

*Fraught Relations in the Letters of Laura Cereta: Marriage, Friendship, and Humanist Epistolarity**

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Laura Cereta is unique among Quattrocento female humanists in directly addressing the position of women as wives and as friends in her substantial corpus of erudite Latin epistolary prose. Questioning the ideals that governed intellectual, social, and personal expectations of matrimony, Cereta's letters reflect her self-consciously double status as humanist and spouse. Her fierce critique of marriage as a site of female oppression and complicity implies an alternative that requires of humanists, husbands, and wives a radical rethinking of marriage in terms of friendship, as well as of the very project of humanist epistolarity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen an unprecedented increase in scholarly attention to Renaissance marriage and to critical writings by early modern women.¹ This article brings together these two fields of inquiry by means of a close analysis of the epistolary production of the Brescian humanist Laura Cereta (1469–99), whose letters sketch a remarkable hope for

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¹Though the bibliography on either subject is far too vast to detail here, a few key texts are worthy of mention. On marriage during the Italian Renaissance, see in particular Brucker; Chojnacki; Dean and Lowe; D'Elia; Hacke; Herlihy; James; Kirkham; Klapisch-Zuber; Kuehn; Molho; Zarri, 2000. On early modern Italian women's writing, see Benson and Kirkham; Cox; King and Rabil; Cereta, 1997; Rosenthal; Smarr; Stevenson; Zarri, 1999.

perfect friendship between husband and wife.² In Cereta's letters, ideal marriage is envisioned as a partnership governed by reciprocal honor, respect, honesty, and love. Cereta never explicitly refers to her own or to another's marriage as a kind of friendship, nor does she ever directly call her husband a friend. Nonetheless, in her letters the languages of marriage and friendship interpenetrate each other, focusing her readers' attention upon the reciprocal relations — mutual love, communication, and duty — that govern both spousal and friendship bonds.

Though relatively little known by both her contemporaries and by modern scholars, Cereta and her writing can nonetheless be viewed in the context of at least three major Renaissance movements. First, as a letter-writing humanist, Cereta claims a place in the long epistolary tradition that took its initial impetus from the letters of Cicero (106–43 BCE). The humanist practice of displaying learning through epistolography rapidly gained momentum throughout the Trecento and Quattrocento, beginning with the letter collection by Petrarch (1304–74) and continuing into the sixteenth century with the epistolary production of Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), Leonardo Bruni (1369–1444), Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), Francesco Filelfo (1398–1481), Lorenzo Valla (1407–57), Poliziano (1454–94), Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), and Pietro Bembo (1470–1547).³

Second, Cereta is among the few early modern women writers whose works remain extant today. Though transmitted through the formal language of Latin epistles rather than the more casual idiom of practical vernacular letters, Cereta's candid tone and sharp tongue recall the Italian letters of wives and widows, including Margherita Datini (1360–1423), Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi (1407–71), and Isabella d'Este (1474–1529).⁴

²Several recent studies explore the various interactions of marriage, friendship, love, and sex in the Renaissance, yet to my knowledge only one book-length study treats marriage and its direct relation to friendship: Leushuis focuses on courtly friendship and marriage in sixteenth-century literature from France and Italy with specific reference to Erasmus, Castiglione, Rabelais, and Marguerite de Navarre. For the most part, however, male-female friendship — whether outside, or, especially, within the context of marriage — remains largely neglected by scholars. For general discussions of medieval and Renaissance friendship, see Kelley and Rosemann; Haseldine; Hyatte; Langer. On male friendship, see Najemy; Rocke; Schachter; on female friendship, see Faderman.

³On letter-writing in the Renaissance, see Clough's classic article on humanist epistolarity. See also the more recent summary on private, professional, and humanist epistolography in Najemy, 18–57.

⁴On Datini, see Crabb, 2007; on Macinghi Strozzi, see Crabb, 2000; on d'Este, see Shemek, 2004 and 2005.

As a member, along with Cassandra Fedele (1465–1558) and Alessandra Scala (1475–1506), of the so-called third generation of Quattrocento women humanists, Cereta is also the inheritor of an earlier female humanist tradition built by women like Isotta Nogarola (1418–66) and Ippolita Sforza (1445–88).⁵ Furthermore, Cereta's keen awareness and unconventional use of traditional male humanist material, as Diana Robin suggests, can be seen as a protofeminist project that anticipates the vituperative treatises of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century female humanists such as Moderata Fonte (1555–92), Lucrezia Marinella (1571–1653), and Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–52).⁶

Third and finally, Cereta is one of several Quattrocento writers intensely engaged in exploring the relationship between two kinds of interpersonal bonds, marriage and friendship. By the end of the fifteenth century, a long tradition of ancient, medieval, and early Renaissance texts on marriage had created a conceptual space for husband-wife relations within the broad domain of friendship.⁷ In particular, two foundational statements about the potential for conjugal friendship, one by a Greek philosopher, the other by a Church father, deeply influenced Renaissance thinking. First, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) argued that marriage, despite being a bond between unequals, may partake of the highest and most rare form of friendship proposed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; second, Augustine (354–430 CE) described marriage as a potential locus of perfect unequal friendship, whether or not husband and wife were engaged in one of the principal activities of an ideal marriage, namely procreation.⁸ During the Quattrocento, similar analogies between friends and spouses appeared in the writings of both sacred and secular authors: in the marriage sermons of the famed preacher Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444), in the marriage

⁵On the first, second, and third generations of Quattrocento women humanists, see King and Rabil, 16–25.

⁶Cereta, 1997, 3.

⁷See, for example, Aristotle, 1825–52 (*Nicomachean Ethics*, bks. 8–9); Plato; Pomeroy; Cicero; Augustine, 1–64 (*De bono coniugali*); Alfonso, 9–27. On spiritual friendship, see also Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rieaulx, and William of St. Thierry; Benincasa.

⁸Aristotle, 1835–36 (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.12). According to bk. 8, the lowest form of friendship is based on utility, which is impermanent and restricted to mutual usefulness; the next form is friendship based on pleasure, which dissolves easily as tastes change and is associated with youth, love, and the erotic; at the top of Aristotle's hierarchy is friendship based on the good, or the excellent, which is enduring and requires mutual trust, time together, intimacy, and love of the other for his own sake. This last type of friendship is the best and also the most rare; nonetheless, it can be enjoyed by spouses, Aristotle argues, if they themselves are good. Augustine, 3 (*De bono coniugali*, 1): "For even without such sexual association there could exist a true union of friendship between the two sexes, with the one governing and the other obeying."

treatise by the Venetian Latinist Francesco Barbaro (1390–1454), in the dialogue on the family by the humanist polymath Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), in the handbook on sinless Christian marriage by the Franciscan Frate Cherubino (1414–84), and in the letters about friendship and marriage by the female humanist and wife Laura Cereta.⁹

2. BIOGRAPHY AND WORKS

Laura Cereta was the eldest daughter of a Brescian attorney, Silvestro Cereto (d. ca. 1488), and his noble wife, Veronica di Leno.¹⁰ In an autobiographical letter to Nazaria Olympica, a female friend and mentor, Cereta explains that her formal education began at the age of seven, when she was sent to a convent and entrusted to a well-respected woman whose learning, habits, and discipline she came to acquire.¹¹ Upon her return home two years later, Cereta came under the tutelage of her father, who was likely one of the staunchest supporters of her intellect and with whom she appears to have had a particularly close relationship. At the age of fifteen, Cereta married a well-educated Venetian merchant, Pietro Serina (d. 1486). Cereta seems to have taken on the role of head of household in the absence of her father and, after her marriage, of her husband. The letters she wrote on behalf of both men, as well as her practical advice to Serina on household and business affairs, support her own account of a life equally active in the domestic and literary spheres.¹² Indeed, she claims, her substantial daytime responsibilities at home allowed her to undertake vigorous study only at night, leaving little time for sleep.¹³

Cereta's intellectual pursuits ranged widely: an early interest in mathematics and astrology was eventually supplanted by a deeper dedication to what Albert Rabil calls a kind of "moral philosophy" informed by classical and, to a lesser extent, sacred literature in both Latin and Greek.¹⁴ The resulting sum of Cereta's extant literary production

⁹In particular, see Bernardino, 538–72 (*Predica* 19); Barbaro, 189–228 (bk. 2); Alberti, 86–158 (bk. 2); Cherubino. On Cherubino's little-known treatise and his unique formulation of conjugal friendship, see McCue Gill, 2009.

¹⁰For Laura Cereta's biography, see Rabil, 4–22; Cereta, 1997, 4–7.

¹¹Cereta, 1997, 25 (letter 1). For citations of letters, page numbers immediately follow the citation, and letter numbers are given in parentheses.

¹²For letters written on behalf of Silvestro Cereto, see Cereta, 1997, 52–61 (letters 9–15); for letters written on behalf of Pietro Serina, see Rabil, 61 (letters 17–18). See Cereta, 1997, 91 (letter 23) for her practical business advice to Serina.

¹³Cereta, 1997, 31–32 (letter 2, to Sigismondo de Bucci, 1 January 1486).

¹⁴Rabil, 25.

fills a single-volume manuscript consisting of eighty-two Latin letters and a dialogue. Cereta compiled and edited the manuscript herself; it was intended for publication but remained unpublished at the time of her death in 1499.¹⁵ While several manuscript copies of her writing were made — two of which are still extant¹⁶ — only selections from her letters have been published, either in Latin or in translation.¹⁷

By making audible a wife's words from the end of the fifteenth century, Cereta's epistles represent, however opaquely, a rare personal and intellectual perspective on marriage, namely that of an educated woman. As Robin notes, Cereta's humanistic production is unique, not only for its emphasis on female experience, but also for its bringing together conventional humanistic topoi, including *amicitia* (friendship), education, and marriage, with topics traditionally forbidden to, or ignored by, most male humanists, including a detailed description of the practical art of embroidery, the description of intense emotion, and the open discussion of

¹⁵Cereta explicitly sought fame and immortality through the publication of her writing. In a letter to her cousin, Bernardino di Leno, dated 26 February 1486, she explains, "After the fruits of my study ripened and the golden grain fell from the stalk, I began to gather the harvest with my rustic pen, so that it could safely and quickly be transported to faraway peoples of the world. . . . And, with you as my judge, this work can win a place for me, a woman writer, among the most highly praised of our ancestors": Cereta, 1997, 51–52 (letter 8). For the Latin, see Cereta, 1640, 74 (letter 34): "Praecox igitur huius studii seges postquam ad succiduum flavescentis aristae devenit, metere coepi olitore calamo fructus, qui securi possint ad remotas orbe gentes ultro citroque deferri . . . quod iudice te, possit scriptrici locum inter laudatissimos in maiores acquirere."

¹⁶For details on the Vatican and Venice manuscripts, see Rabil, 35–39.

¹⁷Cereta, 1640, is the earliest and most complete publication of Cereta's letters, but nonetheless omits a dozen of them. All Latin quotations of Cereta's letters are from this edition unless otherwise noted. Quotations have not been altered, except for the expansion of abbreviations, the simplification of punctuation, and the occasional correction, in square brackets, from the Vatican and Venice manuscripts. Page numbers immediately follow the citation, and letter numbers are in parentheses. Cereta's letters and accounts of her life and work are often included in anthologies of and studies on female humanist writing: see, for instance, King and Rabil, 77–86; Ranft, 192–94; Smarr, 130–32. Since the seventeenth century, the most complete edition of Cereta's work is Cereta, 1997, which includes fifty-five of the letters as well as Cereta's comic dialogue on the death of an ass. Rabil's thorough description of Cereta's life and work contains few complete texts of the letters themselves, but tabulates the contents of the Vatican and Venice manuscripts as well as of Cereta, 1640. Rabil, 42–108, summarizes of the contents of the Vatican manuscript (the most complete extant manuscript of Cereta's letters) and is the only printed reference that addresses Cereta's entire corpus.

highly personal relationships. In contrast with most male humanism in the Quattrocento, which “focus[ed] on objects, events, ideas, and literary and intellectual relationships, Cereta’s letters expose the details of her intimate relationships with her mother, father, husband, and close friends.”¹⁸ Since her epistolary collection was intended for a larger, Latin-speaking audience of humanists, it is striking that Cereta should have chosen, most unlike her male counterparts, to include both intimately personal and banally practical letters alongside formal, humanist treatise-epistles in her edited manuscript. Cereta’s deliberate confounding of the public world of humanism with the private world of intimate social relations can be read as a feminist critique of humanism, which insisted upon a more consistent compartmentalization of the personal and professional; moreover, this blurring of public and private echoes the complexity of Renaissance marriage, itself one of Cereta’s most pressing concerns and which by definition brings together the public, familial, legal, and contractual with the private, individual, personal, and emotional-psychological.¹⁹

Despite Cereta’s apparently strong commitment to literary endeavor during the mid- to late 1480s, there are no extant materials from the last eleven years of her life. Rabil argues that Cereta’s *epistolae* may have been written entirely during and around the time of her marriage, between 1485 and 1488.²⁰ Rabil also acknowledges, however, that while Cereta was conscientious about dating her letters by month and by day — whether accurately, or so as to construct a fictional epistolary narrative, is impossible

¹⁸Cereta, 1997, 9. In fact, Cereta’s letters often do a kind of double duty, fulfilling a personal purpose, on the one hand, and demonstrating the intellectual skills of a humanist engaged in language play or philosophical study, on the other. See Cereta, 1997, 65–72 (letter 17), a letter to a male friend that urges him to marry and simultaneously provides an opportunity for Cereta to describe a number of exemplary women from ancient and more recent texts; *ibid.*, 88–89 (letter 21), to Pietro Serina, which fulfills her husband’s desire for a letter from his wife while showing off her skill at employing the language of law; *ibid.*, 136–38 (letter 39), to a female friend, which seeks to repair a failing friendship by means of a discourse on *amicitia*.

¹⁹Scholars have tended to focus on marriage as a social institution governed by the principles of family alliance, patriarchal power, political advancement, and monetary gain: see especially Klapisch-Zuber; more recently, Dean and Lowe; Molho; Zarri, 2000. The history of marital relationships is also being fruitfully, if more rarely, explored from the perspectives of domestic life, individual spouses, and emotional bonds: see Brucker; Chojnacki; Herlihy; Kirkham.

²⁰On his dating methodology and the obstacles to accurate dating, see Rabil, 39–42. Stevenson, 146, notes that as early as 1488 a finished manuscript of the letters was circulating among local scholars.

to ascertain — only one of her letters is dated by year.²¹ It is unclear, though, whether Cereta continued writing into her twenties: as Rabil suggests, her last letters hint at a departure from her youthful dedication to intellectual pursuits and a turn away from hopes of immortality through humanist letters, in favor of a pious, active life outside the realm of literary activity.²²

Back in the mid-1480s, however, Cereta seems still to have been writing about many things, including marriage. It was likely between the summers of 1485 and 1486 that she addressed four Latin letters to her husband, three of which date from July to September 1485, when Serina was in Venice on business; she also wrote letters that critique the institution of marriage, letters that seek to define ideal friendship, and letters that mourn the loss of her husband, who died of the plague only a year and a half after their marriage. This diverse group of epistles on marriage, which range from formal essay to intimate note, speaks to Cereta's personal and legal bond with Serina as wife and widow as well as to her intellectual engagement with marriage as humanist *topos*; moreover, her letters situate both perspectives within the broader context of prescriptive views on marriage and friendship in the Quattrocento.

3. MARRIAGE AND WOMEN GONE WRONG: A LETTER TO PIETRO ZECCHI

Approximately a year after her own marriage, Cereta composed a formal essay on marriage and addressed it to Pietro Zecchi, a man about to marry for the first time.²³ Though women increasingly came to write against marriage, particularly from the turn of the seventeenth century on, Cereta's late fifteenth-century letter to Zecchi is the first anti-marriage treatise authored by a woman.²⁴ Despite its venomous conclusion, the letter begins conventionally, with little hint of the invective soon to follow: after describing the astrological auspices surrounding Zecchi's marriage, Cereta appeals to the two purposes of Quattrocento marriage — procreation and love — both of which she foresees in Zecchi's future: "A fortunate wife will be given to you as a bride when Jupiter appears, and by her you will receive a grandson from a happy son. . . . And although Chance might cause you to

²¹Rabil employs external historical events as well as moments in Cereta's life, particularly her marriage to Serina in December 1484 or January 1485, in order to date her letters by year. Though we cannot be entirely certain of their accuracy, I find Rabil's proposed dates generally persuasive; I include his estimated years throughout.

²²Rabil, 20–23.

²³See Cereta, 1997, 65–72 (letter 17); Cereta, 1640, 178–87 (letter 64).

²⁴I owe this observation to Diana Robin.

be deceived in a prior promise of marriage, still you will be consoled: in opposition to Fortune, you will soon evade the enemy. Two hearts joined together under the law of chastity will enjoy themselves in an indissoluble knot of love for a long time to come."²⁵ Wisely refraining from offering explicit advice on the first of these two marital goods, the modest and childless Cereta instead turns to the second aim of marriage, hoping to inspire Zecchi's love with tales of exemplary wives: "I will point the way to love — to the extent that I can in a mere letter — by using examples in which the dignity and purity of women have caught fire with the flames of chaste love and a noble heart."²⁶

The bulk of this lengthy letter is then taken up with numerous worthy female *exempla* borrowed primarily from Boccaccio's (1313–75) *De mulieribus claris*. Inspired by Petrarch's *De viris illustribus*, Boccaccio's collection of women's lives is the first such in the history of Western Europe. Boccaccio drew from tales of pagan goddesses and heroines, biblical figures, ancient historical personages, and a few contemporary women: in the introduction to her English translation of *De mulieribus claris*, Virginia Brown includes the Bible, Jerome, Livy, Ovid, and Virgil in a substantial list of Boccaccio's sources.²⁷ The many female *exempla* employed, and often rewritten, by Cereta would thus have been known to her educated readership via both Boccaccio and their traditional sources. In her letter to Zecchi, Cereta follows convention in emphasizing the chastity, patience, loyalty, faithfulness, companionship, protection, endurance, cunning, love, courage, bravery, skill with arms, constancy, and tolerance of wives and widows. Like the exemplary women described in ancient and medieval didactic literature, Cereta's women have many virtues, but above all they are chaste. As wives, they would rather die (many commit suicide) than endure rape or any other offense to their chastity; as widows, they are praised for living chastely in eternal mourning, or, better still, for dying spontaneously (or committing suicide) when learning of their husbands' deaths.

As Robin notes, Cereta's litany of ideal women "suppresses the negative representations of these women in Ovid, Tacitus, Valerius Maximus, and other ancient authors, though her readers would have been familiar with

²⁵Cereta, 1997, 66; Rabil, 50: "At nuptum alba tibi ex aspectu Jovis dabitur uxor, et ab ea videbis ex foelici filio nepotem. . . . Et quamquam in priore iugali promissu falli tibi stet casus, consolator tamen postmodum adversus fortunam hostem evades. Et sub pudica lege coniugii fruiscentur se diu indissolubili nodo charitatis duo corda coniuncta."

²⁶Cereta, 1997, 66; Cereta, 1640, 178–79: "Monstrabo, quantum nostrae poterunt litterulae, viam exemplis quibus castimonia quondam maiestasque mulierum generoso pectore et pudicis amoris flammis inarsit."

²⁷Boccaccio, xiv–xvii.

these texts anyway.”²⁸ There is, however, at least one positive female trait that Cereta turns on its head by criticizing its practitioner and, by extension, the tradition that views such a virtue as exemplary. In her description of Tertia Aemilia (230–ca. 163 BCE), the wife of Scipio Africanus (235–183 BCE) and the final exemplary woman in the letter, Cereta begins much as she has every other mini-biography: “So that no hint of dishonor should tar the unblemished reputation of [Scipio], [Aemilia] took to her grave the long list of his violations of their marital bond, concealing these in the secrecy of her breast.”²⁹ At this point, however, Cereta departs from her usual brief pattern, expanding from the details of Aemilia’s life to her influence on centuries of female behavior: “This learned teacher of tolerance had women who were docile and willing as her pupils, and some of these sent female pupils of their own down to posterity, while other docile women, born later, have filled an entire lineage full of their descendants who are dispersed throughout the world.”³⁰ But quite unlike Boccaccio or his source Valerius Maximus (20 BCE–50 CE), both of whom heap praise upon the forgiving Aemilia, Cereta is not at all pleased either by Aemilia or by the plague-like spread of docility her actions set in motion.³¹ Using Aemilia as an anti-exemplar, Cereta immediately embarks upon a sharp invective against wives who permit their husbands to treat them like animals and who are thus complicit in accepting and even encouraging the demeaning restrictions placed upon them by the institution of marriage.³² Cereta is simultaneously sympathetic to, and furious with, modern-day Aemilias. She begins by criticizing the natural and social foundations of marriage, pitying women who are doubly bound, first by an innate human inclination toward procreation, and second by the Church’s “sacrament that allows us to enter joyously into a sweet oath to beget children.”³³ However, this “sweet oath” turns out instead to be an immense burden on women. Because of “the

²⁸Cereta, 1997, 64.

²⁹Ibid., 71; Cereta, 1640, 184: “[Haec] ne illibatos viri vel defuncti rumores ulla violaret infamae labecula, portavit secum moriens sub arcano pectore longas tediae iugalis offensas.”

³⁰Cereta, 1997, 71; Cereta, 1640, 184: “Haec tolerantiae docta magistra dociles discipulas habuit a quibus in posteros aliae transmissae subnascentesque aliae descendentium totam lineam orbe toto replerunt.”

³¹Boccaccio, 74; Valerius Maximus, 72–73 (6.7.1).

³²It is surely no coincidence that Cereta chooses her discussion of Aemilia as the turning point of this letter: her mention of Scipio alludes to the connection between Petrarch’s ur-humanistic epistolary project and her own, as well as to friendship as conceptually central to letter-writing. I owe this observation to Albert R. Ascoli.

³³Cereta, 1997, 71; Cereta, 1640, 185: “Instituit autem sacramentum ecclesia, quo valeamus [hilares] ad [prolis] tam dulce pignus accedere.”

unbroken probity of conjugal love,” Cereta writes, wives are morally required to be “content with toil and duty,” able and willing “to rear up children amid wailing and all-night vigils.”³⁴ Thus natural procreation and Church sacrament become a trap that prevents any honorable escape.

The restrictiveness of the “sweet” conjugal bond, as we shall see, is even more thoroughly addressed by Cereta, who describes women as never able to escape their husbands, even years after their husbands have died. In this way, Cereta brings a common male humanist topos — marriage as a burden to the husband — to bear on women’s even worse conjugal situation.³⁵ Despite her condemnation of the binding nature of marriage, it is worth emphasizing that marital duty did not necessarily keep Cereta from her scholarly pursuits. In their survey of Quattrocento women humanists, Margaret King and Albert Rabil state that marriage ended the intellectual work of every woman, with the single exception of Cereta, whose studies “rather became more intense after she married.”³⁶ If Cereta did indeed study and write intensively throughout her marriage, as she claims to have done, it is unlikely that she had an easy time of it. As King and Rabil indicate, female humanists suffered from there being no “separation between vocational intellectual roles and social roles” in fifteenth-century Italy.³⁷ As noted above, Cereta explains that for women, maintaining a family requires toil-filled days and wakeful nights; to live a productive scholarly life as well would have been impossible for most female humanists, even if it had been permitted or encouraged by their husbands. Unlike the wives described in her letter to Zecchi, however, Cereta kept nighttime vigils for the sake of her intellectual work, not for children.³⁸

Whether she counted herself among them or not, Cereta’s compassion for wives enslaved to household duties and to long-dead husbands is clearly indicated by her heartrending last words on the subject of widows. After a lifetime of servitude, she writes, women’s sacrifices continue: “When their husbands are stolen from them by death after a lifetime of fidelity, these women, in an anxious daze, bury their own living hearts with the bodies of their men. They disrupt everything with their cries of mourning . . . but in

³⁴Cereta, 1997, 71; Cereta, 1640, 185: “Invitat ad hoc nos infracta coniugalis amoris integritas quae in vigiliis vagitibusque contempto labore et pietate filios educat.”

³⁵On marriage as a burden borne by the husband, see Alberti, 37, 84–85 (bk. 1), in which the young bachelor Lionardo argues that married life is restrictive, weighty, woeful, and replete with unending torments.

³⁶King and Rabil, 23.

³⁷Ibid., 27.

³⁸For mention of Cereta’s night vigils, see Cereta, 1997, 27, 31–32, 38 (letters 1, 2, and 4).

old age, devoid of sight and toiling at the tedium of their lives, they take such pity on their dead that they make public their sighing lamentations of surrender to death with the half-eaten sorrow of a heart that has burst.”³⁹ In this dramatic closing passage, Cereta explicitly extends the burden of marriage on women beyond their husbands’ graves. Hinting at the double standard that allowed Renaissance men relative sexual freedom but required of women perfect chaste faithfulness, Cereta adds that widows, forced as young women into a lifetime of tedious, endless work as wives, end up brokenhearted and alone.

Even as Cereta employs these powerful images of despair to evoke a sympathetic response in her readers, she has already made it clear that wives and widows themselves are by no means without blame. In an earlier section of this same letter, Cereta describes at length the endless toil and numerous wifely duties that she evokes in her concluding passage. Wives are women, she informs Zecchi, who “guard your treasures and offices with solicitous love for the long duration of your life . . . [and] preserve the always-flourishing and much-cherished unity of holy matrimony”; they “govern themselves . . . and they smooth over all the pain when there is dissention in the household with their own good sense.”⁴⁰ Warming to her subject, Cereta continues hyperbolically: “They mount unheard-of plans in the face of inescapable events; they keep the din of war far from their borders and towns; and, relying both on arms and the bonds of kinship, they protect kings and they pacify realms. And if ever they are summoned to resolve the injuries of their husbands, these women immediately wash the animosity away from the heart that has been bruised, having first dissolved it with their little tears. And, soothing egos with compliments to promote a happy mood, they extinguish noisy shouting when tempers flare.”⁴¹

³⁹Ibid., 72; Cereta, 1640, 186: “Verum uni piissimae vitae socii fato rapiuntur, sepeliunt illae cum cadaveribus in anxio illo stupore corda viventia. Disturbant omnia plangoribus . . . sed in orba luminibus senecta et dum taedio vitae laborant, miserentur adeo suorum ut sub deroso moerore animi rupti gemitoria funebris obsequii lamenta concelebrant.”

⁴⁰Cereta, 1997, 71–72; Cereta, 1640, 185: “Hae sunt quae proposita iurisiurandi contestatione devovent se vobis [quaeve] in praelongum spatium vitae deductae gazas honoresque vestros sollicito amore custodiunt. Hae dum caram semper semperque virentem unitatem servant sancti coniugii pro obediendis maioribus imperant sibi et prudentia sua omnes domestici schismatis indignationes emollient.”

⁴¹Cereta, 1997, 72; Cereta, 1640, 185: “Excitant e contra inevitables exitus inaudita consilia et astu atque armis non minus quam iure sanguinis arcent a confinibus bella strepentina tuentur reges regna conciliant. Hae si quando maritalibus appetuntur iniuriis lavant raptim e violato corde odia facta lacrymulis et clementia bilis accensae convitia linitis in laetitiam blandimentis extingunt.”

As we come to know by the end of the letter, in Cereta's view wives are unfairly repaid for this exemplary behavior with lonely old age and "animi rupti."⁴² But nature, Church, and society are not the only cause of such entirely inadequate compensation. Once again, Cereta rewrites traditional notions of female exemplarity by chastising women themselves for their extremes of behavior: "Surely the great and unshakable faith of wives in their husbands is excessive; for [wives], remaining constant through all fortune's changes, enter into [their husbands'] dangers, while their own desires may be rebuffed."⁴³ Cereta suggests that it is precisely the exemplary wife — dedicated, faithful, constant, selfless — whose actions are particularly problematic. With this criticism of female behavior in mind, Cereta's words on ideal wifely behavior and pitiable widowhood can be read as anti-exemplary, even as they repeat traditional ideas about praiseworthy women.

As the letter continues, Cereta's dismay at wives who carry out their thankless tasks with patience and docility becomes more apparent and more violent. Employing increasingly demeaning language, she calls such women "little sparrows" who "come to their husbands just to receive their nods of perfect approval, like little girls who depend on their nurse's opinion," and labels a pliable wife a kind of pet who "rolls herself over like a dog begging and, while she longs for a word of praise, she talks about whips."⁴⁴ Cereta's palpable disgust with these little sparrows constitutes the rhetorical and emotional peak of the letter, which, shortly before its conclusion, takes the form of a bitter invective.

From its conciliatory beginning to its height of anger and its concluding despair, Cereta's letter to Zecchi is carefully structured. The calm, respectful opening section, in which Cereta sets herself up as Zecchi's moral guide and counselor, builds slowly toward Aemilia's biography through a prodigious display of humanist learning and rhetorical skill. Even as Cereta participates in the humanist project by flaunting her ease with Latin composition and her knowledge of ancient, Christian, and contemporary texts, she simultaneously engages in a gentle, yet pointed, critique of humanist traditions. If we reflect upon her entire *opus*, Cereta's critique of

⁴²Cereta, 1997, 72 (letter 17): "a heart that has burst."

⁴³*Ibid.*, 71; Cereta, 1640, 184: "Magna quippe nimium et inexpugnabilis coniugum fides in viros quae in utriusque fortunae mutatione constantes repercussis desiderijs suis pericula [vestra] subintrans."

⁴⁴Cereta, 1997, 72; Cereta, 1640, 185–86: "Passerculis nihil opus est vobis qui ad manum venire assuescant. Adveniunt viris ad emendatos nutus uxores tamquam puellae arbitrio nutricis attractae. Quid clamorosos catellos viri [tenetis] in manibus? Circumvolutat se blandienti similis mulier et gestiens gratiam de verberibus refert."

the humanist project extends beyond her male peers' ideas about women and marriage. Consider, for instance, her purposeful misunderstanding of the rules (of which she would have been well aware) that govern humanist letterbooks, as evidenced by her inclusion of private letters in a collection intended for publication, and by her use of Latin and a high rhetorical style for familiar letters to her mother and husband.

Moreover, by refocusing the traditional narrative emphasis of her female biographical subjects in the Zecchi letter, Cereta persists in subtly highlighting the specific flaws in the male humanist view of exemplary women. Also assessed, but found wanting, are the natural, theological, and social constraints placed by marriage on women: over the course of the increasingly impassioned paragraphs that immediately follow, and are motivated by, the tale of Aemilia, Cereta's earlier mildness entirely disappears. By the time she disdainfully rails against the sparrow-wives, the rhetorical momentum of the letter has reached its highest peak. Drawing the epistle to a close soon thereafter with the evocative image of waiting widows, Cereta concludes with a final poignant depiction of the terrible costs that their childlike desires impose.

In the context of the professed purpose of this rhetorical tour de force — to show Zecchi the way to love, enabling him to “conceive of a surer plan for entering into marriage” and to “prepare the kind of torches [he] should be lighting at the altar of holy matrimony”⁴⁵ — Cereta's epistle is not merely a spectacular literary performance: it also poses a twofold challenge. By exposing the snare set for women by nature, society, and the Church, she implicitly requests that Zecchi and her other male readers refrain from allowing the institution of marriage either to force docility on wives or to encourage the mistreatment of women by their husbands. On the other hand, by revealing women's complicity in their own subjugation, Cereta demands, first, that her male readers refuse to marry, and, second, that her female readers refuse to be wives who are docile, tolerant, and patient — that is, that they not be like Aemilia.

By issuing these challenges to its readers, the Zecchi letter also raises a question about marriage. If nature, society, religion, and women themselves are together responsible for the creation of unequal marriages, what, if one exists, is the alternative? If the kind of marriage outlined in the letter to Zecchi makes women into pets and men into abusive masters, is there another kind of marriage that is to be desired instead? Cereta's challenges suggest that there is an alternative form of

⁴⁵Cereta, 1997, 71; Cereta, 1640, 184: “Consideres intrabit securius de ineundis nuptiis cordi consilium et parabis quas accendas altari pro sacro thalamo faces.”

marriage, but to explore her proposal we must look to the letters she wrote to her husband.

4. AN UNSTEADY MARRIAGE: LETTERS TO PIETRO SERINA

Whether Cereta's letters represent an imagined conversation between textual epistolary interlocutors or a real historical exchange between friends or spouses cannot be determined with any certainty. If her letters to her husband are part of a literary narrative, like the epistles contained in many contemporary humanist letterbooks, I agree with Ullrich Langer that "when crucial choices are made, enacted, discussed and defended within the confines of an imaginary world, these choices constitute interventions in the ongoing reflection by early modern culture on the status and nature of relationships of human beings with each other."⁴⁶ In Cereta's case, the relationship is that between husband and wife. If her epistles to Serina are actual letters sent and received by historical spouses, whether or not Cereta's apparent disillusionment with her marriage extended beyond the letters themselves into the couple's day-to-day interactions is yet another puzzle. Was her unhappiness caused by his absence, exacerbated by distance, adversely affected by the limitations of epistolary communication, or invented so as to enable a unique reconsideration of standard marriage discourse by a female humanist? Barring the unlikely discovery of more letters by Cereta or Serina, or other supporting documentation, these questions cannot be answered.

Nonetheless, while Cereta's epistles may not represent a historical exchange of letters and may not mirror a specific state of mind or a comprehensible set of emotions, it is valuable to read her words as a genuine attempt, first, to immortalize herself through her skill as a Latin letter-writer employing rhetorical techniques to the best of her ability, and, second, to reflect upon issues related to her status and identity as a young wife and widow at the end of the Quattrocento. As Robin points out, it is precisely the coexistence of these two approaches to writing, reflected in Cereta's double role of scholar and wife, that make her letters of particular interest.⁴⁷ It is with Cereta's willful conflation of her multiple roles in mind that I maintain no clear distinction here between Cereta, the humanist author and historical wife, and Cereta, the principal interlocutor within this same author's epistolary narrative.

⁴⁶Langer, 11.

⁴⁷Cereta, 1997, 4.

Cereta represents her marriage as by no means perfect: her letters to her husband convey varying levels of marital discontent, general confusion, and emotional pain. In her first letter to Serina, dated 14 July 1485, she responds defensively to an accusation that she claims was brought against her in an earlier letter from him: “You charge me with laziness and attack me for my long silence as though I were a defendant in court. You act as if I were the sort of person who would write to strangers and only neglect you, as though I were forgetful of you when in fact I accord you a place of honor above that of other learned men.”⁴⁸ Over the course of the letter she continues to playfully employ the formal language of law — plaintiffs and defendants, charges and verdicts, judges and tribunals — in order to claim her own innocence, teasingly insisting that, should her husband truly want to accuse her of neglect, he must return to Brescia: “You will come here, then, if your charges against me are just; nor will you ignore the time limit of two days.”⁴⁹

Less than a week later, on 22 July, Cereta once again answered a reproach from her husband. This time her opening words are wounded, frustrated, and angry:

O ye more favorable gods, whose charge it is to protect innocence, for what times and what mores did this iron procession of ages preserve me to be born? May I be endowed with both eloquence and reticence, so that I can either be silent or respond promptly to your reproach. I too seldom reach the heights where that wind of yours gusts forth. But still, if my silence is more boorish than my conversation in your judgment, I have a compromise: and that is to whisper and to allow these lips to speak freely. For when you ordered me to speak, that virginal shame of mine caused me to refuse. You yourself urged me, though I was often trembling, to desire to free my heart from the fear in which it was drowning. Now, however, though uninhibited in my speech, I am not free from blame either. It is as though you pick arguments with me because either I'm silent when I'm angry or speak when I feel I'm impelled to, though apparently neither option is permitted.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Ibid., 88 (letter 21); Cereta, 1640, 23 (letter 8): “Agis me socordiae et ream aggredieris longi silentii, velut quae ad extraneos scribens te praeterierim solum tanquam oblita, quum potius prae caeteris doctis honoratum tibi gradum ascribam.”

⁴⁹Cereta, 1997, 89; Cereta, 1640, 24: “Venies igitur, si iuste me arguis, neque bidui praeteribis terminum.” Cereta, 1997, 87, notes that Cereta may have acquired knowledge of legalese from her father.

⁵⁰Cereta, 1997, 89–90 (letter 22); Cereta, 1640, 26 (letter 10): “Dii meliores, quibus innocentiam tueri datum est, ad quos nam mores ad quae tempora nascituram me haec ferrea saeculi vicissitudo servavit, ut sive sileam sive scribam mox probro mihi et reticentiae dentur et litterae. Ego quo scopulo iste ventus erumpat parum assequor. At si tamen judico te silentium est sermone rusticius, hoc mihi medium superest ut de hinc vix allevatis labiis insusurrem. Nam quando fari redarguebat me pudor ille virgineus iubebas hortaberis ipse me

By describing her letter-writing as “conversation” and as “speech,” Cereta highlights her awareness of the unique status of the letter, which is both written word — the letters on the page — and spoken dialogue — the conversation enabled by epistolary exchange; both absence, in the requisite distance between letter-writing interlocutors, and presence, as the letters are the embodiment of their authors.⁵¹ The presence of Cereta’s physical body (her lips) and its palpable reaction to Serina’s accusation (her trembling) in this epistle can be read as an illumination of her physical distance from Serina, which she mentions explicitly later in the letter, and as an attempt to locate her, as a present, physical woman, in the mind of the reader.

Previously accused of silence, now accused of speaking too freely, Cereta complains that she is apparently unable to please: she is at fault both when speaking uninhibitedly and when remaining silent. Though she seeks to make Serina happy with her behavior — and here is a hint of the exemplary female behavior described and then reviled in the Zecchi letter — she is troubled about her own lack of freedom within the bounds of her husband’s desires. She is trapped in Brescia, for instance, her physical movements, unlike those of her husband, curtailed: “Thus I congratulate you, husband, dearer than life to me, because you have simply moved away from this place and have gone to Venice, while I still have cause for grief.”⁵² With physical distance imposed — a situation she tries, however jokingly, to remedy in her previous letter — it is her lack of communicative options that concerns her most deeply: “The situation deserves my tears and sadness; it consumes and gnaws at me.”⁵³

The bitterness evident in this letter appears to be linked primarily to Cereta’s frustration at being unable to please Serina with her letters, and at having to make the attempt in the first place, especially in the face of contradictory demands. Trying, but failing, to balance her words to fit his desires, she also depicts an imbalance in their roles: he accuses, judges, orders, urges, and withholds permission; she, like the female anti-exemplars of the Zecchi letter, seeks compromise, suggests alternatives, attempts

saepe trepidulam vellem tandem a perfusa formidine pectus eximere, nunc autem vel secura sermonis a culpa non absum, velut argumento cavilleris quod vel taceam irata vel loquar impulsa, quum neutrum veritatis facies admittat.”

⁵¹On letters as a substitute for physical presence in the early modern period, see Shemek, 2005, 282–87.

⁵²Cereta, 1997, 90; Cereta, 1640, 27: “Sic gratulabor tibi vir, vita mihi carior, quod auctus hinc Venetias migraveris, relicta mihi materia plorandi.”

⁵³Cereta, 1997, 90; Cereta, 1640, 26–27: “Haec dolore prorsus atque lacrymis res digna est, quae me deinceps absumat et rodāt.”

negotiation, and tries to follow instructions. Angered by a double disequilibrium — the unequal roles of husband and wife as well as the insoluble problem of balancing speech and silence — Cereta's belligerence nonetheless becomes sadness and confusion toward the end of the letter. Perhaps conscious of her earlier harshness, she tempers her language by employing the epithet "husband, dearer than life to me" in a last attempt, we might guess, to soften her readers' attitude toward her and to refocus their attention on the risks of disrupting conjugal harmony.

That Cereta appears to fight against the inferior role of a wife and to promote reciprocal regard, clear communication, and mutual love in marriage is noteworthy in the face of historical research that has argued for the infrequency of intimate contact between hierarchically and demographically separated spouses.⁵⁴ If substantial social, emotional, physical, and often geographical distance between spouses was indeed the norm around 1500, why should Cereta either expect or seek to promote anything different? If we momentarily take her letters as representative of a historical marriage, Cereta's dismay at a conjugal relationship that was not always a harmonious partnership must have originated with expectations that encouraged her to believe that marriage would in fact be based upon mutual respect, frequent communication, and love. We might ask, then, whence Cereta's expectations might have come.

As a humanist, Cereta would have been exposed to accounts of ideal marriage in ancient literature as well as in contemporary treatises, sermons, romances, and lyrics.⁵⁵ In particular, Cereta may have been directly or indirectly familiar with Quattrocento ideas about conjugal friendship expressed by preachers like Bernardino of Siena, who employs scripture, Aristotle, and Augustine in his marriage sermons to argue forcefully for friendship between husband and wife; and by humanists like Alberti, who, in book 2 of *I libri della famiglia*, casts marriage as the site of *vera amicizia* (true friendship), elsewhere defined in the dialogue as the strongest of all human relationships.⁵⁶ Furthermore, while real examples of friendly marriage — between Cereta's parents, for example — may have been

⁵⁴For a discussion of this perspective and the recent work that criticizes it, see Dean and Lowe, 8–12.

⁵⁵In her letter to Nazaria Olympica, Cereta claims to have studied Cicero and Seneca, as well as both Old and New Testament scripture: Cereta, 1997, 27 (letter 1). According to Rabil, 6–7, her "training was primarily in the Latin language and literature . . . but she also learned Greek . . . [and her] letters reflect wide reading and memorizing of classical texts and examples." On the schooling of fifteenth-century girls at home and in the convent, see Grendler, 96–102.

⁵⁶Bernardino, 539, 541, 546–47 (*Predica* 19, lines 4–5, 15, 38–40); Alberti, 93–94.

unlikely, affection for one's spouse was deliberately fostered by some parents in their betrothed children, even in the highest echelons of Italian society.⁵⁷

Cereta's historical marriage aside, in her epistolary representation of her own marriage it is precisely affection that is at stake. Though no longer criticized for her speech, or lack thereof, Cereta next writes, on 13 August 1485, that she has been accused of not loving her husband enough, a charge she finds particularly troubling:

But as to your writing me that I don't love you very much, I don't know whether you're saying this in earnest or whether I should realize that you're joking with me. Still, what you say disturbs me. You are measuring a very healthy expression of a wife's loyalty by the standard of the insincere flattery of well-worn phrases. But I shall love you, my husband. What does it mean to you that you reassure me with those trivial little compliments? Do you want me to believe that you expect me to comb my hair in a stylish fashion for your homecoming? Or to feign adoring looks with a painted face? Let women without means, who worry and have no confidence in their own virtue, flutter their eyelashes and play games to gain favor with their husbands. This is the adulation of a fox and the birdlime of deceitful birdhunting. I don't want to have to buy you at such a price. I'm not a person who lays more stock in words than duty. I am truly your Laura, whose soul is the same one you in turn had hoped for.⁵⁸

Here Cereta highlights one of the most pressing problems with letter-writing. Without the visual and auditory cues of gesture, tone of voice, and facial expression, it is difficult for one engaged in an epistolary exchange to tell un-ironic from ironic statements. If Serina's words are in jest, the joke is in poor taste: by suggesting that his wife does not love him enough, he disturbs her greatly. If Cereta's letters represent a real exchange, her apparently deep concern may in fact be justified: as Maria Luisa Doglio notes, since the time of Cicero it has been commonly held that one can write

⁵⁷James, 10–14; Shemek, 2004, 85–86. On the unlikelihood of friendship in Renaissance marriage, see Klapisch-Zuber.

⁵⁸Cereta, 1997, 91 (letter 23); Rabil, 136: "Quod autem scribis te me minus amari, nescio an serio instes an te ludere mecum existimem. Perturbas me tamen ab re et fidei uxoriae integerrimum cultum subdola loci adulatione metiris. Sed, mi vir, amabo, quid tibi est quod his [assentaciunculis] me tibi demulces? An forte credam expectes arte me comaturam comas ad tuum adventum, aut sub expolita facie me simulaturam tibi blanditias? Aucupentur potius gratiam conjugum intestatae mulieres, quae ludibundis oculis sollicitae propriae virtuti non fidunt. Est enim istaec vulpinaris adulatio captiosi aucupii viscarium. Hoc ego te nolim a me tanti mercari. Neque enim ea sum quae plus verborum habeam quam officii. Sum verius tua illa Laura, cui tecum est eadem anima vicissim optata."

things in a letter that could never be said in person.⁵⁹ Furthermore, if Serina were indeed taking advantage of the distance inherent in the epistolary form to voice a serious grievance, we (and Cereta) might read his complaint as potentially more genuine than anything he may have said to his wife in person.

Cereta's alarm at this possibility becomes especially urgent when we consider the organization and diverse content of the letter as a whole. It opens with practical advice on a business disaster caused by fires on the Rialto in Venice that had burned Serina's home and shop almost to the ground: "With fear and trembling we have viewed, through your letters, the raging fires on the Rialto, and we have seen the sum total of your business all but thrown into the billowing inferno there. And so, we can hope for nothing more than that you sell off piecemeal the tattered remains of your goods and household furnishings to other merchants at the open market, in such a way that the buyer who can offer you the appropriate silver for your goods will seek you out."⁶⁰ It is perhaps surprising that two-thirds of this letter (now cited in its entirety) is dedicated, not to this catastrophic financial loss, but to addressing an allegation regarding a perceived lack of wifely love. This imbalance prompts several questions: Why does Cereta spend so much time and rhetorical effort on love, and so little on finance? Why are the Venetian fires and the couple's love paired in this letter? Finally, what is the relationship posited here between family business and marital love?

To address these last two questions first, I propose that this letter reconfirms the coexistence, and sometimes opposition, of two categories of forces at work in Renaissance marriages: on the one hand, the public-familial-economic — including aspects of marriage that have been central to, and well explored by, twentieth-century historiography — and on the other hand, the private-spousal-emotional — facets of marriage that have only recently become of primary interest to Renaissance historians.⁶¹

⁵⁹Doglio, i: "Per lettera si può dire con distacco ciò che non si oserebbe mai esprimere a voce, faccia a faccia."

⁶⁰Cereta, 1997, 91; Rabil, 136: "Ex litteris tuis et rivi alti flagrantis incendia et rerum tuarum summam camino inundanti prope coniectam non absque paventis animi horrore conspeximus. Quare optatius nobis nihil est, quam ut pannosae supellectilis tuae reliquias prae [caeteris venalitiis] mercatoribus ita divendites, ut sine [proseneta] is te emptor exquirat, qui contra merces commodum argentum opponat."

⁶¹See Brucker, 79, 108–09, on the marriage of the fifteenth-century Florentine couple Giovanni and Lusanna, a marriage apparently founded upon sexual desire and love but eventually legally undone by public and family concerns about socioeconomic status. On these aspects of marriage as historiographical approaches, see n. 19 above.

Cereta's language reflects an acute consciousness of these two facets of marriage. It is worth noting, for instance, her shift from the first person plural in her discussion of Serina's public business affairs to the first person singular in her response to his private accusation that she does not love him enough. As an apparently active letter-writer on behalf of other members of her family, Cereta may be giving Serina advice from herself as well as from, for instance, her father. On the other hand, she may be employing the first person plural in order to claim greater authority than that of a woman stepping into the public realm of her husband's business.⁶² In any case, the move from plural to singular highlights the more public nature of family business and the more private nature of spousal love: the letter thus sets up, at the most basic grammatical level, a series of binaries that reflect the complex, twofold nature of Renaissance marriage.

If the public and private, familial and spousal, economic and emotional all contribute to the stability of Cereta's marriage, what, then, can be said about the prominence of love as the second half of the marital equation in this epistle? Cereta's direct, partner-like tone at the outset of her letter is reminiscent of the letters written by the Florentine widow Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, who lavishly furnishes her sons with practical and forceful suggestions regarding the family's financial affairs.⁶³ Like Macinghi Strozzi, Cereta evidently feels capable of giving business advice to men, neither avoiding the issue of finance nor restraining herself from meddling overmuch in her husband's public affairs. Instead, we might read her emphasis on love as a desperate effort to mitigate the damage to her marriage caused both by the fires on the Rialto, a public catastrophe and a *fait accompli*, and by Serina's accusation, a private catastrophe yet to happen and thus still possible to forestall. By bringing together the frightful language of the Venetian disaster — the fear and horror of the raging fires — with Serina's serious charge against his wife, Cereta warns of the fragility of a loveless marriage. In contrast with the hot fires on the Rialto, Serina's allegation paints their marriage as cold. Simultaneously, Cereta's letter acknowledges the possibility that the fires that devastated the economic facet of their relationship could, along with Serina's perception of her lack

⁶²The use by women of external (male) authority and of formal authoritative language, such as the first person plural, in making difficult requests of an equal and in writing demanding letters to a superior is not unique to Cereta. I thank Deanna Shemek for drawing my attention to this tactic in her unpublished analysis of the letters of Isabella d'Este.

⁶³See Macinghi Strozzi, 1987, for the most recent edition of her letters; see also Macinghi Strozzi, 1997, for a selection of translated letters. For an analysis of the letters in the historical context of Florence and the Strozzi family, see Crabb, 2000.

of love, threaten to spread, burning down their emotional bond with equally destructive flames and leaving the entire marriage in “tattered remains.” With the couple’s financial situation already in ruins, however, the letter also has the potential to salvage their marital bond by attesting in detail to Cereta’s ample, genuine love. Cereta may have been resigned to their substantial economic losses, but her lengthy defense of her love for Serina reveals an unwillingness either to allow both facets of her marriage to disintegrate or to accept a marriage in which her love is accused of being deceitful, false, or conventional.

Cereta is thus particularly concerned that Serina is not using the appropriate “measures” for her love of him.⁶⁴ In a letter written almost two years later, she derides at length the shameful “irreverence” of “certain women who redden their milk-white cheeks with purple dye, and who use their furtive little eyes and laughing mouths to pierce the hearts, already poisoned, of those who gaze on them.”⁶⁵ This later invective recalls her words to Serina, who is chastised for trying to “reassure [her] with those trivial little compliments” — an indication, she assumes, that she should “comb [her] hair in a stylish fashion,” “feign adoring looks with a painted face,” and “flutter [her] eyelashes” at her husband upon his return. She also dismisses any measure of love by “the insincere flattery of well-worn phrases” as insufficient proof of true feeling, claiming that the fakery of women with neither means nor virtue “is the adulation of a fox and the birdlime of deceitful birdhunting.” In the Zecchi letter, Cereta refers to women as both submissive little dogs (*catellos*) and small trained birds (*passerculis*); here, in contrast, men become hunted wild birds. By comparing this passage with the description of animal-women in Cereta’s letter to Zecchi, it becomes clear that men and women have in fact switched roles: turning from metaphors of domestic pets to images of wild animals and of the hunt, Cereta calls up images of women as canny foxes and trickster hunters, capable of disrupting

⁶⁴Cereta, 1997, 91 (letter 22).

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 85 (letter 20); Cereta, 1640, 69 (letter 31): “Pudet irreverentiae quarundam lacteas genas ostro rubentium, quae furtivis ocellis et ridentibus buccis venenata intuentium corda transverberant” (letter to Agostino Emilio, dated 12 February 1487). Cereta, 1997, 82–83, considers this letter unique among Cereta’s epistles. Beginning with words that mourn Serina’s death, the letter continues with an invective against frivolous women that strongly echoes the writings of other Quattrocento humanists on women’s great, but entirely unnecessary, desire for beautiful things. As in her letter to Zecchi, however, Cereta turns her sharp tongue against wealthy men as well, whom she blames, at least in large part, for inappropriate female behavior. If women are to correct themselves, Cereta argues in conclusion, they need the guidance of men. In other words, as Robin notes in *ibid.*, 83, “the effort will have to be a joint one and the responsibility will have to be shared by both sexes.”

the order of the hunt as the fox that escapes the hunter, or as the hunter that uses base trickery instead of noble skills. Women thus become simultaneously hunted and hunter, in either case fully capable of turning each role, through manipulation and deceit, to their own advantage.

Cereta had already employed a similar hunter-prey metaphor in her first letter to Serina: “And although I might boast that I have received whatever learning I have from you for the sake of your honor, still I won’t offer further epistolary flattery in place of an excuse in any hope that there could be impunity for one who has committed an offense: for the hunter of false friendships uses flattery to set up her nets.”⁶⁶ This is the only place in her letters where Cereta explicitly links the spousal relationship with any kind of friendship. Even though she appears to be reciting a common formula, it is noteworthy that the term *amicitia* resonates with an element that is decidedly lacking in the conjugal bond explored in her letters to Serina. What Cereta hunts, in other words, is not a “false friendship,” attested to by “well-worn phrases” or womanly “games,” or achieved through the trickery of either prey or hunter, but a true friendship proven by innocence, open communication, and dutiful acts of loyalty.

That Cereta seeks something other than the false friendship brought about by flattery and well-worn phrases is indicated most strongly by the last lines of her letter. As Stanley Chojnacki has shown, the kinds of vernacular epithets employed to describe a beloved wife in Quattrocento Venetian wills were simple, oft-repeated formulas: “my dearest wife,” “my dear and beloved consort,” and “my most beloved consort.”⁶⁷ The terseness of Latin and the formal nature of the humanist epistle, in combination with Cereta’s addressing her husband — who, as a man, deserved a more formal address than the wives about whom Chojnacki writes — indicates that she would likely have had a plethora of choices had she wanted to employ a well-worn phrase to end her letter. Seeking to remove any remaining doubts Serina may still have had, however, Cereta refuses outright to “buy” his goodwill by means of flattery, convention, or trickery. Instead, she offers closing words that draw upon the ancient and biblical tradition of the soulmate, but are nonetheless poignantly original: “I am truly your Laura,” she writes, “whose soul is the same one you in turn had hoped for.”

⁶⁶Cereta, 1997, 88; Cereta, 1640, 23–24: “A quo quamquam pro honore tuo quidquid habeo doctrinae suscepisse me gloriari, ad haec tamen pro aliqua excusatione epistolaria blandimenta non dederim ne forte impunitatis spes ulla possit esse peccanti. Semper enim blandimentorum auceps fallendae amicitiae retia distendit.”

⁶⁷Chojnacki, 162 (“The Power of Love: Wives and Husbands”): “mia molier charissima”; “mia chara e dileta chonsorte”; “mia dilectissima consorte.”

An echo of this exchange of souls occurs in Cereta's last letter to her husband on 17 July 1486, which, if Rabil's date estimate is correct, is almost a year later and precedes Serina's premature death by only a few weeks. It is not without irony that this last letter to Serina is a consolatory epistle to a bereaved husband on the death of his brother.⁶⁸ In her letter, Cereta makes her most straightforward, conventional statement about marriage. After asking a series of questions of Serina, all of which encourage him to think more rationally and more spiritually about his brother's death, she writes: "I myself would like you, and I do beg you now because it is time, to return to your former self, since you have a greater duty towards me than you do towards the dead: for a man and his wife must so mutually love one another that they will not turn aside from that love at any time. Get a hold of yourself, then, and control this weeping of yours that has affected you so bitterly and harshly, lest you seem either to be at war with yourself, or, by the Julian law, to have launched a campaign against the gods who steal men's souls. You ought to remember that even if the fates were to give you to Nicolai, you would still be far more precious to me than to him, since we are now, and always will be, two souls belonging to a single being."⁶⁹ In this passage, Cereta recalls the importance of duty, which she highlighted in the letter of 13 August 1485 as more important for conjugal love than either words or false attempts to beguile a husband — or a friend. In this case, however, it is Serina who owes duty to her.

Cereta's notion that reciprocal duty is something required by marriage repeats the language of Quattrocento preachers and sacred authors, including Bernardino and Cherubino, the latter of whom argues that the three things husband and wife must render each other are *cordiale dilezione* (heartfelt pleasure or love), *individuale abitazione* (cohabitation), and *del debito conjugale e matrimoniale pacifica reddizione* (appropriate payment of the conjugal debt).⁷⁰ Cereta's next words — "for a man and his wife must so mutually love one another that they will not turn aside from that love at any time" — are also highly reminiscent of standard sacred and secular rhetoric

⁶⁸On the form and content of the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance consolatory epistle, see McClure.

⁶⁹Cereta, 1997, 92 (letter 24); Cereta, 1640, 21–22 (letter 6): "Velim ipsa iam atque oro quia tempus est ut restituas te tibi, qui maiore officio obstringeris mihi quam mortuo. Vir enim atque uxor eatenus mutuo se amant ut nullo aevo ab amore declinent. Erue igitur te tandem his fletibus quibus tam acerbe tam acriter tangeris, ne aut indicere bellum tibi aut lege Julia in deos, animarum fures repetundarum agere videaris. Reminisci debes quod etiam si Nicolao te fata donarent esses tamen carior multo mihi, quam illi velut qui iam sumus erimusque semper unius animae duo."

⁷⁰Cherubino, 27.

on marriage in the Quattrocento. As Bernardino writes near the beginning of his Sienese sermon on conjugal love: “We have to talk this morning of the pleasure and love that the husband has to have for his wife and that the wife must have for her husband. Oh how much they must love each other together from the heart!”⁷¹ Alberti’s language on the strength of marital love is similar as well: “The love between wife and husband may be considered very great.”⁷²

Cereta’s final written words to her husband also repeat what seems to have been a commonplace in Quattrocento discourse on marriage: that she and Serina “are now, and always will be, two souls belonging to a single being.” While Cereta here employs the union of souls to highlight the unique bond between spouses, the notion of two souls in one applies not only to marriage: it can also represent the coming together of two souls joined by true friendship. The biblical commonplace of husband and wife as two souls in one flesh is repeated several times in the New Testament after its initial appearance at Genesis 2:24.⁷³ In his brief summary of ancient theoretical wisdom on friendship in book 4 of *I libri della famiglia*, Alberti links the notion of two souls in one, not only to marriage, but also to Aristotelian friendship.⁷⁴ Given Cereta’s awareness of recent and ancient writing on friendship — a topos that, as we shall see, she spends some time exploring — her use of the same two-in-one ideal elaborated in sacred and secular Quattrocento writing on matrimony raises the question of what, if anything, friendship has to do with marriage in the context of Cereta’s letters.

Cereta makes two things clear in her four letters to Serina: first, that her marriage does not live up to her expectations in a variety of ways, and second, that she has specific ideas about a kind of marriage different both from the one described in her letter to Zecchi and from her own marriage. Each letter addressed to Serina deals with the reality and the ideal of marriage by exploring a troubled conjugal relationship. In her first letter, Cereta invokes honor, silence, and neglect, the dangers of flattery, and her desire for her husband to be present. In her second letter, she addresses the problems of communication, of balancing speech and silence, and of the

⁷¹Bernardino, 538 (*Predica* 19, lines 2–3): “Noi aviamo a parlare stamane della dilezione e amore che die avere il marito a la sua donna, e la donna al suo marito. Oh quanto si debbano amare insieme cordialmente!” Author’s translation.

⁷²Alberti, 93–94: “Puossi l’amor tra moglie e marito riputar grandissimo.” Author’s translation.

⁷³See Ephesians 5:31; Mark 10:8; 1 Corinthians 6:16.

⁷⁴Alberti, 301.

marital “unsteadiness” caused by Serina’s blame and her own lack of freedom.⁷⁵ In her third letter she takes on the role of practical advisor, emphasizes the importance of love, loyalty, and duty, and once again stresses the triple threat of flattery, convention, and falseness to marriage. Finally, in her fourth letter she demonstrates her skill as both humanist and wife through the act of consolation, citing love and the biblical-humanist commonplace of two souls in one as reasons for an end to Serina’s grief.

Overall, Cereta’s letters to Serina sketch the hope for an alternative kind of marriage that is based on reciprocal honor, respect, and love; honesty, rather than false flattery; and partnership, in which a wife may guide a husband just as a husband surely guides a wife, both in business and personal affairs. If we read Cereta’s letters to Serina in the context of her other work and in the context of Quattrocento writing on marriage and friendship, it is apparent that what Cereta proposes as an alternative, both to the horrific marriage described in her letter to Zecchi and to the unsteady marriage depicted in her letters to Serina, is marriage as a kind of friendship.

5. LETTERS ON FRIENDSHIP, LETTERS AS FRIENDSHIP

Cereta defines true friendship only once, in a letter to a female friend, Santa Pelegrina, dated 26 February 1486: “Those men who have written about friendship have one thought: they see it as a bond that is both extraordinary and by law itself lifelong, since it springs from the very font of honor.”⁷⁶ Though this is not, by her own admission, Cereta’s own definition, she employs it as the basis of her argument, to which other attributes of friendship, including *mutuae charitatis* (mutual love) and candid conversation, are appended over the course of the letter. Her closing words to Santa Pelegrina are a case in point: “I am so concerned about you that nothing is more precious to me than my being loved in return by you, who are the most beloved of friends. . . . After all, which of us would inflict a punishment on the other, when she might not know the other’s heart equally, and when there could be a mutual exchange between pure minds that are inextricably connected in every way?”⁷⁷ According to this passage,

⁷⁵Cereta, 1997, 90 (letter 22).

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 136–37 (letter 39); Cereta, 1640, 105 (letter 47): “Eorum qui de amicitia scripsere una sententia est: illam, quoniam e fonte honestatis emergat, et praecipuam esse et ipso iure perpetuam.”

⁷⁷Cereta, 1997, 138; Cereta, 1640, 107: “Nimirum ego tantum tui studeo ut precibilibus nihil mihi sit quam a te amatissima amicarum redamari. . . . Quae enim nostrum altera alterae poenam infligat, quam pariter cor utrunque non sentiat? Quum mutuuum liberalis scientiae commercium sit inter ingenuos animos inseparabiliter omnino connexum?”

female friendships require love both given and received, intimate knowledge of the friend's heart, and honest intellectual exchange. In a subtly altered restatement of the two-souls-in-one topos that appears, as we have seen, in two of her letters to Serina, Cereta also reminds her readers that friends should experience their souls as inseparable rather than as distinct. As Robin notes, by employing standard definitions and traditional vocabulary in her letter to Santa Pelegrina, Cereta "shows her mastery of the genre of the humanist *amicitia* (friendship/patronage) letter. Her vocabulary is flawless: friendship, honor, law, enduring ties, utility — all the right images are there."⁷⁸

Though conventional in many ways, Cereta's language is nevertheless remarkable for two reasons: first, because she explores ideal humanist *amicitia*, traditionally defined as friendship between men, in a letter to a female friend about the bond between the rational souls and intellectual minds of two women; second, because her discussion of true female friendship bears a striking resemblance to the qualities lacking in her relationship with Serina. Cereta's fragile relations with Santa Pelegrina and her thorough understanding of ideal humanist *amicitia* both resonate with her desired friendship with Serina: we might read them, therefore, as the ideal standards against which Cereta measures her unsteady marriage. Rather than defining friendship as an exclusively male bond, Cereta seems to suggest that ideal friendship can be enjoyed by, and should be encouraged among, women and spouses as well.

Friendships can go wrong, however. As her letters to Serina indicate, Cereta is particularly concerned with flattery and deception as signs of false friendship in the context of marriage: she sees neither conjugal love nor true friendship as commodities to be bought with flattery or gifts. In a passage highly reminiscent of her words to Serina on 13 August 1485, Cereta asks Santa Pelegrina, an equally unsteady friend, "Am I to believe that you think that the divine law of friendship is about the exchange of flattery and gifts? What did you really think you would achieve with so long a silence, though not one on my part? Still, if I can be accepted as an arbiter in this situation, I would refuse both flattery and gifts, because both are false tokens, since virtue can neither be counterfeited nor bought. What is more, it is close to impossible to divert virtue from its course."⁷⁹ These warnings against false

⁷⁸Cereta, 1997, 137, n. 54.

⁷⁹Ibid., 137; Cereta, 1640, 106: "Num credam existimes in blanditiis aut muneribus numen amicitiae consistere? An quid forte putasti impetraturam te tanto silentio, quod in manu non esset mea? Ast ego, si iudex asciscar, renuerim alterutrum quia falsum, neque enim aut fingitur virtus aut mercatur; neque circa impossibile potest illa versari."

friendship raise a question: if base attempts to form interpersonal relations lead only to fraught marital relations or to virtueless friendships, how does one develop a good friendship or a steady marriage?

Along with the many other traits Cereta attributes to good marriages and excellent friendships, she insists, first and foremost, that both relationships be maintained by honest, open, and frequent communication. Through letter-writing, she maintains, friends and spouses can come to a fuller mutual understanding and to a greater reciprocal love. Indeed, if letters are, to use John Najemy's apt phrase, the Proteus of Renaissance genres — uniquely situated at the intersection of the public and the private, of the fictional and the historical — they have also traditionally been tied up with one specific kind of human bond, namely friendship.⁸⁰ Quoting Klaus Thraede, Giles Constable calls the letter “the result . . . of the coordination of friendship, which created a desire to bridge the gap between two people, and of writing, which provided the means to do so.”⁸¹ In the act of writing a letter, then, one may seek to bring an absent friend closer in the hopes of recreating the intimacy of physical presence and conversation. As noted above, just as letter-writing may somewhat assuage the pain of separated friends by bridging a physical or temporal gap, the distance inherent in an epistolary exchange has an intimacy all its own: removed from the impetuosity of face-to-face conversation, the letter may enable a closeness between writer and reader unachievable by friends and spouses speaking directly to each other.⁸²

A series of letters that Cereta wrote to her father's friends on his behalf shows that for her the intimacy, reciprocity, and mutuality necessary for friendship was best achieved through epistolary exchange. For instance, Cereta berates the physician Felicio Tadino, a one-time friend of her father, for having “shaken off [his] humanity, [as if he] could establish a reputation

⁸⁰Najemy, 57. Cicero's letters are, of course, the archetypal example of the coincidence of friendship and letter-writing. Pennacini, 13, states that the Ciceronian epistle repeats “the familiarity and straightforwardness typical of communication (conversation or dialogue) among friends: that familiarity that permits friends to write to each other, jokingly and seriously, concerning things to laugh about and concerning serious matters.” Petrarch's letters, so heavily influenced by those of Cicero, are a primary locus for the intersection of letter-writing and friendship in late medieval Italy: as noted above, Petrarch's *Rerum familiarum libri* served as a model of the epistolary genre for humanists of the later Trecento, Quattrocento, and Cinquecento, and would certainly have been known to Cereta.

⁸¹Constable, 14.

⁸²I am indebted here to Kathy Eden for her thoughts on epistolary intimacy presented at a talk entitled “The Invention of Intimacy in the Early Modern Period” at the University of California, Berkeley in the Department of Comparative Literature on 12 April 2007.

for [him]self by showing contempt for a friend,” namely Silvestro Cereto.⁸³ Cereta writes that her father’s friendship with Tadino and others, including the grammarian Bonifacio Bembo, had been cemented by specific acts of loyalty: finding a good lawyer for Bembo, and “assuag[ing] the raging anger of the Santa Chiarians and sooth[ing] their harsh opinions with humble orations” for Tadino.⁸⁴ Yet these physical and social manifestations of friendship provoke nothing but silence.⁸⁵ This refusal to respond as a friend should is thus Cereta’s impetus for an epistolary chastisement of her father’s old friend.

At the beginning of her letter to Tadino, Cereta claims that it is easy to trace his ancestry back to “rugged stones”: he has, she accuses, a character “tougher than iron or oak.” His “hardness” is exemplified specifically by “the stony and obstinate silence with which you [Tadino] abuse a friend [Cereto] who, of all your friends, misses you more and is more loyal than any other.”⁸⁶ The only appropriate compensation for this sin of silence, she suggests, is that Tadino reply to her father’s frequent attempts at communication with letters of his own, balancing Cereto’s friendly loquaciousness with words, letters, or writing of a similar kind.⁸⁷ A few months later, Cereta demanded something similar of Santa Pelegrina: in a reversal from her first letter to Serina, in which Cereta herself is accused of silence and neglect, she chastises her female friend for maintaining too long a silence, suggesting that the only remedy for this error is a long and elaborate letter.⁸⁸

Cereta’s linking of epistolary exchange to the success of friendship and marriage, which is presented in her letters as a similar kind of bond, is unsurprising, since letter-writing had been closely associated with *amicitia* since the time of Cicero. Nonetheless, the friendship-marriage-letter triptych constructed in her epistles simultaneously engages a threefold critique of humanistic ideals and social realities. First, as we have seen, Cereta’s

⁸³Cereta, 1997, 59 (letter 13); Rabil, 141: “[Q]uasi gloriae tuae repositionem in amici contemptu fundaveris humanitatem exutus.”

⁸⁴Cereta, 1997, 59; Rabil, 141: “[P]recariis [oratus] suis Clarensum vel ignescentis iras ab dura totiens opinione pacavit.”

⁸⁵Cereta, 1997, 58 (letter 12): “Such acts . . . are the marks of friendship” (“haec vestigia sunt amicitie”).

⁸⁶Ibid., 58–59; Rabil, 141: “Ibi postero tibi avos atque avos ex scabris credo cotibus natos natura concessit, a quibus non degeneras quercu ferroque rigidior. . . . Lignent mihi perspicue potius ex illa adamantina silentii obstinatione, qua tam duriter abuteris in talem amicam, amicis omnibus desiderio tibi fidissimum.”

⁸⁷Cereta, 1997, 59.

⁸⁸Ibid., 137.

definition of friendship is inclusive: rather than identify *amicitia* with male relationships alone, she positions true friendship in the context of female-female *amicitia* and shows false friendship to be complicit in fraught and failing marriages. This analysis of friendship enacts a second criticism, this time of marriage itself. Rather than accept the role thrust upon her by the distopic marriage portrayed in her letter to Zecchi, Cereta critiques the social institution of marriage by bringing friendship into the picture as the basis for an alternative kind of marriage.

Third and finally, her emphasis on a broader definition of friendship and her implicit (self-) critique of the way in which traditional marriage conventions attempt to strictly govern spousal roles point to Cereta's keen reappraisal of the humanist letter-writing project. As has been noted, Cereta's epistolary production is deeply engaged in a thorough rewriting of conventional oppositions: the public and private, the intellectual and personal, the philosophical and emotional. By focusing on marriage and friendship, not in terms of abstract principles, but in the context of instantiated, if often fractured, human relations, Cereta's epistolary production not only breaks down traditional binaries, but it also constructs a new, protofeminist framework for the serious humanistic Latin letter.

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