Venice, 1839), p. 35, no. 110 and p. 36 no. 112, fail to recognize that both entries refer to the same (present) edition (ISTC ib000297300); his fourth (p. 8) is a Roman edition, attributed to Johann Besicken and Martinus de Amsterdam (ISTC ib000297700); and his fifth is Maestro Franco [Cenni]’s edition which he dates to around 1500 (ISTC ib000297250).

\(^{14}\) Ferdinando Fossi, *Catalogus codicum saeculo XV impressorum qui in publica Bibliotheca Magliabechiana Florentiae adservantur*, 3 vols (Florence, 1793-5), i, cols. 275-6.
Feo Belcari’s *Rappresentazione di Abramo* Offset in Phalaris’s *Epistolae*: Adventures of a Florentine Incunabulum

*Figs 2.1, 2.2.* Phalaris, *Epistole*, f. 44r, reversed. Multispectral imaging: Dr Christina Duffy. Reproduced by courtesy of the British Library.

*Fig. 2.3.* Belcari, *Abramo*, stage direction after v. 312, with trace of v. 312 and 313, f. a7v. Reproduced by courtesy of the Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo / Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence. Copyright.
Feo Belcari’s Rappresentazione di Abramo Offset in Phalaris’s Epistolae: Adventures of a Florentine Incunabulum

Figs 3.1, 3.2. Phalaris, Epistole, f. 46v, reversed. Again, the ‘47 visible below the text is is offset from the folio opposite. Multispectral imaging: Dr Christina Duffy. Reproduced by courtesy of the British Library.

Fig. 3.2. Belcari, Abramo, lines 289–92, f. a6r, last four lines. Reproduced by courtesy of the Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo / Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence. Copyright. The text on f. 54v of the Phalaris (not reproduced) is the last four lines of the recto of the last folio (f. 10v) of the Abramo: ‘la mente sua si trauoa radiata / da quella luce delsommo spladore / Quando ordinati sono tutti costumi / drento e difuori al nostro eterno dio’.
Feo Belcari’s *Rappresentazione di Abramo* Offset in Phalaris’s *Epistolae*: Adventures of a Florentine Incunabulum

*Rappresentazione di Abramo*, Florentiae 1490. rotundo express. typo, lineas 31. in pag. integr. complectente. Italicis octostichis opus constat, ac x. foliis absolvitur, cum signatura a numeris rom. minoribus iuncta, duae initiales in prima pagina visuntur, quae in fronte titulum gerit, *Qui comincia la representatione (sic) di Habraam qì idio gli comando che gli facessi sacrificio in sul monte di Isaac suo figluolo (sic).* Et prima viene uno angelo che annunta la festa & dice queste septe stanzhe che sequitano. Ad calcem verba ista reperimur, *Qui e finita La festa da Bramo composta per Feo Belcari Ciptadino fiorentino A di Primo Daprile Nel Mille quatrocēto Novanta: INFIRENZA (sic).* Huius editionis meminere Mazzuchellius & Haym.

The reading room copy of Fossi’s catalogue in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale (Sala MSS Cataloghi 48) records the shelfmark for this edition: Cl. VII.7 Rappresentazioni T.III. N. III; a manuscript list bound at the beginning of the volume, of ‘Opere che nell’anno 1850 non esistevano più in Biblioteca, nel riscontro fatto dal Molini sul Catalogo del Fossi’, includes this edition.

At this point the trail is confused by a red herring. The old shelfmark, Cl. VII.7 Rappresentazioni T. III. N. III, corresponds to the volume that is now Banco Rari 188, a bound miscellany stamped on the spine ‘RAPPRE.I | SECOLO | XV | 3’, with former shelfmarks ‘Migliabechiante Classe VII Palchetto 7’, and subsequently ‘A.8.p.2.1’, noted inside the front cover. The volume still contains Lorenzo de’ Medici, *Rappresentazione di San Giovanni e Paulo*, [Florence: Bonaccorsi, after 17 February 1490/1], ISTC im00427180 / IGI 6321, and Bernardo Pulci, *La passione del nostro signore Gesù Cristo*, [Florence: Bonaccorsi, 1490], ISTC ip01105000 / IGI 8209; but the third work (that is, ‘Cl. VII.7 Rappresentazioni T. III. N. III’), listed as ‘Festa d’Abramo di Feo Belcari’, is missing. There are two later manuscript annotations to the hand-written index to the volume. The first, by G[iuseppe] M[olini] reads: ‘Quest’ultima sparì. Potrebbe anche darsi che passasse a Londra e fosse ivi ricomprata alla vendita Hibbert, per conto della I. e. R. Libreria Palatina’. The second, dated 11 May 1917, revises this hypothesis: ‘Pare anzi che l’esemplare E.6.4.115 Palatino sia proprio quello mancato a questo volume, perché vi si può riconoscere tuttavia qualche traccia della numerazione progressiva delle carte che portavano i nn. 67 e segg. in continuazione dei nn. con quale finisce l’opuscolo II, della Passione di N. S. G. C.’.

Neither statement is correct. I can see no trace of continuous numbering in Palatino E.6.4.115 (no. 2 above) that might suggest that it had once belonged to this miscellany; and Molini knew exactly what had become of the missing *Abramo*. In fact, as I shall show, it was the unique Magliabechi copy of the 1490 edition (no. 3 above) that Molini bought for the Palatine library at the Libri sale of 1847, noting its absence from the Magliabechi collection in 1850. His speculation on the fate of Banco Rari 188 may be mis-remembering of that commission, or it may be a deliberate red herring, to protect a by now ambiguous reputation.

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15 This information is included in the 2011 draft catalogue of incunabula prepared by Piero Scapecchi: Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, *Catalogo incunaboli* 2011 (Sala MSS Cat. 76/A), BNCF 403.
16 I did, nevertheless, search a number of earlier sale catalogues. There is no trace of this volume in the Hibbert sale, *A Catalogue of the Library of George Hibbert, Esq., of Portland Place, which will be sold by auction ... by Mr Evans, at his house, No. 93, Pall-Mall* (London, 1829), or among any of the major lots of *rappresentazioni* auctioned in London in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Pinelli 1789; Roscoe 1816; Heber 1836; Libri 1859; Wellesley 1866).
Feo Belcari’s *Rappresentazione di Abramo* Offset in Phalaris’s *Epistolae*: Adventures of a Florentine Incunabulum

The ‘Catalogo Libri’ offers more information. In 1847 the prodigious Florentine mathematician and even more prodigious book-thief Guglielmo Libri\(^{17}\) issued an ostensibly anonymous sale catalogue (though few at the time were baffled by the asterisks in the title) of the belles-lettres part of his collection which as a whole numbered some 40,000 titles: *Catalogue de la bibliothèque de m. L*** dont la vente se fera le lundi 28 juin 1847, et les vingt-neuf jours suivants à six heures de relevée, rue des Bons-Enfants, n° 30, maison Silvestre, salle du premier*.\(^{18}\) There, Item 1806\(^{19}\) is indeed, as Colomb de Batines would note just five years later, the Florentine edition of 1490, but it has had a make-over:


Edition rare de ce Mystère, qui a été représenté pour la première fois dans une église à Florence en 1444.\(^{20}\) Voyez le Manuel (I, 279) et Gamba (Série, n° 112).

During their Parisian sojourn, the ten folios had been bound in red morocco by Bauzonnet–Trautz, with marbled endpapers, sumptuous gold tooling on the spine, and dentelle borders on

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\(^{19}\) This is not correct. A note at the end of several manuscripts gives the date as 1449; see, for example, Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS. Conventi Soppressi F.3.488, f. 35r: ‘Finita la sopradetta festa e rappresentazione la quale si fece la prima volta in Firenze nella chiesa di Santa Maria Madalena luogo detto Cestegli Anno Domini 1449 Deo Gratias Amen’.

the insides of the cover boards.\textsuperscript{21} The text had been trimmed head and tail, savagely but without loss of text. Any earlier book marks of the library had been removed, and only in 1872 would it be re-stamped.\textsuperscript{22} Giuseppe Molini, bookseller and former Palatine librarian, attended Libri’s sale on behalf of the Grand Duke Leopoldo II and of other clients of the family’s bookdealing business, and on 19 July 1847 he repurchased the volume. On the Grand Duke’s behalf, he acquired forty-one volumes at the auction, including this volume for 152 francs and a restored copy of the \textit{Decameron} for 1600 francs,\textsuperscript{23} and a further twenty-three items after the auction. And when he wrote his note in Banco Rari 188, no later than 1856, he had quite forgotten the details.

Libri’s nefarious past was about to catch up with him. For over two decades he had been stealing precious books (often by feigning ill health and dressing in a voluminous cloak under which he could conceal them), and mutilating them to cover his tracks. Early in 1848 he was warned that he was about to be arrested, and on 29 February, just before the Paris uprising, he fled to London with 30,000 items packed into eighteen trunks.\textsuperscript{24} In London, a fellow, but very different, Italian exile Antonio Panizzi was Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum Library, and until Libri was convicted in absentia by a French court, he enjoyed Panizzi’s protection and was able to sell his collection both by item and in large sales. And among the works Panizzi acquired for the British Museum – after the 1847 sale and before Libri’s arrival in England – we find the Neapolitan edition of Phalaris’s \textit{Epistolae}, which had been rebound by Duru in Paris in 1847. It too had been listed in the Libri 1847 sale catalogue:

\texttt{2718. Epistole di Phalari, tradotte in italiano dal frate Andrea Ferabos Karmelitano. In-4. mar[oquin] r[ouge], fil[ets], tr[anche] d[orée]. Duru.}

Volume précieux (sans chiffres, réclames ni signatures) dédié à Ant. Centelles marchese de Cutrone, et qui a dû paraître à Naples peu de temps après 1470. Il se compose de 63 feuillets.

\textsuperscript{21} ‘Bauzonnet–Trautz’, stamped with the dentelles on the lower inside edge of the front cover, is the form used by Georges Trautz, working in Antoine Bauzonnet’s workshop in Paris, between 1830 and 1848. As a means of disguising the many dubious provenances, numerous Libri books were rebound in this workshop in preparation for the series of sales begun in 1847, so that, paradoxically, such bindings are often a form of identification.

\textsuperscript{22} Brunet (1860 edn, vol. i, col. 739) gives the price as 152 francs. The rappresentazioni are items 1805-52, pp. 290-98, in the Libri catalogue. On the origins of the Molini family as booksellers and publishers, see Luigi Greco, ‘Un Libraire italien à Paris à la veille de la Révolution’, Mélanges de l’École française de Rome: Italie et Méditerranée, cii (1990), pp. 251-80. On Giuseppe Molini (1772-1856), see Piero Scapecchi, ‘Molini, Giuseppe’, in \textit{Dizionario biografico degli Italiani}, lxxv (2011), with ample bibliography; \texttt{http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giuseppe-molini_(Dizionario-Biografico)}, consulted 11 June 2013; Giuseppe Molini, \textit{Operette bibliografiche del cav. Giuseppe Molini, già Bibliotecario Palatino, con alcune lettere di distinti personaggi al medesimo precedute dalle notizie biografiche di esso scritte da G. A. (Florence, 1858). Molini attended the Libri sale of 1847 to purchase or buy back Italian treasures on behalf of the Palatine library and other clients of the Molini bookshop; see pp. xli-lii. Molini’s invoice for 7379 francs, settled in Paris on 6 August 1847, is in Florence, Archivio di Stato, Imperiale e Reale Corte, filza 5417, no. 22; other handling expenses are in filza 5416, no. 61, 28 September 1847. This filza, to which Neil Harris first drew attention (see n. 17 above) invites further study, particularly to identify those books now held by the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence, since their catalogue entries never draw attention to their colourful provenance. At his death in 1856, Molini was working on a \textit{Catalogo delle edizioni del Sec. XV [della Biblioteca Magliabechiana] ridotto in compendio ad uso della Libreria su quello ragionato, compilato dal cav. Giuseppe Molini, già Bibliotecario Palatino} (BNCF Cat. Molini 49, with continuation to 1870 by Giuseppe Canestrini, that would have brought up to date Fossi’s catalogue of 1793-5).

\textsuperscript{23} See Harris, as in n. 17.

\textsuperscript{24} Maccioni Ruju and Mostert, p. 235. The fall of Libri’s principal protector, the French Prime Minister François Guizot, on 23 February 1848, meant that Libri had no choice but to flee Paris.
Feo Belcari’s *Rappresentazione di Abramo* Offset in Phalaris’s *Epistolae*: Adventures of a Florentine Incunabulum

Ce livre, que nous n’avons trouvé indiqué nulle part et qui est d’une exécution très imparfaite, doit être considéré comme un des premiers essais de l’imprimerie napolitaine.25

When I first began to ruminate on the problem of the offset text, I could not imagine circumstances in which the Neapolitan text, printed about 1474, had come in contact with the wet ink of the Florentine text printed in 1490. But a plausible explanation now presents itself. The book thief’s immediate task, when he comes home with his loot, is to remove all evidence of his theft – identifying annotations and stamps – by tearing out pages, by mutilation, or by washing with solvent of some kind.26 I now believe that Libri or his assistants applied solvent to the pages of one or both of these volumes and then left them interleaved with each other to dry, before sending them off to their respective binders.27 The ink of the Belcari was more soluble than expected, and left an offset on the pages of the Phalaris. The loss of ink on the affected pages of the Belcari is not apparent: the ink is not visibly lighter.

I believe that I have gone some way to solving this little riddle, but the question of the printer of the 1490 *Abramo* remains. There has been vigorous contestation over the printer who has been known variously as the printer of Benignus, and Bernardus Nerlius, and the Printer of Vergilius (C 6061).28 Having despatched Nerli as a printer/publisher, Roberto Ridolfi gathered the others together under the name of the ‘Printer of Vergilius (C 6061)’, and the Palatino *Abramo* is now normally ascribed to him. Whoever he is, he is not a particularly accomplished designer and typesetter, and *traditio* of Belcari’s text was not enhanced by his edition.29

25 See *Catalogue*, p. 433. The Parisian bookbinder Hippolyte Duru was active between 1843 and 1863; the binding is stamped ‘Duru 1847’. The work is indeed entirely without signatures or foliation. The New York Public Library’s copy records the price as 59 francs and the purchaser as Payne, presumably John Payne of Payne and Foss. The British Museum Library was one of Payne and Foss’s major clients; see George Smith, ‘Patrons of Booksellers and How They Paid Them a Century Ago’, *Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association Newsletter*, xvi (April 1951); downloaded [http://aba.org](http://aba.org), 8 March 2013. On Payne’s activities at the Libri sale, where he bought on a large scale, see also Harris, ‘The Ripoli *Decameron*’.

26 In the preface of the 1847 *Catalogue*, p. vi, M. L**** draws proud attention to his expenditure on the ‘frais de restauration (sans compter le reliures) ... élevés à plus de douze mille francs’, on the preparation of facsimile pages and on washing. See also the chapter ‘Thief and Forger’ in Maccioni Ruju and Mostert, pp. 202-37; and the example of John Harris described in Neil Harris, ‘The Ripoli *Decameron*’.

27 On the formulation of inks, see C. H. Bloy, *A History of Printing Ink, Balls and Rollers, 1440-1850* (London, 1967). Printing ink, formulated with lampblack as pigment, turpentine as solvent, and vegetable oil as setting agent, hardens over time as the turpentine evaporates. Benzene and benzol, which became plentiful from the 1820s when coal started to be used for making coal gas for lighting, will mobilize the hardened oil. I thank Wayne Davies of SN2 as well as the lithographers of ‘Il Bisonte’ in Florence for their assistance in this matter. I have not consulted Alessandro Gusmano, *Gli inchiostri nella storia della scrittura e della stampa: storie, strumenti, collezionismi* (Milan, 2011).

28 Roberto Ridolfi, ‘Nuovi contributi alla storia della stampa nel secolo XV’, ii: Lo “stampatore del Virgilius C 6061” e l’edizione principe di Omero’, *La Bibliofilia*, iv (1954), pp. 85-101; reprinted in his *La stampa in Firenze nel secolo XV* (Florence, 1958), pp. 95-111. This designation was subsequently accepted by Rhodes, *Gli annali*, p. 11, even though some of the types reproduced by Ridolfi do not correspond to the type of the *Abramo*. The Ridolfi collection, now part of the Fondazione Ridolfi, is housed in the head office of the Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze. For further discussion of the ‘Printer of the Virgilius’, and a possible but not entirely plausible identification with Bartolomeo de’ Libri, see Adolfo Tura, *Edizioni fiorentine del Quattrocento e Primo Cinquecento in Trivulziana*, catalogue of exhibition (Milan, 2001), pp. 16-23. If this edition is by Bartolomeo de’ Libri, then it is a very poor successor to the fine one he printed in 1485.