

Introduction

The Other Voice

“The voice [...] that honors Brescia”

—Pietro Bembo

Veronica Gambara (1485–1550) was one of the earliest women writers of lyric poetry known throughout Italy in the first half of the sixteenth century. Through her ancestors in the Nogarola family of Verona and the Pio of Carpi, Gambara shared a unique connection to the learned women of the humanistic milieu in the fifteenth century.¹ This lineage

1. On the women of the Nogarola family and on women humanists of fifteenth-century Italy more broadly, see Phyllis R. Brown, Laurie J. Churchill, and Jane E. Jeffrey, eds., *Women Writing Latin: From Roman Antiquity to Early Modern Europe*, vol. 3, *Early Modern Women Writing Latin* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Silvia R. Fiore, “The Silent Scholars of Italian Humanism: Feminism in the Renaissance,” in *Interpreting the Italian Renaissance: Literary Perspectives*, ed. Antonio Toscano (Stony Brook, NY: Forum Italicum, 1991), 15–27; Lisa Jardine, “Women and Humanists: An Education for What?,” in *Feminism & Renaissance Studies*, ed. Lorna Hutson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 48–81; Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr., eds., *Her Immaculate Hand: Selected Works by and about the Women Humanists of Quattrocento Italy* (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1997); Margaret L. King, “Thwarted Ambitions: Six Learned Women of the Italian Renaissance,” *Soundings* 59 (1976): 267–304; Margaret L. King, “The Religious Retreat of Isotta Nogarola (1418–1466): Sexism and Its Consequences in the Fifteenth Century,” *Signs* 3 (1978): 807–22; Margaret L. King, “Book-Lined Cells: Women and Humanism in the Early Italian Renaissance,” in *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past*, ed. Patricia H. Labalme (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 66–90; Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991); Holt Parker, “Latin and Greek Poetry by Five Renaissance Italian Women Humanists,” in *Sex and Gender in Medieval and Renaissance Texts: The Latin Tradition*, ed. Barbara K. Gold, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 247–85; Jane Stevenson, “Women and Classical Education in the Early Modern Period,” in *Women’s Education in Early Modern Europe: A History, 1500–1800*, ed. Barbara J. Whitehead (New York: Garland Publications, 1999), 83–109; Jane Stevenson, “Female Authority and Authorization Strategies in Early Modern Europe,” in *This Double Voice: Gendered Writing in Early Modern England*, ed. Danielle Clarke and Elizabeth Clarke (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000), 16–40; Jane Stevenson, *Women Latin Poets: Language, Gender, and Authority from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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may well have influenced Gambara's early literary aspirations, but it also provided a pedigree that reinforced her legitimacy as an intellect in her own right. At the turn of the century, with the rise of the vernacular as the poetic language of choice and the emergence of the *poesia cortigiana* tradition among the signorial circles of Gambara's northern Italian surroundings, she joined the literary chorus as a young woman with her own lyric love poetry in the vernacular.² Gambara wrote primarily in the Italian sonnet form, but she also composed verse in forms suited for musical adaptation, such as the madrigal and *frottola-barzelletta*. Gambara was in fact the first woman in the Italian tradition to publish secular vernacular lyrics, when her madrigal "Or passata è la speranza" (Now hope has gone) was published in 1505 in a collection of musical ballads.³ As far as we are able to date Gambara's extant poetry, there appears to be a hiatus in the circulation and perhaps in the production of her verse beginning around 1519 and lasting until 1529. This break is most likely attributable to the sudden death in 1518 of Gambara's husband, Giberto X of Correggio, while serving in battle as a military *condottiere*. Under the stipulations of Giberto's will, Gambara was designated guardian of their two young sons and appointed to manage her husband's estate as the regent dowager of Correggio—a role she fulfilled until her death in 1550.⁴

Gambara maintained a welcome and celebrated presence on the literary landscape in both stages of her poetic career. Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) was the first notable member of the literary community to honor Gambara's literary talents. In 1504, he and Gambara exchanged original poems; his identification of Gambara as "la voce [...] che Brescia onora" (the voice [...] that honors Brescia) in the final line of a sonnet indicates that Gambara had acquired a degree of regional fame as a young lyrical poet at the time of the composition.⁵

2. Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy: 1400–1650* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 50–53.

3. See Allan Bullock's catalogue of Gambara's presence in various publications, in Veronica Gambara, *Le Rime*, ed. Alan Bullock (Florence: Olschki; Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1995), 36; Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 51.

4. Baldassare Camillo Zamboni, "Vita di Veronica Gambara," in *Rime e lettere di Veronica Gambara*, ed. Felice Rizzardi (Brescia: Giammaria Rizzardi, 1759), 44.

5. The title of Bembo's sonnet to Gambara is "Certo ben mi poss'io dir pago omai."

Later in the century, Bembo included his early literary exchange with Gambara in the appendix of the 1535 edition of his *Rime*. Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533) also made early note of Gambara’s presence in court circles in the 1516 edition of his *Orlando furioso*, where he names her among the honorable ladies of Correggio. He repeats the honor by underscoring Gambara’s literary talent in canto 46 of his final 1532 edition, where she is said to please the poetic muses: “sì grata a Febo e al santo aonio coro” (so dear to Phoebus, and to the sacred Aonian chorus).⁶ In canto 37 of Ariosto’s epic poem there is a longer celebration of another female poet who had acquired acclaim throughout Italy at the time: the Marchioness of Pescara, Vittoria Colonna (1490–1547). Colonna’s poetry was included alongside Gambara’s in Bembo’s 1535 *Rime* index.⁷ As recent scholars have argued, the responsiveness of Bembo and Ariosto to the poetry of Gambara, and their even more enthusiastic reception of Colonna, in the third decade of the sixteenth century, attest to the male literary world’s openness, if not eagerness, to engage with women writers.⁸

Throughout the first decades of the sixteenth century, the lives of Gambara and Colonna were strikingly similar. Both women were highly educated members of the upper echelons of Italian society, connected by birth and marriage to prominent ruling families—though Colonna was of higher noble standing and greater political stature

6. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso* (Milan: Mondadori editore, 1976), 1207.

7. Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy*, 60.

8. For the emergence of the female writer on the early modern Italian landscape, see Abigail Brundin’s introduction to Vittoria Colonna, *Sonnets for Michelangelo, a Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Abigail Brundin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Virginia Cox, “Women Writers and the Canon in Sixteenth-Century Italy: The Case of Vittoria Colonna,” in *Strong Voices, Weak History: Early Modern Women Writers and Canons in England, France, and Italy*, ed. Pamela Joseph Benson and Victoria Kirkham (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 14–31; Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy*; Carlo Dionisotti, “Appunti sul Bembo e su Vittoria Colonna,” in *Miscellanea Augusto Campana*, ed. Rino Avesani et al. (Padua: Antenore, 1981), 257–86; Fabio Finotti, “Women Writers in Renaissance Italy: Courtly Origins of New Literary Canons,” in Benson and Kirkham, *Strong Voices, Weak History*, 121–45; Giovanna Rabitti, “Vittoria Colonna, Bembo e Firenze: Un caso di recezione e qualche postilla,” *Studi e problemi di critica testuale* 44 (1992): 127–55; Nadia Cannata Salamone, “Women and the Making of the Italian Literary Canon,” in *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. Letizia Panizza (London: Legenda Press, 2000), 498–512.

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by virtue of her baronial rank and her family lineage, which linked her to the powerful Montefeltro dynasty. Gambara and Colonna each married prominent military generals, both of whom died in battle in the first quarter of the century, and both Gambara and Colonna remained widows for the remainder of their lives.⁹ Both women proved to be exceedingly talented composers of lyrical vernacular verse in the Bembist *petrarchismo* tradition, and although Colonna's poetic star ultimately outshone that of Gambara, the synchronous rise to fame of the two poets established a tradition, whereby they remained closely linked.¹⁰

A fascinating point of divergence, however, may be found in the thematic preoccupations of the two female lyricists. Colonna's verse crafts a literary identity centered on her widowhood, beginning with the expression in the *Rime amorose* (Love poems) of a devout widow grieving the loss of the virtuous conjugal love shared with her husband. This thematic of the chaste and grieving widow evolved, with some overlap and key variations, into Colonna's *Rime spirituali* (Spiritual poems), where devotion to the virtuous beloved shifts into a profoundly Christianized spiritual meditation. In contrast, in Gambara's extant poetry, only three poems might speak of grief in widowhood; on her return to the literary scene in 1529, hers is a poetic voice deeply immersed in the occasions of the public and distinctly political spheres. In fact, Gambara announces this thematic shift in a sonnet composed for Colonna in 1532, "Mentre da vaghi e giovenil pensieri" (While [I was nourished] by wandering and youthful thoughts): repenting the love-driven wanderings of her early poetic career, she jettisons her "già care rime" (once-dear rhymes) and lets them sink into "silenzio eterno" (eternal silence).¹¹

Gambara's role as the dowager Countess of Correggio deeply influenced the second half of her life, including the content and even the

9. Colonna's husband, Ferrante d'Avalos, died in battle in 1525.

10. A poem by Lucia Bertani dell'Oro (1521–67) named Gambara and Colonna the "Sappho and Corinna" of their age. The pairing of Gambara and Colonna also occurs in contemporary analysis, as when Virginia Cox identifies the poets as the "founding mothers" of women's writing in the first half of the sixteenth century. Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 76.

11. Colonna's sonnet in reply, "Lasciar non posso i miei saldi pensieri," affirms her commitment to the theme of love in her verse in honor of the memory of her virtuous husband.

style of the poetry she produced throughout this period. Whereas her early verse concentrates on the internal workings of the poet-persona's dramatic self, tracing the emotional fluctuations of the private mind following the Petrarchan love-lyric model, Gambarà's mature work harmonizes with the occasions of the public domain; the poet's subject is no longer the internal self but the external world around her. In these poems, Gambarà tells of her surroundings, of the significant political proceedings of her day, and, most pointedly, of the central cultural and political figures responsible for bringing these events into being.

The history of Italian letters from the fourteenth century onward is replete with women who drew on their literary talents to engage in the public sphere. Among the examples of the nexus of women, literature, and politics in Italy during this period is the correspondence between fourteenth-century women humanists and their learned male counterparts, and the Latin orations of the women of the Montefeltro, Visconti, and Sforza dynasties.¹² Gambarà dovetails with this well-established tradition in that she worked innovatively with lyric poetry to participate in the political discourses of her time; indeed, Gambarà's mature verse provides one of the first examples of a female voice following political events through the vernacular sonnet form. We may thus align Gambarà's literary legacy with the poet-ruler model traditionally practiced by men in power—Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–92), for example—and consider her one of the first women of the Italian tradition to utilize her poetic talent as an instrument of rule.

Veronica Gambarà: A Brief Biography

Born in Prato Albino on November 30, 1485, Veronica Gambarà spent her youth on the small feudal estate of her noble family in the Brescia region of northern Italy. Throughout the fifteenth century, Brescia cultivated a distinct presence as a center of erudite learning with which many well-known women humanists, such as Laura Cereta (1469–99) and Cassandra Fedele (1465?–1558), came to be associated.¹³ Through geography and ancestry, the Gambarà family shared an

12. See King and Rabil, *Her Immaculate Hand*.

13. Stephen D. Bowd, *Venice's Most Loyal City: Civic Identity in Renaissance Brescia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 36.

intimate connection to the educated women of the humanist movement: Gambarara's paternal great-grandmother was Ginevra Nogarola (1417–61/68), the learned writer and sister of the even better-known Isotta Nogarola (1418–66) of Verona.

At her family's court, Gambarara began to write poetry while she underwent a classic *studia humanitatis* education.¹⁴ Cultural shifts in the literary landscape played a significant role in Gambarara's development as an intellectual and as a poet. At the time that the *lirica cortigiana* tradition was taking shape, the vernacular came to replace Latin as the language of poetry. The lyric poetry produced by women in this period was heavily influenced by the poetic model provided by Petrarch in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*. The Petrarchan model re-introduced poetic meditations on secular themes in conjunction with spiritual verse, which had long been part of the literary landscape. Court women, in particular, were regarded as the principal public for vernacular writings, and they came to expand their role as audience and as producers of refined court entertainment.¹⁵ In close proximity to Gambarara, one finds the first women to appear in manuscript culture with poetry in the *lirica cortigiana* mode, Camilla Scarampa (1476–1520) among them, whose poetry was circulating throughout the Brescia region, and Veronica's sister Isotta, whose vernacular poetry had attracted public praise.¹⁶

Throughout her young adulthood, Gambarara exhibited both literary talent and an aspiration to circulate her verse to the public, which she did by making effective use of her family network to reach out to prominent cultural figures such as Isabella d'Este (1474–1539).¹⁷

14. Stevenson, *Women Latin Poets*, 168.

15. Two examples that illuminate how the developing lyric culture began to be oriented toward women may be found in the Sforza court of Milan: an elaborate pictorial interpretation of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* was produced for Beatrice d'Este (1475–97); also for Beatrice, Gasparo Visconti dedicated a Petrarchan-themed collection of lyrics. To Isabella d'Este, the historian Vincenzo Calmeta offered a commentary on Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. See Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 2–17; Finotti, "Women Writers in Renaissance Italy," 123; Salamone, "Women and the Making of the Italian Literary Canon"; Stevenson, *Women Latin Poets*, 282.

16. Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 50–53.

17. On Gambarara's paternal side, Galasso Gambarara married Margherita d'Este and Niccolò Gambarara married Lucrezia Francesco Gonzaga. On her maternal side, Gambarara's cousin

As early as 1503, Gambara's madrigal "Or passata è la speranza" (Now hope has gone) was known to Isabella d'Este.¹⁸ Gambara's literary exchanges with Pietro Bembo during this period, rooted in Bembo's acquaintance with the Gambara family, are another example of her use of an extensive network of family and literary connections. Bembo's father served in the Venetian military alongside her father, Count Giovanni Francesco Gambara (d. 1511), and Bembo corresponded with Gambara's brothers. While Bembo's reputation as a literary authority reached its apex later, on the publication of his *Prose della volgare lingua* (1525), he was already well known earlier in the century for his edition of Petrarch's vernacular works, including an edition of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* with commentary. Gambara addressed Bembo in her sonnet "Non t'ammirar, s'a te, non visto mai" (Do not be surprised if, though I have never seen you), to which he replied favorably with a letter and sonnet of his own in honor of Gambara's poetic talents.

Although the feudal territory of the Gambara family maintained a certain level of independence from Brescia proper, throughout Gambara's lifetime the estate was directly affected by the conflict between Venice and France over the region. During the period of Venetian control of Brescia, Gambara's father, Giovanni Francesco Gambara, served as a *condottiere* for the Venetian forces in the successful defeat of the French army's invasion of northern Italy from 1494 to 1498. When hostilities resumed in 1509, France defeated Venice and the Gambara estate fell under French dominion.¹⁹ The Gambara fiefdom emerged as a powerful supporter of the French, and though it grew in power during the occupation (1509–16), it nevertheless remained vulnerable to forces opposed to the French. Such a conflict

Giberto Pio married Elisabetta d'Este.

18. William F. Prizer, "Isabella d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia as Patrons of Music: The Frottola at Mantua and Ferrara," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38, no. 1 (1985): 1–33; Claudio Vela, "Poesia in musica: Rime della Gambara e di altri poeti settentrionali in tradizione musicale," in *Veronica Gambara e la poesia del suo tempo nell'Italia settentrionale*, ed. Cesare Bozzetti, Pietro Gibellini, and Ennio Sandal (Florence: Olschki, 1989), 400.

19. For an account of Giovanni Francesco's flight from the battle of Agnadello and his escape to his family's palace in Brescia, where he surrendered control to the French, see Carlo Dionisotti, "Elia Capriolo e Veronica Gambara," in Bozzetti, Gibellini, and Sandal, *Veronica Gambara e la poesia del suo tempo nell'Italia settentrionale*, 16–17.

occurred in 1512, one year after Giovanni Francesco's death, when Gambarà's mother, Alda Pio, witnessed the Venetian siege of Brescia as Venice attempted to reoccupy the territory.²⁰ Because the Gambaras were allied with the French, the Brescian Council of Ten exiled the family from the region in 1516 when Venice resumed control of the territory. It was not until 1529, under the protection of Charles V, that the family returned to power in the region.

Gambarà's marriage to Giberto X of Correggio in 1509 provided a propitious consolidation of small fortunes and political alliances for both the families. Her noble ancestry, her humanistic erudition, and her literary talent made her well suited for the Correggio court. A small fiefdom in the Po River valley, Correggio was presided over by lords and military generals who maintained long-standing alliances with the princely powers of northern Italy—particularly the Este and Gonzaga, to whom the Correggio were ancestrally tied.²¹ Giberto X, related to Gambarà's maternal Pio family through his mother Agnese Pio, was left a widower upon the early death of his first wife, Violante Pico, niece of the reputed *letterato* Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94). The Correggio family already had some literary standing through the works of Niccolò “Postumo” da Correggio (1450–1508), a *condottiere* for the courts of the d'Este dynasty and a poet renowned for a range of vernacular writings, including theatrical dramas, for court entertainment.²²

Before Gambarà's arrival, the cultural projects of the women of the Correggio family had effectively advanced the public repute of this small seat of power.²³ Agnese Pio (d. 1474) collaborated with her husband, Manfredo da Correggio, to commission the construction of the

20. Bowd, *Venice's Most Loyal City*, 206.

21. Alberto Ghidini, “La contea di Correggio ai tempi di Veronica Gambarà,” in Bozzetti, Gibellini, and Sandal, *Veronica Gambarà e la poesia del suo tempo nell'Italia settentrionale*, 79–80.

22. Niccolò da Correggio, *Opere*, ed. Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti (Bari: Laterza, 1969).

23. For excellent studies on the patronage practices of the Correggio women, see Katherine McIver, “The ‘Ladies of Correggio’: Veronica Gambarà and Her Matriarchal Heritage,” *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 26, no. 1 (2000): 25–44; Katherine McIver, “Two Emilian Noblewomen and Patronage Networks in the Cinquecento,” in *Beyond Isabella: Secular Women Patrons of Art in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Sheryl E. Reiss and David G. Wilkins (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001), 159–76; Katherine McIver, *Women*,

San Francesco church, where Manfredo was later buried.²⁴ In 1475, Cassandra Colleoni, wife of Niccolò da Correggio, expanded the San Francesco structure with the construction of her own family chapel, the Cappella Colleoni. Correggio's Corpo del Cristo church benefited from the patronage of Francesca da Brandenburg (d. 1512), wife of Borso da Correggio (d. 1504); she commissioned a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary to serve as the site for her husband's tomb. As a widow, Francesca da Brandenburg dedicated her dowry to the construction of the Palazzo dei Principi in 1507 to serve as the primary residence of Correggio's leaders.²⁵ Gambara appears to have adapted with ease to the cultural environment. She inherited funds from Francesca to continue her decoration of the church of San Domenico, and she designated a room within the Palazzo dei Principi to serve as her private *studiolo*.²⁶ Gambara's patronage of the well-known local artist Antonio Allegri (called Correggio, 1489–1534) began as early as 1517, though the more significant projects they collaborated on took place later in the century.²⁷

As consort to a feudal lord, Gambara helped forge Correggio's political relations with the surrounding Este and Gonzaga ducal houses. Gambara named her first son Ippolito (1510–52) after the archbishop of Ferrara, Cardinal Ippolito d'Este (1479–1520), who also performed the child's baptism ceremony, held at the court of Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga (1466–1519) in Mantua. Upon the birth of her second son, Girolamo (1511–72), the following year, Gambara chose a close political friend of Francesco Gonzaga, Francesco Munario, as godfather.²⁸ The death of Giberto in 1518 led to Gambara's appointment as the regent dowager of Correggio in the government of her husband's fiefdom. As the single woman ruler over a territory she had acquired by inheritance rather than birth, Gambara held a delicate position of power, which relied on strong alliances for military protection

Art, and Architecture in Northern Italy, 1520–1580 (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

24. McIver, "The 'Ladies of Correggio,'" 30.

25. McIver, *Women, Art, and Architecture in Northern Italy*, 66.

26. Zamboni, "Vita di Veronica Gambara," 109.

27. McIver, *Women, Art, and Architecture in Northern Italy*, 124.

28. Zamboni, "Vita di Veronica Gambara," 40.

and economic stability. When war broke out between the French king Francis I (1494–1547) and Charles V (1500–58), Holy Roman emperor and king of Spain, Gambara managed Correggio's alignment with the victorious Spanish power. In 1520, Charles V affirmed his protection of the Gambara territory under the name of her two sons; a brief letter in Latin from Charles to Gambara, dated 1521, marks the first known correspondence between the emperor and the countess.²⁹

Gambara also made use of her own family's political capital to buttress her position. The period around 1530 was crucial for the fortune of the Gambara family, due in part to the prestigious positions achieved by Gambara's brothers, Uberto (1489–1549) and Brunoro (d. 1570s). Brunoro elevated his rank in Charles V's army, while Pope Clement VII (r. 1523–34) made Uberto papal governor of the city of Bologna to oversee the coronation of Charles V as Holy Roman emperor.³⁰ As Charles V and Clement VII reconstituted key territories of the Italian states, the emperor restored the Gambaras to their original feudal territory after their decade of exile. Moreover, the Gambara brothers were able to insert an article in the peace treaty drawn up between Charles V and the Venetian Republic to ensure protection of the Gambara possessions by imperial forces should they ever fall under threat of Venetian invasion.³¹

The exceptional political and social positioning of the Gambara brothers in the most important city in northern Italy at the time provided Veronica Gambara an ideal setting to advance her two sons, both of whom were then of prime age to enter public office. Gambara's elder son, Ippolito, began to serve in the imperial army of Charles V, while Girolamo served under his uncle Uberto for the duration of his tenure as governor of Bologna. In a letter to her secretary Ludovico Rosso, who received Girolamo upon his arrival in Bologna, Gambara casts Girolamo as a natural extension of herself:

29. The Latin text of the letter is in *ibid.*, 51. For Charles V's protection of Correggio, see Ghindi, "La contea di Correggio ai tempi di Veronica Gambara," 84.

30. Zamboni, "Vita di Veronica Gambara," 53. Charles was Holy Roman emperor from 1519 until his abdication in 1556.

31. Riccardo Finzi, *Umanità di Veronica Gambara (1485–1550): Commemorazione pronunciata a Correggio, nel IV centenario della morte della poetessa, il 28 maggio 1950* (Reggio Emilia: Tipolitografia Emiliana, 1969), 16.

Il Sig. Girolamo mio figlio viene tanto allegro, quanto si possa dire, e starà appresso di Monsignore; io ve lo raccomando non solamente come figliuolo mio, ma come una parte di me stessa, e che dico io una parte, s'egli è il tutto! Ve lo raccomando adunque come me stessa, poichè egli è la Veronica medesima.

(My son Girolamo is extremely happy to arrive, as much as one can say, and he will be staying with my brother; I pass him on to you not only as my son, but as a part of me, though I say “a part” when I mean he is all of me! I pass him on to you then as myself, in that he is the equal of Veronica.)³²

Gambara's way of presenting her son illuminates the representative nature of kinship within ruling families, in that the eminence of Gambara's sons, and indeed that of her entire family, was coterminous with her own public reputation in many ways.

Gambara resided in Bologna for a number of months to be in the company of the most illustrious political and cultural figures of the day. During this period, she returned to the public circulation of her poetry by sending the sonnet “A l'ardente desio ch'ognor m'accende” (The burning desire that ever inspires me) to Pietro Bembo in 1529, to which he replied with the sonnet “Quel dolce suon, per cui chiaro s'intende” (That sweet sound, so clear to all who hear). Gambara secured her standing among the community of elite *letterati* through her poetic activity in this second stage of her life, but her poetry also helped her carve out a unique cultural space, whereby she was able to foster not only her cultural reputation but her political prosperity as well. This is most evident in Gambara's use of poetry to sustain her connection to Charles V—a political aim that dominated Gambara's diplomacy from 1530 forward, and which held implications for the careers of her sons, the reputation of her family, and the security of her fiefdom.

Over the course of Charles V's frequent visits to the states of the Po River valley, the courts competed in their artistic projects to

32. Gambara, *Rime e lettere di Veronica Gambara*, ed. Felice Rizzardi, 171.

celebrate the newly crowned emperor.³³ Gambara hosted Charles V at her Correggio court on his journey out of Italy in 1530 after the historic congress in Bologna that established the peace between Francis I and Charles. In preparation, she undertook a major civic development, calling on the artist Correggio to oversee the construction of a street, the Viale dell'Imperatore, for the imperial procession upon his arrival. Gambara also commissioned the artist to decorate the interior of the Palazzo dei Principi with two frescoes, including one of Mary Magdalen in a penitent pose—a discreet reference to the piety and virtue of the countess; the penitent Magdalen was used in a similar way by Italian Renaissance noblewomen across the region.³⁴ The frescoes were destroyed with the destruction of the palace in 1556.³⁵ More enduring, however, was the series of sonnets that Gambara composed in honor of Charles V in the third and fourth decades of the century, through which she was able to demonstrate not only her devotion to him but also the steadfast attention with which she followed the politics of empire playing out on an international scale.

Other poems of Gambara's mature oeuvre convey her support of the emperor's political campaigns across Italy, such as his work with Alessandro Farnese (Pope Paul III, r. 1534–49) in the fight of Christendom against the Ottoman Empire, and in more local enterprises, such as the return of the Medici family to the government of Florence, orchestrated by Charles V and Clement VII in 1530. Gambara's support of the Medici restoration is elaborately delineated in a twenty-seven-stanza narrative poem (the *Stanze*) composed in ottava rima, "Quando miro la terra ornata e bella" (When I behold the beautiful land, bountifully adorned), in which she calls for a return to the golden age of Medici rule under the legacy of Lorenzo "il Magnifico."

33. For the cultural enterprises of the northern courts in honor of Charles V, see William Eisler, "The Impact of the Emperor Charles V upon the Italian Visual Culture, 1529–1533," *Arte lombarda* 65 (1983): 93–110; Marcello Fantoni, "Carlo V e l'immagine dell'imperator," in *Carlo V e l'Italia*, ed. Marcello Fantoni (Rome: Bulzoni, 2000), 77–101.

34. For the representation of the penitent Magdalen as an icon of virtue for Italian noblewomen, see Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt, 1993); Marjorie Och, "Vittoria Colonna and the Commission for a *Mary Magdalen* by Titian," in Reiss and Wilkins, *Beyond Isabella*, 193–223.

35. Correggio was sacked by the Spanish army after the abdication of the emperor.

Gambara's literary activity throughout her governing years, in her poetry as well as her correspondence, elucidates the interrelationship between cultural currency and political power so characteristic of Renaissance Italy. But these dual roles did not always strike an equal balance. In some instances, Gambara struggled to connect with viable sources of poetic inspiration. In a letter to Pietro Bembo composed in 1538, Gambara writes:

Quanto al mandarle qualcuna delle mie composizioni, già le ho scritto che la vena dell'usato ingegno è secca; pure, se le Muse non mi lasceranno in tutto, cercherò di ubbidirla, e solamente per ubbidirla, sapendo quanto le mie roche e basse rime siano indegne di comparire sotto l'altera vista del suo intelletto avezza a mirar luce divina.

(As for sending you some of my works, I have already written you that the vein of my earlier talent is dried out; yet, should the Muses not abandon me altogether, I will seek to obey you, and I will do this solely to obey you, knowing full well how my coarse and lowly rhymes are unworthy to appear to the noble sight of your intellect, used to contemplate divine light.)³⁶

A distinct echo of this diffidence may be heard in Gambara's sonnet to Pietro Aretino from the same period, where she again describes the withholding Muses: "Voglion le Muse l'ozio e il tempo aprico; / a me Fortuna è dura più che smalto; / il verno mi combatte, e il mar nemico" (The Muses require leisure and pleasant times; to me Fortune is harder than enamel, the winter battles against me, and the sea is my enemy).

In a sonnet to another prominent figure among literary circles, the prolific Venetian writer Ludovico Dolce (1508–68), Gambara presents herself as a poet of limited ability, describing her talent as "rozzo" and "debile" (coarse and weak) in the first tercet. Certainly this humble posture is a product of Gambara's strict adherence to the

36. Gambara, *Rime e lettere di Veronica Gambara*, ed. Felice Rizzardi, 123–24.

traditional ethos of feminine modesty; yet it must also reflect some sense of how the demands of her life as the governing regent may have encroached upon any idea of exploring a purely poetic vocation. Indeed, throughout these years, Gambarara sets out with her pen to advance the public careers of her two sons, to foster relations with and broadcast support for important political allies, and to distill her positions on the significant political events of her time. In a letter written in 1540 to Bembo—who himself integrated cultural and political enterprises throughout his life, especially on his appointment as cardinal under Pope Paul III in 1539—Gambara demonstrates the combined literary, political, and uniquely personal dynamics that developed in their relationship over the years:

Mi parrebbe commettere grandissimo errore, se venendo il Sig. Jeronimo mio in quelle parti non facessi riverenza a V.S. Reverendiss. con questa mia, poichè con la presenza, siccome desidero, non posso. La supplico adunque che si ricordi, che io sono in questo istante, quella stessa che era già tanti anni, e benchè abbia cangiato il pelo, non ho però cangiato voglia, anzi siccome in lei crescono dignità e valore, in me parimente si raddoppiano amore e servitù.

(I would be afraid of committing a great mistake if, given that my son Girolamo is coming to your area [Rome], I did not impart reverence to Your Excellency with this letter of mine, since I could not do this in person, although I wish I could. I pray you remember that I am in this moment the same person I was many years ago, and though my hair has changed in color, my will remains unchanged; for as much as virtue and dignity have grown in you, so love and reverence increase in me, equally.)³⁷

Here again we see the connection between Gambarara and the reputation of her son Girolamo, now promoted within the offices of the

37. *Ibid.*, 126.

church and in service in the papal court at the time of Bembo's appointment as cardinal. From 1539 forward, Girolamo worked with the papal legate Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (grandson of Pope Paul III), and in 1546, he played a significant role in arranging the alliance between the papacy and Charles V to combat the threat from France.³⁸ In Gambara's letter to Bembo, she includes "un mio sonetto non visto da niuno" (a sonnet of mine, not seen by anyone), a politically themed composition in praise of Pope Paul III as the leader of Christendom in the war against the Ottoman Empire.³⁹ Gambara fosters intimacy with her correspondent by noting her age (the reference to her graying hair) as she simultaneously provides crucial support to multiple key figures in the Italian political realm (Cardinal Pietro Bembo and Pope Alessandro Farnese) in both epistolary and lyric forms.

Like Bembo, Gambara approached Vittoria Colonna as an important figure at the center of an influential cultural and political network. Both poets were writers of lyric poetry on the contemporary literary stage, but the subservient tone in which Gambara addresses Colonna in her verse draws attention to the superiority of Colonna's noble rank and poetic repute. Gambara's second sonnet to Colonna composed in 1532, "O de la nostra etade unica gloria" (Oh sole glory of our age), celebrates her contemporary as an icon of literary talent and virtue. In the sonnet, Gambara calls on members of the female sex to erect a temple in Colonna's honor, though it was Gambara's sonnet that in fact helped fortify Colonna's "monumental" status as the female Apollo of the era. Lodovico Domenichi (1515–64) published the sonnet in his anthology of women's poetry in 1559, which subsequently gave rise to a tradition of imitation of the sonnet in other tribute poems by women lyric poets of the century.⁴⁰ Gambara's association with Colonna assuredly added lustre to Gambara's literary reputation; at the same time, Gambara was also motivated to foster a close connection to Colonna because of her relation to the politically prestigious d'Avalos family.

38. Antonia Chimenti, *Veronica Gambara: Gentildonna del rinascimento; Un intreccio di poesia e storia* (Reggio Emilia: Magis Books, 1995), 62.

39. See sonnet 60 in the current edition.

40. Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 69.

The Marquis of Vasto Alfonso d'Avalos (1502–46), the cousin of Colonna's deceased husband Ferrante d'Avalos, served as a prominent general in Charles V's imperial army. A poet himself, d'Avalos visited Gambara's Correggio residence in 1531 in the company of Ariosto, during which Gambara offered Ariosto a small pension to support his writing of the *Orlando furioso*.⁴¹ In 1540, Gambara wrote to d'Avalos asking him to “[t]ener memoria del Sig. Ippolito mio figliuolo, tanto servitore di V. E. quanto ella medesima sa, alla quale bacio le mani, desiderando felice fine a tutti gli altri desiderii” (keep a memory of my son Signor Ippolito, a great servant to Your Excellency, as you yourself know, and I kiss your hand wishing for happy fulfillment of all your other desires).⁴² Her effort was successful, as Ippolito was elevated to a more prominent role in the general's circle.

From 1543 to 1544, when d'Avalos and Gambara's son Ippolito served together in the battles taking place to the north against the French, Gambara composed three sonnets for the d'Avalos family, depicting Maria d'Aragona's endurance of her husband's absence in war.⁴³ In addition to her correspondence with the general and to her composition of verse in honor of the couple, Gambara pursued a further enterprise in support of the prominent family: she commissioned the Correggio scholar Rinaldo Corso (1525–82) to compile a collection of Vittoria Colonna's spiritual verse with his own commentary in 1541. Corso's edition was published in 1543; a second, enlarged edition appeared in 1558.⁴⁴ Colonna's *Rime spirituali* explore Reformist ideas as they circulated among literary and intellectual circles throughout the 1540s, which drew the interest of Pietro Bembo and Maria

41. Zamboni, “Vita di Veronica Gambara,” 67; Ghindi, “La contea di Correggio ai tempi di Veronica Gambara,” 93.

42. Gambara, *Rime e lettere di Veronica Gambara*, ed. Felice Rizzardi, 146.

43. See sonnets 43, 44, and 45 in the current edition.

44. Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 67. For a study of the manuscript, see Monica Bianco, “Rinaldo Corso e il ‘Canzoniere’ di Vittoria Colonna,” *Italique: Poésie italienne de la Renaissance* 1 (1998): 35–45. Konrad Eisenbichler provides an extensive discussion of another, much earlier, instance of a published commentary of an early modern woman writer: Alessandro Piccolomini's published commentary of Virginia Salvi's poem in 1541. See chapter 4, “Virginia Martini Salvi: An Indomitable Woman,” in *The Sword and the Pen: Women, Politics, and Poetry in Sixteenth-Century Siena* (Ann Arbor: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

d'Aragona.⁴⁵ It is likely that Gambara encountered these ideas through Colonna's verse in the collection she commissioned from Corso, and one sonnet of her own spiritually themed verse—"Scelse da tutta la futura gente" ([The noble and infinite Goodness] chose from the future people)—appears to reflect this exploration. While Gambara did not retreat to a spiritual seclusion in her widowhood, she did use poetry to mark significant historical moments within the politics of the church, such as the death of Pope Clement VII in 1534 and the congress in Bologna, called by Pope Paul III, to negotiate a peace treaty between Charles V and Francis I.

Gambara surrounded herself with religious iconography consisting of select *exempla* of her Christian virtue in widowhood. I have already mentioned the penitent Magdalen fresco in her Palazzo residence. Two years before her death, in preparation for her eventual burial, Gambara commissioned a painting of Saint Jerome for her chapel project. The Saint Jerome figure emblemized Gambara's devotion to piety and chastity in her widowhood, virtues that Jerome had come to represent through his epistles to widows, which emphasized these qualities in particular.⁴⁶ The final years of Gambara's life were spent at Correggio, where she maintained close ties with a variety of correspondents. Gambara died in 1550, at the age of sixty-five, and was buried next to her husband in the church of San Domenico.

45. Introduction to Colonna, *Vittoria Colonna: Sonnets for Michelangelo*, 1–43; Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 73.

46. McIver, *Women, Art, and Architecture in Northern Italy*, 178. On Saint Jerome and widowhood, see Caroline Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: A Painter and Her Patrons in Sixteenth-Century Bologna* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), especially chapter 5, "'La Vita Vedovile': The Art of Widowhood"; Eugene F. Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Mary Vaccaro, "Dutiful Widows: Female Patronage and Two Marian Altarpieces by Parmigianino," in Reiss and Wilkins, *Beyond Isabella*, 177–92; Carolyn Valone, "Roman Matrons as Patrons: Various Views of the Cloistered Wall," in *The Crannied Wall*, ed. Craig A. Monson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 49–72; Carolyn Valone, "Piety and Patronage: Women and the Early Jesuits," in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy*, ed. E. Ann Matter and John Coakley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 157–84.

Historical Context: The Ruling Dowager

The ascent of a widow to a seat of political power in the absence of a legitimate male heir was common practice among the courts of northern Italy throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁴⁷ Signorial women were prepared for the myriad public responsibilities they were expected to fulfill as women of the court, beginning in their youth through the humanist edification program provided to most court children.⁴⁸ This education was deemed especially important for court daughters in preparation for the public, and in some cases, political duties women were called to perform as future consorts to rulers—a role that could include temporarily taking over the political affairs of the court in their husbands' absences, perhaps even governing independently as an appointed regent dowager.⁴⁹ The education provided

47. For a study of marriage within the Italian princely courts, see Anthony F. d'Elia, *The Renaissance of Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). See also Natalie Tomas, *The Medici Women: Gender and Power in Renaissance Florence* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), especially the chapter "The 'Problem' of a Female Ruler."

48. The best-known document attesting to the importance of a humanist education for dynastic daughters is a letter by the humanist Leonardo Bruni (1369–1446) to Battista Montefeltro Malatesta (1383–1450). Bruni's letter may have regarded Battista's own education, or, depending on the date of the letter, it may address the education of her daughter, Elisabetta Malatesta Varano (1407–49).

49. For scholarship on women's humanistic studies that views this education as ornamental, see Jardine, "Women and Humanists," and King, "Book-Lined Cells." These studies address "learned Renaissance women" as a collective group and do not sufficiently distinguish the historical experience of dynastic women of the *signorial* courts from women of lower social rank. I follow the line of Cecil Clough's research on the women of the Montefeltro/Malatesta ruling dynasty and the tradition of educating women from this family in preparation for rule: Clough, "Daughters and Wives of the Montefeltro: Outstanding Bluestockings of the Quattrocento," *Renaissance Studies* 10, no. 1 (1996): 31–55. For further studies that address the education of women in preparation for rule in the Italian court tradition see Anthony F. d'Elia, "Marriage, Sexual Pleasure, and Learned Brides in the Wedding Orations of Fifteenth-Century Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2002): 379–433; d'Elia, *The Renaissance of Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Italy*; Fiore, "The Silent Scholars of Italian Humanism"; Werner L. Gundersheimer, "Women, Learning, and Power: Eleonora of Aragon and the Court of Ferrara," in Labalme, *Beyond Their Sex*, 43–65; Stephen Kolsky, "Bending the Rules: Marriage in Renaissance Collections of Biographies of Famous Women," in *Marriage in Italy, 1300–1650*, ed. Trevor Dean and K. J. P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

to Gambara in her youth, in conjunction with the model that her mother, Alda Pio, presented in the management of the family feudatory during her husband's absences and as a widow upon his death, helped prepare Gambara for her adult role as the governing regent countess of Correggio.

In the Po River valley region where Gambara lived as consort to Giberto X, women customarily partook in the management of the area's many small fiefdoms in place of husbands who were frequently absent in military service. To the south of Correggio in Scandiano, Silvia Sanvitale Boiardo (d. 1584) assisted her husband, Giulio Boiardo (d. 1550), in the government of the fiefdom, which served as a vassal of the powerful Este family of Ferrara. Later, Duke Ercole II d'Este (1431–1505) granted Silvia Sanvitale Boiardo approval to rule Scandiano in her own right upon her husband's death.⁵⁰ To the west in Fontanellato, Paola Gonzaga-Sanvitale (1504–70s) took an active role alongside her husband, Giangaleazzo Sanvitale (1496–1550), in managing the political issues of their fiefdom and was given dominion over the territory until her eldest son came of age.⁵¹ Consorts to ruling husbands were engaged politically to varying degrees in a form of partnership in statecraft⁵² and were prepared to fulfill such roles temporarily, as well as permanently upon their husbands' deaths. The ascent of a widow to occupy a seat of power most frequently occurred when the rightful male heir was absent, too young to rule, or incapacitated. There are also instances of widow regency in which the wife provided the legitimate link to the ruling seat through her patrilineal heritage. In all instances, the transfer of power from the ruling husband to his widow depended on the support and tolerance of the male members of court and the family of the female ruler.⁵³

1998), 227–48; Dorothy M. Robathon, "A Fifteenth-Century Bluestocking," *Medievalia et humanistica* 2 (1944): 106–11.

50. McIver, "Two Emilian Noblewomen and Patronage Networks in the Cinquecento," 164–68.

51. McIver, *Women, Art, and Architecture in Northern Italy*, 36.

52. Deanna Shemek, *Ladies Errant: Wayward Women and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 127.

53. Tomas, *The Medici Women*, 165.

Women and men in positions of political power were responsible for shaping a public image that would justify their rule and facilitate the public's reception of a woman's power.⁵⁴ Italian court rulers endeavored to fashion themselves as highly educated, God-fearing devotees to the state; through artistic patronage of church building and religious works of art, rulers made a public display of their piety.⁵⁵ The female ruler who governed as a widow naturally sought to align herself with these qualities in her self-presentation to the public; she benefited even further from displaying the ideal behavior prescribed to widows in the early modern period.

The prescriptive literature addressing the appropriate behavior of widows in the sixteenth century addresses primarily the Italian widow of the upper nobility and the patrician class, rather than widows of dynastic status.⁵⁶ As is the case with the body of prescriptive

54. Joyce de Vries, "Casting Her Widowhood: The Contemporary and Posthumous Portraits of Caterina Sforza," in *Widowhood and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Alison Levy (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 78; Tomas, *The Medici Women*, 166.

55. Clough, "Daughters and Wives of the Montefeltro," 51. See also d'Elia, "Marriage, Sexual Pleasure, and Learned Brides," 422, where in his study of wedding orations in the fifteenth-century courts, he concludes: "While there were clearly different expectations for men and women in Italian courts, brides and grooms are often praised in surprisingly similar ways."

56. For studies on widowhood in the early modern period, see Rudolph M. Bell, *How to Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, eds., *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250–1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Lourens van den Bosch and Jan Bremmer, eds., *Between Poverty and the Pyre: Moments in the History of Widowhood* (London: Routledge, 1995); Kevin Brownlee, "Widowhood, Sexuality, and Gender in Christine de Pizan," *Romanic Review* 86, no. 2 (1995): 339–53; Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl, eds., *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, eds., *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Pearson Education, 1999); Isabelle Chabot, "'La sposa in nero': La ritualizzazione del lutto delle vedove fiorentine (secoli XIV–XV)," *Quaderni Storici* 86 (1994): 421–62; Stanley Chojnacki, *Women and Men in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Essays on Patrician Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Virginia Cox, "The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage Market in Early Modern Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (1995): 513–81; Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993); Jack Goody, Joan Thrisk, and E. P. Thompson, eds., *Family and Inheritance in Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Jack Goody, *The Development of Marriage and Family in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); David Herlihy, *Women*,

texts written by men that set out to codify women's behavior in the Italian Renaissance, the distance between the condition recommended for widowhood and the real lives and perceptions of noble widows was indeed incalculable.⁵⁷ With this disjuncture in mind, these materials may be used as a constructive source for outlining the social ideologies surrounding widowhood in sixteenth-century Italy. Taken together, the sources describe the ideal behavior of noble widows as entailing the display of piety, charity, and spousal devotion in the form of chastity. These widows ideally, but not necessarily, lived in private retreat or in a convent. By and large, patrician widows were to conduct themselves according to sixteenth-century conventional ideals of feminine behavior, though now in the absence of their husbands, they were advised to transfer what was once their devotion to their spouse to a spiritual devotion to God. Naturally, the situation of the ruling widow, because of the very public nature of her duty to her territory, was distinctly at odds with the ideal of the patrician widow, who was to retreat to the private sphere. Yet when one examines the iconography in the patronage pursuits of a typical widow regent, one finds that the fashioning of these qualities—that is, devotion to the memory of her husband and his ruling legacy, a religious piety often exhibited by

Family, and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical Essays (1978–1991) (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995); Diane Owen Hughes, "From Brideprice to Dowry in Mediterranean Europe," *Journal of Family History* 3 (1978): 263–96; Catherine E. King, *Renaissance Women Patrons: Wives and Widows in Italy, 1300–1550* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Joan Larson Klein, *Daughters, Wives, and Widows: Writings by Men about Women and Marriage in England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Thomas Kuehn, *Law, Family, and Women: Toward a Legal Anthropology of Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Catherine Lawless, "A Widow of God? St. Anne and Representations of Widowhood in Fifteenth-Century Florence," in *Women in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Christine Meek (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 15–42; Allison Levy, *Widowhood and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2003); McIver, *Women, Art, and Architecture in Northern Italy*; Louise Mirrer, ed., *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Late Medieval Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*; Tomas, *The Medici Women*; Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Vaccaro, "Dutiful Widows."

57. See Murphy's work, *Lavinia Fontana*, on the portraits by Lavinia Fontana of aristocratic widows of Bologna.