

Introduction

Vittoria Colonna: “*in foemineo sexu rara*”¹

The poet Vittoria Colonna, marchioness of Pescara (1492–1547), was greatly lauded in her day as an accomplished writer and exemplary model of pious widowhood. Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), author of the seminal work on the written Italian language, *Prose della volgar lingua* (*Discussions of the Vernacular Language*, 1525) and expert practitioner of the genre of Petrarchism, in which Colonna also wrote to great acclaim, went so far as to declare that “among the women who practice this art [poetry] you are much more excellent than it seems possible that nature would allow those of your sex to be.”² Bembo’s critical judgement of Colonna’s literary work, which carried great weight among his contemporaries, was entirely sincere. Only a few years after he expressed his glowing opinion of her poetic talents, Colonna became the first woman to have collections of her poetry and letters published in print, the first living poet to be honored with a critical commentary on her collected poetry, and the first to found a new literary genre, that of *rime spirituali* or spiritual Petrarchism.³

1. “A rare example of the female sex”: Emperor Charles V described Colonna in a letter as a woman provided with “singulares virtutes et eruditionem non vulgarem—rem in foemineo sexu raram” (“singular virtues and excellent erudition, which is a rare thing in the female sex”): see Giovanni Rosalba, “Un episodio nella vita di Vittoria Colonna,” in Nicola Zingarelli, ed., *Nozze Pércopo-Luciani: 30 luglio 1902* (Naples: L. Pierro, 1903), 140.

2. “Tra le donne in quest’arte [la poesia] sete assai più eccellente che non pare possibile che al vostro sesso si conceda dalla natura”: Colonna, *Carteggio*, no. XL. Two years later, Bembo returned to his praise of Colonna: in poetry “a me pare che voi di gran lunga superiate et vinciate il vostro sesso” (Colonna, *Carteggio*, no. LII). And in a letter to Vittore Soranzo, Bembo wrote that a sonnet by Colonna was “bello e ingenioso e grave, più che da donna non pare sia richiesto: ha superato la espettazione mia d’assai”: Pietro Bembo, *Lettere*, ed. Ernesto Travi (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 1987–1993), 3:126.

3. Vittoria Colonna, *Rime de la divina Vittoria Colonna marchesa di Pescara novamente stampate con privilegio* (Parma: [A. de Viottis], 1538); Colonna 1544; Rinaldo Corso, *Dichiaratione fatta sopra la seconda parte delle Rime della divina Vittoria Collonna* [sic] (1542). The only extant example of this first edition of Corso’s commentary is damaged and missing its final pages, thus lacking information about the printer and place of publication: see Sarah Christopher Faggioli, “Di un’edizione del 1542 della *Dichiaratione* di Rinaldo Corso alle *Rime spirituali* di Vittoria Colonna,” *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 634 (2014): 200–210. A second edition of Corso’s work was published as *Dichiaratione fatta sopra la seconda parte delle Rime della divina Vittoria Collonna* [sic] *marchesana di Pescara* (Bologna: Gian Battista de Phaelli, 1543). A year before the Corso commentary on Colonna’s collected poems, Alessandro Piccolomini had published a commentary on a single sonnet by Laudomia Forteguerra. See Alessandro Piccolomini, *Lettvra del S. Alessandro Piccolomini Infiammato fatta nell’Accademia degli Infiammati, M.D.XXXXI* (Bologna: Bartholomeo Bonardo e Marc’Antonio da Carpi, 1541); and

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Colonna is often typecast, and indeed she herself actively contributed to this image, as a pious widow, shut away from society and immersed in literary and spiritual conversations with illustrious Catholic reformers.⁴ This image, while containing much that is true, does not, however, represent the whole story. In the first place, her noble status, in combination with various historical developments of her era, prevented her from adopting the enclosed life that she so desired, dedicated to the silence of meditation: instead she was forced to struggle throughout her life for tranquility and a space of her own.⁵ What is more, she frequently found herself caught in the midst of fraught political disputes and was forced to take sides, revealing both the strength and the considerable decisiveness of her character. It is from a perusal of Colonna's letters, rather than from her literary works, that a reader gains a clear sense of the range of her voices and attitudes, the strength of her personality and the effectiveness of her actions and advice in dealing with the complex world in which she made her way.

Striking epistolary evidence of Colonna's often fiery and dynamic character, completely at odds with the image of the pious widow projected in her literary works, is revealed in the events of 1525, when her husband Francesco Ferrante d'Avalos (1490–1525), who had recently been nominated governor of Benevento, was occupied with fighting in the north of Italy and delegated his wife to act as his lieutenant in the new territory. When her authority was questioned on the grounds of her sex, Colonna wrote in almost menacing tones to the papal datary, Giovan Matteo Giberti (1495–1543), asking him to seek a *breve* from the pope reconfirming the validity of her role as governor in her husband's stead.⁶ Once she had obtained the document, Colonna wrote again to thank Giberti in ironic tones: he had with his light illuminated her "lowly merit," as well as that of the whole "disadvantaged female condition."⁷

Konrad Eisenbichler, *The Sword and the Pen: Women, Poetry and Politics in Sixteenth-Century Siena* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 10, 121, and 144.

4. On her own image creation, see Abigail Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian Reformation* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 15–36; and Virginia Cox, "The Exemplary Vittoria Colonna," in Abigail Brundin, Tatiana Crivelli, and Maria Serena Sapegno, ed., *A Companion to Vittoria Colonna* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2016), 467–500.

5. See, for instance, Colonna's request to Pope Clement VII to retire to a house in Naples and hold mass there (Colonna, *Carteggio*, no. XXVII); on this episode, see Ramie Targoff, "La volontà segreta di Vittoria Colonna: Una lettera smarrita a Clemente VII," in Maria Serena Sapegno, ed., *Al crocevia della storia: Poesia, religione e politica in Vittoria Colonna* (Rome: Viella, 2016), 217–24; Ramie Targoff, *Renaissance Woman: The Life of Vittoria Colonna* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 54–55.

6. A *breve* or brief is a papal document, generally simpler and less official than a more formal papal bull.

7. "Basso merito," "depressa condition femminile": letter to Giberti, 8 November 1525, in Pier Desiderio Pasolini, *Tre lettere inedite di Vittoria Colonna, marchesa di Pescara* (Rome: Ermanno Loescher & C. [Bretschneider e Regenberg], 1901), 28–30. On this whole episode see Veronica Copello, "'Locum gerit

Another revealing example of Colonna's character, this time translated into action rather than words, dates from the period after her widowhood when she returned to the Castello Aragonese on Ischia, an island in the Bay of Naples. On 28 April 1528, she heard from that island the cannons firing at the Battle of Capo d'Orso, during which the French fleet encountered imperial ships in the Gulf of Salerno. Colonna's few remaining living relatives were on board the Spanish ships, and she did not wait passively for the battle to end; instead, she began to organize the shipment of supplies to the imperial troops and to instruct spies to penetrate the enemy ranks and bring back information to the authorities in Naples.⁸ The devout poet knew how to transform herself into an authoritative and resourceful leader when circumstances required.

While these historical events were exceptional, it is also the case, as her letters reveal in fascinating detail, that Colonna administrated land and goods throughout her life and occupied herself daily with the reality of taxes, payments, arguments between vassals, undisciplined priests, hereditary rights, boundary disputes and many other such worldly matters. As one reads her collected letters, it becomes clear how she embodied a conflict between the desire for a cloistered life and the demands of the real world, between *otium* and *negotium*, or the contemplative and the active life.⁹ A better understanding of this ongoing conflict in her life and personality, which her correspondence lays out for us, casts important new light on her literary work. While Colonna's poetry projects one persona to her reading public, defined by piety, contemplation and inner spirituality, her letters add an important worldly dimension to her character and indicate the careful work of strategic selection and omission that went into building the image implied in her poems. It is particularly interesting to note how, while the literary persona was seemingly required to conform to the strict gender expectations of the period, in her letters, and by extension her worldly activities, Colonna's gender was less relevant, while her nobility was a key factor in the high degree of agency and authority that she commanded. Although Colonna's literary voice pushed far in completely new directions, thus recalibrating literary gender norms in a profound way, she achieved this outcome through a carefully orchestrated and gradual process of shifting and negotiation of the established canon. In her letters, on the other hand, even the early letters written while she was a young

et tenet autoritate': Il volto politico di Vittoria Colonna tra lettere e documenti inediti," *Rinascimento* 61 (2021): 237–82.

8. The information about Colonna's actions is contained in the imperial privilege of 16 January 1534: see Rosalba, "Un episodio," 140.

9. See Peter Armour, "Michelangelo's Two Sisters: Contemplative Life and Active Life in the Final Version of the Monument to Julius II," in *Sguardi sull'Italia: Miscellanea dedicata a Francesco Villari dalla Society for Italian Studies*, ed. Gino Bedani and others (Exeter: The Society for Italian Studies, 1997), 55–83.

married woman, she demands and receives action, obedience, and deference from a range of interlocutors, and rarely excuses or explains her assumed right to act in the world.

Life, Works, and Spirituality

Born in 1492¹⁰ in Marino, south of Rome, where she was raised and educated, Vittoria Colonna was the daughter of Fabrizio Colonna, a famous soldier who worked for the Spanish king, and Agnese di Montefeltro, daughter of Federico, duke of Urbino.¹¹ In 1495, at the age of three, she was betrothed to Francesco Ferrante d'Avalos, future marquis of Pescara, whom she would come to love sincerely.¹² The marriage contract stipulated a shift in political allegiance on the part of Colonna's father, Fabrizio, who had until that date been in the service of the king of France, but now agreed to change his alliance to the Spanish side.¹³ The political element of the contract reminds us how much was at stake in the marriage of the offspring of nobility: the decision made at this early date concerning Colonna's marriage would have repercussions not only for her personally but for the many soldiers and others who worked in service to the Colonna household.¹⁴

Following her eventual marriage in 1509, Colonna moved to Ischia, where she entered the lively Neapolitan cultural and intellectual circles that were to have a great influence on her life. The Castello Aragonese on Ischia was presided over by Colonna's aunt-by-marriage, Costanza d'Avalos, duchess of Francavilla

10. Many sources cite 1490 as Colonna's birth date, but the evidence for 1492 is clearly presented in Domenico Tordi, "Luogo ed anno della nascita di Vittoria Colonna," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 29 (1892): 17.

11. Recent biographies of Colonna include Targoff, *Renaissance Woman*, and Andrea Donati, *Vittoria Colonna e l'eredità degli spirituali* (Rome: Etgraphiae, 2019), the latter containing many previously unpublished documents and sources. Virginia Cox and Shannon McHugh, eds., *Vittoria Colonna (1490–1547): Poetry, Religion, Art, Impact* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022) presents new work on Colonna from a range of perspectives.

12. See in this volume Colonna's Letter 4 for evidence of the loving relations between her and her husband. One contemporary source, the biography of Francesco Ferrante d'Avalos by Paolo Giovio, instead paints a picture of a less than happy marriage, in which Ferrante spent long periods away from Naples, and when at home, could rarely be distracted from hunting: see Paolo Giovio, *Le vite del gran capitano e del marchese di Pescara*, trans. Lodovico Domenichi (Bari: Laterza, 1931).

13. Tordi, "Luogo ed anno," 15–17.

14. Anthony D'Elia, *The Renaissance of Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Tatiana Crivelli, "Fedeltà, maternità, sacralità: Reinterpretazioni del legame matrimoniale nell'opera di Vittoria Colonna," in *Doni d'amore: Donne e rituali nel Rinascimento*, ed. Patricia Lurati (Cinisello Balsamo [Milan]: Silvana, 2014), 171–79; Julius Kirshner, *Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

(1460–1541), who gathered a distinguished intellectual circle there.¹⁵ Also residing on Ischia were the three siblings Maria, Giovanna, and Antonio d’Aragona, as well as Alfonso (1502–1546) and Costanza d’Avalos (1503/4–1575), cousins of Colonna’s husband Ferrante. These individuals were to become close to Colonna and to remain so for the rest of her life, as her letters testify.

Colonna’s life in this period was taken up with parties and other courtly festivities and seems to have been pleasurable, although her husband was frequently absent, increasingly committed to military activities on behalf of the emperor.¹⁶ In 1524, Ferrante was named captain of the imperial infantry in Italy. In 1525, he was victorious at the Battle of Pavia, a decisive victory over the French troops during which the king of France, Francis I (1494–1547), was taken prisoner. Ferrante’s death from septicemia¹⁷ on 3 December 1525 was a defining moment for Colonna. Thereafter, her pattern of life changed completely: she abandoned her family’s well-appointed palaces and her own sumptuous dress and luxurious habits, and declared that she was ready to abandon all other worldly ties as well.¹⁸ Her intention was to retreat into a state of poverty in a Roman convent, San Silvestro in Capite, but the pope, Clement VII (1478–1534), was not in favor and refused his permission to the nuns of San Silvestro, who were threatened with excommunication if they allowed Colonna to take her vows.¹⁹ Thwarted at the very highest level from taking the veil, Colonna moved instead to her family territories south

15. On Ischia and Costanza d’Avalos’s role there, see Suzanne Thérault, *Un cénacle humaniste de la Renaissance autour de Vittoria Colonna, châtelaine d’Ischia* (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier; Florence: Sansoni antiquariato, 1968); Ippolita Di Majo, “Vittoria Colonna, il Castello di Ischia e la cultura delle corti,” in Pina Ragionieri, ed., *Vittoria Colonna e Michelangelo: Firenze, Casa Buonarroti, 24 maggio–12 settembre 2005* (Florence: Mandragora, 2005), 19–32; Raffaele Castagna, *Un cenacolo del Rinascimento sul Castello d’Ischia* (Ischia: Imagaenaria, 2007); Maria Teresa Guerra Medici, “Intrecci familiari, politici e letterari alla corte di Costanza d’Avalos,” in Maria Teresa Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri and Roberta Frigeni, eds., *Donne e scrittura dal XII al XVI secolo* (Bergamo: Lubrina-LEB, 2009), 115–62; Veronica Copello, “Costanza d’Avalos (1460–1541): ‘Letras’ e ‘valor guerrero’ alla corte di Ischia,” *Mélanges de l’école française de Rome: Moyen Âge* 31, no. 2 (2019): 343–60, <journals.openedition.org/mefrm/6397>.

16. See Letter 6 for details of Ferrante’s military activities in this period.

17. Donati, *Vittoria Colonna*, 49–51.

18. “Essendo piaciuto al nostro Signor Idio farne priva de quel bene che più prezava in nel mundo, che era il marchese de Pescara, mio Signor marito, patre, fratello, figliolo et amico, et in nel quale io senteva ogni sorte de amoroso vinculo, determinata sequirlo senza offendere l’anima, voglio intrare in uno monesterio per fare ogni officio ad me possibile in salvare l’anima sua e la mia; per il che, essendo da reputare il mundo como persona fora de quello, fin dal presente ho deliberato lassare alcune cose de quella facultà che ’l nostro Signore me concesse in remunerazione delli servitii havuti da amici, servitori et servitrici”: Colonna’s proxy-will, 12 December 1525: BSSS, III BB 53, 55, ed. Veronica Copello in Donati, *Vittoria Colonna*, 397–404.

19. See Targoff, *Renaissance Woman*, 44–57. The pope’s opposition to Colonna’s entry into a convent presumably derived from his belief in the possibility of a second, politically favorable marriage.

of Rome. The political climate was growing increasingly fraught, however: on 20 September 1526, Colonna troops attacked Rome and in November the pope, in retaliation, sacked and set fire to their properties. Fleeing the conflict, Colonna moved south again to Ischia, where she remained during the Sack of Rome of May 1527 and the French siege of Naples, followed by an outbreak of plague in 1528.

In the years that followed these traumatic events, Colonna continued to host writers and intellectuals at the court on Ischia. By the end of the 1520s she had also begun an epistolary friendship with Pietro Bembo.²⁰ These were years of renewed cultural as well as spiritual engagement for Colonna, as we learn from the testimony of a contemporary, the historian and humanist Girolamo Borgia, who wrote of her some time before 1528:

as she grew older, she dedicated herself entirely to Christ, and abandoning all earthly concerns, she turned to the holy study of the sacred texts, in which she progressed so far that she would not seem inferior to the most learned theologians in either her knowledge or her discussion thereof.²¹

Clear traces of the studies described by Borgia can be observed in Colonna's poetry as well as in her letters that deal with philosophical and religious themes, in which the high level of her learning and specialist knowledge is always very much in evidence.²²

Alongside her increasing immersion in the study of theology in this period, Colonna also became more concretely involved with religious causes. After 1529, when the Order was first founded, she followed the fortunes of the Capuchins with close attention, and she fought on their behalf with the highest ecclesiastical authorities over a number of years, expending both energy and hard cash on the question of their right to grow their Order through the admission of new friars from the Observants.²³ Colonna's letters on behalf of the Capuchins reveal

20. On the friendship between Colonna and Bembo, see Letter 9, as well as Carlo Dionisotti, "Appunti sul Bembo e su Vittoria Colonna," in *Miscellanea Augusto Campana* (Padua: Antenore, 1981), 1:257–86; and Abigail Brundin, "Vittoria Colonna in Manuscript," in Brundin, Crivelli and Sapegno, *A Companion to Vittoria Colonna*, 39–68.

21. "Cum interim aetate processisset, sese totam Christo devovit curisque terrenis prorsum omissis ad sanctissima sacrae paginae studia convertit in quibus tantum profecit ut nec eruditissimis theologis et bene sentiendo et disserendo quippiam cedere videatur": Girolamo Borgia, *Historiae de bellis italicis* (before 1528), cited in Elena Valeri, "Italia dilacerata": *Girolamo Borgia nella cultura storica del Rinascimento* (Milan: F. Angeli, 2007), 79.

22. See in particular Letters 25 and 35.

23. See Letter 12. On Colonna's defense of the Capuchins, see Tacchi-Venturi, "Vittoria Colonna e la riforma cappuccina," *Collectanea franciscana* 1 (1931): 28–58; Costanzo Cargnoni, ed., *I frati cappuccini: Documenti e testimonianze del primo secolo* (Perugia: Edizioni Frate Indovino, 1988–1993),

her outrage when she perceived that the Church was acting unfairly. She was an idealist, but also a pragmatist who took action to avert such injustices in every way at her disposal. She also may have had the opportunity during these years to meet directly with the Spanish reformer Juan de Valdés (ca. 1500–1541), who had moved to Naples in 1534 and gathered a circle of like-minded people around him in that city.²⁴

In March 1535, Colonna finally returned to Rome, where she attended sermons given by the famous preacher Bernardino Ochino (1487–1564), who would become Vicar General of the Capuchins and who swiftly assumed the role of her indispensable spiritual guide.²⁵ In Rome, as well, probably in 1536, Colonna made another friendship—a friendship that would be one of the most important of her life—with the renowned artist Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564).²⁶ In 1537 she left for Venice, with the intention of setting out by boat on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. En route, she paused in Ferrara where, when her plans for the pilgrimage fell through, she remained for nearly a year.²⁷ While in Ferrara she had the opportunity once again to hear Ochino preach, as well as to form a close bond with the duchess of Ferrara, Renée de France (1510–1575), who had notable reformist leanings, and to meet the future Jesuits Simón Rodríguez and Claudio Jajo. We can also assign to this period in Ferrara the beginnings of Colonna's important friendship with Marguerite d'Angoulême (1492–1549), the French queen of Navarre and sister of the king of France.²⁸ Thus, the Ferrara sojourn was

vol. 2; Concetta Ranieri, "Si san Francesco fu eretico li suoi imitatori son luterani": Vittoria Colonna e la riforma dei cappuccini," in *Ludovico da Fossombrone e l'Ordine dei Cappuccini*, ed. Vittorio Criscuolo (Rome: Istituto storico dei cappuccini, 1994): 337–51; Veronica Copello, "Nuovi elementi su Vittoria Colonna, i cappuccini e i gesuiti," *Lettere italiane* 69, no. 2 (2017): 296–327; Marianna Liguori, "Vittoria Colonna e la riforma cappuccina: Documenti epistolari e un'appendice inedita," *Atti e memorie dell'Arcadia* 6 (2017): 85–104.

24. On Valdés, see Letter 24. There is no documentary evidence to support a meeting between Colonna and Valdés, although some sources suggest that one took place: see for example Concetta Ranieri, "Premesse umanistiche alla religiosità di Vittoria Colonna," *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa*, 32 (1996): 531–48, at 537–38.

25. For the exchanges between Colonna and Ochino, see Letters 14, 15, 28, and 31. More broadly on their relationship, see Giovanni Bardazzi, "Le rime spirituali di Vittoria Colonna e Bernardino Ochino," *Italique* 4 (2001): 61–101; Emidio Campi, "Vittoria Colonna and Bernardino Ochino," in Brundin, Crivelli and Sapegno, *A Companion to Vittoria Colonna*, 371–98; Michele Camaioni, *Il Vangelo e l'anticristo: Bernardino Ochino tra francescanesimo ed eresia, 1487–1547* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2018).

26. On this famous friendship, see Letters 33–34, 37, and 40 as well as the bibliography cited in the notes to those letters.

27. See Letter 15, and on the plans for a pilgrimage, Targoff, *Renaissance Woman*, 125–31.

28. See Letter 20, and the bibliography cited in the notes to that letter.

probably key to the progressive development in this period of Colonna's understanding of and engagement with reform theology.

From Ferrara, Colonna traveled further afield in order to hear Ochino preach, attending his sermons in Pisa, Florence and Lucca. She returned to Rome in 1538, where she took up residence at the convent of San Silvestro in Capite and remained there until 1541. Her stay in Rome in these years was the context for the establishment of another key friendship, that with the English Cardinal Reginald Pole (1500–1558), who from about 1540 took over Ochino's position as Colonna's primary spiritual mentor.²⁹ Other close friends were also to be found in Rome at this time: the reformist bishop Pier Paolo Vergerio (1498–1565), writing from France, described a "school which includes Your Excellency along with my most reverend Cardinals [Gasparo] Contarini, Pole, [Pietro] Bembo and [Federico] Fregoso, all united together."³⁰

Over this whole period, relations between Colonna's brother Ascanio (1500–1557) and Pope Paul III (1468–1549) had continued to deteriorate. For some years the pope had been looking for an excuse to invade the Colonna lands south of Rome, while Ascanio refused to be commanded by the pope and rejected any kind of compromise in the dealings between them.³¹ In the winter of 1541, Ascanio rejected the pope's new salt tax, at which point the tension reached breaking point and Vittoria was forced to take refuge in the Dominican convent of San Paolo in Orvieto.³² At the urging of the Emperor Charles V (1500–1558), she tried to mediate between the factions and persuade her brother to accept the terms for peace, but her pleas fell on deaf ears. In March 1541, the so-called Salt Wars broke out between Ascanio and Pope Paul III: the pope seized all the Colonna territories and Ascanio was forced into exile.

Shortly afterwards, Reginald Pole was chosen as legate of the Patrimony of Saint Peter in Viterbo. Colonna followed him there, and took up residence once again in a Dominican convent, that of Santa Caterina.³³ While in Viterbo she joined the discussions of the so-called *Spirituali* or "Spirituals." The Spirituals were a group of prelates and humanists who were active in pursuit of church reform during the middle decades of the sixteenth century. They were particularly sympathetic to the Lutheran doctrine of *sola fide* (justification by faith alone),

29. See for evidence of Pole's growing role, Letters 24, 28, 30–31, 36, and 39. More broadly on Pole, see Dermot Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Cardinal Pole and the Counter Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

30. "Schola della Eccellentia Vostra et di Reverendissimi miei Cardinali Contareno, Polo, Bembo, Fregoso, che era tutt'una": Colonna, *Carteggio*, no. CXV.

31. See Letters 21 and 22.

32. See Letter 23 and the bibliography in the notes to that letter.

33. For evidence of Colonna's desire to spend time with Pole while she was in Viterbo, a desire that was mostly thwarted, see Letter 24.

and as a result they questioned the validity of many of the rites and practices of Catholicism. After the death of Juan de Valdés in 1541, some members of the Valdesian circle gathered in Viterbo in the household of Reginal Pole.³⁴ This group included men such as the humanist poet Marcantonio Flaminio (1498–1550), the Venetian nobleman Alvise [Luigi] Priuli (ca. 1500–1560), Bembo's protégé Vittore Soranzo (1550–1558), the bishop of Modena Giovanni Morone (1509–1580), the humanist and papal secretary Pietro Carnesecchi (1508–1567) and, there in spirit rather than in person, the widowed noblewoman Giulia Gonzaga (1513–1566). During her stay in Viterbo, Colonna's exposure to and understanding of reformed theology, including Lutheran positions, evidently increased exponentially. It was also during this period that she witnessed the preparation of the draft of the reformist book, *Il beneficio di Cristo*, which came out in print in 1542 but was swiftly suppressed by the Inquisition.³⁵

In 1542, three of Colonna's close friends were taken from her in quick succession. Gasparo Contarini (1483–1542) died in August of that year.³⁶ Just a few days later Bernardino Ochino, who had failed to present himself before the Inquisition in Rome, fled instead to Switzerland and definitively abandoned the Catholic Church.³⁷ In November, Reginald Pole, who had been nominated as papal legate to the Council of Trent, left Viterbo to travel to Trent from where, when the first planned meeting of that body did not eventuate, he rejoined the papal Curia.

In the autumn of 1543, having recovered from an illness that had seriously worried her friends, Colonna returned once again to Rome and took up residence in the Benedictine convent of Sant'Anna. She joined the Compagnia della Grazia (Fellowship of Grace), founded to protect and run Casa Santa Marta, an institution for the rehabilitation of repentant prostitutes that had been set up by Ignatius of Loyola, founder and Superior General of the Jesuit order.³⁸ Many

34. On the Spirituals, and Colonna's relationship to them, see Massimo Firpo, "Vittoria Colonna, Giovanni Morone e gli 'spirituali,'" *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 24, no. 1 (1988); Massimo Firpo, *Tra alumbados e 'spirituali': Studi su Juan de Valdés e il valdesianesimo nella crisi religiosa del '500 italiano* (Florence: Olschki, 1990); Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics*; and relevant chapters in Brundin, Crivelli and Sapegno, *A Companion to Vittoria Colonna*.

35. On the *Beneficio di Cristo*, see Carlo Ginzburg and Adriano Prosperi, *Giochi di pazienza: Un seminario sul Beneficio di Cristo*, 2nd ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 1977); and Luigi Lazzerini, *Teologia del Miserere: Da Savonarola al Beneficio di Cristo, 1490–1543* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2013).

36. See Stephen Bowd, "Prudential Friendship and Religious Reform: Vittoria Colonna and Gasparo Contarini" in Brundin, Crivelli and Sapegno, *A Companion to Vittoria Colonna*, 349–70.

37. Gigliola Fragnito, "Gli 'spirituali' e la fuga di Bernardino Ochino," *Rivista storica italiana* 84 (1972): 777–813.

38. Copello, "Nuovi elementi," 322–23.

contemporaries also record Colonna's considerable charitable activities in this period, in particular her work to build churches and convents.³⁹

Three years later, her health once again took a turn for the worse: she died on 25 February 1547 in Rome. At her deathbed were a number of friends from the group of Spirituals: Marcantonio Flaminio, Luigi Priuli, and, in Pole's absence, his secretary Tommaso Maggi. In her will Colonna left Pole a considerable sum of money.⁴⁰

Colonna's corpus of poetry, according to the collection edited and published by Alan Bullock in 1982, consists of 141 poems treating amorous themes (commemorating the death of Ferrante); 217 poems with spiritual subject matter; and around thirty correspondence poems.⁴¹ There is almost no trace of poetry composed before her widowhood in 1525, despite contemporary sources citing her as a known poet in these early years.⁴² The exception is a poetic *Epistola* composed on the theme of the rout of Ravenna in 1512 during which her husband was taken prisoner.⁴³ Colonna's fame as a poet spread rapidly once she was widowed, however: already by 1532 Ludovico Ariosto was singing her praises in the final edition of his epic *Orlando furioso*,⁴⁴ and in 1535, a sonnet by Colonna was printed in the second edition of Pietro Bembo's collected *Rime*.⁴⁵ Her poetry, as well as her poetic judgement, were sought out by some of the finest writers from across the Italian peninsula.

Sometime around 1535, as her poetry appeared in print via Bembo's mediation, Colonna made known her decision to resume writing after a pause and to turn her literary vocation entirely over to the service of God, narrating her

39. Copello, "Nuovi elementi," 309–10 and 317–18.

40. Targoff, *Renaissance Woman*, 252–73.

41. Vittoria Colonna, *Rime*, ed. Alan Bullock (Bari: Laterza, 1982); and Vittoria Colonna, *Sonetti: In morte di Francesco Ferrante d'Avalos marchese di Pescara: Edizione del ms. XIII.G.43 della Biblioteca nazionale di Napoli*, ed. Tobia R. Toscano (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), which identifies a number of new poems by Colonna. Bullock's division of "amorous" and "spiritual" poems has been problematized and nuanced by later critics: see especially Danilio Romei, "Le *Rime* di Vittoria Colonna," review of Colonna, *Rime*, ed. Alan Bullock, *Paragone-Letteratura* 34, no. 404 (1983): 81–84; Giovanna Rabitti, review of Colonna, *Rime*, ed. Alan Bullock, *Studi e problemi di critica testuale* 28 (1984), 230–39; and above all Toscano in Colonna, *Sonetti: In morte*, 22–51. The identification of correspondence poems is also discussed in Brundin, "Vittoria Colonna in Manuscript?"

42. Thérault, *Un cénacle humaniste*; and Concetta Ranieri, "Descriptio et imago vitae: Vittoria Colonna nei biografi, letterati e poeti del Cinquecento," in *Biografia: Genesi e strutture*, ed. Mauro Sarnelli (Rome: Aracne, 2003), 123–53.

43. The *Epistola* on the rout of Ravenna appears as poem number A2:1 with the first-line title "Excelso mio Signor, questa ti scrivo," in Colonna, *Rime*, ed. Bullock, 53–56.

44. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso* XXXVII.16–21; see Nuccio Ordine, "Vittoria Colonna nell'*Orlando furioso*," *Studi e problemi di critica testuale* 1 (1991): 55–92.

45. See Letter 9.