

Introduction

The Other Voice

Erudition, formidable acting skills, and a shifting performance of gender brought Isabella Andreini (1562–1604) to “diva” stature in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. The publication of her pastoral drama *Mirtilla* (1588) and *Rime* (1601) established her literary prowess and proto-feminist voice, which equally stunned, inspired, and challenged her audiences. After the untimely death of the *commedia dell’arte* actress, two additional texts were compiled and published by her husband Francesco as a labor of love that both contributed to and capitalized on Isabella’s fame: her epistolary collection, *Lettere* (1607), and dialogic scenes, *Fragmenti* (1617). Collectively, these texts eternalize Isabella’s “other voice,” a distinctive fusion of literary and dramatic performance.

The *sui generis* nature of the *Letters*, a collection of 151 fictional epistles written in anonymous male and female voices, complicates our understanding of the humanistic genre of letter writing. Isabella engages with the epistolary tradition by mixing Petrarchan tropes and Neoplatonic themes, particularly learned discourses of love, with dialectical reasoning; at the same time, she calls the tradition into question while displaying her literary mastery. Her “letters” lack dates, places, recipients, and signatures, thus evoking a space of performance rather than one of private correspondence, whose guise of intimacy makes way for a knowing artificiality in Isabella’s hand. The role, form, and potential of the epistolary format is itself also evoked throughout the collection. By calling attention to the asynchronous exchange of written meditations on a variety of themes, Isabella enriches and promotes her dramatic performances. And the written record offers a more permanent presence that goes beyond the ephemeral environment of the stage by offering a vehicle through which to cultivate an enduring public persona.

In addition to meditating from differing vantage points on the subject of love, often in voices reminiscent of *innamorati*, Isabella’s *Letters* tackle a range of themes and offer commentaries—from often surprising perspectives—on pertinent issues such as the death of a loved one, the birth of a girl, prostitution, patriarchal marital practices, love in old age, successful courtiership, life in the country and the city, human nature, and defenses and critiques of both sexes. This thematic plurality is made possible by a “hermaphroditic” voice, since that term emphasizes the quality of being both male and female, masculine and feminine—an alternation of gendered voices that was exceptional in letter writing before Isabella’s time. This performance of gender by Isabella in various roles goes beyond novelty, as her rhetorical finesse comes to the fore and she engages with the *questione della donna* in an indirect and unique fashion. Just as the actress

2 Introduction

shifts roles and performs under the surfaces of her many masks, so in the *Letters* the author herself is difficult to identify on the page. Isabella is both absent and present in these unsigned letters; her self-presentation competes with an enactment of multiple personae. As performance space and self-revelation are blurred in the *Letters*, she offers a shrewd and modern critique of the gendered self, both personal and authorial, as a uniform entity.

Life, Works, and Authorship

Daughter of the Venetian Paolo Canali, Isabella Andreini was born in 1562 in Padua. Very little is known about her pre-professional life, since there do not appear to be any surviving documents.¹ Her writing career begins with the pastoral drama *Mirtilla* (1588), dedicated to Donna Lavinia della Rovere, marchesa del Vasto.² Immediately popular, *Mirtilla* is especially notable for its portrait of female friendship and creative talent as well as a seminal satyr-scene in which the nymph Filli escapes rape and mocks her assailant by neutralizing his physical strength with her clever dissimulation.³ Andreini then published a collection of *Rime* (Milan 1601, Paris 1603, Milan 1605) inspired by the same masters who had praised her acting skills: Torquato Tasso, Gabriello Chiabrera, and Giambattista Marino.⁴ Legendarily, when Cardinal Cinzio Aldobrandini, the dedicatee of Andreini's *Rime*, hosted in his house in Rome a poetic battle (*tenzone poetica*), Andreini lost only to Tasso. Her madrigals, sonnets, scherzi, and canzonette

1. Valeria Finucci suggests that documents may “have been destroyed on purpose, a choice perhaps made in order to project the image for which Andreini became widely known and respected in Italy and abroad: that of the chaste wife and of the riveting performer.” See Finucci's Introduction to *Mirtilla, A Pastoral: A Bilingual Edition*, by Isabella Andreini, ed. Valeria Finucci, trans. Julia Kisacky (Toronto: Iter Press; Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2018), 3.

2. Isabella Andreini, *Mirtilla. Pastorale d'Isabella Andreini, comica gelosa* (Verona: Girolamo Discepolo, 1588). See also the modern edition of her pastoral play, *La Mirtilla*, ed. Maria Luisa Doglio (Pisa: Pacini Fazzi, 1995), and two English translations: *La Mirtilla: A Pastoral*, ed. and trans. Julie D. Campbell (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002), and *Mirtilla, A Pastoral: A Bilingual Edition* (2018), cited in note 1.

3. Virginia Cox, “Arcadian Adventures: Women Writers and Pastoral Drama,” in *The Prodigious Muse: Women's Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 100 and 110, and Alexandra Coller, “Women Writers and the Canon: Satyr Scenes and Female-Authored Pastoral Drama,” in *Women, Rhetoric, and Drama in Early Modern Italy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 133–73.

4. Isabella Andreini, *Rime d'Isabella Andreini Padovana, comica gelosa* (Milan: Girolamo Bordone e Pietromartire Locarni, 1601). See also the modern edition of her poetry, *Rime*, ed. Nunzia Soglia (Salerno: Edisud, 2015), and an English translation, *Selected Poems of Isabella Andreini*, ed. Anne MacNeil, trans. James Wyatt Cook (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005).

granted her membership in the *Accademia degli Intenti* as *l'Accesa* (“the burning one”).⁵ Secondary evidence suggests that she was also writing an epic.⁶ Her *Lettere* (Venice 1607) and *Fragmenti d'alcune scritture* (Venice 1617, originally entitled *Ragionamenti*) were published posthumously by her husband Francesco Andreini (ca. 1548–1624).⁷ They had married in 1578 and together developed an extraordinarily successful acting career through the *Compagnia de' Gelosi*. Famed in both Italy and France, Andreini counted among her admirers Vincenzo I Gonzaga, duke of Mantua, and Carlo Emanuele I, duke of Savoy, as well as Henri IV of France and his queen, Marie de' Medici. Andreini captivated her audiences with indelible performances such as *La pazzia di Isabella* (“the madness of Isabella”), staged in Florence on May 13, 1589, for the marriage of Ferdinando I de' Medici, grand duke of Tuscany, to Christina of Lorraine. Giuseppe Pavoni chronicled her exploit: the character of Isabella goes mad when she realizes she has been abducted by an impostor and has lost her true love; she wanders through the streets speaking Spanish, Greek, Italian, and French “without rhyme or reason,” singing songs “in the style of the French,” and imitating the languages of all the other *commedia dell'arte* characters, ultimately leaving Pavoni and the rest of the audience speechless.⁸

5. Andreini's membership in a literary academy is notable: women members of sixteenth-century literary academies were few and far between. As an example, Conor Fahy lists the following: “Veronica Gambarà (Sonacchiosi of Bologna), Laura Terracina (Incogniti of Naples), Tarquinia Molza (Innominati of Parma), Isabella Andreini (Intenti of Pavia), Eleonora di Toledo, niece of the wife of Cosimo I (Alterati of Florence).” See Fahy, “Women and Italian Cinquecento Literary Academies,” in *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. Letizia Panizza (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), 444. This list has been expanded by Virginia Cox, “Members, Muses, Mascots: Women and Italian Academies,” in *The Italian Academies, 1525–1700: Networks of Culture, Innovation, and Dissent*, ed. Jane E. Everson, Dennis V. Reidy, and Lisa Sampson (Cambridge and Abingdon, UK: Legenda, 2016), 132–69. On the relationship between professional actors and actresses and academies see also Lisa Sampson, “Amateurs Meet Professionals: Theatrical Activities in Late Sixteenth-Century Italian Academies,” in *The Reinvention of Theatre in Sixteenth-Century Europe: Traditions, Texts and Performance*, ed. T. F. Earle and Catarina Fouto (London: Legenda, 2015), 187–218, and Serena Laiena, “Meretrices Ergo Dive: Academic Encomia and the Metamorphosis of Early Modern Actresses,” *The Italianist* 41, no. 1 (2021): 23–40.

6. See Virginia Cox, *The Prodigious Muse*, 164 and 339n1.

7. It is unclear whether “Andreini” was Francesco's real or professional name: “Eighteenth-century biographical encyclopedias made Francesco a member of the Cerrachi family of Pistoia (later called Dal Gallo), although the name Francesco gave his father in notarial records was Antonio Andreini.” Sarah Gwyneth Ross, “Performing Humanism: The Andreini Family and the Republic of Letters in Counter-Reformation Italy,” in *For the Sake of Learning: Essays in Honor of Anthony Grafton*, ed. Ann Blair and Anja-Silvia Goeing (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 1:142.

8. Giuseppe Pavoni, *Diario descritto . . . delle feste celebrate nelle sollemnissime nozze delli serenissimi sposi, il sig. Don Ferdinando Medici e la sig. Donna Christina di Loreno Gran Duchi di Toscana* (Bologna: Giovanni Rossi, 1589), cited by Cristina Grazioli, “La vita, l'arte, il mito: Un'introduzione alla figura di Isabella Canali Andreini,” in *Isabella Andreini: Una letterata in scena*, ed. Carlo Manfio (Padua: Il

Andreini died in Lyons in 1604—during her eighth pregnancy and likely due to a miscarriage—while returning to Italy with the Gelosi troupe, which disbanded shortly afterward. Giovan Battista Andreini, Isabella and Francesco's eldest son and a prominent member of the Gelosi with the stage name of Lelio, had already founded his own *Compagnia dei Fedeli*; with his wife, actress Virginia Ramponi (Florinda), Giovan Battista carried on his parents' legacy by becoming one of the leading seventeenth-century European dramatists.⁹ He memorialized his mother Isabella with the poem *Il pianto di Apollo* (Milan 1606).¹⁰ A solemn funeral lit by torches was arranged, and a medal was struck to memorialize Isabella, with her image on one side and Fama, the personification of fame, on the other—a fitting choice for a renowned actress who was keenly aware of the threat rumors posed to a woman's reputation.¹¹

Scholars have noted that while Francesco's fame is linked to the *maschera* of *Capitan Spavento da Valle Inferna*, a sort of *miles gloriosus* of his own invention, Isabella becomes her own mask as she performs the leading role of the young lover, the *prima amorosa* or *prima innamorata*, a well-born, fashionable, and refined young lady.¹² At a time when women could not yet pursue an acting career

Poligrafo, 2014), 13. Isabella's *pazzia* had a lasting influence on eighteenth-century *opere buffe*, which often featured a mad scene that allowed the *prima buffa* to exhibit her virtuosity, including her ability to imitate multiple languages; see Gianni Cicali, "Le tante pazzie di Isabella: La prima buffa," in *Attori e ruoli nell'opera buffa italiana del Settecento* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2005), 141–44.

9. For an introduction to Virginia Ramponi see Anne MacNeil, *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte in the Late Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Emily Wilbourne, "Isabella ringiovinita: Virginia Ramponi Andreini before *Arianna*," *Recercare* 19 (2007): 47–71; and Emily Wilbourne, "Ma meglio di tutti Arianna comedianta," chap. 2 in *Seventeenth-Century Opera and the Sound of the Commedia dell'Arte* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 51–91. On Giovan Battista Andreini see Maurizio Rebaudengo, *Giovan Battista Andreini tra poetica e drammaturgia* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1994); Fabrizio Fiaschini, *L'"incessabil agitazione": Giovan Battista Andreini tra professione teatrale, cultura letteraria e religione* (Pisa: Giardini editori e stampatori, 2007); and Vittorio Tranquilli, *La regola e la trasgressione: Dalla commedia dell'arte al Don Giovanni attraverso Giovan Battista Andreini* (Rome: Aracne, 2010).

10. Giovan Battista also recognizes her in *La Saggia Egiziana* (1604), *Teatro celeste* (1625), and *La Ferza* (1625); see Grazioli, "La vita, l'arte, il mito," 19. As Jon R. Snyder notes: "Isabella was only fourteen years old when Giovan Battista was born, and her career as an actress and writer lay almost entirely in front of her. Although her son was eventually sent to study in Bologna, a profound and lasting bond formed between a young mother and son extremely close in age." See Snyder's introduction to Giovan Battista Andreini, *Love in the Mirror: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Jon R. Snyder (Toronto: Iter Inc. and Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2009), 2. Isabella would marry Francesco two years later. On Isabella and Francesco's other children see the Introduction to Isabella Andreini, *Lovers' Debates for the Stage: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Pamela Allen Brown, Julie D. Campbell, and Eric Nicholson (New York and Toronto: Iter Press, 2022), 8n20.

11. See Letter 1, "The Worth of Honor," in this volume.

12. On the *innamorata* and the Gelosi, see Cesare Molinari, *La commedia dell'arte* (Milan: Mondadori, 1985), 26 and 113–22; on the stage costume and iconography of the *innamorata*, see also M. A.

without raising suspicion of less than honorable conduct, Andreini projects “an image of actress as noblewoman, mother, wife, and poet.”¹³ As she performed and articulated both male and female roles on stage and on the page, Andreini was challenged to create “a hermaphroditic persona credible within both masculine and feminine authoritative spheres.”¹⁴ Andreini’s rhetoric of modesty only accentuated by contrast the erudition she displayed. Her success can be measured by her decorous and learned correspondence with the Dutch *accademico intento* Erycius Puteanus (1574–1646), who admired Andreini’s poetry and repeatedly praised the outstanding “masculine” quality of Andreini’s writing.¹⁵ As Sarah Gwyneth Ross notes, he “treated Andreini as a colleague, not a student. He respected her as an academician and greeted her in his first letter just as he would a male colleague: ‘Isabellae Andreinae Academicæ Intentæ’ (To Isabella Andreina, member of the Accademia degli Intenti [Pavia]).”¹⁶ Puteanus was by no means the only male intellectual interlocutor and admirer of Andreini. The *Letters* are preceded by twelve male-authored encomiastic and elegiac poems dedicated to her, the first of which is an unsigned panegyric to Isabella penned by Puteanus; her fellow academicians composed many of the other encomia, as did literary luminaries Torquato Tasso and Giambattista Marino, whose sonnets of praise were prominently displayed as part of this poetic requiem.¹⁷ These encomia, in addition to Andreini’s correspondence with Puteanus, centered on intellectual matters and demonstrate her avid participation in the humanistic Republic of Letters, which likely served both as part of the actress’s strategy of legitimization and as a genuine practice of intellectual refinement.

By approaching acting and writing as an organic performance, Andreini built a reputation for authenticity on stage and on the page that gained her the status of a diva.¹⁸ Ironically, she bolstered her credibility by denouncing her own work as fiction or craft. The introductory sonnet of her *Rime* beautifully likens her

Katritzky, *The Art of Commedia: A Study in the Commedia dell’Arte 1560–1620 with Special Reference to the Visual Records* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 205–9.

13. “[L]’immagine di un’attrice nobildonna, madre, moglie e poetessa.” See Ferdinando Taviani, “Bella d’Asia: Torquato Tasso, gli attori e l’immortalità,” *Paragone letteratura* 35 (1984): 5.

14. MacNeil, *Music and Women*, 89.

15. “As Boccaccio had done in lauding the virile spirit of his female patron, Andrea Acciaiuoli, so too Puteanus gives the name ‘Andreini’ the false Greek etymology of *andros* (genitive, ‘of man’).” See Sarah Gwyneth Ross, *The Birth of Feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 216.

16. Ross, *Birth of Feminism*, 216.

17. See the Translators’ Note for a further discussion of these encomia.

18. Rosalind Kerr has untangled the complex knot of texts, people, and practices involved in the “making of a diva.” See her “Isabella Andreini: The Making of a Diva,” in *The Rise of the Diva on the Sixteenth-Century Commedia dell’Arte Stage* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 102–46 (this chapter hereafter cited as “The Making of a Diva”).

poems to her performances of “feigned ardors,” “acting imagined loves with insincere affects and feigned, lying words, [. . .] weeping my false sorrows, sometimes singing my false delights, [. . .] acting now women, now men, I showed in varied style all that nature and art can teach.”¹⁹ Andreini’s variation in expressing the fictional nature of the sentiments she recounts and performs shows her predilection for the mannerist trait of *peregrinità*, refined elegance, rare and precious style, and original and eccentric content—a display of the writer’s tools in which style is indistinguishable from content. In the same lines, as Alexia Ferracuti notes, Andreini pursues and challenges mimesis, articulates gender difference, and unveils it as a social construction through the range of her performances.²⁰

The dedication of *Letters* to Carlo Emanuele I, duke of Savoy, a patron of Isabella and Francesco before their last acting tour with the Gelosi in France in 1603,²¹ uniquely exemplifies Isabella’s legacy of a hermaphroditic voice and an unveiling of fiction: the letter is written in her voice and is signed “Your Most Serene Highness’s most humble and devoted servant, Isabella Andreini,” but it is dated “Venice, March 14, 1607,” three years after her death on June 11, 1604. As previously noted, *Letters* was assembled and/or edited, as well as published posthumously, by Isabella’s husband, Francesco Andreini. The absence of an extant manuscript renders it difficult to disentangle his contributions and modifications from those of Isabella herself, a task compounded by Francesco’s deliberate attempt to blur that distinction within the text.

Critical opinion of the dedicatory letter’s date has ranged from a description of it as a “mundane” discrepancy (Isabella may have in fact composed the letter before her death, and Francesco simply dated it to coincide with the text’s publication),²² to more provocative speculation (Francesco wrote the letter, using Isabella’s signature and the letter’s posthumous date to give the illusion that she speaks from beyond the grave as a death-defying divinity).²³ Daria Perocco, for instance, leans toward

19. Virginia Cox, *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 174.

20. Alexia Ferracuti, “Reflections of Isabella: Hermaphroditic Mirroring in *Mirtilla* and Giovan Battista Andreini’s *Amor nello specchio*,” *California Italian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014): 128–30, <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4br8n5zs>>.

21. Siro Ferrone, *La Commedia dell’Arte: Attrici e attori italiani in Europa (XVI–XVIII secolo)* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014), 263.

22. Richard Andrews, “Isabella Andreini’s Stage Repertoire: The ‘Lettere’ and ‘Fragments,’” in *The Tradition of the Actor-Author in Italian Theatre*, ed. Donatella Fischer (London: Legenda, 2013), 31.

23. Kerr, “The Making of a Diva,” in *Rise of the Diva*, 132. In addition to the well-established construction of Isabella’s celebrity status and “superhuman persona” (Kerr, “The Making of a Diva,” in *Rise of the Diva*, 102) during her lifetime, also bolstering this latter interpretation is a passage from the letter itself that directly references Isabella’s desire to attain “a very long, if not eternal, life” (“se non perpetua, almeno lunghissima vita”) through the dissemination of her writings. Ferdinando Taviani also interprets the fabricated date as Francesco’s clever way to signal his authorship of the dedicatory letter

attributing the dedicatory letter to Francesco, primarily on the basis of its rhetorical parallels with two other dedicatory letters signed by him—the dedication of his *Le Bravure di Capitano Spavento* to Amedeo of Savoy (“All’illustrissimo e eccellentissimo signore, il signor don Amedeo di Savoia”) and his address to the readers (“Ai benigni lettori”) of Isabella’s *Fragments*.²⁴ Yet numerous rhetorical similarities

while hinting at Isabella’s immortality (Taviani, “Bella d’Asia,” 11–12). Richard Andrews, however, objects that Francesco might have obtained this effect simply by changing the date to that of an already existing letter drafted by Isabella (Andrews, “Isabella Andreini’s Stage Repertoire,” 39n8).

24. See Daria Perocco, “Donna/uomo, attrice/scrittrice, Isabella/Francesco: Metamorfofi della scrittura di Isabella Andreini,” in *Instabilità e metamorfofi dei generi nella letteratura barocca: Atti del convegno di studi, Genova, Auditorium di Palazzo Rosso, 5–6–7 ottobre 2006*, ed. Simona Morando (Venice: Marsilio, 2007), 88–91. In her penetrating analysis, Perocco includes three additional reasons that are intriguing to debate. First, there is Francesco’s clarification in the letter to Amedeo of Savoy that “This work that I bring You is mine alone” (“Questa fatica, che io le arredo, è da me solo inventata”), which, according to Perocco, implies that Francesco had contributed to Isabella’s work. It is also possible that Francesco might have simply wished to claim full authorship of his *Bravure*, since, given Isabella’s fame and previously published books, audiences might have assumed her input in *Bravure*, Francesco’s first publication (the first part of Francesco’s *Bravure* was published in Venice in 1607; the second part was published in Venice in 1618, and the entire set of dialogues was reprinted in Venice in 1624). Second, there is Francesco’s statement in the dedicatory letter to Amedeo of Savoy that “it was the desire of my wife Isabella (of blessed memory) to dedicate the collection of her beautiful *Letters*’ to Your Brother, His Most Serene Highness the Duke [Carlo Emanuele I of Savoy]” (“l’animo di Isabella mia moglie (buona memoria) era di dedicare il Compendio delle sue bellissime Lettere all’Altezza Serenissima del Signor Duca suo fratello”), which Perocco interprets as Francesco’s revelation that death prevented Isabella from actually doing it and that he fulfilled her wishes. It is also possible that Francesco was stating that his dedication of *Bravure* was inspired by Isabella’s previous choice. Indeed, Francesco’s dedication of *Bravure* to Amedeo, the firstborn but illegitimate son of the former duke Emanuele Filiberto and Lucrezia Proba, seems an appropriate and shrewd homage to an important member of the House of Savoy only when considered in tandem with Isabella’s previous dedication to Carlo Emanuele, the only child of Emanuele Filiberto and his wife, Margherita de Valois. On Amedeo’s stature within the House of Savoy see Robert Oresko, “Bastards as Clients: The House of Savoy and its Illegitimate Children,” in *Patronages et Clientélismes 1550–1750 (France, Angleterre, Espagne, Italie)*, ed. Roger Mettam and Charles Giry-DeLoison (Villeneuve d’Ascq, France: Publications de l’Institut de recherches historiques du Septentrion, 1995), 39–67, <<https://books.openedition.org/irhis/1215>>. Third, Perocco points to a passage in the dedication of the *Letters*: “By the goodness of our Highest Maker I was destined to become citizen of the world, and this desire for knowledge is by chance more ardent in me than in many other women of our time, who, even after discovering that a great many women have become famous and immortal through their studies, nevertheless only wish to tend to the needle, the distaff, and the spinning wheel (with due respect to those women who have their minds set to loftier and more glorious matters)” (“or essend’io stata dalla bontà del Sommo Fattore mandata ad esser cittadina del mondo, e essendo per avventura questo desiderio di sapere nato in me più ardente che in molt’altre donne dell’età nostra, le quali come che scuoprano in virtù degli studi molte e molte esser divenute celebri e immortali, nondimeno vogliono solamente attender [e ciò sia detto con pace di quelle che a più alti, e a più gloriosi pensieri hanno la mente rivolta] all’ago, alla conocchia, e all’arcolajo”). Perocco interprets this as a criticism of women atypical of Isabella’s otherwise

also exist between the dedication of *Letters* and other letters signed by Isabella. The tropes of modesty, the desire to cultivate her natural talent, and the avoidance of idleness appear also in the dedicatory letter of Isabella's *Mirtilla*; the professed reluctance to publish, the supposed humility of her gift compared to the dedicatee's extraordinary virtues, the reference to her poems as her children and herself as their "father, mother and wet-nurse," as well as a commonplace on a classical figure (the lawmaker Lycurgus of Sparta), are present in the dedication of *Rime*; the regret for lacking the time to write due to her acting commitments is mentioned in one of her letters to Puteanus;²⁵ and, finally, the reflection on art and nature and the defense of writing as a way to eternalize one's deeds—the same "laborious profession" of actress that ironically takes Isabella away from her writing—are echoed throughout *Letters*. Stefano Santosuosso has also identified in Giovan Battista Gelli's 1549 dialogue *La Circe* (10.73) the common source of a phrase in the dedicatory letter and Isabella's eclogue *Mentre correr vedea* (8.66–75).²⁶

Perhaps Francesco forged the dedicatory letter by drawing on muscle memory from his compositional partnership with Isabella, or more deliberately appropriating Isabella's previous written work;²⁷ perhaps Isabella wrote the letter and Francesco edited it, or she discussed ideas with Francesco, who then transcribed them. Interestingly, the posthumous date is missing from the 1616 and later editions. It is possible that Francesco decided that its relevance or meaning would have been lost once *Lettere* began to be published together with *Fragmenti*.²⁸ All this said, at the moment, there is no compelling reason to deny Isabella authorship of the dedicatory letter that bears her signature: the letter's resonance with

pro-woman stance, but it rather seems to us that Andreini is acknowledging women's agency to make different choices whether or not to fulfill their potential.

25. See "I. Isabella Andreini to Erycius Puteanus (Ruelens, *Erycius Puteanus et Isabelle Andreini*, 29–30)" (Isabella Andreini a Ericio Puteano, Torino, 14 agosto 1602), edited and translated in MacNeil, *Music and Women*, 321–22, and also edited in Perocco, "Donna/uomo, attrice/scrittrice, Isabella/Francesco," 107–8. Being a leading member of a theatre company required expertise in the mechanics of letter writing. Prominent actors, including Andreini herself, communicated with each other, with their patrons, and with the managers of performance venues through letters dealing with all aspects of booking, financing, and producing a performance. A range of these letters is also edited and translated in "Documents" in MacNeil, *Music and Women*, 265–323.

26. The original phrase in the dedicatory letter reads, "Chiamasi l'uomo mercè del sapere, signor delle cose inferiori, famigliar delle superiori, terreno Dio, animale celeste, e finalmente pompa, e miracolo della medesima Natura," which we translated as "Thanks to knowledge man is called lord of lower beings and kin to superior ones, an earthly god, a celestial animal, and finally the pride and miracle of Nature herself." Stefano Santosuosso has identified a handful of other phrases recurring in both *Rime* and *Lettere*; see his *Isabella Andreini spirituale, morale e boschereccia* (Rome: Aracne, 2020), 174–79.

27. Santosuosso does not exclude the possibility that the dedicatory letter is a "falso d'autore," an oxymoron that indicates a false text produced by a renowned artist (Santosuosso, *Isabella Andreini*, 176).

28. Perocco noted the disappearance of the dating since 1617; see "Donna/uomo, attrice/scrittrice, Isabella/Francesco," 89.

previous work by both Isabella and Francesco, and the trace of Francesco's hand in the postponed dating of the letter, are a testament to their enduring professional collaboration, which Pamela Allen Brown, Julie D. Campbell, and Eric Nicholson invite us to regard as mutual.²⁹

The critical discourse on the attribution of the dedicatory letter is especially interesting if considered in the larger context of the question of the extent of Francesco's editorial work in *Lettere*: did Francesco contribute passages or entire letters? Two letters have drawn scholars' attention: Letters 137, "On the Pain at the Death of One's Wife," and 151, "On the Death of One's Wife," which, as Meredith Ray has argued, echo passages from Francesco's *Le Bravure*.³⁰ Here, too, this evidence does not exclude the co-presence of Isabella's voice, particularly in Letter 137, which, as Perocco has noted, rests on recurrent themes of the lament for the dead.³¹ In conclusion, a few facts can help frame Francesco's editing of *Lettere*: first, Isabella mentions that she was working on *Lettere* as early as November 1601;³² second, Francesco attributes the *Letters* entirely to Isabella, and signals his own editorial work only in the dedicatory letter, via the fictional dating of Isabella's signature, and the last missive, Letter 151, "On the Death of One's Wife," by framing his editorial work as a monument in her honor; third, some mismatched letter summaries (which we describe in the Translators' Note) indicate either a hasty redaction or a light editorial hand on Isabella's work, which was halted by her sudden death.

Isabella Andreini and Women's Writing in Early Modern Italy

Isabella Andreini, "the first great international diva,"³³ belongs to the second generation of professional Italian *commedia dell'arte* actresses, following Vincenza

29. In their refreshing approach to Francesco's role with regard to the composition of the *Lettere* and *Fragments*, Brown, Campbell, and Nicholson have invited us to consider that "the debt ran the other way" too, given Isabella's fame and ability to write and act in a range of voices; see the Introduction to Andreini's *Lovers' Debates for the Stage*, 13.

30. See Meredith K. Ray, "Between Stage and Page: The Letters of Isabella Andreini," in *Writing Gender in Women's Letter Collections of the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 162–63 (this chapter hereafter cited as "Between Stage and Page"), in which Ray assigns to Francesco as well the dedicatory letter to Carlo Emanuele I, duke of Savoy.

31. Daria Perocco, "Isabella Andreini ossia: Il teatro non è *ianua diabuli*," in *Donne e Teatro: Atti del Convegno Venezia, Auditorium Santa Margherita 6 ottobre 2003*, ed. Daria Perocco (Venice: Università Ca' Foscari, 2004), 31.

32. See Isabella's letter to Erycius Puteanus (Pavia, November 14, 1601) in Charles Ruelens, *Erycius Puteanus et Isabelle Andreini: Lecture faite à l'Académie d'Archéologie le 3 février 1889* (Antwerp: Van Merlen, 1889), 25–26. Richard Andrews ("Isabella Andreini's Stage Repertoire," 31 and n8) suggests that with *Lettere*, Andreini might have referred instead to her epistolary exchange with Puteanus.

33. Kerr, *Rise of the Diva*, 4.

Armani (ca. 1530–1569) and Barbara Flaminia, or Flaminia of Rome (fl. 1565–67), who emerged in the 1560s.³⁴ For the first time in Europe, the “virgins/maidens and virtuous women”³⁵ of *commedia dell’arte* performed on stage. Women were so central to *commedia dell’arte* that each troupe was identified primarily with its *prima donna*; on a 1591 license to perform in Florence, the Gelosi were referred to as “Isabella and her company,”³⁶ and Francesco Andreini himself in his *Bravure* confirms that the company itself considered Isabella as “the light and splendor of that virtuous and honored company” (lume e splendore di quella virtuosa ed onorata compagnia).³⁷

Siro Ferrone states unequivocally that the arrival of women on the Italian stage was the most significant development in European theater of the sixteenth century, as well as an essential factor in the creation of professional theater.³⁸ One crucial reason for this development was economic in nature: the novelty of women acting on stage generated a significant financial draw. While actresses acquired professional credibility, they were still looked upon with scorn by both the public at large and particularly the Church, with the figure of the actress representing, as Ferrone asserts, “a moral revolution incarnate.”³⁹ The perceived equivalence of the actress and the prostitute was central to Church moralists’ condemnation of the performers, which reduced the actress to a conduit of sin.⁴⁰ As Bernadette Majorana argues, however, the Counter-Reformation Church’s position on theater was complex and contradictory.⁴¹ On the one hand, it opposed professional

34. For more on the presence of women on stage in Italy, see Siro Ferrone, “La donna in scena,” in *La Commedia dell’Arte*, 40–61; Valeria Finucci, Introduction to Andreini’s *Mirtilla, A Pastoral*, 18–29; Anne MacNeil, “Celestial Sirens of the Commedia dell’Arte Stage,” in *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell’Arte*, ed. Judith Chaffee and Olly Crick (Abingdon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2015), 246–54; and Anne MacNeil, “Commedia dell’Arte in Opera and Music 1550–1750,” in *Commedia dell’Arte in Context*, ed. Christopher B. Balme, Piermario Vescovo, and Daniele Vianello (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 167–76.

35. “[V]ergini e donne oneste.” See Angelo Ingegneri, *Della poesia rappresentativa e del modo di rappresentare le favole sceniche* (Ferrara: Vittorio Baldini, 1598), ed. Maria Luisa Doglio (Ferrara and Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 1989), 4–8.

36. MacNeil, *Women and Music*, 5.

37. Francesco Andreini, *Le Bravure del Capitano Spavento* (Venice: Giacomo Antonio Somasco, 1607), in Stefano Mazzoni, “La vita di Isabella,” *Culture Teatrali* 10 (2004): 85.

38. “L’avvento della donna sulla scena italiana è la più rilevante novità dello spettacolo del Cinquecento e uno dei fattori decisivi per la formazione del teatro dei professionisti”: Ferrone, *La Commedia dell’Arte*, 40.

39. “[U]na rivoluzione dei costumi incarnata.” Ferrone, *La Commedia dell’Arte*, 41.

40. For an example of the stance of such church moralists, see: Petri Hurtado de Mendoza, *Scholasticae, et morales disputationes* (1631), cited in Ferrone, *La Commedia dell’Arte*, 41n5.

41. Bernadette Majorana, “Commedia dell’arte and the Church,” in Balme et al., eds., *Commedia dell’Arte in Context*, 133–48.

theater due to its perceived vanity and commercialization; on the other, it appreciated the social function of the theater, which was “integrated into the most advanced aspects of Christian life.”⁴² The Church thus attempted to circumscribe theatrical practice by sanctioning it solely as an instrument of moral education. *Commedia dell’arte*, however, was considered as distinctly incompatible with the precepts of religious theater, in which “Christian actors assumed a social function, promoting values such as holiness and virtue.” *Commedia dell’arte* actors were accused of “introducing sensual pleasures,” which weakened the moral resolve of the spectator.⁴³ The supposed moral erosion arising from *commedia* spectacles became all the more problematic with the presence on stage of the actress, whose eroticized body was “offered to the avid gaze of the spectators.”⁴⁴ Isabella, in response, endeavored to align her work as a *comica* with Christian virtue, even inspiring her son Giovan Battista Andreini to adopt the same stance.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the ill repute equated with the figure of the actress, however unwarranted, is likely a reason why the forging of a literary career, and its resultant respectability, was so attractive to Andreini. In addition to her performance of virtue in life and art, another aspect of her strategy to avoid moral censure was her engagement with, rather than provocation of, ecclesiastics such as the cardinals Cinzio Aldobrandini and Pietro Aldobrandini (both nephews of Pope Clement VIII), as well as prominent learned men closely associated with the Church, such as Erycius Puteanus, who was supported by Cardinal Federico Borromeo.

Andreini embarks upon her literary career in a “contradictory moment in the history of Italian women’s engagement with literary culture,” as Virginia Cox characterizes the Counter-Reformation. In this period women writers produced literature of unprecedented quantity and range, yet misogynous discourses also began to resurface, creating an antagonistic literary environment and resulting in a retreat of the female secular writer after the 1620s, which lasted until the late seventeenth-century revalorization of women writers by the Accademia degli Arcadi.⁴⁶ Isabella’s literary and performative triumph, her unprecedented “superstardom,”⁴⁷ are testament to her ability not only to survive, but thrive, in this contentious period.

42. Majorana, “Commedia and the Church,” 138.

43. Majorana, “Commedia and the Church,” 140.

44. Majorana, “Commedia and the Church,” 134.

45. Majorana, “Commedia and the Church,” 147.

46. See Virginia Cox, “Backlash (1590–1650),” chap. 6 of *Women’s Writing in Italy, 1400–1650* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 166–227 (this chapter hereafter cited as “Backlash”).

47. Julie D. Campbell notes that Isabella was “on her way to the Renaissance equivalent of superstardom, and her cachet as an actress was inextricably combined with her associations with courtly, academic circles, illustrating the ways in which she embodied the fascination of the age with both the

There are very few, if any, aspects of Isabella's biography that are not exceptional. While she was not the first actress on the Italian stage, she became the first international diva,⁴⁸ sought by the uppermost echelons of nobility, praised by both humanist cultural elites and the most respected of her fellow poets. Unlike Isabella, whose obscure origins are likely humble, most women writers of the period descended from aristocratic families which offered a literary environment for their daughters and invested in their thorough humanist education.⁴⁹ The paucity of information regarding her early life and education have led scholars to theorize that Isabella, a woman "strangely refined and prepared to compose and improvise verse,"⁵⁰ was trained to become a *cortigiana onesta*, a figure only slightly more maligned than the professional actress by ecclesiastics and other moralists.⁵¹ No records appear to exist to confirm or deny definitively such allegations, but one can reasonably surmise, as does Ross, that Isabella's family would not have embraced her decision (if indeed it was her decision) to undertake an itinerant theater career as an unmarried sixteen-year-old.⁵² While theater performers generally enjoyed low cultural prestige, with actresses regarded as particularly immoral and harmful to society because of their cultural adjacency to prostitutes, Isabella Andreini represents a paradox. Instead of attracting scorn to her theater troupe, she was instead its "strongest asset," facilitating its entrée into more respectable spaces through her "performance of normative domesticity" and her acquisition of "cultural credibility."⁵³ In fact, Andreini as prima donna succeeds

stage and academic discourse." See her *Literary Circles and Gender in Early Modern Europe: A Cross-Cultural Approach* (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 56.

48. See Kerr, "The Making of a Diva," in *Rise of the Diva*, 102–46.

49. Although not named as such by Virginia Cox, Isabella Andreini certainly serves as an exception to the majority of women writers hailing from learned literary families: "Among female writers of this period for whom we have some biographical information, it is actually quite difficult to find one who did not come from a literary background, except perhaps Francesca Turina, who in one autobiographical poem laments having had her childhood energies directed to the 'spindle and the needle' rather than 'spending her years in the fine studies of Pallas.'" See Cox, *The Prodigious Muse*, 12.

50. "[S]tranamente colta, preparata a comporre e improvvisare versi." Ferdinando Taviani and Mirella Schino, *Il segreto della Commedia dell'Arte: La memoria delle compagnie italiane del XVI, XVII, e XVIII secolo* (Florence: La casa Usher, 1986), 339.

51. While it was a controversial theory when introduced, the idea that Andreini was either trained among courtesans, or groomed to be one, is now generally accepted. See Ferdinando Taviani, "La fleur et le guerrier: Les actrices de la *commedia dell'arte*," *Bouffonneries* 15/16 (1986): 75–76 and 89–90; Rosalind Kerr, "The Actress as Androgyne in the *Commedia dell'Arte* Scenarios of Flaminio Scala," Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1993, 64; and Kerr, "The Making of a Diva," in *Rise of the Diva*, 103. Virginia Scott, however, holds a different view in her "La vertu et la volupté: Models for the Actresses in Early Modern Italy and France," *Theatre Research International* 23 (1998): 152–58.

52. Ross, "Performing Humanism," 142–43.

53. Ross, "Performing Humanism," 144.

in ennobling and dignifying the acting profession. As Taviani and Schino argue, “it was with Isabella that, for the first time, the figure of the actress detaches from that of the ‘*honesta meretrix*.’”⁵⁴

Even lesser-known figures, such as Pavian *letterato* Antonio Maria Spelta (1559–1632), a representative of the resurgent misogyny of the late sixteenth century, make an exception for Isabella Andreini. She is the only woman praised, albeit obliquely, and whose proper name appears, in Spelta’s “curious moral text,”⁵⁵ *La saggia pazzia* (1607), a work otherwise quite hostile to women.⁵⁶ In an ironic passage, Spelta ventriloquizes women, to whom he refers mockingly as “*catonesse*” or “*dottorresse*” (“*know-it-alls*,” “*pedants*”/“*women of letters*”), through whom he critiques a catalogue of the most renowned poets, including Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, and Tasso. Regarding Isabella Andreini’s work, Spelta has these pseudo-intellectual women say, “[t]he poems of the learned Isabella Andreini are praiseworthy, though rather languid and sensual.”⁵⁷ Spelta intends the reader to understand that if such women find a (disputable) flaw in Andreini’s work, it is because her genius, like that of the other universally revered poets they criticize, is too far beyond their comprehension. This rather contorted compliment of Andreini by Spelta is further complicated by his disparaging categorization of these aspiring women as “*poetesse*” who write “‘*little verses*,’ ‘*little letters*,’ ‘*little lovers*’ songs.”⁵⁸ Isabella, of course, could be considered a prime example of such “*dottorresse*,” given that she actively sought admittance into academic spheres and was herself an author of the same genres as the ridiculed “*poetesse*.” By the end of Andreini’s life, the early humanist invention of the “*learned lady*”⁵⁹ had begun to deteriorate into an aggressively misogynist mockery of “*overly learned*” women with no business engaging in “*professions so dissimilar from their disposition, such as philosophizing*.”⁶⁰ Women viewed as usurping on male-dominated cultural spheres were reviled and ridiculed as inferior imposters

54. “[F]u con Isabella che la figura dell’attrice si staccò, per la prima volta, da quella della ‘*honesta meretrix*.’” Taviani and Schino, *Il segreto della Commedia dell’Arte*, 340.

55. “[T]esto curioso [. . .] di argomento morale.” See Apollonio di Silva, “Spelta, Antonio Maria,” in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 93 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2018), <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-maria-spelta_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/>.

56. Antonio Maria Spelta, *La saggia pazzia, fonte d’allegrezza, madre de’ piaceri, regina de’ belli humori . . . Libro primo-secondo* (Pavia: Pietro Bartoli, 1607).

57. “I poemi della dotta Isabella Andreini sono degni di lode, sebbene alquanto languidi, e molli.” Spelta, *La saggia pazzia*, 35.

58. “[V]ersetti [. . .] letterine, canzonette da innamorati.” Spelta, *La saggia pazzia*, 34.

59. For a discussion of the history of the “*learned lady*” trope, see Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy*, 17–28.

60. “[T]roppo savia,” “*professioni allo stato loro molto differenti, come filosofare*.” Spelta, *La saggia pazzia*, 33.

by male *letterati*, perhaps because of the threat they posed.⁶¹ The ambiguous space inhabited by Isabella in Spelta's text well illustrates the hostile place of intellectually aspirant women generally in this period, while at the same time evincing her exceptionality.⁶² Although, technically, she belongs with the ambitious intellectual and artistic women ruthlessly criticized by Spelta, she is spared the pejorative titles of "poetessa," and "dottoressa," seeming not even to fall into the category of "donna," "so feeble-minded a sex."⁶³ Isabella is instead fetishized as a wondrous aberration of the female sex rather than as its representative. Her status as an actress, a public woman, seems to confer upon her a special status, approaching that of an honorary man. In their effusive praise of Andreini, male authors tend to focus on the extraordinary nature of her talents.⁶⁴ Isabella's unique skills betray the flaws of intellectually ambitious but ultimately inferior women, while at the same time spotlighting the virtue and judgment of the astute men able to recognize and celebrate her; they congratulate themselves for admitting her into their ranks, and utilize her as a muse to their encomia, which serve to refocus attention upon themselves and their own literary ambitions. Spelta, for one, uses the myth of Andreini to further his own fame. He wishes to demonstrate that he, too, was witness to the phenomenon of Andreini, and in fact his own praise of her was so praiseworthy as to warrant the printing of two hundred copies of his "portrait" of Isabella.⁶⁵ Isabella functions as a sort of a curiosity in their cabinets, a flaw of nature epitomizing that essential female virtue of "onestà" while also incarnating the supposedly more masculine province of "dottrina," the likes of which are unlikely to appear again.

61. Cox, *The Prodigious Muse*, 49.

62. Isabella Andreini flourished on stage and in print in a period that straddled the integration of women into literary culture, and the "backlash" when "literary misogyny was on the rise and long-established conventions of gallantry were beginning to break down." Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 165.

63. "[U]n sesso si imbecillo." Spelta, *La saggia pazzia*, 29.

64. In addition to Spelta, see Tommaso Garzoni, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (Venice: Giovanni Battista Somasco, 1585; rpt., Venice: Herede di Giovanni Battista Somasco, 1593), 738, and Erycius Puteanus in MacNeil, *Music and Women*, 90–94 passim.

65. "Ed io in una pastorale avendola veduta in diversi atti compitissima mirabilmente si ne' gesti, come nelle parole, e concetti riuscite una sera, la mattina seguente, ritrovandomi in vena, le feci questo Encomio, il quale da molti dimandatomi per levarmi la fatica di copiarlo a penna, ne feci stampar dugento copie col ritratto di essa in questa forma" (And I, having seen her perform one evening in several acts of a pastoral with such sublimity, so marvelously in gestures, words, and conceits, the next morning I found myself moved to compose this encomium for her, which so many people requested, that in order to spare myself the labor of recopying it by hand, I had two hundred copies printed along with her portrait). Antonio Maria Spelta, *Historia d'Antonio Maria Spelta, cittadino pavese, de' fatti notabili occorsi nell'universo . . .* (Pavia: Pietro Bartoli, 1603), 172.

Surprisingly, the celebration of Isabella by men in academic and courtly spheres speaks to Andreini's own ability to highlight and market her rare talent.⁶⁶ Andreini appears to have succeeded in assuring them of her virtue, as well as appealing to their vanity while not overtly challenging their authority.⁶⁷ Additionally, as Anne MacNeil argues, Andreini's position as an actress necessitated that she constantly seek and secure financial backing.⁶⁸ While Isabella undoubtedly prioritized her own success, however, particularly in light of economic necessity, she also devoted her writing to the defense of women's dignity and the celebration of their intellectual potential—although more obliquely than women writers such as Arcangela Tarabotti and Moderata Fonte, whose output included openly polemical texts. Although Andreini was spared the *ad feminam* attacks to which other women writers were subjected,⁶⁹ she was neither disengaged from the struggle of intellectually aspirant women, nor did she see such attacks as irrelevant to her. Through her texts, in fact, Andreini situates herself in a critical role vis-à-vis the literary representation of women. While she is bold in her defense of women and particularly their intellectual potential, she is nonetheless strategic in her successful management of her public and private personae. Isabella openly conforms to certain established social norms while simultaneously challenging others. For instance, she accepts that perceptions of honor and chastity are important in women's lives, and she performs as well as decorously upholds the roles of faithful (and fertile) wife and mother. Yet, in her literary creations, Andreini consistently offers innovative rewritings that celebrate women's cleverness and eloquence. In her *Mirtilla* (1588), one of the first known woman-authored pastoral plays,⁷⁰ Andreini adheres to the lexicon and stylistic features of Tasso's *Aminta* (1573), yet progressively distances herself from the plot of her model.⁷¹ The nymph Filli,

66. For a discussion of Isabella's achievement of "celebrity" status, see Kerr, "The Making of a Diva," in *Rise of the Diva*, 102–27.

67. See Ross, "Performing Humanism," 140–56.

68. MacNeil, *Music and Women*, 90.

69. See Cox, *The Prodigious Muse*, 49.

70. Maddalena Campiglia's pastoral *Flori* was also published in 1588, yet Franco Vazzoler argues that Andreini's *Mirtilla* originates earlier in the decade. See Cox, *The Prodigious Muse*, 92 and 314n32, and Franco Vazzoler, "Le pastorali dei comici dell'arte: La *Mirtilla* di Isabella Andreini," in *Sviluppi della drammaturgia pastorale nell'Europa del Cinque-Seicento*, ed. Maria Chiabò and Federico Doglio (Viterbo: Centro studi sul teatro medioevale e rinascimentale, 1992), 281–99. Barbara Torelli Benedetti's *Partenia*, completed by 1586, precedes both Andreini and Campiglia's plays, although only as a manuscript which was recently published as a scholarly edition in translation as part of the *Other Voice* series: Barbara Torelli Benedetti, *Partenia, a Pastoral Play: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Lisa Sampson and Barbara Burgess-Van Aken (Toronto: Iter Inc. and Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2013).

71. See Maria Luisa Doglio, "Isabella Andreini 'scrittora,'" in Manfio, ed., *Isabella Andreini: Una letterata in scena*, 51–60.

a role Isabella saved for herself, does not suffer the same fate as Tasso's nymph Silvia, who is nearly raped by a satyr only to be saved by another man, Aminta, the young shepherd who loves her.⁷² Through Filli, as we have noted, Andreini "rewrites ancient misogynous *topoi*"⁷³ by transforming the helpless and desired nymph figure into an independent woman who saves herself by employing the power of her wits to overpower the satyr's brute force.

The defense of women through the demonstration of their intellectual potential and literary skill is present in *Letters* as well, if perhaps in a seemingly more "muted form."⁷⁴ A comparison between *Letters* and the *Lettere amorose* (1563) of Alvis Pasqualigo (1536–1576) showcases Andreini's innovation in the epistolary genre. While Pasqualigo's text insists on the "truth" of this epistolary record of a singular love story,⁷⁵ for example, Andreini's *innamorati* are multiple and the reader is forced to recognize their fictionality. The letters written in the voice of Vittoria, the female lover in Pasqualigo's text, display a self-consciousness, and an acknowledgement of an innate intellectual inferiority compounded by condescension found in those written by the male lover, as evident in this excerpt:

Based on the last letter you wrote me, in which you apply my own words to an opposite subject, I know that you mock me and my letters. I do not wish to believe that you did so in order to prove to me that your intellect is greater than what I already know it to be (which is to say endlessly great), but I firmly believe you wrote it to reveal to me my own ignorance.⁷⁶

Pasqualigo's Vittoria is shrewd enough to detect her lover's mockery and confront him with it, yet her defense is not one of redemptive wit, but instead of sincerity:

72. See Julie D. Campbell, *Literary Circles and Gender*, 51–72, and Meredith K. Ray, "La Castità Conquistata: The Function of the Satyr in Pastoral Drama," *Romance Languages Annual* 9 (1998): 312–21.

73. "[R]iscrive antichi *topoi* misogini." Doglio, "Isabella Andreini 'scrittora,'" 55.

74. Ray, "Between Stage and Page," in *Writing Gender*, 177.

75. Jeannine Basso and Maiko Favaro discuss whether Vittoria's letters are authentic, or a caricatural portrait of a woman letter writer penned by Pasqualigo himself. See Jeannine Basso, *Le Genre épistolaire en langue italienne (1538–1662)* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1990), 1:225–26, and Maiko Favaro, "La trasparenza e l'artificio: Riflessioni sulle lettere amorose del '500," *Italianistica* 45, no. 1 (2016): 18n30.

76. "Conosco per l'ultima lettera che m'avete scritto, che voi vi burlate di me e delle mie lettere, scrivendomi con le mie proprie parole soggetto contrario. Il che non voglio credere che sia stato per farmi conoscere il vostro intelletto maggiore di quello ch'io lo conosco (che è senza fine grande), ma crederò bene che l'abbiate scritto acciò ch'io conosca la mia ignoranza." Alvis Pasqualigo, *Lettere amorose*, in Favaro, "La trasparenza e l'artificio," 18. For the full text, see Alvis Pasqualigo, *Lettere amorose* (1563; rpt., Venice: Niccolò Moretti, 1587), 136.

I firmly believe you write many things contrary to your sentiments for the pleasure of deceiving me with words, but—miserable me—I only write what Love dictates to me, and that which is true.⁷⁷

Vittoria's words, morally accusatory and rather sanctimonious, are not an attempt to vanquish him intellectually. Alvisè, her lover, is thus not compelled to consider Vittoria as an equal or superior interlocutor, but instead is confronted only with the potential shame Vittoria hopes to elicit by her moral condemnation of his deception, and defense of her own sincerity.

In contrast with Pasqualigo's text, Andreini constructs in her *Letters* a bold female voice. Hers are not a vehicle by which to uphold or propagate misogynous stereotypes and condescending attitudes regarding women's intellectual inferiority. Instead, Andreini's female-voiced letters often display an assuredness in the capabilities of women, a confidence in their knowledge, and an unvarnished rebuke of condescension and infidelity.

The letters composed in the female voice number nearly forty, while those in the male voice number more than double that amount. The curtailed representation of the female voice is an interesting, and perhaps surprising, choice by Andreini. It reflects the marginalization of the "scrittora," the rarity of the female literary voice, as well as the silenced female voice on stage and page;⁷⁸ moreover, this overrepresentation of the male voice serves to showcase her versatility and virtuosity as a writer, in addition to her protean talents as a performer. Andreini creates a surprisingly varied array of female voices, encompassing many aspects of the total female experience. These include an assertive woman in defense of her honor (Letter 1, "The Worth of Honor"); an infant daughter unwanted by her father and defended by a knowledgeable woman (Letter 21, "On the Birth of a Woman"); a young woman promised by her father to a man she does not love, and the powerless silence of her mother (Letter 113, "On Giving a Daughter in Marriage"); women pursued by insincere and unworthy suitors (Letters 31, "On Flattery"; 38, "On Audacity"; and 87, "On the Chastity of Women"); and a woman abandoned by her unfaithful lover (Letter 121, Untitled). The female-voiced letters, though fewer in number, offer a stark tonal contrast to the male-voiced letters, and thus emerge as the text's focal point. They are among the most literarily ambitious and successful—as well as most memorable—of the collection.

In her *Letters*, as in her revision of the pastoral genre and the love lyric, Andreini also aims squarely at the expectations regarding female epistolarity. Most

77. "Crederò bene che molte cose mi scriviate contrarie all'animo vostro per prendervi piacere dell'ingannarmi con parole, ma io misera scrivo bene quel tanto che mi detta Amore, e che è vero." Alvisè Pasqualigo, *Lettere amorose*, in Favaro, "La trasparenza e l'artificio," 19. For the full text, see Pasqualigo, *Lettere amorose*, 176.

78. See Ray, "Between Stage and Page," in *Writing Gender*, 172.

letters written in the female voice showcase an authoritative and clever protagonist, while only a fraction of the female-voiced letters feature a pitiable, scorned woman, a male creation that Katharine Jensen terms “Epistolary Woman.”⁷⁹ Andreini consistently endows the women (letter) writers with knowledge, or at least intellectual capability, and eloquence, while at the same time confronting the notion that gender predetermines those qualities. Following are but a few selected examples of Andreini’s creation of an authoritative female voice, both in terms of command and of writerly talent.

Letter 11, “On Disdain (i),” displays a mastery of the conventions of Petrarchan love rhetoric, yet, at its core, is a rebuke of male deception, and a celebration of a triumphant woman wishing to have the last word. No longer blinded by her love for an unworthy suitor, the letter writer now wishes to utilize the epistle to make her (former) lover aware of her newly gained wisdom, rather than to beg pathetically for his renewed affection. Employing a central Petrarchan figure, the blazon (“serene countenance, charming eyes, rosy cheeks, ruby lips, graceful movements and, in sum, a different kind of beauty”), the letter challenges both the literary tradition as well as its superficial praise of physical beauty. By inverting the blazon to praise male physical beauty, the female letter writer then undermines the rhetorical figure by negating the list of beautiful features of her former lover in scorn of his “spiritual ugliness.”

Letter 21, “On the Birth of a Woman,” “offers an important and original approach to the so-called ‘woman question’”⁸⁰ through its address to a father who wishes his newborn daughter had been born male. The female letter writer lists many valorous women of history and literature, and contrasts them with the many disappointing sons (“how many fathers have been and are disappointed and miserable because of their sons?”) before concluding with the hope that the newborn daughter “equals Sappho in knowledge, or Tomyris in valor, or Penelope in chastity, or maybe, to make her even more marvelous,” is endowed by the Heavens “with all these singular graces.” It is worth noting that through citing these virtuous women, Andreini privileges qualities of intellectually independent and courageous women; the first-ranked “grace” is knowledge (*sapere*), followed by valor (*valore*), and, last of all, chastity (*castità*), the quality that renders women most subservient to men.

Letter 40, “On Youth,” gives voice to a “woman at the window”⁸¹ who objects to the undesired attention of a suitor, this time too young. This missive is both similar to and distinct from the more often cited Letter 24, “A Reproach

79. Katharine Ann Jensen, *Writing Love: Letters, Women, and the Novel in France, 1605–1776* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 1–2.

80. Ray, “Between Stage and Page,” in *Writing Gender*, 179.

81. For more on this trope, see Jane Tylus, “Women at the Windows: *Commedia dell’arte* and Theatrical Practice in Early Modern Italy,” *Theatre Journal* 49, no. 3 (1997): 323–42.

of Old Men in Love,” acting as a sort of companion piece to that letter (which caustically derides the lecherous Pantalone-like man who shamelessly chases after younger women). In both letters the voice of the witty female letter writer is nobody’s fool, mocking her suitor’s exaggerations (““Woe is me, I am lovesick!” [. . .] Oh, please!”); moreover, instead of serving as the object of undesired advances, the female voice embodies a subject who talks back, refusing to remain silently framed in her window. The sharp-witted (and sharp-tongued) woman is wise and confident in her assessment:

Do not write to me again, for I will not respond; I do not believe your fables. You say that you wish to die should you fail in obtaining my favor, and it would be too great a loss to the world if you were to follow through; but I know you will not. All you young men constantly say that you wish to die, and considering you say it so easily, you must forget it just as easily, since your tongue never seems to follow your thoughts.

Letter 49, “On Intellect,” represents the opposite sentiment to the female voice expressed by Vittoria in Pasqualigo’s collection. Instead of an admission of intellectual inferiority, Andreini’s female letter writer states: “I may be unpolished and inexperienced, but I am not so ignorant that I cannot tell black from white.” The notion here is that while women often lack access to knowledge, they are not so innately ignorant as to be unable to discern truth from falsehood. The perceived “ignorance” of women, Andreini suggests, is culturally, rather than naturally, determined, due to the meager educational opportunities available to them. Andreini also morally rebukes the letter’s male interlocutor for seeking to take advantage of a woman he perceives to be intellectually inferior with specious logical arguments in order to benefit him personally.

The Question of Genre: Pushing the Boundaries of the Letterbook

Over the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century, vernacular letters, or *Lettere*, gained tremendous popularity. Grounded in classical and humanistic epistolography in Latin, the genre was “invented”⁸² by Pietro Aretino (six volumes, 1538–57) and adopted by the likes of Vittoria Colonna (*Litere alla duchessa d’Amalfi*, 1544), Pietro Bembo (four volumes, 1548–52), Bernardo Tasso (a first

82. “[C]on lo straordinario, irripetibile, *exploit* del 1538 [Pietro Aretino] aveva imposto, ‘inventato’, il ‘libro di lettere’ *volgari*, la sua stessa tipologia tipografica, il suo mercato” (with his extraordinary, unrepeatable feat in 1538 [Pietro Aretino] had established, ‘invented,’ the *vernacular* letterbook, together with its published format and market). Amedeo Quondam, *Le “Carte messaggere”: Retorica e modelli di comunicazione epistolare. Per un indice dei libri di lettere del Cinquecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1981), 39.