

*“In My Own Hand”: Costanza Colonna and the Art of the Letter in Sixteenth-Century Italy**

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Scholarship on Italian women’s secular writing of the sixteenth century has illuminated the remarkable success female authors enjoyed in print, as well as the complex and ambivalent responses they evoked as a group. This article argues that the more shadowy praxis of ordinary female letter-writing, an obligation for most elite wives and widows, required a baseline level of literacy that enabled more eminent literary women to flourish in print. The essay studies the unpublished letters of the Roman noblewoman Costanza Colonna, the Marchesa of Caravaggio (ca. 1556–1626), to demonstrate her development as a self-taught, competent writer, familiar with the terms of Renaissance debates on the epistolary genre. Colonna exemplifies the hidden world of female literacy that helps explain both the extraordinary flourishing of women’s publishing in sixteenth-century Italy, and the hostility it encountered from some elements of society.

1. INTRODUCTION

During Lent of 1587, the Milanese priest Carlo Bascapè (1550–1615) wrote a long and rather stern letter to a spiritual daughter, the widow Costanza Colonna, the Marchesa of Caravaggio (ca. 1556–1626). The priest urged Colonna to put aside pleasurable worldly affairs and devote herself to the pious life and the raising of her young children. Along with the usual scoldings against excessive dress and makeup, Bascapè condemned both reading and writing as forms of worldly temptation. Chiding Costanza for her various sins, Bascapè exclaims, “You think you cannot live without reading Petrarch’s sonnets from time to time. But oh, what extravagances are these? What do the loves and lusts of Petrarch or some other [poet] have

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to do with a widow lady of your status? Surely elegant writing is not your business, in which case it could have been permitted."¹ Such cautions against secular literacy, both passive and active, were a stock element in the rather severe injunctions lowered on laywomen in the early modern period; similar remarks can be found in advice books for women from Savonarola through the seventeenth century.² It is nonetheless a somewhat puzzling rebuke for this particular addressee, for Costanza Colonna was by all accounts a model Counter-Reformation laywoman. Her reading habits tended to the devout, and her writing was confined to a prolific family and business correspondence.

Bascapè's seeming misfire makes sense, however, when placed in the context of broader anxieties surrounding women and literacy in the later Italian Renaissance. These anxieties arose from two seemingly quite different directions. The first was the surge in women's printed literary production in the mid-sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries, arguably the golden age of Italian female publishing before the twentieth century. This women's Renaissance, though it stretches the usual temporal boundaries of the term rather aggressively, is a classic, still-flourishing subject of scholarship. A second source of anxiety regarding female literacy, and one that has gathered attention only more recently, was the widespread daily practice of writing in which elite women like Colonna engaged through their correspondence. Few of the advice books on which Bascapè drew acknowledged the centrality of women's writing to the functioning of elite families, both noble and mercantile. Yet material remains speak plainly: family archives bulge with women's letters.³ Women's extensive participation in the fraught and near-universal practice of ordinary letter-writing can help us understand Bascapè's unease about his spiritual daughter's reading habits. Without the baseline, functional level of literacy required of nearly all elite women, the slender but strong body of women's published literature could not

¹Archivio Storico dei Padri Barnabiti, Milan (hereafter ASBarn), Registro di Lettere Prepositali (hereafter LP), 1:507; also in ASBarn in typescript, LP tom.1 let. 440, 568–81: "Vi pare di non potere stare senza leggere qualche volta i sonetti del Petrarca. Ohimè che stravaganze sono queste? Che hanno da fare gli amori et le lascivie del Petrarca o d'altro tale, con una donna vedova della vostra qualità? Già non è vostro mestiere lo scrivere elegante, onde ciò forse vi si potesse concedere a bon fine." Edited, with important errors, in Berzaghi, 20–27. Bascapè was a member of the Barnabite order and a devoted imitator of the recently deceased Archbishop Carlo Borromeo: see *Carlo Bascapè*.

²On the advice literature, see Zari, 1996.

³Most works on women's letter-writing in the Renaissance have focused on letters intended for publication. Important recent works on women's private letter-writing include Doglio; Shemek, 2008; Nico Ottaviani; *Per lettera; Women's Letters Across Europe*.

emerge, and the lay and ecclesiastical concerns about overly powerful, i.e., literate, women would gain less purchase.

This article explores the writer's craft of Costanza Colonna, great-niece of the illustrious poetess Vittoria Colonna. Noble but not herself extraordinarily wealthy or powerful, literate but not too much, the younger Colonna authored a substantial unpublished correspondence that maps some of the murkier coordinates of elite women's engagement with the written word. The praxis and technology of letter-writing introduced hundreds of upper-class women to active literacy through a genre that boasted a long, complex pedigree, one that in Colonna's time had seen a recent boost of vernacular enthusiasm. While writers like Colonna did not generally aspire to reach a broad public, they did participate in a pervasive *habitus* of elementary literacy on an unprecedented scale, including mimicry and manipulation of the contemporary literary tropes in which their brothers, at least, were well schooled. Their letters thus deserve a reading that is attentive to echoes of humanist letter-writing. This background of daily, self-conscious paraliterary exercise provided the subsoil from which the broadly accepted presence of women in sixteenth-century print could emerge. Moreover, the presence in every elite household of writing women helped lay the groundwork for the ready reception of published female authors by male and female readers alike. Bascapè's and other writers' concerns about the dangers of women reading and writing poetry thus neatly obscured the more pervasive and significant way that women used the written word: the private letter. Through Colonna's case study, two larger agendas can be advanced: that of situating women's published writings in a context of widespread competency, and that of probing the gulf between norms and practices of writing for women.

Before proceeding to the case, it is important to review what was at stake when a woman set quill to paper or even opened a book. The *querelle* over whether women should read — and if so, what — figured prominently in sixteenth-century advice books, in both the secular (courtly) and religious spheres. Working with Archbishop Carlo Borromeo a few years earlier, Bascapè himself had collaborated in producing one of the genre's bestsellers, Silvio Antoniano's *Tre libri sull'educazione cristiana* (1584), which forbade most women to read vernacular poetry or prose, for fear it would add pride to female vanity, and tempt women to fall in love with their tutors.⁴ Another classic of the genre, fra Sabba da Castiglione's *Ricordi* (1549), went further,

⁴Patrizi, 3:1312–13 (*Tre libri dell' educatione christiana de i figliuoli*, 3.46). Antoniano wrote the work at Borromeo's request; Bascapè reviewed it for the archbishop and offered revisions: Patrizi, 1:226–27; Pagano, 318.

and acknowledged the social pressure for a lady to be urbane and well read, as well as the possible attractions of a wife with a sentimental education. Advising a young man on choosing a wife, Castiglione writes: "Suppose by chance an eager and sensual young man asks you, Don't you want [the prospective bride] to know how to read and write well, so that by reading Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and other such vernacular authors, she avoid being thought a boor, a nothing, a rustic?" Having dangled the enticement of a poetically educated wife via the query of the "eager and sensual young man," Castiglione then redirects his audience to the preferred path of devout female literacy: "you will reply that you highly praise reading and writing in women, but not in order to read the sonnets and songs of Petrarch, or the hundred tales [of Boccaccio] . . . and other such lascivious and dishonorable works; but rather so that they may read the Bible, the office of the Virgin, the legends of saints, lives of the Holy Fathers, and other Catholic, devout, spiritual, and religious books suitable to well-born, well brought up Christian ladies, whose principal profession must be honor, modesty, and so forth."⁵ Like Bascapè, Castiglione refers to the "profession" of writing poetry as one that women should avoid, or replace with another, more womanly office, a hint that the prominence of women as publishing professionals had caught their attention.⁶

Writers of a religious stripe like Castiglione and Antoniano focused primarily on the implications of women's literacy for their sexual and religious virtue: which books might invite them to sin, and how dangerously, and which reading or writing would assist them in pious living. They left slim space for women's practical uses of writing. In contrast, some more courtly writers allowed that women's daily activities required at least a basic level of literary competence, and reframed the topic to question their literacy's appropriate scope. For example, the characters in Stefano Guazzo's widely-circulated dialogue *La civil conversazione* (1579) turn over the subject in terms that reflect the ambivalence of the age: while "the knight" sees danger in teaching women to read and write, he also recognizes the need for these skills, since women's responsibilities in courtrooms, at the lawyer's office, and in the account books of the household require it, in Italy nearly as much as in France; but, he cautions, Italian women have the unique temptations of reading Petrarch and Boccaccio, and of writing "vain and

⁵Castiglione, 217–18: an edition of 1554, *ibid.*, 286, adds a paragraph forbidding women to read love poetry. On this work and its multiple editions, see Quondam, 1980, 54–55.

⁶In an earlier draft of his letter to Colonna, Bascapè used the term "professione di scrivere elegante" and later changed it to the more artisanal "mestiere": ASBarn LP 1.507.

lascivious letters.”⁷ Here Guazzo’s knight links vernacular literacy to household administration, acknowledging that legal exchanges and accounting, whether for mercantile affairs or merely for the running of a large household, are a critical part of a laywoman’s task. Naturally, once a woman learned to write, it was only a small leap for her to write love letters, read poetry, or even write it, as even the more permissive secular author Guazzo had to acknowledge. Herein lay a fundamental challenge for the Renaissance *querelle des femmes*: much as literate, authoritative women made some men nervous and others excited, the very functioning of their class and their society depended on female literacy. As Antoniano puts it, noblewomen of great houses needed a “mediocre” command of reading, writing, and accounts; but “preaching and poetizing” would make them want to “be the teacher” and must be avoided.⁸ In short, in everyday life administration tended to trump poetry; but in public discourse, poetry (and its policing) predominated.

And so the interlocutor of Guazzo’s knight, a certain Annibale, indicates as he extends his friend’s cautiously pro-literacy point of view. Literate women, Annibale remarks, could “read the lives of the Holy Fathers, keep the household accounts, and console their husbands without sharing their secrets with other writers.” Annibale even tries to untie the Gordian knot of literacy and sexual license, when he notes drily that illiteracy is no guarantee of a wife’s virtue: “You can be sure that those women who cannot write, not being able to make love by letter, will do it in person, if they want to.”⁹ Annibale solidly shifts the terms of women’s interaction with the written word from love poetry and illicit correspondence to religion and family business. The Lombard priest Bascapè’s advice to avoid secular, “lascivious” reading and writing thus joined a vast chorus of alternately worried and titillated condemnations, much of it focused on questions of women’s virtue.¹⁰

These worries were well founded, for women were participating actively not only as readers, but as writers, in an unprecedented range of genres both secular and religious. Between 1538 and 1600, Italian presses issued more than seventy single-authored new works by women, many of them in

⁷Guazzo, 1:237.

⁸Patrizi, 3:1312 (*Tre libri dell’ educatione christiana de i figliuoli*).

⁹Guazzo, 1:137.

¹⁰This mistrust coincided with the Inquisition’s new campaign against court literature, said to be typical of Catholic thought in the post-Tridentine age: Fragnito, 2005. Hostility to women’s visible roles had, of course, many more contexts and variations over time and place: King provides an overview.

multiple editions, suggesting that they found welcoming audiences.¹¹ While moralists and churchmen shushed the learned ladies, just as many male cultural arbiters promoted them, praising their uniquely feminine talents and rushing their works into print. This struggle over women's presence in public life, particularly literate life, was one of the prime battles of the culture wars of the late Renaissance.¹²

2. A WOMEN'S RENAISSANCE? NEW VIEWS

Some important recent works have brought new life to our understanding of this particular episode in the *querelle des femmes*, synthesizing several decades of scholarship on women's literary contributions to the long Renaissance, and arguing for a new vision of women's centrality to this movement. These works identify new ways to read women as significant, even central contributors to high culture and politics as creators, patrons, mediators, and public figures. Moreover, such a refashioning of the Renaissance woman has sufficiently shaped current discussions, at least in the literary and political fields, that one may safely say that a reconsideration of women's roles is a major factor in the current contours and resurgence of the Renaissance field.¹³

Virginia Cox's *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400–1650* offers a bold analysis of the paradox produced by the culture wars of the sixteenth century, in which women who wrote found themselves criticized harshly on one side by clerical authorities, while on the other many men celebrated them and facilitated their careers. As the date range of her title suggests, the book's central thesis challenges existing periodization, bringing together the fruits of the recent explosion of research on individual women writers to propose a two-century golden age of women's published writing, with identifiable cycles within it. While Cox writes that the "general picture" of

¹¹Cox, 235–45. Thirty-seven of these works appeared in the years 1580–1600, precisely Bascapè's most active period: *ibid.*, 131. These figures do not include reissues of previously published works, or anthologies including women authors.

¹²The term is from Muir, 2007.

¹³Remarkably, it is once again possible to use the term *Renaissance* outside the world of the arts, to encompass high culture in general, including its political and familial contexts, in Italian urban contexts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Though pronounced virtually dead in 1978 by William Bouwsma, and again by Muir, 1117, in 1995 — "The Renaissance lingers on in the historiography but often signifies little more than a chronological tag, except in the history of thought and the arts" — the term is recovering, along with a new ascendancy of intellectual history, a habitat in which the word has ever prospered. For a recent update, see Starn.

women's concrete, material opportunities "would appear to be one of stasis, if not of deterioration," at the same time, within some circumscribed areas, women contributed "in a quantity and with a prominence unprecedented in the ancient or medieval world. . . . Although their place within Italian literary culture remained undoubtedly marginal, we are not talking of a silence broken by a few exceptional voices but of something more like an established minority presence, increasingly accepted over time as a matter of course."¹⁴ This is a far cry from the fourteenth-century hostility toward reading women, much less writing women, embodied in Paolo da Certaldo's advice that only girls destined for the convent should read, and then only after they were safely confined to the nunnery.¹⁵

Thus, even as some writers continued to discourage women's public activity, "powerfully affirmative new attitudes to women" emerged in literary circles.¹⁶ These were rooted in a more general appreciation among Italian elites of women's moral and intellectual virtues and their contribution to society — their "excellence and dignity" in the words of one 1525 title.¹⁷ While women's legal and social status, as well as the range of their religious opportunities, appear to have been diminishing over the sixteenth century — at least if much recent scholarship is to be believed — the ongoing discussion of women's value to culture was moving, at least temporarily, in their favor during the Italian sixteenth century.¹⁸ This discourse welcomed women into the public world of print. Their presence in this sphere, and a sampling of the remarkable range of women's published works, have now been made available to a broad audience by the *Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* series of translated works by and about women. Concomitantly, scholars have asked how women's contribution to public life served the needs of the culture that welcomed them into an (albeit limited) space, and what broader cultural shifts explain the ups and downs of their reception. Cox hypothesizes that the rise and fall of women's prominence in publishing — discernible in cycles from 1450 to about 1650 — depended largely on the availability of powerful female patrons, who were particularly numerous at the princely courts of Italy.¹⁹ When male authors, publishers, and editors had to please women with purse-strings,

¹⁴Cox, xiii–xiv; Ross, 313–19.

¹⁵Certaldo, 126–27, cited in James, 2008, 43.

¹⁶Cox, xiv.

¹⁷Galeazzo Flavio Capella, *Della eccellenza e dignità delle donne* (Rome, 1525).

¹⁸On the declining status of elite laywomen, see, for example, Ago and Borello; on women in the religious sphere, see Zarri, 2000.

¹⁹Cox, 184–86.

they promoted favorable attitudes toward female aptitude and virtue, and hunted up or manufactured female authors — some of them actually men publishing under women's names — to promote and sell as a sign of their pro-women attitudes.²⁰ Thus, regardless of women's fate in legal terms, the existence of a group of wealthy women with money to spend could guarantee women more generally a degree of acclaim and respect in the public sphere.

Recent work on women's roles in social and political structures of power has followed a parallel track, reading women as integrated participants in fields — state building, finance, art patronage, and so forth — formerly imagined as male. Eased by the trends in these subfields that highlight networks alongside institutions, and give as much credence to soft power as to central authorities,²¹ works such as Letizia Arcangeli and Susanna Peyronel's *Donne di potere* present women as often complicit, if subordinate, players in political games of hierarchy and manipulation. While the volume concentrates mainly on women who held sovereign political power, or directly influenced those who did so, its proposition may be fruitfully extended to less-exalted women in the context of institutional or family settings.²²

Taken together, these arguments are exciting because they offer a possible way out of what has become a frustrating blind alley: how to resolve the apparent contradiction between normative discussions — in which women's public roles were often discouraged and always controversial — and daily practices in which women routinely took active roles as authors, promoters, and correspondents.²³ This way out links the women's history of female authors, rulers, patrons, and wives to the gendered history of the *querelle des femmes* and other contemporary discussions of femininity and masculinity. Joan Kelly Gadol's question is relevant again: yes, women had

²⁰Ray, 2009a, 695, demonstrates the reciprocity of one relationship between male and female collaborator, Ortensio Lando and Lucrezia Gonzaga; more generally, she writes, Lando was a serial collaborator with eminent women who furthered “the manufacture of female cultural reputation.”

²¹Chojnacki, 2008, 25: “the explorations of the last two decades have contributed to the view that not only did women possess power, but indeed the possession of power, for at least some women, was a central aspect of their identity.”

²²A recent example is Cantù, 10. The editor's introduction identifies “women's evident impact on strategies and actions of power through discursive and behavioral practices that operated effectively within networks of dynastic, family, and class power.” For discussion of elite women's power in households, see also Chojnacki, 2000; Tomas.

²³Bryce, for example, takes Klapisch-Zuber to task for overplaying normative writers such as Paolo da Certaldo, and concluding that few Florentine women could read or write in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; by emphasizing practice rather than norms Bryce reaches an opposite conclusion. Such debates, however, do not address the gap between norm and practice.

a Renaissance, in secular literature if not in legal or economic status. More than that, the Renaissance had women, and plenty of them: women as subjects and objects participated with the full cooperation of men, and played important, distinctive roles in the discussions of art, artifice, authority, letters, and learning that are characteristic of the whole movement. Marginalized no more, women have arrived in the center of mainstream Renaissance cultural history.²⁴

This is not to say that women's position in all spheres improved in the period, nor that they met with unequivocal welcome when they ventured into public life or letters. On the contrary, it seems clear, at least for now, that whatever power a few female patrons might have held among the upper echelons, when it came to mundane, measureable issues of legal rights and economic welfare, most women did not prosper in the sixteenth century.²⁵ Herein lies one of the central problems suggested by Kelly's question, still in need of an answer: that of why women made such a visible cultural impact as authors and patrons, while their formal, legal, and economic status declined, or at least did not improve.

3. PRIVATE LETTERS AS SEMI-LITERARY TEXTS

A consideration of elite women's reading and writing in some less exalted genres and contexts may help explain this phenomenon. The constant backdrop behind the bright spots of Vittoria Colonna, Veronica Franco, or Moderata Fonte, those prominent women whose "profession" really was "elegant writing," was formed by the more humble, less highly educated women who wrote day in and day out. Scratched out hastily in untrained hands or dictated to a secretary for reasons of ceremony or convenience, women's letters accumulated in vast files in their natal family's archives. The quantity of surviving women's letters exploded between 1500 and 1600, coinciding with the print revolution, cheaper paper, and faster mail service.²⁶ These mountains of text are certainly less

²⁴The women-Renaissance dynamic remains problematic, however, for some scholars coming from either side of the dyad. For example, Wiesner-Hanks asks not what women can do for the Renaissance, but what Renaissance as a concept does for women's history; her answer seems to be, not much. Meanwhile, back in Renaissance studies, it is startling to find a recent review of new developments in "Renaissance intellectual history" barely acknowledging the "centrality of the *querelle des femmes* to humanism" in a two-paragraph coda: Jurdjevic, 267.

²⁵See, for example, D'Amelia, 1996; Guerra Medici.

²⁶A letter posted in Milan normally took about eight days to reach Rome: see Delumeau, 37–53.

spectacular than high literature, but nonetheless they constitute a critical element in the universe of women's writing, a continual rumbling from which more elevated writers could emerge.

To write a letter was to engage, more or less intensely, with the literary preoccupations of polite society. In her 1580 publication *Lettere familiari*, the Venetian author Veronica Franco refers to her "mestiere" using the Ciceronian phrase "the duty of words" ("ufficio delle parole").²⁷ Franco, of course, wrote in the crossover genre of letters written (or subsequently prepared) for publication, in the manner of Pietro Aretino's much-imitated *Lettere* of 1538, and drawing on a tradition reaching back through Petrarch to Cicero and Seneca. Despite the habit of praising them as spontaneous and plainspoken, such familiar letters were clearly shaped and revised for a broad public.²⁸ Here, in contrast, are letters with no apparent intent to circulate more widely than their addressee and a few intimates. Nonetheless, these letters, too, were far from spontaneous. All letter-writers engaged with form, genre, and authorship as part of their office. Historians have mined private letters primarily for documentation of events and attitudes, treating them as raw material reflecting an external world. But even in the most humble of missives, writers artfully exploited the letter's forms, a genre that lay halfway between practical application and literary opportunity. As Cox writes of women's unprinted literary works, "the 'visible' tradition of women's writing, as it appears from library catalogues and other listings of published works, represents only a small portion of what was a far larger and more diffused cultural practice."²⁹ This attention to the cultural practices surrounding printed publication can be extended from the manuscript and anthology production to which Cox refers, to include nonliterary forms of writing.

A persistent thread of criticism links letters to women. Roger Duchêne has even called the letter a "male genre" that became a "female practice" in

²⁷Franco, 10. In another example of a female letter-writer consciously manipulating the conventions of humanist letter-writing, Gill, 1110, notes the fifteenth-century humanist Laura Cereta's "deliberate confounding of the public world of humanism with the private world of intimate social relations" in the edition of her Latin letters she prepared for publication. Here again, we see a female author (this time a highly educated one writing in Latin) challenging the letter's generic restrictions in order to make a point about their gendered nature. On fifteenth-century women humanists more generally, see King and Rabil; Cereta; Nogarola.

²⁸For commentary on the genre, see Ray 2009b, 3; Quondam, 1981; Rosenthal, 312; Doglio, 17–26; Caffiero; Genovese; Najemy, 18–57. For another female-authored example of a published letter-book, see Tarabotti.

²⁹Cox, 138.

the early modern age.³⁰ This association may perhaps be an anachronism, reflecting a more recent era: the vast majority of letters written in the Renaissance were written by men. Nonetheless, of the surviving writings by laywomen of the Renaissance, letters are by far the most numerous. Because they were a routine, everyday part of normal life, written by nearly all literate people at some point, letters were more accessible to women than many other genres of writing. Legal writing, for example, was limited to notaries or jurists and therefore not available to women; official diplomatic dispatches were also limited to men holding professional appointments; account books were usually (though not always) monopolized by male heads of families or businesses. Thus letters were a sort of gateway genre, an easily accessible form of active literacy, open to vastly greater numbers of women than was any other genre.³¹ The famous early examples of this were mainly fifteenth-century Florentine merchants' wives, most notably Margherita Datini (1384–1410) and Alessandra Strozzi (1406–71), known respectively as the wife of the merchant of Prato and the widow of an exiled Florentine patrician.³² By the middle of the 1500s the phenomenon had passed from the extraordinary or exceptional to the norm, and most family archives of merchants and nobility positively teemed with women's letters. The very nature of patrilocal marriage, in which women left their paternal homes to take up residence with husbands elsewhere, invited women to write home as they maintained the agnatic ties for which they had been chosen.

These women shared a common fate in their being dispatched, sometimes at shockingly young ages, across regions or across town in the service of dynasty. Nonetheless, they varied considerably in their level of mastery of the epistolary genre, as codified in how-to books such as Francesco Sansovino's *Il segretario* (1564). At the most elevated end of this scale may be Isabella d'Este, Marchesa of Mantua (1474–1539), author of some 12,000 surviving letters. Deanna Shemek has brilliantly analyzed Isabella's manipulation of her epistolary persona, her use of conventions of the genre and its multiple authorship, as she built dynasty, shaped relationships, and even played games with forgery. Isabella's "full command of the epistolary terrain,"³³ rendered beautifully visible through her secretary's expert hand,

³⁰Duchêne; see also Nico Ottaviani, 33; *Per lettera*, xiii.

³¹As King and Robin note in the introduction to Nogarola, describing a more formal literary context for the fifteenth century. See Contini and Scatigno, 1:31, who note "the centrality of the letter and epistolary exchange in female experience of writing."

³²James, 2008; Bryce; Crabb.

³³Shemek, 2005a; Shemek, 2003, 89. Shemek, 2008, 85, argues that Isabella d'Este makes self-conscious use of the letter's claim to authenticity to exploit it as fraud, both for political profit and for fun: "one of the clearest forms of mastery is play."

contrasts sharply with the virtually illegible scrawls of noblewomen like Geronima Colonna (d. 1587). Geronima, Costanza's favorite aunt, composed over 400 surviving letters to her brother, Marco Antonio Colonna. Despite her commanding epistolary voice and comfortable position as the Duchess of Monteleone, Geronima apparently lacked access to a professional secretary and herself never employed the basic letter conventions of spacing, salutation, and dating, much less a legible script — to the everlasting chagrin of her brother's secretary (and of this reader). Most noblewomen, like Costanza Colonna, fell somewhere between these two extremes.³⁴

While women's private letters may be found anywhere, the bulk of them are gathered in family archives, repositories that originated in families' desires to maintain property and memory, but whose recordkeeping reach quickly expanded to encompass much more.³⁵ The Colonna family archive, now located in the Biblioteca Statale Monumentale in the Benedictine monastery of Subiaco (Lazio), provides a good example: it is structured, preserved, and accessed in a manner similar to many other noble family archives in Italy, though it is larger and older than most, with nearly 100,000 items dating from 1150 to the twentieth century. About 85,000 of these items are letters.³⁶ Considering just the correspondence of Marco Antonio Colonna II "Il Grande" (1535–84), which is gathered into a separate series of about 12,000 letters with its own computerized inventory, a rough estimate puts the female-authored letters at about 5 percent of the total, or about 600 letters, mainly from the period 1555 to 1584, nearly all of them from close family members of Marco Antonio. The sheer quantity of the documentation available, in this and countless other family archives across Italy, compels us to enlarge our analytical toolboxes.

4. COSTANZA COLONNA: THE LETTER-WRITER AS AUTHOR

Costanza Colonna, to whom Bascapè's stern letter was addressed, was Vittoria Colonna's great-niece, but shared none of the iconic poetess's art.³⁷

³⁴For exemplary models of analysis of noblewomen's family letters, see D'Amelia, 1993 and 1999; Fosi.

³⁵Nico Ottaviani; *Archivi nobiliari e domestici*.

³⁶There is no published or online inventory for the Colonna archive; Attanasio gives some descriptions of its contents, its move at the end of the twentieth century from the family palace in Rome to Subiaco, and the current project to digitize some of its holdings.

³⁷There is a vast literature on Vittoria Colonna; here I mention only Rabitti; Zancan. Many of Costanza Colonna's letters discussed here have been excerpted in Berra, whose analysis differs substantially from mine in method and purpose. The transcriptions are my own.

Known to history mainly for her patronage of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, the younger Colonna was born in Rome in about 1556; she died in 1626 in Lombardy, aged about seventy. Her experience can be traced through a rich documentation in the Colonna family archive and in various Lombard archives. Sent from Rome to marry the Marchese of Caravaggio, a minor nobleman, Costanza developed deep religious, artistic, and personal ties in Lombardy during the time of Carlo Borromeo. Her development as a letter-writer can be observed from her youth, as marital and political difficulties gave her urgent reasons to correspond with distant family members, with her patron Borromeo, and with spiritual advisors such as Bascapè. At the same time, the very thickness of her letters in the family archive are a measure of distance: Colonna experienced her physical removal to a foreign land as a form of exile from paternal affection and power. Her letters limned a distance they tried vainly to bridge.³⁸

Arranged in 1567, Colonna's marriage carried with it a heavy burden of political significance for both families. For the Colonnas, one of the two most ancient families of the Roman barons, Costanza's betrothal formed part of an effort to repair the family's ragged reputation and to shore up ties with the peninsular aristocracy. The Colonna family was on the rise from their exile and from the financial crisis of the 1540s and 1550s. After a triumphant return to Rome in 1560, Marco Antonio, working together with his powerful mother Giovanna d'Aragona, had reacquired most of the family properties and titles in the Papal States that had been confiscated by Pope Paul III in response to Marco Antonio's father's aggression in the 1540s. When added to Colonna family properties in the Kingdom of Naples, these totalled a formidable chunk of feudal lands spread across two states. Now more-or-less permanently in the direct service of the Spanish crown and their lords in Naples, and on better terms with the papacy, the family pursued a multilateral marriage strategy to improve and consolidate their position.³⁹ In 1558 Marco Antonio's sister Agnese married a Roman; his sister Geronima and eldest daughter Giovanna were soon betrothed and moved to Naples and its hinterland, respectively, reinforcing the Colonnas' powerful presence in that kingdom. Costanza Colonna's match extended the family's reach northward to Lombardy, as did that of her younger brother Fabrizio, betrothed in 1562 to Anna Borromeo, sister of Carlo.

³⁸As Fantini wrote of another exiled Roman bride, Cassandra Chigi.

³⁹Bazzano, 2003, 112–14. For a comparable story of another Roman baronial family, see D'Amelia, 1996. Dandeleit discusses Marco Antonio Colonna's use of his secretary, Cesare Gallo, to better relations with the Spanish crown during this period.

Relative to her siblings, Costanza Colonna's match was less than stellar. Her dowry of 30,000 scudi was generous, but not immense. The Sforza of Caravaggio, into which she married, were new nobility, a mere two generations away from the first titleholder, an illegitimate son of the last Sforza duke of Milan.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, the match extended the Colonnas' connections in Lombardy, also under Spanish rule and one of the two poles of Spanish power in Italy, and helped to consolidate the bond with the Borromeo-Medici power axis. For Sforza's family, marriage to a Colonna woman brought an old name and prestige, as well as a Roman connection that might, if successfully cultivated, bring the family greater power and presence in the papal capital. This technique of marrying across regional lines, and, particularly, marrying into the old Roman aristocracy, became one of the lynchpins of the formation of a national elite that began in the sixteenth century, an elite that centered in Rome: its goals were the gaining of high ecclesiastical office and, if possible, the establishment of a family palace and permanent beachhead in Rome. Rome's open networks were the breeding ground of a pan-Italian ruling class, held together by its brides, particularly Roman brides, shipped all over Italy but tied to Rome through letters.⁴¹ Colonna's journey north was thus one small drop in a sea of female migration, and her letters home part of the net that built an Italian ruling class before Italy existed.⁴²

The early development of Costanza Colonna's epistolary voice is luckily evident to us because she married unusually young, even for her class and time. She was most likely born early in 1556, and was thus twelve when, in October 1568, she arrived in Caravaggio to join her eighteen-year-old husband and his paternal grandmother, Violante Bentivoglio Sforza, who served as his guardian and managed the household.⁴³ In fact, the Sforza family, acting through their Roman representative Cardinal Ascanio Sforza,

⁴⁰For correspondence regarding their betrothal, see Berra, 29–36.

⁴¹*La nobiltà romana*.

⁴²On Roman marriage to foreigners, see Fosi and Visceglia; Pellegrini; Baernstein, 2012.

⁴³For conflicting reports of her age, see the dowry agreement, at Archivio di Stato di Milano, Archivio Trivulzio di Milano, vol. 308 (copy of 28 April 1578) and marriage contract of 13 June 1567. Though the latter contract claimed she had already reached the required age of twelve “or thereabouts,” which would put her birth in 1555, this was most likely rounded up to meet legal requirements. The Venetian ambassador Bernardo Navagiero reported that Costanza's mother Felice Orsini was “seven months pregnant” when she, her mother-in-law, and Felice's older child (Giovanna) had fled Rome in disguise in late December, 1555: Bertolotti, 158. This would put Costanza's birth in January of 1556 at the earliest. Cf. Berra, 28–32.

had asked for her elder sister's hand instead, "in hopes of rapid procreation"; but Marco Antonio had other plans for his eldest, and so Costanza had to suffice.⁴⁴ Her father evidently felt some twinges of guilt at having sent so young a daughter so far, and with so little support. Within two months of her arrival, he was asking Borromeo to attend to her more closely: "and do not believe, Your Lordship, that we are overreaching, because this young girl, of so few years, was sent without a woman or a man who would stay with her, solely because the Marchese preferred to give his own people the task, and may he have every satisfaction. But for this girl to be confined, and deprived of the sight of her grandmother, and treated with this severity . . . I would not have imagined. Please, for the love of Christ, protect her and keep me informed."⁴⁵ Her aunt Geronima, with whom she had spent considerable time in Naples, also fretted over Colonna's youth and solitude, lamenting, "there's no one there, the girl is all alone, without anyone of authority nor of counsel."⁴⁶ With a domineering grandmother-in-law and an uninterested, possibly violent husband, Colonna's life was soon "an inferno," as she wrote in one of the many dramatic flourishes that would mark her voice.⁴⁷ By the summer of 1569 she was housed in a convent in Milan, awaiting the annulment of her marriage on the grounds of her husband's impotence; had she not unexpectedly delivered a stillborn child in the convent in November of 1569, she might have escaped Caravaggio's fog and isolation for good. But, constrained to return to the provincial capital in early 1570, she lived there until her husband's death in 1583, when she took responsibility for his estates and their six surviving children.⁴⁸ Throughout her marriage and her long widowhood, she

⁴⁴Berra, 31–32; Bazzano, 2003, 112.

⁴⁵Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan, Epistolario San Carlo Borromeo (hereafter BAM SCB) F114 inf. fol. 389^r, 24 December 1568: "né creda, Vostra Signoria Illustrissima che noi pretendemo stravagarci è perche questa giovine de cosi pochi anni si è mandata senza una donna ne homo che habia a restar con lei solo perche il signor Marchese a suo gusto li mettesse persone appresso et ne havesse d'haver ogni sodisfacione, ma che questa giovane habia da esser reservata e privata della vista dell'ava, e trattata con questi rigori certo sembra ogn'altra chosa io mi havea pensata. La prego per amor di Christo a tenerne protezione e darmene avviso."

⁴⁶Biblioteca Statale Monumentale di Santa Scolastica, Archivio Colonna, Subiaco (hereafter AC), Carteggio di Personaggi Illustri (hereafter PI), AB cam. 5 let. 2, Geronima Colonna to Marco Antonio's agent Cesare Gallo, 10 September 1569: "La non ci'è niiscuno, la figliola è solissima, senza persone de autorità ne de consiglio."

⁴⁷AC Carteggio di Marco Antonio Colonna II "Il Grande" (hereafter MAC), b. 50 n. 1146, 31 May 1575: "gia che io o da vivere in questo inferno."

⁴⁸Berra, 337. Costanza's disastrous marriage merits a more extended discussion than can be provided here.

maintained a constant correspondence with the leaders of her Roman family, first her father and grandmother, and then her brother, Cardinal Ascanio Colonna.

The thick files of Colonna's letters attest to her stylistic development and growing comfort as a correspondent.⁴⁹ She was never an elegant writer: her prose never flows with the conscious polish of her ecclesiastical correspondents, not to mention some of her more literary relatives. Nonetheless, she grew gradually into some mastery of the conventions of the epistolary genre so elaborately detailed in published handbooks and exemplified in the published letterbooks that spilled forth from presses during her lifetime. Her texts combined elements of the medieval *ars dictamina*, with its practical prescribed outline, with the humanist letter's greater attention to literary style and format. Scribally, too, her skills matured during her teen years. Her earliest letters of 1568 and 1569 are childlike autographs of a few lines, striving to achieve the polished salutations, full titles, and careful spacing of the professional letter. Her letter of 7 February 1569 (fig. 1), written to her father four months after her arrival, shows this tidiness, with generous use of white space and extended salutations. The body of the letter begins, "Your Excellency's letter, so full of heartfelt love, gave me more happiness of spirit than you can believe; hearing of your wellbeing really brought me up with a great desire such that, my father, I beg you to do so more often."⁵⁰ Her script during the early years of the marriage, round and careful, stained with inkblots, became steadier and more regular, particularly over the period from 1570 to 1572, when she came into her own as a scribe and a writer (fig. 2).

Like most men and women of her class, Colonna relied on a secretary for official business and often used him for letters to intimates as well. When their secretary died suddenly in 1570, she took charge of replacing him, demanding a new man from Borromeo "of the same quality,"⁵¹ repeating in a few weeks' time, "it is most urgent to have one who can write well and knows how to make letters for us, for the affairs that we have constantly to

⁴⁹The Archivio Colonna contains about eighty letters of Costanza Colonna in all, most located in the correspondence of her father, AC MAC b. 50 and b. 90. A smaller group of letters directed to her grandmother is in PI BQ. Other letters have been consulted in BAM and ASBarn.

⁵⁰AC MAC b. 50 n. 1159, 7 February 1569: "La lettera de Vostra Eccellenza cosi piena di svigerato amore mha dato quello contento danimo che si puo considerare havendo inteso il ben star di Vostra Eccellenza che veramente ne solleva (?) con grandissimo desiderio tal che signor padre mio di questo vi prego ce ne donati al spesso."

⁵¹BAM SCB F 129 inf. fol. 264, 27 February 1574: "della medesima qualità."

Ill^{mo} et Exc^o S^o mio Pater Semp^o OSSI^{mo}
 no my Clemente
 permy francesco che viene mandato dal s^o marchese
 mio in tenera il ben standi fatti et il soceso del mio parto
 Sol^o di conquista il S^ogano con la gonognia, atore che non
 uo gliu mangare de fanci^o il s^o marchese mio nelle cose giuste
 et donorelone spero sono quele do mandare a questa et an
 perche quel che da la casa mia le mandare a un con^o
 nono dolor mio: et se bene non ho me menfo nessuno fan
 u non san ma; che non sia figlia et del sangue et che
 quello che fatto e contra del s^o marchese non sia contrabatta
 la casa sua per tanto se di si deca il mio contento non
 mancha de agnitarlo con el rimor del s^o mio come sono cost
 fare et di g^o in caro s^o fatto mio non si pro giungo
 questo dolor ha questa sua buona figlia perche basta solo
 tenerme abolone le se lontana da voi et in se donne
 tanto lo amara da chi ma cosa in questo mondo
 et perche io che non manchan per sua bona de la
 giusticia nele cose della ragione firmo con for s^o
 li mila volte le mandare pergarlo mi bene di qua et
 pergarlo s^o mater et qua me se deca a se non li seruo
 perche lo amare il mio da cam uagari ad i zzi di benano
 D. V. Exc^o figlia et non altro bene in questo mondo 1572
 Costanza Colonna

FIGURE 2. Costanza Colonna to Marco Antonio Colonna, 23 January 1572. Archivio Colonna, Subiaco, Corrispondenza di Marco Antonio Colonna II b. 90 n. 2532.

attend to here.”⁵² Letter-writing was often a collaborative enterprise, with the secretary writing a formulaic main body, and the sender adding an autograph postscript to show authenticity and, sometimes, to apologize for not writing “in my own hand.”⁵³ In Colonna’s case, it seems likely that she learned her writing skills from the secretary, either through direct instruction or simply from observing his finished products closely.

But the secretary, or employee serving as such, was far from neutral in family power dynamics, particularly when writing for a non-dominant family member. Colonna’s misery in her new home was not something her husband and his grandmother wanted her father to know, and they intervened in her correspondence accordingly. A short and stiff autograph letter of 14 February 1569 (fig. 3), hints at trouble and, perhaps, censorship: “Given the opportunity, I didn’t want to omit giving you news of our wellbeing, together with the Lady Violante and the Marchese. I don’t want to trouble you with writing at length, so I write little. Only that I request your usual blessing.”⁵⁴ Perhaps Colonna’s in-laws were dissatisfied with this meager testimony, for a few weeks later she signed a secretarial letter (fig. 4) written with fulsome, loving tones toward them: “I am very happy, because besides being loved so greatly, as I am, by the Marchese my consort, I can say I am with Your Excellency and my mother, since I am with the lady Violante, who loves me as her own daughter, and I could not give enough compliments to the great courtesy that this lady shows me more of every day, as does my lord consort.”⁵⁵ This letter would be startling for its contrast with Colonna’s other accounts of the period, and particularly her continual laments of her distance from parental affection. But on opening the letter’s fold, one finds another letter, this one scrawled hastily on a half-sheet of

⁵²BAM SCB F 129 inf. fol. 288, 4 March 1574: “Perho per essere tanto necessario e di bisogno uno che scriva bene e sappia di ffare lettera a noi per gli negotii che sempre si ha de far qua continuamente.”

⁵³As, for example, AC MAC b. 50 n. 1151, 13 August 1574: D’Amelia, 1999, notes the difficulty women had in some households in gaining access to the secretary’s time.

⁵⁴AC MAC b. 50 n. 1160, 14 February 1569: “Per havere questa comodita non ho voluto mancare del d[ar] nova del nostro bene stare giontamente con la Signora Violante et signor marchese mio. Io non voglio fastidire Vostra Eccellenza di scriverle lungo per essere poco che ho scritto solo che me racomando alle sue solite beneditione.”

⁵⁵AC MAC b. 50 n. 1161, 24 March 1569: “Et per la Iddio gratia io son sana anchor che alli giorni passati hebbi un poco di male, il quale mi è poi stato con gran sanità molto contenta, perche oltra al esser amata come io sono grandemente dal signor Marchese mio consorte, puoscio dire di essere presso di Vostra Eccellenza et della illustrissima Signora Madre trovandomi presso dell’Illustrissima signora Violante la quale mi ama da figliola propria, et non potrei dire a compimento le gran cortesie che essa signora ogni dì più mostra et medemamente il signor mio consorte.”

^{mo} Ill^{mo} S^{re} C^{ca}: ^{mo} S^{re} Proindossi^{mo}
 14/2/69

Per l'aver questa comodità non ho voluto
 mancare dell'obsequio del nro bene. Et acc
 giontamenec con l'ass^{mo} mio Cap^o e c^o
 marchese mio Io non uoglio far vedere
 S^{re} C^{ca}: di scriuerle lungo et bre poco che
 ho scritto solo che me raccomando alle
 sue solite benedictione da Caracragio
 a 14 di febraro 1569

O V^{ra} C^{ca}: serva.
 Et figlia obbediente^a

Costanza
 Colonna
 Sforza

FIGURE 3. Costanza Colonna to Marco Antonio Colonna, 14 February 1569. Archivio Colonna, Subiaco, Corrispondenza di Marco Antonio Colonna II b. 50 n. 1160.

Mio et Cele. s. mio et Cele. oss.
 La tua D. V. C. ha fatto ho racconata mi ha ~~la~~ tutta consolata per essere
 così lungo tempo che se no ne haueua hauuto noua di sua salute
 et per la Idio gratia. Io son sana anchor che all' giorni passa
 Ebbi un poco di male il quale mi e poi stato con gran sanita
 molto contenta per che oltre a ^{esser} amata come io sono grandone
 dal G. Marchese mio consorte fuorono a dire di essere presso
 et della M^{ra} S. Madre concordami presso dell' M^{ra} S. m^{ra} la
 la quale mi ama da figliola propria et no potrei dire a Com.
 le gran cortese che essa sig. ogni di piu mostra et mehemamente
 il S. mio Consorte houe suff. che. V. C. insieme con me ne resti
 consolatissimo et no essendo patero se no che idio ve dia felice
 Viaggio la bascio la mano da Caracoggio a di Marzo 1569

D. V. C.
 Figlia obedientissima

Costanza
 Colonna

FIGURE 4. Costanza Colonna to Marco Antonio Colonna, 24 March 1569. Archivio Colonna, Subiaco, Corrispondenza di Marco Antonio Colonna II b. 50 n. 1161.

paper (fig. 5): "The letter that comes to you [signed] by my hand, they made the chaplain copy, and everything that's happened is the opposite, and don't abandon me, my father, for the love of the passion of Christ. Costanza Colonna."⁵⁶

Colonna never explained her complaints with her new household very precisely on paper; the closest she came was in a letter written to her grandmother early during her stay in the convent, as she eagerly awaited news of her hoped-for annulment and return to Rome: "With your letter, saying that I should be happy and of good will, my spirits were lifted, having understood that soon I will be out of this land, never to see it again in this generation. . . . May God be praised, for making the pope understand my case, and these people's cruelty. . . . Please arrange quickly for me to be with you."⁵⁷ This letter, too, was a secretarial effort, clearly not one under her in-laws' control; but in its departure from the formulaic niceties of the genre, it reveals both the thirteen-year-old's sense of urgency and her growing willingness to add a rhetorical flourish of her own, even when speaking through the hand of another.

Over time Colonna gradually acquired more ease with epistolary ceremony, and a more nonchalant tone, borrowed from the letters she received and from those she saw written for her. Already in 1570 she showed her mastery of the literary topos of the absence of the beloved, as well as the use of the letter itself as a substitute: "being unable to [enjoy your presence] due to distance, I will enjoy it in spirit" (fig. 6).⁵⁸ There is no reason to think that Colonna had any direct acquaintance with the rich literature on the theory and practice of humanist letter-writing, which by her day had trickled amply out of the Latin versions elaborated in the previous century by such learned men as Filelfo, Valla, and Erasmus, into the thousands of print editions applying new versions of these rules to vernacular letters.⁵⁹ Yet even

⁵⁶AC MAC b. 50 n. 1161, inserted: "La lettera che ve ne pasata de mano mia l'ano fatta copiare al cappellano, et [*erased*: è pasata] è tutto lo contrario et non me abandonate, Signor padre mio, per amor de la pasione de Christo. Costanza Colonna."

⁵⁷AC PI BQ 147, 20 July 1569, partially illegible due to a hole in the paper: "con la lettera che Vostra Eccellenza me scrive che stia allegra et di bona voglia mi sono tenuti li spiriti rallegrati, havendo inteso che presto sarò fora da questi paesi per non averli da vedere mai più questa generatione. . . . Sia ringratiato sempre la misericordia de Iddio che . . . a posto del core di Sua santità di conoscere la mia giustitia per la crodelità di questi, et così vi prego Signora ava mia che procurate quanto prima che venga a servirla."

⁵⁸AC MAC b. 50 n. 1152, 18 April 1570: "non potendo questo [godere la loro presenza] per la lontananza, li goderò con l'animo."

⁵⁹Quondam, 1981; Robin, 1991; Shemek, 2005b. Bethencourt and Egmond, 6–7, note how readily learned tropes and habits could trickle down to less well-read correspondents.

Ma fra che uene pasata demano
 mia canofatta copiare a
 cappe llano, et ~~capata~~
 e tutto lo contravolo
 et non me ab'adone se
 s. promia, zarano de
 la lasatione de christo

Co. Costanza
 Colonna

FIGURE 5. Costanza Colonna to Marco Antonio Colonna, undated. Archivio Colonna, Subiaco, Corrispondenza di Marco Antonio Colonna II b. 50 n. 1161.

15/4/70.

M^{mo} + no. 20?
 15: + cor. 59: 5: et pro mio oho?

L'ultima che v. ecc. ha fatto della persona del S. Bagnò per scritto
 del Marchese et mio, ci si è piaciuta tanto che ni baciava la mano
 à quella, et li ni restava co molto obligo, per che vedemmo ni fare,
 come ella era amabile, et ella M^{ma} casa sua et ella mia, et accompa-
 gnato da tal gente che ni spava ogni suo profetto mio, onde l'eco-
 nia no ha da dubitare che no li subiti da loro quell'istima et cura
 di lui, ch'ella desidera, poi che ella mia inclinatione verso esso, si
 aggiungono li suoi comandamenti, pero li subiti d'alto ni man-
 ca il cuore di tutte le cose nostre con una gran soddisfazione et soliva-
 mento d'animo, come v. ecc. mandava da lui stesso, et di più non li
 direi altro, ma tutto ni fu per v. ecc. a fare come se la S^{ta} mia
 questa mia co' questa li facci sopra et io me' trouo altri bene ni gli
 mia grandezza, maggior e suo honor. et felice li mi soliti strati
 sono entrati altri quattro mi et già si era la curatura à morare.
 sono per' cura li ecc. me' che s' mandava mi ama et sona tanto
 et io mio sapui entrata donna di mondo, no mi manca altro, et
 poter godere della persona loro, no puotno gustar per la costanza
 la godere co' l'animo, et lo' pagne la divina M^{ta} per la salute et
 prosperita loro co' che li baciò l'umil^{ta} li mani raso. alla bora già
 di Calauggio alla fine Aprile nel 1570.

Il v. ecc.

Serva, et figlia obbl. coll. M^{ma}
 et obbl. d'entellima
 Costanza
 Colonna

FIGURE 6. Costanza Colonna to Marco Antonio Colonna, 14 April 1570. Archivio Colonna, Subiaco, Corrispondenza di Marco Antonio Colonna II b. 50 n. 1152.

without access to these models, Colonna articulated a vision of letters as poor substitutes for physical presence, a stand-in for the live voice and warm body: here is an echo of Machiavelli's more clearly Ciceronian comment to his friend Vettori, "how welcome to me was your letter, in which nothing was lacking but your presence and the sound of your voice aloud."⁶⁰ In her quotidian application of these tropes, so familiar to Renaissance readers, echoes of contemporary debates about the use and meaning of the letter can be discerned.

5. MASTERING THE ART OF DEFERENCE

As Ruppel and others have shown, letter-writing also functioned as a form of social positioning, in which hierarchy was restated and negotiated through proper forms of address and tone.⁶¹ Colonna's skill at this increased over time. In 1574 she affected the hypotheticals and florid language of the letter of the social inferior as she wrote to her father: "And with every reverence, I render infinite thanks to Your Excellency for the favors that you do me. And if ever the love and affection I bear you could grow old, these favors are such, and they obligate me so much, that they alone could cause in me immortal obligation." This rhetorical effort, with its metaphor of aging love, then gives way to a more desperate, less writerly run-on sentence: "I assure Your Excellency that I could not have a greater need of the comforts you gave me with your letter; if it were not for the consolation they bring me, with the continual anguish I find myself in every day doubling, I don't know how I could resist my desperation any longer. But I will try as best I can to pass the time, waiting and hoping to have help swiftly from Your Excellency."⁶² Colonna also deployed both these registers — the formal, almost professional voice of deference, and the pleading, more spontaneous

⁶⁰Machiavelli, 250.

⁶¹Ruppel; Broomhall and van Gent; McLean. On Marco Antonio Colonna's use of the language of deference in missives to King Philip II and others at the Spanish court, see Bazzano, 2001.

⁶²AC MAC b. 50 n. 1155, 12 December 1574: "Et con ogni riverenza, rendo infinite gratie a Vostra Eccellenza delli favori che mi fa, et se l'amor et affetione che li porto potesse senescere, questi favori son tali, et tanto me hoblighano, che senza altra causa, da lor causariano in me hoblichio immortale. Asicuro bene a Vostra Eccellenza che maggior necessità non potevo havere di questi conforti che mi a fatto per la sua lettera di quel che havea perche se non fusse la consolatione che mi arechano le sue per le continove angosce nelle qual mi trovo, et hogni dì me se radopiano non so come, più potria resistere alla desperatione ma mi sforzaro, al meglio che posso, pasar questo tempo aspettando, et sperando presto aver aiuto da Vostra Eccellenza."

tone of despair — when writing to her grandmother. Until her death in 1576, Giovanna d'Aragona served as co-head of the Colonna family, and the younger woman's posture reflected this position in a way her letters to her own mother, the less imposing Felice Orsini Colonna, never did. "Most illustrious and excellent my dear lady Grandmother and Patroness," she wrote in 1573, thanking her grandmother for a gift of plates, "I will not fail to write you, as you command me, for I have no other consolation than being able to serve you."⁶³

Colonna's constant marital and financial troubles gave her good reason to use the standard tropes of pleading humility that were conventional for a patron-client relationship. Particularly after his grandmother died in 1572, the Marchese managed his constant debts less well than the Colonnas managed theirs, and the young wife was compelled to repeatedly nag her family for bailouts. "And with hope in Your Excellency, in whose arms I throw myself," she wrote to her grandmother just after Violante's death, "begging you now, do not abandon my lord," even hinting at her husband's possible anger if the Colonna clan did not come to his aid: "Your Excellency is wise, and knows what goes on; if the Marchese is not helped out by you, he will be displeased; and you know even better that his anger comes to me, if he doesn't receive what he's due."⁶⁴ Colonna's more despondent letters, such as this one, combine fear of the Marchese's anger with an even deeper fear of her family's abandonment, whether financial, political, or personal.

After 1572, Colonna herself took on more household administration, to her family's general satisfaction. Borromeo, for example, wrote to Colonna's father of the "almost irremediable defects of the Marchese . . . and the disorders of the house,"⁶⁵ and urged Marco Antonio's rapid payment of Colonna's dowry installments, so that the young couple could pay off some debts and make it "easier for the Marchesa to take over the governance of the household, as the Marchese himself is happy for her to do."⁶⁶ Now

⁶³AC PI BQ 147, 29 September 1573: "Illustrissima et Excellentissima Signora Ava mia cara et Patrona. . . . Non mancharo di scriverle come la mi comanda, che non o altra consolatione che di poterla servire."

⁶⁴AC PI BQ 147, 8 November 1572: "Et con la speranza de Vostra Eccellenza, alla quale me le buto nele bracia pregandola in questa occasione non voglia abanonar il signor marchese mio. . . . Vostra Eccellenza e savia et sape che pasi son questi, Et che sel Signor Marchese hadeso non se è sulevato da Vostra Eccellenza rimanerà con discusto; sapete poi meglio che ha me da cholera se non li dimostra tanto qualche se deve."

⁶⁵AC PI BY 53, 9 March 1575: "li difetti quasi irremediabili del marchese . . . e i disordini della casa." Cited in Berra, 52.

⁶⁶BAM SCB P10 inf. fol. 202^v, 30 March 1574: "che sarà più facile à la Marchesa pigliar il governo della casa, come il marchese inclina, ch'ella faccia." Cited in Berra, 51.

eighteen years old and a mother of two, her letters became more assured, less pleading, with more space devoted to rents and incomes. Yet until his death in 1584, Colonna's letters to her father could still take on the beseeching, less artful tone of someone farther down the social scale. In 1574 she insisted that her father's letters were her only solace, for "it seems I can hardly resist desperation, but I will try as best I can to pass the time awaiting and hoping for your help," against "my unhappiness and miseries, together with the ruin of this house." "Liberate me from this inferno," she continued, for "the Marchese is in such discord with me, that I am in danger of my life at every hour."⁶⁷ These letters, often autograph and scrawled with more haste than usual, tend to repetition: "my father, I beg you for the love of God that you must owe me as a father, do not fail to console me with your letters; please do not do what you have done thus far, for it is insupportable to one who loves you as much as I do, and who has no other blessing in the world."⁶⁸

Widowhood came in 1583, when she was twenty-seven. Disappointed that she could not take the veil, Colonna nonetheless was now able to travel, something the Marchese had never allowed. Taking the children with her — they ranged in age from eleven to two — she went to Genoa in June of 1584, where she met her father as he was en route to Spain;⁶⁹ to Milan in September of 1584 to follow a dispute before the Senate and to visit her friends the nuns;⁷⁰ and later, in 1600, on pilgrimage to Rome and to Loreto, the fashionable Marian shrine.⁷¹ A letter to her father in 1584 (fig. 7), written shortly after the death of her husband, shows her engagement with the elaborate game of authenticity so characteristic of the Renaissance letter: its short main paragraph, in the secretary's hand but in her own voice, apologizes at length for the author's failure to write it "in my own hand." She offers illness as an excuse, but then allows that she's better now.

⁶⁷AC MAC b. 50 n. 1154, 9 August 1574: "Poiche il signor Pompeo [Tuttavilla], il quale havendo toccate con mani le infelicità e miserie miei, et insieme la ruina di questa casa, ha fatto tanto per me, ch io istessa non havrei saputo più desiderare, informerà Vostra Eccellenza di tutto, et di qualche s'è appuntato per liberarmi di questo inferno et riparare insieme alla ruina di questa casa . . . il Marchese è venuto in tanta rottura meco, che sto a pericolo ad ogni hora della vita." Cited in Berra, 51.

⁶⁸AC MAC b. 50 n. 1153, 1 January 1578: " il mio signor Patre ve prego per amor di l'amor che il me deve volere, et da patre che non mi manchi di consolarme con sue lettere che non facia come ha fato sinora che saria cosa incomportabile ha chi l'ama tanto come facio he che non ha altro bene al mondo."

⁶⁹BAM SCB F70 inf. fol. 83, 3 June 1584, Borromeo to Madama Casaolona, Costanza's traveling companion.

⁷⁰As Borromeo reported to Marco Antonio Colonna: BAM SCB P24 inf. fol. 604^r, 21 September 1584. Cited in Berra, 64.

⁷¹Calvesi, 123–25.

M^{mo} et C^{mo} S^{mo} et B^{mo} semp^{er} in

Per ora C^{da} non si meravigli se non ho le serviti di mia mano, per
 che la mia indisposizione, ch'ella deve di già saper, per altro miè servit.
 Me lo vieta. La glie se ne va pur covando in meo c^{ore}, per la sua
 gratia mi sento meglio. Non ho però voluto ch'è per meo ch'io mi vedea
 d'interromper mi facer covare almeno di far in parte l'officio ch'è d'ubho
 Et come sono posto le rendo le buone les^{ce}, con pregarlo da Nos. S.
 Saldò il colmo d'ogni suo desiderio, et prosperità di vita lunga.
 Et qui non essendo mi per hora altro ch'è d'ubho, se non ch'è d'ubho con
 adoratione da lei d'ella rip^{ta} del mio negozio, à C^{da} quanto so.
 Et po^{che} sono humiliss^{imo} con deo, le mani, et nella sua gratia in le
 vac^{ca} con tutto l'animo. Si Carauaggio, à 2^a di Gen^{ario} 1584

C^{da} S^{mo} et B^{mo}

Il Cardinali p^{ro}mo partito di non giunta in prima di già
 non di aboissio con il Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici per
 huculare Simonini di N^{apoli} et di non Simonini, non
 far che in prima mano capitano li loro per che li meo
 mio fig^{lio} il sig^{no} Cardinali Sama Pappalardo, spin et
 balconi, in prima et in ultimo di questi figlioli il partito
 messo da N^{apoli} verso del forte di mess^o in fa tanto
 a bighiani di monno me et favor, et questi due Sim
 toni

Sig^{no} et una abichimpit
 Col^{onna} et una Faber
 Costanza Colonna

C^{da} S^{mo} et B^{mo}

FIGURE 7. Costanza Colonna to Marco Antonio Colonna, 10 January 1584. Archivio Colonna, Subiaco, Corrispondenza di Marco Antonio Colonna II b. 50 n. 1145.

The secretary's hand continues with the necessary formalities: "I did not, however, wish that my few remaining infirmities should prevent me from doing my duty, at least in part. And so, as now I can, I wish you good holidays," and then the salutation. Below this "duty" (*officio*), essentially a holiday greeting, there follows another duty, less formal but more specific: a postscript, in Colonna's own hand, as long as the body of the letter. Formalities dispensed with, and the secretary perhaps sent from the room for the sake of confidentiality, the new widow reports on recent visits from Cardinals Borromeo and Sfondrati, relates their accounts of maneuverings in Milan, and asks her father for help in finding places in Rome for her two young sons.⁷²

Here Colonna is in full command of several levels of voicing and genre that speak directly to the letter's generic ambiguity, moving from formal holiday greetings to practical, sensitive news of family business, while altering tone and hand to suit the different demands of each subgenre. Not an original use, perhaps, but a clever one, for Colonna was fully cognizant of the letter's game of transparency, as she makes plain with her opening gambit of apologizing for not writing herself. Intimate letters such as this one purported to speak from the heart, to reveal something personal of the writer's inner self, hence the need to make excuses for dictating. Intimates could reproach one another for neglecting the personal touch, as Colonna's mother Felice Orsini Colonna did, for example, in a letter to her husband, on a ship in the eastern Mediterranean: "For while I learn of your wellbeing from letters of servants of the family, and from others, nonetheless, if I do not see them written in your own hand they cannot satisfy me at all."⁷³ Despite this rhetorical stance of sincerity and guilelessness, tight generic expectations surround the letter and stiffen it, providing a scaffolding of convention and professionalism within which the writer can only move so far. Even the longed-for authenticity of hand, voice, and presence became a conventional trope.

Colonna's letters show her efforts to master the nuances of the genre without formal training or textbooks. What little can be discerned of her early education suggests it was minimal: while her two brothers received

⁷²AC MAC b. 50 n. 1145, 10 January 1584: "Your Excellency will not be surprised that I'm not writing in my own hand, because my indisposition prevents me, as you know from my other letters. It is slowly easing, so that now by God's grace I feel better. Nonetheless, I did not want this small lingering infirmity to make me omit doing my duty [*officio*] at least in part. And so as I can, I wish you a good holiday."

⁷³AC MAC b. 51 n. 1047, 11 September 1571: "Et si ben intendo per lettere di questi servitori di casa et d'altri la salute di Vostra Eccellenza pur il non vederlo scritto di vostra mano non me quieta hafatto."

a tutor, regular book purchases, swords and saddles, and training in Spain for their respective careers of courtier and cardinal, Colonna and her sisters appeared in Colonna account books only as the recipients of shoes, dresses, and a bathtub.⁷⁴ The girls may have profited from sharing their brothers' tutor, but their poor script and relative lack of high style does not suggest it. Perhaps due to her secondhand exposure to instruction, Colonna never indulged — as her father and brother did on occasion — in the flowery, adjective-laden run-on sentences that were the stock-in-trade of Latinizing vernacular writers of her day.⁷⁵ Instead her quotidian practice of writing remained a subtle but perceptible echo of fashionable tropes. Colonna corresponded with her family for both business and pleasure, for love and for money; in pursuit of these ends, she took hold of the genre of the letter however she could, developing a thin but sure authorial voice.

6. COSTANZA COLONNA'S RELIGIOUS READING

Thus far the focus has been on secular models of writing, the traditional focus of Renaissance literature and Costanza Colonna's metier as a writer.⁷⁶ To find the noblewoman in more direct engagement with the public world of letters, this article turns finally to her reading habits. Here, too, Colonna made her choices deliberately, defying her priest's orders through a distinctive and somewhat subversive reading program. But unlike the imaginary Costanza Colonna whom Bascapè addressed, Colonna's subversion took a religious, not a secular, form. It is difficult to find support for Bascapè's implicit accusation that Colonna was reading too much Petrarchan poetry for her own good. Everything that is known about her intellectual and literary life points in the opposite direction, toward an intense piety and a particularly deep engagement with Lombard religiosity. There is scant evidence that she favored the works of courtesy and secular poetry written in honor of her grandmother, Giovanna d'Aragona, her mother, Felice Orsini Colonna, and her aunt, Geronima Colonna: these women all cultivated circles of poets and editors, and received the printed

⁷⁴See lists of household expenses from the early 1570s: AC MAC b. 51 cams. 1046, 1050, 1051. On girls' education, see Bryce; Grendler, 96–102; Petrucci.

⁷⁵James, 2002, 27, describes the style thus: "long and complicated sentence structure, full of gerunds, innumerable conjunctions, relative clauses and accumulations of adjectives."

⁷⁶There is a vast literature on women's devotional lives: one recent title is Zarri, 2006. Tylus's work on Catherine of Siena is an exemplary use of creative reading techniques to locate female authorship in texts recorded largely by others.

adulation due to them as patrons.⁷⁷ Instead, there is evidence of Colonna's religious interests, not in the family archive — apparently she did not expect much spiritual engagement from her relatives — but rather in the archives of Milanese religious institutions with which she associated.

Colonna's first encounter with a Milanese convent happened in May of 1569, while her family was attempting to annul her marriage. At her father's request Borromeo temporarily housed the unhappy bride in the convent of San Paolo Converso, with three ladies in waiting. "One of the best convents in the city," was how Borromeo described the Angelics of San Paolo reassuringly in a letter to Colonna's mother; but San Paolo was much more than a prestigious home for wealthy local daughters. The sister house of the Barnabites, San Paolo retained a strong and uniquely Lombard spirituality drawn from its origins as an unenclosed convent founded in the 1530s, like the Barnabites inspired by the Dominican spiritual fra Battista Carioni da Crema.⁷⁸ Colonna lived with the nuns for seven months, absorbing their religiosity and their way of life remarkably quickly and thoroughly; the identity and networks she formed in the convent remained central to her for the rest of her life.

The monastic way of life, too, attracted her, perhaps unsurprisingly for a woman who endured twelve pregnancies in fifteen years and a clearly unhappy marriage. At every turn in her rather long life, Colonna begged to become a nun. In 1569, before delivering her stillborn child, she declared her desire to enter a convent in Naples; had her pregnancy been successfully hidden, she might have succeeded. At her widowhood in 1583 she again asked Borromeo for permission to enter the convent of San Paolo Converso, offering to take her daughters with her and to send her sons to Rome to stay with their uncle. The Colonna family agent, reporting to Marco Antonio on her condition shortly after the death of her husband in 1583, praised her as "an angel from heaven . . . so far removed from the things of the world that it is a miracle to see a woman her age so mortified in spirit, that if it were not for the great love that she bears these children,

⁷⁷Costanza's grandmother, Giovanna d'Aragona, was the patron and subject of the first *tempio* — an anthology of poetry in praise of a single lady — in 1555: Ruscelli. This subgenre of the multi-authored poetic anthology saw later versions: another *tempio* was dedicated to Geronima Colonna; see Sammarco. On the subgenre, see Quondam, 1974; Bianco; Robin, 2007, 103–23. One small exception in Costanza's literary presence is Margherita Sarrocchi's dedication to Costanza, in 1606, of an early, partial edition of her epic poem *La Scanderbeide*, printed just as Costanza was wrapping up a six-year stint in Rome, acting as her brother's representative. Sarrocchi's complete poem appeared in 1623, dedicated to someone else: Cox, 162–65.

⁷⁸Baernstein, 2002.

I believe that she would quickly choose the cloistered life.”⁷⁹ Once again in 1590, with her daughters now settled, she requested permission to enter a convent in Rome, but her brother dissuaded her on the grounds that he needed her help there.

Like many other pious women, Colonna herself wrote little about her spirituality; her reading interests, however, may be traced. In 1572 she requested and received permission to read the Bible in the vernacular, a bold move in post-Tridentine Italy.⁸⁰ A booklist in her hand, undated but probably from the mid-1570s, gives precious insight into her distinctly Barnabite, or Angelic, spiritual orientation.⁸¹ There are no secular works here. The list includes the *Dialogues* and *Vita* of St. Catherine of Siena; two books of collected saints' lives, including a *Leggendario dei santi* identified as “like that of Angelica Paola Battista,” indicating that Colonna had shared or compared reading materials with the nuns;⁸² an unspecified life of the Virgin; the (pseudo) meditations of St. Augustine;⁸³ Lives of St. Bridget, St. Guglielma, and St. Radegund;⁸⁴ Bonsignore Cacciaguerra's *Lettere spirituali*, a 1562 work of spiritual advice directed especially to nuns;⁸⁵ and, finally, a pair of problematic Barnabite texts. The first of these was a 1551 imprint, *La Giostra spirituale*, by Lorenzo Davidico, an expelled Barnabite convicted of heresy by the Inquisition in 1555. The second was the collected works of Battista da Crema, the renegade evangelical Dominican of the 1530s and inspirer of the early Barnabites, whose works were by then under suspicion of heresy and had been abjured by the Barnabites in 1553. Aware of this last work's dubious nature, Colonna added “that I understand

⁷⁹AC MAC 117 n. 19: Nicolò Daneo, 28 September 1583: “Ella è tanto lontana dalle cose del mondo, che è miracolo grandissimo una donna di questa etate così mortificata de' spirito, che se non fusse l'amore grande che porta a questi Signori Figli, credo che più presto si elegerebbe il stato della vita claustrale.” Cited in Berra, 57.

⁸⁰ASBarn, cartelle gialle (hereafter c.g.) 3, 28 February 1572: Report of the Barnabite Gian Paolo Besozzi that he has procured an episcopal license for Colonna to read the Bible in the vernacular, at her request. On vernacular Bible reading in the post-Trent period, see Fragnito, 1997.

⁸¹ASBarn c.g. 37 fasc. 2, undated, “Lista di Libre.” On Borromeo's efforts to collect convent booklists, see Zardin.

⁸²Likely that of Jacobo da Voragine, though there were others in circulation.

⁸³An apocryphal work published in many compilations.

⁸⁴*Vite* of St. Bridget and St. Radegund were numerous; St. Guglielma, a Hungarian queen of the twelfth century, seems to have had no printed *vita* until the seventeenth century. Perhaps the work was a manuscript, or a printed compilation of several saints' lives, or perhaps it was a copy of the Florentine nun Antonia Pulci's play of the same title. I thank David Falvey for help on St. Guglielma, and for sharing his manuscript.

⁸⁵Cacciaguerra, 1562 and 2005.

it was mistaken to print.”⁸⁶ (Perhaps she had one of the clandestine editions of the 1560s.) Whatever the reason she submitted her booklist to the Barnabites — perhaps to solicit spiritual guidance, perhaps to offer them for sale, as some of the titles had prices — the list indicates that her transfer to Lombardy brought consequences, not only for family political strategy, but also for her spiritual life.

Her list included those titles that the moralistic authors Guazzo and Sabba da Castiglione recommended for ladies: lives of saints and church fathers, prayer books. But the condemned Barnabite authors, the Bible, and the mystical works of Catherine of Siena are signs of a more committed and even unorthodox spirituality that could not have pleased the rigidly Tridentine and orthodox Bascapè. Perhaps his invective against Petrarch was a mere generic trope, not directed specifically at Colonna’s own case but borrowed from a sermon or advice book. Or perhaps he was attempting to divert her attention away from her spiritual longings and toward other worries, other guilts. A hint may be found in a *pentimento* in an early draft of Bascapè’s letter cited above: in chiding her for reading poetry, he reminded his spiritual daughter, “you are not a priestess,” a remark he later struck out.⁸⁷ To ears attuned to the Barnabites’ and Angelics’ story, such a term clearly recalled Paola Angelica Negri, a “living saint” who led the congregations until driven out in 1552.⁸⁸ Called “divine mother” by the priests and revered as near-ordained, Negri had long since been expunged from the official record of the Barnabites; but Bascapè knew her reputation and so did the nuns from whom Colonna derived her spiritual interests. Tempted to label Colonna a *pretessa*, Bascapè thought better of it and labeled her a *poetessa*. The elision is telling, for it links multiple ways in which literate women could upset the status quo. To chide a lady given to reading St. Catherine’s *Dialogues* for an excessive reading of Petrarch was perhaps a task of the times: no one knew, after all, where a woman reading might lead.

7. CONCLUSION

Attention to women’s private correspondence compels questions about the distinctions between literary and quotidian writing, between so-called high and low style, and between women who put on professional airs as writers

⁸⁶ASBarn c.g. 37 fasc. 2: “Che ho inteso che si tortano havere stampare.” On fra Battista’s reception, see Davidico; Marcatto.

⁸⁷ASBarn, LP, 1:508: “non siete voi pretessa.”

⁸⁸Firpo; Baernstein, 2002, 57–78.

and women who simply minded the household (also as writers). By muddying these distinctions the ghost behind Bascapè's advice to eschew poetry can be discerned: a woman's near-daily practice of the art of the letter could facilitate so many other forms of writing.

Costanza Colonna's letters, like those of hundreds of other elite women, lie gathered in boxes and volumes among the contracts, lawsuits, and above all letters that wealthy families assembled to buttress family power through property and memory. Across Italy, undereducated, and mostly lonely young women upheld family strategy with their bodies and their pens. Their correspondence, conducted in the service of family networks, constituted an invisible but essential foundation, even a *sine qua non*, for the more ambitious cultural and literary activities undertaken by other women of the same elite. More, they desperately hoped, it kept their memory alive in the hearts of their kinfolk. As the newlywed Costanza Colonna wrote to her father, "Write to me, so that even though I am far away, and settled, you will keep me always in your presence."⁸⁹

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⁸⁹AC MAC b. 50 n. 1159, 7 February 1569: "mi scrivete ancora che con tutto che vi stia lontano, et casata, me tenete sempre nella presentia."

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