

## Receiving ‘Vittoria’ Reformed Gift-Relations in Vittoria Colonna’s and Marguerite de Navarre’s Epistolary Correspondence

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The brief but highly significant epistolary correspondence (1540-1545) between Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547) and Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549) invites us to consider the intersection of gender and church reform at a critical juncture in Italian religious identity alongside its encounters with French culture.<sup>1</sup> While both Colonna and Marguerite were known for their literary prestige in their respective Italian and French contexts, their contemporaries often diminished their involvement in reformist movements. Although Colonna nor Marguerite officially denounced their Catholicism, in their epistolary encounter, imbued with expressions of reformist thought, we are able to better grasp how French relations formed Italian history along religious and gendered lines. Colonna’s and Marguerite’s correspondence was also noteworthy given their connection through the Battle of Pavia (1525), which claimed the life of Marguerite’s first husband, Charles IV of Alençon (1489-1525), and resulted in the year-long captivity of her brother, King François I (1494-1547), and also caused the death of a certain Fernando Francesco d’Avalos (1489-1525),<sup>2</sup> which would later ignite the poetic voice of his beloved wife, Vittoria Colonna.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the contentious origins of Colonna’s and Marguerite’s relationship, their epistolary exchange illustrated the cultivation of female friendship between two women separated by geographical borders and territorial conflict, yet united on the basis of their common explorations and literary expressions of reformist theology. Barry Collett provides a detailed framework for the theological and philosophical context of Colonna’s and Marguerite’s correspondence.<sup>4</sup> According to Collett, the five surviving letters of Colonna’s and Marguerite’s correspondence are written ‘in an allusive style, and with an abundance of biblical allusions, both of which require detailed textual analysis and sensitive exegesis,’ and can be seen as evidence for these

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<sup>1</sup> For the remainder of the article, I mostly refer to Vittoria Colonna by her family name, ‘Colonna,’ and Marguerite de Navarre as ‘Marguerite.’ This latter choice is due to space restrictions as well as the fact that her aristocratic denomination (de Navarre) was not officially a part of Marguerite’s name.

<sup>2</sup> J.M. Le Gall details the experience of the Battle of Pavia from the perspective of combatants in ‘Les combattants de Pavie. Octobre 1524 - 24 février 1525’, in: *Revue historique* 316, 3 (671) (2014), pp. 567-596.

<sup>3</sup> Abigail Brundin has already noted how Colonna’s and Marguerite’s lives intersect in the Battle of Pavia, although they were on opposing sides of the battle (A. Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian Reformation*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008, p. 102).

<sup>4</sup> B. Collett, *A Long and Troubled Pilgrimage: the Correspondence of Marguerite d’Angoulême and Vittoria Colonna, 1540-1545*, Studies in Reformed Theology and History, Princeton, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2000).

women's 'detailed and sophisticated knowledge of the Bible.'<sup>5</sup> The exegetical and theological sophistication that characterized Colonna's and Marguerite's epistolary exchange is of crucial importance to the historical understanding of women's relationship with institutionalized forms of Christianity in France and Italy.

This article builds on the foundation that Collett has established concerning Colonna's and Marguerite's epistolary correspondence by evincing how this exchange reflects a gendered approach to spiritual and ecclesiastical reform. Whereas Collett views the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as central to his reading of these letters, the notion of reformed gift-relations is the primary lens through which I analyze this correspondence. As such, I explore how Colonna's and Marguerite's correspondence staged each woman's reception of a newfound female spiritual community through the mutual giving and receiving of the other's words through epistolary exchange. More specifically, I argue that Colonna and Marguerite negotiated reformist perspectives through mutuality and counterbalance, represented in the image of the counterweight (*contrapeso*), a union that transcended spatial boundaries, and a joint maternal role in ecclesiastical reform.

### Religious Reform in Sixteenth-Century France and Italy

While this article seeks to illuminate the poetics of the epistolary exchange between Colonna and Marguerite, it is helpful to establish the context, in brief, of religious reform in Italy and France. In both the Italian states and the French Kingdom, the desire for reform within the church differed significantly from the Reformation in Central and Northern Europe, spearheaded by Martin Luther. The Italian and French reform movements, led by the *spirituali* and the *évangeliques*, respectively, were related to, but not synonymous with German Protestantism.<sup>6</sup> As Massimo Firpo explains, 'it is necessary to take into account the multifarious diversities of individual paths and to avoid imposing inflexible doctrinal constraints on different religious experiences, fluid religious identities, and communities' that characterized these, in Firpo's words, 'embryonic crypto-reformed communities'.<sup>7</sup> These attempts at reform were more complicated in Italy and France than in the German speaking lands for several reasons, not to mention the close ties of both countries to the papacy that dictated religious belief and norms. Despite this close connection to papal authority, Italian and French reform-minded leaders began to question the dogmas and critique the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church long before and independent of the Protestant Reformation in German speaking lands.

On the Italian peninsula, Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) had sought to revitalize theology through a classical, humanist approach in looking at the early Church Fathers and biblical texts more closely, instead of relying on later dogmatic interpretations of Scripture by the Roman Church, which over-emphasized biblical commentaries and thereby diminished the Bible itself.<sup>8</sup> Following Valla, Juan de Valdés (1509-1541), a

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<sup>5</sup> Collett, *A Long and Troubled Pilgrimage*, cit., p. xii.

<sup>6</sup> See A. Jouanna, *La France du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: 1483-1598*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1996, for an overview of terms designating religious reform movements in France. Jouanna claims that historians have used the adjective 'reformed' to designate all impacts flowing from Calvin whereas the term 'Huguenot' refers to the political dimension of the French Reform (used after 1560). 'Protestants' were followers of Luther, who protested against the Roman Catholic Church and later separated from it (p. 297). As for the term *évangélisme*, proposed in 1914 by P. Imbart de La Tour, Jouanna explains how 'les évangeliques croient qu'on peut concilier le message de Lefèvre d'Étaples et d'Érasme et celui de Luther 1525-1534' (pp. 297-8).

<sup>7</sup> See M. Firpo, 'The Italian Reformation', in R.P. Hsia (ed.), *A Companion to the Reformation World*, Malden, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 169-184.

<sup>8</sup> See D. Marsh, *The Quattrocento Dialogue: Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980.

Spanish reformer living in Naples in the 1530s, gained a significant number of supporters who would eventually be known as the *spirituali*.<sup>9</sup> Dermot Fenlon has suggested that Valdés' concept of the *beneficio di Cristo*, in particular, reflected Protestant theology in its emphasis on justification by faith leading to one's salvation, given to humanity 'as a gratuitous gift, whereby he [the Christian] enjoyed the benefit accruing from Christ's death'.<sup>10</sup> Valdésian spirituality also resisted hard and fast doctrinal labels, which, according to Firpo, offered reform-minded individuals a way to 'embrace the doctrine of justification by faith without necessarily entailing the doctrinal 'consequences' that would have ensued from a break with the official church'.<sup>11</sup> Spirituality for Valdés' followers (the *spirituali*) focused instead on one's personal encounter with the Bible, leading to communion with God.

After Valdés' death, the *spirituali* congregated in Viterbo around the English cardinal Reginald Pole (1500-1558). Pole and the *spirituali* held ideas on church renewal that were closely linked to reformist thought, particularly Luther's views on sin, grace, and justification by faith.<sup>12</sup> Some preachers who identified as *spirituali*, such as Bernardino Ochino (1487-1564), who proclaimed his belief in Luther's doctrine on justification by faith alone in his Lenten sermons of 1542,<sup>13</sup> eventually fled Italy because of their Protestant leanings. After these types of departures, the *spirituali* in Italy were eventually categorized as threats, synonymous with the heresy of Lutheranism, to Catholic hegemony.

For her part, Vittoria Colonna spent a significant amount of time in Viterbo where she developed close ties, through personal interaction as well as epistolary correspondence, with prominent members of the *spirituali*, particularly in the pre-Tridentine years (1530-1545). Colonna avoided a decisive break from the Catholic Church, a circumvention that nuanced her writings and made it impossible to peg her to any one confessional stance (Protestant or Catholic), even if it has been established that Colonna found many reformist notions to be a purer representation of Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Adriana Chemello attributes the rich production of Colonna's more spiritual correspondences to her time in Viterbo, where her 'she focused her mind on inner reflection and distanced herself from the praise and eulogies of the mundane world'.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, for Emidio Campi, the verses of Colonna's *Rime spirituali* (1546) can be conceived as 'poetry becoming theology',<sup>16</sup> and a direct result of her interaction with Italian reformers.

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<sup>9</sup> See V. Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400-1650*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> D. Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Cardinal Pole and the Counter Reformation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Firpo, 'The Italian Reformation', cit., p. 178.

<sup>12</sup> Collett, *A Long and Troubled Pilgrimage*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> S. Caponetto, *The Protestant Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, A.C. Tedeschi and J. Tedeschi (trans.), Kirksville, Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999, p. 101.

<sup>14</sup> To name a few of the more recent studies on Colonna's reformist involvement: Abigail Brundin's *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian Reformation* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008) is a foundational resource for my research. Brundin explores the relationship between Colonna and the Italian Reformation, with particular focus on the Petrarchan tradition vis-à-vis the Reformation in Colonna's vernacular spiritual poetry. Virginia Cox has also noted the reformist nature of Colonna's spiritual oeuvre in the introduction to *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, pp. 7-10).

<sup>15</sup> A. Chemello, 'Vittoria Colonna's Epistolary Works', in: Brundin, Crivelli, and Sapegno (eds.), *A Companion to Vittoria Colonna*, Leiden, Brill, 2016, p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> E. Campi, 'Vittoria Colonna and Bernardino Ochino', in: Brundin, Crivelli, and Sapegno (eds.), *A Companion to Vittoria Colonna*, Leiden, Brill, 2016, p. 375. Campi discusses Colonna's religious views in detail and notes how her contemporaries often downplayed her familiarity with Lutheran doctrine, as well as her association with the *spirituali*.

Throughout her life, Colonna remained in constant communication with family members, powerful Italian nobles, religious leaders, as well as royal figures outside of Italy. We are fortunate to have her *Carteggio* – the collection of her many correspondences with a vast array of prominent members of Colonna’s society, and those beyond Italian territory.<sup>17</sup> Colonna’s correspondence with Marguerite and other notable reform-minded figures such as Bernardino Ochino (1487-1564, and Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) demonstrated a marked degree of interaction with reformist theology against the volatile background of ecclesiastical reform. In this context of volatile church reform, Colonna’s involvement with the *spirituali* in Italy was significant as it indicated her own interest in beliefs soon to be deemed heretical by the Catholic Church.

The origins of ecclesiastical critique in the French context can be attributed to the influence of Erasmus (1466-1536), who called for church reform in his emphasis on the communication of the ennobling purity of the Christian faith as exemplified by Christ in the New Testament (*Philosophia Christi*). Erasmus significantly impacted other reform-minded humanists, such as Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples (1455-1536), who initiated church reform in France and advanced the humanist project of propagating a simple religion with his translations of the Bible into French. Rouben Cholakian notes that Lefèvre, as a leader of the reformist group, the so-called *évangéliques* of the 1520s in France, set forth a ‘theory of biblical exegesis that emphasized the spiritual rather than the merely literal meaning of the text’.<sup>18</sup> For Lefèvre, believers should approach God through meditative and intentional interaction with Holy Scripture. Eventually Lefèvre and Bishop Guillaume Briçonnet (1472-1534) formed the ‘Circle of Meaux,’ a reform-minded group that sought to renew the church with an emphasis on preaching from biblical texts and an overall spiritual reform within the leadership of the Church as well as her laity.

Although we cannot align Marguerite with Roman Catholicism or the Protestantism of Martin Luther (as religious identities lacked the clear designations with which we are familiar today), her involvement in and support for associated reform movements in France have been well documented.<sup>19</sup> More recently, Jonathan Reid has explored the formation of Marguerite’s network, the development of French evangelicals, as well as the impact of Briçonnet’s theology on Marguerite de Navarre.<sup>20</sup> Reid insists that, ‘The letters, books, and deeds of Marguerite and her collaborators reveal they were waging a coordinated campaign to advance the renewal of the faith and the Church on several fronts’.<sup>21</sup> While the early reformers such as the *spirituali* in Italy and the *évangéliques* in France were not ‘confessionally’ attached to the Lutheran Reformation, their sympathies toward reformist theology did not go unnoticed by the Inquisition and the papal powers. As a response to their apparent ties with reform minded theology/theologians, many *évangéliques* and *spirituali* were steadily being forced to choose between heresy and orthodoxy - a choice that would culminate in the

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<sup>17</sup> Quotes from Colonna’s correspondence are from Vittoria Colonna, *Carteggio di Vittoria Colonna: Marchesa di Pescara*, E. Ferrero and G. Muller (eds.), Turin, Ermanno Loescher, 1889. In the note, the first page number refers to the *Carteggio*.

<sup>18</sup> R. Cholakian, ‘Introduction’ in Marguerite de Navarre, *Selected Writings: A Bilingual Edition*, R. Cholakian and M. Skemp (eds.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Robert Cottrell, in the *Grammar of Silence: a reading of Marguerite de Navarre’s poetry*, Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1986, views Marguerite’s spiritual poetry through the lens of an Augustinian-Dionysian tradition whose main objective is transcendence (p. ix). Likewise, Gary Ferguson, in *Mirroring Belief: Marguerite de Navarre’s Devotional Poetry*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1992, argues that Marguerite de Navarre was Augustinian (p. 10).

<sup>20</sup> J. Reid, *King’s Sister - Queen of Dissent: Marguerite of Navarre (1492-1549) and her Evangelical Network*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, p. 274.

<sup>21</sup> Reid, ‘Marguerite de Navarre and Evangelical Reform’ in: G. Ferguson and M.B. McKinley (eds.), *A Companion to Marguerite de Navarre*, Leiden, Brill, 2013, p. 34.

Council of Trent (1545-1563). It is in this tempestuous context in which Colonna and Marguerite exchanged letters with one another, revealing a most remarkable spiritual connection undergirded by a shared vision of ecclesiastical renewal in the midst of religious persecution.

### Exchanging Letters, Exchanging Gifts

In addition to the religious context of Colonna's and Marguerite's epistolary exchange, we must also keep in mind the significance of early modern correspondence as representative of one's social status as well as one's skill in the tradition of epistolary rhetoric.<sup>22</sup> Katherine Kong views the practice of exchanging letters from the perspective of the medieval *ars dictaminis*, 'the highly rule-bound medieval discipline of letter writing,' which 'structured the expression of [...] relationships by prescribing epistolary elements that reflected the respective social status of correspondents'.<sup>23</sup> Kong adds that despite the existence of established epistolary convention, letter writers 'actively navigated letter-writing rules to convey complicated and even coded personal and public messages, and to express contradictory and sometimes illicit relationships'.<sup>24</sup> Although there was nothing illicit about Colonna's and Marguerite's relationship, as nobles from various European territories frequently communicated to each other, these exchanges by two women interested in ecclesiastical renewal, but often caught in the crossfires of religious conflict, are a source of great interest to scholars interested in gender and reform.

Furthermore, the exchange of artwork, literature, letters, and other symbolic gifts was deeply embedded in the social fabric of early modern Europe. Giving as a societal practice has long been conceived as a system of reciprocity that marks one's social status within various networks, ranging from nobility to the clergy, as well as patron-client relationships. Marcel Mauss has significantly impacted how scholars theorize social networks with the conceptualization of the 'gift economy,' which both describes and prescribes a system of total services (the 'potlatch') whereby giving, the obligation to receive and reciprocate giving bind members of society to one another.<sup>25</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis has applied Mauss's observations of the "gift economy" in the light of sixteenth-century Europe,<sup>26</sup> an era in which religious reform and practice revamped the system of exchange, at least on a conceptual level. For Davis, "In a profound sense, the religious reformations of the sixteenth century were a quarrel about gifts, that is, about whether humans can reciprocate to God, about whether humans can put God under obligation, and about what this means for what people should give to each other".<sup>27</sup> The weight of perpetual reciprocal obligation was especially pronounced in the earning of one's salvation. Could one perform sufficient good works to merit God's salvific favor?

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<sup>22</sup> According to Meredith Ray, the *carteggio* became 'a flourishing genre in Italy' and is itself 'a work of literary construction, one in which ostensibly personal correspondence is used to produce a carefully crafted epistolary self-representation' (M. Ray, *Writing Gender in Women's Letter Collections of the Italian Renaissance*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2009, p. 4). Ray adds that female epistolary collections represent a 'studied performance of pervasive ideas about gender as well as genre, a form of self-fashioning that variously reflected, manipulated, and subverted cultural and literary conventions regarding femininity and masculinity' (p. 4).

<sup>23</sup> K. Kong, *Lettering the Self in Medieval and Early Modern France*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2010, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Kong, *Lettering the Self*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> According to Mauss, while in theory, gifts are freely given, 'in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily' (M. Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, W.D. Halls [trans.], New York, W.W. Norton, 1990, p. 3).

<sup>26</sup> See N. Z. Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France*, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 100.

This question propelled reform-minded individuals who affirmed the belief of justification by faith (*Sola Fide*), that one receives the gift of faith from God, the most gracious donor, whose nature does not depend on frail humanity. This reframing of gift-relations also had implications for human relationships, as can be seen in the mutual exchange of artwork, letter-writing, particularly in reformist circles where reform-minded individuals started to give and receive more freely among themselves, attempting to mimic God's imparting salvation on humanity as a freely-given gift. Mauss and Davis help deepen our understanding of Colonna's and Marguerite's exchange. As we consider the reformed understanding of gift-relations, we are able to further conceive of Colonna's and Marguerite's correspondence in terms of each woman's reception of a newfound female spiritual community through the mutual giving and receiving of one another's letters.

For my analysis, I rely on the five surviving letters, written in Italian, provided in the *Carteggio* with corresponding English translations in Collett's *A Long and Troubled Pilgrimage*.<sup>28</sup> Instead of adhering to a strictly chronological approach to the letters, I divide my discussion among the themes of counterbalanced mutuality, transcendent union, and the joint maternal role in church reform, which emerge between Colonna and Marguerite over the course of their correspondence.

#### **'Per inalzare i contrapesi': Mutuality and Counterbalance**

Colonna's and Marguerite's correspondence performed a mutuality that was based on the stabilizing force of counterbalance. Throughout the correspondence, both women perceived themselves in relation to one another, through verbose praise simultaneously conveyed with a sense of balance for the other. Both women's words of elevation for each other were further met, in their responses, with humility and self-abasement, a dynamic that exemplifies the complementary aspect of their mutual exchange. In *Poetic Relations: Intimacy and Faith in the English Reformation*, Constance Furey has elaborated the relational alternative to the 'individual-social binary that constricts our vision of selfhood and religion today' through a close reading of a selection of English poems.<sup>29</sup> Furey's notion of 'poetic relations' is particularly useful in my analysis of Colonna and Marguerite, whose respective spiritual poetry was often characterized by an inward quest for union with God, as well as their epistolary exchange. While elucidating the relational aspects of Colonna's and Marguerite's poetry goes beyond the scope of this article,<sup>30</sup> we can view their entire correspondence as a mutual and collaborative negotiation, staged through the encounter of one another's words, of a convoluted spiritual, theological, and ecclesiastical conundrum.

In the first surviving letter (February 15, 1540), written by Colonna to Marguerite, in response to a letter that she had received from Marguerite, Colonna provided the following greeting: 'Sereniss. Regina. Le alte et religiose parole della humanissima lettera di V. Maestà mi dovriano insegnare quel sacro silentio che in vece di lode s'offrisce alle cose divine'.<sup>31</sup> The contents of the initial letter no doubt contained an intensely religious message, written with elegance, concerning celestial matters,

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<sup>28</sup> I could not locate Colonna's last letter to Marguerite in the *Carteggio*, so I will refer to Collett's *A Long and Troubled Pilgrimage* in this case.

<sup>29</sup> C.M. Furey, *Poetic Relations: Intimacy and Faith in the English Reformation*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2017, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> See A. Corsaro, 'Manuscript Collections of Spiritual Poetry in Sixteenth-Century Italy', in: A. Brundin and M. Treherne (eds.), *Forms of Faith in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2009, pp.33-56.

<sup>31</sup> Colonna, *Carteggio*, cit., p. 185; The initial letter from Marguerite to Colonna has apparently been lost (see V.L. Saulnier, 'Marguerite de Navarre, Vittoria Colonna, et quelques autres amis italiens de 1540,' in: *Mélanges à la mémoire de Franco Simone: France et Italie dans la culture européenne I, Moyen Age et Renaissance*, Geneva, Slatkine, 1980, p. 282).

which Marguerite often struggled to express in her own writing.<sup>32</sup> Instead of imitating Marguerite's silence, Colonna's letter served as a counterweight to complement Marguerite's words: 'ardirò, non già di rispondere, ma di non tacere in tutto, et solo quasi per inalzare i contrapesi del suo celeste horologio, acciochè, piacendole per sua bontà di risonare, a me distingue et ordini l'hore di questa mia confusa vita'.<sup>33</sup> Colonna employed an intriguing image, the counterweights (*contrappesi*) in the clock, as a means for providing balance to the weightiness of Marguerite's letter.

The counterweight was also situated in the visual heritage of the clock – a common medieval trope that was often equated with wisdom and depicted in illuminated manuscripts of 'Books of Hours,' with wisdom often personified and endowed with feminine qualities (i.e. 'Lady Wisdom' or *Sapientia*). By choosing this image, Colonna elevated her interlocutor Marguerite de Navarre to a near divine status as the embodiment of female wisdom. All at once, Marguerite's high status did not demand silence or reverence, but rather invited Colonna to participate with this embodied feminine wisdom as a counterpart working towards the same end. Through this collaboration of mutually giving and receiving one another's words, the exchange became a source of temporal stability for both Marguerite and Colonna.

From a broader philosophical and theological perspective, the importance of balance and the presence of the counterweight evoked both Neoplatonic and Augustinian themes of the soul's endless movement to achieve harmony in the cosmos and reconciliation with God. More specifically, the notion of weight recalled Augustine's *pondus amoris* ('the weight of love'), which shed light on the textual and spiritual movement of Colonna's and Marguerite's epistolary exchange. In the final book of his *Confessions*, Augustine wrote: 'my weight is my love (*pondus meum amor meus*), and wherever I am carried, it is this weight that carries me. Your Gift sets us afire and we are borne upward'.<sup>34</sup> Propelled by the weight of love that countered the predilection for sin (*pondus cupiditatis*), Augustine acknowledged God's gift of grace, which enabled this upward force that overcame the heaviness of the body. While for Augustine, this 'lightness of being' could only be attained in the resurrected body of the saint in Heaven, as Andrea Nightingale explains,<sup>35</sup> in Colonna's letter for Marguerite, we find a similar movement expressed as a means to find solace and stability in the present life.

Towards the middle of this letter, Colonna reinforced her adoration for Marguerite whom she declared to be an example both for her personally, as well as a model given for all other women to follow:

parendomi che gli essempii del suo proprio sesso a ciascuno sian più proportionati, et il seguir l'un l'altro più lecito; mi rivoltava alle donne grandi dell'Italia, per imparare da loro et imitarle: et benchè ne vedessi molte vertuose, non però giudicava che giustamente l'altre tutte quasi per norma se la proponessero, in una sola fuor d'Italia s'intendeva esser congiuncte le perfettioni della volontà insieme con quelle d'intelletto.<sup>36</sup>

For Colonna, Marguerite was the paragon for all women because of her perfect fusion of will and intellect. In the mode of early modern exemplarity, Colonna followed this trend but simultaneously challenged it with the emphatic statement concerning the

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<sup>32</sup> Cottrell describes Marguerite's spiritual poetry as a way of fashioning 'a language that is somehow the equivalent of silence' to describe celestial matters (Cottrell, *Grammar of Silence*, cit., p. 10).

<sup>33</sup> Colonna, *Carteggio*, cit., p. 185.

<sup>34</sup> Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, M. Boulding (trans.), New York, Vintage Books, 1997, Book XIII.9.10, p. 310.

<sup>35</sup> See A. Nightingale, *Once out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, pp. 129-131.

<sup>36</sup> Colonna, *Carteggio*, cit., p. 186.

appropriateness of women following after examples of their own sex ('gli esempii del suo proprio sesso').

Additionally, this passage embodied the complementary nature of relationships among women, both in and beyond the Italian peninsula. While Collett translates 'proportionati' as 'appropriate,' it is important to note the dimension of balance that this adjective communicates, especially in light of the image of the counterweight and the concept of mutuality. Colonna called attention to her personal identity as an Italian woman, who surveyed other women in her society but failed to find one who encapsulated the perfect balance of will and intellect. Instead, looking beyond the borders of her environs to seek this perfection ('congiuncte le perfettioni della volontà insieme con quelle d'intelletto'), Colonna settled her gaze on the French Kingdom, and specifically upon Marguerite de Navarre. Colonna's desire for other women in her social sphere to be worthy counterparts of Marguerite, herself included, required them to model their lives according to Marguerite's example.

We are fortunate to have two lengthy responses by Marguerite to Colonna. The language of counterbalance, which illustrated the complementary mutuality that defined Colonna's and Marguerite's correspondence, announced itself early in Marguerite's first letter of response to Colonna (late March 1540). In particular, the presence of opposing forces, as well as the word, 'contrary' itself, scattered across this letter illuminated this complementary positioning towards the other that both women demonstrated in the correspondence. In the opening lines, Marguerite wrote:

La vostra lettera, Cugina mia, m'ha portato tanto di contentamento, vedendo in essa la vostra tanto desiderata affettione dipinta vivamente, che la gioia m'ha fatto dimenticare la noia, ch'io dovrei havere di sentire in me il contrario delle lode, che mi dona la bontà del vostro giudicio.<sup>37</sup>

For Marguerite, Colonna's letter carried the weight of words that shifted the movement of her soul, from a downward spiral to spiritual ascent. In particular, this contrapuntal language manifested itself in the rhyming pair, *gioia / noia*, which recalled a frequent rhyme in Italian poetry and thus demonstrated the literary salience that inflected Colonna's and Marguerite's epistolary exchange. For Marguerite, Colonna's letter not only complemented her sorrow but also countered it by offering contentment. Collett's translation of *noia* as 'heaviness' also works well with the imagery of counterweight, which exemplified Marguerite's reception of Colonna's letter as a balance that lightened the heaviness (*noia*) of her troubles.

Beyond this poetic representation of opposing forces (*gioia / noia*), emblematic of the complementary mutuality present in Colonna's and Marguerite's correspondence, Marguerite perceived her own qualities as contrary to the positive attributes that Colonna articulated in her letters. Marguerite stressed the depths to which she felt within her, 'il contrario delle lode', which underlined her proclivity towards self-abasement before God, and apparently, in this case, before others whom she held in great esteem and affection. Marguerite reiterated this sentiment later in the same letter as she wrote, 'che per il dentro io mi sento sì contraria alla vostra buona opinione'.<sup>38</sup> Marguerite's reaction to the praise that Colonna gave to her in her letters effectively lowered the elevated status that Colonna conferred upon her, an admission that was in line with the humility topos prominent in exchanges among nobility and other learned communities. At the same time, however, Marguerite's interaction with Colonna's appraisal of her, as an act of countering that revealed a mutual connection reinforced by the dynamics of counterbalance.

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<sup>37</sup> Ivi, p. 202.

<sup>38</sup> Colonna, *Carteggio*, cit., p. 203.



For both Colonna and Marguerite, the letter functioned as a vessel that carried the weightiness of one another's words: the expression 'vostra lettera' appeared several times throughout the correspondence, and gave a palpable dimension to one woman's words for the other. In the last letter of the correspondence, written from Colonna to Marguerite (10 May 1545), Colonna wrote, 'Vedendo con quanta cortesia et amore vostra M.tà si allegra della vita mia, doverei ricevere questa gratia come un chiaro testimonio, che la tenessi nascosta in quel signore'.<sup>39</sup> Colonna's last letter served as a climax in the textual movement of the correspondence, exemplifying mutual giving and receiving of one another's words as a reflection of divine grace (*gratia*). A few lines later, Colonna reiterated the force of Marguerite's words: 'Ma quanto più mi sento lontana da tal perfettione, tanto più le sue efficacissime parole eccitano il mio desiderio'.<sup>40</sup> For Colonna, Marguerite's words became a testimony that in turn caused her to remain in the presence and under the protection of God. Marguerite's letter became a stabilizing force and source of balance that edified Colonna, and caused her to strive for spiritual ascension, alongside Marguerite.

When taken in its entirety, this rather brief epistolary exchange embedded mutuality that bound one woman to the other, but it did so in a way that complemented, stabilized, and balanced the connection through the (counter)weight of the written word.<sup>41</sup> In both letters, moreover, Colonna and Marguerite inflected their language with reformed ways of conceiving the acts of giving and receiving, culminating in their spiritual union, which transcended spatial boundaries.

#### **'Cominciar a correre appresso di voi': Transcendent Union**

Throughout their exchange of letters, Colonna and Marguerite oscillated between the language of counterbalance and the desire to unite with one another in person.<sup>42</sup> The hope of meeting in person despite the territorial borders and temporal obligations infused a transcendent contour to their expression of union. In the letter discussed above (February 15, 1540), we find a profound longing on the part of Colonna to be in Marguerite's presence: 'fin tanto che Dio mi concederà di udire V.M. ragionare dell'altra con la sua voce viva, come si degna darmi speranza'.<sup>43</sup> The last words of this passage foreshadowed Marguerite's and Colonna's meeting one another in person; in the meantime, however, Colonna viewed her correspondence with Marguerite as a placeholder to fill the space of the physical distance that separated them.

Such a meeting would fulfill Colonna's hope ('speranza') and satisfy her 'intenso desiderio.' The translation, 'in person,' that describes this *réunion*, however misses what Colonna's language staged in the following sentence. The sensorial language (*udire* and *voce*) invoked a corporeal and vivacious (*viva*) communion between these two women. The consonance in the phrase, 'voce viva,' also evoked the often-repeated phrase, *viva fede* in Colonna's *Rime spirituali* as well as Marguerite's *vive*

<sup>39</sup> Collett, *A Long and Troubled Pilgrimage*, cit., p. 130.

<sup>40</sup> Ivi, p. 130.

<sup>41</sup> Gérard Defaux expounds upon the relationship between the spoken word and the Bible as a vivifying force whose communicative presence permeated sixteenth-century Europe. According to Defaux, 'L'écriture, donc, est étrangement vivante: plus vivante encore que le vivant. Elle est souffle, et mouvement. Elle pense, elle souffre, elle respire et elle parle [...] Elle n'est plus lettre, mais Esprit. Et puisque tout, dans ce monde [...] tout y est image, miroir ou signature, comme la Parole de Dieu, celle de l'homme est elle aussi présente, expression et représentation du sujet parlant' (G. Defaux, *Marot, Rabelais, Montaigne: l'écriture comme présence*, Paris, Champion, 1987, p. 34).

<sup>42</sup> While Colonna and Marguerite never met in person, Colonna made a visit to the Court of Ferrara in 1537, where Marguerite's cousin, Renée de France, presided. See J. Bonnet, 'Vittoria Colonna à la Cour de Ferrare [1537-1538]', in: *Bulletin Historique Et Littéraire [Société De L'Histoire Du Protestantisme Français]* 30, 5 (1881), pp. 207-19.

<sup>43</sup> Colonna, *Carteggio*, cit., p. 185.

foy throughout her spiritual oeuvre.<sup>44</sup> For both women, faith, which proceeds from God, comprised the essence of true life and was itself life giving. Accordingly, the presence of the gift in this letter revealed a reformist bent to Colonna's thinking, in the sense that only God could grant her such a union with Marguerite ('mi concerderà di udire'), which would, in turn, give Colonna hope (*darmi speranza*). The language of gift giving tied into the reformist notion of God's initiative as the sole benefactor who graciously gave himself to others; Colonna's hope of receiving Marguerite thus mirrored God's benevolent nature.

In Marguerite's responses to Colonna's letters, we find a strong sense of intimacy, illustrating the transcendent union that characterized their correspondence. In her 1540 letter, this tone of intimacy was strengthened as Marguerite reflected on Colonna's kind words written towards her, but denied any such praise, as did Colonna with her constant self-abasement. Marguerite acknowledged the distance between the two women and expressed her desire to meet Colonna in person:

se non per la speranza, che ho, che mediante le vostre buone preghiere elle mi saranno uno sprone per uscire del luoco, ove io sono, et cominciar a correre appresso di voi; perciò che avenga che voi siate così avanti che riguardando lo spacio, ch'è tra voi et me, io perda la speranza delle mie fatiche.<sup>45</sup>

Marguerite likened her physical surroundings as a prison from which she wanted to escape in order to run towards Colonna ('cominciar a correre appresso di voi'). Moreover, Marguerite considered Colonna's prayers as *uno sprone*, a 'spur' or 'stimulus', that could move her out of the space in which she dwelled and into communion with Colonna. As such, the movement that Marguerite perceived in Colonna's prayer was reinforced by kinetic language (*uno sprone*, *uscire*, *cominciar*, and *correre*), which was indicative of the *viva fede* that enabled both women to transgress and transcend terrestrial boundaries, which, in the reality of their circumstances, could only manifest itself in the giving and receiving of one another's words through epistolary exchange.

Marguerite's hope was rekindled as she remembered that their letter writing allowed both women to be present, in a spiritual sense, for one another, despite their physical separation. Marguerite remained steadfast in her hope, which came from the gift of faith: 'non voglio io perdere la fè, che dona contro speranza a speranza vittoria, de la quale Dio per vostro buon ufficio havrà la gloria, et a Voi ne donerà il merito'.<sup>46</sup> For Marguerite, it was God's gift of faith that bestowed the highest hope – even against (*contro*) all other hopes –, a reference to the great faith of Abraham as celebrated by Paul in Romans, which led to supreme victory (*vittoria*).<sup>47</sup> The act of countering dissolved in this ecstatic moment of communion, etched onto the pages of Colonna's and Marguerite's written correspondence. This 'giving-faith' drove both women into spiritual communion with one another, which transcended spatial barriers.

We can read even further into these lines in terms of spiritual intimacy between Marguerite and Colonna: through hope, Marguerite should receive the gift of victory/Vittoria, both figuratively and literally in the person of Colonna herself. This type of communion with one another recalled the language of Paul in his letter to the

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<sup>44</sup> Ferguson posits that Marguerite was influenced by the moderate evangelical Jean Bouchet's (1476-1557) use of the term 'foy formée' and 'vraye et vive foy,' to describe the faith by which man is both justified and sanctified: 'Living faith, formed faith, is seen through the effects it produces' (Ferguson, *Mirroring Belief*, cit., p. 150).

<sup>45</sup> Colonna, *Carteggio*, cit., p. 203.

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, p. 203.

<sup>47</sup> Romans 4:18 (Revised Standard Version): 'In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations.'

Christians in Rome: 'so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another'.<sup>48</sup> In this way, there was a spiritual belonging to one another in community, a lively giving and receiving of the other, which became the foundation of Marguerite's and Colonna's spiritual friendship, a victory in the truest sense as these women's territorial boundaries dissipated, and friendships and community were forged through God's unifying gift of faith. The closing of this letter anticipated their ability to see one another in the world to come, the afterlife, as it is understood that these women were never able to see one another in person: 'desidero et spero vedervi eternalmente'.<sup>49</sup>

The last letter, written towards the end of 1544, that Marguerite wrote to her spiritual sister was shortly after she had heard of Colonna's severe illness. Marguerite was immensely saddened but then overjoyed to know that Colonna was still alive. Marguerite likened her sentiment to the biblical account of Jacob's joy after discovering that his son, Joseph, was still alive:

bastami, poichè 'l mio figliolo Ioseph vive. Così, cugina mia, havendo io pianto la vostra morte [...] ma quando ho poi veduto la lettera vostra, con la quale mi pare sentire la voce et lo spirito vostro ragionare con meco, è forza ch'io dica: bastami, et lodato sia Dio che la mia cugina et buona amica vive.<sup>50</sup>

This particular moment of the letter is striking not only for its sensorial language, with the repetitious consonance, 'sentire la voce et lo spirito vostro', which evoked Colonna's corporeal presence, but is also significant in terms of the biblical allusion to the story of Joseph. Marguerite imagined herself in the position of Jacob, Joseph's father, who was full of joy, knowing that his son had not perished.<sup>51</sup> In fact, the entire story of Joseph and his brothers was one of betrayal that was met by forgiveness and grace, which corresponded to the reformed way of understanding gift-giving relations. Within this biblical parallel, Marguerite viewed herself as a maternal figure (like Jacob, Joseph's father) for Colonna, who wept with joy over her daughter's being alive, despite the sickness that she had endured. If Colonna was represented as Joseph, then we can, by extension, consider Marguerite's words as a celebration of the gift of underserved grace, which signaled the reformist doctrine of *Sola Gratia*, that is, salvation by grace alone.

In the context of *réunion*, we also find in Marguerite's reference to the story of Joseph an imagined space of Colonna and Marguerite coming together and receiving one another in joyful communion after a long season of separation. While Colonna's and Marguerite's physical union never materialized, their spiritual intimacy and oneness led into their united effort to reform the Church.

#### **'Essergli madre nel absentia mia': Joint Maternal Roles in Church Reform**

Colonna's and Marguerite's figurative union extended beyond satisfying their personal desires of physical union. Instead, the epistolary exchange between these two women demonstrated the conception of a joint effort to influence, reform, and renew the church, as spiritual mothers who were united in their common goal. Colonna joined forces with Marguerite as fulfilling an exemplary role for the Church. In her second letter (1540) to Marguerite, Colonna wrote, 'Ma sopra tutte queste cose è da riverire

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<sup>48</sup> Romans 12:5.

<sup>49</sup> Colonna, *Carteggio*, cit., p. 206.

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, pp. 289-290.

<sup>51</sup> In the Genesis account, the sons of Jacob sell their youngest brother, Joseph, as prisoner to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Potiphar learns of Joseph's abilities to interpret dreams and eventually calls him to interpret his bizarre visions. Joseph slowly rises to power in Egypt and organizes a reunion with his brothers (whom he forgives) and father. For the full account, see Genesis 37-50.

la religione, come suprema perfezione dell'anima nostra; et maggiormente in qui gran specchi, ove i popoli possono godere della utilità dell'esempio'.<sup>52</sup> After Colonna acknowledged Marguerite's noble rank and high intellect, she asserted that it was their shared religion that was the main motivation behind their roles as exemplars. Unfortunately, Collett's translation omits the use of the mirror imagery (*gran specchi*), which reveals Colonna's understanding of Marguerite on a literary level, as Marguerite's *Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* (1531) functioned not only as a mirror for Marguerite's own soul, but as a mirror to follow for all society (and all women), and which ultimately pointed to the Bible as the supreme *speculum*.

Furthermore, this letter demonstrated an unmistakable desire for ecclesiastical reform: Marguerite bemoaned the fallen state of the Church and invited Colonna to act as a spiritual mother to nurture spiritual renewal in Italy alongside the work that Marguerite was doing in France. In the letter, Marguerite advised Colonna to act as a mother and spiritual guide for a recently appointed cardinal (Monsieur Cardinal d'Armagnac) so that he would not fall into temptation as other church leaders had done: 'vi prego, cugina mia et bona sorella, piaccavi d'essergli madre nel absentia mia, et di parteciparlo della gratie, che Dio ha donate a Voi, accio che le tentationi, che assaliscono dalla mano destra, noi facciamo cadere nel abisso comune degli altri pari suoi'.<sup>53</sup> Marguerite asserted that Colonna should fill the void of her maternal absence over the French cardinal, who has left her hearth for the Italian peninsula. In so doing, Marguerite pointed out to Colonna that she would be co-participating in the act of grace that God has so generously given. We also see, in the latter part of the sentence, a bold allegation on the part of Marguerite, who feared that this newly appointed cardinal would fall into the 'abyss' of temptation and cause the destruction of the Church ('miserabil ruina della Chiesa').<sup>54</sup>

Instead, if ministers of the Church would simply return to the purity of Christianity, hostile reform movements would naturally subside: 'le bocche di coloro, che li sprezzano et riprendono, sarebbono chiuse, ma vivendo come vivono, se gli huomini tacciono, le pietre parleranno'.<sup>55</sup> Marguerite's vision for church reform was not a departure from Roman Catholicism; rather, it was a call for thorough renewal and revival. Through their shared aspiration for ecclesiastical renewal, Marguerite and Colonna embodied a "mothering role" to the representatives of the Church, thus becoming examples of women's active leadership and female friendship for others, including their fellow male ministers, to follow. Moreover, the reference to the rocks crying out was a striking image and was an almost verbatim rendering of Luke 19:40, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out,' which is Christ's response to the Pharisees who condemned Christ's disciples for celebrating his 'triumphal entry' into Jerusalem. Marguerite subtly altered the words of Christ and directed them to those leaders of the Church who were trying to silence reformers; if the reformers and other men within the Church did not speak out and seek to return to the simplicity of Christ in ecclesiastical affairs, then the rocks would. Indeed, Marguerite and Colonna considered themselves to be such 'rocks' announcing the establishment of a purified and vivified community of faith.

In the closing lines of their correspondence, Marguerite wrote the following to Colonna: 'Et con questa confidentia pregarò quel Dio [...] che già vi è, cioè vita et salute, sanità et consolatione et che mi tenga sempre mai nella vostra bona amicitia. Vostra bona cugina, sorella et amica Margarita'.<sup>56</sup> Marguerite reminded Colonna that

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<sup>52</sup> Colonna, *Carteggio*, cit., p. 201.

<sup>53</sup> *Ivi*, p. 291.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 291.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 291.

<sup>56</sup> *Ivi*, p. 292.

God was the sole source of infinite gifts of wisdom, true life, and salvation. This declaration was intimately tied to her own friendship with Colonna, a relationship characterized of giving oneself to the other, which ultimately mirrored God's gracious offering of himself to humanity. This dynamic permeates the entirety of the epistolary exchange, which illustrated counterbalanced mutuality, transcendent union, and joint mothering of the Church on the part of Colonna and Marguerite. Colonna and Marguerite conducted themselves as spiritually on par with their male counterparts, viewing one another as both capable of voicing concerns and spiritual guidance for the Church, and weighing in on theological matters. Colonna's and Marguerite's correspondence further participates in broader conversations of the academy that seek to re-theorize the expression and reception of reform in the midst of an era imbued with polarizing discourse on both sides of every conflict.

### **Keywords**

epistolary correspondence, reform movements, gender, Vittoria Colonna, Marguerite de Navarre

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### **RIASSUNTO**

#### **Ricevere 'Vittoria'**

#### **Le relazioni riformate del dono nella corrispondenza epistolare tra Vittoria Colonna e Margherita di Navarra**

Nonostante la natura precaria delle relazioni franco-italiane nel Cinquecento, troviamo nella corrispondenza tra Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547) e Margherita di Navarra (1492-1549), uno scambio di idee che ci invita a riflettere sulla natura della Riforma ad un momento cruciale della storia europea. Questo articolo tratta della corrispondenza tra Colonna e Margherita considerando l'espressione del pensiero riformista delle scrittrici. Le lettere, scritte in italiano da Colonna e Margherita, due donne separate da conflitti territoriali, però accomunate dalle loro esplorazioni spirituali della teologia riformista, mostrano come queste due erudite abbiano negoziato ed espresso il loro interesse nella riforma della Chiesa.

In particolare, discuto la corrispondenza tra Colonna e Margherita in connessione al principio della giustificazione per fede (*Sola Fide*) e l'economia del dono divino privilegiato dei riformisti, che emerge come un modello fondamentale dello scambio. Inoltre, le lettere pongono l'accento sulla solidarietà femminile e spirituale in imitazione del dono divino in un momento critico del Cinquecento, un momento in cui il potere papale, sospettoso di eresia, controllava attentamente tutte le forme di comunicazione. Il successo della Controriforma nella sua repressione dei movimenti riformisti, ci aiuta a comprendere le implicazioni più indicative dell'identità religiosa italiana, che propende a glorificare e aderire alle strutture tradizionali.