

'MIO' OR 'MI'? A MISPRINT IN BESTERMAN'S EDITIONS
OF VOLTAIRE'S LETTERS¹

Giovanni Ricci

Academy of Fine Arts, Florence

On '24 sept.' (that is September 24th 1760), from the 'Chateau de Ferney en Bourgogne', Voltaire writes a letter to Goldoni, drawn up per three-quarters in Italian language. For a long time the philosopher has been appreciating the texts of the Venetian playwright, but this is the first missive that he sends to him directly. Let's remember its contents:

Sig^{or} mio, Pittore e Figlio della Natura, vi amo dal tempo ch'io vi leggo. Ho veduto la vostra anima nelle vostre opere. Ho detto: Ecco un uomo onesto, e buono, che hà purificato la scena italiana, che inventa con la fantasia, e scrive col senno. Oh che fecondità! mio signore, che purità! E come lo stile mi pare naturale, faceto ed amabile! Avete riscattato la vostra Patria dalle mani degli Arlecchini. Vorrei intitolare le vostre Commedie: L'Italia liberata dai Goti. La vostra amicizia m'onora, m'incanta. Ne sono obbligato al sig: senator Albergati;² e voi dovete tutti i miei sentimenti a voi solo.

1 I am very grateful to Christophe Paillard for our email exchange on the subjects of this paper.

2 Francesco Albergati Capacelli – a friend of Goldoni and Voltaire, and coming from '*una delle più nobili famiglie bolognesi*' ('one of the noblest families of Bologna') – succeeded his father Luigi in the senatorship and more than once was gonfalonier of justice in the city of Bologna, but '*fin dalla giovinezza fu attratto da una grande passione per il teatro, al quale, superando incomprensioni e pregiudizi, dedicò tutta la sua vita, come traduttore, interprete dilettante, commediografo, protettore di attori e di autori*' ('since he was young, he was attracted by a great passion for stage and, overcoming incomprehension and prejudices, he devoted all his life to it, as a translator, amateur actor, playwright, and patron of actors and authors'). See Alberto Asor Rosa, art. 'ALBERGATI CAPACELLI, Francesco', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960), vol.1, p.624.

Tengo l'edizione di Torino, e dio mio guardi da quella di Medebach.³ Vi auguro mio signore la vita più lunga, e la più felice, giache [*sic*⁴] non potete essere immortale come il vostro nome: Intendete di farmi un onore, e già mi avete fatto il più gran piacere.⁵

J'use, Mon cher Monsieur, de la liberté françoise en vous protestant sans cérémonie que vous avez en moi le partisan le plus déclaré, l'admirateur le plus sincère, et déjà le meilleur ami que vous puissiez avoir en France. Cela vaut mieux que d'être votre très humble et très obéissant serviteur

Voltaire
gentilhomme de la chambre du roi.⁶

Here I have transcribed the letter D9257 of Besterman's definitive edition of Voltaire's correspondence. The editor copied the text transcribed by Albergati and, as he writes, now kept in Rome at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Fondo Patetta).

258

However, in Besterman's first edition, he copied the manuscript in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence (Italy). This letter – classified as Best. 84890 – is dated '20 7bre' (that is September 20th) 1760, from the 'Château de Frenay⁷ en Bourgogne / par Genève'.⁸ As Besterman writes, certainly it is not authentic. However it says:

3 The edition of Goldoni's works loved by Voltaire is the one published in Florence by Eredi Paperini from 1753 to 1757; it was reprinted also in Turin. When Goldoni left the Teatro Sant'Angelo, moving to the Teatro San Luca, his ex-manager Medebac (or Medebach) claimed he was the owner of the comedies written by Goldoni for the Teatro Sant'Angelo. Medebac's edition competed with Paperini's. Because of a claim of Medebac and of the Goldoni's ex-publisher, the Paperini edition was forbidden in the Venetian Republic. But in 1760, in Venice, Pitteri's edition was also being published.

4 In Italian manuscripts, until the end of the 19th century, the use of stresses is rare. Here the modern word is 'giacché' ('because'). In his correspondence, Voltaire himself makes use of stresses very rarely.

5 Translation: 'My Sir, Nature's Painter and Son, I have loved you since the time I read your texts. I have seen your soul in your works. I said: here is an honest and good man who purified Italian theatre, who invents imaginatively, and who writes in an intelligent way. Oh, what inventiveness! My Sir, what purity! And how the style appears natural, witty and lovable! You freed your native country from Harlequins hands. I would entitle your Comedies: Italy freed from the Ghots. Your friendship honours me, delights me. I am in debt to sir senator Albergati for this; and all my sentiments for you are due to you only. I have Turin's edition, and my god protects by Medebach's one [see later]. I wish you a longer, happier life, because you can not be as immortal as your name is: You intend to honour me, and you already give me the greatest pleasure'.

6 D9257.

7 This is a mistake which Voltaire cannot have made: the right geographical name is Ferney.

8 *Voltaire's Correspondence*, edited by Theodore Besterman, Genève, Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1959, vol. XLIII, letter n. 8490, p.160.

Sig⁹ mio pittor e fig¹⁰ della natura, vi amo dal tempo che vi leggo. Ho veduto la vostra anima nelle vostre opere. Ho detto: ecco un uomo onesto e buono, che ha purificato la scena italiana, che inventa con la fantasia, e scrive col senno. O che fecondità mio sig.¹¹ O che purità! E come lo stile mi pare naturale, faceto e amabile! Avete riscattato [*sic*¹²] la vostra patria dalle mani degli arlechini [*sic*¹³]. Vorrei intitolare le vostre commedie: *L'Italia liberata da' Goti*. La vostra amicizia mi onora, m'incanta. Ne sono obbligato al sig^r sen^r¹⁴ Albergati, e voi dovete tutti i miei sentimenti a voi solo.

Tengo l'edizione di Torino, e dio mio guardi da quella di Medebach. Vi auguro mio sig^e la vita più lunga et la più felice, giache [*sic*¹⁵] non potete esser immortale come il vostro nome. Intendete di farmi un grand'onore: e già mi avete fatto gran piacere.

J'use mon cher mons^r¹⁶ de la liberté française en vous protestant sans cérémonie que vous avez en moi le partisan le plus déclaré, l'admirateur le plus sincère, et déjà le meilleur ami que vous poussiez avoir en France. Cela vaut mieux que d'être

Votre très humble et très obéissant serviteur

VOLTAIRE

gentilhomme de la chambre du roi.

I have quoted two variants of this letter from Besterman's editions, but whoever knows Italian will find this passage strange: '*dio mio guardi da quella di Medebach*' (a literal translation might be: 'my God protects [whom?] from that by Medebach'). It is a very serious mistake and an evident non-sense.

I therefore checked the copy which is present at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence:¹⁷ the writer wrote '*dio mi guardi*' ('God protects me') and not '*dio mio guardi*' as Besterman reports in his first edition of Voltaire's correspondence. Moreover, here we find '*poussiez*' instead of '*puissiez*', and '*et*' instead of '*e*'. I also discovered that, in addition to these mistakes, Besterman replaced commas by colons, hardly ever quoted capitals (the more evident included), and in two cases began or did not begin a new paragraph without respecting the letter of the text. There are also two words not belonging

9 Abbreviation for '*Signor*' ('Sir').

10 Abbreviation for '*Figlio*' ('Son').

11 Abbreviation for '*Signore*' ('Sir').

12 In modern Italian '*riscattato*' ('ransomed').

13 In modern Italian '*Arlecchini*' ('Harlequins').

14 Abbreviation for '*senator*' (in modern Italian '*senatore*').

15 See above, n.4.

16 Abbreviation for French word '*monsieur*' ('Sir').

17 Sala Manoscritti, Carteggi, Vari, cassetta 6, n.215.

to the manuscript. Other modifications – like the insertion of accents and apostrophes (signs completely absent in the manuscript) or Voltaire’s cursive signature which is reported in small capitals – correspond with acceptable criteria.

Here is a literal transcription of Voltaire’s letter present in Florence:

au Chateau de Frenay [*sic*] en Bourgogne
par Genève 20 7bre 1760
(sg¹⁸)
al D.^r Carlo Goldoni

Sig^r mio Pittor e fig^o della Natura: vi amo dal tempo che vi leggo. Ho veduto la vostra anima nelle vostre opere. Ho detto: ecco un uomo onesto e buono, che ha purificato la scena italiana¹⁹ che inventa con la fantasia, e scrive col senno. O che fecondità mio Sig^e! O che purità! E come lo stile mi pare naturale, faceto e amabile! Avete riscatato [*sic*] la vostra Patria dalle mani degli arlechini [*sic*]. Vorrei intitolare le vostre commedie: *L’Italia liberata da Goti*. La vostra amicizia mi onora, m’incanta. Ne sono obbligato al Sig^r Sen^r Albergati: e voi dovete tutti i miei sentimenti a voi solo. Tengo l’edizione di Torino, e Dio mi guardi da quella di Medebach. Vi auguro mio Sig^e la vita più lunga e la più felice; giache [*sic*] non potete esser immortale come il vostro nome. Intendete di farmi un grand’onore: e già mi avete fatto gran piacere.

J’use mon cher Mons^r de la liberté française en vous protestant²⁰ que vous avez en moi le partisan le plus déclaré [*sic*], l’admirateur le plus sincere, et déjà le meilleur ami que vous pussiez avoir en France. Cela vaut mieux que d’être
Votre tres-humble et tres-obeissant serviteur

Voltaire gentilhomme de la Chambre du Roi.

Besterman, however, is right when he notes that this letter is ‘a contemporary copy in an Italian hand’.²¹ With regard to this, a specialist of Voltaire’s handwriting has written to me: ‘This is not Voltaire’s handwriting nor the handwriting of his secretary Jean-Louis Wagnière. Moreover, Voltaire would never have made a mistake with the name of “Frenay” which is spelled “Frenay”. The “G” in “Genève”, the “F” in “France”, the many “I”s, the long “S” are clearly not by his hand [...]. I’ve never met this handwriting before’.²² Then the Florentine manuscript ‘spells “Française” and “Françoise” while Voltaire,

18 Probably an abbreviation for ‘*signore*’ or ‘*signor*’ (‘Sir’).

19 Here there are no punctuation signs.

20 In the copy of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence, there are not the words: ‘*sans cérémonie*’.

21 *Voltaire’s Correspondence*, Th. Besterman (ed.), vol.XLIII, p.160.

22 Ch. Paillard, personal communication.

struggling to conform orthography to phonetics, insisted on writing “ai” in “*Français*” and various other words’.²³

Actually, the enclosed nineteenth-century bill says that the manuscript is authentic,²⁴ but there are ‘dozens of them that are clearly wrong: Voltaire’s letters were so expensive they were often falsified’.²⁵ So the letter at the Biblioteca Nazionale is counterfeit and it is certainly true that an Italian wrote it: actually he astutely avoided writing ‘mio’ instead of ‘mi’.

The letter at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV) is much more reliable. In effect Besterman has not consulted documents in the BAV between 1960 and 1972,²⁶ but he used to ask many world libraries to send him photocopies (that were sometimes barely legible) or photographs or microfilms of the documents he needed.²⁷ From this point of view, it is very significant what we read in the French translation of the letter where Frédéric Deloffre²⁸ writes: *‘Dieu me garde de celle de Medebach’*²⁹ (‘God protect me from Medebach’s one’), which is a perfect translation of the Italian text.

I could have a photograph of the letter in the BAV that is in a codex once possessed by Federico Patetta (1867-1945). The letter is introduced by the annotation: *‘Copia di Lettera al Sig.^r Goldoni’* (‘Copy of a letter to Mr. Goldoni’). Patetta was professor of History of Italian Law in several Italian universities and, particularly, devoted himself to studying public law in the early Middle Ages and to critical editions of ancient juridical texts. He presented BAV with

23 Ch. Paillard, personal communication.

24 The Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence (Italy) bought the manuscript by ‘Giovanni Dotti libraio’ [bookseller] ‘della Libreria Grazzini’ [of Grazzini bookshop] on August 11th 1894. Dotti’s receipt reports: *‘Lettera autografa di Voltaire a Goldoni’* (‘Letter in Voltaire’s own hand to Goldoni’). The cost was relatively high: 150 Italian liras (according to 1887’s and 1895’s regulations, the highest annual salary of Biblioteca Nazionale’s prefect was 6,000 liras while the annual salary of doorkeepers varied from 900 to 1,300 liras: Alberto Petrucciani and Giuliana Biagioli, personal communication). In 1894 the prefect (that is the director) of Biblioteca Nazionale was Desiderio Chilovi, a very valuable bibliographer and expert in library science; but, in this case, perhaps also for the not very high price, he did not think he was buying a fake.

25 Ch. Paillard, personal communication. See also Christiane Mevau and Christophe Paillard, ‘À la recherche d’un faux voltaïrien. *Marginalia apocryphes sur les Observations critiques*’, *Revue Voltaire* 8 (2008), p.279-328.

26 I thank Andreina Rita (office Bibliographic Information of the BAV) for this information.

27 Ch. Paillard, personal communication.

28 Voltaire, *Correspondance*, Th. Besterman (ed.), F. Deloffre (trad.), Paris, Gallimard, 1980, vol.V, letter n.6231, pp.1124-25 and 1624. In every volume of this French edition, we read: *‘Les notes de l’édition définitive de la correspondance de Voltaire, établie par Theodore Besterman, ont été traduites de l’anglais, et adaptées par Frédéric Deloffre, professeur à l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne’*.

29 *Ibid.*, vol.V, p.1624.

his collection of books and manuscripts and the letter by Voltaire to Goldoni was among these documents. In 1760, it had been copied by Albergati and, certainly, Patetta bought it. This is its text which is a little different from the Besterman's one:

Au Chateau de Ferney en Bourgogne

24 Sept. 1640

Signor mio, Pittore e Figlio della Natura, vi amo dal tempo ch'io vi leggo. Hò [*sic*] veduto la vostra anima nelle vostre opere. Hò [*sic*] detto: Ecco un uomo onesto, e buono, che hà [*sic*] purificato la scena italiana, che inventa con la fantasia, e scrive col senno. Oh che fecondità! mio signore, che purità! E come lo stile mi pare naturale, faceto, ed amabile! Avete riscattato la vostra Patria dalle mani degli Arlecchini. Vorrei intitolare le vostre Commedie: l'Italia liberata da' Goti. La vostra amicizia m'onora, m'incanta. Ne sono obbligato al Sig. Senator Albergati; e voi dovete tutti i miei sentimenti a voi solo.

Vi auguro, Signore, la vita la più lunga, e la più felice, giacche [*sic*] non potete essere immortale, come il vostro Nome. Intendete di farmi un onore, e già m'avete fatto il più gran piacere.

J'use, Mon cher Monsieur, de la liberté françoise en vous protestant sans cérémonie que vous avés en moi le partisan le plus déclaré, l'admirateur le plus sincere, et déjà le meilleur ami que vous puissés avoir en France. Cela vaut mieux que d'être votre très humble et très obeissant serviteur

Voltaire.³⁰

As we have seen and as Besterman points out, the copy in the BAV does not contain the sentences: '*Tengo l'edizione di Torino, e dio mi guardi da quella di Medebach*' and '*gentilhomme de la chambre de roi*'. The editor drew them from the Florence copy. In conclusion, Albergati, who was a man of letters, could not mistake writing '*mio*' instead of '*mi*'. Even if it was Voltaire's mistake – an undoubtedly improbable hypothesis³¹ – Albergati had corrected it. So, certainly, Besterman was wrong in writing this word.

30 BAV, codex Patetta 825, ff. 20v-21r. Actually it is the same text readable in the seventy-fourth volume of Voltaire's works published by Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais in the 18th century, but this edition is full of mistakes: see *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, [Kehl], De l'imprimerie de la société littéraire typographique, 1785, vol.74, lettre XXXIV, pp.75-76.

31 Voltaire spoke (and wrote) Italian, and also Venetian, very well. On his speaking Italian see D21063 and on his writing Venetian see D10678. Goldoni himself wrote to Voltaire: '*conoscete si [*sic*] bene l'Italia, e precisamente Venezia, giacché sapete persino parlare e scrivere in Veneziano*' (D11303; 'you know Italy so well, and especially Venice, because you can speak and write Venetian').

And, as I have said, he introduced an expression (*'dio mio guardi'*) which, in the Italian language, is completely absurd in the context in which it is included.