

Introduction

1. *The Other Voice*

Although a pioneering partial translation was published by Heather Gregory in 1997, it is the present series that has provided the opportunity—long overdue—for the first complete English version of the seventy-three surviving letters authored by Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi (c. 1406–1471).¹ Alessandra, a member of the Florentine mercantile patriciate, left a widow with five children when in her late twenties, is thereby brought into comparative contact with a remarkable diversity of other women writers, not least the small band of Florentines from before 1500 who have already featured in the series: Margherita Datini, Antonia Pulci, and Lucrezia Tornabuoni, the latter mentioned (admittedly in no very friendly fashion) in Alessandra’s Letter 45.²

The series title alludes to our modern recognition of the historical inequality of the sexes, the dominance of the male voice in the written record over the centuries, and the silence—indeed the silencing—of women’s voices; at the same time, it proclaims a mission to rectify this state of affairs where possible. When Cesare Guasti rescued Alessandra’s letters from archival obscurity in the 1870s, his was not, of course, a feminist project, his intention being rather to present his own fast changing society with a model (as he saw it) of devoted and self-sacrificing motherhood from Italy’s more distant (and idealized) past.³ His edition did mean, however, that from the later nineteenth century onwards, but particularly with the surge of scholarly investigation into fifteenth-century Florence that began in the second half of the twentieth century, her voice was to become a familiar one, regularly cited by scholars working in disciplines ranging from the various categories of social history (the family, kinship, and marriage), through economic history (prices, taxation, dowries), to epidemiology (recurrences of the plague), and, of course, the political history that focuses on the continuing tensions and upheavals experienced by the Florentine republic through the middle decades of the Quattrocento. Indeed, perhaps nowhere is Alessandra’s status as an

1. *Selected Letters of Alessandra Strozzi*, ed. and trans. Heather Gregory, bilingual edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

2. Margherita Datini, *Letters to Francesco Datini*, trans. Carolyn James and Antonio Pagliaro (Toronto: Iter, Inc. and the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012); Antonia Pulci, *Saints’ Lives and Bible Stories for the Stage*, ed. Elissa B. Weaver, trans. James W. Cook (Toronto: Iter, Inc. and the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2010); and Lucrezia Tornabuoni, *Sacred Narratives*, ed. and trans. Jane Tylus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

3. Alessandra Strozzi, *Lettere di una gentildonna fiorentina del secolo XV ai figliuoli esuli*, ed. Cesare Guasti (Florence: Sansoni, 1877). On this edition, hereafter abbreviated as “Guasti,” see also section 5 below, *The Afterlife of the Letters*. For an autograph original, see Figs. 1a and b.

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“authority” more ironic than in this latter arena, one from which fifteenth-century Florentine women were habitually excluded. Her apparently prescient remark in Letter 26 about the relative political fortunes of the Medici and the Pazzi is much cited: less so, her acknowledgement in Letter 49: “I wouldn’t be concerned about such things if it were not for our particular situation.”

Indeed, we owe the existence (and perhaps the survival) of her letters to one dominant set of circumstances, namely the intense period of Florentine political contestation in which, for more than three decades, she and her family found themselves on the losing side. Initially, it was adverse economic factors that forced her three sons to seek their fortunes abroad: between 1458 and 1466, however, came the experience of the harsher realities and constraints associated with their formal exile. In both cases, letter-writing was their mother’s response to the emotional and practical strains of separation.

Alessandra has often been described as exceptional among fifteenth-century Florentine women in terms of her literacy skills, but just how much of an exception was she? The question of female education in this period has been addressed by a number of scholars in recent decades, but differences of emphasis remain. Some have presented a more negative picture, stressing women’s exclusion, or else their lack of competence in penmanship, spelling, or grammar, while others choose to read the fragmentary and incomplete record of evidence in a somewhat more positive light.⁴

There is no doubt that middle and upper-class families gave clear priority, as they would do for centuries, to the education of their sons, whether in preparation for a career or as a social ornament and status indicator. Education, even if just in terms of basic literacy, was certainly not accessed as a matter of course even by upper-class women. Some lay and religious moralists of the period expressed their outright hostility towards the idea of women learning anything other than needlework and household management, while others experienced,

4. For Florentine women’s literacy, see especially the seminal study by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “Le chiavi fiorentine di Barbablù: L’apprendimento della lettura a Firenze nel XV secolo,” *Quaderni storici* 57, no. 3 (1984): 765–92, a French version of which appears in Klapisch-Zuber, *La maison et le nom: Stratégies et rituels dans l’Italie de la Renaissance* (Paris: Éditions de l’école des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1990), 309–30; and Klapisch-Zuber, “Épistolaires florentines des XIVe–XVe siècles,” *Clio: Histoire, femmes et sociétés* 35 (2012): 129–45, doi: 10.4000/clio.10540. See also Robert Black, “Literacy in Florence, 1427,” in *Florence and Beyond: Culture, Society, and Politics in Renaissance Italy: Essays in Honour of John M. Najemy*, ed. David S. Peterson, with Daniel E. Bornstein (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 207–9; Judith Bryce, “Les Livres des Florentines: Reconsidering Women’s Literacy in Quattrocento Florence,” in *At the Margins: Minority Groups in Premodern Italy*, ed. Stephen J. Milner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 133–61; Ann Crabb, “‘If I Could Write’: Margherita Datini and Letter Writing, 1385–1410,” *Renaissance Quarterly* (hereafter RQ) 60 (2007): 1170–1206; and the studies by Luisa Miglio from the later 1980s onwards, republished under the title *Governare l’alfabeto: Donne, scrittura e libri nel Medioevo* (Rome: Viella, 2008).

at best, a certain degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, the ability to read was deemed unnecessary for women carrying out their traditional domestic roles in the home and there was also anxiety lest they access the morally dubious realms represented, say, by Petrarchan love poetry or the *novelle* of Boccaccio. Writing, a completely separate skill, was viewed in a similar light, namely as both unnecessary and dangerous. On the other hand, some limited abilities might be condoned with the specific aim of allowing women to benefit at first hand from devotional literature and even perhaps of providing very young male children (females are not mentioned in this context) with basic literacy training (see Letter 70).

While prescriptive male pronouncements are still habitually cited in the context of modern discussions about fifteenth-century women's literacy, it is generally agreed that these do not provide an unproblematic representation of what was undoubtedly a more complex reality. Above all, in the context of the Florentine elites, the experience of physical separation between family members was relatively common, whether in the extreme case of exile, or in the more normal circumstances of male absence from the city on business (which could include extensive periods of residence abroad), or in the service of the republic. Such absences meant that practical responsibilities often devolved upon women left at home: in such circumstances the ability of these latter to read and to write could be regarded by their menfolk as convenient. In other words, pragmatism and self-interest might very well win out over any wholesale adoption of more extreme contemporary strictures. This said, a merchant such as Giovanni Morelli (1371–1444) seemed unaware that female literacy might be an issue. Instead he recorded with pride that one sister, Mea (b. 1365), could “read and write as well as any man,” while another, Sandra (b. 1369), “possessed all the skills one would expect of a respectable woman: she could embroider, read and write; she was most eloquent, a good speaker, and knew how to express herself confidently and well.”⁵

The intimate or familiar letter provided the principal vehicle in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for women's introduction into the world of written communication.⁶ Either they wrote themselves or else they used a scribe (and

5. Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli, *Ricordi*, in *Mercanti scrittori: Ricordi nella Firenze tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan: Rusconi, 1986), 153 and 156, my translation. See also Bryce, “Les Livres des Florentines,” 134–35.

6. On women's letter-writing see, for instance, Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, eds., *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb, eds., *Women's Letters Across Europe, 1400–1700: Form and Persuasion* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005); Crabb, “If I Could Write”; Maria Luisa Doglio, “Letter Writing, 1350–1650,” in *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*, ed. Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13–24; Klapisch-Zuber, “Épistolères florentines”; Miglio, *Governare l'alfabeto*; Deanna Shemek, “Letter Writing and Epistolary Culture,” in *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Renaissance and Reformation*, <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399301/obo-9780195399301-0194.xml>>; and Gabriella Zarrì, ed., *Per lettera*:

doing so did not necessarily imply illiteracy on the part of the woman delegating the responsibility, as we see in the cases of Lucrezia Tornabuoni or Alessandra Strozzi).⁷ In both cases, letter-writing was a technology that enabled women to extend the domestic sphere in both time and space. At a bare minimum, a very few conventionally expressed lines (however haphazard the layout or spelling) allowed them to keep in touch with absent family members, sending greetings, reporting on the health of those at home, asking after the health of the addressee, requesting a gift or a favor, or else acknowledging receipt of one or the other of these. A longer, more complex letter might cover these topics more expansively, while, in addition, delivering information about family properties and material goods, relating family, local, or other news, and expressing a whole range of personal emotions and preoccupations. What we receive, on occasion, is altogether a most powerful sense of an individual female voice speaking to us from the distant past. Leaving Alessandra Strozzi herself aside for the moment, a very few other examples will suffice here, starting with a moment of good humor and colloquial exuberance from Ginevra degli Alessandri, the young wife of Giovanni di Cosimo de' Medici. Writing to him in 1462 from a local spa, she declares that she is "bathing like mad while the weather is good" (a justifiably idiomatic rendering of the original *bangniomi alla disperata mentre abbiamo buon tempo*). Margherita Datini consciously used the medium of the letter to stand up to her husband, writing on 23 January 1386: "Francesco, I acknowledge that I have written to you too freely and have demonstrated too much independence from you in telling you the truth. If you were here beside me, I would not have spoken so boldly. Slap me in the eyes or on the head or wherever you will. I don't care. I will always speak the truth as I know it. I have said nothing to you that I haven't already said at least once a month, and when you are here perhaps I don't speak so directly, although I see you do things that make me swell with anger twelve times a day." And two further cases offer equally challenging expressions of female anger, frustration, and general dissatisfaction. Dora Guidalotti del Bene signs off a letter of 19 May 1381 to her errant husband as "your enemy, Dora," while Nannina Rucellai remarks to her mother, Lucrezia Tornabuoni, on 12 July 1479: "you don't want to be born a woman if you want to have your own way," a rare example of an exasperated acknowledgement of the power imbalance in a patriarchal society (as we might express it today).⁸

La scrittura epistolare femminile tra archivio e tipografia, secoli XV-XVII (Rome: Viella, 1999). See also note 45, below.

7. Stress is sometimes laid on the fact that in the later 1440s Alessandra got her youngest son to write letters for her. This was not due to her own incapacity, however, but rather to a declared need to give him practice and also, it must be said, to give strength to her argument that Filippo should not insist on Matteo being sent away from home, leaving her alone and supposedly helpless (see, for instance, Letters 2 and 2a). On the question of scribes and dictation see, for instance, Crabb, "If I Could Write."

8. The sources of these quotations are, respectively, Miglio, *Governare l'alfabeto*, 283 and Table 27, my translation; Datini, *Letters*, 50; Klapisch-Zuber, "Épistolères florentines," 140, my translation; and

To return to Alessandra Strozzi, it is frustrating that we have no concrete information regarding her initial acquisition of basic literacy skills, although this most likely took place within her natal family home. The same may be true of her numeracy skills. Although in Letter 15, she complains that certain calculations are too hard for her to manage, and although she almost certainly relied on the support and assistance of male kin such as Antonio Strozzi or Marco Parenti, she appears to have had a significant level of competence that enabled her to handle personal expenses, to be aware of the market values of property and agricultural produce, to keep track of debit and credit in relation to her sons, to deal with local banks, and to take some responsibility for her tax affairs. Only one precious account book survives, modeled on those belonging to her late husband.⁹

All in all, it would seem safe to argue that her level of numeracy and her writing ability were both considerably developed and enhanced as a result of the very particular circumstances in which she later found herself. If, then, we were to seek to position her on the spectrum of fifteenth-century women writers, we might say that she was more skillful and confident than Margherita Datini from half a century earlier, but that she had none of the literary ambitions of two of her Florentine contemporaries, the religious dramatist Antonia Pulci, and Lucrezia Tornabuoni, literary patron and author of narrative poetry on biblical subjects, far less the advanced humanistic training acquired by a small group of contemporary northern Italian women, Ippolita Sforza (also mentioned in Alessandra's letters), Isotta Nogarola, Cassandra Fedele, or Laura Cereta.¹⁰ As in the case of Datini, Alessandra's literacy was, above all, instrumental—a tool or technology for

F. W. Kent, "The Making of a Renaissance Patron of the Arts," in *Giovanni Rucellai ed il suo Zibaldone*, vol. 2, *A Florentine Patrician and His Palace: Studies by F. W. Kent et al.* (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1981), 66, my translation. For a lively letter by Alessandra's daughter-in-law, Fiammetta Adimari, to her husband, Filippo, in which she asks him to inform her of the date of his return from Naples and not to tell fibs on the subject as he has done on previous occasions, see Guasti, 598–99; note 32 below, and Letter 71, notes 700 and 707.

9. This is account book A (her *quadernuccio*), which refers in turn to an account book C, now apparently lost. See Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Carte Stroziane (hereafter ASF, CS), Series 5, 15, fols. 37v and 39r, and also Guasti, 176.

10. For Datini, Pulci and Tornabuoni, see note 2, above. For the women humanists see, for instance, Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, ed. and trans. Diana Robin (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997); Cassandra Fedele, *Letters and Orations*, ed. and trans. Diana Robin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Isotta Nogarola, *Complete Writings*, ed. and trans. Margaret L. King and Diana Robin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and forthcoming in the Other Voice series, Ippolita Maria Sforza, *Collected Letters and Orations*, ed. and trans. Diana Robin. For recent overviews and relevant bibliography see, for example, Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400–1650* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), chap. 1; Margaret L. King, "Women and Learning," in *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Renaissance and Reformation*, <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399301/obo-9780195399301-0032.xml>>; and Panizza and Wood, *A History of Women's Writing*, part I.

bridging the gap caused by the absence of family members, for servicing affective connections with them and, at the same time, carrying out her perceived duties as regards her particular branch of the Strozzi clan whose future was threatened by the centrifugal forces of economic migration and of political exile. Fascinating for the insight they afford into the relationship between mother and sons, a topic which will be further developed below in section 4 on *Writing as a Mother*, the letters are also precious simply for the light they shed on Florentine life in the middle decades of the fifteenth century—from the political challenges to Medici hegemony and the operations of the marriage market to the advisability of taking out life insurance during a daughter’s pregnancy and tips on how to conserve cheese or fennel.

2. *The Life of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi: The Intersection of Private and Public Domains*

Florence in Alessandra’s day was a city of around forty thousand inhabitants, notably smaller than a century earlier, its population dramatically reduced by the Black Death of 1348 and the subsequent recurrences of pestilence that were to be a periodic threat during her own lifetime.¹¹ The population shrinkage meant that within the vast third circle of walls completed in 1334—the result of optimistic planning on the part of the city fathers—the actual built-up area of the city was still surrounded by gardens and orchards. Viewed from the surrounding hills (see Fig. 2), two principal landmarks rose above the otherwise dense mass of private dwellings, churches, hospitals, monasteries and convents: Brunelleschi’s immense, revolutionary dome crowning the recently completed cathedral consecrated by Pope Eugene IV in 1436, and, representing the secular authority, the tall tower of the seat of government, then more than a century old, the Palace of the Priors, usually referred to today as Palazzo Vecchio. Outside the walls lay the *contado* or hinterland, dedicated to servicing the city’s material needs in terms of essentials such as grain, wine, meat, flax, and firewood, and dominated by the urban middle and upper classes with their extensive rural landholdings.

Population decline notwithstanding, fifteenth-century Florence was a dynamic and successful city, probably best known today for its outstanding artistic achievements. At the top of its social hierarchy was a substantial mercantile patriariate. Below that came lesser merchants and tradesmen, artisans, workers in the city’s premier cloth industries (wool, traditionally, but now with a new expanding

11. The bibliography on fifteenth-century Florence is vast—as one would expect. Anyone making an initial approach to the subject will find the following useful: Gene A. Brucker, *Florence: The Golden Age, 1138–1737* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200–1575* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); and Sharon Strocchia, “Florence,” in *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Renaissance and Reformation*, <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399301/obo-9780195399301-0022.xml>>.

silk production), servants, slaves, and the poor, while alongside this varied lay population was a large religious community of priests and friars, monks and nuns.

It was the mercantile patriciate that was the driving force behind the city's economic life, the latter based on two principal sectors, namely the cloth industries mentioned above, and banking, both with a notable international dimension. Aggressive and outward looking, too, was the city's expansionist policy as it strove to create a substantial territorial state. A significant milestone in this enterprise was the conquest of the rival republic of Pisa in 1406, delivering unimpeded access to the sea and giving rise to the establishment in the 1420s of the Florentine galley fleet whose movements Alessandra records in a number of letters to her sons.

Alessandra's date of birth remains uncertain, sometimes appearing in the scholarly literature as 1406, sometimes as 1407 or 1408.¹² Her father, Filippo di Niccolò Macinghi (d. 1420), a member of an old patrician family, was a resident of the quarter of San Giovanni: her mother was Caterina di Alberto Alberti who died during Alessandra's childhood. The family consisted at this stage of an illegitimate son of her father's named Berto, and a younger brother of Alessandra's named Zanobi (1409–1452). Her father's second marriage to Giovanna di Albertuccio Ricasoli produced three further children: Caterina, Antonio, and Ginevra. All these siblings are mentioned in the letters, except for Berto who was perhaps already deceased. In June 1422, Alessandra, then in her mid-teens, married Matteo di Simone Strozzi, bringing him a large dowry of sixteen hundred florins and moving to a house in the adjacent quarter of Santa Maria Novella, *gonfalone* Leon Rosso (ward of the Red Lion), located on what was then known as the Corso degli Strozzi or Borgo degli Strozzi, and surrounded by other households of her new husband's *casa* (as she terms it) or lineage (see Fig. 3).¹³

12. 1406 is on the basis of her 1446 tax submission (Guasti, 40), but 1408 is on the basis of her 1458 submission when she is said to be fifty years old. See ASF, Catasto 816, fol. 1011r. Both cases may reflect the Florentine habit in tax records of rounding ages up or down to multiples of five or ten. See David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 169–79. See also Alessandra's principal modern biographer, Ann Crabb, *The Strozzi of Florence: Widowhood and Family Solidarity in the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 20n1. Other sources of biographical information include Gene A. Brucker, "Alessandra Strozzi, 1408–1471: The Eventful Life of a Florentine Matron," in Brucker, *Living on the Edge in Leonardo's Florence: Selected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 151–68; Manuela Doni Garfagnini, "Macinghi, Alessandra," in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (hereafter DBI), 67 (2006): 113–17, <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alessandra-macinghi_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/>, which gives her date of birth as 1406; Doni Garfagnini, "Condizione familiare e vita cittadina nelle lettere di Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi," in Zari, *Per lettera*, 387–411; and Guasti, vii–xlv.

13. Much of the information given here is from Crabb, *Strozzi*, particularly 23–26, and her genealogical table A.1. For the marriage date, see also Lorenzo Fabbri, *Alleanza matrimoniale e patriziato nella Firenze del '400: Studio sulla famiglia Strozzi* (Florence: Olschki, 1991), 19, 188, 213–14. For the dowry, see Matteo's account book, ASF, CS, Series 5, 11, fol. 94 right. For the Strozzi in the Quarter

The family of Matteo di Simone di Filippo di Messer Lionardo Strozzi (1397–1435) belonged to the city’s mercantile elite, and was one of several dozen households in the city bearing the Strozzi name at this time.¹⁴ Like his father, and his uncles, Lionardo and Piero, he was involved in the wool business, and held a typical portfolio of landholdings and of shares in the *Monte comune*, the funded debt of the republic. According to Goldthwaite, in terms of wealth Matteo was “in the upper two and one-half percent of the population,” but he seems to have done little to increase his patrimony after the death of his father in 1424.¹⁵ Perhaps he was sufficiently well off to be able to choose to devote more energy to civic and intellectual pursuits. The former included ambassadorial missions (for example to Venice in 1425), activity at local gonfalone level in connection with the process of election to officeholding status, and a supervisory involvement with the final stages of the completion of the cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore, in the early 1430s.¹⁶ He was also known among his contemporaries for his love of the classics and ancient philosophy. In this there was an unbridgeable disparity between himself and his wife, but it was an interest he shared with a number of individuals alluded to in her letters, men such as Lorenzo di Palla Strozzi, Benedetto di Pieraccione Strozzi, and Niccolò della Luna, while a former mentor of Matteo’s, Giannozzo Manetti, was later to feel it his duty to write a letter of condolence to Alessandra on the death of her youngest son, also called Matteo (see Letter 17).¹⁷

of Santa Maria Novella, see Heather Gregory, “Chi erano gli Strozzi nel Quattrocento?” in Daniela Lamberini, ed., *Palazzo Strozzi: Metà millennio, 1489–1989: Atti del convegno di studi, Firenze, 3–6 luglio 1989* (Rome: Istituto della enciclopedia italiana, 1991), 16–17; and Dale V. Kent and F. W. Kent, *Neighbours and Neighbourhood in Renaissance Florence: The District of the Red Lion in the Fifteenth Century* (Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin, 1982), for example, chap. 2. Also useful for factual information on Matteo and Alessandra is Guido Pampaloni, *Palazzo Strozzi* (Rome: Istituto nazionale delle assicurazioni, 1963), chap. 1.

14. Fabbri focuses on four generations of Strozzi of the branch to which Matteo belonged. For a brief profile of the family, see his *Alleanza matrimoniale*, 13–31, and for Matteo himself, 18–19. See, too, Heather Gregory, “A Florentine Family in Crisis: The Strozzi in the Fifteenth Century” (PhD diss., University of London, 1981). See Fig. 4 for a simplified genealogy of Matteo’s family.

15. See Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence: A Study of Four Families* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 34–52.

16. For the public offices held by him, see Guasti, x. Dale V. Kent cites a letter to him from Strozza Strozzi in February 1434: “... you, Matteo, have your finger on the pulse of things.” See *The Rise of the Medici: Faction in Florence, 1426–1434* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 323. For the cathedral project, see Margaret Haines, “Oligarchy and Opera: Institution and Individuals in the Administration of the Florentine Cathedral,” in Peterson, with Bornstein, *Florence and Beyond*, 154, 160–67, and 172, Table 3, “Officials for Tomb and Altar of St. Zenobius, Organ, Cantoria, Stained Glass,” at 166–67. Haines also reports that Filippo Brunelleschi, architect of the cupola, acted as godfather to Matteo and Alessandra’s son, Lorenzo.

17. On Matteo’s intellectual interests and contacts, see Lorenzo [di Filippo di Matteo] Strozzi, *Le vite degli uomini illustri della casa Strozzi*, ed. Pietro Stromboli (Florence: S. Landi, 1892), 48–49;

For the thirteen years of her married life, Alessandra managed the household and gave birth to nine children. In Letter 11 (27 February 1452/1453), she rehearses the birth dates of the five survivors for the benefit of Lorenzo, her second son. Filippo was born on 4 July 1428; Caterina in May 1431; Lorenzo himself on 21 August 1432; Alessandra in August 1434; lastly, Matteo, who was born on 1 March 1436, after his father's death. Of those who did not survive, her firstborn, Andreuola, named after her recently deceased mother-in-law, Andreuola Rondinelli, lived for less than a year, and the name was used again for a second daughter born in 1425. Simone followed in 1427, and Piero in 1429. All three of these children, like their father, succumbed to plague during the exile in Pesaro.¹⁸

To understand the catastrophe that overtook Matteo Strozzi and his family, impacting on the rest of their lives, a brief account of the Florentine political context is necessary at this juncture.¹⁹ The essentials of the government of the Florentine republic had been laid down in the late thirteenth century with the displacement of a ruling magnate class in favor of the mercantile class operating through a regime dominated by the city's guilds. At the top of this new political hierarchy was the priorate or *Signoria*, whose members were elected to serve a two-month term of office. By Alessandra's day, the priors were eight in number, two for each quarter of the city: at their head, as chief executive, was the *gonfaloniere di giustizia* (Standardbearer of Justice). The defeat of the magnates did not mean an end to contestation over political power and the fourteenth century saw conflict both among the upper echelons of society, and between elements of these and workers in the city's cloth industry, the Ciompi, the latter actively demanding guild representation and therefore participation in government. By the early decades of the fifteenth century, the dominant struggle was between two factions, the more aristocratic Albizzi, on the one hand, and, on the other, the more overtly populist Medici. The Signoria in post for September–October 1433 invoked the weapon of political retribution customary in Italy in this period, banishing Cosimo de' Medici from the city, together with other members of his family and their supporters. The latter group included Agnolo Acciaiuoli who features prominently in Alessandra's later letters.

Cosimo's term of exile was initially for a period of five years, then extended to ten: only one year later, however, with the election of a pro-Medicean Signoria, he was able to return home and exact revenge by exiling a large number of his

Vespasiano da Bisticci, *Le vite*, ed. Aulo Greco (Florence: Nella sede dell'Istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento, 1970–1976), 2:221–24, and also now Brian J. Maxson, *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), especially chap. 2.

18. See Crabb, *Strozzi*, 29–32 and Table A.3; and Guasti, xxiv, n15. For an alternative birthdate for Filippo of 10 July, see Guasti, 31.

19. For what follows see, for example, Kent, *Rise of the Medici*, and Najemy, *History of Florence*.

opponents in their turn.²⁰ This sequence of events marked the start of a period of Medici dominance in Florence political life that was to last until 1494 in spite of the serious challenges to their regime which form a major topic of Alessandra's letters of the mid-1460s (Letters 36 to 72). After some interruptions in the early sixteenth century, from 1530 to the eighteenth century, they were to rule, first as dukes of Florence and then as grand dukes of Tuscany.

Matteo Strozzi's role in the 1433 defeat of the Medici is not entirely clear, and sources such as his grandson, Lorenzo di Filippo, and the anti-Medicean bookseller and biographer, Vespasiano da Bisticci, insist, unsurprisingly, on his innocence. Nevertheless, on Cosimo de' Medici's return, Matteo was one of only four Strozzi to be exiled: these included the notional head of the wider lineage, Palla di Nofri Strozzi, members of whose family we glimpse in Alessandra's letters.²¹ On 12 November 1434, Matteo departed for Pesaro on the Adriatic coast, his designated place of exile. Alessandra did not leave immediately: apart from anything else, she had only very recently given birth, but there were also practical matters to attend to, not least packing and dispatching clothing, household linen, and other things her husband needed or actively requested, as we learn from one of his account books.²² In due course, however, she and the children appear to have joined him in Pesaro.²³ At some point, probably in the summer of 1435, Matteo and three of their children died of plague.²⁴ Alessandra returned with the

20. For a detailed account of the events of 1433–34, see Kent, *Rise of the Medici*, chap. 5. On Medici reprisals, see Alison Brown, "Insiders and Outsiders: The Changing Boundaries of Exile," in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 337–83, and Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici, 1434 to 1494*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), chap. 1. On the weapon of exile in this period, see Christine Shaw, *The Politics of Exile in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Randolph Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth: The Theme of Exile in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), chaps. 4 and 5.

21. Dale Kent cites a source accusing Matteo of being one of a group that attempted to prevent the new priors of September–October 1434 from entering the Palace of the Priors (*Rise of the Medici*, 330). This affront to the dignity of the chief elected representatives of the republic would have been sufficient to attract serious reprisals. See, too, Lorenzo Strozzi, *Vite*, 48–49 and Vespasiano, *Vite*, 2:221–23.

22. Official details are in ASF, Otto di Guardia e Balìa della Repubblica, 224, fol. 49v. For Matteo's own account, see ASF, CS, Series 5, 12, fols. 40r–42r. In Pesaro, they were given what he describes as a fine house by the ruling Malatesta family, next door to a compatriot, the merchant Filippo di Gualtieri Portinari (fol. 41r). Filippo (or Pippo) was the brother of Giovanni Portinari, their neighbor in Florence, married to Checca di Piero Strozzi to whom Alessandra was always very close (see, for example, Letter 18).

23. Her grandson's version of events suggests that she remained in Florence (*Vite*, 63), but that would not explain the birth of Matteo in March 1436 or the children's clothing figuring among the things she sent to Pesaro.

24. The record of his monthly reporting-in ends in May 1435 (see ASF, Otto di Guardia, in note 22, above), but his own account book appears to have references to June and July (ASF, CS, Series 5, 12,

remaining four to Florence, now a widow in her late twenties and pregnant with Matteo, named for his late father. Twenty years on, she was to remind her sons with some pride that she had never remarried and, consequently, had never abandoned them (see Letter 49).²⁵

Without their father, the boys found themselves in difficult circumstances. Not for them the humanistic interests of Matteo's more leisured existence; instead, they were obliged to leave home early to make their way in the world of business, supported, however, by their father's cousins, Iacopo (1404–1461), Filippo (1406–1449), and Niccolò di Lionardo di Filippo Strozzi (1410–1469), to whom their fortunes were to be tied for the next twenty years.²⁶ It is significant that their mother is able to rehearse the succession of their departures with great precision, calculating in February 1453, for instance [Letter 11], that Filippo had been gone for almost twelve years: he must therefore have left in 1441, aged twelve.²⁷ Filippo (1428–1491) worked for his Strozzi relatives, first in Barcelona and subsequently in Valencia, but when Niccolò di Lionardo conceived a plan to set up a business in Naples, Filippo's wish, subsequently granted, was to relocate with him rather than to remain in Spain. While awaiting departure, he supervised his thirteen-year-old brother, Lorenzo (1432–1479), recently arrived from Florence.²⁸ Guasti publishes

fol. 42r).

25. On widowhood, see Isabelle Chabot, *La dette des familles: Femmes, lignage et patrimoine à Florence aux XIVe et XVe siècles* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2011), chaps. 7–10; Chabot, "Lineage Strategies and the Control of Widows in Renaissance Florence," in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1999), 127–44; and Ann Crabb, "How Typical Was Alessandra Strozzi of Fifteenth-Century Florentine Widows?" in *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe*, ed. Louise Mirrer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 47–68. See, too, Letter 25, notes 256 and 257, and Letter 49, note 477, below.

26. An apprenticeship in a Florentine company, whether at home or abroad, was of course the career path of many young males, as shall be seen from Alessandra's correspondence (as in, for example, Letters 27 and 46). For the cousins, see Fig. 4; Fabbri, *Alleanza matrimoniale*, genealogical table, and Crabb, *Strozzi*, Table A.2. For the locations and dates of their business interests abroad, see Mario del Treppo, "Stranieri nel regno di Napoli: Le élites finanziarie e la strutturazione dello spazio economico e politico," in *Dentro la città: Stranieri e realtà urbane nell'Europa dei secoli XII–XVI*, ed. Gabriella Rossetti Pepe (Pisa: GISEM; Naples: Liguori, 1989), 222–23; Fabbri, *Alleanza matrimoniale*, 20–21; Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth*, 53; and Heather Gregory, "The Return of the Native: Filippo Strozzi and Medicean Politics," *RQ* 38, no. 1 (1985): 3–6. On the significance of being fatherless, see Morelli, "Ricordi," 165–207.

27. See Iacopo Strozzi's letter to Alessandra of 31 March 1441 on the decision to send Filippo away for his own good (Fabbri, *Alleanza matrimoniale*, 21n42), and Filippo's own letter to her of 14 August 1446 in which he views their only chance of success for the foreseeable future as lying outside Florence (Gregory, "Return of the Native," 4). For her sons' movements, see also Crabb, *Strozzi*, chap. 4.

28. Letter of 14 August 1446 (Guasti, 25–27). For the geographical coordinates of the letters, see Fig. 5. The debate among historians over whether or not Filippo spent time in Palermo (see Lorenzo Strozzi's

a lively letter from this latter to his “carissima quanto maggiore Madre,” dated 28 April 1446. On the one hand, there is his journey from Florence to Valencia by galley, involving devastating sea sickness with no one to care for him: on the other, his enthusiasm for the abundant foodstuffs and beautiful women of his new home.²⁹

Already in 1446, Filippo was speaking of the future career of his youngest brother. Alessandra made desperate efforts to keep Matteo (1436–1459) at home as long as possible, availing herself of a variety of excuses (as, for example, in Letter 3). He finally departed early in 1450, travelling with Niccolò Strozzi, first to Spain and subsequently to Naples to join Filippo. His death there, at the age of twenty-three, was to be an immense grief to his mother (Letters 17–18). By the early 1450s, Lorenzo had transferred to northern Europe, working first in London for a distant relative, Lodovico Strozzi, and his brothers, and then in Bruges for Iacopo Strozzi (see, for example, Letter 11). The only letter of the present collection not addressed to her sons is in fact to this latter, and deals with the delicate subject of Lorenzo’s return to Italy to work with his older brother in Naples (Letter 23). Filippo, after some initial difficulties (see Letter 1), was to be the rock upon which the restoration of the family and its fortunes was founded (see Fig. 6). With the Neapolitan king and court as major clients of his bank and other mercantile ventures, he grew to be an immensely wealthy man, and his mother lived long enough to express her pride in that success despite all the odds (see, for example, Letter 64).³⁰

The two daughters who returned with their mother from Pesaro, also survived into adulthood—Caterina (1431–1481) and Alessandra (1434–1502). Letter 1 is full of news of the betrothal of the former to Marco di Parente Parenti (1421–1497), who was to have particularly close ties with Alessandra and her sons, and whose published letters provide valuable additional information on the vicissitudes of the family.³¹ In 1451, the younger daughter, Alessandra, was to marry Giovanni di Donato Bonsi (1413–1473) (Letter 10), whose parlous financial circumstances were a periodic topic of concern (as, for example, in Letters 14 and 66). No correspondence survives between mother and daughters which has led some scholars to suppose that, unlike their mother, they were illiterate. A remark by Marco Parenti would seem to indicate the contrary, at least as far

claim in *Vite*, 63), is partly resolved by a letter from Matteo to Filippo of 29 March 1448 in which he mentions the latter returning to Naples from that city (Guasti, 23–24).

29. Guasti, 27–30.

30. See Mario del Treppo, “Il re e il banchiere: Strumenti e processi di razionalizzazione dello stato aragonese di Napoli,” in *Spazio, società, potere nell’Italia dei comuni*, ed. Gabriella Rossetti Pepe (Pisa: GISEM; Naples: Liguori, 1986), 229–304; Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth*, 52–73; Michele Jacoviello, “Affari di Medici e Strozzi nel regno di Napoli nella seconda metà del Quattrocento,” *Archivio storico italiano* (hereafter ASI) 144 (1986): 169–96; and Lorenzo Strozzi, *Vite*, 61–76.

31. Marco Parenti, *Lettere*, ed. Maria Marrese (Florence: Olschki, 1996).

as Caterina is concerned. If that is the case, such letters presumably fell foul of preservation practices differentiated along gender lines.³²

If marriage was crucial for the honor of the daughters and of their natal family, it was even more so in relation to the sons on whom the whole future of the patriline depended. The wealth of detail on the topic makes their mother's letters a precious resource for social historians. In the case of the daughters, criteria for their family's selection of a husband included the latter's position in society, his occupation, financial circumstances, character, and involvement in public life. In the case of possible wives for the sons, the criteria were personal beauty (partly as an indicator of their potential to produce fine children), age (youth was viewed as a greater guarantee of purity), an honorable dowry, their capacity to run a household, the social and political standing of their male kin, and the degree of usefulness of these latter to the future husband and his family.³³

The marriages of Filippo and Lorenzo are a major preoccupation of the latter half of the surviving letters, but so too is the business of their repatriation. Although there is some disagreement among historians, it would appear, not least from evidence provided by Alessandra's correspondence, that in the 1440s and 1450s, Filippo and his brothers (like their late father's cousins), were in what might be called "voluntary," rather than formal exile.³⁴ This situation was to change dramatically in late 1458, however, when Alessandra's sons were among a number of relatives of earlier exiles who were formally banished from the city for twenty-five years (Letter 13). In her subsequent letters we find her arranging her affairs in Florence, selling off property, and preparing to go to live with one of her sons, should they so decide (Letter 18, for example). The catalyst for the final act

32. For Miglio's doubts about Caterina's literacy, see *Governare l'alfabeto*, 63, and for a discussion of the subject, see Ann Crabb, "How to Influence Your Children: Persuasion and Form in Alessandra Macigni Strozzi's Letters to Her Sons," in Couchman and Crabb, *Women's Letters Across Europe*, 31–33. Parenti's reference to a letter from Filippo to Caterina on the death of her brother Matteo ("I haven't had the heart to give it to her yet") is perhaps inconclusive (*Lettere*, 47, 1 September 1459). More promising, however, is a much later remark, again to Filippo: "I'll leave it to Caterina to reply on the other topics relating to the women" (*all'altre parte delle donne lascerò rispondere alla Caterina*, in Parenti, *Lettere*, 219, 23 July 1470). Like Alessandra, Parenti uses the term *parte* here to mean an *argomento* or topic in a letter (see *Lettere*, 216n2). A solitary letter survives of the correspondence between Alessandra's daughter-in-law and her husband, Filippo, during the latter's absences in Naples (see note 8, above, and Letter 71, notes 700 and 707), while who knows what happened to the letters of Costanza de' Medici to her son, Antonio, mentioned near the beginning of Alessandra's Letter 14.

33. For a full treatment of this subject see Fabbri, *Alleanza matrimoniale*, and Anthony Molho, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

34. Compare, for example, Gregory, "Return of the Native," 3–4, and Charles de La Roncière, "L'exil de Filippo et Lorenzo di Matteo Strozzi d'après les lettres de monna Alessandra Macinghi negli Strozzi, leur mère, 1441–1466," in *Exil et civilisation en Italie: XIIe–XVIe siècles*, ed. Jacques Heers and Christian Bec (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1990), 67–93, on the one hand, and on the other, Doni Garfagnini, "Conduzione familiare," 388–89, 397n26. See also note 153, below.

of the drama of exile was the death, in August 1464, of Cosimo de' Medici, and the emergence of a challenge to the position of his son, Piero, spearheaded by a group of former Medici supporters, Luca Pitti, Dietisalvi Neroni, and Agnolo Acciaiuoli (Letter 36 onwards). We are lucky to have a good survival rate of letters between then and the spring of 1466, during which time the fortunes of the Strozzi hung in the balance as the two factions battled it out. Those covering the last crucial phase leading to the Medici triumph in September 1466, followed by the lifting of the ban on some of the exiles, including Filippo and Lorenzo, are, however, missing. Only three later letters (70–72) have come down to us, their existence owed to Filippo's continuing periodic absences in Naples where his business empire was still centered. Letter 70 reveals that Alessandra's longing for a daughter-in-law and grandchildren had been realized. After much patient research into suitable partners and a great deal of exasperation caused by her sons' extreme reluctance to commit themselves (see, for instance, Letter 59), in January 1467, a matter of months after the end of exile and his return to the city, Filippo, then aged thirty-eight, married Fiammetta di Donato degli Adimari (1449–1476), and the first grandchildren duly arrived (Letters 70–71). It was not until the summer of 1470 that Lorenzo married Antonia di Francesco Baroncelli and the couple left Florence for Naples (Letter 71, note 699).

The political ramifications of Filippo's first marriage have received less scholarly attention than other aspects of the Strozzi story, but are of particular interest. In Letter 71, dated 8 May 1469, we hear that Lucrezia Tornabuoni, wife of Piero di Cosimo de' Medici, has been extremely insistent that Fiammetta attend the June wedding of her son, Lorenzo ("the Magnificent"), to Clarice Orsini. Why so? Was this merely a compliment to the young woman's absent husband, a gesture indicating renewed favor, or was it related, at least in part, to Fiammetta's own familial connections? She did attend the event, as did her mother Antonia, mentioned, although without clear identification, in Letters 70 and 71. Antonia was a Bardi di Vernio by birth, as was Contessina de' Medici, mother of Piero, and both women took a close interest in Fiammetta's marriage prospects, the former in spite of the fact that she was now resident in Bologna with her second husband, Iacopo degli Orsi.³⁵ More importantly, as Orsola Gori has shown, the Bardi di Vernio, an ancient feudal family with estates to the north of Florence, were a source of significant military support for the Medici (as were the Bentivoglio rulers of Bologna), for example in 1458, but particularly in the late summer of 1466, the

35. See Marco Parenti to Filippo Strozzi, 27 July 1465 (*Lettere*, 93–94) and 24 October 1465 (*Lettere*, 131). We learn from Parenti that Fiammetta's father was Donato di Matteo di Messer Donato Adimari. For Antonia as the daughter of Simone de' Bardi, see Orsola Gori, "Per un contributo al carteggio di Lorenzo il Magnifico: Lettere inedite ai Bardi di Vernio," *ASI* 154 (1996): 261n17; and for Antonia's second husband, see Crabb, *Strozzi*, 208.

time of the most serious challenge to their regime.³⁶ In 1465, Marco Parenti seems not to have viewed Filippo's possible alliance with Fiammetta as being particularly productive in terms of the acquisition of useful kin: in this he perhaps reveals a not uncommon prejudice on the part of the mercantile elite against the feudal aristocracy.³⁷ The context described above, however, indicates that Fiammetta Adimari herself, and the web of family connections she brought with her, were more significant than has been imagined: it also sheds fresh light on Alessandra's letter of 15 February 1465/1466 (Letter 69) in which she twice suggests that Piero de' Medici (whom she disliked and distrusted) should be consulted over Filippo's choice of a bride. It seems to be an acknowledgement of the fact that a match sanctioned by, or even arranged by the Medici, was probably the only way to go.

The lifting of the ban of exile, Filippo's return to his native city, his marriage bringing connections to a noble family who were significant allies and relatives of the Medici, and the personal and collective statement made by the building of the great Strozzi Palace begun in 1489 (see Fig. 7), might all suggest that the family's long history of tribulation—recorded so vividly in Alessandra's letters—had come to a triumphant end: the story told by one of Filippo's sons by his second wife, Selvaggia Gianfigliuzzi (1459–1525), reveals otherwise. In his collection of biographies of members of the lineage, Lorenzo di Filippo Strozzi (1482–1549) speaks instead of the continuation of tensions between the Strozzi and the Medici through the cataclysmic years of 1494 onwards, in a context of foreign invasions, warfare throughout the peninsula, and the continuing struggle of the Medici for political dominance in Florence. This latter culminated in the establishment of the duchy in 1530 and the death in a Medici prison in 1538 of Lorenzo's brother, baptized Giovanbattista (b. 1489), but known, after the death of his father in 1491, as Filippo Strozzi the Younger.³⁸

It was through the line of their grandson, Lorenzo di Filippo, that the descendants of Alessandra and Matteo di Simone Strozzi continued to inhabit the Strozzi Palace down through the centuries until its sale in 1937. Currently run

36. See Orsola Gori, "La crisi del regime mediceo del 1466 in alcune lettere inedite di Piero dei Medici" in *Studi in onore di Arnaldo d'Addario*, ed. L. Borgia et al. (Lecce: Conte, 1995), 3:809–25; Gori, "Per un contributo"; and Gori "Contessina moglie di Cosimo 'il Vecchio': Lettere familiari," in *Scritti in onore di Girolamo Arnaldi offerti dalla Scuola nazionale di studi medioevali*, ed. Andrea Degrandi et al. (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 2001), 233–59.

37. See Parenti, *Lettere*, 94, to Filippo, 27 July 1465.

38. Lorenzo Strozzi, *Vite*, 84–202. As a product of a new generation, this Lorenzo already represents a different world, conveying a new, more aristocratic image of the lineage from the one we see in his grandmother's letters. His father is the only merchant (albeit one who financed the king of Naples), the remainder being selected for their intellectual or military careers. For the vicissitudes of Florence, the Medici, and the Strozzi in these decades, see for example Melissa Meriam Bullard, *Filippo Strozzi and the Medici: Favor and Finance in Sixteenth-Century Florence and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), and Najemy, *History of Florence*, chaps. 13–15.

by the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi established in 2006, it houses, appropriately enough, the Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, as well as major cultural and artistic exhibitions and a rather smart wine bar.³⁹ Alessandra did not live to see the demolition of her old home in order to make way for the giant new palace encompassing the entire block (see Figs. 3 and 7). She died on 2 March 1471, a little less than a year after her last letter, and was buried in the Strozzi family tomb in Santa Maria Novella.⁴⁰

3. *Alessandra and the Genre of the Familiar Letter*

Alessandra's "familiar" or "private" letters are essentially modelled on the conventions of the mercantile correspondence of the period. As such they are very different from the self-conscious "literary" letters by women that appeared in the printed vernacular letter collections of the following century.⁴¹ Each has a tripartite structure beginning with a standard invocation ("In the name of God") and the date of writing. If the letter was held over for any reason, this is signalled in the text itself at the point where she next takes up her pen. In accordance with what Jérôme Hayez calls the "simplified" mercantile letter, there is usually no salutation, although when it does appear, it is significant. The "Dearest son" of Letter 1 is likely triggered by the important family news it conveys, namely Caterina's betrothal, while Letter 17's "My sweet son" is in response to the news of the death of Matteo in Naples. Letter 23 is another exception, the only one addressed not to her sons, but to her late husband's cousin, Iacopo Strozzi, in Bruges. Here the salutation ("Dearest as an elder brother") functions as an additional mark of respect.⁴²

Opening paragraphs refer to the date of her most recent letter and the date of receipt of any from her sons, a convention which offered a security check that the dialogue between correspondents had not been interrupted, whether through negligence or deliberate interception (see the fears expressed in Letter 21). For similar reasons, where appropriate she gives the name of the bearer. Also conventional is the occasional apology for any earlier failure to respond and the reason

39. See Palazzo Strozzi website at <<http://www.palazzostrozzi.org/>> and Lamberini, *Palazzo Strozzi*.

40. The bodies of her husband and children had been brought back from Pesaro for burial. See Guasti xxivn15, and Matteo's instructions in ASF, CS, Series 5, 12, fol. 25r. For Alessandra's bequests and a letter of condolences to Filippo from Scolastica Rondinelli, abbess of the convent of Le Murate, see Guasti, 610–12.

41. See, for example, Doglio, "Letter Writing," 18–24; Meredith K. Ray, *Writing Gender in Women's Letter Collections of the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); and Zarri, *Per lettera*. For what follows, I am particularly indebted to Jérôme Hayez, "Io non so scrivere a l'amicho per siloscismi?: Jalons pour une lecture de la lettre marchande toscane de la fin du Moyen Âge," *I Tatti Studies* 7 (1997): 37–79. See Figs. 1a and b for the autograph original of Letter 39.

42. Iacopo used a similar formula in his letters to her. See Letter 13, note 161.

for this, such as illness (Letter 41, for example), followed by a statement of intention to reply, so much of a formula that she sometimes reduces it to “Risposta” or “Risposta al bisogno” (“Reply as necessary”). The concluding section of the letter contains a signal of closure (“No more for now”), a benediction (“God keep you [both] safe from harm”), a subscription or signature, and the writer’s present location (usually just “from your Alessandra [or Alessandra Strozzi] in Florence”). Occasionally this is followed by a brief postscript, for example with advice that the letter contains an insert (see Letters 35 and 63).

In the body of the letter, she addressed topics of immediate concern. Some of these were introduced on her own initiative (“I’m letting you know that ...”),⁴³ although the overall impression is that the selection is made strictly on the basis of perceived relevance to the addressee:⁴⁴ many were, however, responses to specific information, to views expressed, requests, or instructions on the part of her sons, hence her frequent use of phrases such as “you say/write that,” “regarding,” or an equivalent. This is also implied in the formula about replying “as necessary” mentioned above, and is partly responsible for the disconcerting shifts between paragraphs (conventionally a new one for each topic), for example, from tears to towels, or from death to flax or fennel (Letters 3 and 50).

Once written, the letter would be folded, sealed with wax (see Letter 48), and the addressee and his location added. He, in turn, would usually note the date of receipt (see Letter 1, note 1), thereby giving an idea of delivery times between Florence and Naples, or Florence and Bruges. Alessandra often entrusted her letters to relatives and/or work colleagues of her sons, and to trusted acquaintances, but she also benefited from the couriers (*fanti*) who serviced banks and businesses. In May 1464, she mentions looking forward to Thursdays when the courier was due (Letter 34). In July 1465, it was either Wednesdays or Thursdays, and she refers to sending to the bank for news if no letter came for her (Letter 49). Goods were exchanged as well as letters: flax and fruit coming north; fennel, cheese, shirts, and towels going south. Friends’ saddlebags might be used for smaller objects (Letter 7), but there are frequent references to carriers plying their trade between Florence, Rome, and Naples. Alternatively, there might be the opportunity of the Florentine galleys using Porto Pisano, with road or river connections between Florence and Pisa (as in, for example, the saga of the plums in Letters 39–41, and 43).

43. This is again a standard formula, usually involving the verb *avvisare*, the equivalent of a phrase such as “please you to know” used in early English letters.

44. We might therefore ask ourselves what is *not* in the letters.

4. Writing as a Mother

As has already been noted in section 2 above on *The Life of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi*, the politics of civil conflict and exile, together with marriage, constitute dominant themes of Alessandra's letters, and both are widely discussed in the literature.⁴⁵ Here, however, the focus will be on a topic that has been subjected to less scrutiny, even although it is an inevitable consequence of the primary relation of the writer to the addressees of all but one of her surviving letters. That topic is motherhood and mothering, and it both pervades and shapes the entire correspondence.⁴⁶ Specific subjects for comment will be the mother-son relationship, questions of maternal care and duty, and issues of authority and of selfhood.

A particularly precious aspect of the letters is their wealth of detail concerning her relations with her distant sons. Expressions of maternal love, affection, pride, and unconditional support abound, manifesting themselves through a

45. Modern studies of Alessandra's letters include Angela Bianchini, introduction to Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, *Tempo di affetti e di mercanti: Lettere ai figli esuli* (Milan: Garzanti, 1987), 7–58; Crabb, "How to Influence Your Children," 21–41; Crabb, *Strozzi*, passim; Maria Luisa Doglio, "Scrivere come donna: Fenomenologia delle 'Lettere' familiari di Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi," *Lettere italiane* 36 (1984): 484–97, reprinted in Doglio, *Lettera e donna: Scrittura epistolare al femminile tra Quattro e Cinquecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1993), 1–15; Doni Garfagnini, "Conduzione familiare"; La Roncière, "L'exil," 67–93; Lauro Martines, "A Way of Looking at Women in Renaissance Florence," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1974): 15–28 (useful now above all as a measure of how far the investigation of Renaissance women has come); Ottavia Niccoli, "Forme di cultura e condizioni di vita in due epistolari femminili del Rinascimento," in *Les femmes écrivains en Italie au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance: Actes du colloque international, Aix-en-Provence, 12, 13, 14 novembre 1992* (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'université de Provence, 1994), 13–32; Fulvio Pezzarossa, "Non mi peserà la penna: A proposito di alcuni contributi su scrittura e mondo femminile nel Quattrocento fiorentino," *Lettere italiane* 41 (1989): 250–60; Georges Ulysse, "De la séparation et de l'exil: Les lettres d'Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi," in Ulysse, ed., *L'exil et l'exclusion dans la culture italienne: Actes du colloque franco-italien, Aix-en-Provence, 19–20–21 octobre 1989* (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'université de Provence, 1991), 89–112; and Alessandro Valori, "'Da lei viene ogni utile e ogni onore': Lettere di Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi ai figli e la tutela del 'patrimonio morale' della famiglia," *ASI* 156 (1998): 25–72. On women's letter-writing more widely, as well as the bibliography cited in note 6 above, and although of a very slightly later period and a rather different social context, I have nevertheless found the following studies richly suggestive: James Daybell, ed., *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450–1700* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2001); Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500–1700* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

46. Doglio, Crabb, Ulysse, and Valori (see note 45 above) do address this topic, as does Susan Lesley Hartley, "Writing Motherhood: A Study of the Letters of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi to Her Sons, 1447–1470" (MPhil diss., University of Bristol, 2008). The implied viewer of the painting of Tobias and the Angel, chosen as the cover illustration, should be imagined specifically as a mother (see Letter 59, note 585).

wide spectrum ranging from the emotionally intense to the teasing and playful. Nor are more negative feelings absent: shame and disappointment (Letter 11), occasional resentment or petulance—is she to move from Florence to be with them or is she not (Letter 18)—even vexation and extreme irritation (Letter 53). The maintenance of emotional bonds tested by physical separation was an important part of the work done by Alessandra through her correspondence, as was, to some degree, the management of relations between the sons themselves (see, for example, Letter 23). She was acutely aware of the very different personalities of the two older ones in particular, and of the tensions between them, perhaps arising, initially at least, from Filippo's tendency to be overbearing in his treatment of the younger two (Letters 3, 7, and 9). Then there were issues of perceived favoritism, with Filippo probably irritated by her protectiveness towards Matteo (Letter 2a), or accusing her of giving preference to Lorenzo (Letter 43).

It is unfortunate that apart from the letters included in Guasti's appendices, often transcribed only in part, what we have is chiefly one side of a long running dialogue. It is unfortunate, too, that we know relatively little about her relations with her daughters, either before or after their marriages. It is sometimes claimed that Alessandra prioritized her sons to the virtual exclusion of her daughters—a case of out of sight out of mind once they had been married off—but is this interpretation perhaps the result of the bias inevitably generated by the survival of letters only to the sons? In any case, these letters, together with those of Marco Parenti, do provide evidence of continuing contact between mother and daughters, in terms of the distribution or exchange of material goods as well as in terms of visits. In the summer of 1469, for instance, Alessandra was with Lorenzo, Caterina, and the latter's son Piero, at a spa near Pisa, while a year later Marco was warmly inviting her to join him and the family in Colle Val d'Elsa where he was serving a term of office on behalf of the Florentine government, just as he had encouraged her to take refuge from plague-stricken Florence in their country villa back in 1449.⁴⁷ In the case of her younger daughter, Alessandra seems regularly to have visited the Bonsi country property, Le Selve, and Giovanni's financial difficulties meant that, at times, either he or the whole family came to live with her in Florence in order to save money (Letter 14, for example). Clearly, too, Alessandra saw it as a maternal duty to foster continuing good relations between her daughters and their distant brothers, as we learn from Letter 31.

Still with the focus on her continuing obligation of maternal care, and returning to the mother-son relationship, the pervasive presence of the material world in the letters can be viewed as intimately related to such an obligation, manifesting itself in issues of food and clothing, diet and health—from the making and dispatching of shirts and underwear to the sending of medicine with the

47. See respectively Parenti, *Lettere*, 180, dated 6 July 1469, to Lorenzo in Bagno ad Acqua; 209, dated 13 June 1470, to Filippo Strozzi in Florence; and 24, dated 19 September 1449, to Filippo in Naples.

injunction to use it wisely. Caring for the bodies of her sons extended, in turn, to caring for their souls, summed up in the endlessly repeated mantra concerning “the health of the soul and the body.” Clarissa Atkinson provides a neat summary of the expectations that would have been internalized by Alessandra to form part of her own set of spiritual coordinates: “among the persistent ideologies of Christian motherhood is the conviction that mothers can—and should—be good enough to ‘save’ their children.”⁴⁸

If such duties of care were affected, in Alessandra’s case, by her physical separation from her sons, they were also further extended and shaped by the practical, emotional, and psychological consequences of political exile. In the absence of their father, and of the sons themselves, it devolved upon her to see to the latter’s marriages to Florentine women, thereby ensuring the continuation of the line and the transmission to the next generation of the Strozzi name and patrimony, namely the townhouse and what little rural property could be saved after the process of pretty well wholesale disinvestment due to financial exigencies (see, for example, Letter 65).⁴⁹ Her obsessive focus on the subject of marriage was both a “natural” maternal concern and an imperative of survival if this branch of the wider lineage was not to disappear. In a time of plague and political persecution, it was a fear of extinction that seems to have been shared by other members of the *casato*, with a Strozzi relative in Venice remarking to Filippo: “We need to ensure we don’t die out.”⁵⁰ In the case of sons whose youth and young adulthood were lived elsewhere, Alessandra also acted as a custodian of family documents (her husband’s account books and some of his correspondence), family information (for example, the dates of birth in Letter 11), family memory, and therefore

48. Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 127. Contemporary churchmen such as Giovanni Dominici and Archbishop Antonino Pierozzi would have agreed. See, for example, Giuseppina Battista, *L'educazione dei figli nella regola di Giovanni Dominici, 1355/6–1419* (Florence: Pagnini e Martinelli, 2002), and Judith Bryce, “Dada degli Adimari’s Letters from Sant’Antonino: Identity, Maternity and Spirituality,” *I Tatti Studies* 12 (2009): 11–53.

49. In Matteo di Simone’s will the townhouse (although of relatively recent acquisition) is seen as a particular focus of family identity, and this is echoed in Alessandra’s own testamentary instructions. See ASF, CS, Series 5, 12, fol. 25r and ASF, CS, Series 5, 15, fol. 96v respectively (“because she wished the said house to remain in her family in perpetuity as a dwelling and receptacle [*ricettaculo*] for her male children and their descendants in the male line”). See, too, Guasti, 318. The role of widowed mothers in conserving the patrimony for the benefit of male heirs was both sanctioned and encouraged by the church and laity; see, for example, Battista, *L'educazione dei figli*, 116–19. It was a duty and a task that was all the more important in the case of exiles; see, for example, Chabot, *La dette des familles*, 291.

50. See Guasti, 216, letter dated 20 October 1459.