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Notes on the Meaning of *commentarius* in the Italian Renaissance.

by Johann Ramminger

In antiquity the word *commentarius* had a large range of meanings, which underwent a certain amount of changes and reductions during the Middle Ages. In the following I would like to show how the humanists - in a process which we shall follow from Petrarch to 1500 - gradually recovered and revived the usages attested in the Latin literature of antiquity.¹

*Classical (and Medieval) Latin*

The earliest testimony for the word *commentarius* is in an oration by L. Licinius Crassus (cos. 140 B. C.) which occurs in a passage quoted by Cicero; we have widespread attestations from the late Republic onwards (forty instances in Cicero alone).

The *Thesaurus linguae Latinae*² presents *commentarius* in two parts: Originally it was ‘notae, tabulae, collectio comminiscendi causa facta’, i. e. any kind of segmented text; this definition includes a variety of journals and note-books mainly produced inside public administration and to a lesser extent by private individuals. Aside from the context of administration, *commentarius* was also a category of writings. This category is subdivided into ‘collectio rerum, locorum, verborum ad memoriam firmandam facta’ (writings as memory aid, excerpts) and ‘breviarium,

¹ In connection with the Bonn congress of the IANLS in 2003, I published, as an appendix to a discussion of Ermolao Barbaro’s *Corollarium in Dioscoridem*, a very short overview over how humanists in the second half of the Quattrocento used the word *commentarius* and related words. I would like to take the chance offered by this congress to revisit some of the questions raised there, to add new material and to present some points in a different light. See Ramminger 2005, 77-85. The word is not treated in Rizzo 1973. The material for this survey comes mainly from the archive of my *Neulateinische Wortliste*, Ramminger 2003 ff.

² ThLL, III, *commentarius* (-um) p. 1856.3-61.41 (Bannier). Here and in the following I have shortened the Latin definitions given in the ThLL.
capita rei tractandae' (outline, overview). The second part comprises ‘doctrinae vel artis expositio, libellus, opusculum’ with two groups: firstly ‘artis cuiuslibet doctrina’ generally, including ‘rerum gestarum memoria litteris mandata’ (Caesar’s commentarii appear in this subgroup), secondly specifically ‘interpretatio scriptorum’, i.e. the modern ‘commentary’.

Since dictionaries of Medieval Latin mainly register divergences from the classical lexicon, the actual usage is difficult to ascertain. From what we are able to see, the word is used mainly for ‘commentary’, ‘summary, abridgement’, and ‘register’.³

In classical Latin the word commentarius occurs in two forms, masculine commentarius and neuter commentarium. According to the ThLL these were used without distinction, also by the same authors.⁴ Since the forms are the same except in the nominative singular and nominative and accusative plural, most of the time we will not be able to decide between the two.

**From Petrarch to Alberti**

Although the word commentarius has a continuous fortuna from antiquity throughout the Middle Ages, from the early humanists we get the impression that there was only a very limited use of the word.

**Petrarch.** Petrarch⁵ used the word only eight times and with an extremely restricted range of meaning: Caesaris commentarii are referred to three times in the Rerum memorandarum libri (1343-1345);⁶ he also mentions Macrobius’ commentaries on the Somnium Ciceronis in Cicero’s Republic: the singular “secundo commentario” in the Collatio laureationis (1341)⁷ and De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia (1371),⁸ the

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³ Mittellateinisches Wörterbuch II. München 1974, 954; Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources II, London 1981, 393. See also Teeuwen 2003, 235-26 “commentari, commentarius (-ium), commentum, commentator”.
⁴ ThLL III, p. 1856, 5–17.
⁵ Most of the material cited is from Petrarca 1997.
⁶ Rerum memorandarum libri 1.12, two quotations from Hirtius, Gall. viii, one from Cicero’s Brutus 262, taken from Suetonius (the Brutus at that point was not yet known directly).
⁸ De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia 4.7, Petrarca 1975, II, 1102, “Macrobius secundo com-
plural in the *Epistulae familiares.* There are two further attestations: in *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* he uses *commentarius* for Chalcidius’ commentary, in the *Epistulae seniles* for unspecified commentaries to Vergil.

Petrarch uses *commentarius* only in the masculine and in the established titles of classical works. *Commentarius* in the singular is an entire work, not the explanation of an individual passage; the plural designates multiple works in the case of commentaries (not a unity of collected comments as in later authors), the whole of the eight books on the Gallic war in Caesar’s case. Although in the passages quoted the word designates both historiographical works and commentaries, Petrarch is not yet troubled by the two problems besetting later generations of humanists, namely, how these two meanings related to each other, and whether or how the oscillation in gender might depend on them. The notion of brevity as a common denominator is for Petrarch not yet a constituent part of the meaning.

*Salutati.* Salutati’s use is equally modest; there are six examples, all in the plural, mainly from the letters. Caesar’s *commentarii* are mentioned three times. There are the *commentarii* of Macrobius and Boethius to Cicero’s *Topica.* Unlike Petrarch Salutati also uses the plural neuter (1392-1394): “Eustratii [...] commentaria” (to Aristotle, see Novati’s note). Salutati seems to avoid taking a position on the exact

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10 *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* 4, 7, Petrarca 1975, II, 1092, “apud Calcidium, in Thimeum Platonis secundo commentario”.
11 *Epistulae seniles* 4, 5, 38, Petrarca 2003, 93, “non ii tantum qui Commentarios in Virgilium, sed qui libros Saturnium legerunt”.
12 The material is provided by Salutati 1992. The letters are edited in Salutati 1891-1911, the *De Laboribus Herculis* is cited from Salutati 1951.
14 *lab. Herc.* 4 tract. 1, 2, 5, Salutati 1951, 465, “primo libro Commentariorum Super Somnio Scipionis.” Salutati uses *commenta* synonymously with *commentarii*, see n. 15.
meaning of the singular *commentarius*, when he uses *liber* to designate the single components of the *commentarii*: “primo libro Commentariorum Super Somnio Scipionis”,\(^{17}\) instead of Petrarch’s *secundus commentarius*.

While the word *commentarius/ii* is rarely used by Salutati, we have eighteen examples where he uses the word *commentator* as a circumlocution (e.g. “Lactantius *commentator in decimo scribit*”,\(^{18}\) “egregius Virgilii *commentator Servius refert*”\(^{19}\)). The relative avoidance of *commentarius* may have been a stylistic preference of Salutati.

**Bruni.** For Bruni I have excerpted a more limited material, mainly the *Historiae Florentini Populi* and the writings edited by Viti.\(^{20}\) Bruni’s use is completely different from what we saw in Petrarch and Salutati. As far as I have been able to discover, he uses *commentarius* only for the concise type of historical writing exemplified in Caesar’s *commentarii*: He mentions Caesar’s *commentarii*,\(^{21}\) but also knows Cicero’s autobiographical *commentarii consulatus*: “Scripsit etiam [...] Commentarios consulatus sui grecce scriptos, quos ad Posidonium philosophum misit” (*Cicero novus*)\(^{22}\). Since the source for this information, a letter by Cicero to Atticus, has *commentarium*\(^{23}\) in the acc. singular (masc. or neuter?), the transfer to *commentarios* allows us a glimpse at Bruni’s predilection for the plural.

More significantly, Bruni also calls a number of his own historical works *commentarius* or *commentarii/a*.

We have the singular masc. in the title “Rerum suo tempore gestarum *commentarius*” (if this was the works’ original title),\(^{24}\) and neuter in his *Commentarium rerum graecarum* (1439) based on portions of Xeno-

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\(^{17}\) see n.14.

\(^{18}\) *lab. Herc.* 3, 39, 9, Salutati 1951, 389.

\(^{19}\) *ep.* 4, 18, Salutati 1891-1911, 1, 325 (1379).

\(^{20}\) Bruni 1996.

\(^{21}\) *De studiis et litteris*, ed. in Bruni 1996, 248-78: 264, “Caesarem ipsum res gestas suas *commentariis* summa facilitate venustateque explicantem”.


\(^{23}\) *Cic.* *An.* 1, 19, 10, “Commentarius consulatus mei Graece compositum misi ad te”.

\(^{24}\) ed. Bruni 1926. From Di Pierro’s edition it is not clear whether the word *commentarius* was part of the original title, cp. *ibid.* 407–408; it is, however, attested by the explicit of at least one ms. from the fifteenth century, BNCF, Magl. classe XXV, cod. 661, c. 43b, “Explicit *commentarius* Leonardi Aretini de temporibus suis [...]“*, see *ibid.* 413.
phon’s *Hellenica*.  

Otherwise Bruni uses the plural and both genders without a discernible difference: plural neuter in “Commentaria primi belli Punici”, and plural masc. about the same work in “Ego in commentariis illis, quos tu legisti, Polybium Megalopolitanum secutus sum” (“quos” shows that this is masc.).

In the *Rerum suo tempore gestarum commentarius* Bruni explains what he understands as typical for this form of historiography. It is the *discursus brevis* contained in a *libellus*, a booklet:

> Qui per Italiam homines excelluerint aetate mea et quae conditio rerum quaeve studiorum ratio fuerit, libuit in hoc libello discursu brevi colligere  
> (I have wanted to put together a brief presentation of the men who excelled in Italy in my time and of the political affairs and the state of the letters).  

Bruni insists on the difference between *historia* and *commentaria*; the former proposes a more ample and detailed treatment of its topic, whereas the latter are denser and emphasize the overview:

> Commentaria tamen ab historia multum differunt. Illa enim amplior ac diligentior est, haec contractior et minus explicata. Livius quoque in Romuli et in Hostilii et Tarquinii Regum Romanorum gestis referendis non annos prosequitur, sed rerum summam.  
> (*Commentaria* are quite different from history. The one is larger and more detailed, the other briefer and less expansive. Also Livy, when he reports the deeds of Romulus and the Roman kings Hostilius and Tarquinius, does not give an account year by year but an overview over what happened).

I have not been able to find any example where Bruni talks about a commentary using the word *commentarius*. The only relevant example again reminds us of Salutati’s curious avoidance of the word *commentarius* for commentary: “Verba Servii Virgilii commentatoris viri doctis-

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25 *ep*. 8, 3, Bruni 1741, II, 109, “Scripsi noviter commentarium quoddam rerum Graecarum”.
26 *ep*. 4, 19, Bruni 1741, I, 134, and *ep*. 9.6, Bruni 1741, II, 151.
27 Bruni 1926, 423.
28 *ep*. 4, 20, Bruni 1741, I, 135.
Poggio. For Poggio I have excerpted the letters, where I have found two examples. The first is of a well-known type (1427): “Mittam tibi, cum primum invenero qui diligenter ferat, commentaria Caesaris”. Poggio here uses the neuter, which regarding Caesar’s writings will soon be unacceptable to his fellow humanists. In the second example we find a meaning we have not seen so far (1431):

Scias tamen me, quod tibi dudum pollicitus sum, tanquam in commentaria conieciesse usque ad hec tempora fortune varietatem, neque conceperam laborantur e memoria.
(I want you to know that I have - what I promised you a long time ago - up to now thrown my thoughts concerning the mutability of fortune into some kind of commentaria, so as not to forget them).

Poggio seems to mean a sort of note-book where he jotted down his thoughts in shorter form. Obviously he expects the recipient of the letter to know that commentarium is not only a fullsized work like Caesar’s commentarii or a commentary to another author but could also be used to designate a booklet for collecting notes. This is a meaning for which I have so far found no attestation since antiquity.

It is too early to claim that Poggio himself resuscitated this meaning from classical Latin, but we may assume that this was a recent usage since Poggio eight years earlier still had to explain what he meant when he used the diminutive commentariolum in the same sense in a letter to Niccoli (1423):

Mittas ad me, rogo, singula commentariola mea, hoc est extracta illa ex variis libris quos legi.
(Please send me my commentariola, that is those excerpts from various books I have read).

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29 ep. 10, 25, Bruni 1741, II, 222.

Alberti. The ‘private note-book’ we encounter again in Leon Battista Alberti’s *De pictura* (3, 61, 1437)\(^{33}\):

> Quove id certius teneamus, modulos in parallelos dividere iuvabit, ut in publico opere cuncta veluti ex privatis commentariis ducta suis sedibus collocentur.

(To make our subject matter more comprehensible, we will divide it into parallel units, so that in the published work everything is arranged in its proper place as if drawn from private *commentarii*).

To reinforce the aspect of brevity, Alberti uses the diminutive in a similar example, where *commentariolus* is a short excerpt (*Momus* 3, 5, 1450)\(^{34}\):

> Quid, si ei tradam optimas illas commonefactiones de regno quas olim apud philosophos collectas redegi brevissimos in commentariolos?

(What if I send him those excellent precepts about the kingdom which I once collected from the philosophers and arranged in very short *commentarioli*).

Similar is the usage of the plural for ‘outline’ (*Intercenales* 10, *bubo*, 1430-1440):

> Bubo [...] in medium habuit contionem, mea quidem sententia haud inelegantem, qua quidem, ut eiusdem veluti commentaria recitem, aiebat [...]

(In the middle he held a speech - which in my opinion was rather elegant -, in which, if I may give just an outline, he said the following [...])\(^{35}\)

In an important development, Alberti frees himself from the restriction of the literary *commentarii* to historical works in the opening sentence of the *De pictura* from 1437 (1, 1):


\(^{34}\) ed. Alberti 1986.

\(^{35}\) ed. Alberti 1964, 209.
De pictura his brevissimis commentariis conscripturi, quo clarior sit nostra oratio, a mathematicis ea primum quae ad rem pertinere videbuntur accipiemos

(As we are beginning these short reflections on painting, we shall, so as to make our exposition clearer, take over from the mathematicians the relevant information).

That Alberti dubs his *De pictura* ‘commentarii’ may be a reflection of his reading of Vitruvius (whom he quotes twice in the *De pictura*). Vitruvius had insisted that “litteras architectum scire oportet, ut commentariis memoriam firmiorem efficere possit” (an architect has to know letters, so that he can strengthen his memory with notes).\(^{36}\) For Alberti the commentarii as a form of technical literature are marked by brevity (“succincte”, “commentariorum brevitas”, “brevitatis causa”, “quam brevissime”), which allows for the presentation of what is really necessary (1, 6, “quae ad rem pernecessaria sint”) without demanding a full scale treatment of a topic (1, 23, “quod his commentariis brevitatis causa praetermittendum censui”, what I decided to omit to achieve brevity).\(^{37}\)

Furthermore we have *commentariilia* generally for ‘studies’ (1452/1453)\(^ {38}\): “haec de multis ueterum commentariis excerpta breuissime perstrinxi” (these excerpts from many commentarii of the Ancients I have presented as briefly as possible. Previously Alberti had cited Plutarch, Plato, and Diodorus) and the writings of the Church Fathers, “sermones autem quibus uterentur diserti per ea tempora pontifices ex patrum commentariis spectare passim licet” (The sermons held by the learned bishops of that age can be seen throughout the writings of the Fathers).\(^ {39}\)

For ‘explanation’ Alberti had used the singular *commentarius* in his *De iure* (1437): “Nobis autem annus iam ferme sextus elapsus est postea

\(^{36}\) Vitr. 1, 1, 4.

\(^{37}\) Alberti remarks on brevity in the following passages in *De pictura*, (1, 6), “Satis enim erit his commentariis succinte quae ad rem pernecessaria sint demonstrasse”, (1, 8), “Hoc autem loco sit, quantum commentariorum brevitas postulat, satis ea retulisse ex quibus dubitet nemo hoc ita esse”, (1, 23), “quod his commentariis brevitatis causa praetermittendum censui”, and (3, 51), “Sed cum ad perfectum pictorem instituendum ut omnes quas recensuimus laudes assequi possit, nonnulla etiam supersint, quae his commentariis minime praeterundae censeo, ea quam brevissime referamus”.

\(^{38}\) *De re aedificatoria* 4, 1, Alberti 1966, I, 269.

\(^{39}\) *aedif.* 7, 13, Alberti 1966, II, 629.
From Valla to Perotti – Theory and Practice

The authors we have cited so far have - if they expressed any theoretical considerations at all - focused on the meaning of *commentarius*. A more comprehensive view which incorporates the shifts of the gender will be attempted by Lorenzo Valla, Giovanni Tortelli, and Niccolò Perotti. At the same time the practical usage of the humanists will expand greatly; at the end of the Quattrocento humanists will not only have recovered a large part of the classical lexicon, but also left their own imprint on the language they used for intellectual communication.

*Lorenzo Valla*. In the middle of the Quattrocento, Lorenzo Valla is the first to codify classical usage in regard to both gender and meaning in a chapter of the *Elegantiae* (4.21), “Commentaria quid sint” (full Latin text see Appendix 1):

> What the word *commentarius* means, is explained by Seneca in the third book of the *Declamations* when he says: “He never spoke without notes, and he was not content with the sort of notes that contain the bare facts”. And Cicero in the *Brutus*: “This [i. Crassus’ speech against Cn. Domitius] is not a speech but chapter headings and a somewhat richer outline of the speech”. And Quintilian: “It is, however, a common practice with those who have many cases to plead to write out the essentials, at least the introductory parts, to cover the remainder which they bring from home by considering it in advance, and to meet sudden contingencies by improvising, a practice regularly adopted by Cicero, as is clear from his note-books. [...] These memoranda, however, of which I am speaking are so carefully drawn up that they seem to me to have been composed by himself for the benefit of pos-

40 Alberti 1985, 178.
Concerning the gender of *commentarius*, Valla formulates three rules. Firstly, if *commentarius* means ‘brief presentation’, then the noun has masculine forms in the plural, neuter forms in the singular: “In plurali hoc nomen esse generis masculini, quum in singulare sit neutri” (in the plural this noun is masculine, in the singular neuter). Secondly, if *commentarius* designates a part of a larger work, such as in Caesar’s *commentarii*, then the singular, too, is in the masculine, because “nunquam ‘commentarium’ ita mihi in magnis auctoribus videor annotasse” (I have never seen the neuter form *commentarium* in this meaning in the important authors). Thirdly, in the meaning “expositio et interpretatio auctorum”, i.e., ‘commentary’, the genders are used indistinctly. Valla also tries to clarify the relationship between *commentarius* and *liber*: “commentarios idem esse quod libros” (*commentarii* are the same as books). By this Valla means that *commentarius* is a subcategory of *liber*, “Quare ita sentio, omnes commentarios libros esse, sed non continuo libros commentarios” (all *commentarii* are books, but not therefore all books *commentarii*), and “ubi res sunt late diffuseque explicatae et non brevius quam poterant tractatae, libri tantum sunt, non commentarii” (where the matters are treated broadly, amply and as extensively as possible, we have just *libri*, not *commentarii*). Thus Valla understands his own *Elegantiae* as *commentarii* (preface to the second book): “meos hos commentarios”.

Valla also believed that he had found two examples in Servius where *commentarius* meant ‘author of a commentary’. This information is repeated by Tortelli and Perotti, but I have not been able to find any ex-

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41 For the translation of the Seneca-quotation I have used Winterbottom’s translation, Seneca 1974, 1, p. 381; for Quintilian I have used the translations by Russel, Quintilian 2001, IV, 387, and Butler, Quintilian 1920-22, IV, 151.

42 Examples of the plural masculine abound, e.g. *Antidotum in Facium* (1447), Valla 1981, 233, “Quid severius, quid fere brevius historiis Caesaris, quas propter compendiarium genus dicendi commentarios vocat?” (What could be more austere, what shorter than the histories of Caesar, which he called *commentaries* on account of their concise style), in the singular we have no unequivocal attestation for the neuter, cp. *Antidotum in Facium*, Valla 1981, 43, “Imitat us enim sum Titum Livium [...] et rerum Caesaris commentarium”, eleg. 6, 13, Valla 1999, 706, “Caesar Commentario primo”.

43 Valla 1999, 184.

44 This meaning is attested in some glossaries, see ThLL, III, 1856,35 ff.
amples in the Renaissance where it is actually applied.

In Valla’s definition one usage which had been popular with Poggio and Alberti is conspicuously absent, the meaning ‘collection of excerpts, notes’. Considering how much (negative) attention Valla paid to Poggio’s Latin, we would like to assume that this is a conscious omission. Certainly the Latin of the humanists after Valla mirrors his preference; so far I have not found any example for *commentarii* as ‘excerpts’ in the second half of the 15th century.

Valla’s practice exactly mirrored his theoretical considerations. As an example of the first rule concerning the gender we may adduce a passage from *De libero arbitrio*, “ad episcopum Ilerdensem disputationem hanc scriptam et, ut ais, in commentarium redactam mittamus, cuius iudicio nullum novi quod anteponere aurea” (let us send this disputation written down and, as you say, laid out as a rough sketch to the bishop of Ilerda, whose judgement I consider unrivalled).\(^{45}\) For the second rule we have a plural masc. in the *Antidotum in Facium*, “apud commentarios Caesaris”.\(^{46}\) Finally, the plural neuter admitted by the third rule is used in *eleg.* 2 praef., “Multos transeo [...] doctos, inter quos sunt Paedianus et Victorinus, quorum alter ad orationes, alter ad rhetoricos Marci Tullii commentaria composuit” (I pass over many learned men, amongst whom there are Asconius Pedianus and Marius Victorinus; one of them wrote a commentary to the speeches, the other to the *De inventione*).

**Giovanni Tortelli.** In *De orthographia* Giovanni Tortelli has a lengthy discussion of *commentarius* which, while reproducing a large part of Valla’s material, does not insist any more on the differentiation between masculine and neuter forms in the singular, whereas in the plural the neuter forms remain restricted to the meaning ‘commentary’ (Latin text see Appendix 2). Tortelli keeps Valla’s distinction between *commentarius* and *liber* but adds that he actually used *liber* also for the parts of his *commentarii/a*: “Verum hos uigintiquatuor ‘libros’ diximus, etsi ex multis longisque tractatibus breuiora coacertuentur compendia. ‘Commentarii’ etiam dici possunt, uti nos commentarios hos XXIII libros diximus” (we have called these twenty-four ‘books’, even though they

\(^{45}\) Valla 1934, 53 (acc. sg. masc./neutr.)

\(^{46}\) Valla 1981, 86; the singular is frequently attested, but nearly always in the ablative, which leaves the gender undecided, e. g. Valla 1981, 175, “accipe Caesarem, commentario primo”.
are shorter digests of many long works; they can also be called *commentarii*, as we have called these twenty-four books *commentarii*).\textsuperscript{47} This passage contains the only attestation so far of the plural masculine form in Tortelli.

Otherwise the whole of the *De orthographia* is designated by the plural neuter, thus positing the work in the commentary-genre: “Coeperam olim [...] commentaria quaedam grammatica condere quibus omnem litterariam antiquitatem et orthographiae rationem cum opportunis historiis pro poetarum declaratione connectere conabam” (I once began to compose some sort of grammatical *commentaria*, in which I wanted to combine the literature of antiquity and an exposition of orthography with suitable examples into an explanation of poetry).\textsuperscript{48} Ignoring Valla’s view of the difference between *liber* and *commentarius* he uses *liber* for the twenty-four subdivisions of his work, in the plural, “nonnulla [...]”, que in alii commentariorum libris non tetigimus” (some matters which we have not treated in the other books of the commentaries),\textsuperscript{49} as well as the singular, “ut in primo horum commentariorum libro ostendimus” (as we have shown in the first book of these commentaries).\textsuperscript{50} Tortelli also uses the plural neuter for Pophyry’s commentary on Homer: “Porphyrius etiam [...] in Homerum commentaria edidit” (Porphyry, too, wrote *commentaria* on Homer).\textsuperscript{51} If Tortelli wants to include the notion of brevity, he uses the diminutive *commentariolum*:

\textit{Nec id sane formido quod nonnulli vaticinari videntur: futuros quosdam qui commentariola quedam ex his nostris commentariis diversos in poetas sine honore nostro traducere [...] non verebuntur} (I am not afraid of what some see coming: that people will copy some small comments on various poets from our *commen-
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*taria without acknowledging their source).*

Until now I have not found in Tortelli an example of *commentarius* or *commentarium* in the singular, although both receive broad attention in the *commentarius*-definition.

*Niccolò Perotti.* Perotti *Cornu copiae* 44.9-10 (for Latin text see appendix 3),53 adopts Valla’s doctrine, shortening it radically, especially by reducing the large number of citations. There is a faint remnant of Valla’s discussion concerning the connexion between meaning and gender; its *raison d’être* can only be guessed against the background of its source:

Dicimus autem tam in masculino genere commentarius quam in neutro commentarium. Commentarii etiam siue commentaria uocantur expositiones siue interpretationes autorum, quod [...] (We use *commentarius* in the masculine form as well as the neuter *commentarium*. Commentarii or *commentaria* are explanations or interpretations of authors because [...]).

Perotti aligns a major aspect of the definitions with contemporary usage. Already Tortelli had wrestled with explaining the copious length of his own supposedly short commentary. Perotti went a step further and omitted Valla’s considerations concerning the difference in length and contents between *commentarius* and *liber*. Thus, Perotti did not have a problem to call his own masterpiece *Commentarii*; length for him had become a virtue (*Cornu copiae* proh. 4):

Postremo breuitatem ibi tantum custodiendum esse ubi causa postulat; alioquin praesuricationem esse transire quae necessaria et utilia sunt [...] Commentarios huiusmodi eo meliores esse quo longiores, ut inter Demosthenis et M. Tulli orationes eae feruntur optima quae maxima (Finally, brevity should be observed only if there is a reason, otherwise it is misleading to pass over what is necessary and useful. This kind of commentary is the better the longer it is, just as amongst the speeches of Demosthenes and Cicero those are the best which are the longest).

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52 Lemma *prologus*, quoted from Sanford 1951, 215.
This made it possible for him to write a “commentary on everything” (*Cornu copiae* proh. 6): “Hoc opus non unius Poetae, sed omnium latinarum autorum commentarios iure optimo dici posse” (This work with the best of rights could be called a commentary not to one poet but to all of Latin literature).

Perotti uses the plural masculine also for his other commentaries. Thus the friend who had come to check Calderini’s erroneous information referred to Perotti’s notes on Martial as *commentarii* (*Letter to Pomponio Leto*, 1473)

Quo mihi tradito atque perlecto, statim tremebunda uoce ac trepidanti similis: “Audiui”, inquit, “modo amicum quendam in corona doctorum uiorum mirifice se extollentem [...] Non potui hominis impedientiam ferre, qui se ita iactaret; iccirco ueni ad te quo Martialem abs te emendatum et commentarios tuos uiderem tuam que deinde sententiam iis qui hominem iactabundum audierunt referrem.” Ad haec ego surridens: “[...] Verum bono animo sis, mi Rufe; iam commentarios nostros uidebimus.” (When I had read the text of the epigram he showed me, he pressed on saying with a trembling voice and obvious anxiety: “I just heard an acquaintance putting himself forward in an extraordinary manner in a group of learned men [...] I could not stomach the fellow’s impudence and boasting; therefore I came to you to look in your emended Martial and in your commentary/ies and to relate your opinion to the people who heard him boasting.” To this I said smilingly: “[...] But cheer up, my Rufus, lets have a look at my commentary/ies”).

The Martial commentary referred to, is in all probability the Vaticanus latinus 6848 in the Biblioteca Vaticana, the vast and disparate conglomerate of information which was shortly to form the core of the *Cornu copiae*.

We have only one instance where Perotti uses the singular: “In scriiniis Mithridatis maximi regis deuicti Cn. Pompeius inuenit manu illius scriptam in peculiari commentario compositionem antidoti” (In the ar-

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54 ed. Leto 2006.


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chives of Mithridates Pompey found a separate note written by Mithridates himself with the composition of the antidote).\footnote{Cornu Copiae 4, 115, Perotti 1989-99, IV [ed. M. Pade, J. Ramminger], 45.} Since this passage is copied from Pliny (nat. 23, 149), it only incidentally reflects the humanist’s usage.

Although Perotti mentions Caesar’s commentarii,\footnote{Cornu Copiae 1, 302, Perotti 1989-99, I [ed. J.-L. Charlet], 110, “Legionis alaudarum meminit Caesar in commentariis”.} we have no example of the usage for a type of ‘historiography’ so prominent in Bruni. The only time Perotti enlarges the usage of commentarii is in the definition of itinerarium, ‘description of a voyage’:


Since the source of this definition, if any, has not been traced, we cannot know how much of the Latin is owed to Perotti himself; we note, however, that the use of the plural masculine is in keeping with the other examples we have discussed.

After Valla: Hermolaus Barbarus min.

I would like to conclude my paper with a short overview regarding the usage of one author at the end of the Quattrocento. I have chosen Hermolaus Barbarus the Younger, who shows a certain variety in his usage and thus illustrates the extent of the semantic possibilities of the word at the end of the fifteenth century. Whether the theoretical observations of Perotti’s Cornucopiae (first printed in 1489) - a work which Barbaro uses assiduously, if critically - have influenced Barbaro’s use of our word, is at this point difficult to ascertain. Since Perotti covers only a part of the semantic breadth of Barbaro’s usage, he can in any case only have been of limited value. I have 28 examples of commentarius in his letters, the Castigationes Plinianae, and the Corollarium ad Dio-
scoridem.

Barbaro mentions Caesar’s *commentarii* (in a rare instance of the singular a single book is a *commentarius*) and also uses the term for contemporary historiography, such as Jacobus Bracellus’ *De bello Hispano*, Bernardo Giustinian’s *De origine urbis Venetiarum [...] historia*, and other works. The notion of brevity, if present at all, is hardly in the foreground.

In a broader sense Barbaro uses *commentarii* for various kinds of historical sources, such as those used by Giorgio Merula in his project of writing the history of the Visconti, the *Antiquitates vicecomitum*, “Video provinciam tibi de scribenda historia non facillimam contigisse: agnosco et diligentiam tuam, qui non omnibus commentariis fidem habes” (I see you have accepted the project of writing a history - not the easiest task - and I am well aware of your careful approach which does not trust all information), or unspecified *scriptorum commentarii* which have put a name to Livia’s lover, “Credo et Liviae Drusi uxoris adulterum nominatim in scriptorum commentariis citatum esse; eo legentes haec remitterimus” (I believe the name of the lover of Livia, the wife of Drusus, is given in some historical works; we refer our readers to these).

Barbaro expands the notion of *commentarius* to include any kind of compilation of facts from antiquity, such as a work on birds by a certain Boethus, or the *commentarii nocturni*, a genre of writing on “what happens at night”.

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61 *ep.* 120, Barbaro 1943, II, 36 (1488), “Commentarios patris tui De bello hispaniensi voluptate tanta legimus”; the work in question is Jacobus Bracellus, *De bello Hispano* (Milan ?: ca. 1476), HC 3695 = H 3696; ISTC ib01057000.
62 *ep.* 131, Barbaro 1943, II, 489 (1489), “reipublicae commentariis ab urbe condita perscriptis”.
64 *ep.* 35, Barbaro 1943, I, 52 (1484).
67 *Castig. gloss.* P 151, Barbaro 1973-79, III, 1437, “Commentarios etiam nocturnos, id est re-
This category also includes better-known works such as the writings of Aristotle, Plutarch’s *Moralia*, and the two works of Dionysius of Halicarnassus about the style of Thucydides. Also present-day works fall into this category such as the “paterni commentarii” (his father Francesco Barbaro’s *De re uxoria*), and unspecified writings.

The other category, ‘commentary’, is present in various *commentarii* to Aristotle, those by Alexander of Aphrodisias, his ownThemistius-translation, his commentary to the *Analytica Posteriora*, and other commentaries. Barbaro also understands his two major works, the *Corollarium in Dioscoridem* and the *Castigationes Plinianae*, as *commentarii*. The singular, ‘explanation’, we find only once, in a gloss on *talentum*:

sed haec, quae carptim cursimque velut semina materiae difficilli-mae libavimus, dilato in aliud tempus pleniore commentario, sufficient (But these observations, which we offered in a piecemeal...
and cursory manner as the seeds of a very intricate matter, have to suffice for the present; we reserve a fuller commentarius for another occasion).  

Even though Barbaro reserves the singular form commentarius for the single unit of information, the connotation of ‘brevity’ does not seem to play a role, since also a single unit of Plutarch’s moralia and a book of Caesars’ Bellum Gallicum is a commentarius. The only exception to this rule, where the singular is used for a whole work, is in a paraphrased quotation from Vitruvius. Regarding the gender, in the few cases where it can be decided, Barbaro mostly uses the masculine, we have only one example for the (plural) neuter.

Conclusion

On our itinerary along the path of commentarius we have come a long way from the author we started with. Where Petrarch confined himself to a tiny number of titles of works from classical antiquity and Leonardo Bruni exclusively used it to define a part of his historical writings, by the end of the Quattrocento the humanists had achieved a remarkable feat: they had (mostly with success) tried to understand how the Romans had used what initially had been a technical term for a product of the Roman bureaucracy of the Republican period, reappropriated what was usable for application to their own writings, made sense of the irregularities of gender in their sources by establishing rules (however erroneous), and in general firmly restablished a broad variety of uses which they expected their audience to be familiar with. By the end of the Quattrocento, Italian humanism was spreading to other parts of Europe. Further research will have to show whether the lexical gains made by Italian humanists would be maintained in the expansion of the new linguistic ideals to other language communities, and how the use of the commentarius adapted to

79 For Plutarch see note 69, for Caesar see note 60.
81 see note 68.
new situations and the rapidly evolving publishing world of the Reformation.

Appendix: Texts

Two of the three theoretical texts discussed above have never been reliably edited. For ease of reference, I have decided to append a complete text of the three passages, even though many uncertainties remain. In the case of Valla and Tortelli the text is a slightly emended transcription of the text of the editio princeps, where modern usage of capital letters and punctuation has been introduced; also the cited classical sources have been indicated. The proposed emendations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

1. Valla, Elegantiae 4.21

The text follows the edition of Venice: Nicolaus Jenson, before July 1471, HCR 15802, ISTC no. iv00051000. The copy used is the one from the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, as reproduced in the microfiche collection Incunabula: The Printing Revolution in Europe, 1455–1500, unit 8, PI94. Jenson has a continuous numbering of chapters, ours is CCII. I have also consulted the modern edition by S. López Moreda, Valla 1999, which, however, contains a certain number of sometimes crucial errors.

Commentaria quid sint

COMMENTARII nomen quid significet, tertio declamationum libro Seneca declarat, quum dicit [contr. 3 praef. 6]: “Sine commentario nunquam dixit, nec commentario contentus erat, in quo nudae res ponuntur”. Et Cicero in Bruto [164]: “Non est oratio, sed capita rerum et orationis commentarium paulo plenius”. Et Quintilianus [inst. 10, 7, 30]: “Plaerunque autem multa agentibus <accidit>, ut maxime necessaria et utique initia scribant, caetera, quae domo afferrunt, cogitatione complectantur. Subitis ex tempore occurrunt; quod fecisset M. Tullium sui commentariis apparat. Sed feruntur aliorum quoque, et inuenti forte, ut eos dicturus quisque composuerat, et in libros digesti, et causarum, quae sunt actae a Seruio Sulpitio, cuius tres orationes extant. Sed hi, de quibus loquor, commentarii ita sunt exacti, ut ab ipso mihi in memoriam posteritatis ui-

82 Inserted from Quintilian in many later editions of the Elegantiae, see Valla 1999, ad l.
deantur esse compositi”. Per haec Quintiliani uerba colligitur non modo id quod dicebam, simulque in plurali hoc nomen esse generis masculini, cum in singulari sit neutri, de quo mox etiam dicam, uerum etiam COMMENTARIOS idem esse quod LIBROS: quod Cicero confirmat, cum III libro De finibus dicens [3, 10]: “Tu ipse cum tantum librorum habeas, quos hic tandem requiris commentarios? quosdam, inquam, Aristotelicos”, tum secundo De oratore [2, 223]: “Tres patris Bruti de iure ciuili libellos tribus legendos dedit; ex libro primo forte euenit” et caetera. Ac statim post [2, 224]: “Vbi sunt hi fundi, Brute, quos tibi pater publicis commentariis consignatos reliquit? quod nisi puberem te iam haberet, quartum librum composuisset et se in balneis locutum cum filio scriptum reliquisset”. Ecce eandem rem tribus vocabulis Cicero declarauit, LIBELLIS, LIBRIS et COMMENTARIIS. Quare ita sentio, omnes commentarios libros esse, sed non continuo libros commentarios. Namque ubi res sunt late diffusae explicatae et non breuiores quam poterant tractatae, libri tantum sunt, non commentarii, - unde Caesarius COMMENTARI, in quibus ad exequendam historiam alius uidetur subiecisse materiam -; qui si fuerint singuli, COMMENTARIUI uel COMMENTARIIVS uel LIBER dicetur. Lliuus XLVIII [1 39.47.3-4]: “Quae quae iussit ab eo, ecquem de his rebus commentarium a patre accepisset. Cum respondisset accepisse se, nihil prius nec potius uisum esset quam regis ipsius de singulis responsa accipere; librum poposcerunt”, si plures, ‘primus et secundus commentarius’, non ‘primum et secundum commentarium’, ut Hirtius siue Oppius, qui accessionem addidit Caesaris commentariis, ait [Gall. 8 praef. 2]: “Proximus alterius commentarius”. Nunquam COMMENTARIIVM ita mihi annotasse in magnis auctoris uideor. Quidam tamen aliter faciunt, utique in alia significatione, quae est, ut sentio, ‘expositio’ et ‘interpretatio’ auctorum, utroque generi promiscue utentes, ut A. Gellius [17, 9, 5]: “Est adeo Probi grammatici commentarius satis curioso factus”, et iterum [2, 6, 1]: “Nonnulli grammatici, qui commentaria in Virgilium composuerunt”. Et iterum quoque [7, 14, 5]: “Noster Scaurus in primo commentario, quos in Gorgiam Platoni composuit, scriptum reliquit”. Boetius [diff. top. 4 p. 1215D]: “Quod in his commentariis diligentius expediimus, qui a nobis in eiusdem Ciceronis Topica scripti sunt”. Et iterum (ibid.): “Quo autem modo de his dialecticis locis disputetur in his commentariis, quos in Aristotelis Topica a nobis translatas conscrisimus, expeditum est”. Quidam etiam talia huiusmodi opera COMMENTVM uocauerunt, ut Nigidius, Donatus, Priscianus aliqui nonnulli.83 Seruius COMMENTARIIVM COMMENTARIOSQUE pro homine

83 This note, which has been copied by Tortelli as well as Perotti (without the reference to Donatus), is difficult to verify. Concerning Nigidius, Stok (Perotti 1989-99, VI, ad l.) gives ‘Nigid. inc. 56 ap. Mar. Vict. gramm. VI 8,1’ as reference; since neither this nor any other fragment of Nigidius has commentum in its modern text (see Funaioli 1907, I, 161-79), the exact reference must remain sub iudice. For Priscian Stok refers to gramm. III 281.15; other possible references are collected in ThLL, III, 1868.3-45. The reference to Donatus may simply be deduced from
accipere uidetur, cum inquit in VII Aeneidos [7, 543]: “Dicit quidam commentarius ‘connexa’ legendum”, et in Georgicorum primo [1, 147]: “Superfluo mo-uent quaestionem commentarii”.

2. Tortelli, De orthographia, from De syllabis desinentibus in M

The text is based on the edition of Rome: Ulrich Han (Udalricus Gallus) and Simon Nicolai Chardella, after 10 Aug. 1471, HC(+ Add) 15563, ISTC no. it00394000. The copy used is from the Biblioteca Nazionale di Napoli.


Priscian, the ThLL does not have a separate quotation from Donatus.

84 See note 47.
auctorum, ut A. Gellius [17, 9, 5]: "Est adeo, inquit, Probi grammatici commentarius satis curioso factus". Et iterum [2, 6, 1]: "Nonnulli grammatici, qui commentaria in Virgilium composuerunt". Iterum quoque [7, 14, 5]: "Noster Taurus in primo commentariorum, quos in Gorgiam Platonis composuit, scriptum reliquit". Quidam etiam talia huiusmodi opera commentVM uocauerunt, ut Nigidius, Donatus, Priscianus aliique nonnulli. Seruius uero commentarios etiam pro hominibus accepisse uidetur, cum inquit super Georgicorum primum [1, 147]: "Superfluam mouent quaestionem commentarii", hoc est 'qui commenta aediderunt'.

3. Perotti, Cornu copiae 44.9–10

The text is based on the critical edition, Nicolae Perotti *Cornu copiae seu linguae Latinae commentarii*, VI [ed. Fabio Stok], Sassoferrato 1997, 247, and a new collation of the autograph manuscript, BAV, Vrbinas lat. 301 fol.562rv. In the following text I give only the sources which are explicitly mentioned. A fuller documentation can be found in Stok’s edition.


85 See note 83.
86 See note 83.
“Superfluo mouent quaeestionem commentarii”. Item á comminiscor fit frequen-
tatium commensor, quod modo ‘fingo’ significat, modo ‘commentarium scri-
bo’, cujus diminutium est commentariolum.

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