



**A WEB OF SENTIMENTS**  
LETTER WRITING AND GENDER  
IN THE EARLY MODERN MEDITERRANEAN

UNIVERSITY OF FLORENCE  
*Monday 7 February 2022*  
Aula Parva, Via San Gallo 10, Florence

Paper is a fundamental material medium for communication and consequently the creation, regulation, and administration of complex human communities of all sorts. Epistolography is one of its most versatile and productive uses. Beyond the routines involved in the management of economic, political, or religious institutions, the exchange of private letters informed a series of discursive patterns for sentimental engagements, from friendship and family ties to what has come to be known as romantic love. This sort of epistolary rhetoric, which circulated in printed popular products such as handbooks on letter writing and works of prose fiction, became a discursive mirror for emotional self-fashioning. It also contributed to the creation of public personae with published collections of originally private epistles that followed the models of classics and moderns like Cicero and Petrarch.

This seminar aims to explore this textual diversity with a particular emphasis on female authors. We seek to gather a series of case studies that can exemplify how female epistolography furnished discursive practices that facilitated not just the creation of private and public personae, but also textual spaces for shared sentiments, and consequently the creation of communities in which women sought to negotiate social and emotional spaces of their own. Our seminar aims to sample cases that can illustrate these genres and practices from different linguistic and cultural communities in the broad Mediterranean and European contexts, with a particular focus on the Early Modern period (ca. 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries).

*Keywords: paper, epistolography, prose fiction, women's writing, history of emotions, networks, republics of letters, self-fashioning, Mediterranean*

**CONVENERS:**

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**SPEAKERS:**

Lina Bolzoni (Scuola Normale of Pisa, keynote), Susan Broomhall (Australian Catholic University), Carmen Caballero Navas (University of Granada), Ida Caiazza (NYU and University of Florence), Virginia Cox (University of Cambridge), Anne J. Cruz (University of Miami), Orietta da Rold (University of Cambridge), Unn Falkeid (University of Oslo), José María Pérez Fernández (University of Granada), Ann Thomson, (European University Institute)

\* Image: Gerard ter Borch, *Woman writing a letter*, 1655 (<https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/our-collection/artworks/797-woman-writing-a-letter/>)



THIS PROJECT HAS RECEIVED FUNDING FROM: THE PEOPLE IN MOTION COST ACTION CA18140; EUROPEAN UNION'S HORIZON 2020 RESEARCH AND INNOVATION PROGRAMME UNDER THE MARIE SKŁODOWSKA-CURIE GRANT AGREEMENT NO 101024624 (WOMEN THINKING LOVE); THE HUM383 RESEARCH GROUP "LITERATURA Y TRADUCCIÓN", UNIVERSITY OF GRANADA.

## SCHEDULE

9:00 - 9:30

Welcome and opening remarks – José María Pérez Fernández & Ida Caiazza

9:30 - 10:30

Keynote

Lina Bolzoni - "Know that every day and every night I cannot think of anyone but you".  
Maria Savorgnan's letters to Pietro Bembo.

10:30 - 11:30

Susan Broomhall - Ottoman women and the politics of epistolary emotions.

Carmen Caballero - "More tears flowed from my eyes than from a fountain". Sephardic women's letters from the Cairo Genizah.

11:30 – 12:00

Coffee break

12:00 – 13:00

Virginia Cox - 'Ite dolci alimenti': a confectionery *speculum principis* for a cardinal-duke.

Unn Falkeid - The merchant of Prato and her husband: the case of Margherita Datini (1360–1423).

13:00 to 15:00

Lunch Break

15:00 to 16:30

Anne J. Cruz - Letters of support: the spiritual community of Luisa de Carvajal and Sor Mariana de San José.

Orietta da Rold - Paper and affect: the space of emotions in the epistolary culture of late medieval England.

José María Pérez Fernández - From Carmenta to Justina: textual spaces for female voices in early modern prose fiction.

16:30 – 17:00

Coffee break

17:00 – 18:00

Ida Caiazza - Gender and the rhetorical performance of love in a 17<sup>th</sup>-century love letter collection from Lucca.

Ann Thomson - "Destined for the distaff"? Scientific self-fashioning and emotions in Clelia Grillo Borromeo's letters to Louis Bourguet.

18:00 – 19:00

Roundtable and final remarks

## ABSTRACTS

### **Lina Bolzoni (Scuola Normale of Pisa, keynote)**

#### **“Know that every day and every night I cannot think of anyone but you”. Maria Savorgnan’s letters to Pietro Bembo**

The amorous correspondence between Maria Savorgnan and Pietro Bembo (1500-1501) has reached us in two different versions. Whereas Bembo revised and rewrote his own letters for publication as part of his *opera omnia* when he was already a cardinal, Maria Savorgnan’s letters have reached us in their original versions. They offer us therefore a valuable testimony of the ways in which poetry and love intertwine, of the ways in which the Petrarchist code and the fascination with portraits play an important role in the narration of the passions.

Lina Bolzoni is professor emerita in Italian Literature at the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa and Global Distinguished Professor at New York University. She has also taught in France (Collège de France) and the United States (UCLA, NYU, Harvard). She has been a fellow at All Souls College and Christ Church College in Oxford University. She is also part of the scientific committee of the Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, and member of the National Committee for the commemoration of the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dante’s death. She is also a member of the Accademia dei Lincei, and fellow of the British Academy. Her research interests include the relations between literature and philosophy in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, sacred and profane oratory, the art of memory and its relations with literature and the visual arts, as well as the experience of reading. Her books, which have been translated into different languages, include *La stanza della memoria* (Torino 1995); *La rete delle immagini: Predicazione in volgare dalle origini a Bernardino da Siena* (Torino 2002, Premio Viareggio); *Poesia e ritratto nel Rinascimento* (Roma Bari 2008); *Il cuore di cristallo: Ragionamenti d’amore, poesia e ritratto nel Rinascimento* (Torino 2010); *Il lettore creativo: Percorsi cinquecenteschi fra memoria, gioco, scrittura* (Napoli 2012); and *Una meravigliosa solitudine: L’arte di leggere nell’Europa moderna* (Torino 2019, Premio De Sanctis). She has edited Giulio Camillo’s *L’idea del teatro* (Adelphi) and more recently *La Commedia di Dante nello specchio delle immagini* (Roma: Treccani, 2021). She has curated the following exhibitions: “La fabbrica del pensiero: Dall’arte della memoria alle neuroscienze” (Florence, Forte di Belvedere; 1990); *Donne e cavalieri, incanti, follia. Viaggio attraverso le immagini dell’Orlando Furioso* (Pisa, Centro Espositivo San Michele degli Scalzi, 15/12/2012 – 15/02/2013); and *Orlando Furioso e le arti* (Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rome, 1/09 – 28/11, 2015). She collaborates with the literary supplement of the Italian journal *Il Sole 24 Ore*.

### **Susan Broomhall (Australian Catholic University)**

#### **Ottoman women and the politics of epistolary emotions**

In this paper, I explore the role of diplomatic letter-writing in crafting sites for self-fashioning and establishing particular sociabilities for and among powerful women in the Ottoman world of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. I analyse how Hürrem Sultan, Mihrimah Sultan, Nurbanu Sultan and Safiye Sultan, and their intermediaries, most notably *Kira* Esther Handali, employed letters, and letters of considered affective rhetoric, to locate their activities and requests in conceptual frameworks of community that would be productive for female political action. These texts, addressed



to European leaders across the Mediterranean such as Sigismund II of Poland, Catherine de' Medici, Elizabeth I and various Doges of Venice, were designed explicitly to cross boundaries but also to claim shared experiences and thereby establish networks, opportunities and possibilities for their authors. Some of these works suggested an intimate exchange between women, others voiced contemporary expectations of female emotional experience, often through identities as family and friends. Yet, however much both the creation of such letters and the content they contained were constructed by their authors as acts of emotional expression or experience articulated to exclusive readerships, these letters were carefully produced in expectation of broader circulations that could not always be controlled. These were sophisticated texts that sought power for their authors through gendered discourses of politics and emotion.

Susan Broomhall is Professor of History and Director of the Gender and Women's History Research Centre, Australian Catholic University. Her research explores women and gender in the early modern world. She has long-standing interests in women's writings, correspondence and political participation, and the gendered dimensions of emotional expression. Her most recent monograph is *The Identities of Catherine de' Medici* (Brill, 2021).

### **Carmen Caballero Navas (University of Granada)**

#### **"More tears flowed from my eyes than from a fountain". Sephardic women's letters from the Cairo Genizah.**

The rich holdings of the Cairo Genizah, one of the largest repositories of manuscripts produced by Jewish cultures from the 9th to the 19th century, has preserved at least some 200 letters written by or on behalf of women in Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Arabic, Hebrew and even Yiddish between the 12th and 16th centuries. While some of the letters are addressed to communal authorities with requests of various kinds, a good number of them are personal correspondence with family members and other women. In both cases, according to scholars who have studied them, women's letters show a higher level of frankness and spontaneity than those of men. This paper focuses on a group of letters from the late 15th to 16th centuries written in Judeo-Spanish by Sephardic women exiles from the Iberian Peninsula. Settled either permanently or temporarily in Egypt and the Holy land, these women share a common geo-cultural origin, the vicissitudes of exile, and their attachment to Jewish tradition. Individually, their experiences are also marked by social class, past and current family status, the circumstances of their particular migrations, and other personal and contextual factors. With all this in mind, the study explores discursive practices and rhetorical devices these women use in their letters to convey emotions (grief over separation, distress, hope, joy), and to represent themselves. The analysis will take into account recent studies on pre-modern Jewish women's literacy which have put forward concepts such as "the language of women", or the idea of "father tongue" versus "mother tongue".

Dr. Carmen Caballero Navas is a Senior Lecturer of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at the University of Granada, Spain. She received her Ph.D. (Summa Cum Laude), with honours, from the University of Granada in January 2000. Her PhD dissertation received the Koret Jewish Studies Publications Program Award (Koret Foundation, San Francisco, USA). She spent one year as a graduate student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, and three and a half years as a postdoctoral fellow at The Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL (UK). Her research focuses mainly on Hebrew textual

production on women's health care in the Mediterranean West during the Middle Ages, and on the historical experience of Jewish women, especially but not exclusively as recipients and givers of medical care. She has paid particular attention to the ways in which medieval discourses constructed meanings about the female body and sexual difference. She has also studied other aspects of the production and transmission of medical and scientific knowledge among medieval Jews –including the knowledge and practice of magic–, and the life of Jewish communities in southern Europe during this period. She has authored four monographs, numerous book chapters and articles, and co-edited one volume. Among her latest publications are: “The Genesis of Medieval Hebrew Gynaecology: A Preliminary Assessment”, in *Defining Jewish Medicine. Transfer of Medical Knowledge in Jewish Cultures and Traditions* (ed. Lennart Lehmhaus; Harrassowitz, 2021); “The Reception of Galen in Hebrew Medieval Scientific Writings,” in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Galen* (eds. P. Bouras-Villianatos/B. Zipser; Brill, 2019); “Virtuous and Wise: Apprehending Female Medical Practice from Hebrew Texts on Women's Health Care,” *Social History of Medicine*, 32/4 (2019); and “Del árabe al hebreo. El nacimiento de la ginecología hebrea medieval y el Canon de medicina de Ibn Sīnā,” *Sefarad* 79/1 (2019).

## **Ida Caiazza (NYU and University of Florence)**

### **Gender and the rhetorical performance of love in a 17<sup>th</sup>-century love letter collection from Lucca.**

Collections of love letters were a very successful genre in early modern Italian literature. These printed collections of romantic epistles enjoyed a sustained period of popularity all over the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries. Profoundly influenced by well-established traditions in love lyrics—Petrarchism in particular—they were also presented as the private correspondence between anonymous lovers. Women's voices feature prominently in this genre, which was in fact one of the textual spaces where female subjectivity frequently found the means for discursive self-fashioning. This presentation will focus on a short collection of love letters that were copied at the end of an early seventeenth-century manuscript alongside a series of texts by Elisabetta Coreglia, a poetess and dramatist from Lucca. The author of these epistles (who might have been Coreglia herself) explored the potential varieties and nuances of romantic epistolary exchanges by performing both male and female voices. This collection proves that even after a century as a best-selling genre, love letters still sustained well-established gender stereotypes while at the same time leaving enough space for more nuanced female agency and emotional self-determination.

Ida Caiazza is currently a Marie Curie Global Fellow at the University of Oslo and at New York University. She studied at the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa, and collaborated with the University of Pisa, the University of Helsinki, the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore, the Guglielmo Marconi University of Rome. Her research interests regard mainly the Italian literature of the Renaissance, but also modern and contemporary writers as Foscolo and Camilleri, as well as Classical Philology. She has published on a diversity of subjects which include sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries love letter collections, Renaissance dramatic production, hybrid narrative forms, paremiology, and literary onomastics. Her Marie Curie project focuses on literary and private female writings that explore the connections between love, marriage and adultery. These writings will be analysed with a gender perspective and within the methodological framework of the history of emotions.

## Virginia Cox (University of Cambridge)

### 'Ite dolci alimenti': a confectionery *speculum principis* for a cardinal-duke

This paper examines the surviving evidence for an unusual gift offered to Ferdinando de' Medici, during the brief period in 1587-88 in which he was both a cardinal and grandduke of Tuscany: a sculptural confection in *cotognata* (quince paste) incorporating twelve allegorical figures of virtues. We know of this 'edible monument' through a record in Angelo Grillo's 1589 *Rime morali*, which comprises twelve madrigals carried by these figures—presumably originally written on scrolls or flags— together with an accompanying sonnet and a prose *argomento* explaining the context of the gift. The intriguing textual-material artifact the poems memorialise may be read as a capricious take on the rhetorical tradition of the *speculum principis*, as well as a witty materialization of the Lucretian metaphor of poetry as a sweetener for philosophical 'medicine'. The paper proposes a reading of this vanished culinary artwork from the perspectives of the histories of food, medicine, poetry, gender, and political thought.

Virginia Cox works on Italian literature and culture between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, on the history of gender and women's writing, and on the history of rhetoric. She has worked on epistolography in connection with my studies of women's writing, and she is interested in letters and their circulation in connection with her current book project, *The Social World of Italian Renaissance Lyric*, both because letters and poems were intricately linked in their circulation patterns, and also because both served similar functions in binding virtual networks and communities through textual and material means. She is interested in this regard in thinking through the relationship between the exchange of textual-material gifts such as letters and poems, and more visual and sensory gifts.

## Anne J. Cruz (University of Miami)

### Letters of Support: the spiritual community of Luisa de Carvajal and Sor Mariana de San José

As one of the most prolific letter writers of early modern Europe, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza—a noblewoman who travelled to Anglican England as a self-appointed Catholic missionary—created several virtual communities through her correspondence with her relatives and patrons in Spain. Unlike the numerous letters intended to garner financial support for her mission, the letters she writes to Sor Mariana de San José, the abbess of the Reformed Augustinian convent, and to her two servants, now professed in the convent, instead offer Carvajal spiritual and moral support as she navigated her politically tenuous presence in enemy territory. My talk will focus on how the correspondence that circulated among religious women provides an intimate space that allows for emotional self-protection and expression.

Anne J. Cruz is Professor of Spanish and Cooper Fellow in the Humanities Emerita at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL. She has published extensively on early modern Spanish literature, focusing mainly on women's writings, the picaresque novel, poetry, and Cervantes. Recent publications include *The Life and Writings of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza* (2014); and the coeditions *Beyond Spain's Borders: Women Players in Early Modern National Theaters* (2016); the *Routledge Research Companion to Early Modern Spanish Women Writers* (2018); and *Espacios de la nobleza en la Monarquía Hispánica (1450-1715)* (2021). She is Louisiana State University Series Editor of *New Hispanisms: Cultural and Literary Studies* and corresponding member of Spain's Royal Academy of History.

## Orietta da Rold (University of Cambridge)

### **Paper and affect: the space of emotions in the epistolary culture of late medieval England**

On 6 July 1451, Margaret Paston writes to her husband John Paston I a short business letter, concluding with the customary salutations and then a telegraphic: 'paper is deynty'. The rhetorical effect of such sentence justifies the brevity of her letter, but the turn of phrase also denotes a luxury to behold, a fine product to keep in regard. That fine product, paper, and its availability is the essential tool which keeps Margaret in contact with her beloved husband and is thus precious. The 1000 or so letters and papers of the Pastons show the significance that paper material had in the fifteenth century. Paper enabled business transactions, built relationship, communicated needs and, of course, kept people in touch, but it also displayed emotions. The pragmatic need of writing on paper morphs into a productive, often gendered, but not always, space for affect. In this talk, I will discuss how paper established itself as the main tool of writing lives and emotions in late medieval England across several letters' collections, contributing to what Petrucci defines as 'l'Europa imparata a riscriversi'.

Dr Orietta Da Rold is an Associate Professor at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of St John's College. She has published widely on medieval textual cultures and manuscript studies. She has recently published *Paper in Medieval Britain: From Pulp to Fiction* (CUP), which emerged from her British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship, and edited the *Cambridge Companion to British Manuscripts* with Elaine Treharne. She is currently working on a book project provisionally entitled 'Paper in Time and Space'.

## Unn Falkeid (University of Oslo)

### **The merchant of Prato and her husband: the case of Margherita Datini (1360–1423)**

In 1870 a large mercantile archive comprising thousands of documents and ledgers was discovered beneath a walled-up staircase in the Datini palace. The archive, now fully digitalized, has for decades been a gold mine for economic historians and medieval and renaissance scholars in general. Most research has been focusing on Francesco Datini, the merchant in charge, and lesser on his wife. Margherita's more than 250 letters reveal, however, a woman to a certain degree on par with her husband. While she is struggling to conquer the art of writing, which from a perspective of early modern women writers is exciting in itself, she performs an extraordinary competence regarding the family's finances, household and social network. Through an analysis of a cluster of letters, this paper aims to explore the possibility for female agency in a world usually considered as reserved for men, and specifically how Margherita Datini constructed her own emotional and authorial space in the family's trading business.

Unn Falkeid is Professor of History of Ideas at the University of Oslo. Her research focuses on Renaissance humanism and book history, apocalyptic and utopian visions in late medieval and early modern Europe, and women's contribution to the history of knowledge. Her books include the

monograph *The Avignon Papacy Contested* (Harvard University Press, 2017) and the edited or co-edited volumes *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden. Women, Politics and Reform in Renaissance Italy* (forthcoming at Brill, 2022), *Sanctity and Female Authorship in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and Beyond: Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena* (Routledge, 2019), *The Cambridge Companion to Petrarch* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), and *Rethinking Gaspara Stampa in the Canon of Renaissance Poetry* (Ashgate, 2015).

## **José María Pérez Fernández (University of Granada)**

### **From Carmenta to Justina: textual spaces for female voices in early modern prose fiction**

This presentation intends to trace the path of a series of female voices in prose fiction and the international networks throughout which they circulated in translation, from Boccaccio's Neo-Latin Nicostrata to Francisco López de Úbeda's Spanish Justina. This path will lead from the mythical invention of the Latin alphabet, the use of script as a textual mirror, epistolography as a dialogical strategy for sentimental self-fashioning, and then on to the changes brought about by the transition from manuscript to print in well-established traditions like that built around Ovid's *Heroides*. I shall conclude with an approach to the narrative techniques used to produce a series of frequently underexplored cases of metafiction in sentimental novels like Juan de Flores' *Grimalte y Gradissa* or in the picaresque prose of Francisco López de Úbeda's *La pícaro Justina*.

José María Pérez Fernández is Professor of English Literature at the University of Granada in Spain, where his research on translation and comparative literature started with a doctoral dissertation on Henry Howard's English rendering of books II and IV of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Recent publications and current work in progress have embraced a more interdisciplinary approach to translation and early modern cultural studies, with a focus on different aspects of translation and communication—such as the joint impact of paper and print, the development of an international news market, the generation and transmission of knowledge throughout transnational networks, and how financial and mercantile processes mirrored the ways in which information exchange took place within Europe and beyond its borders. He has published essays in journals like *Comparative Literature*, *The Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* and *Translation and Literature*, and several books which include a critical edition of James Mabbe's *The Spanish Bawd* (MHRA, 2013), a collection of essays on *Translation and the Book Trade in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2014, co-edited with E. Wilson-Lee), and a monograph on Hernando Colón's library and catalogues (*Hernando Colón's New World of Books: Towards a Cartography of Knowledge*, Yale University Press, 2021, co-authored with E. Wilson-Lee). He is one of the editors of a six-volume edition of Hernando Colón's *Libro de los Epítomes* (forthcoming with Oxford University Press in 2025) and is currently working on a monograph on Thucydides in translation between Valla and Hobbes (under contract with Oxford University Press, to be published in 2024). In 2019 he joined the PIMo COST Action, where he leads the Paper in Motion Work Group.

## **Ann Thomson, (European University Institute)**

"Destined for the distaff"? Scientific self-fashioning and emotions in Clelia Grillo Borromeo's letters to Louis Bourguet.



The Milanese aristocrat Clelia Grillo Borromeo Arese (1684-1777) was a mathematician, natural scientist and accomplished linguist, who conducted experiments on reproduction and was much admired and praised by contemporary scholars, several of whom dedicated scientific works to her. She was in correspondence with the Huguenot natural philosopher Louis Bourguet in the 1720s, mainly in order to try to convince him to come to Milan to join the 'Academia Cloelia Vigilantium' which she was trying to set up with the help of Antonio Vallisneri. Bourguet also provided her with many works to distribute among her circle. Her letters to Bourguet, which are full of extravagant praise for him as a scholar and scientist, show her desire to be an important player in the republic of letters; but they also frequently express her own feelings of inadequacy at her lack of education and her frustration at the need to devote much of her time to domestic concerns, making it difficult to concentrate on reading long works. They thus reveal the social pressures of her position as an aristocratic woman and the complex emotions driving her scientific self-fashioning within the republic of letters.

Ann Thomson is Professor of Intellectual History Emerita at the European University Institute. She works on the intellectual history of the long Eighteenth Century, and studies questions at the intersection of religion, medicine and politics, as well as the circulation of ideas, correspondence, book history and translation, and European writings on the Muslim world. She has published widely on all these subjects, including monographs such as *Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment* (Oxford University Press, 2008) and *L'âme des lumières. Le débat sur l'être humain entre religion et science Angleterre-France (1690-1760)* (Champ Vallon, 2013), and several collective volumes, including *Cultural Transfers: France and Britain in the long eighteenth century*, edited with Simon Burrows and Edmond Dziembowski, (Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, 2010). She has also published critical editions, most recently of Book 11 of Raynal's *Histoire des Deux-Indes* (2020), and co-edited Charles de La Motte's letters to Pierre Des Maizeaux (Paris, Champion, 2021).