

DIODATA MALVASIA

Writings on the Sisters of San Luca
and Their Miraculous Madonna



Edited and translated by

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Introduction

The Other Voice

In 1617, the voice of Diodata Malvasia (c. 1532–post-1617), a Dominican nun from the city of Bologna, was heard publicly for the first time with the printing of her history, *The Arrival and the Miraculous Workings of the Glorious Image of the Virgin Painted by Saint Luke*.¹ The book relates the miracles performed by the Madonna of San Luca, a painting attributed to the Evangelist and held in custodianship by the nuns of Malvasia's convent. The text was once thought to be Malvasia's only piece of writing, and the few scholars who referenced it generally described it as a fairly conventional example in a long line of histories on this particular miraculous image. What had not been noted, however, was the existence of a second and much earlier text by Malvasia: a manuscript entitled *A Brief Discourse on What Occurred to the Most Reverend Sisters of the Joined Convents of San Mattia and San Luca from the Year 1573*.² This chronicle recounts the campaign Malvasia waged with her sisters against the enactment of proposed ecclesiastical reform that arose in the period following the Council of Trent: in this case, forced enclosure and seizure of their preternatural Marian icon. The two compositions are presented here together, the *Brief Discourse* in its first ever printing, and selections of the *Arrival* in the text's first modern edition.

During this period, the church enacted sweeping programs to “reform” monastic women, working to enforce limitations on their autonomy, mobility, and activity. Convents often reacted with vehement opposition to these attempts. The *Brief Discourse* recounts one such monastery's struggle, enacted primarily through an epistolary offensive designed to win support from the most powerful men at the papal court, including the pope himself. At the same time, the manuscript represents only the beginning of Malvasia's personal campaign of

1. Diodata Malvasia, *La venuta et i progressi miracolosi della santissima Madonna dipinta da San Luca* (Bologna: Rossi, 1617).

2. *Breve discorso di quanto avviene [sic] alle reverendissime suore di San Mattia et San Luca, monasterij uniti dell'anno 1573*, Bologna, Biblioteca comunale dell'Archiginnasio, MS Gozzadini 189, 209r–227r. The manuscript consists of 18 folios apparently transcribed by a single, seventeenth-century hand, in brown ink on parchment, with occasional numbering by a later hand in pencil. It is bound with a number of other documents pertaining to the history of the convents of San Mattia and San Luca, including copies of the papal dispensations and bulls addressed to the two convents in Latin and vernacular, evaluations of their possessions, registers of tax payments and monetary gifts received, and several large eighteenth-century pamphlets announcing the processions of the Madonna of San Luca during Holy Week in Bologna. On the recent recognition of the *Brief Discourse*, see Danielle Callegari and Shannon McHugh, “‘Se fossimo tante meretrici’: The Rhetoric of Resistance in Diodata Malvasia's Convent Narrative,” *Italian Studies* 66, no. 1 (2011): 21–39.

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resistance, one performed by means of literary production. Read together with the previously known *Arrival*, the unpublished *Brief Discourse* makes apparent the author's sustained efforts, both creative and political. It is now clear that rather than being an isolated (and reportedly uninspired) written record, the *Arrival* is in fact the finale of a lifelong social and creative crusade on behalf of her convent.

Malvasia's enduring labor seems to have opened and closed with the two texts under study here, but is not necessarily limited to them. On the contrary, in the intervening four decades, she emerges as a likely participant in such literary projects as an expansion of a text by the historian Leandro Alberti (1479–1552) and a poetic anthology by the intellectual Ascanio Persio (1554–1610), the latter involving Malvasia's contemporary women writers Chiara Matraini (1515–1604) and Lucrezia Marinella (1571–1653). In this richer context, the *Brief Discourse* and the *Arrival* provide a fascinating glimpse into monastic women's resistance to injurious post-Tridentine reform.

The merit of Malvasia's compositions is not limited to their sociohistorical revelations. As K. J. P. Lowe has established, though nuns' chronicles have rarely been given scholarly attention, they often reveal themselves to be more ambitious than simple catalogues of events.³ Malvasia's *Brief Discourse* is no exception. Though it can be categorized under the broad and heterogeneous classification of convent chronicle, it is unique in that it is not a straightforward prose text. Rather, Malvasia interweaves her own narration throughout transcriptions of entire epistles exchanged between the nuns and their would-be champions.⁴ As Malvasia herself emphasizes, it should be considered a sort of *ars epistolandi*, a handbook aimed at demonstrating the art of persuasive letter-writing for the sisters who would have to wage battles after her. In this way the *Brief Discourse* reveals itself to be an extraordinary example from this period of a functioning rhetorical guidebook by an Italian woman writer. The *Arrival* similarly breaks with expectations, at times more explicitly given the quantity and formulaic nature of histories of the famous Madonna of San Luca that had been composed up to that time. Malvasia digresses at length on profound theophilososophical questions and inserts long passages on the nuns' specific participation in the miraculous activities of the Madonna. Individually, the *Brief Discourse* and the *Arrival* constitute telling examples of the lively intellectual exchange and the active engagement of nuns

3. K. J. P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture: Women and History Writing in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. 1–9.

4. We are currently at work on an article that focuses on external letters about the nuns' case, exchanged between the Bolognese senate and papal delegates in Rome. By revealing the unexpected and supportive involvement of a third party—the government of the city, which was officially a papal state, but which clung obdurately to its roots as an independent republic—these epistles indicate that nuns' resistance to reform could be of broader civic and political interest.

within their convent and with the outside world. Taken together, they establish Malvasia as an ambitious, self-aware author of a provocative and unstudied contribution to women's writing.

Diodata Malvasia and the Convents of San Mattia and San Luca

As her brief biography in Giovanni Fantuzzi's *Notizie degli scrittori bolognesi* relates, Malvasia was serving as subprioress of the convent of San Mattia at the time that she signed the dedicatory letter of her first known work, the *Brief Discourse*.⁵ She would serve as prioress there in 1592, 1606, 1611, and 1613. Malvasia was born sometime in the early 1530s to Count Annibale Malvasia and Giulia Alamandini, both of noble lineage and from families well represented in the Bolognese senate. When Malvasia professed at San Mattia in 1547, she was joining the company of many other sisters and daughters of Bolognese nobles, women who had chosen the veil over marriage or who had been forced into the convent by exorbitant dowries.⁶ It is not surprising then that her writing exhibits an authoritative tone indicative of her upbringing as an educated patrician woman.⁷ Indeed, she

5. Giovanni Fantuzzi, *Notizie degli scrittori bolognesi*, 9 vols. (Bologna: San Tommaso d'Aquino, 1781–1794), 5:163–164. Malvasia's dedicatory letter is signed 1575, dating the manuscript to more than forty years prior to the publication of her *Arrival*. On Malvasia as an author see also Elisabetta Graziosi, "Scrivere in convento: devozione, encomio, persuasione nelle rime delle monache fra Cinque e Seicento," in *Donna, disciplina, creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII secolo: studi e testi a stampa*, ed. Gabriella Zarri (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1996), 303–32, especially 319–20; Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400–1650* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 147–48; Virginia Cox, *The Prodigious Muse: Women's Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 8–10, 66, 214, 250, 262.

6. As Silvia Evangelisti summarizes, "convents had a multifunctional role for aristocratic and wealthy sectors of society. As cornerstones of civic religious life and primary centers for women's education, nunneries were an honorable and economically convenient place for patrician families to send daughters they did not want, or could not afford, to marry off." In "'We do not have it, and we do not want it': Women, Power, and Convent Reform in Florence," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 34 (2003): 677–700, at 679. See also Gabriella Zarri, "Monasteri femminili e città (secoli XV–XVIII)," in *La chiesa e il potere politico*, eds. Giorgio Chittolini and Giovanni Miccoli, vol. 9 of *Storia d'Italia. Annali* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), 357–398. On forced cloistering see for example Giovanna Paolin, *Lo spazio del silenzio: monacazioni forzate, clausura, e proposte di vita religiosa femminile nell'età moderna* (Monreale Valcellina: Centro studi storici Menocchio; Pordenone: Biblioteca dell'Immagine, 1996); and Sharon T. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 31–32, both of whom build upon the vast existing bibliography on the subject.

7. A woman of Malvasia's social class would have received an education including training in vernacular reading and writing, and possibly Latin, either in the home or in a convent school. On the education of women in this period, see for example Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 87–102; Gabriella Zarri, *Recinti: Donne, clausura e matrimonio nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000), esp. 156–59. For examples of the types of books to which Malvasia may have had access, see the

describes herself and the other women in convent leadership as “all gentlewomen truly capable of governing and ruling a republic, let alone a convent of nuns.”⁸

San Mattia’s sister convent was an essential element of that formidable self-image, mostly because the smaller San Luca, located on the Monte della Guardia just outside of the city, was well-known as home to and namesake of the Madonna of San Luca, the miraculous icon brought to Bologna in the late twelfth century.⁹ As Malvasia recounts in the *Arrival*—keeping generally to the icon’s accepted history of her time, though making frequent embellishments—the relationship between the united convents and the image began in the eleventh century, when a young devout Bolognese woman established a hermitage on a hill beyond the city where she could dedicate herself entirely to a life of prayer and abstinence. Shortly after that, a hermit named Eutimio was guided, by divine providence and his own religious fervour, to deliver the Madonna to its desired resting place in the young woman’s spiritual retreat on the Monte della Guardia outside of Bologna. Since then she and her company had united themselves with various other groups of religious women, and eventually, to house their growing number and assure their safety, they shifted their primary residence to the larger and more central San Mattia.

Nonetheless, as Malvasia wrote toward the end of the sixteenth century, the connection between the larger convent and both the image and its domicile was still the primary focus of the women’s energies. Nine of San Mattia’s senior

library catalogues of two contemporary Italian convents: Danilo Zardin, “Mercato librario e letture devote nella svolta del Cinquecento tridentino: Note in margine ad un inventario milanese di libri di monache,” in *Stampa, libri e letture a Milano nell’età di Carlo Borromeo*, eds. Nicola Raponi and Angelo Turchini (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1992), 135–246; and Paul F. Gehl, “Libri per donne: Le monache clienti del libraio fiorentino Piero Morosi (1588–1607),” in *Donna, disciplina, creanza cristiana*, 67–80.

8. “gentildonne tutte veramente da governare et reggere una repubblica, nonché un convento di monache,” *Breve discorso*, 210r. All citations from the manuscript are reproduced here in their archaic form, but with modernized spelling, accents, and punctuation where necessary for clarity.

9. For the most comprehensive and modern histories of the convents and the icon, see Amedeo Benati, “La chiesa del Monte della Guardia: da romitorio a monastero, sec. XII–XVIII,” and Mario Fanti, “La leggenda della Madonna di San Luca di Bologna: Origine, fortuna, sviluppo e valore storico,” both of whom rely on archival evidence and discredit certain traditional elements found in earlier histories of the convents and the icon (as will be noted below); both are found in Mario Fanti, Giancarlo Roversi, and Patrizia Angiolini Martinelli, eds., *La Madonna di San Luca di Bologna: Otto secoli di storia, di arte e di fede* (Bologna: Silvana Editoriale, 1993), 49–67 and 69–99, respectively. See also Nicholas Terpstra, *Lay Confraternities and Civic Religion in Renaissance Bologna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19–23; Nicholas Terpstra, “Confraternities and Local Cults: Civic Religion Between Class and Politics in Renaissance Bologna” in *Civic Ritual and Drama*, eds. Alexandra F. Johnston and Wim N. M. Hüsken (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 143–74; Paolo Mattioli, *Guida storica per devoti della Madonna di S. Luca* (Bologna: Compositori, 2004); Paola Foschi, “Il convento delle domenicane di San Mattia: studi per un restauro,” *Atti e memorie. Deputazione di storia patria per le province di Romagna* 58 (2007): 291–355; Sherri Franks Johnson, *Monastic Women and Religious Orders in Late Medieval Bologna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 99–108.

nuns were sent up biennially to reside in San Luca in order to maintain and guard the sacred image as well as prepare her for public processions during Holy Week and the Rogation days. San Mattia in turn was among the institutions that played host to the image and the many pilgrims who came to adore her when it was brought down to the city on high holy days. The icon was an integral component of civic pride and religious observance in Bologna; it thus imbued the women with agency as the chosen caretakers of the Madonna and provided them with an important means to participate in life beyond their convent walls. The women of the united convents of San Mattia and San Luca came to anchor their identities in the icon, as Malvasia's works demonstrate.

Though Malvasia gives her readers a detailed and painstakingly crafted history of her convents, their relationship with the Madonna of San Luca, and the challenges they faced in the convent reformation that followed the Council of Trent, she remains mostly silent on her own past and her role in the events that unfold. The *Brief Discourse* is almost entirely devoid of any personal references, with the exception of the opening of her narration, in which she names herself impersonally as one of the governing members of the convent. In the *Arrival* she is somewhat more forthcoming as she draws upon her own experiences and faculties to construct a more convincing argument for the glory of Mary and their miraculous image. For instance, she explains that she was aware of Galen's *On the Temperaments* and certain other medical treatises—an unexpected set of reading material for a nun—because, “through the order of my superiors, I served as nurse, and it thus pleased me to read something of medicine, in order to carry out my duty as best I could.”¹⁰ She is most candid and personal in recounting the moment in which she entered the convent, recalling it with pride and nostalgia: “And I myself remember when I took the veil, and dressed myself in this cloak of the most holy, never adequately celebrated, Dominican order.”¹¹ Upon hearing the words of her professor, Malvasia describes, “they remained in my heart as though inscribed, and they have served me as a shield and a solid defense in the tribulations that we have often suffered through the persecutions of some who looked at this holy habitation (where we are—surely we are right in saying so—nearly always on our knees, both out of the reverence due to such a place and for the common benefit of our city) as a place of recreation, leisure, and entertainment.”¹²

10. The *Arrival*, 91. Interestingly, Malvasia does not seem to be the only Bolognese nun engaged with medicine in this way; her contemporary Semidea Poggi, a singer in her youth in her convent and a published poet later in life, was also known as an herbalist. See Gian Ludovico Masetti Zannini, “Una canonichessa erborista: Semidea Poggi (sec. 16–17),” *Strenna storica bolognese*, 45 (1995): 383–401. Sharon Strocchia has explored the practice in Florence, in Strocchia, “The Nun Apothecaries of Renaissance Florence: Marketing Medicines in the Convent,” *Renaissance Studies* 25 (2011): 627–47.

11. The *Arrival*, 106.

12. The *Arrival*, 107.

While it is likely that the decision to take vows was impressed upon Malvasia by her family, her writing emphasizes how she embraced the unique kind of freedom that a convent could provide to an early modern woman, sparing her subjection to a husband and the obligations of motherhood. The extensive work in recent years on Arcangela Tarabotti has drawn attention to the practice of forced religious vocations and the suffering some women endured inside the cloister.¹³ Nonetheless, the apparent confines of a monastery, and the preponderance of male commentary on female religious life at this time, belie the time and space a convent could afford for creative production and the exercise of a certain kind of power.¹⁴

Tridentine Reform and Malvasia's Chronicle

The historical moment Malvasia captures with her *Brief Discourse* was of tremendous consequence not only to the cloistered men and women of the Church, but for the entire Catholic world. As early as 1520, the deteriorating Catholic hegemony on the European continent—marked most notably by the issuance of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*—had prompted the idea of a council to clarify the church's position and establish a standardized orthodoxy across national and regional boundaries. In following, the Council of Trent was convened with the mission of carefully defining the Catholic directives for scriptural interpretation, reaffirming the relationship between faith and works, and explicitly rejecting rising Protestant tendencies. However, the congress itself became controversial and difficult to organize. It was realized only after several failed attempts and was generally poorly attended, particularly by non-Italian prelates. Though the Council would ultimately be recalled as the moment when the Catholic Church affirmed its adherence to strict conservatism in the face of Protestant movements, the

13. On Arcangela Tarabotti see, for example, the translation of Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, ed. and trans. Letizia Panizza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and the collection of essays edited by Elissa Weaver, *Arcangela Tarabotti: A Literary Nun in Baroque Venice* (Ravenna: Longo, 2006).

14. Whether Malvasia's impressions of her convent sisters' feelings are accurate is impossible to tell for sure. However, in contrast to the infernal entrapment described by Tarabotti, her chronicle comes much closer to the one composed by Bartolomea Riccoboni, which, as Daniel Bornstein underlines, tells a story of "female dedication and self-determination [in a convent] filled with women who definitely wanted to be there," where "each found scope for her particular talents and inclinations" and enjoyed "a privileged vantage point from which to observe and comment on events in the outside world." Daniel Bornstein, introduction to Bartolomea Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: The Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395–1436*, ed. and trans. Daniel Bornstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2–4. A successful approach must balance the tendency to present cloistered women as either creative heroines or helpless victims, as advocated by, among others, Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent* (New York: Viking, 2002), xxi.

congresses did not appear to have effected the climactic change that in retrospect marked a turning point for the Church and continental politics.¹⁵

Compliance with the decisions made at Trent was at best partial during the first decade following the final congress, and in 1573 the intensity with which reform would be enacted remained largely unclear. As Adriano Prospero observes, enforcement of conciliar decrees fell exclusively on the papacy, and prior to the ascent of Gregory XIII (Ugo Boncompagni, 1502–1585; pope 1572–1585), many of the most stringent policies had been dismissed without further comment.¹⁶ The first Bolognese pope in nearly four hundred years, Gregory finally introduced a rigorous series of apostolic visitations in an attempt to actually implement the monastic reforms prescribed by the third congress of the Council in 1563.¹⁷ For monastic women specifically, this edict meant the enforcement of perpetual claustration, restriction of the access of visitors to the convents, limitation to the nuns' civic participation, and the threat of severe punishments for all violations.¹⁸

When Malvasia recounts in the *Brief Discourse* that in early 1573 the women of San Mattia heard “rumors” of impending convent assessments, she is reminding us of the real uncertainty that existed in this crucial moment following the Council, not just within the convent, but also beyond its walls. It is thus instructive to note how well the sisters were able to anticipate the potential severity of

15. For a general introduction to the historical context and proceedings of the Council, see the very useful studies by John O'Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), and *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013); as well as the classic Italian manual by Adriano Prospero, *Il Concilio di Trento: Un'introduzione storica* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), esp. 108–112, or his lengthier study, Adriano Prospero, *Tribunali della coscienza: Inquisitori, confessori, missionari* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996).

16. Prospero, *Il Concilio di Trento*, 112.

17. Gregory XIII was known as the major enforcer of Tridentine reform. His native city of Bologna benefitted from the access to information and promotion that direct connections to the papal court made available. For Gregory XIII, see Agostino Borromeo, “Gregory XIII” in *Enciclopedia dei papi* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2000), 3:180–202; and particularly for his interaction with the city of Bologna, see Ludwig von Pastor, *The History of the Popes: From the Close of the Middle Ages*, trans. Frederick Ignatius Antrobus, Ralph Francis Kerr, and Dom Ernest Graf, 23 vols. (St. Louis: Herder, 1891–1953), 19:11–65.

18. On the Council of Trent and convent reform specifically see Raimondo Creyten, “La riforma dei monasteri femminili dopo i decreti tridentini” in *Il Concilio di Trento e la riforma tridentina: Atti del convegno storico internazionale (Trento 2–6 settembre 1963)* (Rome: Herder, 1965), 1:45–83; Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. 6–8. On the changes women saw in this period, see Gabriella Zarri, “Gender, Religious Institutions and Social Discipline: The Reform of the Regulars,” in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (London: Longman, 1998), 193–212; Zarri, “From Prophecy to Discipline, 1450–1650,” in *Women and Faith: Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present*, eds. Lucetta Scaraffia and Gabriella Zarri (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 83–112.

the situation and immediately rise to challenges to their autonomy, despite the expected limitations to their awareness of changing tides outside of the cloister. They acted preemptively, capitalizing on their relationship with Filippo Guastavillani, then the gonfalonier of justice of Bologna, as he was not only “the most beloved nephew of the pope, Gregory XIII” but also the brother of three nuns in that convent.¹⁹ To be sure, the sisters showed great prescience in discerning that their ability to move within the city might be jeopardized, especially between San Mattia and San Luca for the purposes of caring for the icon, as this was precisely what the reformers would condemn.

To dispel any question of nepotism on his part, Gregory not only began to implement the edict on convent reform with vigor in his native city, but he moreover sent his most zealous and thorough visitor, Ascanio Marchesini (usually referred to in Malvasia’s text as “Monsignor Visitor”), who conducted an inspection of San Mattia on November 13, 1573.²⁰ For the sisters residing at the convent of San Mattia, who were, as even the militant reformer Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti would write, “truly laudable,” Marchesini’s scrutiny of their living conditions turned up only two concerns that he would be forced to report back to Rome.²¹ The first was the existence of a space in the convent that looked over a shared garden in Via Frassinago and from which the sisters admitted they “see, and are seen” (*vediamo e siamo vedute*) by working men; the second, the expected necessity of forcibly barring the doors in order to enclose the convent in accordance

19. *Brief Discourse*, 35. Filippo Guastavillani (1541–1587), son of Angelo Guastavillani and Giacomina Boncompagni. When the events unfolded in 1573 he was the gonfalonier of justice of Bologna, though shortly thereafter he was promoted to the cardinalate by his maternal uncle, Gregory XIII. For Guastavillani, see Giampiero Brunelli, “Guastavillani, Filippo,” in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 60 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2003), 489–92; Pastor, *History of the Popes*, 19:31–2.

20. Gregory XIII also broke with the long-standing tradition of entrusting the most powerful roles in the papal court to his own nephews, creating one cardinal-nephew at his ascension, Filippo Boncompagni, but waiting two (unprecedented) years before extending the same privilege to another, Filippo Guastavillani, and leaving a third nephew as archbishop. Conversely, he openly promoted the career of his illegitimate son and publicly showered him with gifts; see Borromeo, “Gregory XIII,” 3:183. Of the visitations, Pastor describes: “How carefully the visitors carried out their task is clear from the fact that Ascanio Marchesini, who was appointed to visit the diocese of Bologna, limited himself to the city itself, while for the rest he appointed two delegates.” Pastor, 19:74. Ascanio Marchesini (d.1580), was bishop of Mallorca and apostolic visitor for the Council of Trent, nominated by Gregory XIII on April 2, 1573; see Pastor, *History of the Popes*, 19:74, n. 1.

21. Gabriele Paleotti (1522–1597; cardinal 1565–1566; archbishop of Bologna 1566–1597) was lauded for the severity and intensity of the reform practices he oversaw in his archdiocese following the Council of Trent. A coauthor of the Council’s decree on religious images, he notably proposed an index of prohibited images to complement the church’s *Index of Prohibited Books*, though it was never realized. For Paleotti see for example, Paolo Prodi, *Il Cardinale Gabriele Paleotti (1522–1597)*, 2 vols. (Rome: Storia e letteratura, 1959, 1967).

with Tridentine orders.²² Surprisingly, the actual break in their cloister facing the garden was a problem the women succeeded in resolving quite quickly. They cleverly and swiftly offered to purchase the land from the proprietors, brothers of the neighboring monastery, thus manufacturing a situation in which the papal treasury was compelled to give them funding to expand their convent or risk being seen as complicit in allowing the women to remain partially exposed. This approach was especially effective, as the need for full enclosure was often supposed to be an unavoidable measure taken against the nuns' natural tendency towards promiscuity.²³

However, while the nuns were working to combat the issue of claustration, petitioning the aid of no less an authority than the pope himself, a third point of contention arose. After his second, separate visitation to the residence at San Luca, displeased with the informal organization of the living quarters and the frequent arrival of pilgrims, Marchesini immediately ordered the eviction of the nine elderly nuns who resided there and the convent's relinquishment of the miraculous painting of the Madonna.

The icon became both the major focus of the conflict Malvasia recounts in the *Brief Discourse*, as well as the center of a lengthy battle that persisted well after Malvasia's own death and the apparent settling of the issue in the sisters' favor.²⁴ Marchesini for one perceived the Madonna of San Luca as the most grievous threat to the nuns' maintenance of total abstinence, in that its governance required the nuns to leave their cloister and that conditions at its domicile were less strict. Arousing his ire, perhaps, was his awareness that the icon constituted a source of power that the women might wield within, and even over, the city of Bologna. As the ferocity with which the sisters reacted to the prospect of being dispossessed can attest, they were far from unaware of the icon's significance. Rather, they were prepared to use the power the Madonna gave them to reinforce their position, and even to threaten those officials who dared to undermine their role as caretakers of the image: "should [the Madonna] be wrongfully taken from this place, they prophesy the total ruin and extermination of this city; for as this Madonna came miraculously under their governance, miraculously again will she

22. *Brief Discourse*, 46. The visitor's dual concerns are described on p. 45.

23. For examples of enclosure being enacted at least in part in order to "protect" nuns from their own inevitable licentiousness—and instances of women's resistance—see Katherine Gill, "Scandala: Controversies concerning Clausura and Women's Religious Communities in Late Medieval Italy," in *Christendom and Its Discontents: Exclusion, Persecution, and Rebellion, 1000–1500*, eds. Scott L. Waugh and Peter D. Diehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 177–203; Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, esp. 79–99; Evangelisti, "'We do not have it, and we do not want it.'"

24. Manuscript documents bound with the *Brief Discourse* from as late as the 1780s recount the attempts by other orders to commandeer the Madonna and messages from Rome intervening; see MS Gozzadini 189, 259r–270r.

avenge this grave injury.”²⁵ How the sisters might wield this power would become the subject and the driving force behind Malvasia’s composition of the *Brief Discourse*.

Structure and Themes of the Brief Discourse

The dedicatory letter of the *Brief Discourse*, addressed to the prioress and sisters of Malvasia’s convent, dates the primary content to 1575, though an appended section recounts events through 1579 and brings the total page count up to thirty. The manuscript’s account of the convents’ visitations and conflicts might have been composed entirely in narrative prose, but Malvasia integrates the epistolary record into her own historical narration, transcribing entire letters both written by and addressed to the nuns that trace exchanges between the sisters and various influential male figures from whom the women sought help. These were mostly relatives with prominent positions at the papal court in Rome, but Malvasia also includes letters to the city’s senate as a whole and even, on several occasions, to Gregory XIII himself. The pope was not only a Bolognese compatriot but also a convent relative, with three nieces living in residence as well as two sisters buried within its walls—facts of which the sisters were wont gently and persuasively to remind him. The bulk of the convents’ epistles are signed by the prioress and sisters of San Mattia; Malvasia generally describes these as having been written by the prioress, though frequently acknowledges the input and assistance of other women in the college. Some of the letters, however, are written in a less official and more intimate capacity, such as when the gonfalonier Guastavillani’s three sisters correspond with him, or when Sister Margherita Bianchetti writes directly to her nephew Ludovico Bianchetti, master of the Apostolic Camera.²⁶ Even these more personal letters bear the marks of community composition, though, as they are remarkably “on message” with the prioress’s more formal communications. The Guastavillani sisters’ missive of November 28, 1573 echoes entire lines of the prioress’s letters to the senate and the pope composed on the same day, testifying to the intensity of the campaign’s coordination.²⁷

Dozens of chronicles from early modern Italian convents are extant, and though they appear in various forms, they constitute a cohesive genre. A handful of these have been reprinted in modern editions, and two—Bartolomea Riccoboni’s chronicle of the Corpus Domini in Venice and Giustina Niccolini’s

25. *Brief Discourse*, 50.

26. See for example *Brief Discourse*, 41–42 and 53–54.

27. For the letters, see *Brief Discourse*, 53–54. The letter to the senate is undated, but given its similarity to the letter to the pope and the fact that they appear consecutively in the manuscript, one can assume the same dating.

of Le Murate in Florence—have been translated into English.²⁸ K. J. P. Lowe has analyzed three other histories at length, of convents from different religious orders and from diverse areas of the peninsula; using these three annals as case studies, Lowe’s inquiry considers various components by which we might compare and interpret nuns’ chronicles as texts of literary and historical value.²⁹ Italian women both religious and secular were writing and publishing in the decades after the Council of Trent, despite a long-held assumption to the contrary among literary scholars, and were even venturing into genres formerly considered exclusively male, such as chivalric romance and epic.³⁰ However, as Lowe has pointed out, convent chronicles appear to be the only histories written (if unpublished) by Italian women in this period—though they have not always been taken seriously as histories per se.³¹ This is a reading practice Lowe importantly argues against, and that an examination of Malvasia’s *Brief Discourse* can further help to correct.

Some aspects of Malvasia’s history correspond to common elements of convent chronicles, among them a penchant for lists, which in the *Brief Discourse* finds expression in a register of all the nuns in the convent, “beginning with the reverend prioress and following through to the last.”³² This insistent naming of her fellow sisters aligns with another prevalent feature of convent chronicles, which is a conscious effort to give agency to their dramatis personae. The Corpus Domini chronicle, for example, includes a necrology in which every nun is ascribed a short biography with personal, individualized details.³³ The endings of Malvasia’s documents (both that of the original 1575 body and the later addendum), which

28. Riccoboni, *Life and Death*; Giustina Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, ed. and trans. Sandra Weddle (Toronto: Iter and Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2011). For modern editions and references to other well-known chronicles, see Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles and Convent Culture*, 6.

29. Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles and Convent Culture*, especially 11–57.

30. For a counterargument to Carlo Dionisotti’s much-quoted statement in his *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999), 238, that only in the mid-sixteenth century did Italian women writers produce in numbers (“soltanto nella letteratura del medio Cinquecento le donne fanno gruppo”) and have the luxury of experimentation in further genres, see, among others, Cox, *Women’s Writing*, where she cites Malvasia’s *Arrival* as an example of the increasingly authoritative voice essayed by women writers in this period (214; see also 8–11 on nuns publishing).

31. See Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles and Convent Culture*, 52–57, for a full discussion of this topic. One particularly fascinating anecdote that corroborates her point about convent chronicles having been dismissed because they were written by women is the account of how Niccolini’s *Chronicle of Le Murate* (discussed below at 12) was plagiarized by a male physician, who stole and repackaged the history under its own name, his male “authorship” suddenly imbuing the text with legitimacy (Lowe, 53).

32. *Brief Discourse*, 59.

33. On the Corpus Domini necrology and the tradition of convent necrologies, see Bornstein, introduction to *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent*, 14–15.

draw to a close in the author's present, are also telltale markers of the genre. These open endings can leave a modern reader with an unsatisfying feeling of ambiguity, but as Lowe observes, this practice was standard because "[t]he present of the chroniclers was not the end of the 'story' of the convents, and therefore the 'story' was never completed."³⁴

Still, Malvasia's chronicle distinguishes itself in a number of ways, among them chronologically: that is, rather than tracking a convent's history over a span of decades or even centuries, the *Brief Discourse* records a very specific event and only a handful of years. So focused is Malvasia's reportage that she opens in medias res, placing her reader in the middle of the action by opening on the word "while" (*mentre*), relating the very first rumblings of reform and including no preface beyond her dedicatory letter. By contrast, Giustina Niccolini of Le Murate in Florence recounts an ecclesiastical visit by a Tridentine representative akin to the one described by Malvasia, but this single event was logged among many in a convent history that dated all the way back to the cloister's founding.³⁵ Their commentary on the visits provides further contrast: Niccolini lists the reforms but does not complain of them, whereas Malvasia's entire chronicle is a record of her convent's disapproval of and battle against the proposed changes.

Other clues embedded within Malvasia's text reveal a marked authorial self-awareness. The title is revealing in this regard; rather than utilizing more conventional nomenclature for a convent history, such as "chronicle" in the singular or plural (for example, "cronaca" or "cronachette"), Malvasia imbues her text with a particular literary pedigree by calling it a "discourse." Though convent chronicles were sometimes composed anonymously, Malvasia not only signs her work, but includes her name in the title, asserting that it was "composed and recorded in this form with highest diligence by the reverend Sister Diodata Malvasia, gentlewoman of Bologna." That she includes a dedicatory letter at all is another sign of her desire to make her manuscript as much like a book as possible. Though the typical modesty tropes of weak wit and style are present, as well as the expected gratitude to Mary for her grace and aid, Malvasia nevertheless expresses an authorial voice, underlining the confidence she feels that she will be able to "narrate fully" all that happened; her characterization of her writing as an "undertaking" (*impresa*) and "labor" (*fatica*) belie any claims to self-doubt.³⁶

This ambition reveals itself at various points in Malvasia's prose sections as well. Her writing strives to present a historical straightforwardness and personal detachment. She narrates almost exclusively in the third person, with austerity that eschews such ornamentation as direct speech, analogy, or literary references,

34. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture*, 25.

35. See *ibid.*, 48 for the mention of the event in Niccolini's manuscript. The visit is reported in Niccolini, *Chronicle of Le Murate*, 213–18.

36. *Brief Discourse*, 34.

whether Biblical or secular. This spartan style serves to underscore Malvasia's moments of more florid prose, however, such as her pathetic description of the crucial scene in which the nuns learn that they are to lose their icon: "oh what cries were heard! oh what pleas! oh what laments in the convent of San Mattia! It seemed as if the final sentencing had come, that all the mothers were being brought to judgment. Some suffered fever, others were struck with headache, and it seemed as if the convent were an inferno."³⁷ The same is true of highlighting moments when Malvasia permits the admission of a bit of her personality into the text. Though Malvasia's narration is never truly impartial, the reader enjoys the particularly self-congratulatory tone evinced when the author announces that, once the nuns had won their right to maintain the Madonna, "one could easily believe that each time San Luca was taken from them, it would be miraculously restored."³⁸

The hallmark of Malvasia's text is its hybrid prose-epistolary format, which allows it to inhabit simultaneously the genres of historical chronicle and rhetorical *ars epistolandi*.³⁹ That Malvasia intended for her *Brief Discourse* to function as a letter-writing handbook is supported by the text's dedication. Though it is addressed to the prioress and the nuns of the college, Malvasia makes it clear that the true intended recipients of her text are not her fellow sisters of the present, but those of their future: "And so that this truth might appear even more clearly, I resolved to put down on paper in readable form all of our actions: not for you, who were present, but for those who will come after us."⁴⁰ The unresolved nature of both the 1575 narration and the 1577–1579 postscript demonstrate Malvasia's understanding that their battles over enclosure and governance of the image had not truly been settled and might not be for some time. Thus she composes the *Brief Discourse* not only as a means to record what happened to the convents and how they responded, but specifically to teach later generations of the convents' residents. By going beyond prose narration to include transcriptions of entire letters, she manages not only to tell these future sisters but also to show them, "so that they might see clearly and touch with their hands our travails and our blessings, and the manner in which we helped ourselves."⁴¹

37. "Oh che pianti si sentirono, oh che querelle, oh che lamenti nel monastero di San Mattia. Parea esser venuta la sentenza, che tutte le madri fossero giustiate. A chi venne la feb[b]re, a chi dolore di capo, e parea, che il convento fosse un Inferno" (*Breve discorso*, 217r; *Brief Discourse*, 49).

38. *Brief Discourse*, 55.

39. On this subfield of rhetoric, which was developed in the Middle Ages and became a popular treatise format under the humanists, see Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts: Collected Essays*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 235; William Dominik and Jon Hall, eds., *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010), 355.

40. "non per voi, che foste presenti, ma per quelle, che doppo [sic] noi verranno" (*Breve discorso*, 209v; *Brief Discourse*, 33).

41. "acciò chiaramente veggghino [sic], et tocchino con mani quali furono li travagli, et quali le gratie, et in qual modo c'aiutammo" (*Breve discorso*, 209v; *Brief Discourse*, 33–34).

Malvasia's endings provide further reason for reading her *Brief Discourse* as an instructional guidebook. Though both the 1575 and 1579 segments lack formal conclusions, both end with a final reported victory: in the earlier text, with news that the convents will maintain control of the image; in the latter, that they will maintain the right, without risk of excommunication, to host in the enclosed San Luca local noblewomen who find themselves caught in the rain during visits to the image. Moreover, both portions end by acknowledging that the battle continues and by modeling the indefatigability necessary for future successes. The 1575 text concludes with the prioress realizing that their struggles were far from finished, and so she pledges her trust in the Lord, though not without executing "every effort": "They wrote more letters to Rome, solicited Cardinal Ercole, and did other necessary things in order to bring about the desired results."⁴² The 1579 addendum finishes with a final letter to the pope in which the women thank him for his most recent dispensation—but not without petitioning him again, this time to support them by overruling an order that they have received to construct a wall at the church of San Luca. Malvasia may conclude in an ambiguous present, but she is careful nevertheless to instill in her readers, her future sisters, both a feeling of hope and an impulse to action.

With Malvasia's rhetorical purposefulness in mind, we can appreciate the persuasive strategies modeled by the letters contained in the *Brief Discourse*. The women of San Mattia and San Luca clearly recognized the disadvantaged position in which they found themselves as women writing to men, as nuns writing to senior ecclesiastical officials (and even at times the head of the church himself), and as petitioners writing under desperate circumstances. The women make no attempts to conceal or distract from their state of disempowerment, however; if anything, they frequently highlight their status of feminine vulnerability.⁴³ Their letters contain constant reminders that they are servants, that they merit little, that they are poor women of a poor convent. Signatures always feature tortuous variations of the women throwing themselves to the ground, kissing hands or feet, and begging for blessing, aid, or comfort. At times the writer performs a reluctance even to make an appeal, as when the prioress writes to Bianchetti that

42. *Brief Discourse*, 59.

43. From a rhetorical standpoint, an illuminating correlative example to the epistles recorded by Malvasia are those chronicled in Alison Thorne's study "Women's Petitionary Letters in Early Seventeenth-Century Treason Trials," *Women's Writing* 13, no. 1 (2008): 23–43. Thorne examines the set of shared rhetorical strategies employed by women who, like the sisters of San Mattia, were writing in extremis. She finds that women's performance in these letters often reflects gender differences that are more pronounced than in other types of petitionary letters of this period: specifically, she argues that, as a rhetorical strategy, the authors of these letters tended to emphasize their feminine weakness rather than mitigate it.

the sisters find themselves vexed at harassing him, and do so only because the circumstances are so dire, for “when necessity forces us, we cannot do otherwise.”⁴⁴

In other instances, the women highlight physical illness or distress, playing into the cultural assumption of the physiological weakness of their sex. When the sisters learn of the threat to their governance of the image, they narrate for the pope their piteous state, both physical and emotional: “Think of the cries, the laments, the blows to the heart that this news brought to us, unfortunate and truly wretched women . . . We are quite sure that if Your Holiness saw the desperation of these aged Mothers, if you heard the cries and lamentations, you would be moved to pity. Here no one sleeps, no one eats; rather we remain in constant torment and tribulation.”⁴⁵ Another letter from the prioress apologizes to Bianchetti for the fact that she is communicating with him in place of his aunt, Sister Margherita Bianchetti, who unfortunately finds herself too ill to write—though a fairly miraculous recovery is implied assuming that the aunt receives good news from the pope.⁴⁶

Paradoxically, it seems, this emphasis on the nuns’ “poor” state frequently appears as a source of their power. In the first letter to the pope, an admission of their potential unworthiness is followed by a reliance on the worth of the image: “And if we are not ourselves deserving of such a great demonstration, please be moved by the great merits of that most sacred Virgin of San Luca, protectress of Your Holiness.”⁴⁷ Despite their disadvantage, they draw potency from their governance of the miraculous painting. By extension, these humble virgins are implying further religious associations with other meek but virtuous women of the Bible, not only the Virgin Mary, but perhaps also the penitent Magdalene, who, like the nuns, locked herself away from the world of earthly temptations in order to fully contemplate and serve the Lord.⁴⁸ An exaggerated trope of feminine weakness, because of its association with spiritual fortitude, in fact works to their advantage.

The aforementioned examples highlight the letters’ heavy reliance on *pathos*, or appeal to emotion. The nuns can also be seen to engage *logos*, or appeal to

44. *Brief Discourse*, 59.

45. “Pensi Vostra Santità che gridi, che lamenti, che ferite al cuore sono state queste a noi poverelle, e veramente meschine . . . Siamo sicurissime che se Vostra Santità vedesse la disperatione di queste madri vecchie, li pianti, e le querelle, si moverebbe a pietà: qui non si dorme, ne si mangia, ma si sta in continua afflictione, e travaglio” (*Breve discorso* 218v; *Brief Discourse*, 57).

46. *Brief Discourse*, 51–52.

47. *Brief Discourse*, 58.

48. On women’s rhetorical acquisition of power by association with humble but righteous female Biblical figures, see Thorne, “Women’s Petitionary Letters,” 8–11. Jane Tylus also discusses this as a strategy in Catherine of Siena’s letters; see Jane Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature and the Signs of Others* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), 196–99.

reason, as when they use logical arguments that range from pragmatic concerns (e.g., the doors cannot be barred because it would prevent the nuns from carrying out such essential tasks as disposing of garbage and burying their dead) to legal justifications, as when on several occasions they cite their 500 years of sovereignty over the image, not to mention the concessions and privileges of thirteen pontiffs and infinite allies, bishops, and other prelates.⁴⁹ But more prevalent and powerful than *logos* is their employment of *ethos*, the appeal to one's character, such as when they praise or blame the integrity of the addressee. The most salient example is the emphasis that the women place on reminding the male recipients of their various connections to the convents, as when the pope is reminded of his manifold relationships to the nuns, who sign off "as your subjects, your compatriots, and your daughters"; in the same letter, Gregory's specific familial obligations are invoked as his "three most honorable nieces throw themselves to the ground."⁵⁰

At times this appeal to *ethos* means inciting the respondent to Christian charity and models of piety. One letter asks the pope to send the convents money for a project that his own father, Cristoforo Boncompagni, had started before his death. Another asks that he be charitable to the monasteries in the way that another pope, Pius V, had been generous with the sisters of Saint Peter Martyr. They even remind the pope of his role as representative of the divine on earth, implicitly encouraging him to imitate the Lord when they ask that he grant them "grace" and charity. On one notable occasion, praising Gregory for his benevolence, they liken him to Christ by invoking Scripture: "It remains only for us to throw ourselves to the ground and one by one kiss your most holy feet," the prioress writes, "and to say with your most honored nieces, *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini*."⁵¹ The Latin phrase, part of the Sanctus of the Ordinary of the Mass, is repeated in each one of the Gospels as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The insinuated comparison reminds the pope that he is meant to serve as the representative of Christ in this world, who, during his own time on earth, was notably most generous with humble and helpless women.

Even more impressive are moments when the sisters rail against the severest of restrictions by citing their own strong morality. Sometimes these assertions of character are subtle. When the nuns ask the pope for funds to purchase the garden, they emphasize their own modesty, downplaying the fact that their hand has been forced by Marchesini's command and instead stressing their own chaste desire to avoid impure visual exposure.⁵² Elsewhere they are more direct, as when

49. *Brief Discourse*, 51.

50. *Brief Discourse*, 46–47.

51. *Brief Discourse*, 56. Literally, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." The phrase appears first in Psalm 118:26 (AV; Psalm 117:26 Vulg.), and is repeated with the arrival of Christ into Jerusalem in the Gospels.

52. *Brief Discourse*, 46–47.

they demand that the senate take account of the fact that “there has never been a word of anything scandalous there,” or when they ask that the pope remember that the icon has always been governed by them “without news of a single incident that could blemish our honor.”⁵³ They follow this assertion with a covert insinuation about a risk to matters closer to his own heart. Though they merit so little, they assert, they ask him to act mercifully for the blood of Christ and, pointedly, “for the pious memory of the reverend bones of your most dear sisters.”⁵⁴ The barbed reminder, thinly veiled as a plea, raises the point that the physical well-being of the pope’s sisters’ bodies as they rest in the convents, and their spiritual health in the next life, for which the nuns continue to pray, are to some measure in the hands of the nuns of San Mattia.

As the stakes of the nuns’ supplications reach new heights, so does the fervor of their rhetorical language, which occasionally mounts to virulent attacks on the character of their enemies. At the height of their outrage, the sisters even make implied threats against anyone who might wrongfully try to impugn their honor and steal the image from them: “We are informed that there are those who, wishing to take this possession from us, have provided sinister information to the Sacred Congregation; but when they are informed of the goodness and integrity of our life, perhaps they will come to another conclusion.”⁵⁵ In one of the *Brief Discourse’s* most memorable moments, the nuns underline their immaculate and chaste—and specifically feminine—ethical posture by invoking its inverse: “And if you knew how we have been treated, you would have compassion: were we so many whores, we would not have been forced to endure so many walls, so many restrictions, and so many strange provisions.”⁵⁶ The letter, addressed to Bianchetti, climaxes with an outrageous assertion: “In the end it would be better to hang us all and end it.”⁵⁷ By invoking the startling opposition of virgin-whore, and then sug-

53. *Brief Discourse*, 50, 52.

54. *Brief Discourse*, 52.

55. *Brief Discourse*, 53.

56. “Se ella sapesse come siamo state trattate, ci havrebbe compassione; se fossimo tante meretrici, non ci sarebbero fatte tante muraglie, tanti ristringimenti, e tante strane provisioni” *Breve discorso* 221r; *Brief Discourse*, 57. In the same letter the prioress hints at the nuns’ sexual welfare, which rather than being protected by claustration will in fact be put at risk because of it, given that they will not be able to lock the doors well from the inside: “we are accustomed to entering the church at night and placing the heavy locks and great bars on the door; without those, how will we be safe?” *Brief Discourse*, 57.

57. “All’ultimo, sarebbe meglio impiccarle tutte, e finirla.” *Breve discorso* 221r; *Brief Discourse*, 57. The audacious nature of some of the letters begs the question of to what degree Malvasia may have modified their content or style: that is, whether the author privileged history or rhetoric. This is an inquiry for which resolution is not possible given that we do not have the original copies of the letters transcribed in the manuscript. A telling comparison is that some of the letters that appear in the *Brief Discourse* are transcribed again in the *Arrival* (see p. 107–9 below); those underwent only minor

gesting the horrifying death of an entire convent of female innocents, the women strive to shock their reader into acknowledging, and acting in favor of, their virtuous ethos. Should the addressee do any less, he might as well tie their noose with his own hands.

Malvasia's Arrival in Its Context

Malvasia's later *Arrival* would demonstrate with even greater sophistication and ambition this awareness of what the power of the icon, and the nuns' relationship to it, could mean to their liberty when Rome threatened tighter restrictions. The work's very composition was a means to draw support for the nuns of San Mattia and San Luca, though for most of its existence readers may have remained ignorant of this goal.

In publishing the *Arrival* in 1617, Malvasia joined a tradition of religious women who had played a role in Italy's literary canon. Within the early modern context, Arcangela Tarabotti is the most famous of these, but nuns and tertiaries had composed in the Italian vernacular nearly from its birth, beginning in the fourteenth century with the tertiary Catherine of Siena (1347–1380). One of Italy's earliest circulated writers, Catherine produced hundreds of letters to figures as powerful as the pope (prefiguring Malvasia and her sisters' own epistolary activities by three hundred years) as well as the *Dialogo della divina provvidenza* (Dialogue on Divine Providence), a dialogue that she referred to simply as her *Libro* (Book).⁵⁸ Early modern Bologna in particular had a prestigious tradition of convent writers with a pedigree dating back to Catherine of Bologna (1413–1463); her *Le setti armi spirituali* (The Seven Spiritual Weapons), published posthumously between 1473 and 1475, was among the first works to leave Bologna's early printing presses.⁵⁹ Also published in Bologna in the early sixteenth century was a collection of poetry entitled *Le devotissime compositioni* (Compositions of

revisions, such as apparently inconsequential changes to word selection or ordering. On the other hand, that some missives in the *Brief Discourse* appear out of chronological order does demonstrate Malvasia's deliberate narrative hand.

58. On the debate over and the notion of Catherine of Siena as author, see Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, esp. 1–53.

59. On Catherine of Bologna see Serena Spanò, "Caterina Vigri," *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 22 (1979): 381–383. See also Joseph R. Berrigan, "Franciscan Mystic: Saint Catherine of Bologna," in *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 81–98. For an introduction to and a modern edition of her text see Catherine of Bologna [Caterina Vegri or Vigri], *Le sette armi spirituali*, ed. Cecilia Foletti (Padua: Antenore, 1985); in English, Catherine of Bologna, *The Seven Spiritual Weapons*, ed. and trans. Hugh Feiss and Daniela Re (Toronto: Peregrina, 1998; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

the Greatest Devotion), authored anonymously, probably by a nun, from the city's convent of Corpus Domini (founded by Catherine of Bologna).⁶⁰

From the late sixteenth century through the mid seventeenth century, when Italy saw its most prolific period of publishing nuns, Bologna was the center of this activity, and Malvasia was but one example among several.⁶¹ Gerolama Castellani (fl. 1550) became the first nun to have her rhymes collected in the great Petrarch-an anthologies of the mid-Cinquecento, including Ludovico Domenichi's famous compendium of women writers.⁶² Around the time that Malvasia was composing the *Brief Discourse*, Eugenia Calcina (fl. 1576) published a modest volume of poetry, and, remarkably, another Bolognese Dominican, the lyricist Febronia Pannolini (fl. 1600–1610), was not only featured in two important poetic anthologies from 1600 and 1601, but also composed verse specifically on the Madonna of San Luca.⁶³ Shortly after the publication of the *Arrival*, the Lateran canoness Semidea Poggi (1560s–after 1637) would publish a collection of religious verse, *La Calliope religiosa* (The Religious Calliope, 1623).⁶⁴

Moreover, Bologna played host to a number of female artists working in other media. The city's convents were active in using music as both an outlet for

60. This poetic collection is apparently the first published by a nun. With the first acknowledged edition having been printed in 1525, this dates the text, as Elisabetta Graziosi has indicated, more than a decade prior to Vittoria Colonna's 1538 *Rime*, generally considered the first collection of poetry by a woman writer. Graziosi highlights Bologna as the home of "un trend cittadino, a un tempo religioso e femminile [...] un notevole primato per la città e per la promozione femminile monastica nei confronti di quella laica e aristocratica": see Elisabetta Graziosi "Due monache domenicane poetesse: una nota, una ignota e molte sullo sfondo," in *Il velo, la penna e la parola. Le domenicane: storia, istituzioni e scritture*, eds. Gabriella Zarri and Gianni Festa (Florence: Nerbini, 2009), 165.

61. As Cox underlines in *Prodigious Muse*, 7, though nuns' writing tended to remain in manuscript form in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and then again in the later seventeenth, "from the 1570s to the 1650s, we encounter quite a number of nuns publishing their own work during their lifetime." For identification of Bologna's early modern convent writers as a group, see Cox, *Women's Writing*, 147–48; 332, n. 78.

62. Lodovico Domenichi, ed., *Le rime diverse d'alcune nobilissime e virtuosissime donne raccolte per M. Lodovico Domenichi* (Lucca: Busdragho, 1559), 61. For Castellani, see Cox, *Women's Writing*, 89, 115–16, 300, n. 48; Graziosi, "Due monache," 166–73; Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, 7.

63. Eugenia Calcina, *Priego alla vergine beatissima* (Bologna: Giovanni Rossi, 1576); on Calcina see Elisabetta Graziosi, "Arcipelago sommerso: le rime delle monache tra obbedienza e trasgressione" in *I monasteri femminili come centri di cultura fra Rinascimento e Barocco: Atti del convegno storico internazionale* (Bologna, 8–10 December 2000), eds. Gianna Pomata and Gabriella Zarri (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2005), 145–74, at 159; Cox, *Women's Writing*, 318, n. 6; Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, 8. On Pannolini, see Fantuzzi, *Notizie degli scrittori bolognesi*, 6:270–72; Graziosi, "Scrivere in convento," 319; Graziosi, "Arcipelago sommerso," 162–63; Cox, *Women's Writing*, 147–48, 188; Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, 8, 58, 227.

64. Semidea Poggi, *La Calliope religiosa* (Vicenza: F. Grossi, 1623). On Poggi see Graziosi, "Scrivere in convento," 320–22; Graziosi, "Arcipelago sommerso," 159; Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, 62–66.

creativity and a tool for resistance, an effort that can be linked clearly to Malvasia's own literary activity.⁶⁵ Outside convent walls, the city also knew a strong tradition of female artists, most famously Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614).⁶⁶ Of high interest in this regard are Ginevra Cantofoli (1618–1672) and Lucrezia Scarfaglia (fl. 1678), both of whom painted self-portraits that show their own likenesses painting modernized versions of the miraculous Madonna of San Luca. In doing so, they associated themselves not only with Saint Luke, the icon's alleged creator and patron saint of painters, but also with the community of female spirituality surrounding the painting—and notably, with Malvasia's *Arrival*, cited by Babette Bohn as the key text to which Cantofoli and Scarfaglia's interest in the icon can be attributed.⁶⁷

Malvasia's aspirations to join this elite community of creative women would find ironic confirmation in the *Notizie degli scrittori bolognesi*, where Giovanni Fantuzzi notes rather condescendingly: "If one were to remove the tedious digressions and superfluous erudition, we would be hard pressed to find a more impressive and complete history of the holy image."⁶⁸ Malvasia's history of the Madonna of San Luca is indeed thorough and generally the most comprehensive example in the wake of the first known attempt at a history of the icon, by Graziolo Accarisi (c. 1459), which intended to explain "how and in what way the most beloved painting of the glorious Virgin Mary, painted by the hand of Saint Luke, which is now above the church altar at San Luca on the Monte della Guardia of the city of Bologna, called by the people of the city of Bologna the mount of San Luca, was brought from the church of Saint Sophia in Constantinople to the city of Bologna."⁶⁹ With at least a half dozen major examples to draw from, the historical element of Malvasia's work is heavily dependent upon, and highly imitative of, the histories of the Madonna of San Luca that were published before

65. Craig Monson, *Disembodied Voices: Music and Culture in an Early Modern Italian Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). For nuns' creative production outside of Bologna, see, for example, Elissa Weaver, *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

66. Caroline Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: A Painter and Her Patrons in Sixteenth-Century Bologna* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

67. Babette Bohn, "Female Self-Portraiture in Early Modern Bologna," *Renaissance Studies*, 18, no. 2 (2004): 239–86, 268–69.

68. Fantuzzi, *Notizie degli scrittori bolognesi*, 5:164. All translations of other texts are ours unless otherwise noted.

69. This manuscript passage is reproduced and commented in Fanti, "La leggenda della Madonna di San Luca di Bologna," 74. Accarisi was responsible for suggesting the idea of processing with the Madonna as an act of faith after three months of damaging rains, in imitation of a similar Florentine ritual, and led the procession on the first occasion that the Madonna was lifted from her usual resting place in July 1433, as noted in Terpstra, "Confraternities and Local Cults," 143–44.