

A History of Women's Writing in Italy

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Letter writing, 1350–1650

In ancient Greece the invention of the epistolary genre was attributed to a woman, a queen from the East with the name of Atossa. She was the daughter of Cyrus the Great, the wife of Darius (who organised the first Imperial mail system), and the mother of Xerxes; and she also figured prominently as a character in Aeschylus's play, *The Persians*. This attribution can seem ingenuous today, for it is well established that the letter has no historical beginnings and originated with writing itself. However, it is not without significance, particularly if we bear in mind not only the feminine gender of the Greek word *epistolé*, but also the testimony of Cicero, the greatest Latin letter writer of all antiquity. He affirmed that one of the most illustrious women of the Roman Republic, Cornelia, daughter of Scipio Africanus, who conquered Hannibal at Zama, and mother of the Gracchi, was a model letter writer: 'We have read the letters of Cornelia . . . they make it plain that her sons were nursed not less by their mother's speech than at her breast' (*Brutus*, 211). Her letters to her son Caius were the first to be collected among the Romans. With the subtle aphorism, originating with Cicero, 'a letter does not blush' (*Ep.* v.12.1), Cicero implied that the letter, written *in absentia*, was especially important for a woman. It granted her emotional detachment, thus enabling her to write freely what dared not be uttered face to face. At the same time, he denies to letter writing the emotionalism, involvement in feelings and the 'right to blush' traditionally associated with the 'weaker sex'.

If Cicero drew attention to the fact that the first letters to be collected in Rome were a woman's, Ovid in the *Heroides* first established the image of the woman as letter writer. In a splendid gallery of imposing heroines telling their famous love stories, the *Heroides* offers a complete spectrum of the love experience in a 'woman's heart'. But Ovid's outstanding innovation lies in

the model of the woman who entrusts to writing, in the form of the letter, her concern about her distant loved one, the frustration of waiting, the gnawing distress of jealousy, the regret for the loss of love, the desperation of being abandoned. Penelope, Phyllis, Briseis, Phaedra, Oenone, Hypsipyle, Dido, Hermione, Dejanira, Ariadne, Canace, Medea, Laodamia, Hypermnestra, Sappho, Helen, Hero, Cydippe, in addition to making present a distant past, realise an autonomous intellectual dignity. By the very act of writing, awareness of the power of writing is linked to these heroines. The letter, then, becomes the sign of the determination and the 'modernity' of woman, a sign and a topos which remains unaltered until the nineteenth century, when it moves from poetry to the short story, to drama and the epistolary novel itself.

After Ovid, the image of the woman as letter writer is consolidated during the Middle Ages in two different ways. On the one hand, *epistolae* are written by well-educated women enclosed within monastery walls. In her letters to Abelard, Héloïse not only tells the story of an exemplary love and conversion, but also asks her former lover to guide her along the path of 'monastica perfectio', by giving his teachings and his rules to the monastery she founded, called the Paraclete because devoted to the Holy Spirit. Supported by the certainty that her 'grieving mind' can 'obey as does the hand as it writes', Héloïse shows herself ready to dedicate herself entirely to divine love. In the same century, Hildegard of Bingen, musician, philosopher and saint, one of the most enigmatic and fascinating figures of the Middle Ages, wrote letters to St Bernard, to Elizabeth of Shönau and the prelates of Magonza, revealing an original epistolary style imbued with scholastic philosophy. Her letters display a strong didactic intent, but with their own distinctive touches and particular rhythms, and they rise at times to intuitions and theorisations on the love of God, the problems of the inner life and the mission of the nun.

In addition to *epistolae* written by real women, the literary model of woman as letter writer also began to establish itself. In this regard Boccaccio's *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* (composed 1343–4) is definitive.¹ Within the fiction of the lived story, Boccaccio revives the great Ovidian topos of the self-aware woman determined to confide her experience of suffering to the letter. Fiammetta narrates 'very true things', associating her writing with the urge of a fiery and passionate love which changed her from a 'free soul' into the 'most wretched servant', an extreme example both of the happy wife caught unawares and struck down by sudden passion, and of the abandoned mistress. Fiammetta is certain not only of

the power, but also of the lasting value of her letters. Through her and the fifteenth-century figure of Lucrece in the Latin *Tale of Two Lovers* by Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini,² this genre is transmitted to the epistolography of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

*St Catherine of Siena was born at the time when the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* was gaining recognition. Although her letters, dictated between 1365 and 1380, entail a series of very intricate textual and historical problems concerning the oral nature of dictation and the interventions of scribes, they are still the first great collection of letters in the vernacular. Undoubtedly, they are one of the finest examples of Italian epistolary writing of any period, both for the perfect match of the human and spiritual message and their linguistic innovations and stylistic characteristics. Catherine of Siena's writing carried an exceptional weight and was widely read. It bore witness to an authority and importance not yet attained by any woman in Italian society, and which she claimed not only in mystical and religious spheres but also in political, social and cultural ones as well. Catherine's starting point was mysticism, but far from absorbing herself in the mystical experience and in solitary contemplation, Catherine turned her mysticism outwards in an intense and fruitful determination to spread the word in a community of the faithful, identified with the mystical body of the Church. All the letters begin with the formula 'I, Catherine, servant and slave to the servants of Jesus Christ, write in His precious blood', a formula which expresses not the inferior condition of woman but a considered choice and firm commitment to service. It confirms the intention to 'bathe' and to 'drown' in the blood of the Divine and to offer her own blood, by taking upon herself the ills of the world and transforming violence and evil.

The distinctive expressive strength of her letters combines with a complex variety of tone. St Catherine employs both the language of the Holy Scriptures and contemporary idiom. Metaphors drawn from Biblical language and the Epistles of St Paul mingle with simple expressions about domestic matters and the minutiae of daily life, mystical terminology with popular Sieneese dialect. The collection includes an address to the Pope, reminding him of the responsibilities of his office, and of the need to reform the Church and to bear himself 'in a virile manner as a virile man'. Other letters express maternal care for her disciples and townsfolk, and focus on the presentation of her inner life centred on love. Long before the impressive 1500 edition, by the scholar-printer

Aldus Manutius, containing 353 of her letters, which heralded the great century of letters and letter collections, she exerted a strong influence on epistolary writing, and continued to do so in the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

While in the fourteenth century St Catherine's letters were an exceptional phenomenon on all counts, in the fifteenth the image of woman as letter writer was no longer restricted to queens and saints, and began to figure in the literary scene of the whole peninsula, from *Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi in Florence, to Ceccarella Minutolo in Naples. Women letter-writers make their appearance not only in the secret register of strictly private family or love letters but also in an official register, the 'high' register of written Latin (see the next chapter). When the leading Florentine humanist and poet, Angelo Poliziano, met Cassandra Fedele in Venice in June 1491, he recorded his admiration for her in a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici: she was an exceptionally accomplished woman, whether in Latin or the vernacular, and beautiful as well.³

In the vernacular, the most remarkable case is undoubtedly Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, whose letters, written between 1447 and 1470, constitute the first real collection of letters by a lay woman.⁴ Macinghi Strozzi found in writing to her distant sons, who had been banished from Florence, the only possible form of family life and the only comfort in her loneliness and difficulties, intensified by the mass of problems encountered by a woman widowed young with five children to rear. The seventy-two letters which have come down to us are responses to an immediate and urgent need to communicate. They have no literary concern or aim, no character or mark of being 'public' works. They are absolutely private texts in which the very grammar belongs to the spoken word: opinions, maxims, memories, news and reports of events, sometimes with parts in ciphher or code, and decisions relating to the family and to the intimacy of the house. These letters form a secret correspondence to be seen only by the sender and receiver, according to strict instructions, repeated many times, to consign the letters to a 'trustworthy person', and to check, when they are received, that they have not been opened. Carefully kept for centuries amongst the family papers, and published at the end of the nineteenth century, these letters form a collection which reflects an internal order and measure revealing their author as participant in the cultural conditions of her time. But they also reveal an external order. Their structure, invariably articulated according to traditional rules – *salutatio*,

exordium, narratio, petitio, conclusio (greetings, opening, narrative, requests and conclusion), indicates the continuation of the rigidly codified formulae of letter writing, even in the context of a form of communication bound to secrecy, and therefore devoid of literary intentions. This structure remained unchanged over the years.

Far more than notes dictated spontaneously from the heart, the letters comprise a continuous educative process articulated in three categories: ethical-religious, economic and political. Exhortation to virtue, such as the practice of imparting good rules of conduct – the first duty of parents in relation to their children – is firmly anchored in the premise of encouraging young people in self-knowledge, so as to give a good account of themselves, and of educating them in patience, temperance, justice and honesty. Within this traditional viewpoint, broadened by the impulse of maternal love, come recommendations to her first born, Filippo, on affectionate and responsible behaviour towards his younger brother. Alessandra's words mingle with those of the Holy Scriptures, paraphrased and freely adapted. Each letter reveals an intimate familiarity with both sacred texts and vernacular sermons in the mould of St Catherine of Siena and St Bernardine. This is not the familiarity of someone who has meditated upon them with speculative intent, but of one who has found in them nourishment and models for living. Scriptural echoes linked with frequent allusions to secular literature permeate the rules about running the house, household economy, duties of hospitality, appropriate conduct with servants and procedures governing the choice of a wife.

The whole cycle, from the choice of a wife to the formation and presentation of the good mother, follows the path laid down in learned treatises. In Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi's family letters, however, we see a radical difference. For the first time, woman becomes subject rather than object. Clearly conscious of everything she describes, formulates and institutes, Macinghi Strozzi is present and active, maker of her own image. In corresponding with her sons she does not only assume awareness of herself and her condition, of her responsibilities and her competencies; she coherently imparts her advice according to an educative design analogous to that theoretically proposed by Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) in Book II of *Della famiglia* (*The Family in Renaissance Florence*) and entrusted, in Book III, to the merchant householder, Giannozzo. The paradigm is the education of the prince, seen as the exclusive task of men of letters. Macinghi Strozzi, like Giannozzo, does nothing but remind her children of everything that 'è di nicistà', that is necessary for them to do. And in so doing

she links an ethical/religious and economic education with a political one in a unified organic programme, clearly deviating from the feminine sphere by crossing over into an area distinctly marked as masculine and, in the historical context, not pertinent to women. She recounts no anecdote about the life of the city to her distant sons, but offers maxims and political memories reflecting a precise ideological position and a mature personal reflection.

After the long-desired return of her sons in 1466, there is a significant change of register. The advice now links the family with the Medicean court, countering domestic traditions with courtly rules of behaviour. Between the two poles of 'doing everything for a good end' and 'being prepared', Macinghi Strozzi's intention is always clear: to provide a private education, with no literary pretensions, but in tune with the supreme credo of the humanists, who promoted education as sign of a good upbringing, the peak of personal development and proof of excellence and dignity. These ideals are reaffirmed in the same period by the Florentine humanist who also wrote in the vernacular, Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1459), whose words are directly evoked in her letters.

Through her letter writing Strozzi achieved and broadened that gender equality which Leon Battista Alberti had given some recognition to. But Alberti limited that equality to the running of the house, postulating the superiority of man as agent/maker ('my wife', says the merchant Gianozzo, 'was certainly an excellent mother on account of her native intelligence and behaviour, but much more so because of my advice'). She was 'excellent' because her husband, like a god, instructed her both to 'seem to be, and be, very honest and happy'.⁵ As a woman who committed to paper the good teachings of a complete education, however, Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi attained equality with those who wrote to transmit ideas and to mould minds, albeit in the restricted sphere of private communication.

*Vittoria Colonna's *Litere* also share the distinction of being first in a special field. A celebrated poet who was admired by the best writers and artists of her time, Colonna was revered as 'divine', as were Petrarch, Ariosto and a little later, Tasso. Addressed to Costanza d'Avalos, duchess of Amalfi, the *Litere* appeared in Venice in 1544, in the early stage of the flowering of the epistolary genre (Pietro Aretino's acclaimed collections of letters had appeared between 1538 and 1542). In addition to the date, the long title ('Letters of the Divine Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara

to the Duchess of Amalfi, on the Contemplative Life of St Catherine and on the Active Life of St Magdalen’) clearly links the relationship between author and addressee not only with the spiritual connotation of the collection but also with the figures of the two exemplary saints, Catherine of Alexandria and Mary Magdalen, themselves emblematic of the period between the Renaissance and Counter-Reformation. The collection, which comprised three letters with neither date nor indication of place, is remarkable for a number of editorial, biographical and historical/documentary reasons. The letters are also of particular significance within the context of a deep religious and intellectual experience. These issues have been explored with reference to Colonna’s poetry (see chapter 3, by Giovanna Rabitti), but have received little attention with reference to the letters; for example, the relationship between letter writing and the expression of her inner life, or the relationship between letter writing and the search for Christian spiritual perfection, mirrored in the ‘works’ and in the imitation of the ‘thoughts’ of the two saints. Here is not the place to return to the complex editorial issues, nor to emphasise the changes in her life, mind and spirit caused by the events of the years between 1541 and 1544, with her residence in the convent of St Caterina of Viterbo, her links with Reginald Pole and the circle of the Spirituals, her return to Rome in the summer of 1544 and her subsequent seclusion in the Benedictine convent of Sant’ Anna – events well-researched by historians from the nineteenth century to the present day. But it is important to highlight one detail: this small but significant collection by Vittoria Colonna is undoubtedly the first of what is to become a genre of spiritual letters, preceding not only the massive volume of *Lettere spirituali* by Bonsignore Cacciaguerra, reprinted many times between 1563 and 1584, but also the intense *Lettere spirituali* by Angelica Paola Antonia de’ Negri, which were published in Milan in 1564, and the self-defined ‘instructive’ and ‘preceptive’ *Lettere spirituali sopra alcune feste e sacri tempi dell’ anno* (‘Spiritual letters on some feast days and holy seasons’) by Giovan Pietro Besozzi, published in 1578.

Furthermore, Colonna’s volume heralds the clearly defined series of letters composed by women. Emblematically, the *Litere* of Vittoria Colonna precede not only the *Lettere a gloria del sesso femminile* (‘Letters in praise of women’) of Lucrezia Gonzaga da Gazuolo (1552), but also the *Lettere amorose* of Celia Romana (1563), the *Lettere familiari* of *Veronica Franco, and the *Lettere*, gathered together with the poetry, of *Chiara Matraini (1595). Vittoria Colonna’s letters constituted, as did her poetry in

1538, a first, a major milestone of a printed correspondence of letters by a woman, with her own first name and surname, just forty years after that fundamental Aldine edition of the *Epistole* of St Catherine of Siena. Colonna's letters mark the eruption of the figure of woman as letter writer, woman poet and intellectual, into the official ranks of a traditionally masculine literary society, a phenomenon which Carlo Dionisotti highlighted in the development of Italian culture, along with the opening up of linguistic horizons, as characteristic of the period around 1530.⁶

In terms of style, her use of rhetorical tropes is most striking: sequences of antithesis, oxymoron, metaphor and allegory; play with amplification and repetition; and a continuous use of superlatives, drawn from that type of figurative language characteristic of the mystical tradition, but adapted to Colonna's very individual, intimate, fleeting and ineffable religious experience. Frequent quotations from or allusions to the Gospels, St Paul's Epistles, the Acts of the Apostles and lives of the saints are added to the typical modes of figurative language and to specific allusions to the letters of Catherine of Siena, a model which had a very strong influence and bearing on the epistolary writing of Colonna. By expressing in letter form 'what Christ writes in my heart', the letters are intended to transmit a need which is the structural and determining principle factor in the whole stylistic process. This original didactic element united with an aspiration towards the sublime (not only towards the desire for God, but also to the ideal of linking 'the perfections of the will with those of the intellect'), is a determining and marked feature of the exemplary and normative character of her writing.

In their outward form the three letters present a structural scheme articulated in three parts: the pure initial address, the final subscription and, between these, the spiritual nucleus. This identical tripartite structure, with its first and last part reduced to a minimum, concentrates the attention, even visually, on the central nucleus. This communicates both the edifying discourse of encouragement, in the dialogue between the 'I who write' and the 'you who read', separated by time and space (but indissolubly brought together, united, bound in the common contemplative practice) and the ways and levels of the process of ascent and revelation, of reading and illumination. The recurrent metaphors of inner vision, of the inner eye and of the table which eases hunger and thirst, document a precise understanding of the spiritual letter as an instrument and model through which to teach and to learn the 'way of perfection', the 'ladder',

the journey upwards to the union of the soul with God which is achieved through meditation on sacred texts and, within the privacy of her study, readings commented on by members of Colonna's circle at Viterbo.

The *Lettere familiari* of the poet and courtesan Veronica Franco, published in 1580 (and a complimentary copy of which was sent to Michel de Montaigne on his way to Venice), also mark a first. Again they are the first example of a collection composed by a woman, this time with the word 'familiar' included in the title, which hitherto had been used exclusively by 'illustrious authors', from Pietro Bembo to Annibale Caro. This is a book of letters, fifty to be precise, with no date, no indication of addressee, except for the first addressed to Henry III of France (thanking him for having paid her a visit in her 'humble dwelling', bearing with him a portrait of Veronica), but also doubling up as a supporting feature for two celebratory sonnets. The relationship *à deux*, between writer and addressee, becomes triangular: the writer engages both with the private addressee of the letter and then with the reading public, present and future. In the process, every reference to the first addressee is omitted, and every element of possible identification is carefully removed, cancelled and rendered vain by formulae like 'signor H', 'signor A', 'signor N'. With no names and places, and no temporal and spatial references, Franco's collection aims to put forward, not only an exemplary anthology and a new epistolary model, but also her own individual image of a woman writing letters: letters of introduction; thank-you letters; letters of information, supplication, recommendation and invitation; letters of blame as well as good cheer; model love letters and letters discussing a particular issue. All of them present an image of a woman who deliberately uses the letter to exercise what she sees as 'l'ufficio di parole', the function and duty of words themselves.

It is in this term *ufficio* that we find the key to Veronica Franco's letter writing. It surfaces regularly, and particularly in an instructional letter sent to a mother to dissuade her from the 'evil intention' of planning to ruin her daughter by advising her to become a 'woman of the world'. The fact that this letter is the most extended of the whole collection, and placed almost exactly at the centre, exemplifies best this notion of 'the duty of the written word'. The letter assumes an emblematic character with its interweavings of admonishments, exhortations and warnings typical of educational treatises. Exercising her 'duty of the written word', Veronica Franco assumes, with full ideological and rhetorical awareness,

a traditionally male role, employed for millennia by men in their genealogical, historical and cultural prerogative of educator and teacher. The letter – a ‘familiar’ one in the humanistic sense of ‘care of the family’, of ‘civic obligation’, of reminding parents of their responsibilities towards their children – transcends the character of private communication. It becomes a document and model not only of epistolary writing in general, but (to adapt Cicero’s formulation) of that ‘proper role and function of the letter’ to instruct the person addressed, and to ensure that they become aware of things which on their own they would not know.

If by exercising this ‘duty of the written word’ women express their intellectual autonomy and attain equal dignity with men, by writing to instruct, women demolish the barrier of submission founded on the age-old ban forbidding women to teach. This ban was sanctioned by the Apostle Paul in his Epistles (II Timothy, 2. 11–15; I Corinthians, 14. 34), and became part of the Statutes of the early Church, of the laws of Gratian, and of social custom. Veronica Franco knew how to exercise an activity as a man would have exercised it, an exercise which afforded her equal dignity in the difference, both repeated and emphasised, of her nature and condition. For Franco, moreover, instruction is not directed only at women; she turns to men as well, as she weaves into her increasingly impressive pattern of her image of herself as a woman writing, not only poems and letters but compositions which reach the heights of poetry. From the first to the last piece of the collection, Franco gradually crystallises her idea of letter as a ‘duty of the written word’ and her sense of the permanence of her art form, with the image of woman as letter writer.

The picture of woman as letter writer is further developed by *Isabella Andreini. As a famous actress, well known on both the Italian and French stage, a star who not only reaped success but who, at the age of sixteen, had already indelibly linked her name to the theatre in her role of the ‘first female lover’ in the *Gelosi* company, Isabella appears as a fully realised individual both in her professional and her personal life as woman, wife and mother. With her husband Francesco, an actor celebrated for his role of Captain Spavento, they formed an impressive couple, both on the stage and in their domestic reality of a family abounding in fame and children. She makes clear-sighted plans with her husband for the up-bringing of their children, and carefully watches over their joint ascent to the peak of their acting career. All this is not enough, however. Isabella has pronounced cultural interests, not only

relating to reading but also to literary writing. With complete self-awareness, she confirms the image of herself in the introductory poem to her *Rime* as a woman who writes ‘a good thousand sheets in a variety of styles’; and composes not only *La Mirtilla* (1588), a pastoral fable in drama, but a variety of genres, from poetry to letters to dramatic dialogues. Beyond her total but ephemeral fascination with the stage, beyond the magic of gesture and voice, beyond the ever-new ‘captivation’ of acting, Isabella wants to live on, not just in the eyes and impassioned memory of all those who applauded her on the stage – princes, cardinals and poets – but through writing, through the very pages of her compositions.

In this regard, her *Lettere* are extremely revealing. Printed in Venice in 1607, three years after her death and edited by her husband (a fact which involves still unsolved problems concerning his possible interventions, additions and modifications), they are preceded by an important dedication to Charles Emanuel I of Savoy. After defining herself ‘citizen of the world’ who is marked by an extraordinary ‘desire to know’, Isabella Andreini gives an account of the phases of her writing career: *La Mirtilla*, the poems, the pressing need to ‘snatch time’ from her work ‘to give to the light of day’ a collection of her letters, the desire to distinguish herself from the majority of women only interested in ‘the needle, the distaff and the wool-winder’, but, above all, to gain through writing ‘if not everlasting life, at least a very long one’. The collection comprises 151 letters, unnumbered, without date or indication of place, or even, in the majority of cases, of the addressee. All lack references to biographical detail and day-to-day events, with the exception of one letter, expressing deep feeling on the death of Torquato Tasso ‘who will never die because oblivion will never have power over him’.

Each letter is nevertheless distinguished by a summary which indicates its theme. Mentioned are debates concerning love on the one hand and moral and social issues on the other. In the first category she considers beauty, falling in love, the ineffable quality of love, fear, pain, illusion, disillusion, jealousy, suspicions, unfaithfulness, and constancy; in the second, honour, virtue, marriage and living at court. Just as on the stage, ‘now woman and now / man I created, representing in various style / what nature and art required’, so in her letters, Andreini impersonates feminine and masculine roles with equal ease, achieving a work of instruction through a catalogue of teachings on how to choose a lover, on how to keep and increase love, and through the revaluation, in the area of love, of the

primary role of woman. It is her duty to safeguard honour and virtue, which will ensure life after death and gain her immortal fame.

Thus at the turn of the sixteenth century, aspirations of enduring life link the configuration of the image of woman as letter writer with the commitment of the woman who entrusts to the written page her vision, her life's work and her engagement with culture.

NOTES

1. In C. Segre (ed.), *Opere di Giovanni Boccaccio* (Milan, 1963); *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*, trans. and ed. M. Causa-Steidler and T. Mauch (Chicago, 1990).
2. 'Historia duobus amantibus', Latin and facing Italian in M. L. Doglio, *L'exemplum nella novella latina del '400* (Turin, 1975).
3. For the Italian text of this letter, see Angelo Poliziano, *Prose volgari inedite, poesie latine e greche edite e inedite*, ed. I. Del Lungo (Florence, 1867), pp. 78–82.
4. For the letters of Macinghi Strozzi, Colonna and Franco, see M. L. Doglio, *Lettera e donna. Scrittura epistolare al femminile tra Quattro e Cinquecento* (Rome, 1993).
5. Leon Battista Alberti, *I Libri della Famiglia*, in *Opere volgari*, ed. C. Grayson, 3 vols. (Bari, 1960–73), vol. I, pp. 221, 222, 218, 233. *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, trans. R. Watkins (Columbia, SC, 1969); also trans. by G. Guarino as, *The Albertis of Florence: L. B. Alberti's 'Della Famiglia'* (Lewisburg, NJ, 1971).
6. Carlo Dionisotti, *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin, 1967), pp. 191–4.