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Amorous Poems and Passionate Letters:
An Analysis of the Contributions of Two Female Authors to the Literary Scene of 16th
Century Italy

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Honors Studies in History

By:
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History
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Abstract:

Vittoria Colonna and Chiara Matraini were well known women in intellectual and public Italian society during the 16th century. However, the history surrounding their individual impacts has often been limited due to the common practice of grouping these two women together or focusing more intently on their male connections. This thesis aims to advance women's history on the Early Modern period by providing holistic accounts of Vittoria Colonna and Chiara Matraini's careers that provide a better understanding of the unique contributions that these women made to distinctly female literature in the Early Modern period in Italy. This thesis utilizes selected portions of Colonna and Matraini's published works and personal letters that contribute to the examination of the female authors' perspectives and goals by focusing on their lives as Italian women, public image, religious beliefs, and contribution to female intellectual development in the 16th century. For Vittoria Colonna, her adherence to a pristine image should not be viewed as her only asset, as she constantly redefined previously male-dominated literature forms and practiced spiritual and financial authority independent from her famous male connections. For Chiara Matraini, she should not be viewed as only an imitator to Colonna, as she actively engaged with humanistic literature and passionately defended her agency and career in the public sphere without emulating others. This work encourages the continuation and further development of women's history in the Early Modern period by focusing on the unique impact of these women.

Introduction

It was a busy day in Lucca, 1538, when crowds of people gathered to hear the fifth and last sermon of Bernardino Ochino. The sermon commenced, and the authoritative voice of Ochino rang out speaking about God's mercy for the sinners in Italy, touching many Italians who never imagined that a doctrine like this could exist outside of the Catholic church. Among the crowd of people, two very different women could have been spotted. One of them was a woman in her middle age, who had traveled across Italy following the sermons of Ochino. This woman, known by the world as Vittoria Colonna, was already renowned for her amorous poetry that delighted her readers. Perhaps she spotted another woman, just 23, listening to the sermon as well. This woman, named Chiara Matraini, was not following Ochino specifically, but as a citizen of Lucca, may have stopped in the street to hear the sermon. Her involvement with the religious and cultural progressiveness in her hometown would eventually lead her to also begin a career as an author.¹

Although Colonna (c.1492-1547) and Matraini (c.1515-1604) would be mentioned together in scholarship hundreds of years after their deaths, this instance may have been the closest they ever came to interacting.² Colonna and Matraini probably never met or held a conversation, yet they were destined to make an impact on the Italian literary scene during the 16th century, one that would contribute to the increased presence of women in the public literary sphere. In the 16th century, Italy was home to intellectual communities, new innovations, and vast opportunities that seemed unparalleled to any time before. Amid this, Vittoria Colonna and

¹ Eleonora Carinci, "L'inquieta Lucchese: Tracce Di Evangelismo Nelle Opere Religiose Di Chiara Matraini," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 23, no. 1 (2017): 146.

² Carinci, "L'inquieta Lucchese," 146.

Chiara Matraini were well-known in intellectual and public Italian society.³ However, centuries after their deaths and the heights of their careers, scholarship on the early modern period has struggled to give proper recognition to the impact of these two female authors.

This work focuses on Colonna and Matraini, and analyzes how they contributed to the wider literary scene during the Italian Early Modern period. Much scholarship on this period showcases Colonna only as a notable exception to the general lack of agency and influence that women had during the Early Modern period. She is often mentioned alongside her famous male friends, such as Michelangelo, and her works are presented as a companion to theirs. In Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance*, she is introduced as "the most famous woman of Italy, the friend of Castiglione and Michelangelo,"⁴ and in Arnaldo Di Benedetto's "Introduzione al petrarchismo cinquecentesco", he states that "[la sua] amicizia con Michelangelo fu celebrata in alcuni quadri di artisti italiani del XIX secolo,"⁵ rather than a full biography. For Matraini, she is often a side note in a wider statement about Colonna, or other Early Modern female authors, like Benedetto's statement that "oltre a quello della Colonna, molti serebbero i nomi di poetesse da ricordare: ...[come] Chiara Matraini."⁶ In this instance, her literary impact is restricted to demonstrating the impact of other notable women, rather than focusing on her own work.

³ Giovanna Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," in *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini*, ed., and trans. Elaine MacLachlan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 5

⁴ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1878): 151.

⁵ "Her [Vittoria Colonna's] friendship with Michelangelo was celebrated by some Italian paintings," Arnaldo Di Benedetto, "Un'introduzione al Petrarchismo Cinquecentesco," *Italica* 83, no. 2 (2006): 199

⁶ "In addition to Colonna, many female poets could be remembered: [like] Chiara Matraini (among a large list)," Benedetto, "Un'introduzione al Petrarchismo Cinquecentesco," 199.

Much research also limits Colonna and Matraini's unique contributions by grouping them together because of their similar style of amorous poetry. Even in Abigail Brundin's introduction to *Sonnets for Michelangelo*, a book in the *Other Voices* series, which aimed to illuminate the "other", female voice in the Early Modern period, she noted that, "some followed [Vittoria Colonna's literary approach] closely, most notably Chiara Matraini,"⁷ highlighting the similar styles these women had, rather than their individual impact. Instead of assuming that their impact was equivalent because of their similar literary style, this thesis argues that Colonna and Matraini's lives and careers differed from each other and deserve to be recognized for their unique contributions to Italian literary movements, rather than biproducts of each other or other prominent male influences.

In addition, much discourse on the Early Modern period fails to recognize the unique ways that female authors used their public image and religious works to communicate their views on the role and value of women in society. My research will illuminate the individual developments of agency, public image, and literary form that these two female authors contributed to Early Modern society and the many female authors that came after them. The selected portions of Colonna and Matraini's published works and personal letters contribute to this thesis's examination of the relationship between female authors and the public sector, male sponsors, and societal pressures in 16th century Italy. Colonna and Matraini's lives will be studied through the lens of their role as women in Italian society, their individual reputations in comparison to each other, the importance they place on religion and reform, and the examination of what their individual written works attributed to the development of female literary tradition.

⁷ Abigail Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," in *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition by Vittoria Colonna*, ed., and trans. Abigail Brundin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to contribute to modern research on women's history and present the lives and works of Colonna and Matraini as autonomous female authors, rather than defining them to their influences or connections.

A Brief Overview of Women's History in the Early Modern Period

To understand the work that this thesis intends to accomplish, it is important to understand the development of modern women's history on the Early Modern period. Although much historical study before the 20th century was restricted to prominent men, there has been a recent interest in gendered history and uncovering the different challenges experienced uniquely by women.⁸ Some of the most prominent works by women that defined their ability to write and publish, began to flourish in the 15th century, during the start of the Early Modern period. Many studies often begin with Christine de Pizan's *Book of The City of Ladies* (1405), in which she defended her right to publish and work in intellectual communities as a woman.⁹ Although originally published in France, her works were quickly translated into other languages and circulated throughout Europe.¹⁰ Following Pizan's groundbreaking work, female participation in literary and intellectual communities grew, and more women began publishing their own works in Early Modern Europe.¹¹

However, in Italy, women were still heavily restricted in their publishing abilities.¹² Even after women like Pizan began to write on political and social topics, Italian women were essentially only allowed to circulate manuscripts privately, and penmanship was often reserved

⁸ Joanna De Groot, "Women's History in Many Places: Reflections on Plurality, Diversity and Polyversality." *Women's History Review* 27, no. 1 (2018): 109–19.

⁹ Charity Cannon Willard, "Introduction," in *The Writings of Christine De Pizan* (New York: Persea Books, 1994), xiii.

¹⁰ Willard, "Introduction," xiii.

¹¹ Willard, "Introduction," xiii.

¹² Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 2-3

for convents.¹³ Because of the once-common view that the Early Modern period was beneficial for all people, many outdated sources, particularly from the 18th century, assumed that Italian women were given the same opportunities as men to flourish intellectually during the Early Modern period. However, in more modern scholarship, the recognition of the public and private challenges unique to women has illuminated the impact that women were making among themselves despite the limits of a male-dominated society. Although women's history as a discipline is developing, for many years, the unique contributions of Early Modern female authors, especially Chiara Matraini, have been undervalued.¹⁴

To understand the outdated view of Early Modern women during the 19th century, it is integral to examine Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* critically.¹⁵ This text perpetuated the widely accepted idea that women and men were virtually equal during this period.¹⁶ Although Burckhardt acknowledged some publication challenges that women faced in the public sphere, he concluded that "the education given to women in the upper classes was essentially the same as that given to men"¹⁷, insinuating that although women faced different career challenges, they had the basic resources to be as successful as their male family members and counterparts. In addition, Burckhardt mentioned Vittoria Colonna in this chapter, and he wrote "One indeed [female author], Vittoria Colonna, may be called immortal."¹⁸ However, Burckhardt stated that her merit was found in "the manly tone of [her] poetry [which was] so

¹³ Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr., "The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series," in *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xxiv-xxv

¹⁴ De Groot, Joanna. "Women's History in Many Places," 109-19.

¹⁵ Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 142-68.

¹⁶ Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 156-157.

¹⁷ Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 156.

¹⁸ Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 156

precise and definite in [its] character, and so far removed from the tender twilight of sentiment, and from the dilettantism which we commonly find in the poetry of women, that we should not hesitate to attribute [it] to male authors, if we had not clear external evidence to prove the contrary,”¹⁹ a rather backward way of commenting on Colonna’s work. Despite Burckhardt, in the 20th century, there was a shift in the way that many perceived, and wrote about, women’s history in the Early Modern period.

This shift was heralded in Joan Kelly-Gadol’s “Did Women Have a Renaissance,”²⁰ an important article for the development of women’s history. In this article, Kelly directly challenged Burckhardt’s outdated idea that women and men enjoyed the same intellectual opportunities in the Early Modern period.²¹ Instead, she claimed that the Renaissance diminished female sexual and intellectual freedom in comparison to the Medieval period.²² Kelley argued that the Medieval literary tradition of “courtly love,” which showcased noble women as objects of desire, encouraged female sexuality and intimacy, despite the church’s attempt to remove elements of sexuality and pleasure from the idea of Christian marriage.²³ According to Kelly, Early Modern men preferred the ancient, and primarily Athenian, idea that women were naturally inferior to men.²⁴

Kelly argued that this notion “established chastity as the female norm and restructured the relation of the sexes to one of female dependency and male domination,”²⁵ during this time.

¹⁹ Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 156

²⁰ Joan Kelly-Gadol, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), 175-201.

²¹ Kelly-Gadol, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” 197.

²² Kelly-Gadol, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” 179-84.

²³ Kelly-Gadol, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” 178-179.

²⁴ Kelly-Gadol, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” 177.

²⁵ Kelly-Gadol, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” 177.

Her stance on the limitations on female sexuality and agency during the Early Modern period has been constantly reaffirmed by women's historians in the 21st century, such as Elizabeth S. Cohen in her article "Evolving the History of Women in Early Modern Italy,"²⁶ in which Cohen emphasized the restrictions of social ideas of female purity and unbalanced marriage dynamics.²⁷ In addition, throughout the *Other Voices* series edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr., they consistently emphasized the idea that women were confined to piety because of the Catholic idea that the fall of man was due to the lustful, deceitful, and talkative nature of women.²⁸

In addition to disagreeing with the once-common view of female sexuality and purity, Kelly disagreed with the idea that women and men enjoyed equal education during the Early Modern period and claimed that education was "extreme in its denial of women's independence."²⁹ She stated that although women from upper class families were often tutored in classics, literature, and languages alongside their male family members, education was not equal between the sexes.³⁰ According to Kelly, women were almost exclusively educated by male tutors during this period, as opposed to the Middle Ages, when older female members of courtly society educated young women.³¹ Because women were not being taught by other women, Kelly claimed that "male educators, who, as humanists, suppressed romance and chivalry to further classical culture, with all its patriarchal and misogynist,"³² shaped women's outlooks and therefore cultivated the idea that women were inferior intellectually and socially.

²⁶ Elizabeth S. Cohen, "Evolving the History of Women in Early Modern Italy: Subordination and Agency," in *Spain in Italy: Politics, Society, and Religion 1500-1700*, ed. Thomas Dandeleit and John Marino (Boston, BRILL, 2006): 325-54.

²⁷ Cohen, "Evolving the History of Women in Early Modern Italy," 325-54.

²⁸ King and Rabil, "The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series," xxviii.

²⁹ Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" 177.

³⁰ Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" 185-89.

³¹ Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" 188

³² Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" 188

This view, which diverged significantly from Burckhardt's 19th century vision, was extremely impactful when it was published and has contributed to the unique gendered challenges that women faced during the Early Modern period.

Kelly's idea that women received a limited and biased education was later expanded upon by Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine in the book *From Humanism to the Humanities*.³³ In Chapter 2, titled "Woman Humanists: Education for What?"³⁴, Grafton and Jardine elaborated on the educational challenges and opportunities faced by women during the rise of humanist education in the Early Modern period. Like Kelly, they agreed that noble women were granted access to education, but they claimed that humanistic education did not encourage female academic pursuits or agency.³⁵ According to Grafton and Jardine, "it was not customary for a woman to pursue advanced humanistic studies,"³⁶ and women rarely became published writers and academists without the aid of influential male sponsors. In addition, Grafton and Jardine argued that female authors had to adhere to a specific image to gain respect. This image revolved around female sexuality and purity, and heavily equated their careers with their sexual and religious status.³⁷ This status, as mentioned by Kelly, was ideally a virgin, and if not, then a chaste and supportive wife.³⁸

The lack of female agency during this time often mystifies the autonomous voices of female authors and has made reading between the lines imperative to modern study. *The Other*

³³ Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986)

³⁴ Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 29-57

³⁵ Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities*, 29-57

³⁶ Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities*, 32

³⁷ King and Rabil, "The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series," xxvi.

³⁸ Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" 189-97.

Voice in Early Modern Europe series, once edited by King and Rabil, attempted to illuminate the “other voice” in modern Europe, one they claimed was “in contradiction to the ‘first voice’, the voice of the educated men who created Western culture.”³⁹ In their series introduction, they expanded upon earlier scholarship and discussed male-female relationships and challenges unique to women in the Early Modern period.⁴⁰ King and Rabil agreed with Kelly’s previous argument that women and men in the Renaissance experienced different educational opportunities.⁴¹ However, unlike Kelly, who claimed that Medieval women enjoyed relatively more sexual and intellectual freedom, King and Rabil argued that women were always restricted sexually and intellectually, even during the Medieval Ages.⁴² Kelly’s arguments were also expanded and challenged by other historians’ articles, most notably in Merry E. Wiesner-Hank’s “Do Women Need the Renaissance?,”⁴³ and Theresa Coletti’s ““Did Women Have a Renaissance?’ A Medievalist Reads Joan Kelly and Aemilia Lanyer.”⁴⁴

In Wiesner-Hank’s article, she stated that historians have often grouped all women’s experiences together, instead of acknowledging differences across social classes, locations, and time.⁴⁵ Wiesner-Hank’s emphasis on periodization in women’s history gained significance in the 21st century and was also developed by Theresa Coletti who specifically discussed periodization and unique opportunities for Early Modern women in her article.⁴⁶ Although she agreed that

³⁹ King and Rabil, “The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series,” xi

⁴⁰ King and Rabil, “The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series,” xi-xxx.

⁴¹ King and Rabil, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series*, xx.

⁴² King and Rabil, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series*, xiv-xv.

⁴³ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, “Do Women Need the Renaissance?” *Gender & History* 20, no. 3 (November 2008): 539-557.

⁴⁴ Theresa Coletti, ““Did Women Have a Renaissance?’ A Medievalist Reads Joan Kelly and Aemilia Lanyer” *Early Modern Women* 8 (Fall 2013): 249-259.

⁴⁵ Wiesner-Hanks, “Do Women Need the Renaissance?” 539-557.

⁴⁶ Coletti, *Did Women Have a Renaissance*, 249-259.

women were limited by Early Modern society, she claimed that certain opportunities such as “the impact of print and the Protestant reformation, the increased volume of women’s writing in the early modern period, and greater numbers of known, named women authors,”⁴⁷ benefited women living in Italy.

While these factors did not apply to all women, these opportunities made it possible for many noble women, like Colonna and Matraini, to publish in the 16th century. With these previous studies and historical contexts in mind, this thesis will add to the growing development of women’s history during this period. The historiography of the Early Modern Period is integral to understanding the misguided way that Colonna and Matraini have been written about previously. Much historiography surrounding women has often been incomplete or unjustified, limiting the impact of Colonna and Matraini and defining them based on other people. Understanding current historiography on women during the Early Modern period is also necessary to understand the unique, gendered, challenges that these women encountered. Positioning itself among this prior research, this thesis aims to present the historical narrative in a manner that accounts for periodization and challenges unique to women, furthering the discipline and value of Early Modern women’s history, and redefining the impact and autonomy of both Colonna and Matraini’s careers independent of each other and their male contemporaries.

⁴⁷ Coletti, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?,” 252.

Chapter 1

Vittoria Colonna

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most important female authors in the Italian Renaissance, Colonna was a familiar name within the historical canon of notable Early Modern figures. Praised for her poetry, prose and letters, Colonna was recognized as the first female poet to appear in print, an accomplishment that would define the progress of women's publications throughout the course of the Early Modern period.⁴⁸ Because of the fame that she enjoyed in her life, and her close relationships with notable Renaissance men, Colonna's name is rarely missing from works about women in the Renaissance. Colonna has never been "rediscovered" in recent scholarship, as many other Early Modern female authors are often referred, because of her unique ability to retain a public image that adhered to the public view of right conduct for noble women.⁴⁹ This public image has set her apart from other women in the eyes of many male Renaissance and Early Modern historians throughout time, like Burckhardt, who often took her adherence to gender norms and proper female conduct at face-value. Because of this, she is often praised for her pious and religious public life or mentioned only because of her relationship with Michelangelo. However, through sections highlighting her private life, public image, religiosity, and literary contributions, this thesis argues that Colonna created new ideas that challenged and transformed the way women were viewed in Early Modern society independent from her prominent male influences, aiming to ultimately provide a more well-rounded view of her contributions to distinctly feminine literary tradition.

⁴⁸ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 18.

⁴⁹ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 2-3.

“La Marchese”⁵⁰: Vittoria Colonna as an Italian woman

Although Vittoria Colonna was a well-known public figure, little is known about her life before her success as an author. Baptismal records conclude that Colonna was born near Rome between 1490 and 1492.⁵¹ Because of her family’s aristocratic status and important political position, her familial duty upon birth, like most noble Italian women, was to marry an important connection and remain a dedicated wife and mother throughout her life.⁵² At the early age of three, Colonna was betrothed to Ferrante d’Avalos, a member of one of the ruling Spanish families in the Kingdom of Naples.⁵³ Upon their marriage, d’Avalos was the Marquess of Pescara, giving Colonna the title “Marquesa di Pescara,”⁵⁴ a name that she held throughout her life.⁵⁵ Because of her status as a noble woman, Vittoria Colonna was likely educated as a young woman alongside her brother, and was part of the relatively high 12% of urban women in 16th century Italy that were literate.⁵⁶

Although Vittoria Colonna, and other noble women, received a relatively good education, their curriculum, as mentioned in Kelly’s “Did Women Have a Renaissance,” was restricted by the humanistic view that women were the inherently inferior sex.⁵⁷ However, by Colonna’s

⁵⁰ Quoted from a signature at the end of a letter addressed to Colonna’s cousin; Cited in Vittoria Colonna, To Costanza d’Avalos del Balzo, December 1525. Letter, in *Selected Letters, 1523-1546: A Bilingual Edition by Vittoria Colonna*. Edited by Veronica Copello, trans. Abigail Brundin (New York: Iter Press, 2022), 53.

⁵¹ Brundin, “Volume Editor’s Introduction,” 6.

⁵² Cohen, “Evolving the History of Women in Early Modern Italy,” 344-46

⁵³ Ramie Targoff, “Introduction,” in *Poems of Widowhood: A Bilingual Edition by Vittoria Colonna*, ed., and trans. Ramie Targoff and Troy Tower (New York: Iter Press, 2021): 10.

⁵⁴ English: “Marchioness of Pescara.”

⁵⁵ Susan Haskins, “Vittoria Colonna’s Plaint of the Marchesa Di Pescara on the Passion of Christ: Editor’s Introduction,” in *Who Is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, ed., and trans. Susan Haskins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 47-53.

⁵⁶ Targoff, “Introduction,” 3.

⁵⁷ Kelly-Gadol, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” 175-201.

adolescence, women in 16th century Italy were already challenging the social norms that defined the male-view of female conduct. Vittoria Colonna's first involvement with other women in an intellectual environment followed soon after her marriage, when she and d'Avalos moved to Ischia, an island off the coast of Naples that had a reputation for harboring nobles hoping to avoid various political battles and epidemics.⁵⁸ This flow of influential nobles led the island to cultivate a vibrant intellectual exchange with many groups that met and discussed politics, religion, and literary works.⁵⁹ While living in Ischia, Colonna joined a literary circle hosted by her aunt Costanza d'Avalos that is often regarded as one of the first literary societies led by women, an early example of Colonna operating outside of the typical social role of women during the Early Modern period.⁶⁰

As Colonna's life progressed, and she became more involved with the women in her aunt's intellectual community, her early career as a writer began to develop. A defining moment in Vittoria Colonna's life, and one that would change her career and impact on the literary world, was the death of her husband in 1525.⁶¹ At age 35, Vittoria Colonna had neither husband nor children to devote her time to. Without the traditional roles of a wife and mother to fulfill, she was in an unusual position for a noblewoman and began a new life as a widow.⁶² Although widowhood in Italy during the 16th century could offer unmarried women, and particularly

⁵⁸ Shulamit Furstenberg-Levi, "The D'Avalos-Colonna Literary Circle: A 'Renewed Parnassus.'" In *Vittoria Colonna: Poetry, Religion, Art, Impact*, ed. Virginia Cox and Shannon McHugh (The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 42-45.

⁵⁹ Furstenberg-Levi, "The D'Avalos-Colonna Literary Circle," 42-45.

⁶⁰ Furstenberg-Levi, "The D'Avalos-Colonna Literary Circle," 38.

⁶¹ Targoff, "Introduction," 11.

⁶² Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 8.

childless women like Colonna, some independence, widowed Italian women were also restricted in terms of financial security and social status.⁶³

Like Colonna, many women of wealthy families were married to make connections with wealthy and prominent families, and those that weren't were sent from a young age to take the vows of a nun and live in a convent.⁶⁴ In many cases, young women living in religious societies were granted more educational freedom, and some, like Antonia Pulci, published plays that were read and performed at convents.⁶⁵ However, most noble women were not given the same intellectual freedom, even within widowhood, and were essentially expected to spend the rest of their days in prayer and contemplation for the lives of their deceased husbands.⁶⁶ Popular literature on women's lives at the time, most notably *Libro della vita viduale* by Girolamo Savanarola, warned women to not draw any attention to themselves in widowhood to prevent male attention.⁶⁷

Colonna was often seen by her contemporaries, such as Baldassare Castiglione, as a woman "whose virtue [he] had always held in veneration as divine,"⁶⁸ and in many ways, she adhered to the proper mourning and religious devotion expected of widows during this time. However, Colonna also used the freedom gained through widowhood to operate considerably outside of the societal norm by living and traveling as an unmarried woman, and eventually

⁶³ Cohen, "Evolving the History of Women in Early Modern Italy," 325-354.

⁶⁴ Cohen, "Evolving the History of Women in Early Modern Italy," 325-354.

⁶⁵ King and Rabil, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series*, xxiv.

⁶⁶ Helena Sanson, "Widowhood and Conduct in Late Sixteenth-Century Italy: The "Unusual" Case of *La Vedova Del Fusco* (1570)," *The Italianist*, 35, no. 1 (January 2015): 5.

⁶⁷ Targoff, "Introduction," 17.

⁶⁸ Baldassare Castiglione, "The Book of the Courteir," 1528, dedicatory Letter, in *Poems of Widowhood: A Bilingual Edition* by Vittoria Colonna, ed., and trans. Ramie Targoff and Troy Tower (New York: Iter Press, 2021): 4.

publishing a collection of poems dedicated to her deceased husband.⁶⁹ By cultural standards, these *rime amorose*, or love poems, were far from what was expected of the typical Italian widow. Colonna strived to honor her relationship with d'Avalos after his death by creating her own style of mourning. By using her talent as a writer to express her emotions, Colonna began to create a place for women to freely express their emotions and desires in a public and refined literary manner.⁷⁰

Although Colonna is often remembered for her time as a widowed poetess and pious woman, the independence granted by widowhood did not drastically change what she was already doing, despite restrictions placed upon her by her sex. Even before the start of her independent career, Colonna was demonstrating political independence and literary autonomy in letters throughout her lifetime.⁷¹ Various letters from the early 1500s demonstrate Colonna's determination to maintain her property and finances while her husband was away at war. One of them concerns d'Avalos's final request was for the castle of Colle San Magno, which was currently in their possession, to be returned to the rightful owners of the friars of the Benedictine abbey.⁷² In a letter to her cousin Costanza d'Avalos, Colonna petitioned her to return her portion of the property, pleading that she would "return [the castle] to them [the Benedictine abbey], otherwise it [would] be a burden on [her] husband's soul."⁷³ This letter not only demonstrated Vittoria's confident handling of her family's property, but also the emotional rhetorical strategy,

⁶⁹ Targoff, "Introduction," 17.

⁷⁰ Targoff, "Introduction," 11-12.

⁷¹ Brundin and Copello, "Introduction," 1-32.

⁷² Abigail Brundin and Veronica Copello, "Letter 7: 21 December [1525] To Costanza d'Avalos del Balzo," in *Selected Letters, 1523-1546: A Bilingual Edition by Vittoria Colonna*, ed. Veronica Copello, trans. Abigail Brundin, (New York: Iter Press, 2022): 51-52.

⁷³ Vittoria Colonna, to Costanza d'Avalos del Balzo, December 1525, Letter, in *Selected Letters, 1523-1546: A Bilingual Edition by Vittoria Colonna*, ed. Veronica Copello, trans. Abigail Brundin (New York: Iter Press, 2022): 52-53.

by appealing to her husband's soul, that she used to convince her cousin that the property was worth returning.⁷⁴

In addition, Colonna also demonstrated fiscal responsibility later in this letter. As per her husband's request, Colonna was "paying the income [equal to the yearly revenue of the castle] to the abbey,"⁷⁵ while attempting to gain cooperation from her husband's other relatives.⁷⁶

Although her relatives eventually refused d'Avalos's final wish to have the castle Colle San Magno returned to the Benedictine abbey, Colonna continued to pay the abbey and persuade her relatives to donate the property throughout their lives, demonstrating her dedication to honoring her husband's requests and keeping the affairs of his fortune in order.⁷⁷ At the end of this letter, although she is addressing a family member, she still signs off as "La Marchese,"⁷⁸ invoking her title through marriage, and the prestige granted to her through her position in society. Her use of the title Marchioness in her personal letters highlighted her authoritative position despite being often remembered in history as a humble and religious author. Even before her career as a poet, Colonna was practicing independence as a woman by handling her own finances, supporting her community, and following her personal convictions, a facet of her life that has been rarely mentioned in historical scholarship on this period. Much study of Colonna's life revolves around her pristine image and important connections, an approach lacking the holistic view of Colonna's life as an independent and confident noblewoman.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Brundin and Copello, "Letter 7," 52.

⁷⁵ Vittoria Colonna, to Costanza d'Avalos del Balzo, December 1525, Letter, 52.

⁷⁶ Brundin and Copello, "Letter 7," 52.

⁷⁷ Brundin and Copello, "Letter 7," 51-52.

⁷⁸ Vittoria Colonna, to Costanza d'Avalos del Balzo, December 1525, Letter, 53.

⁷⁹ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 8.

“La Divina Pescara”⁸⁰: Vittoria Colonna in the public sphere

Colonna’s reputation in history reflected her ability to conform to the proper, pious, female image that received ample praise from men centuries beyond her death. Although there are aspects of Colonna’s life, such as her constant devotion to religion and charity, that were in-line with her own beliefs, much of her reputation needs to be re-examined with the context of her male sponsors’ influence and the restrictive view of women in the public sphere. As a noblewoman and widow, Colonna was already demonstrating independence that was uncommon for a woman in Early Modern Society.⁸¹ Though subtle, Colonna was challenging the traditional restrictive roles of widowed women, and the male view of the capabilities of the female sex, in Early Modern society. The constant praise of Colonna, in her own lifetime, and throughout historical canon, demonstrates the importance of her public image and the strategic rhetoric, intentional or not, that presented her as a humble, pious woman who had fame thrust upon her, rather than an independent woman who dedicated her life to perfecting a poetic craft in a new, unique, way.

After the death of her husband, Colonna’s poems began to circulate high Italian intellectual society, and eventually, a collection of her poems, titled *Rime*⁸², was first published in 1538.⁸³ One of the most prominent ways that Colonna’s image was modified to fit social standards was under the influence of male sponsors involved with her publication process.⁸⁴ Colonna famously did not take any stake in her career, and remained removed from her fame

⁸⁰ “The Divine Pescara,” in Filippo Pirogallo, *To the most learned mister Alessandro Vercelli [from] Filippo Pirogallo*. Letter, in *Poems of Widowhood: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Ramie Targoff and Troy Tower (New York: Iter Press, 2021), 35

⁸¹ King and Rabil, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series*, xi-xxx.

⁸² “Rymes” in English.

⁸³ Targoff, “Introduction,” 6.

⁸⁴ Targoff, “Introduction,” 5.

throughout her life, exhibiting the public humility and modesty required of successful women during this time.⁸⁵ She notoriously relied on the efforts of other, prominently influential men, to promote and publish her work in the public sphere.⁸⁶

This image, of Colonna as a woman who humbly received success rather than seeking it out, is most notably seen in the dedication letter of her 1538 *Rime*.⁸⁷ During the Early Modern period, many authors included a dedicatory letter at the beginning of their book to introduce their work to the audience.⁸⁸ However, Colonna did not write her own dedicatory or introductory letter. Instead, her 1538 *Rime* was introduced by a letter written by her first publisher, Filippo Pirogallo.⁸⁹ Despite being her first publisher, Pirogallo did not have much influence on Colonna's career, and likely did not anticipate the eventual success of the poems.⁹⁰ This letter remains an example of Colonna's male sponsors promoting her image as a woman who adhered to a standard social norm and wrote for the pleasure of men, rather than a woman who was creating and defining a new genre of poetry.

Although Pirogallo's dedicatory letter emphasized Colonna's removal from the publication process, there is evidence that Colonna circulated her own poems during her involvement with the literary circle of Costanza D'Avalos, as many mentions of Colonna's work appear before their official publication.⁹¹ However, the first edition of Colonna's complete *Rime* in 1538 was marketed as if Colonna had not authorized the publication.⁹² In the dedication letter,

⁸⁵ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 18.

⁸⁶ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 1-55.

⁸⁷ Targoff, "Introduction," 1-30.

⁸⁸ Targoff, "Introduction," 9.

⁸⁹ Targoff, "Introduction," 9.

⁹⁰ Targoff, "Introduction," 1-2.

⁹¹ Brundin and Copello, "Introduction," 1-32.

⁹² Targoff, "Introduction," 1-9.

addressed to Alessandro Vercelli, Pirogallo states “I have been so bold as to put them [Colonna’s poems] into print, even if it goes against the wishes of so grand a lady,”⁹³ insinuating that Colonna never approved the release of the edition. The removal of Colonna’s agency in the matter, and her apparent rejection of fame became an integral trope in distancing her from the fame-seeking and fickle personalities that Early Modern male society expected of intellectual women.⁹⁴

Intellectual women, like Colonna, presented a power dilemma in the eyes of the male-dominated society of the Early Modern period. Women were expected to be chaste and inferior to men, mainly restricted to submissive roles within the church and the household.⁹⁵ Therefore, to have a viable career as a poet, Colonna’s place in society had to be established as inferior to men, despite her obvious skill with the pen.⁹⁶ Pirogallo used his introductory letter to further demonstrate Colonna’s status in relation to her male contemporaries by stating that it was “less of an error to displease one lady (however rare and great) than to deny so many men what they want.”⁹⁷ In this way, Pirogallo communicated to the audience that Vittoria Colonna’s agency as an author was less important than pleasing the men who wanted to read her poems. The status of Colonna as a woman still outweighed her skill as an author, and Pirogallo defined the start of her career as a way to please men, rather than benefit herself.⁹⁸

⁹³ Filippo Pirogallo, *To the most learned mister Alessandro Vercelli [from] Filippo Pirogallo. Letter*. In *Poems of Widowhood: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. by Ramie Targoff and Troy Tower (New York: Iter Press, 2021), 35.

⁹⁴ Cohen, “Evolving the History of Women in Early Modern Italy,” 325-54.

⁹⁵ King and Rabil, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series*, xviii.

⁹⁶ Targoff, “Introduction,” 11-16.

⁹⁷ Pirogallo, “Letter,” 35.

⁹⁸ Targoff, “Introduction,” 11-16.

Along with holding a status inferior to men, chastity was a very important virtue that women of the Early Modern Period in the public sphere adhered to.⁹⁹ Although the practice of prostitution was widespread throughout Italy, and many of these women became prominent authors, noble women, like Colonna, were expected to remain chaste to maintain their husband's bloodlines and ensure the respect of their male relatives. Women operating in the intellectual public domain faced issues revolving around chastity, as traditionally, the virtues of virginity and submission kept them at home and outside of public discourse.¹⁰⁰ In his dedication letter, Pirogallo confirms Colonna's chastity by distancing her from the publication process, and therefore keeping her out of public discourse, which would have been improper for a pure and upright woman.

The practice of publishing an author's work without their consent was a very common practice in Early Modern publishing, and authors, especially those who published outside of Venice, had little authority over their own writing.¹⁰¹ However, Pirogallo's dedication letter carried a certain significance as it appeared at the beginning of a the first published collection of poems by a woman in Italy.¹⁰² Although it is possible that Colonna did not ever want her poetry to be published, her efforts to privately circulate her poetry earlier in her life seemed to contradict the image that Pirogallo presents of her.¹⁰³ It is instead likely that Colonna would not have been able to promote her own work, or achieve the success her first edition *Rime* gained, under her own volition.¹⁰⁴ By marketing her work as pirated, Colonna had the ability to maintain

⁹⁹ King and Rabil, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series*, xxv-xxvi.

¹⁰⁰ King and Rabil, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series*, xxvi.

¹⁰¹ Targoff, "Introduction," 3.

¹⁰² Targoff, "Introduction," 5.

¹⁰³ Targoff, "Introduction," 11-16.

¹⁰⁴ Targoff, "Introduction," 5.

the socially correct role as a humble woman while also ensuring that her career and poetry flourished. In addition, the idea of a woman's secret amorous poems would have been alluring to many men during this period, and therefore good for business. Although it is difficult to discern whether Colonna worked with Pirogallo to launch her career in this way, or if her poems were published against her will, Colonna's career and success as a poet was directly related to her social image, the upkeep of which remained important throughout the duration of her life.

In addition to presenting her as dependent and pleasing to male society, Pirogallo also referred to Colonna as "La Divina Pescara"¹⁰⁵ in his dedicatory rather than "La Marchese" like Colonna's earlier letters and even later publications. Thus, Colonna was introduced to the literary world under a more unattainable, rather fictitious title that highlighted the close association between her status as a pure and humble woman and her status as "Divine". Calling Colonna "Divine Pescara" almost associated her with the spiritual, and unrealistic, women commonly celebrated in Italian literature.¹⁰⁶ By removing her social title, and presenting her as a sort of holy woman, Pirogallo further succeeded in crafting an image of Colonna that delighted and inspired early modern men, rather than threatening them.¹⁰⁷ In this way, Colonna was able to reach unprecedented success for a woman through her almost unattainable image.¹⁰⁸ After her death, and even in modern historical study, Colonna's image remains closely tied to her career. The longevity of her name is largely due to her ability to please male authors who often presented her as a goddess-like figure who transcended the ability of all other women, rather than an

¹⁰⁵ Pirogallo, "Letter," 35.

¹⁰⁶ Shannon McHugh, "A Guided Tour of Heaven and Hell: The Otherworldly Journey in Chiara Matraini and Lucrezia Marinella." *Early Modern Women* 9, no. 1 (2014): 28-32.

¹⁰⁷ Targoff, "Introduction," 5.

¹⁰⁸ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 1-6.

innovative woman who would inspire other women to create and publish their own writings.¹⁰⁹

In future study and recognition of Colonna's career, it is important to give proper attention to the male view that propelled her career and understand that her public image was highly crafted due to the demand of her male audience, rather than assuming her public image was a direct reflection of her character.

“[La voce di] un uomo in una donna, anzi un dio”¹¹⁰: Vittoria Colonna and spirituality

Colonna was always viewed as a “divine” woman who transcended other women with her otherworldly devotion to humility and piousness. However, much historical study neglects proper understanding of Colonna's spiritual experience and the agency she found through religion. Colonna's mobile life after the death of her husband prompted her to seek spiritual discussion and scholarship throughout Italy.¹¹¹ Although Colonna never took the vows and joined a convent, she regularly stayed in various convents throughout Rome and the surrounding cities and was even buried with the sisters of Sant'Anna.¹¹² After the start of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, Colonna became increasingly interested in reform spirituality. Her passion and devotion to these topics were evident throughout her writing. In addition, in her personal life, she was constantly following preachers like Ochino to learn more about reform movements.¹¹³ The Protestant Reformation greatly influenced the intellectual and social climate of the early 16th century Renaissance, but few devoted their lives and works as vigorously as Colonna.¹¹⁴ Her

¹⁰⁹ Brundin, “Volume Editor's Introduction,” 39-43.

¹¹⁰ English: “A man within a woman, or rather a god” Michelangelo Buonarroti, “Un uomo in una donna, anzi un dio,” 1544-46. Madrigal, Cited in *The Poetry of Michelangelo*. Ed. and trans. James M. Saslow (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 235.

¹¹¹ Bassanese, “Vittoria Colonna's Man/God,” 265.

¹¹² Targoff, “Introduction,” 16

¹¹³ Carinci, “L'inquieta Lucchese,” 146.

¹¹⁴ E. Harris Harbison, “The Protestant Reformation,” In *Christianity and History: Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1964), 143.

loyalty to reform Christianity remained constant throughout her life, and became an outlet for her to express agency, a facet largely unnoticed by her male contemporaries, and modern male scholars, who presented her synonymously with her carefully curated public career.¹¹⁵

Although many women in the Early Modern period were involved with religion in some way, Vittoria Colonna communicated her spiritual views and convictions in a way that was revolutionary for women at the time.¹¹⁶ Her *Rime*, which contained poems of mourning for her dead husband, was also intertwined with her own religious ideas, many of which were new and counter-cultural.¹¹⁷ Rather than upholding the long-standing Catholic traditions of the Early Modern period, Colonna instead passionately believed reform spirituality, which was growing in popularity during the late 15th and early 16th centuries.¹¹⁸ Instead of focusing on the Catholic church as a mediator between God and the people, spiritual reformists like Colonna stressed the idea of *sola fide*, a person's own personal connection to God through faith alone, rather than endless duties and repentance to the Catholic church.¹¹⁹

Rather than restricting her spiritual beliefs to her personal life, Colonna instead made her ideas about reform spirituality integral to her poetry, even though her poems were marketed as "amorous".¹²⁰ In Colonna's *Rime*, she included several poems that introduced her audience to reformist ideas, like poem 98, in which she wrote:

Le nostre cople han mosso il tuo furoure
Giustamente, signor, nei nostril danni,

¹¹⁵ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 13-18.

¹¹⁶ Bassanese, "Vittoria Colonna's Man/God," 263.

¹¹⁷ Targoff, "Introduction," 16-21.

¹¹⁸ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 13-18.

¹¹⁹ Una Roman D'Elia, "Drawing Christ's Blood: Michelangelo, Vittoria, and the Aesthetics of Reform," *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2006): 95

¹²⁰ Targoff, "Introduction," 16-21.

Ma se l'offese avanzano gli affanni,
D'assai la tua bontà vince ogni errore.
Chiede mercè ciascun carco d'orrore
Deposta la superbia e i ricchi panni...

Our earthly faults have rightly stirred your anger,
O Lord, with respect to our harmful sins;
But if our offenses exceed our griefs,
Your great goodness defeats all errors.
We each ask for your mercy, burdened with horror,
And put aside our pride and costly wares...¹²¹

In this poem, Colonna emphasized her views of God's mercy and forgiveness through the notion of an individual sinner repenting of their sin, an idea that was popular among spiritual reformist groups.¹²² Likewise, she constantly affirmed that it was through the goodness of God that sins are forgiven, not because of the power or intervention of the Catholic Church.¹²³

Colonna placed emphasis on her ideas about reform spirituality during her lifetime, but efforts to undermine her spiritual assertiveness and confidence after her death and following the Council of Trent in 1563, redefined her legacy.¹²⁴ Towards the end of her life, the Inquisition in Italy investigated Colonna's works for evidence of heresy, and some of her poems may have

¹²¹ Vittoria Colonna, "Poem 98. Love Wrapped me in so noble a flame," 1538. Cited in *Poems of Widowhood: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. by Ramie Targoff and Troy Tower (New York: Iter Press, 2021), 121.

¹²² Carinci, "L'inquieta Lucchese," 146.

¹²³ Simone Maghenzani, "The Protestant Reformation in Counter-Reformation Italy, c. 1550–1660: An Overview of New Evidence." *Church History* 83, no. 3 (2014): 574.

¹²⁴ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 39-43.

been blacklisted during the immediate aftermath of the Council of Trent.¹²⁵ Although Colonna's legacy has survived for many centuries, her dedication to spiritual reform is often understated in historical canon. Instead of being revered as a great spiritual author, Colonna was mainly recognized for her amorous poetry, rather than her religious authority and integration of reformist ideas into her poetry.¹²⁶ Many are more inclined to discuss her passionate friendship with Michelangelo, whose name she is most commonly synonymous with. However, this relationship, rather than defining her career, gave Colonna an opportunity to demonstrate her authority on religious subjects during her lifetime.¹²⁷

Colonna's long-lasting friendship with the artist began around the time of her first publication of *Rime* in 1538.¹²⁸ Michelangelo and Colonna corresponded through letters and their respective art forms throughout the remainder of Colonna's life and career. In a public sphere, Michelangelo sent Colonna various artistic renditions of biblical scenes, including the *Pietà*, or a drawing of a mourning Mary holding Jesus after his death on the cross.¹²⁹ In addition to responding to Michelangelo's work through letters, Colonna crafted a gift manuscript for Michelangelo, originally published in 1540, that included 103 sonnets, all in the *Rime Spirituali*¹³⁰ style. These sonnets were all spiritual reflections, initially dealing with earthly love, like her *Rime* in 1538, and ending with the beauty of eternal love and a final prayer to the Virgin Mary.¹³¹

¹²⁵ Targoff, "Introduction," 26-27.

¹²⁶ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 1-5.

¹²⁷ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 26-33

¹²⁸ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 26.

¹²⁹ Haskins, "Vittoria Colonna's Complaint of the Marchesa Di Pescara," 49.

¹³⁰ English: "Spiritual rhymes (or poems)."

¹³¹ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 33-39.

The sonnets that Colonna included in the gift manuscript to Michelangelo were also wrought with ideas of reform spirituality, as seen in sonnet 21, in which Colonna writes:

Onde con questi doni e questo ardire
Lo veggia non col mio ma col suo lume,
L'ami e ringratii col suo stesso amore.
Non saranno alor mie l'opre e 'l desire,
Ma lieve andrò con le celesti piume
Ove mi spinge e tira il santo ardore.

Thus, once armed with these gifts and this burning ardor,
I may behold him not through my own powers of vision but through his,
And may love and worship him through the power of his love for me.
Thus my deeds and desires will no longer be my own,
But lightly I will move upon celestial wings
Wherever the force of his holy love might fling me...¹³²

In this sonnet, Colonna once again demonstrated the assertion of her own ideas about spiritual reform in her writings, despite it being discouraged by the Catholic church. She challenged the long-standing Catholic belief that faith was attainable through works, and instead insinuated that she would rely on salvation and grace from God to grant her the ability to follow wherever her religious convictions would take her.¹³³ Not only was this revolutionary spiritual ideology for the

¹³² Vittoria Colonna, Sonnet 21. 1542, in *Sonnets for Michelangelo: A Bilingual Edition by Vittoria Colonna*, ed. and trans. Abigail Brundin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 73.

¹³³ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 35.

time, but it was also uncommon for women to write with such spiritual authority and conviction in the public domain.¹³⁴

Colonna's relationship with Michelangelo gave her the ability to exercise and develop her knowledge of reform spirituality and *sola fide* outside of a convent, where many female spiritual writings were limited.¹³⁵ Although she was presented as a humble and virtuous woman, it is clear that she was also writing rather authoritative and revolutionary poetry on spiritual topics.¹³⁶ She was revered by her contemporaries, including Michelangelo, who stated that she spoke with the voice of "a man within a woman, or rather a god."¹³⁷ Not only was Vittoria Colonna a prominent author, but her relationship with Michelangelo affirmed that he viewed her as an authoritative voice on spiritual matters.¹³⁸ Michelangelo did not view himself as her benefactor, as many sources seem to allude to, but instead constantly reaffirmed her skill and even further stated that "having listened to her, [I] have been made such that I'll never be my own again,"¹³⁹ showcasing his positive impression of her skill as an author.

Although her public image featured her as a submissive woman subject to the wishes of her male publishers and sponsors, her relationship with reform spirituality presented another image of her private life, one that showcased her as a confident and authoritative religious guide despite the restrictions placed upon her as a woman.¹⁴⁰ This image of Colonna, although it suffered due to the desire of her male contemporaries to display her as a divine and rare female

¹³⁴ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 35.

¹³⁵ King and Rabil, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series*, xxiv-xxv.

¹³⁶ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 33-39.

¹³⁷ Michelangelo Buonarroti, "Un uomo in una donna, anzi un dio," 235.

¹³⁸ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 28-29.

¹³⁹ Michelangelo Buonarroti, "Un uomo in una donna, anzi un dio," 235.

¹⁴⁰ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 28-29.

figure, is integral to understanding Colonna's character. The historical view of Colonna should not present her as inferior to her male connections, but rather as a woman who inspired and challenged them spiritually, transcending her social status as the inferior sex and contributing greatly to the intellectual development of reform spirituality.

“Illustrissima Signora Vittoria Colonna”¹⁴¹: Vittoria Colonna's contribution to distinctly female literature

Although some modern scholarship refers to Colonna as a protofeminist, many others regard her works simply as they appear at face value: a pious and humble woman expressing her devotion to religious works and living a quiet life.¹⁴² Regardless, Colonna impacted the ongoing trend of female authors and contributed to the increase of female agency and growing literary world around her.¹⁴³ Perhaps one of Colonna's most important contribution to the Early Modern world was her unique variation of the *rime spirituali* and *rime amoroze* style of poetry that became synonymous with women's literature after her career.¹⁴⁴ Vittoria Colonna defined her own poetry by emulating and working with the previous literary canon at the time while also advancing the stylistic and social ability that female authors were granted during 16th century Italy.

Even before the start of her official career, Colonna demonstrated a vast desire to create and manipulate previous literary styles to fit her own goals. Her first surviving work, a poem that is credited before the death of d'Avalos, followed Dante's *terza rima* scheme, which first

¹⁴¹ English: “The most renowned woman.” In Vittoria Colonna, *Le Rime Spirituali Della Illustrissima Signora Vittoria Colonna Marchesana di Pescara*. Vinegia: Alla Bottega D'erasmo; appresso vicenzo Vagrasi, 1548 (Courtesy of University of Arkansas, Fayetteville Special Collections Library).

¹⁴² Brundin, “Volume Editor's Introduction,” 41-43.

¹⁴³ Brundin, “Volume Editor's Introduction,” 35.

¹⁴⁴ Di Benedetto, “Un'introduzione al Petrarchismo Cinquecentesco,” 199.

appeared in the *Divine Comedy*.¹⁴⁵ The *terza rima* followed a strict rhyming scheme within a group of three lines. The outer lines of the group of three rhyme, and the inner line rhymes with the subsequent outer lines and so on. Because of this unique interdependence of every line in the stanza, this form was difficult to perfect because of its lack of flexibility when re-writing or adjusting, and many authors did not attempt to emulate it.¹⁴⁶ Although not much is known about Colonna's literary career before the death of d'Avalos, she was transcending the skill of even the most respected male authors, and transforming the style of Dante to compliment her own goals as an author, operating outside of what was common for female literacy at the time.¹⁴⁷

Although most of her poems in the 1538 *Rime* revolved around her husband and her mourning as a widow, Colonna also included many poems that glorified her relationship with God and focused on an expected eternal life with her beloved.¹⁴⁸ Writing poems about a beloved or to honor God was not uncommon during this time, and Colonna certainly used existent influences to inspire her own writings.¹⁴⁹ In her poetry, Colonna drew heavily upon the model of another famous Italian poet, Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), who became a favorite among the humanist writers of Colonna's time.¹⁵⁰ Petrarca, more commonly known by the anglicized name Petrarch, was widely revered because of his integral contribution to European lyric poetry in his work *Canzoniere*. This volume consisted of 366 poems, many of which were sonnets addressed to his beloved Laura, a woman who he had very little personal or realistic relationship with.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ Bassanese, "Vittoria Colonna's Man/God," 265.

¹⁴⁶ J. S. P. Tatlock, "Dante's Terza Rima," *PMLA* 51, no. 4 (1936): 895.

¹⁴⁷ Bassanese, "Vittoria Colonna's Man/God," 265.

¹⁴⁸ Targoff, "Introduction," 16-26.

¹⁴⁹ Ernest H. Wilkins, "A General Survey of Renaissance Petrarchism," *Comparative Literature* 2, no. 4 (1950): 327-42.

¹⁵⁰ Di Benedetto, "Un'introduzione al Petrarchismo Cinquecentesco," 199.

¹⁵¹ Targoff, "Introduction," 17.

Petrarch, like Colonna, even wrote amorous poetry after the death of his beloved.¹⁵² This style of devotion and admiration of female beauty and love, often unattainable, became a common style for many male writers the centuries following Petrarch's death. It was within this framework that Colonna began crafting her own *Rime*, adapting the styles of Petrarch to better relate to her status as a widowed woman.¹⁵³

Perhaps one of Colonna's most important contributions to Early Modern female writing was the creation of her *rime spirituali* style which she developed during her original *Rime* publication in 1538. The poems in this collection were wrought with laments over the fate of her husband and the desire for them to be reunited in the afterlife. Although described as "amorous", these poems did not celebrate earthly love and instead focused on the pain of losing a beloved and the pitiful life that follows.¹⁵⁴ Colonna started her collection with a poem about her grief that states, "I write only to vent my inward pain..."¹⁵⁵ and continued to communicate her passionate feelings about the tragedy in her life by creating and writing poetry. A reflection of her mourning was also apparent in poem 18, which read,

Un sol dardo pungente il petto offese,
Tal ch'ei riserba la piaga immortale
Per schermo, contra ogni amoroso impaccio.
Amor le faci spense, ove l'accese.
L'arco spezzò a l'aventar d'un strale;

¹⁵² Targoff, "Introduction," 17.

¹⁵³ Targoff, "Introduction," 16-26.

¹⁵⁴ Targoff, "Introduction," 17.

¹⁵⁵ Vittoria Colonna, "Poem 1. I write only to vent my inward pain," 1538, in *Poems of Widowhood: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Ramie Targoff and Troy Tower (New York: Iter Press, 2021), 39

Sciolse suoi nodi a l'annodar d'un laccio.

A single pungent arrow afflicts my breast
So that it keeps alive the immortal wound,
And shields all other love from entering
Love consumed the passion where once he lit it;
He broke the bow with his enduring shot,
Melted all other knots in tying this one..."¹⁵⁶

These verses, along with many others, were a testament to the depth of Colonna's affection for her husband. Poetry full of personal anecdotes and emotions became popularized in modern literature, however, the idea of writing about a dead husband, especially as a form of mourning in widowhood, was unprecedented for Colonna's time.¹⁵⁷

Petrarch included many poems about Laura's life after her death, yet he remained strictly within the sphere of earthly love and did not form a connection between his relationship with her on Earth and eternal life in heaven.¹⁵⁸ This connection was unique to Colonna's innovative blend of *rime spirituali* and *rime amorose*, which gained popularity immediately after her first collection of poems was published, especially among women.¹⁵⁹ Colonna's use of spiritual and earthly elements to transcend the boundaries of her love and devotion for d'Avalos was also present in her lack of an over-arching story throughout the entirety of her *Rime*. Although

¹⁵⁶ Vittoria Colonna, "Poem 18. Love Wrapped me in so noble a flame," 1538, in *Poems of Widowhood: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Ramie Targoff and Troy Tower (New York: Iter Press, 2021), 52-53.

¹⁵⁷ Targoff, "Introduction," 17.

¹⁵⁸ Targoff, "Introduction," 19.

¹⁵⁹ Di Benedetto, "Un'introduzione al Petrarchismo Cinquecentesco," 199.

published in a specific order, there is no evidence of the order in which Colonna composed her poems. This was very different than Petrarch who carried a story throughout the entirety of his *Canzoniere*. Colonna's ambiguity of the over-arching connection between each of her poems also contributed to her lack of boundaries between her earthly view of her love for d'Avalos and her view on their eternal marriage and heavenly life together.¹⁶⁰

In her *Rime*, Colonna used Petrarch's former stylistic ideas to fit her own sentiments. As a particularly religious woman, she diverged from purely earthly love to the praise and recognition of heavenly love. Throughout her *Rime*, she constantly related her relationship with God to her relationship with d'Avalos. In poem 138, Colonna discussed her relationship with d'Avalos in heavenly terms, stating,

Da Dio mandata, Angelica mia scorta
Volgi per dritto calle al Ciel la mente;
Et quando l'alma al suo cader consente
Repiglia il freno, e 'l piè lasso conforta,
Sì ch'è la Nozze eterne non sia morta
Ogni mia luce; ma con lampa ardente
Chiamata dal signor saggia e prudente,
Aperta al giunger mio trovi la porta.

My angelic escort, sent from God,
Turn my mind onto the straight path to heaven,
And when my soul consents to its own fall,

¹⁶⁰ Targoff, "Introduction," 21.

Take the reins and comfort my weary feet,
So that at the eternal marriage
My light is not spent, but with a burning lamp
Deemed wise and prudent by the Lord above,
I find the door open to receive me...¹⁶¹

In this poem, Colonna revered her late husband as a spiritual guide that would eventually lead her to eternity with God. This idea, of a lover as a spiritual guide, was famously seen in Dante's *Divine Comedy* when the poet and sinner is led by Beatrice through heaven.¹⁶² However, instead of choosing a figure that was unattainable and relatively removed from her, like Beatrice was to Dante, Vittoria Colonna chose to honor her husband by envisioning what their relationships would look like in heaven. In this way, Colonna stressed both the human and spiritual aspects of her and d'Avalos's love and diverged from the writers, like Petrarch and Dante, that came before her, blending the styles of her *rime spirituali* and *rime amorose*.¹⁶³

Another main diversion, and perhaps the most influential one, that Colonna made from her original model of Petrarch's works was the reversal of gender roles within her *Rime*.¹⁶⁴ In Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, and many other works that followed the same style, praise of female beauty and chastity was stressed, particularly in relation to invented, or heavily glorified, lovers.¹⁶⁵ In her *Rime*, Colonna followed a similar structure, but instead of illuminating feminine beauty, she focused her admiration for the male valor and strength, qualities she admired during

¹⁶¹ Vittoria Colonna, "Poem 138. My angelic escort, sent from God," 1538, in *Poems of Widowhood: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Ramie Targoff and Troy Tower (New York: Iter Press, 2021), 155.

¹⁶² Tatlock, "Dante's Terza Rima," 895.

¹⁶³ Targoff, "Introduction," 16-26.

¹⁶⁴ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 19.

¹⁶⁵ Tatlock, "Dante's Terza Rima," 895.

her husband's earthly life.¹⁶⁶ Colonna offered much praise and admiration of her deceased husband, like in poem 5 of her *Rime*, which stated:

Larghi fiumi, alti monti, alme Cittadi,
Da l'ardir tuo fur debellati e vinte.
Salisti al mondo in più pregiati gradi,
Hor godi in Ciel d'altri triomphi veri,
D'altre frondi le tempie ornate e cinte.

The wide rivers, high mountains, rich cities,
Were all crushed by the sheer force of your strength.
In this world you climbed the loftiest peak,
In heaven you enjoy greater triumphs,
Your temples adorned with the finest laurels.¹⁶⁷

In this poem, Colonna used classic imagery, like the laurel crown, to communicate her adoration of d'Avalos. The use of the laurel crown as a symbol of admiration was used by Petrarch in his poetry, often when honoring his beloved Laura.¹⁶⁸ Although Colonna praised d'Avalos for masculine traits, such as strength and valor, she also used the symbol of the laurel to honor him, which was a typically feminine trope. In this way, she was tweaking the poetic styles of well-known male authors to write on issues and sentiments specifically experienced by women.

¹⁶⁶ Targoff, "Introduction," 21.

¹⁶⁷ Vittoria Colonna, "Poem 5. For your victories, my eternal light," 1538. Cited in *Poems of Widowhood: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Ramie Targoff and Troy Tower (New York: Iter Press, 2021), 43.

¹⁶⁸ Ramie Targoff, "Notes on the English Text." In *Poems of Widowhood: A Bilingual Edition by Vittoria Colonna*, ed. and trans. by Ramie Targoff and Troy Tower (New York: Iter Press, 2021), 173.

Colonna did not invent an entirely new writing style, but the way she used the poetic influences of Petrarch and Dante created a new medium for other women, particularly widowed women, to express their emotions through written work, contributing to the eventual rise in female authors after Colonna's time.¹⁶⁹ In addition to her contributions of the development of the *rime spirituali* and *rime amorose* style, Colonna also seemed to have a growing interest in women's roles in authoritative positions and relation with each other, themes that she conveyed in her religious writings.

Colonna is most remembered for her relationship with men, however, in her religious works she often focused on the lives and faiths of biblical women and used this to inspire the contemporary women around her. Vittoria Colonna devoted much of her religious works on the Virgin Mary and her role in biblical canon. As the mother of Jesus, the virgin provided an example of a woman who was heavily devoted to religion, and was sometimes even seen as equally important to God.¹⁷⁰ As a perpetual virgin in many doctrines, she was also an ideal figure for women to aspire to be.¹⁷¹ Although Vittoria Colonna was known for her piety and humility in the public sphere, she actively created a version of the Virgin Mary that acted as a female spiritual leader in her work entitled *Pianto della Marchesa di Pescara sopra la passione di*

¹⁶⁹ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 39-43.

¹⁷⁰ Susan Haskins, "Volume Editor's Introduction," in *Who Is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, ed. and trans. Susan Haskins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4-5.

¹⁷¹ Helen Hills, "Cities and Virgins: Female Aristocratic Convents in Early Modern Naples and Palermo." *Oxford Art Journal* 22 no. 1 (1999): 34

*Christo*¹⁷², originally published after her death in 1547.¹⁷³ Colonna used her *Pianto* to highlight the emotional connection between Mary and Jesus as mother and son, and used this to demonstrate her own personal and emotional connection to religion and theology, as well as making an overarching statement about the role of women within church and society.¹⁷⁴

In *Pianto*, Colonna centered her analysis of the Virgin Mary through the traditional scene of the Pietà, or Mary mourning over Jesus after his death on the cross.¹⁷⁵ This work could have even been a direct reflection of the drawing of a Pietà given to her by Michelangelo.¹⁷⁶ In her reflection of this particular artwork, or perhaps a more broad reflection on the famous scene, Colonna emphasized the intense emotions she envisioned the Virgin Mary experiencing and stated, “I believe that the Queen of Heaven mourned Him in many ways: first as a human being, seeing his most beautiful body, created from her own flesh, entirely torn... and his hands; which had blessed her as her Lord, and served her as a son, wounded.”¹⁷⁷ In this work, Colonna emphasized Mary’s earthly relationship as a mother to Jesus, while also highlighting her status as a woman devoted to following God.¹⁷⁸ Using a prominent female figure, Colonna crafted an account of the death of Christ that showcased an emotional connection with Jesus, something that Colonna herself took great stake in throughout her own religious life. Although she was

¹⁷² English: “The Pliant of the Marchesa Di Pescara on the Passion of Christ,” Vittoria Colonna, “Pliant of The Marchesa di Pescara on the Passion of Christ,” 1557. in *Who Is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, ed. and trans. Susan Haskins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 53-65

¹⁷³ Susan Haskins, “Vittoria Colonna’s Plaint of the Marchesa Di Pescara on the Passion of Christ: Editor’s Introduction.” In *Who Is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, ed. and trans. Susan Haskins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 47-53.

¹⁷⁴ Haskins, “Vittoria Colonna’s Plaint of the Marchesa Di Pescara on the Passion of Christ: Editor’s Introduction,” 49.

¹⁷⁵ Vittoria Colonna, “Pliant of The Marchesa di Pescara on the Passion of Christ,” 53-65.

¹⁷⁶ Haskins, “Vittoria Colonna’s Plaint,” 49.

¹⁷⁷ Vittoria Colonna, “Pliant of The Marchesa di Pescara on the Passion of Christ,” 55.

¹⁷⁸ Vittoria Colonna, “Pliant of The Marchesa di Pescara on the Passion of Christ,” 53-65.

praised for her amorous poetry, the lesser known, spiritual works of Colonna demonstrated her ideas about spiritual reform and female spirituality, a facet of her life that was often disregarded in favor of her humanistic and idealistic feminine public image.¹⁷⁹

In addition to the Virgin Mary, Colonna wrote about other women in the Bible to showcase the importance of women in Jesus's ministry. Colonna devoted much of her public and private works to the semi-controversial character of Mary Magdalene. In her personal life, Colonna wrote a letter sometime between 1535 and 1542 to her friend and spiritual mentor, Orchino about her admiration of Mary Magdalene. In this letter, she honored the former prostitute, stating, "In her [Magdalene's] case it can be seen clearly, rather (and it is an even greater thing), we should take it as certain, that she lived a blessed life on earth, absolved from all past sins, and [was] certain that she would never again be condemned, nor be capable of sinning in the future."¹⁸⁰ Colonna also claimed that Mary Magdalene "did not boldly ask of anything, but like a true convert, illumined and perfected, she abandoned herself entirely to Christ and thought nothing of herself; she modeled her will to the Lord's,"¹⁸¹ a bold assertion of Magdalene's faith, especially as a controversial figure because of her background in prostitution and sexual immorality.¹⁸² In her private letters, she clearly believed that women had the innate

¹⁷⁹ Haskins, "Vittoria Colonna's Plaint," 47-53.

¹⁸⁰ Vittoria Colonna, To Bernardino Ochino, c.1535-1542, letter, in *Selected Letters, 1523-1546: A Bilingual Edition by Vittoria Colonna*, ed. Veronica Copello, trans. Abigail Brundin (New York: Iter Press, 2022), 125.

¹⁸¹ Vittoria Colonna, To Bernardino Ochino, 125.

¹⁸² Brundin, Abigail, and Veronica Copello. "Letter 27: [1535-1542] To Bernardino Ochino" In *Selected Letters, 1523-1546: A Bilingual Edition by Vittoria Colonna*, ed. Veronica Copello, trans. Abigail Brundin (New York: Iter Press, 2022): 124.

ability to follow Christ wholeheartedly, despite the common view that women were more prone to sin because of their inherent nature due to Eve's original sin.¹⁸³

In addition to honoring specific women like Mary Magdalene, Colonna also used female religious characters in *Pianto* to comment on the role of women in society as leaders and religious figures. After writing extensively about the emotions that the Virgin Mary felt while she held the newly deceased Christ, Colonna listed off some of the male followers of Christ who did not show the same faith and dedication that Mary and the other women who helped bury Jesus did.¹⁸⁴ She included a section that called out various disciples and challenged them to express the same emotions and reverence that she believed Mary and other female followers experienced.¹⁸⁵ Colonna most notably called upon Lazarus in a direct comparison to his sister Mary by asserting that “ [Lazarus] does not understand that his sweetest sister, a woman and weak, surpasses him in courage and love, precedes him in gratitude, and is superior to him in all virtues.”¹⁸⁶ In this passage, Colonna acknowledged that the common view of women at her time was “weak”. By honoring Mary's faith over Lazarus's, Colonna made a bold claim that women, although viewed as weak, were capable of faith and devotion that rivaled men.¹⁸⁷ Although she was promoted to the public as a pious, humble, and an almost “weak” woman, Colonna was going against her curated image to convey her own views in these religious works.

In addition, at the end of *Pianto*, Colonna again pointed to the faith and devotion that the Virgin Mary possessed. Colonna mentioned the role that she believed Mary held in Christ's inner

¹⁸³ King and Rabil, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series*, xxiv-xxv.

¹⁸⁴ Vittoria Colonna, “Pliant of The Marchesa di Pescara on the Passion of Christ,” 53-65.

¹⁸⁵ Vittoria Colonna, “Pliant of The Marchesa di Pescara on the Passion of Christ,” 57.

¹⁸⁶ Vittoria Colonna, “Pliant of The Marchesa di Pescara on the Passion of Christ,” 58.

¹⁸⁷ Haskins, “Vittoria Colonna's Plaint,” 47-53.

circle by envisioning what the virgin did after the death of Christ. Instead of wallowing, Colonna claimed that, “she [Mary] alone had to thank Joseph, satisfy John, [and] comfort [Mary] Magdalene.”¹⁸⁸ Colonna concluded that Mary did not lose faith or succumb to ingratitude like many other followers of Jesus, but instead, “she thanked the Holy Spirit who, through extraordinarily love, made her delight in this suffering.”¹⁸⁹ In this way, not only did Colonna highlight the importance of the Virgin Mary in religious contexts, but also presented her as a female character with authority over other believers. In this way, Colonna made a statement about the viability of women as leaders in a religious setting.¹⁹⁰

Although Colonna did not write a distinct argument on the role of women in the church and society, the examples that she chose to include within her works showcased her contributions to a woman’s place within a religious and social context. Later in her life, she would be described as “*Illustrissima Signora Vittoria Colonna*,”¹⁹¹ a title that inherently distinguished her from other woman in an idealized way. However, despite the efforts of men to separate her from other women, Colonna continuously related her religious experience to the women of the Bible, rather than any of the apostles. In this way, she showcased continuous solidarity to female characters, a practice that would continue to inspire many women after her time. Although nuns had been doing this within their own convents, Colonna was one of the first women in Italy to move these ideas from a small circle to a worldwide audience.¹⁹² Her positioning of the Virgin Mary as a spiritual leader was also revolutionary at a time when women were purely viewed as playing supportive and submissive roles within the context of religion.

¹⁸⁸ Vittoria Colonna, “Pliant of The Marchesa di Pescara on the Passion of Christ,” 63.

¹⁸⁹ Vittoria Colonna, “Pliant of The Marchesa di Pescara on the Passion of Christ,” 63.

¹⁹⁰ Haskins, “Vittoria Colonna’s Plaint,” 47-53.

¹⁹¹ Vittoria Colonna, *Le Rime Spirituali*, 1.

¹⁹² Brundin, “Volume Editor’s Introduction,” 39-43.

Chapter 2:

Chiara Matraini

Introduction

Chiara Matraini published during the latter half of the 16th century. Female authors, like Vittoria Colonna, were becoming more mainstream during this time, but Matraini still faced inequality based on her sex, and dealt with challenges unique to her gender. Although much modern historical study on female authors during this time is devoted to Colonna, Matraini enjoyed vast success during her life and career. However, modern scholarship on Matraini is limited, especially in the English language.¹⁹³ In many instances, Matraini is mentioned only briefly alongside Colonna's legacy, or in a long list of other female authors.¹⁹⁴ Very rarely does historical study devote proper attention to Matraini's life and career, and many assume, because of her use of the *rime spirituali* and *rime amorose* style, that her impact was virtually the same as Colonna's. Although Matraini used Colonna's works as an inspiration for her early poetry, there are many facets of Matraini's life, reputation, and career that set her apart from Vittoria Colonna.¹⁹⁵ Matraini's lack of unique recognition is another example of the inadequate documentation of Early Modern women, and this work argues, through the study of Matraini's private life, controversial public image, religious views, and contributions to distinctly feminine literature, that Matraini developed female literary tradition in a unique and distinctive way.

¹⁹³ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 1-2.

¹⁹⁴ Benedetto, "Un'introduzione al Petrarchismo Cinquecentesco," 199.

¹⁹⁵ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 1-32.

“Gentildonna Lucchese”¹⁹⁶: Chiara Matraini as an Italian woman

A native of Lucca, Matraini belonged to a wealthy family, and her duties as a woman, much like all upper-class women, included a proper marriage that ensured a comfortable and connected life for herself and the male members of her family.¹⁹⁷ After the death of her father in 1516, Matraini’s uncle, Rodolfo di Giovanni Matraini, took custody of her and began plans to create an advantageous match for Chiara.¹⁹⁸ In 1530, when Chiara was fourteen, he secured a marriage between her and Vincenzo Cantarini, and the two were married, with a hefty dowry of 300 *scudi*,¹⁹⁹ a year later.²⁰⁰ Matraini’s social status in Lucca was reflected under her first published title, *Rime et Prose*, as “Gentildonna Lucchese,”²⁰¹ a name that connected her to the city of Lucca, and her relatively respected social standing.²⁰² Although Matraini came from a prominent family of cloth dyers, the Matraini family had a complicated reputation that culminated in Matraini’s childhood when her male family members organized an unsuccessful political revolt against the government system in Lucca. These revolutionaries attempted to change the oligarchic system and give more political power to middle class families in the city.²⁰³ The revolt ultimately failed, and many of Matraini’s family members were subjected to harsh punishments.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁶ English: “Gentlewoman of Lucca.” In Chiara Matraini, “Rime et Prose di Madonna Chiara Matraini,” In *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini*, edited and translated by Elaine MacLachlan, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 40.

¹⁹⁷ Cohen, “Evolving the History of Women in Early Modern Italy,” 344-46.

¹⁹⁸ Acucella, *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, 16.

¹⁹⁹ A *scudi* was an Italian gold coin used in Early Modern Italy, worth the equivalent to around 96 cents each.

²⁰⁰ Acucella, *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, 16.

²⁰¹ Matraini, “Rime et Prose di Madonna Chiara Matraini,” 40.

²⁰² Matraini, “Rime et Prose di Madonna Chiara Matraini,” 40.

²⁰³ Acucella, *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, 16.

²⁰⁴ Acucella, *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, 16.

This event created mass shame and the sudden downfall of the Matraini family's public image in their hometown of Lucca.²⁰⁵ Due to her family's political losses and eventual disgrace, records before the start of Matraini's literary career are scarce.²⁰⁶ Her family's fall from grace also contributed to her inability to gain a formal education.²⁰⁷ In many cases, these events would have corrupted an Early Modern woman's ability to contribute to Italian society, especially because Matraini had no formal humanist education. However, despite these setbacks, Matraini used the developing female literary styles in the 16th century to gain independence and experiment with her own version of popular poetic styles. Because Vittoria Colonna's poems were already widely circulated by the time Matraini was in her twenties, Matraini most certainly read Colonna's poems, and transformed them to model her own unique experience as a woman in the latter half of the 16th century.²⁰⁸

Matraini initially encountered feminine literature due to the wide circulation of Colonna's poems. Two decades after the original publication of Colonna's 1538 *Rime*, numerous women were entering the public sphere as aspiring authors, creating a community of female intellectuals across Italy.²⁰⁹ Many of them, including Matraini, borrowed stylistic structures directly from Colonna.²¹⁰ However, similarity in structure should not be equated with similarity in intention or influence. The works of Matraini should be studied with an acknowledgement of the influence of Colonna, but without neglecting Matraini's own unique contributions to the development of distinctly female literary tradition. At the beginning of her career, her first publication in Lucca,

²⁰⁵ Acucella, *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, 16.

²⁰⁶ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 5.

²⁰⁷ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 4.

²⁰⁸ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 23-29.

²⁰⁹ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 39-43.

²¹⁰ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 23-29.

the 1555 *Rime et Prose*, showcased Colonna's direct influence on Matraini, particularly in Matraini's subject material of mourning a lost love.²¹¹ However, even in these early poems, Matraini was diverging from her predecessor in style and content.

Matraini's early marriage carried little significance on her life and career, and records have concluded that by 1533, Matraini had a son named Federigo, and in 1542, at the age of 27, she was a widow.²¹² Not much is known about her feelings surrounding the death of her husband, but later in life, she had a noted affair with a man named Bartolomeo Graziani, whom she shared a house with in Lucca.²¹³ Matraini's time as the partner of Bartolomeo Graziani was fruitful for her career and intellectual development.²¹⁴ During her time living with Graziani, she gained numerous connections that eventually promoted and advanced her career, however, she was not officially published until 1555, after tragedy struck.²¹⁵ Due to reparations from his affair with Matraini, Graziani was murdered sometime between 1547 and 1553, leaving Matraini without a partner once again.²¹⁶ Although she was widowed previously, the death of Graziani affected her drastically, and through these events, and her mourning, she developed her first work, *Rime et Prose*, in 1555.²¹⁷

From an early age, Matraini gained independence as a widow. Although widowed women were encouraged to remarry or join a convent, guidelines on the conduct of widows were relatively undefined compared to the guidelines surrounding marriage.²¹⁸ After the very

²¹¹ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 23-29.

²¹² Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 5.

²¹³ Acucella, *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, 16.

²¹⁴ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 7.

²¹⁵ Acucella, *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, 16.

²¹⁶ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 6.

²¹⁷ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 6.

²¹⁸ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 5.

publicized career of Colonna, widowhood presented another opportunity for aspiring female authors to follow Colonna's literary example and express their own emotions and stories through published poetry.²¹⁹ While many women, like Matraini, used Colonna's example to initially inspire their publications, it is important to understand the unique ways in which these women applied themselves to the literary world.

Following the style that Colonna's poetry made popular among women, Matraini employed the style of Petrarch, glorifying the life and death of her beloved Graziani.²²⁰ Matraini was also affected and inspired by Pietro Bembo's *Canzoniere*, which she imitated extensively in her early poems.²²¹ Inspired by Colonna's transformation of previous male-dominated poetic styles, Matraini's her poems were highly autobiographical, a deviation from the almost figurative love highlighted in poetry by Petrarch and other men.²²² Matraini's *Rime et Prose* was a collection of poems about the life and death of Graziani, and was obviously reminiscent of Colonna's blend of spiritual and earthly love.²²³ Matraini stated in song 82 of her collection's first volume of,

Dinanzi al tuo apparir, doglia e tormento
spariva, come al sol sparisce ogn'ombra,
e rallegravi il cor, sì com'ei suole
far doppio poggia; or fosca nebbia ingombra
de' più foschi pensieri ogni momento
l'alma, che senza te nell'altro vuole;

²¹⁹ Di Benedetto, "Un'introduzione al Petrarchismo Cinquecentesco," 199.

²²⁰ Wilkins, "A General Survey of Renaissance Petrarchism," 327–42.

²²¹ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 23.

²²² Di Benedetto, "Un'introduzione al Petrarchismo Cinquecentesco," 199.

²²³ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 23.

e quell'ond'or via più m'afflige e duole,
è ch'io non posso o debbo ancor morire,
dubitando da te farmi più lunge.

When you first appeared, grief and torment
Disappeared, as the sun makes every shadow vanish,
And you made my heart rejoice, as the sun
Makes everything glad after rain; now
a dark fog of troublesome thoughts burdens
my soul, which wants nothing but you;
and what now still torments and grieves me most
is that I cannot and must not yet die,
fearing that I would make myself more distant from you...²²⁴

In this poem, Matraini's grief was boldly expressed, and she utilized the *rime amoroze* style to mourn her loss of love. Matraini's poetry seemed dire at first glance, and she even included an idealization of suicide in the last line. However, Matraini's contemporary audience would have realized that Matraini was presenting her hopes for an eternal life with her lover in heaven, thus blending the *rime spirituali* and *rime amoroze* styles.²²⁵ Suicide due to lost love was a common trope for literary women²²⁶, but Matraini asserted in the last lines of this poem that suicide would

²²⁴ Chiara Matraini, "Song (A 82)," 1556, in *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini*, ed. and trans. Elaine MacLachlan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 86-87.

²²⁵ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 10-17.

²²⁶ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 28-29.

only separate her further from Graziani, a common notion due to the condemnation of suicide in the *Divine Comedy*.²²⁷

In many ways, Matraini's writing style and amorous verse showcased the influential impact that Colonna had on her work. Because Colonna is often viewed as the most important Early Modern Italian female author, many women, including Matraini, have been included in historical canon only to further demonstrate the impact of Colonna. However, even in her earliest works, Matraini was attempting to further the stylistic development of distinctly female poetry in a unique way, separate from Colonna's previous actions. Matraini did not separate her poems between Graziani's life and death, which was popular with male authors like Petrarch and Bembo at the time. These men typically separated their love between *in vita*²²⁸ and *in morte*²²⁹, overly glorifying women as pseudo-angels in death.²³⁰ Even Colonna still heavily relied on Petrarch's original style, and still made *in vita* and *in morte* distinctions in her *Rime*.²³¹

Matraini used the inspiration of Colonna, Bembo and Petrarch in her own writing, but ultimately crafted her own poetry with no separation between *in vita* and *in morte*. Instead, she focused on an overarching emotional journey of love and loss, both earthly and eternal, eventually developing this into new and innovative style of amorous poetry.²³² Despite this, Matraini was often seen as a woman who simply emulated the style of others that came before her.²³³ Although she certainly used inspiration from previously published poems throughout her

²²⁷ In the divine comedy, Dante condemns people who died by suicide to a life in hell in Canto 13. Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 40-43.

²²⁸ English: "In life." (Poems during the life of a lover).

²²⁹ English: "In death." (Poems after the life of the lover).

²³⁰ Wilkins, "A General Survey of Renaissance Petrarchism," 327-42.

²³¹ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 23.

²³² Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 23.

²³³ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 1-32.

life, viewing her career as imitation severely undervalues the way that she changed existing literature. In addition to the comparison of Colonna and Matraini's poetry, it is important to not view these women's lives and impact as the same. The most drastic difference between Colonna and Matraini was Matraini's controversial public reputation.²³⁴ Colonna was quite unique in the dedication to her "divine" and un-attainable reputation, and Matraini's reputation, which was far from upright, demonstrated how their careers had different outcomes based on the influence of their public audience and the pressures from their male benefactors and their society.

"Una Disonesta Donna"²³⁵: Chiara Matraini in the public sphere

Matraini's family already had a negative public image in Lucchese society. In her adolescence, Chiara Matraini seemed to escape the public disgrace of the failed rebellion. However, after the death of her husband, and the start of her affair with Graziani, Chiara Matraini quickly fell from positive public opinion.²³⁶ Widowed women were given some independence in Italy, however, even after Colonna published her *Rime*, the public consensus was that women needed male authority in all aspects of their lives, lest they succumb to feminine sin.²³⁷ During her affair with Graziani, Matraini received much backlash from men who believed she was engaging in improper conduct for a widowed woman. This negativity holistically altered Matraini's life, and her career suffered greatly because of her reputation.²³⁸ However, unlike Colonna who remained unattached from the status of her career, Matraini actively engaged with

²³⁴ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 29-32.

²³⁵ English: "A wicked woman." Cited in Anonymous. "Vita di Gherardo Sergiusti P.L. celebre di Gherardo Diceo." In Acucella, Cristina. Introduzione di *Lettere e Rime*, di Chiara Matraini (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2018), 17.

²³⁶ Acucella, *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, 16.

²³⁷ Sanson, "Widowhood and Conduct," 7.

²³⁸ Acucella, *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, 16.

the men who looked down upon her.²³⁹ The way that her personal life affected her career not only showcased deviance from Colonna's life, but also illuminated the gendered challenges that women faced in public Italian society.

It is important to note that there were some that viewed Matraini's life in a positive way and applauded her for her contribution to the growing intellectual society in Lucca. One of these sources came from Pietro Pera's *Miscellanea Lucchese*, which stated "besides poetry, Matraini delighted in music and played the spinet and sang very pleasantly, so that the youths of Lucca, attracted by her gracefulness, went to converse in her house... which caused a lot of murmuring and slander, since the contemporary habit of free conversation was unknown in those days."²⁴⁰ However, these opinions were not the common opinion, and many citizens of Lucca had a negative view of Matraini, even before the start of her official career.²⁴¹

The most coherent source available on Matraini's affair comes from an anonymous town chronicle titled *Life of Prof. Gherardo Sergiusti famous under the name of Gherardo Diceo*, which detailed the affair between Graziani and Matraini. This text naturally gained wide public attention in Lucca for its scandalous depiction of Matraini, who was a relatively recognized woman among intellectual circles at the time.²⁴² The chronicle stated that "[Graziani] began a love affair with a dishonest woman of the family 'Matraini' who worked as a poetess."²⁴³ Further in the text, Matraini was also described as a "wicked widow" who demanded that

²³⁹ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 3.

²⁴⁰ Pietro Pera, "Miscellanea Lucchese" In *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini*, ed., and trans. by Elaine MacLachlan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 6.

²⁴¹ Acucella, *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, 17.

²⁴² Anonymous. "Vita di Gherardo Sergiusti P.L. celebre di Gherardo Diceo." In Acucella, Cristina. *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, di Chiara Matraini (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2018), 17.

²⁴³ Anonymous. "Vita di Gherardo Sergiusti P.L. celebre di Gherardo Diceo." 17.

Graziani “establish within his house [an academy where] not only during all hours of the day, but also the night, they laughed and made jokes, used foul language thousands of times, and engaged in an infinite number of indecent things.”²⁴⁴ These depictions, although biased, did not provide a positive image of Matraini to the people of Lucca, a factor that led her to specifically address these negative comments in the first edition of *Rime et Prose*, indicating that her public image was already an issue before the beginning of her official career.

The importance of proper conduct and public image was integral to women in 16th century Italy. For Colonna, this set her apart as a goddess-like figure.²⁴⁵ For Matraini, this seemed to restrict her in various ways. However, the main difference between Colonna and Matraini was that Matraini intentionally addressed her image and negative reputation. Unlike Colonna, who took no personal claim over her work and maintained an image of distanced chastity, Matraini’s career was highly personal, and she used it as a platform to defend herself, and other women, in the public sphere. In the last section of her first edition of *Rime et Prose*, she included a letter addressing the complaints of a person solely referred to as “M.L.”.²⁴⁶ Although the identity of “M.L.” remains unknown, Matraini was most likely addressing a man, or group of people, that were spreading negative claims about her career and upbringing. Matraini began the letter by addressing M.L.’s claim that it was improper for her to be writing poetry because she was “a woman not of the noblest blood.”²⁴⁷ Matraini quickly refuted this by stating, “I come not from an ignorable family nor poor and lowborn ancestors (as you have

²⁴⁴ Anonymous. “Vita di Gherardo Sergiusti P.L. celebre di Gherardo Diceo.” 17.

²⁴⁵ Brundin, “Volume Editor’s Introduction,” 39-43.

²⁴⁶ Chiara Matraini, “Letter [to M.L.],” 1556. In *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini*, edited and translated by Elaine MacLachlan, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 102-105.

²⁴⁷ Matraini, “Letter [to M.L.],” 102.

reason to know), but from famous blood.”²⁴⁸ Although Matraini’s family had been defamed for their participation in political scandals, she obviously took pride in her paternal family name and upbringing, claiming this boldly, and unusually, for a woman. Chiara Matraini retained her paternal name throughout the entirety of her life, further demonstrating her loyalty to her family and legitimizing her role in public society, despite the many negative connotations associated with her name.²⁴⁹

In addition to defending her family name and craft, Matraini specifically defended her right as a woman to publish literature. Instead of relying on public image and male publicity like Colonna, Matraini specifically defended her innate ability and talent for literary craft, forsaking the usual humility and modesty that was expected of women. In her letter to M.L., Matraini simply stated that she was “blessed with a great soul,”²⁵⁰ and this explained her poetic talent. Rather than invoking humility or piety, Matraini insinuated that she should be respected based on her merit, rather than adherence to the male-centric view of female authors. The focus that Matraini placed upon her inherent ability to become writer was important because many female authors were the product of wealthy male sponsors and benefactors.²⁵¹ Although Matraini did have support from famous male influences, such as Benedetto Varchi, Lodovico Dolce, and Lodovico Dominichi, she gave explicit credit to her own talent and defended her own image passionately.²⁵²

Matraini also differed substantially from other female authors because of her assertive defense of amorous poetry. Instead of relying on male influences to introduce the legitimacy of

²⁴⁸ Matraini, “Letter [to M.L.],” 102.

²⁴⁹ Acucella, *Introduzione di Lettere e Rime*, 16.

²⁵⁰ Matraini, “Letter [to M.L.],” 102.

²⁵¹ Carinci, “L’inquieta Lucchese,” 159-160.

²⁵² Rabitti, “Volume Introduction,” 7.

her work, Matraini dedicated a large portion of her letter to M.L. to defending the increasingly feminine tradition of amorous poetry. In her letter, Matraini stated, “Love, with useful reins and helpful spurs, turns and pushes us on the way of honor and health, making us always audacious in honorable undertakings, steadfast in following them, and prudent in maintaining them.”²⁵³ After Colonna’s *Rime* in 1538, amorous poetry became widely dominated by female authors.²⁵⁴ Thus, Matraini was not only using this letter to defend her own talent with the pen, but also to defend female literacy. Matraini used this letter to communicate her view that amorous poetry, and feminine themes of love, were noble and virtuous. This varied greatly from the common view that women, especially those in the intellectual public, were purveyors of sexual immorality.²⁵⁵

Towards the end of this letter, Matraini further emphasized the importance of writing about love by framing it within the common trope of devotion to God.²⁵⁶ Although Matraini’s poems centered around her scandalous affair with Graziani, she argued that the main subject matter pointed to worship and devotion towards God. At the end of her letter to M.L., she claimed that “Love is the one who, enlightening our minds, shows us not only the true road to honor but that of Heaven, our final, desired aim, so that, stealing away from us these fleeting and earthly beauties that are always changing, little by little, sweetly, with the wings of the mind, we are raised to Heaven.”²⁵⁷ Thus, Matraini also employed religious sentiment to defend her right as an author in Lucca.

²⁵³ Matraini, “Letter [to M.L.],” 104.

²⁵⁴ Brundin, “Volume Editor’s Introduction,” 39-43.

²⁵⁵ King and Rabil, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series*, xi-xxx.

²⁵⁶ Wilkins, “A General Survey of Renaissance Petrarchism,” 327-42.

²⁵⁷ Matraini, “Letter [to M.L.],” 105.

In her letter to M.L. at the end of this edition, Matraini diverged significantly to what other women were contributing to the female Italian literary tradition. In much historical canon, Chiara Matraini is mentioned as if she purely imitated Colonna.²⁵⁸ However, as this letter demonstrates, Matraini took great personal stake in her career and publicly defended her status as a female author by highlighting her talent and taking ownership of her family name. Although this letter did not change the controversial nature of her career, which succumbed to further criticism during the Counter-Reformation, it gave her readers a clear understanding of how she personally viewed her role as a female author. This perspective was often missing from other female authors who, like Colonna, preferred to stay out of public discourse, and was a large step towards progressing female agency in 16th century Italy that should not be undervalued in modern discussion.

“La seconda parte delle rime”²⁵⁹: Chiara Matraini and spirituality

Although Matraini was passionately defending her career and autonomy as a female author in her *Rime et Prose*, her negative reputation and other outside influences changed her original rhetorical position. Later in her career, she was confined to the image of a pious and humble woman, and in later editions of her work, the letter to M.L. was omitted.²⁶⁰ Matraini’s rhetorical switch was due to a variety of factors. After the Council of Trent in the late 1560s, much of Matraini’s influences who had been heavily intertwined with reform spirituality, such as Colonna, suddenly faced much criticism and condemnation.²⁶¹ In addition, the principle of

²⁵⁸ Benedetto, “Un’introduzione al Petrarchismo Cinquecentesco,” 199.

²⁵⁹ English” “The second part (or second rendition) of the poems.” In *Lettere di Madonna Chiara Matraini Gentildonna Lucchese, 1597*, in *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini*, edited and translated by Elaine MacLachlan, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 132.

²⁶⁰ Rabitti, “Volume Introduction”, 9.

²⁶¹ Targoff, “Introduction,” 27.

virginity as a virtue was re-emphasized by the Council of Trent, creating increased hostility towards widowed women.²⁶² Matraini's previous affairs undoubtedly drew much criticism and suspicion as she grew older. Although her entire 1555 *Rime et Prose* was included in an important anthology edited by the renowned Lodovico Dolce, titled *Rime di diversi signori napoletani e d'altri*, her works were omitted from later anthologies.²⁶³ During her affair with Graziani, she gained many influential male sponsors who originally promoted her career because of the increased popularity of female poets after the success of Colonna.²⁶⁴ However, due to her controversial public reception, she lost the support of Lodovico Dominiche, one of her most influential male benefactors, and he did not include any of her works in his 1559 *Rime diverse d'alcune nobilissime et virtuossime donne*, the first anthology exclusively featuring women.²⁶⁵ Because Dominiche was a close acquaintance of Matraini, this would have been an obvious snub.²⁶⁶ This event drastically slowed Matraini's career, and she did not publish again until 1581.²⁶⁷

Matraini's original publication of *Rime et Prose* suffered drastically after the last session of the Council of Trent in 1563.²⁶⁸ This council focused on issues of Christian canon, morality, and unity in the Catholic Church by directly disputing the popular ideas of reformation preachers like Luther.²⁶⁹ Although spiritual reform gained much popularity in Italy during the 16th century, the reinforcement of Catholic orthodoxy and the Italian Inquisition in the 1560s and 70s stifled

²⁶² Sanson, "Widowhood and Conduct in Late Sixteenth-Century Italy," 8.

²⁶³ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 7.

²⁶⁴ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 7.

²⁶⁵ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 14-15.

²⁶⁶ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 14-15.

²⁶⁷ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 15.

²⁶⁸ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 14-15.

²⁶⁹ Robert E. McNally, "The Council of Trent, the Spiritual Exercises and the Catholic Reform." *Church History* 34, no. 1 (1965): 36.

much public circulation of spiritual reformist thought.²⁷⁰ This negatively affected both the legacy of Colonna and the current career of Matraini, as many female authors were attracted to the personal and emotional aspects of reform spirituality.²⁷¹ Following the aftermath of the Council of Trent, Matraini paused her publications because much of her work and literary inspiration, like the imitation of Petrarch and Colonna, was dependent on the aesthetics of reform spirituality.²⁷² After a thirty-year silence, Matraini returned to the literary scene in 1581 with a new persona and different rhetoric.²⁷³ From this time on, Matraini seemed to closely adhere to the expectations placed upon Early Modern women and worked to remove all evidence of reform spirituality from her literary career.²⁷⁴ Although Matraini seemed to place more emphasis on her public image in her later life, she still found unique ways to communicate her own opinions about the validity of women's agency and spiritual reform.

In 1597, following her hiatus, Matraini published a new version of her *Rime et Prose*, which she revised and renamed *Lettere con la prima e seconda parte delle sue Rime*.²⁷⁵ In her introductory letter, Matraini claimed that she “published her youthful compositions,”²⁷⁶ already showcasing literary autonomy that differed from Colonna years previously. Although Matraini stated that these poems were her previous work, the poems that she included in this volume were drastically different from her previous 1555 edition. Instead of the 99 poems found within the 1555 edition, Matraini only included 77 previous poems, many of which were changed from

²⁷⁰ Maghenzani, “The Protestant Reformation in Counter-Reformation Italy,” 574.

²⁷¹ Una Roman D’Elia, “Drawing Christ’s Blood,” 95.

²⁷² Carinci, “L’inquieta Lucchese,” 146.

²⁷³ Rabitti, “Volume Introduction,” 15.

²⁷⁴ Rabitti, “Volume Introduction,” 17.

²⁷⁵ Rabitti, “Volume Introduction,” 17-29.

²⁷⁶ Chiara Matraini, to [Matraini’s] readers, 1597, letter, in *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini*, ed. and trans. Elaine MacLachlan, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 134-35.

their original subject material.²⁷⁷ Furthermore, she completely omitted her particularly amorous poems, probably with the intent to legitimize her new image as a religious woman, rather than highlighting her scandalous love affair.²⁷⁸

In her later works, Matraini worked relentlessly to redefine her negative public reception. In this way, Matraini seemed to channel Colonna's famous pristine image with the goal to regain popularity and circulation in society. Perhaps it was Colonna's unprecedented success that led Matraini to re-define herself as a pious and humble author after the sudden plummet of her career and popularity. Regardless, Matraini's life provides an interesting example of the power that public opinion had on the eventual outcome of her literary works. After the release of her amorous poetry and humanist writings in the 1550s, and her 30 years of absence from the field, Matraini strictly wrote spiritual verse, perhaps aspiring to reach the divine reputation of Colonna.²⁷⁹ However, even this imitation of Colonna did not make Matraini's goals or legacy equal to Colonna's. Despite a shift in her career, and her decision to promote herself with common tropes of feminine virtues, Matraini continued to convey her desire for increased autonomy and recognition within her spiritual works, creating her own independent impact on the distinctly female literary tradition of the 16th century.²⁸⁰

Matraini's first organic written work after her thirty-year break was her 1581 *Meditazioni spirituali*, a collection of twelve meditations featuring a narrator who was lost in a storm and had to call upon God for help.²⁸¹ These meditations appeared to uphold orthodox Catholicism on a

²⁷⁷ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 17.

²⁷⁸ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 17.

²⁷⁹ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction", 17.

²⁸⁰ Carinci, "L'inquieta Lucchese," 145-60.

²⁸¹ Elaine Maclachlan, "Spiritual Meditations Translator's Note," in *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 107.

surface level, as Matraini wrote: “I confess by my many and great sins to have called your wrath and your fury down on me, and I confess myself to be worthy of your contempt and infinite punishment,”²⁸² emphasizing the importance of both confession and penance. However, in other portions of these meditations, Matraini seemed to instead communicate ideas on the reformist view of salvation through faith, which she mentioned in a prayerful text, “O Lord, you said that whoever has faith in you will have eternal life,”²⁸³ focusing on faith rather than confession. Although Matraini communicated subtle counter-reformation themes, she was not given full literary autonomy later in life. Many of her spiritual works differ drastically from her earlier convictions, highlighting efforts to redefine her literary career based on her virtue, rather than her merit, which gained her a controversial reputation in her early career.²⁸⁴

Matraini’s 1586 *Considerazioni sopra I Sette Salmi Penitenziali* also showcased Matraini’s increased dedication to upholding a proper image as a woman. She does include small anecdotes of spiritual reform, including her choice to emphasize the faith and inherent character of King David, rather than the spiritual merit and the strength of his penance and confession. As she stated in her *Considerazioni*,

We see [that] David’s petition is always directed to the glory of his Lord’s majesty and to the praise of his most holy name, adding almost always that he is a faithful servant and worshipper of his God. Thus, we learn to serve God with purity of life and sincerity of

²⁸² Chiara Matraini, “Meditazioni spirituali,” 1581, In *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition* by Chiara Matraini, ed. and trans. Elaine MacLachlan, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 112.

²⁸³ Chiara Matraini, “Meditazione spirituali,” 116.

²⁸⁴ Carinci, “L’inquieta Lucchese,” 150.

heart, to love him as we are beholden, because then without fail we shall obtain the desired grace for the salvation of our souls.²⁸⁵

This praise of David's faith and Matraini's confidence that the grace of God alone provided salvation was a common belief in reformist groups.²⁸⁶ Furthermore, the very nature of utilizing line-by-line commentary to study scripture was a practice common in reform spirituality. This demonstrated Matraini's subtle continuation of her previous religious beliefs, even though she was restricted to her new public image of an orthodox author.²⁸⁷

Matraini's career was drastically changed by the aftermath of the Council of Trent. These years hold integral periodization that separate the influence and impact of both Matraini and Colonna.²⁸⁸ Thus, equating their influence is not viable in this instance, as Colonna was given religious freedom in her works pre-Council of Trent. In addition, the different reputations that these women had remain integral to understanding the extent of their impact. Colonna was widely praised, and the common view was that she was essentially flawless, so she had certain freedoms in her written works that Matraini did not have later in her life. Matraini attempted to convey her autonomy in her early career, but ultimately, her reputation after the Council of Trent and the condemnation of her affairs essentially forced her to re-create her public image.²⁸⁹ However, Matraini's later spiritual works are a testament to her ability to adapt to the changing spiritual world in Italy post Council of Trent. Her spiritual works also showcased her feminist views and provide a well-rounded perspective of her view of women not only in spiritual

²⁸⁵ Chiara Matraini, "Considerationi sopra I Setti Salmi Penitentiali del Gran Re e Profeta Davit." 1586. In *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini*, ed. and trans. Elaine MacLachlan, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 119-125.

²⁸⁶ Carinci, "L'inquieta Lucchese," 152.

²⁸⁷ L'inquieta lucchese., 152-53.

²⁸⁸ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 15.

²⁸⁹ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 15.

contexts, but in larger public and intellectual settings, making her later works an influential and important facet to the development of distinctly feminine literature in the Early Modern period.

“Ma io che oltre il commune uso delle donne”²⁹⁰: Chiara Matraini’s contribution to distinctly female literature

Matraini was extremely active in her support of female authors and constantly worked to promote and defend her own self-image.²⁹¹ However, the impact and legacy of Matraini is often clouded because of her fall from favor in the public sphere.²⁹² Even though she was restricted by the pressures to maintain a newly formed image as a quiet and pious woman, her private correspondences, particularly with Cesare Coccapani, whom she had an affair with, showcased a continued dedication to her craft that is often forgotten by history.²⁹³

Although she did not publish another active defense of her innate talent and literary works like the letter to M.L. at the end of the 1555 edition of *Rime et Prose*, Matraini still discussed her desire to be granted proper recognition in her private correspondences. Even during her years of silence, she confidently stated in a letter to Coccapani that, “It will never happen, as far as possible, that I give up that beautiful and honored exercise [of writing] ... I delight in it by nature, and if God does not take away my intellect, I will never give it up,”²⁹⁴ again highlighting her view that she had an inherent literary talent.²⁹⁵ Her private correspondence with Coccapani also detailed her dissatisfaction with restrictions of her works due to both her

²⁹⁰ “But I, who want to write beyond what is common to women.” Cited in Chiara Matraini, To Cesare Coccapani, 1560-70. Letter. In *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini*, ed., and trans. Elaine MacLachlan, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 8.

²⁹¹ Carinci, “L’inquieta lucchese,” 152-53.

²⁹² Rabitti, “Volume Introduction,” 29-32.

²⁹³ Rabitti, “Volume Introduction,” 7-9.

²⁹⁴ Matraini, To Cesare Coccapani, 8.

²⁹⁵ Rabitti, “Volume Introduction,” 8.

reputation and her sex, and she stated that, “[I] want to write beyond what is common to women.”²⁹⁶ Although Matraini’s ability to write autonomously in her later life seemed stifled by society, she was extremely assertive in her interest in humanistic topics typically covered by male authors in her early career.²⁹⁷

Although often forgotten due to her exclusive circulation of spiritual works in her later career, Matraini’s *Oration in Praise of the Art of War*, which appeared at the end of her 1555 *Rime et Prose*, is an integral example of Matraini’s impact on female agency in the Early Modern period. This section of prose deviated from her previous amorous poetry, and was instead a passionate piece on the glorification of war, a topic quite unusual for a female author.²⁹⁸ In this work, Matraini gave unflinching praise to soldiers in war, stating in a very idealistic nature that, “[the warriors] will arm themselves with faith, justice, charity, and all other virtuous clothing, and they will surpass with these most powerful arms both their internal and external enemies.”²⁹⁹ In this way, she used authoritative speech to list virtues and practices that soldiers should follow as they go into battle.

Even though lengthy prose on the merits of war were not typically written by women during Matraini’s time, there was a long humanist tradition of writing orations on the glories of war by the time Matraini’s was published. These orations, in the typical humanist fashion, sought

²⁹⁶ Matraini, To Cesare Coccapani, 8.

²⁹⁷ Rabitti, “Volume Introduction”, 9.

²⁹⁸ Milligan, “Women Writers Demanding Warrior Masculinity: Catherine of Siena, Laura Terracina, Chiara Matraini, and Isabella Cervoni.” In *Moral Combat: Women, Gender, and War in Italian Renaissance Literature* (University of Toronto Press, 2018), 108.

²⁹⁹ Chiara Matraini, “Oration in Praise of the Art of War.” 1555, in Milligan, Gerry. “Women Writers Demanding Warrior Masculinity: Catherine of Siena, Laura Terracina, Chiara Matraini, and Isabella Cervoni.” In *Moral Combat: Women, Gender, and War in Italian Renaissance Literature* (University of Toronto Press, 2018): 108.

to glorify Early Modern life through the lens of antiquity.³⁰⁰ Chiara Matraini encouraged men to apply themselves to the study of philosophy and military study, so that they could “raise [themselves] from an obscure and lowly place,”³⁰¹ and gain recognition equivalent to the praise enjoyed by the ancient soldiers of Greece and Rome. A woman confidently writing on the topic of war was already unusual for the time.³⁰² However, even more notably was the authoritative voice that Chiara Matraini employed throughout this work, and she even offered her own advice on the difference between honorable and dishonorable male soldiers. The most prominent example of her authoritative presence is her suggestion that military men should read more texts surrounding war and war biographies, alluding to the inclusion of her own.³⁰³ Matraini’s *Oration in the Praise of the Art of War* communicated her understanding and execution of humanistic writing, a relatively new development for female authors, as many were typically restricted to amorous or spiritual poetry.³⁰⁴

Matraini’s views on women and gender rights were also heavily tied to her spiritual works, and like Colonna, she applied much of her personal views on the traditional character of the Virgin Mary. One of her last written works, titled *Breve discorso sopra la Vita e laude della Beatissima Vergine e Madre del Figliuol di Dio*, focused specifically on the Virgin Mary with context from the Bible and common apocrypha of the virgin’s life.³⁰⁵ Matraini used this spiritual prose to uplift the role of women as leaders and role models. Matraini presented Mary as a figure

³⁰⁰ Katherine Elliot van Liere, “Humanism and Scholasticism in Sixteenth-Century Academe: Five Student Orations from the University of Salamanca,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2000): 59.

³⁰¹ Matraini, “Oration in Praise of the Art of War,” 110.

³⁰² Milligan, “Women Writers Demanding Warrior Masculinity,” 107.

³⁰³ Milligan, “Women Writers Demanding Warrior Masculinity,” 110-111.

³⁰⁴ Milligan, “Women Writers Demanding Warrior Masculinity,” 107.

³⁰⁵ Milligan, “Women Writers Demanding Warrior Masculinity,” 110-111.

that many should aspire to be, and stated that, “we should seek to emulate her with every care and, as we need her help, we should turn to her for grace and mercy with every devoted affection and reverence.”³⁰⁶ In this way, Matraini gave much power and influence to a female Bible character, challenging all Christians to follow her example and look up to her ministry.

Another prominent factor of Matraini’s *Breve Discorso* was that she elevated the character of Mary as the “second Eve” who was sent to birth the destroyer of the devil and the salvation for all of humanity. This was particularly notable because women in Matraini’s time were often condemned for excessive speech or attempting to exert authority over men, common vices prescribed to Eve, and therefore seen as the vices of all women.³⁰⁷ However, in her *Breve Discorso*, Matraini used the Virgin Mary to complete the story of Eve and uplifted her as a virtuous and influential woman. Matraini stated that, “[Mary] was that so powerful woman, to whom the Lord was referring [in Genesis], saying that she would break the head of the ancient and death-dealing serpent with her foot,” and that she “had been chosen before time to be the way of the truth of life.”³⁰⁸ Thus, Matraini heavily stressed Mary’s role in God’s plan of salvation for the world.

Matraini’s most revolutionary portion of her *Breve Discorso* was a section that deliberately presented Eve as equal to Adam. Instead of including any reference to Eve’s creation out of Adam’s rib, Matraini instead simply wrote that, “In the beginning, God placed man among the delights and joy of earthly Paradise in company with a beautiful and pleasing

³⁰⁶ Chiara Matraini, “Breve discorso sopra la Vita e laude della Beatiss. Verg. e Madre del Figliuol di Dio” 1590, in *Who Is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, edited and translated by Susan Haskins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 118.

³⁰⁷ King and Rabil, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series*, xxvi-xxix.

³⁰⁸ Matraini, “Breve discorso,” 78.

woman,”³⁰⁹ presenting the two as equals rather than the traditional view that Adam was created first and therefore ruled over Eve. In addition, Matraini’s work did not provide any allusion to the individual temptation of Eve, or the sexual theme often included in the story.³¹⁰ Instead, Matraini stated, “[Lucifer], with extreme craftiness, went in the guise of a serpent to give them to understand that if they ate the forbidden fruit, they would become as gods, immortal.”³¹¹ Matraini would have been very aware of the biblical canon that surrounded the temptation of Eve, and her choice to not explicitly condemn her was significant at the time.³¹² Matraini’s conscious decision to not individually condemn Eve for the fall of humanity, but instead insinuate that the fall of man was due to the joint sin of both Adam and Eve alluded to her view that women have the same innate ability to achieve the same spiritual and intellectual roles as men, a view that she communicated throughout her career.³¹³

In addition to writing about biblical figures, Matraini also created her own stories and characters in her last work, *Dialoghi Spirituali*, which was published in Venice in 1602.³¹⁴ This text detailed a journey of a female narrator as she traveled through the afterlife led by, notably, a female spiritual mentor and guide.³¹⁵ Spiritual dialogues featuring a character traveling through the afterlife were common during Matraini’s time; however, Matraini included certain aspects in her dialogues that specifically addressed the validity of women as intellects and leaders.³¹⁶

³⁰⁹ Matraini, “Breve discorso,” 77.

³¹⁰ Haskins, “Chiara Matraini’s Brief Discourse,” 70.

³¹¹ Matraini, “Breve discorso,” 77.

³¹² Haskins, “Chiara Matraini’s Brief Discourse,” 70.

³¹³ Haskins, “Chiara Matraini’s Brief Discourse,” 70.

³¹⁴ Elaine Maclachlan, “Spiritual Dialogues Translator’s Note,” in *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition by Chiara Matraini*, ed., and trans. Elaine Maclachlan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 204.

³¹⁵ McHugh, “A Guided Tour of Heaven and Hell,” 25.

³¹⁶ Janet Levarie Smarr, “Dialogue & Spiritual Counsel,” in *Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women* (University of Michigan Press, 2005): 85.

Matraini gave all the female characters in her dialogues authoritative voices, and the female characters actively engaged with spiritual themes to better understand the nature of God. Instead of simply creating her own, unique narrative on a known spiritual figure, Matraini created new and unique characters that better represented the women living and engaging with society during her time.³¹⁷

Matraini's *Dialoghi Sprituali* revolved around the character of Theophila, who was a direct self-insert of Matraini's herself. Although male characters appear throughout the dialogue, they typically take the more feminine role, as they seek Theophila's counsel on spiritual issues.³¹⁸ Matraini showcased her female character as the assertive and authoritative voice in the dialogue, an ambitious endeavor for the time. Matraini was also progressive by expressing Theofila's active desire to seek wisdom and spiritual council throughout her travels through the afterlife. Journeys through the afterlife were popular in Early Modern Italy, and many imitated the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. However, Chiara Matraini's dialogues departed from Dante's original version, and many of the works that were created by male authors, by featuring a real female character involved in the spiritual dialogue, rather than a figurative female embodiment, like Lady Philosophy, or an otherworldly spiritual guide, like Dante's Beatrice.³¹⁹

In many spiritual works, like the *Comedy*, the main character was thrust into various spiritual revelations, as Dante's famous opening lines were: "[I] found myself within a dark forest,"³²⁰ insinuating that his character arrived unintentionally and ambiguously. In Matraini's narrative, however, she began her story stating that Theophila actively made the decision to enter

³¹⁷ McHugh, "A Guided Tour of Heaven and Hell," 27.

³¹⁸ Smarr, "Dialogue & Spiritual Counsel," 85.

³¹⁹ McHugh, "A Guided Tour of Heaven and Hell," 28-32.

³²⁰ Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*, 3.

her friend's garden and engage in dialogue with him. According to Matraini, Theophila's goal was to "comfort [her] soul a little, as [she was] oppressed by many grave and unceasing thoughts."³²¹ Matraini's version of this trope was bold because she presented a female character as a willing participant in spiritual dialogue, which varied from the reluctance seen in Dante's character. In addition, Matraini's decision to create a character that essentially reflected herself demonstrated the confidence that Matraini had on her willingness to engage with intellectual and spiritual ideas. This change is significant not only because of her diversion from the traditional spiritual dialogue, but also because of her wider statement about herself and the roles of women. Instead of awaiting spiritual counsel from males, Matraini's character actively sought knowledge and desired wisdom, traits that were often condemned in women.³²² Thus, Matraini succeeded in transforming a literary style primarily utilized by men to demonstrate her views on the active role she believed women should play in intellectual and spiritual dialogue and debate.

³²¹ Chiara Matraini, "Dialoghi Spirituali," 1602, in *Selected Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition* by Chiara Matraini, ed. and trans. Elaine MacLachlan, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 206.

³²² McHugh, "A Guided Tour of Heaven and Hell," 31-33.

Conclusion

It is possible that Colonna and Matraini crossed paths during the Bernardino Ochino's sermon in 1538, yet there is no way to know for sure whether these two women ever met.³²³ However, their impact would become synonymous with important female literacy movements in the Early Modern period centuries after their deaths. Colonna and Matraini both contributed unique elements to purely female literary tradition, however, their influence is often restricted by the other historical figures they are constantly compared to. In many cases, Colonna is labeled alongside Michelangelo, and Matraini is fated to always be a sidenote in longer passages about more well-known female authors. In addition, much of their literary impact has been neglected in past historical canon because of the former male-dominated historiography of the Early Modern period. Colonna and Matraini are both examples of how historiography still struggles to provide proper recognition of many women's unique and individual impacts on Early Modern history. Going forward, they both should be recognized for their individual contributions to Italian women's history apart from the people they are regularly compared to.

Colonna has remained a recognizable figure throughout the historical study of the Early Modern period. However, her influence is often restricted by the curated image she portrayed to the public.³²⁴ Rather than attempting to understand her individual influence, much scholarship on Colonna has been incomplete and inconclusive due to constant neglect of her multi-faceted and often counter-cultural career and private life. Instead of defining her to her relationship with Michelangelo and idealized purity as a woman, her private, public, and spiritual influence should be studied in relation to each other. Although Colonna herself has not been "rediscovered" by

³²³ Carinci, "L'inquieta Lucchese," 146.

³²⁴ Brundin, "Volume Editor's Introduction," 18.

modern standards, modern discussion and analysis on her life and career should transcend beyond her relationship with prominent men to better understand her dedication to redefining literary verse and spiritual prominence within the context of gendered history and her contributions to distinctly female literary tradition in the Early Modern period.

Matraini was a strong female writer who was divisive and innovative with her literary styles. However, due to her negative public reception, she was virtually forgotten by history until recently.³²⁵ Consequently, her unique impact on the literary world is often grouped together with other important women, most notably Colonna. Because Matraini wrote with the same style as Colonna, her impact is often seen as the same, or similar, to Colonna's. However, Matraini faced different obstacles, goals, and influences that set her apart from other women. She took pride in her career and passionately defended her subject material and literary talent. Today, Matraini remains an obscure figure in Early Modern history and literature. Her revolutionary written works on humanistic prose and progressive female-central spiritual dialogues should not be simply grouped together with other female poets of her time but deserve individual praise for their unique impact and influence that contributed to the development of female authors during the Early Modern period.

Although historians do not agree with Burckhardt's original assumption that men and women were granted equal opportunity during the Early Modern period, women's history still falls short in certain areas. This work focused on Colonna and Matraini because they both are often defined by another person's supposed influence over them. In many cases, they are grouped together, and sometimes, their contributions to female history can be perceived as equivalent. The limited view of both poet's impact being the same, or equivalent to any of their

³²⁵ Rabitti, "Volume Introduction," 1-2.

influences, should be rejected due to the unique facets seen throughout this overview of Colonna and Matraini's lives. Their unique experiences as Italian women, public figures, religious writers, and contributors to women's literature showcased the important and distinct influence of these two women and contribute to the development of modern women's history in the Early Modern period.

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