

# Letters to Francesco Datini

MARGHERITA DATINI



*Translated by*

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## Introduction

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I am more teased than a newlywed, and they say things to me that they would not even say to a new bride. If I am sad, they say I am jealous. If I am happy, they say I can't be missing Francesco di Marco. They talk such rubbish that if you were a young boy it would be bad enough. In this household all they do is joke about you and me [letter 1].

Margherita Datini (1360–1423) was twenty-four when she dictated this message to be sent to her husband, the merchant Francesco di Marco Datini, who was about twenty-five years her senior. The couple had moved from Provence to Tuscany the year before. By the time the correspondence opens, Francesco had established warehouses not only in Prato, the small town ten miles from Florence that he had left as a youth, but also in Pisa and Florence itself. The rapid expansion of Francesco's business made it necessary for him to spend prolonged periods away from home, during which the couple was obliged to communicate by letter. The intriguing reference in this passage to the teasing jokes of Florentine relatives and friends about the Datini marriage alerts us to what appears to be an unconventional relationship, and it whets our appetite for the unfolding saga of their marital collaboration in epistolary exchanges that continued for some twenty-six years.<sup>1</sup> Here is a woman who seems to conform little to the medieval

1. [There are two ranges of footnotes. The main range begins at letter 1; all cross-references will refer to notes within that main range.] See *Le lettere di Margherita Datini a Francesco di Marco (1384–1410)*, ed. Valeria Rosati (Prato: Cassa di Risparmio e Depositi, 1977), and *Le lettere di Francesco Datini alla moglie Margherita (1385–1410)*, ed. Elena Cecchi (Prato: Società Pratese di Storia Patria, 1990). Margherita's letters, including a number of previously unpublished ones, are also available on a CD-ROM. See Diana Toccafondi and Giovanni Tartaglione, ed., *Per la tua Margherita—: lettere di una donna del '300 al marito mercante* (Prato: Archivio di Stato, 2002). Margherita's life in Avignon before her marriage (and, to a lesser extent, after Francesco Datini's death) can be reconstructed only in broad outline, although the current research of Jérôme Hayez, Simona Brambilla, and Ann Crabb on unpublished Datini material may reveal more. For the most recent scholarship on Francesco Datini, see Giampiero Nigro, ed., *Francesco di Marco Datini: The Man, the Merchant* (Flor-

## 2 Introduction

stereotype of wifely virtue exemplified in its most extreme form in Giovanni Boccaccio's tale of patient Griselda.<sup>2</sup> Although Margherita admitted that she was not as obedient as a good wife ought to be, she regarded herself as sorely tested by an irascible and idiosyncratic husband who required her to conform to—and to go well beyond—traditional wifely roles.

Her letters to Francesco, here translated into English for the first time, provide a wealth of information about the societies of Prato and Florence, between which the Datinis divided their time.<sup>3</sup> Even more remarkably, the letters tell us a great deal about Margherita herself. She reveals her political views and the influence she could exert within Florentine patronage networks by virtue of her aristocratic connections.<sup>4</sup> She also comments in detail on her household, the tasks her husband delegated to her, and the activities and personalities of the relatives and friends with whom she socialized. The complex portrait of everyday life and social relationships in the urban environments of late-medieval Tuscany that emerges from Margherita's letters is dramatically different from the static, limited view of women's lives presented in the prescriptive texts of her period.

Although letters constitute the largest category of early writing by women of western Europe, fourteenth-century examples are scarce, especially those from lay women. Among the few that have come to light are thirty-one letters of the Florentine Dora Guidalotti del Bene, also a merchant's wife and Margherita's contemporary, and

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ence: Firenze University Press, 2010), and Paolo Nanni, *Ragionare tra mercanti: Per una rilettura della personalità di Francesco di Marco Datini (1335ca–1410)* (Pisa: Pacini, 2010).

2. In Boccaccio's tale (day 10, tale 10), Griselda remained docile and obedient to a husband who tested her virtue with ever more inventive forms of cruelty. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Antonio Quaglio (Milan: Garzanti, 1974), 927–39.

3. We have translated all but one of the letters that are transcribed in the CD-ROM edition of Margherita's letters to Francesco. This most complete edition dates a much-damaged letter (folio 1401879) as 3.9.1400, but it is more likely to have been written in 1398. Only the date 3 September remains. Because of the difficulty of placing this letter chronologically and its fragmentary condition, we decided not to include it here. See note 548 in letter 218.

4. On this theme see Carolyn James, "Woman's Work in a Man's World: The Letters of Margherita Datini (1384–1410)," in Nigro, ed., *Francesco di Marco Datini*, 53–72.

three written in the 1360s by a Venetian woman named Cataruza.<sup>5</sup> The letters of Dora del Bene share Margherita's lively, colloquial tone and her concern with domestic detail. The Datini collection, however, offers unique riches. Margherita's more extensive correspondence makes it possible to study both her epistolary voice and her relationship with her husband over time. The collection also has the advantage of breadth, because many letters written by associates, friends, and relatives in her close-knit community also survive in the same archive. This allows us to reconstruct, in unusual detail, the context for the dramas that play out in the Datini couple's exchanges.<sup>6</sup> For much of her life Margherita was only semiliterate, and nearly all of her letters were dictated to various scribes. Despite this lack of formal training, once she was forced by circumstance to communicate with Francesco by letter, Margherita took firm authorial control of the dictation process. Her correspondence, therefore, provides interesting evidence of how an intelligent and determined woman successfully adapted the mercantile letter—a ubiquitous, practical, dynamically evolving sub-genre of epistolary writing—for her own purposes.<sup>7</sup>

### *Margherita's Early Life*

Margherita's life had scarcely begun when her fate, and that of her family, was profoundly affected by the political factionalism endemic to late-medieval Florence. Her parents, Domenico Bandini and Dianora Gherardini, both belonged to ancient, knightly families that were regarded with suspicion by the major guildsmen and wealthy merchants who dominated the Florentine republic. Resentful of their

5. Three letters written by the noble Venetian widow Cataruza were preserved by the procurators of San Marco as evidence about property division within her family. The extant letters of Dora del Bene were written to her husband and sons. See Guia Passerini, "Dora Guidalotti del Bene: Le lettere (1381–92)," *Letteratura italiana antica* 4 (2003): 101–59, and Linda Guzzetti, "Donne e scrittura nel tardo trecento," *Archivio veneto* 152 (1999): 5–31.

6. See, for example, Ser Lapo Mazzei, *Lettere di un notaro a un mercante del secolo XV, con altre lettere e documenti*, ed. Cesare Guasti (Florence: Le Monnier, 1880).

7. On the evolution of merchant letters, see 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: Essays in the Renaissance* 7 (1997): 37–79.

exclusion from participation in government, a group of twelve magnates, including Bandini and some of his Gherardini relatives, staged an unsuccessful coup against the republican regime toward the end of 1360. Bandini and another conspirator, Niccolò del Buono, were captured and executed. The others, including Dianora's male kin, were exiled, and their property within the city was confiscated.<sup>8</sup> Although the Florentine government made some provision for the widow by giving her a house that had belonged to her husband in the quarter of Santo Spirito as compensation for her dowry, Dianora and her six children surely found themselves in difficult circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

Margherita must have been the youngest child, born only months before her father's execution, because in a letter of February 1385 Francesco Datini refers to her entering her twenty-fifth year.<sup>10</sup> It remains unclear how exactly Dianora Gherardini and her children fared in the 1360s. The widow might have remained in Florence until her sons reached their teens and became subject to the laws that had forced their older male relatives into exile. Margherita's sister Francesca married the merchant Niccolò dell'Ammannato Tecchini and continued to live in Florence. The rest of the family moved to Avignon, probably with the help of a relative who was already settled among the Florentine colony of merchants there. The presence of Dianora and her children in the papal capital, a city of approximately twenty thousand people, is documented from the early 1370s.<sup>11</sup> It was here that Margherita met her future husband.

Francesco di Marco Datini was born in Prato around 1335. His early years, like his wife's, were also traumatic. He and his brother,

8. Gene Brucker, *Florentine Politics and Society 1343–1378* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 187.

9. Jérôme Hayez has established that this Florentine house was Bandini property, probably given to Dianora by the Florentine Commune as a refund of her dowry when her husband was executed. The widow apparently used it to raise loans. Consequently it became legally encumbered and caused familial disputes.

10. Francesco to Margherita Datini, 23 February 1385, *Le lettere di Francesco Datini*, 31–35 (34). In Francesco's 1384 tax report, Margherita is said to be 24 (Archivio di Stato, Florence, Estimo 217, folio 388v). I am grateful to Jérôme Hayez for this archival reference.

11. Jérôme Hayez, "Préliminaires à une prosopographie avignonnaise du XIVe siècle," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome: Moyen Âge, temps modernes* 100 (1988): 113–24 (121–24).

Stefano, were orphaned after the Black Death swept through Tuscany in the summer of 1348. The brothers were cared for by their guardian and relative, Piero di Giunta del Rosso (Francesco remained intimate with Rosso's descendants all his life), and by Monna Piera di Pratese Boschetti, who took them into her home. In May 1349 Francesco was apprenticed to a Florentine merchant, but after less than a year he set off to seek his fortune in Avignon, the most vibrant financial center in Europe. The opportunities for profit and advancement in Avignon were considerable, and Francesco proved to be an energetic and talented businessman. As Luciana Frangioni has shown, he sold arms and other iron wares such as nails and needles, and he marketed various kinds of cloth and hides.<sup>12</sup> He also produced and sold salt.<sup>13</sup> These entrepreneurial activities soon made him wealthy.

In 1376, when he was about forty, Francesco finally heeded his foster mother and friends in Prato, who advised him to marry so that he might produce a legitimate heir.<sup>14</sup> The merchant had apparently become well acquainted with Dianora and her children. He chose the sixteen-year-old Margherita as his wife, fully confident (if we are to believe his letters home to Prato) that his friendship with her family would ensure the success of this marriage. "I know them and they know me. We have been friends for a long time and I know them better than anyone else," he wrote.<sup>15</sup> In many ways Francesco's judgment proved to be sound, but if he chose Margherita for the intelligence, moral integrity, and good sense that emerge clearly from her correspondence, he may have underestimated the effects of his own quick temper and strong will on a similarly disposed person. In 1381 Francesco praised his wife to his brother-in-law, Niccolò dell'Ammannato Tecchini, as respectful, obedient, and without undue pride in her no-

12. Luciana Frangioni, *Chiedere e ottenere: L'approvvigionamento di prodotti di successo della bottega Datini di Avignone nel XIV secolo* (Florence: Opublibri, 2002).

13. Christiane Villain-Gandossi, *Comptes du sel (Libro di ragione e conto di salle) de Francesco di Marco Datini pour sa compagnie d'Avignon, 1376-1379* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1969).

14. For a brief biography of Francesco Datini, see Federigo Melis, *Aspetti della vita economica medievale*, vol. 1 (Siena: Monte dei Paschi di Siena, 1962), ch. 1.

15. *Le lettere di Margherita Datini*, 4.

ble Gherardini blood.<sup>16</sup> Letters Margherita wrote several years later suggest that she outgrew such youthful modesty and malleability, if there was ever any truth in Francesco's boast. She was certainly aware of her aristocratic lineage and was not averse to pointing out her husband's more humble background when he annoyed her (letter 12).

Dianora Gherardini seems to have shared aspects of her daughter's robust temperament. Her amicable relationship with her son-in-law in the early period of their acquaintance was soured by later conflicts about money. In 1384 she demanded an exorbitant price when Francesco asked to rent her house in Florence. Eventually she bequeathed the property to Iacopo di Cianghello Girolli da Cantagallo, the husband of Margherita's sister Isabetta. Iacopo, or Giachi as he was known (letter 12), was in financial trouble by early 1386. Dianora's decision to leave the Florentine house to Isabetta and her spouse was probably influenced by the fact that she lived with them in Avignon and shared the consequences of the couple's ill fortune.<sup>17</sup> Even on her deathbed in May 1388, Dianora Gherardini remained resolute that she owed nothing to Francesco or to her other son-in-law, Niccolò dell'Ammannato Tecchini. When Giachi and Isabetta tried to sell the Florentine house after Dianora's death, their relatives in Tuscany challenged the will and impeded the sale for many years.<sup>18</sup> Francesco claimed that he was owed money from the disputed estate because he had never received his wife's dowry.<sup>19</sup> Margherita apparently felt some bitterness about the financial dealings of her natal family, whose behavior, she claimed, she could never fully reveal to her husband. In a letter of 1399 to her brother, Bartolomeo Bandini, Margherita reminded him that of all the siblings, she alone had received nothing from her father's estate.<sup>20</sup>

16. Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato: Francesco di Marco Datini 1335–1410* (New York: Knopf, 1957), 193–94.

17. See Jérôme Hayez, "Un facteur siennois de Francesco di Marco Datini: Andrea di Bartolomeo di Ghino et sa correspondance (1383–1389)," *Bollettino dell'Opera del vocabolario italiano* 10 (2005): 203–397 (236–37).

18. See Margherita's letters 12 and 20.

19. Francesco Datini's will mentions the fact that Margherita's dowry was never paid by her family. See Mazzei, *Lettere di un notaio*, 1:27–28.

20. Margherita's letter to her brother is translated in the notes to letter 211.



## *Homecoming*

In late 1382, Francesco resolved at last to return to Italy. He and his household left Avignon and traveled by mule over the Alps to Italy. The party of eleven stopped to do business in Milan for a week and stayed for some days in towns along the way, such as Asti, Cremona, and Bologna.<sup>21</sup> In spite of the leisurely pace, traveling over rugged and unfamiliar terrain in midwinter must have been a considerable adventure for Margherita; although, as the letters show, she was certainly not the only woman in her circle to travel between Tuscany and the Provençal capital.<sup>22</sup> The Datini couple and their companions arrived in Prato in January 1383. Francesco immediately set about establishing a warehouse there and transforming the small house he had bought when he was still in Avignon into a splendid residence. Within two years of his return, the merchant was also overseeing a new branch of his company in Pisa and traveling constantly between Prato and Florence, where he also set up a warehouse and rented a fine house.

Margherita's first letters to her husband were sent from their Florentine home. In comparison to Prato, its tiny dependent, Florence was a sophisticated metropolis of considerable size, although its population had fallen from 100,000 to less than 40,000 following the plague outbreak of 1348. Here, back in the city she had left as a child, Margherita was reunited with her sister Francesca, her brother-in-law, their numerous children, and other relatives, including her father's sister, Monna Giovanna, the widow of Salvestro Cavalcanti. Several of her mother's brothers lived just beyond the borders of the Florentine state, and even her ninety-year-old maternal grandfather, Cione Gherardini, known as Pellicia, seems to have been still alive when Margherita returned to Tuscany.<sup>23</sup>

In the years following the move from Avignon, Francesco and Margherita were often apart. At first Margherita did not realize that

21. For the itinerary and other details of the journey to Italy see Melis, *Aspetti della vita economica*, 51–53.

22. Letters 3 and 4, for example, refer to Monna Beatrice's sea voyage to join her husband in Avignon.

23. Francesco Datini mentions the death of Pellicia in a letter to Margherita of 4 August 1385: *Le lettere di Francesco Datini*, 36–38.

this would be a permanent feature of their life together. Unhappy about her husband's long stays in Pisa between March 1384 and July 1385, in February 1385 she declared that she would come "not only to Pisa, but to the end of the earth" to ensure his welfare and to help him expedite his business affairs (letter 5). Her move to Pisa, discussed by the couple on numerous occasions, was however endlessly postponed, and did not eventuate. Margherita constantly reproached Francesco for living in a frenetic and disordered fashion when he was away from her. For example, in January 1386 she wrote: "You send me messages telling me to be happy and to enjoy myself but you stay awake until morning and dine at midnight and lunch at sunset. I will not be happy and will never be able to rest if you don't live differently" (letter 10).

During the 1380s, major building activity at the Datini residence in Prato often made it necessary for Margherita to stay in Florence; but as the provenance of the letters make clear, sometimes she had to live in Prato to supervise the builders and other artisans working at their house while Francesco remained in Florence (letter 16).<sup>24</sup> We know from the merchant's account books that in early 1387, during one of these early marital separations, Francesco fathered a male child by the fifteen-year-old servant Ghirigora, who had accompanied the Datinis from Avignon.<sup>25</sup> Ghirigora is mentioned by Margherita only in her first surviving letter, of January 1384. This baby died in March 1388 at six months old, and Francesco buried him with his kin in the church of San Francesco in Prato.

In 1392 Francesco had another illegitimate child: Ginevra, whose mother was a young household slave called Lucia. She is first referred to by Margherita in a letter of October 1389. Lucia was often sent to serve Francesco when he was away from home (letter 217). On good terms with her mistress (and eventually freed), in 1399 she married one of the servants and in 1401 the couple had the first of

24. On Francesco Datini's building program, see Simonetta Cavaciocchi, "The Merchant and Building," in Nigro, ed., *Francesco di Marco Datini*, 131–63; and Jérôme Hayez and Diana Toccafondi, *Il palazzo di Francesco Datini a Prato: Una casa fatta per durare mille anni* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2011).

25. Cavaciocchi, "The Merchant and Building," 52.