

WRITING GENDER  
IN WOMEN'S LETTER COLLECTIONS  
OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

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MEREDITH K. RAY

Writing Gender  
in Women's Letter Collections  
of the Italian Renaissance

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*For my grandmother, Mary Gertrude Benante Wade, 1910–2008*

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# **PART ONE**

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## **The Vernacular Letter in Context**

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# Introduction: Reading the *Lettera familiare*

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## I

In a letter published in her 1552 *epistolario*, Lucrezia Gonzaga da Gazuolo offers an apt definition of the *lettera familiare*, or personal letter, when she explains to Girolamo Parabosco that she enjoys his letters because they seem so natural: ‘... non sono vestite d’arte, né gonfiate di lusinghevole o vano studio, ma puramente favellano ...’ (‘they are not clothed in artifice, nor puffed up from excessive revision, but rather speak plainly ...’).<sup>1</sup> Gonzaga’s *epistolario* was printed at the height of the vernacular letter’s popularity in Italy, and her comments to Parabosco reflect the common notion of what the vernacular, ‘familiar’ letter should be: a natural and spontaneous composition, rather than a studied, formal piece of writing.<sup>2</sup> The effect of spontaneity or artlessness – akin to what Castiglione termed *sprezzatura* – was much appreciated in the epistolary genre and lauded by its many theorists, but in reality published letters were not unmediated by literary artifice.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Parabosco’s most successful published letters were those he wrote under a woman’s name, while the authorship of Gonzaga’s own letters has been questioned by critics who would identify the *poligrafo* Ortensio Lando as their composer, and her book derives part of its content from a repertory text. The familiar letters of the Venetian writer and courtesan Veronica Franco pay homage to classical models, and those of the Benedictine nun Arcangela Tarabotti are revised at points from earlier manuscript versions. Pietro Bembo famously reworked his vernacular letters for years (and died before he could see them published); other humanist letter writers were similarly obsessive revisers.<sup>4</sup> Self-fashioning, self-censorship, revision, masquerade – all are common to the epistolary genre.

The familiar letterbook, a genre that flourished in Italy from the age of Petrarch to that of Marino, is a work of literary construction, one in which ostensibly personal correspondence is used to produce a carefully crafted epistolary self-representation. Under the guise of a 'private' communication between writer and addressee, the individual letters in a published *epistolario* provide readers with fragmentary sketches from which to reconstruct an image of the writer. When considered together, these fragments form the writer's public self. Following the enormous success of Pietro Aretino's first volume of letters in 1538, dozens of writers, grasping the genre's potential as both a commercial and literary endeavour, rushed to publish their correspondence, using it as a forum for self-representation, self-promotion, and even dissent.<sup>5</sup> Among this virtual flood of letter writers were a number of women, who brought to the genre a wide range of female experience, from discussions of marriage, motherhood, sexuality, and virtue to reflections on the challenges of being a woman writer. So marked was the audience for women's epistolary texts that even some male writers published letters under women's names. Such texts capitalized on the convergence of a broader cultural interest in defining social and gender roles (as evidenced, for example, in comportment literature or the *querelle des femmes*, or debate over women) with the conviction that letter-writing was, unlike other literary genres, an innately feminine form. This study focuses on epistolary representations of women, both authentic (written by women) and impersonated (male-authored), the dynamics and goals of which have never been fully examined and compared in the early modern Italian context. I argue that all such collections were a studied performance of pervasive ideas about gender as well as genre, a form of self-fashioning that variously reflected, manipulated, and subverted cultural and literary conventions regarding femininity and masculinity.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the women who wrote and published letters in early modern Italy are familiar to us through their other literary works. The courtesan Veronica Franco, for example, was also the author of a book of verse, as was the *petrarchista* Chiara Matraini. The *commedia dell'arte* actress Isabella Andreini was a poet and the author of a pastoral play, *La mirtilla*, as well as a book of letters; the Roman *virtuosa* Margherita Costa, who published a volume of *Lettere amorose*, was even more prolific. Suor Arcangela Tarabotti of Venice penned several protofeminist texts in addition to her *Lettere familiari e di complimento*. Still others, such as Lucrezia Gonzaga (whose Fratta palazzo served as a centre for literary gatherings), are

known to us for their status as cultural figures. While the epistolary personae adopted by these women differ, all of these writers made an important contribution to the burgeoning epistolary genre by expanding its parameters to include the female voice.

Although these women were among the first to publish vernacular letter collections after Aretino, they were not the first to write letters for a public audience. The letters of Catherine of Siena, for example, a blend of spiritual and political counsel, were among the first printed books in Italy and indeed have been called ‘the first great collection of letters in the vernacular.’<sup>7</sup> The fifteenth-century writers Isotta Nogarola, Laura Cereta, and Cassandra Fedele each made brilliant use of the genre in its pre-Aretinian, humanist incarnation, prefiguring in many ways the gendered self-portraiture of later women epistolarians.<sup>8</sup> Olimpia Morata of Ferrara wrote poems, dialogues and letters in Greek and Latin, published posthumously in her *Opera omnia*. Ceccarella, or Francesca Minutolo, enjoyed a measure of fame for her eclectic collection of letters that circulated in manuscript form around 1470.<sup>9</sup> In the first half of the sixteenth century, women contributed to many facets of the epistolary genre, producing not just familiar letters, but love letters, letters on religious themes, and didactic letters. The renowned poet Vittoria Colonna, for example, published a small but significant collection of spiritual letters in 1544. Letters by another important poet, Veronica Gambara, are included in several sixteenth-century anthologies and were finally collected and published in a single volume in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, women – like men – engaged regularly in private correspondence that was not destined for publication, whether for personal or family business. Although it is beyond the scope of the present study to examine women’s unpublished correspondence – that rich territory of actually exchanged letters intended only for a particular, specified reader, a subject worthy of a book in itself – it would be remiss not to recall the trove of material found in the letters exchanged between Vittoria Colonna and Michelangelo, for example, or Maria Savorgnan and Pietro Bembo, not to mention the family history laid out in the letters of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi to her exiled sons.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the letters of Suor Maria Celeste to her father, Galileo, paint an absorbing picture of seventeenth-century convent life, while also allowing us to see Galileo the scientist through the prism of his role as a father.<sup>12</sup> The archives are filled with countless such documents, most exchanged among far less well-known figures: letters penned by mothers, daughters, wives, and

nuns to friends, relatives, husbands and patrons – they remain only to be discovered. Indeed, much of the important current work on women's letter-writing focuses on unpublished documents of this sort, which present a different set of interpretative and historical problems than their published counterparts.<sup>13</sup>

Published letter collections, however, take on characteristics beyond those found in correspondence not destined for so wide and so public a viewing.<sup>14</sup> As literary texts that aspired to the appearance of unmediated personal exchanges – yet were often revised, censored, or completely fabricated – collections of familiar letters were constructed at the intersection of private and public communication, a stand-in for intimate conversation made accessible to a broad audience. Demetrius, one of the earliest theorists of the letter, characterized the letter as one half of a spoken dialogue; Cicero, as a dialogue with an 'absent friend'.<sup>15</sup> Erasmus, one of the great epistolary theoreticians, echoed Turpilius' definition of the letter as a 'mutual conversation between absent friends';<sup>16</sup> and Francesco Sansovino wrote that 'famigliare è quella lettera che noi scriviamo all'amico delle nostre facende' ('a familiar [letter] ... is one we write to a friend with our news').<sup>17</sup> Integral to any letter is the participation of the reader, who provides the missing half of the 'conversation' necessary to complete its meaning. In the case of early modern letters, published or not, this missing piece might be supplied by more than one reader, or indeed by an entire epistolary community, for in many cases letters circulated as communal intellectual and social documents. As Gary Schneider points out in his recent study of the early modern English context, 'Letters ... were sociotexts: collective social forms designed, understood, and expected to circulate within designated epistolary circles'.<sup>18</sup>

All letters, then, depend upon a reader or readers, but a published letter collection requires at least two implicit and distinct readers to achieve its full interpretative significance. If, at one level, the published *epistolario* creates the illusion of a 'private' exchange between specific parties, it also establishes a second, equally important relationship between the letter writer and the reader of the entire collection. In a study of modern epistolary fiction, Janet Altman uses the terms 'internal' and 'external' readers to distinguish these levels of readership.<sup>19</sup> For a published letter collection, it is the external reader in particular who functions as the book's essential interpretive engine, organizing each individual letter into a narrative from which emerges an epistolary portrait of the writer. The letter writer is, in turn, influenced by both



internal and external readers in the production of meaning: at the moment of writing, the writer's knowledge of a future audience (of the external as well as the internal reader, if the writer is aware that the letter will be published) influences the choice of linguistic and stylistic registers as well as content.<sup>20</sup> The letter writer may also, to a degree, influence the reader, setting out each individual letter as a piece of an epistolary puzzle, and anticipating the puzzle's consolidation in a future moment of interpretation by the external reader.<sup>21</sup> The epistolary personae that emerge from these letter collections can, in fact, mask a variety of hidden messages, agendas, and identities apparent to the external but not the internal reader: A wife writing letters on behalf of her husband, for example, may actually write to pursue her own place in the literary arena; a woman's letter may have been composed by a man (or vice versa).

In some cases the *epistolario* functions as a vehicle for controversial views, such as religious dissent or social criticism, which require the 'right' reader for retrieval.<sup>22</sup> The letter writer plants clues in a published collection; it is the external reader's job to extract the message contained in the text as a whole, completing the writer's process of epistolary self-construction. The process of constructing and publishing a letter, and thereby creating a public epistolary persona, involves writer, letter recipient(s), and outside reader in a multifaceted interpretative process, in which each plays a role in the manufacture of meaning. This process is never fully stable, however. As one recent study of early modern English letters notes, 'Acts of writing and reading the familiar letter involve making and inferring meanings that may be pertinent to a single reading only as well as constructing meanings that might shift with the circumstances in which the letter might be read.'<sup>23</sup> The complex layers of epistolary composition made it a useful and powerful tool as well as a creative instrument, one that offered exciting possibilities for self-construction and expression.

## II. Women and the Epistolary Genre

If the published *epistolario* is a form of disguise, a pretense of intimate, one-to-one communication within the wider communicative network engendered by its circulation as a published document, it is also a public performance of identity and a declaration of literary authority unlike that found in other genres. Despite its aspirations to intimacy and spontaneity, the published collection of familiar letters is the product of a process of revision and self-construction that obscures boundaries

between the writer's personal world (written exchanges with family, friends, and patrons) and the literary world (the audience for the collection). As Andrea Battistini notes, it took the 'corraggio' of Aretino to presume that his familiar letters (in Aretino's case, some 3,000 of them), from which his own personality and experience emerge as the clear protagonist, would be not only worthy of print, but of interest to the reading public.<sup>24</sup> If for male writers the publication of one's 'familiar' or personal correspondence constituted an act of public exposure and risked the accusation of narcissism, for women writers the act was still more audacious, performed in a cultural climate that seemed to discourage their participation in the public sphere.<sup>25</sup> That women were enjoined by cultural conventions to chaste silence in theory, if not in practice, is reiterated by numerous Renaissance treatises, including works such as Stefano Guazzo's *Civil conversazione*, which asserted, 'è sommamente lodato nella donna quel silenzio che tanto l'adorna e che tanto accresce l'opinione della sua prudenza' ('most highly prized in a woman is that silence which so suits her and augments her reputation for prudence'); and Castiglione's *Libro del cortegiano*, which similarly connected a woman's modest speech to her good reputation.<sup>26</sup> Dozens of others made the same point, including many works that were written in defence of women, such as Juan Luis Vives' *De institutione feminae Christianae*.<sup>27</sup> The humanist Isotta Nogarola, even as she circulated her own works, recalled Sophocles' characterization of silence as 'women's special adornment.'<sup>28</sup>

On a broader scale, cultural anxiety about woman's speech and her access to the written word were reflected in a number of early modern texts, many of which sought to limit women's education to the vernacular reading and writing skills that would make her a virtuous wife and mother. A woman's true education, according to Francesco Barbaro, lay in her comportment, including good manners, silence, and, of course, virginity.<sup>29</sup> By contrast, Barbaro characterized female speech as dangerous, equivalent to a public display of nakedness.<sup>30</sup> Even among defenders of women and their intellectual capabilities – more numerous, at least in literary debate, as the *querelle des femmes* continued to unfold over the course of the sixteenth century – such ideas about sex and speech persevered, even as women themselves began publishing in greater numbers. Vives linked women's education to chastity, stating, 'when this has been thoroughly elucidated, she may be considered to have received sufficient instruction,' while Agrippa's *Declamatio de nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* attributed women's superiority in

part to their superior sense of shame.<sup>31</sup> Although Castiglione asserted that the *donna di palazzo* ought to be educated in letters as well as music and art, he maintained that one of her most important tasks was to refrain from gossip, lest she be considered unchaste. Likewise, she should not be remarked upon by others, lest her reputation suffer.<sup>32</sup> Part of women's *grazia*, that prized element of courtly interaction, lay in adeptly and imperceptibly navigating this paradox.

Historians such as Margaret L. King and Patricia LaBalme have argued that learned women were often viewed with hostility in early modern culture, their speech standing in opposition to the feminine virtues of silence and chastity. Hence erudite women might be perceived as 'intellectual transvestites' – a kind of third sex – or else sexually impure.<sup>33</sup> The humanist Laura Cereta complained that women themselves perpetuated this notion, and lambasted these 'veritable Megearas who can't stand to hear the epithet "learned women."' <sup>34</sup> They were tolerated, and even admired, primarily when seen to live lives of unquestionable chastity, or when they closely adhered to male literary norms, thus containing the destabilizing force that men seemed to fear in the female voice. Although recent work on women in early modern Italy has been most instructive in reasserting the degree to which women freely participated in literary culture, in many cases without evident opposition, such ideas about women intellectuals persisted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, at least on the printed page.<sup>35</sup> This helps explain why a woman writer like Lucrezia Gonzaga could be praised for exemplary wifely fidelity even as she authorized a strikingly public as well as personal epistolary self-portrait, and Isabella Andreini's orthodox writings were widely lauded as paragons of masculine literary excellence; while outspoken protofeminist writers like Veronica Franco and Arcangela Tarabotti were, by contrast, the targets of great hostility throughout their careers.

If the female voice – both in its literal incarnation and in its reflection in women's learning and writing – was associated not only with unchecked speech but with physical accessibility, female silence (or not-writing) was the sign of chastity.<sup>36</sup> Letter-writing, described by theoreticians from Cicero to Erasmus as a substitute for conversation, makes concrete the connection between speech and writing. The letter, as Claudio Guillén points out, functions as a 'basic hinge between orality and writing.'<sup>37</sup> If a woman who speaks (or writes) becomes a 'public' figure, she is never more public or more available to her readers than within the very personal framework of the familiar letter. When the

names of Lucrezia Gonzaga, Arcangela Tarabotti, or any other woman appeared on the frontispiece of her letters, the early modern reader was apt to connect that name to the experience and persona described in the text.<sup>38</sup> The act of publishing her familiar letters – or allowing someone else to publish them – thus made her vulnerable to accusations of lack of literary merit in comparison to men, as well as to speculation about her moral character.<sup>39</sup>

Given this cultural climate, the act of making public what was ostensibly private correspondence was an implicitly transgressive one for women writers, no matter how orthodox some of the resulting texts may have appeared. At the same time, as I show in this study, the gradual intersection of a growing literature concerned with defining the nature and role of women, together with the widely held perception that the letter was a ‘natural,’ even feminine medium, rather than an art (as implied by Gonzaga’s comments to Parabosco), created a deep interest in women’s epistolary collections – authentic or otherwise – by readers who sought them out as models of epistolary style and by editors and publishers eager to capitalize on a clear market demand for women’s letters. Such texts, whether authored by women or the product of a form of literary ventriloquism on the part of male writers, engage in a kind of knowing construction (and deconstruction) of the conventions of gender identity, the epistolary genre, and literary persona.

### III. The Feminization of Epistolary Writing

As the market for vernacular letterbooks continued to increase throughout the sixteenth century, so did readers’ appetite for texts that reflected (or purported to reflect) the experience of women. Indeed, an interest in examining, defining, and appropriating female experience is apparent not just in epistolary texts, but across early modern literary genres. At one end of the spectrum were literary texts that inserted themselves into the *questione della donna* or ‘woman question’ (from Agrippa’s *Declamatio* to Sperone Speroni’s *Della dignità delle donne*), or that sought to codify female behaviour (for example Lodovico Dolce’s *De la institution de le donne*). At the other end was a profusion of ‘how-to’ manuals, many of which addressed the experience or concerns of women. Male-authored medical treatises, for example, taught women how to conceive and give birth, while a barrage of less erudite *libri di segreti* added recipes for making soap or cosmetics and methods for removing stains from soiled clothing to discussions of pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation. What all

such texts have in common is an interest in teaching women how to negotiate their world, in describing that world, and in making it accessible to an external audience. This interest speaks to the reality of a new female readership that emerged as vernacular texts began to replace Latin works, and the eagerness of writers and editors to take advantage of it; it also raises questions of literary authority and appropriation, as we will see in part two of this study.

If female experience attracted growing attention in dialogues, treatises, and how-to manuals, epistolary expressions of female experience were also increasingly embraced by an audience of both sexes, fuelled in large part by common perceptions of letter-writing as an innately 'feminine' activity. As scholars have pointed out, from the sixteenth through (at least) the eighteenth century, letter-writing was considered a natural and therefore innately feminine practice, distinct from more 'literary' forms of writing.<sup>40</sup> Letter-writing was merely the translation of experience onto paper, a practice requiring neither art nor training, but only spontaneity and feeling. This lack of 'art' did not detract from the enjoyment elicited in the reader. Indeed, a good letter was one that spoke simply but sincerely, with emotional force, as described by Gonzaga in her letter to Parabosco.<sup>41</sup> The best letters, therefore, were 'unliterary.' Although putatively devoid of rhetorical elaboration, they often and paradoxically were the result of heavy revision or direct literary imitation.

The construction of epistolary practice as natural and specifically feminine helps explain how women were able to navigate the gendered minefield of reputation and publication. On the one hand, women's *epistolari* constituted public expressions of self, implicit and explicit challenges to the cultural codes that privileged female silence. Indeed, the first-person narrative of epistolary writing and the association it encouraged between author and epistolary protagonist rendered the letter writer uniquely accessible to her audience. Therefore, as Elizabeth Goldsmith has noted, a conflict was staged when women published their letters and the 'new admiration for a "natural" feminine style' in the letter clashed with 'old arguments about female virtue,' for, Goldsmith continues, 'to be virtuous was to be modest, self-effacing, above all not talked about, and most certainly not published.'<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, when perceived as an emotional rather than an artistic outlet, letter-writing threatened no boundaries between the sexes, encroached upon no male literary space. In a sense, then, this gendering of genre may have contributed to the diffusion of women's letterbooks,

obscuring the actual transgressive element of such texts. Of course, this effort to relegate women's writing to the realm of the non-literary was potentially limiting in its effects. Katharine Jensen investigates this problem with regard to French letterbooks, pointing to the circular reasoning set up by such 'gendered theories of letter-writing' as that of the seventeenth-century author La Bruyère, which claimed women were well-suited to epistolary writing but lacked the art necessary for other genres.<sup>43</sup> Men, according to such theories, did not come naturally by the emotion that women so effortlessly poured into their letters, but they could acquire it; in addition, they already possessed the requisite art. That is, although women could not satisfactorily compete in masculine genres, men could easily learn to participate in a feminine genre. By 'giving' epistolary writing to women, men saved the 'literary' realm for themselves (while at the same time reserving the right to engage in letter-writing). If letter-writing had the potential to threaten boundaries between public and private space by blurring the lines between the two, then the insistence on the non-literary quality of the letter was an attempt to preserve these divisions, to keep 'private' or feminine experience confined to its proper realm, a social function rather than a literary art.<sup>44</sup>

The construction of letter-writing as a social, feminine practice raises compelling questions about the concept of women's writing and about the literary construction of gender. What does it mean to write 'like a woman'? I don't mean to engage here in a critique of *l'écriture féminine*, but rather to stress that the idea of 'writing like a woman' evokes a concept of a writing that, in both its structural attributes and its content, reflects a specifically female experience. Yet ideas about what constitutes 'female' writing are the reflection of cultural concepts of male and female at any given time, constructs to be assumed, appropriated, or discarded. For early modern women writers, choosing a 'feminine' medium in which to express themselves – writing, that is, 'like women' – was, despite its apparent limitations, one way to circumvent restrictive attitudes towards female expression and presence in the public realm.<sup>45</sup> However – and we will return to this point throughout the subsequent chapters – many women writers went on to use epistolary space in transgressive ways, publicizing and valorizing their own experience and implicitly or explicitly commenting on the literary and cultural construction of gender. In some cases, like that of Andreini, a writer drew deliberate attention to such constructions by writing obviously fictionalized compositions in both male and female voices.

The conflict produced by the collision of cultural ideal and literary vogue forms an integral element of the *epistolari* authored by women in this period. But women were not the only writers who attempted to navigate this conflict and to use epistolary space as a forum for female experience. Some of the most frequently reprinted 'women's' letter collections of the second half of the sixteenth century were, in fact, 'female impersonations': texts written by men and published under women's names. Ortensio Lando's *Lettere di molte valorose donne*, an anthology of letters purportedly composed by nearly 200 women, was immediately reprinted following its initial publication in 1548; while Parabosco's phenomenally successful *Lettere amorose* included a section of love letters composed by the author in the 'female voice'.<sup>46</sup> The pseudonymous *Lettere amorose di Madonna Celia*, one of the most reprinted letter collections of the sixteenth century, has also been attributed to Parabosco.<sup>47</sup> Examples of epistolary ventriloquism abound in later centuries – the *Lettres portugaises*, Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels *Clarissa* and *Pamela*, as well as earlier examples that include Ovid's *Heroides* and Boccaccio's *Elegia di madama Fiammetta* (which drew upon Ovid).<sup>48</sup> At the heart of such cases of epistolary cross-dressing were issues of literary authority. If, on the one hand, these books could function as manuals of women's writing, teaching readers how to imitate the 'female' style, they were, on the other hand, demonstrations of the writers' own literary bravura in having mastered this style. The literary reconstruction of gender becomes the focal point of such texts and the core of their innovation, deliberately exposing what Linda S. Kauffman terms 'the literary artifice of gender'.<sup>49</sup> Stylistically, then, such female impersonations were a demonstration of skill – the successful literary imitation of gender the triumph of art over nature.

Female impersonations raise an important question about the literary construction of gender: if gender is itself a social construction, a kind of 'performance' (to follow Judith Butler's formulation), how is it represented in the epistolary context, which fashioned itself as a specifically feminine genre?<sup>50</sup> The efforts of male writers to master the female epistolary voice inevitably reflect perceptions about women and women writers as well as ideas about gender and genre, and differ to varying degrees from women's own self-constructions. Given not only the phenomenon of epistolary ventriloquism, but the wider, gendered theorization of epistolary writing, it is essential to interrogate how letter-writing came to be constructed as a feminine genre and how that construction was thought to be reflected in epistolary practice. As

Goldsmith contends, 'Any study of the female voice in epistolary literature ... must examine male ideas of what it means to write as a woman, along with the writings of real women.'<sup>51</sup> As we examine women's letters and male representations of women's letters, the literary and performative aspects of the epistolary construction of gender become ever more apparent.

Finally, writing 'like a woman' had commercial implications for both male and female authors. As recent studies have highlighted, the epistolary market was one in which literary production and the book market were beginning to come together, and in which editors took an active role in trying to create and meet reader demand.<sup>52</sup> Letters, as we will see in chapter 1, were a popular commodity – easily produced and quickly consumed, and publishing letters under one's own name granted immediate public status and recognition. Publishing letters under an assumed name, however, had its own benefits. An anonymous or pseudonymous book could be produced quickly and without fear of negative reflection on the author or accusations of literary narcissism, and some of the profits of a successful book would rebound to the writer, if only through future commissions. Thus, a Parabosco or Lando might simply have responded to a demand for women's letters that was not being fully met, given that women still published in far smaller numbers than men. Women's letters and pseudo-letters also fit into a growing interest among readers for books that could teach them how to do things. Epistolary manuals and repertories such as those published by Battista Ceci, Bartolommeo Miniatore, and Francesco Sansovino demonstrated a practical concern for promoting the kind of courtly culture and 'civil conversation' aspired to by Guazzo and Castiglione, and taught readers how to compose socially appropriate missives through the imitation of examples.<sup>53</sup> Some of these manuals included specific instruction on how to write 'like a woman,' often through the presentation of women's love letters, an epistolary typology that would continue to grow in popularity throughout the century. Many epistolary anthologies included women's letters as models as part of a broader project to promote the *volgare* as a literary language. Comportment literature, *libri di segreti*, and medical manuals exhibited a parallel concern with female experience via discussions of marriage, motherhood, pregnancy, childbirth, or household management. In female impersonations like that of Lando, for example, the didactic vein of texts like these merged with ideas about epistolary style and an almost voyeuristic interest in women's experience to produce the male-authored book of 'women's' letters.



Women's letter collections, those composed by women as well as female impersonations, thus evolved out of a literary and cultural climate that had a deep interest in women's experience and in feminine epistolary style, despite its broader ambivalence to women's participation in learning and the production of literature. Epistolary writing itself was theorized in gendered terms, and writers negotiated this framework in different ways. In all the cases considered in this study, the literary and epistolary construction of gender plays an increasingly central role.

The following chapters examine the ways in which early modern ideas about gender and women's social roles, and about literary activity in general and letter-writing in particular, converged in women's published *epistolari*. Chapter 1 situates women's epistolary production within the literary and cultural context of early modern Italy, focusing specifically on the development of the epistolary genre from its humanist origins (with particular attention to the work of women humanists such as Isotta Nogarola, Cassandra Fedele, and Laura Cereta), to its post-Aretinian form. It examines the literary tradition that gave rise to the new vernacular letterbook, and the expectations and concerns of letter writers and readers. I look at the models that existed for the kinds of gendered self-positioning found in later vernacular letters, and I investigate the gradual evolution of epistolary texts from Aretino's example to the highly stylized collections that characterize the later part of the century. My discussion here focuses on the letters of Aretino as well as on an important anthology published by Paolo Manuzio, both of which help provide a clear picture of the literary, cultural, and commercial aspects that fuelled the epistolary genre.

Part two of my study turns to the increasing sixteenth-century interest in women's letters, the accompanying assumptions of readers and writers regarding the female epistolary voice, and the problem of epistolary ventriloquism. How was gender constructed in male representations of the female voice within the space of the published vernacular letter? Chapter 2 focuses on Ortensio Lando's anthology of 'women's' letters, the *Lettere di molte valorose donne* (1548). I argue that Lando's collection, which addresses a range of issues pertaining to women, from the domestic (household chores, child-rearing, medical remedies, and cosmetics) to the literary (specifically the 'famous women' catalogue and the *querelle des femmes*), critiques humanist epistolary tradition by radically expanding the parameters of the epistolary genre and by doing so in the voices of women. At the same time, I question what it

meant for Lando to write 'like a woman,' and what relationship his impersonation has to the epistolary self-representations of real women.

Chapter 3, by contrast, looks at the *Lettere ... a gloria del sesso femminile* (1552), a collection of letters by Lucrezia Gonzaga, a sixteenth-century woman who was widely acclaimed for her learning and her virtue, but which some critics have argued is actually another female impersonation by Lando (who made Gonzaga an interlocutor in many of his works, including the *Valorose donne*). Gonzaga claims to publish her *epistolario* in an effort to win support for her notoriously imprisoned husband, and indeed many of her letters are written to or about him; but other, equally important undercurrents run through her collection, from a desire for literary recognition to an increasing fascination with the heterodox religious views that were sweeping through Italy (and for which she would ultimately be tried by the Inquisition in Mantua). Gonzaga's collection thus performs multiple functions as a kind of true-crime narrative (through her husband's story), a model of exemplary womanhood (through her self-representation as a paragon of wifely loyalty), and as a literary self-portrait and a font of heterodox religious views. Although the complex literary relationship that existed between Gonzaga and Lando, along with certain stylistic similarities between the *Lettere ... a gloria del sesso femminile* and the *Lettere di molte valorose donne*, lends credence to his editorial intervention in her text, evidence for Gonzaga's involvement in this work published under her name can be found not only in the testimony of her contemporaries but also in Italian archives (specifically, a number of manuscript letters penned by Gonzaga to various correspondents). I argue, therefore, that a scenario of literary collaboration and partnership capitalizing on the market for women's epistolary collections is the more likely explanation for this text, which makes an interesting comparison to Lando's *Lettere*: the one choral in nature, the other strikingly individual.

Part three of this study continues to explore the wide range of women's published collections over the span of the genre's greatest popularity, turning now to three women who were known for their prolific literary activity. The letter collections of Veronica Franco (1580), Isabella Andreini (1607), and Arcangela Tarabotti (1650) – three women who occupied very different social roles – provide a panorama of female experience in the early modern period as well as of diverse approaches to epistolary writing. Franco, discussed in chapter 4, was a renowned courtesan, closely linked to Venetian literary society through

her influential patron Domenico Venier. Her elegant missives recall classical and humanist models while also allowing her identity as a cultured courtesan to play a central role. Published as Franco's fortunes were on the wane, the collection was a last attempt at professional and artistic self-promotion, a literary performance that sought to capitalize on the particular popularity of women's epistolary texts. Andreini's letters, by contrast, the subject of chapter 5, reflect her experience as a *prima donna innamorata* on the commedia dell'arte stage. Essentially a collection of highly stylized discourses on love, Andreini's compositions engage in a knowing and overt performance of gender, as the author assumes both male and female voices to create what may be called a hermaphroditic epistolary text. Far removed from the narrative specificity of Gonzaga's letters, for example, Andreini's letters reflect an engagement with a late sixteenth-century trend towards increasingly generic, fictionalized letters, a movement informed by a growing body of epistolary manuals and repertoires.

Finally, Tarabotti, whose *epistolario* is examined in chapter 6, was a *monaca forzata* – a nun forced to take vows without a religious vocation. Forbidden by the newly strengthened doctrine of *clausura* to leave her convent, yet determined to create a name for herself as a literary figure as well as to condemn the practice of forced enclosure, the letter had more practical importance for Tarabotti than for any of the other women discussed here. For her, letter-writing constituted a way – the only way – to transcend the convent of Sant'Anna and to establish and maintain relationships beyond its walls, especially in the literary world. As Tarabotti began to draw heated criticism for her other polemical works, including accusations of plagiarism, she used her letters to defend herself and promote her literary reputation. Her letters, in contrast to those of Andreini, constitute a distinct departure from the trend towards generic letters modelled on epistolary repertoires, and instead recall Aretino's pointed use of the medium to punish his enemies and reward his supporters.

Studying women's letters and examining ideas about gender and epistolarity can contribute greatly to our understanding of the ways in which gender was constructed in the early modern period, yet this area has not been fully explored for early modern Italian letter collections. In negotiating the familiar letter's fundamental tension between public and private communication, between artifice and experience, women letter writers questioned the constructs of gender and genre. In all the cases considered here, the act of publication serves to assert

the value of female experience, declaring it worthy of contemplation and imitation by a public that demanded that letters exhibit the qualities of *utilità* (usefulness) as well as *diletto* (entertainment), as we will see in the next chapter.

# 1 Women's Vernacular Letters in Context

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## I. Women and the Humanist Tradition

In 1552, the erudite noblewoman Lucrezia Gonzaga followed Aretino's epistolary example when she published her *Lettere ... a gloria del sesso femminile*, a collection of familiar letters composed in the vernacular. The writers Veronica Franco, Isabella Andreini, and Arcangela Tarabotti would soon follow suit. By the time these women were composing and publishing their *epistolari* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, the letter had undergone significant linguistic, structural, and thematic transformations. The letterbooks of these late Renaissance women differed from their earlier, humanist predecessors in many respects, not only because they were written in Italian rather than Latin and therefore addressed a different public but also because of the central role that gender played in these volumes. This concern was largely absent from the male-authored humanist collections of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Only in the works of a small handful of early women humanists do we discern some precedents for the kind of gendered self-portraiture found in these later texts. Among vernacular letter writers of the sixteenth century, by contrast, gender was a frequent backdrop to letter-writing, due not only to the increased activity of women epistolarians but also to popular characterizations of letter-writing as a feminine activity, as we saw in the introduction. This chapter situates early modern women's epistolary writing in its historical and literary context by thinking about what the genre looked like in its Latin incarnation, when a *libro di lettere* was the hallmark of Italian humanists from Petrarch to Bembo – and what women were able to accomplish within its confines. It then examines the changes the letter

underwent as a result of the vernacular renaissance set in motion by Pietro Aretino in the mid-sixteenth century, including the ways in which writers, editors, and readers approached and understood the published letterbook, both generally and with specific regard to women's epistolary production.

Undoubtedly, Aretino's experimentation with the letterbook helped pave the way for the women writers I examine in this study. Indeed, Aretino is widely recognized as the 'father' of the vernacular letterbook.<sup>1</sup> His letters (six volumes altogether) touched a chord among both readers and writers, who responded eagerly to this 'new' or at least reinvented genre. Aretino's first volume – by far his most successful – was reprinted twelve times within two years of its initial publication in 1538. Its impact was wide and enduring: by 1627 more than 500 such vernacular letter collections had been published in Italy.<sup>2</sup> The women who published epistolary collections in early modern Italy owed much to the vernacular bravado of Aretino's *Lettere*, but they also shared a genealogy with certain pre-Aretinian women who had sought to express the female voice within the parameters – or confines – of the humanist letterbook. In the mid-fifteenth century, well before Aretino made his appearance as Venice's 'secretario del mondo' (a self-designation that evoked the shift from the letter writer as a secretary in the service of a prince to one who served himself and his public) and inspired a revival of interest in the *lettera familiare*, the writers Isotta Nogarola, Cassandra Fedele, and Laura Cereta all sought to make their mark within humanist culture by composing and circulating letter collections.<sup>3</sup> Those of Nogarola (1418–66), one of the most learned women of the early Renaissance, circulated in Venice and Rome by the mid-1400s, and those of Fedele (1465–1558), considered by many of her contemporaries to have been the greatest woman writer of her century, were also read during her lifetime. Likewise, the letters of Laura Cereta (1469–99) were copied and distributed while the author was still alive, between 1488 and 1492. The fame attained by all three women during their lifetimes was due in great part to the compelling self-portraits they were able to paint in their letters, cementing their position as valid participants in humanist culture.<sup>4</sup>

In composing and circulating their letters, all three women participated in a genre with a history as old as literature itself, its models rooted in antiquity with the letters of Cicero, Pliny the Younger, and Seneca.<sup>5</sup> The fourteenth century had seen the felicitous discovery of Cicero's familiar letters by Petrarch (himself an epistolarian whose

*Familiares* would become a model for those who followed him) and Coluccio Salutati, marking the beginning of a gradual shift away from the medieval *ars dictaminis*.<sup>6</sup> In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, as the humanists turned to the past for epistolary models, it was Cicero they strove to emulate (although letters continued to reflect a tension between the two traditions). Latin letters written by men such as Poggio Bracciolini, Antonio Beccadelli, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, and Pietro Bembo represented an attempt to recuperate the classical tradition, mediated through the example of Petrarch.<sup>7</sup> Although the humanists aspired to the 'familiar' quality of the Ciceronian model, their interest in rhetoric and their very imitation of classical models imbued their letters with a certain artificiality.<sup>8</sup> Fundamental to the humanist letter was its studied erudition, which truly set it apart from many of its vernacular descendants.<sup>9</sup> Because the humanists used letter-writing not only to prove their skill as writers but also to spread humanist principles, many of their letters were dissertations on issues of cultural or political import and intended for a wider audience than a single recipient.<sup>10</sup> According to one modern editor of Aretino's letters, 'la distanza cronologica e linguistica' of these learned letters transformed them into historical and literary documents, in which the author reigned as an 'unico testimone,' and from which the reader was, in a sense, excluded.<sup>11</sup> Often rendered abstract by the generality of the arguments they addressed, humanist letters were closer to treatises than private exchanges, and were intended primarily as a demonstration of the writer's abilities as well as a reflection of the epistolary networks in which he moved. A kind of intellectual autobiography, they highlighted the writer's relationships with other scholars and patrons, his reputation, and his accomplishments. Indeed, more than one critic has likened the humanist letterbook to today's scholarly dossier: it reflected the writer's credentials, his skill as a thinker and critic, and his position within the field.<sup>12</sup> To a certain extent these aspects persisted in the vernacular letterbooks of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – particularly the highlighting of important associations and literary accomplishments and the quest for public recognition – but they would come to exist alongside a new set of concerns relating to family, everyday life, and practical advice as quotidian as how to do one's laundry or swaddle a baby – a set of concerns that allowed ample room specifically to address the experience of women in domestic as well as literary life. The practical capacities of the letter would come to be emphasized over its rhetorical underpinnings, with Aretino demonstrating how to use the

letter to navigate the myriad events and relationships that made up an individual's life.

Nogarola, Fedele, and Cereta used the letterbook to the same ends as did their male counterparts: to gain literary recognition and attain lasting fame. Structured like letters, the collections of Nogarola, Fedele, and Cereta are carefully constructed essays on a range of humanist themes, such as virtue, fortune, friendship, and other stock topics, and are aimed at displaying the authors' erudition. Despite the Ciceronian notion of the letter as a 'dialogue with an absent friend,' a definition that implicates (at least) two voices, these letters are, in effect, monologues rather than dialogues.<sup>13</sup> They are not 'personal letters' as we understand them today, but rather formalized discourses.<sup>14</sup> Diana Robin, for example, writes of Cereta's letters that they are 'little more than projections of her own ego – the entire letterbook is a soliloquy of sorts.'<sup>15</sup> Indeed, each of Cereta's letters is a self-contained work, complete in its own right. They do not require the participation of the reader to fill in blanks or silences, to supply the other half of the 'conversation,' to orient the letter in time and space. In contrast to many later vernacular letters, the humanist letter is meant to transcend time and space. Concrete details that might ground it to a specific place or moment are often absent (date, time, place, specific detail) and only occasionally do individual letters appear to respond to practical rather than literary exigencies. In this way, each letter can stand alone and the author can (attempt to) retain control over its meaning. Cereta's letter to 'Europa solitaria' on the theme of the virtues of solitude versus city life, for example, is so self-contained that it has been referred to as a true soliloquy, the addressee 'Europa' a stand-in for the writer herself.<sup>16</sup> Fedele's very formal letter of consolation to Duke Pietro d'Aragona follows humanist conventions and could be adapted easily to another correspondent, serving as it does first and foremost to highlight the writer's skill at the genre.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Cereta's consolatory letter to Martha Marcella contains a variety of standard funerary tropes and resembles those of male humanists from Petrarch to Filelfo.<sup>18</sup> Such letters of consolation could be read, appreciated, and imitated by any reader basically familiar with the consolatory form. Compare these letters, by contrast, to Arcangela Tarabotti's much later letters of condolence regarding her friend, the French ambassador Nicolas Bretel de Grémonville (d. 1648). Tarabotti addresses this loss repeatedly in letters to his widow, his children, and his friends in a manner that assumes specific familiarity on the part of the reader with both the deceased and



the circumstances of his death.<sup>19</sup> Although she makes use of some standard expressions of consolation, her letters require increased participation on the part of the reader to furnish the letter with its full context and meaning – something that can be difficult to do over the distance of time and space.

Humanist letters were composed in Latin rather than Italian, reflecting the education and authority of the author and showcasing his – or her – erudition, but also limiting their letters' audience in certain respects. The humanists wrote for an élite, male public of fellow humanists, capable of reading and responding to Latin works. The same names surface repeatedly in humanist letterbooks of the period, creating a kind of epistolary intertextuality defined by the experience of a specific network of men. Indeed, the very humanist education that was so hard-won for Nogarola, Fedele, and Cereta would have made their work less accessible to the many women whose knowledge of Latin was inferior or non-existent.<sup>20</sup> Certainly fewer women are the recipients of Latin humanist letters than of the later vernacular variety. Those to whom humanist letters are addressed tend to fall into three basic groups: women of high social status whose patronage the writer seeks, as in Erasmus' letter to Lady Anne of Veer; women who are objects of admiration for their 'exceptional' degree of learning and culture, as when Guarino Veronese writes to (or about) Nogarola; and women to whom the writer wishes to direct some piece of wisdom or advice, as in Bruni's well-known letter on women's education addressed to Battista da Montefeltro Malatesta.<sup>21</sup> Later vernacular letters continue to address women patrons, praise learned women, and teach female 'students,' yet they also make room for letters to and about women from many other parts of society, including mothers, sisters, courtesans, and servants.

Even among the women humanists, letters to men outnumber letters to women. Fedele addresses missives to royal women like Isabel of Spain, Eleanor of Aragon, and her daughter Beatrice of Aragon, but Nogarola writes to none at all. Both Fedele and Nogarola are concerned to replicate the humanist letterbook as closely as possible, and gender is not as underscored as much as patronage. Only Cereta addresses herself to a truly 'familiar' network of correspondents, many of them female, rather than focusing exclusively on *destinatari* of high status; thus, only in her letters do we see gender truly move to the forefront of epistolary expression.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a marked increase in the presence of women as both authors and addressees. Women make frequent appearances in such influential

collections as that of Aretino, as well as in those of Bembo, Caro, and Tolomei (where the names of Veronica Gambara, Vittoria Colonna, and Giulia Gonzaga all recur regularly), and letters to and by women are anthologized in collections like Paolo Manuzio's *Lettere volgari di diversi nobilissimi uomini illustri* (1542), Lodovico Dolce's *Lettere di diversi eccellentissimi uomini* (1559), and the three volumes of *Lettere a Aretino* published in 1557.<sup>23</sup> Letter-writing manuals such as Bartolommeo Miniatore's *Formulario* (1568), Giovanni Antonio Taglienti's *Componimento di parlamenti* (1584), and Battista Ceci's *Compendio* (1618) included model letters formulated specifically for women.<sup>24</sup> Such a presence of female names and epistolary tools for women is indicative both of an increased female readership for the vernacular letter and of a growing interest in letters written by women.

Of the triad of letterbooks published by women humanists mentioned here, it is Cereta's that presages the gendered self-positioning of the later women writers discussed in this study. Cereta plays deliberately on gendered tropes – for example, juxtaposing her skill at embroidery with her literary bravura – to craft an intellectual autobiography that in many points transcends the masculine confines of the humanist model she imitates by highlighting female experience.<sup>25</sup> Her epistolary self is at once 'masculine' – competing with male humanists on their terms by displaying her knowledge of classical literature, philosophy, and the sacred texts – and 'feminine' – where she describes her role as a wife and daughter, recalls the obstacles she faces as a woman humanist, and defends women's right to education. Cereta's letters have been called a 'radical departure' from those of her contemporaries.<sup>26</sup> The merging of male and female aspects in her epistolary persona calls to mind the letters of Veronica Franco or Isabella Andreini more than those of Nogarola or Fedele; her focus on critiquing female experience prefigures the kind of commentary found in Lucrezia Gonzaga and, especially, in Arcangela Tarabotti. Whereas Fedele sticks closely to humanist themes, and Nogarola's catalogues of illustrious women are in many respects in keeping with traditional literary models (although she moves the figure of the learned woman to the forefront), Cereta rewrites the standard humanist autobiography by narrating the different stages specific to the woman writer's intellectual journey. Woven into this narrative is Cereta's uneasy relationship with her mother, her girlhood passed in the convent, a portrait of the father who encouraged her studies, and a memorial to the husband to whom she was married a brief eighteen months. None are subjects typically found in a humanist

collection. Ever present is Cereta's inner conflict as a woman and writer, and the anxiety she experiences in trying to fulfill her duties as a daughter and wife – consuming roles she assumed with considerable resentment – and as a learned scholar. Cereta seems keenly aware of the gendered distinctions between public and private worlds, often referring to spatial imagery as she orients herself at the border of both. In her evocative autobiographical letter addressed to Nazaria Olimpica, for instance, Cereta describes how the rudiments of the education that would later allow her to become a public figure were first obtained in the private, female space of the convent, parceled out 'in the inner chambers of the convent, the doors to which were opened and shut with a hundred locks.'<sup>27</sup> The image is a gendered mirror of the male *studio* in Alberti's *Libri della famiglia*,<sup>28</sup> for Cereta's learning is acquired in a specifically female fortress, under conditions of great secrecy and security. The reader is left to imagine the force it must have required for Cereta to open those locks, break past the convent walls, and enter the public sphere through literary dialogue. In another letter, Cereta makes clear her desire and need to be recognized in this public sphere, writing that 'public acclaim has built a solid enough foundation for my immortality' and that such public acknowledgment is, 'in the order of things, quite important.'<sup>29</sup>

Cereta's focus on the feminine activity of embroidery as an expression of her artistic identity further suggests that she is integrating the territory of male and female space and even interrogating typical constructs of gender. She devotes ekphrastic pages to her skill at embroidery, a pursuit that she undertakes with the same dedication and art that she does her writing, and worries about finding the time to devote to her own intellectual and artistic expression. She describes the insomniac nights necessary for both her writing and sewing, and laments the time wasted in 'domestic leisure': 'I have no time for my own writing and studies unless I use the nights as productively as I can,' she writes. 'Time is a scarce commodity for those of us who spend our skills and labor equally on our families and our work.'<sup>30</sup> Certainly, such conflict does not appear in the letters of male humanists, who unlike Cereta, had the luxury of 'otium,' blank days to devote to study and composition.<sup>31</sup> Nor, needless to say, does such a portrait of women's experience occur in other humanist collections. Cereta is virtually alone in using this humanist medium as a vehicle for specifically female experience and the central role she allots to gender does not reappear until after Aretino.

This is not to say, however, that gender has *no* place in other humanist collections. Ann Rosalind Jones has argued that even when women adhere to the literary conventions of dominant culture, sex matters: 'When a member of the sex systematically excluded from literary performance takes a dominant/hegemonic position toward an approved discourse, she is, in fact, destabilizing the gender system that prohibits her claim to public language.'<sup>32</sup> By the very act of writing, the woman writer challenges male models. In some cases, gender is manipulated for specific purposes. Nogarola, for instance, makes a strategy of gender in certain of her letters, calling on stereotypes of female weakness, inferiority, and volubility to create a kind of defensive posture and disarm her male critics. Nogarola writes gender as vulnerability, while in actuality using it to her advantage. In a letter to the humanist Ermolao Barbaro, for example, she excuses her presumption by saying 'my sex itself will provide the greatest excuse for me among some men, since it may be very difficult to find a silent woman.'<sup>33</sup> In a letter to Guarino Veronese, she laments having been born female, since 'women are ridiculed by men in both word and deed.'<sup>34</sup> Nogarola's frequent apologies for her lack of skill or learning – typical of many humanist letters – take on gendered implications in the context of her position as a woman who feels herself vulnerable to attack, as, for example, when she attributes Guarino's initial rejection of her to her sex. Similarly, Fedele excuses herself to her correspondents as a 'bold little woman' and 'both a woman and a naïve young girl,' 'scarcely allowed ... to go out of my little schoolhouse'; while Cereta calls herself a 'small chattering woodpecker among poetic swans' – disingenuous statements meant to deflect criticism and highlight accomplishment.<sup>35</sup> Both the sentiment and the strategy are present in vernacular letters by women, many of which are constructed specifically to combat criticism directed at the authors' literary activity.

The defence of women's intellectual capabilities, a subject taken up by male humanists with varying degrees of conviction in the context of the *querelle des femmes* (and rooted in the 'women worthies' tradition from Boccaccio and Christine de Pizan to Renaissance treatises such as those of Castiglione and Firenzuola) is also given new weight and a new perspective in the texts of the women humanists.<sup>36</sup> Whereas male catalogues of illustrious women tend to highlight sexual licentiousness, almost as a consequence of women's intellectual accomplishment or their activity in the public sphere, or to explain women's achievements by likening them to men, Nogarola and Cereta approach this literary

problem from a different angle. Nogarola, for instance, uses the recitation of famous women to highlight their virtue and her own, thereby writing herself into this group. She does not completely refute the stereotype of women as overly loquacious, allowing that the actions of a few cause this notion to be perpetuated, but she highlights women's tradition of eloquence and virtue, implicitly challenging the silence/chastity construct.<sup>37</sup> Cereta, too, defends women's intellect and delineates even more clearly a female genealogy of learned women of which she is now a part. An impassioned letter to Bibolo Semproni recalls a vast female lineage that has won glory in 'virtue and literature': it stretches from the Ethiopian Queen Saba, called upon by Solomon, to Nicostrata, Sappho, and Semiramis, and indeed extends to 'Isotta of Verona' (Nogarola) and 'Cassandra of Venice' (Fedele).<sup>38</sup> 'The possession of this lineage is legitimate and sure,' Cereta writes, 'and it has come all the way down to me from the perpetual continuance of a more enduring race.'<sup>39</sup> Cereta thus sees herself as part of a community of learned women. Hers is a complex position, however. Although she writes in defence of learned women, she feels very much an outsider to her sex and to traditional feminine culture, which she views quite negatively. In this, she appears to have internalized much of the misogynist tradition regarding women's nature and behaviour. She ridicules most women as vain, empty-headed gossips ('gabbing and babbling women') content in the pleasurable confines of their own subjection.<sup>40</sup> All women should have the freedom to learn, Cereta says, but they must choose it, and most do not:

And here choice alone, since it is the arbiter of character, is the distinguishing factor. For some women worry about the styling of their hair, the elegance of their clothes, and the pearls and other jewelry they wear on their fingers. Others love to say cute little things, to hide their feelings ... to indulge in dancing, and lead pet dogs around on a leash ... or they can yearn to deface with paint the pretty face they see reflected in mirrors. But those women for whom the quest for the good represents a higher value restrain their young spirits and ponder better plans ... For knowledge is not given as a gift but by study.<sup>41</sup>

Scornfully, emphasizing her own exceptionality, Cereta concludes that 'deep down we women are content with our lot.'<sup>42</sup> The use of catalogues and exempla is widespread in humanist letters and even picked up in some post-humanist collections (most pointedly by Ortensio Lando in

the *Lettere di molte valorose donne*, discussed in chapter 2) as a tool to showcase the writer's erudition. However, Cereta's questioning of what it requires to be learned and why more women do not attempt to attain that for which they have a natural gift is unique. Cereta's pervasive focus on what it means to be a woman writer in a world of men, along with her ability to intertwine standard humanist epistolary rhetoric with an individualistic and gendered epistolary self-portrait make her an important example for early modern women writers of vernacular letters. In Cereta, the boundaries of the humanist letter are stretched and redrawn to include female experience, and it is in this sense most of all that her work prefigures that of the post-Aretinian women writers studied in chapters 3 through 6.

## II. Aretino and After: The Vernacular Tradition

If the world of humanist letters to which Cereta, Nogarola, and Fedele sought access was an exclusive club, its doors were flung open when Pietro Aretino published his enormously influential first volume of letters in 1538. Aretino's most important divergence from the humanist tradition was, of course, his use of Italian rather than Latin in his letters, an innovation legitimized by the rising respectability of the vernacular. For Aretino, who had little proficiency in Latin, this was more a necessity than a choice.<sup>43</sup> Aretino's use of the *volgare* ensured that his letters would be accessible to a wider audience than their classical and humanist predecessors had been, including many more women. In his seminal essay, 'La letteratura italiana all'epoca del concilio di Trento,' Carlo Dionisotti argued that the linguistic openness of the period between 1545 and 1563 engendered by the emerging primacy of the vernacular in Italy fostered the entry into the literary arena of marginalized groups with limited access to formal, humanist education (such as Aretino himself).<sup>44</sup> Thus, a humanist education was no longer a prerequisite for authorship; similarly, readers were not required to read Latin or to be conversant with complex rhetorical formulas in order to appreciate the new vernacular *epistolario*. The wider diffusion of Aretino's letters, moreover, was aided by the increasing expansion of the printing industry, which rendered the publication (and acquisition) of books more economically feasible.<sup>45</sup> Dionisotti's analysis of the rise of the vernacular, when considered along with the impact of printing on authors and readers, is useful for contextualizing the huge success not only of Aretino's *Lettere* but also of the vernacular *epistolario* in general, and