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BOOKSHELF

'Renaissance Woman' Review: A Lady of Letters

Vittoria Colonna had a masterly ability to craft her own public persona, understanding exactly what was expected of a female thinker and poet.

By Cammy Brothers

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If the world outside of Italian Renaissance literature knows the name Vittoria Colonna at all, it is as a footnote to Michelangelo. She was his friend and correspondent, with whom he exchanged poems, drawings and letters. But more than that, she was an accomplished poet, a friend to many of Europe's leading religious reformers and, perhaps most remarkably for a 16th-century woman, the architect of her own destiny.

A child of one of the richest and most powerful families in Rome, Colonna was married into a union of political advantage, but for her it was also one of love. When her husband died in battle in 1525, her grief led her into a period of extraordinary productivity: In the years immediately following, she composed more than 130 sonnets in his memory.

In doing so, she took the dominant poetic model of the time—Petrarch's "Canzoniere," dedicated to his beloved, Laura—and turned it on its head. In Petrarch's rendering, Laura is defined by her elusiveness, composed of isolated physical attributes. Colonna did not fetishize her husband's appearance but emphasized his valor and virtue, at the same time inscribing herself into his martial triumphs. Playing on her name, she implies that his victories were dependent upon her, Vittoria. In her later spiritual poetry, she introduces a further, more transgressive twist, construing Christ as the object of her love. This transposition of love poetry onto a spiritual subject would prove tremendously influential.

As Ramie Targoff relates in "Renaissance Woman: The Life of Vittoria Colonna," Colonna's grief was real and not merely a poetic pretext. Friends remarked on her frequent tears and prolonged mourning. But the widespread knowledge of her sorrow, not least as conveyed by her poems, also served to keep suitors at bay. The last thing she wanted after her husband's death was another man. Instead, she deepened her religious practice and devotion. Though thwarted by no less than Pope Clement VII in her desire to join a convent, she constructed around herself a

spiritual universe, seeking out the like-minded company she needed and affording herself an unparalleled degree of autonomy of movement and thought.

Like Michelangelo, Colonna had a masterly ability to craft her own public persona. She understood exactly what was expected of a female thinker and poet—above all, modesty. She rebuffed repeated attempts by her literary friends to edit and publish her works. One editor of her religious poetry wrote, “It would seem to me too great an injustice to the world to keep such a great treasure hidden.” Despite her resistance to print, Colonna wrote multiple drafts of her poems, read her work aloud at elite gatherings, gave it as gifts and allowed it to circulate in manuscript form. These were carefully composed literary works, not merely emotional outpourings, and she sought an audience on her own terms. Her resistance to publication must be viewed in the context of an era when ambition was perceived as the antithesis of femininity.

Nonetheless, her sonnets were published in a pirate edition in 1538, the first independent collection of poems by a female author in the Renaissance. They were an immediate success. A series of female authors followed her into print, a trend marked by the 1559 publication by Lodovico Domenichi of the first anthology of women’s poetry.

For one who had contemplated joining a convent, Colonna led a remarkably itinerant life. Her travels took her across Italy and into contact with some of the leading figures of her day, including Protestant reformers. In Ferrara, to which Renée of France, the Duchess of Ferrara, had drawn a number of Lutheran and Calvinist thinkers, Colonna strengthened her commitment to a central tenant of Protestantism—the pursuit of a direct relationship with Christ. These ideas found their way into her poetry, sometimes in radical, unsettling ways—including love poems to Christ, ripe with carnal imagery.

These same ideas were also the basis of her unlikely friendship with Michelangelo. In addition to their exchange of letters, she gave him a book of 103 poems on fine parchment (now at the Vatican Library) and a gold-framed monocle to help his aging eyes. He in turn dedicated poems to her and presented her with three drawings, one now lost. His “Pietà,” at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, depicts Mary not in the role of a grieving mother, prone at the base of the cross, but as intercessor, hands raised beseechingly toward heaven, and as sepulcher, her body encasing his. Another drawing, at the British Museum, shows Christ on the Cross already reaching toward his resurrection, his body only loosely anchored as he strains upward. The drawings constituted a new category of art—as the historian Alexander Nagel has argued—a private form of communication between friends.



PHOTO: ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

RENAISSANCE WOMAN

By Ramie Targoff

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One of the last chapters of Ms. Targoff's book is devoted to Colonna's retreat from Rome in pursuit of the English Reform thinker Reginald Pole. Considered a threat by Henry VIII, Pole ensconced himself in the town of Viterbo, where he was safe until Pope Paul III ushered in the Counter-Reformation and brought the Inquisition to Italy.

Here and elsewhere, Ms. Targoff is adept at keeping the reader informed of the complex geopolitical machinations taking place in Colonna's life, among them the conflict between Clement VII and Charles V, which pits her family's loyalties against her husband's, and the schism in the church wrought by Lutheranism. All of this is introduced not as dry context but as high drama. Working closely with Colonna's letters and poems, Ms. Targoff gives her the vividness of a fictional protagonist. Too often, she is depicted in modern historical accounts as a bit dull: a chaste and bloodless widow, entombed in her own piety, devoted only to God. In Ms. Targoff's hands, she emerges as a fully human mix of ambition, desire and shame.

Colonna's books were best sellers, and she had an enormous influence on poets of both sexes. While scholars agree about the radical nature of her late spiritual poems, there are questions regarding the amorous verse. Was it restrained and conventional? Erotic and original? Leading scholars of Italian literature, including Abigail Brundin, Virginia Cox, Shannon McHugh and Maria Serena Sapegno, have argued it different ways, citing distinct poems.

In the biographies of artists and writers, there is always the risk that a fascination with their lives will supplant attention to their work. Indeed, there are more books on Colonna than there are editions of her poems. With luck, Ms. Targoff's erudite and lively biography will spur scholars and publishers to place more of her poems and letters into the hands of readers, to judge her legacy for themselves.

—*Ms. Brothers is a visiting associate professor at Harvard and the author of "Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture."*

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