The Sword and the Pen

Women, Politics, and Poetry in Sixteenth-Century Siena

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While conducting research for this book over the span of fifteen or more years, I have contracted innumerable debts of gratitude with many generous archivists, librarians, and scholars.

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This book is dedicated to my aunt and godmother, Anna “Nelly” Martinolich, an indomitable woman who, like the poet Virginia Salvi, suffered exile but never gave up thinking of her homeland, Lussinpiccolo.
NOTE ON TEXTS AND TRANSLATION

All poems in the chapters and the Appendix have been edited on the basis of their earliest printed edition and the extant manuscript sources. To standardize the orthography and facilitate reading for a public not accustomed to the heterogeneity of sixteenth-century printed Italian, I have

— expanded abbreviations such as the ampersand, macron, and slash (&, ¯, /)
— rectified u/v and i/j variance to modern usage
— removed the pleonastic “h” in words such as anchora, chori, habbi, Helicona, berede, Hiacinto, Himeneo, boggi, bonesta, honorata, bora, borrenda, hostello, talbor, trahe
— transcribed the Latinizing “ph” and “th” as “f” and “t” respectively in words such as ninphe, Thebro
— rectified the conjunction et as e, unless followed by a vowel
— added accents and apostrophes in words such as che →ché, cosi →
cosi, gia → gia, ne → né, piu → più, poiche → poiché, u → u’, virtù →
virtù, vo → vo’
— rectified capitalization to modern usage: Io → io, Me → me (but retained it in forms of direct address, Voi, or in references to the divinity, Egli)
— introduced word division to reflect modern usage: cha → ch’ha,
c’hor → ch’or, lalata → l’alata, lalma → l’alma, lbonore → l’onore,
talche → tal che
— revised punctuation to modern usage

All translations are mine.
Introduction

Il ne sera jamais, dames siennoises, que je n’immortalize vostre nom tant que le livre de Monluc vire; car, à la vérité, vous estes dignes d’immortelles louanges, si jamais femmes le furent.

—Blaise de Monluc, Commentaires

In the mid-sixteenth century, as the ancient republic of Siena was coming to an end, torn apart by insoluble internal divisions and by overwhelming external forces, a group of women suddenly appeared on the city’s cultural landscape and began to compose poetry that attracted the attention not only of the local literati but also of prominent writers elsewhere in Italy. While today the names of these women sound completely unfamiliar to most scholars of Italian literature, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they rang out loudly to the honor not only of the women who bore them but of their families, their city, and their sex. The poems they composed—sonnets, madrigals, and canzoni—appeared in many of the collections of poetry published in those centuries. They also formed an integral part of the three major collections of women’s poetry assembled over the course of three different centuries by Ludovico Domenichi (1559), Antonio Bulifon (1695), and Luisa Bergalli (1726), thus attesting to their enduring popularity.

What is fascinating about these Sienese women poets is not so much that they composed poetry in the Petrarchan style that was current at
the time but that some of them engaged with Petrarch’s poetic legacy in ways that were significantly different from those of more traditional and better-known Italian women poets of the time, writers such as Veronica Gambara (1486–1550), Vittoria Colonna (1490–1547), Tullia d’Aragona (ca. 1510–56), Gaspara Stampa (1523–54), and Veronica Franco (1546–91), to mention just a few. This volume will thus look at these Sienese women poets as persons who, though part of and fully engaged with a much larger literary, intellectual, social, and political dynamic, were nonetheless individuals in their own right, contributing in an original manner to the world around them. Firmly grounded in the realities of their time, these Sienese women used the Petrarchan idiom to correspond, to plead, to congratulate, and to lament. In so doing, they called upon a network of contacts, both private and public, both literary and political, both lay and religious, that extended well beyond the medieval walls of Siena to reach across the Italian peninsula and as far as the royal house of France and the Imperial family of Spain. And, in one case at least, they crossed the boundaries of normative sexuality to express a profound same-sex affection between two women that was seen as “lesbian” (to use a modern word) even by their own contemporaries.

While it might be tempting to align the current study with Carlo Dionisotti’s periodization of women’s writing in Italy, this should not be done. In his highly influential “La letteratura italiana nell’età del Concilio di Trento,” the Italian scholar acknowledged the presence of women writers throughout medieval and Renaissance Italy but also claimed that such a presence had been limited to a few exceptional individuals. He then suggested that, as a group, women did not appear on the Italian literary stage until the mid-sixteenth century and then only for a very brief time, that is, from about 1538 to 1560. Although Dionisotti’s periodization fits very closely with the flowering of women poets in Siena discussed in this volume, I would like to distance my study from it on the grounds that the Sienese case should not be seen as representative of all of Italy. A much more accurate picture of women’s writing in Renaissance Italy is presented, instead, by Virginia Cox when she points out that women’s presence in Italian letters was “much more durable” than Dionisotti suggested. As Cox convincingly points out, “By at least the last decade of the fifteenth century, women had attained a fairly high-
profile place within Italian literature, a place they held, with fluctuations, for over a century, until the early decades of the seventeenth.'2 My study is thus better seen as yet another tessera in the greater mosaic that is women’s participation in Italian letters. As a tessera, it is small but not insignificant, for it bears some similarities with but also some marked differences from the other tesserae in the picture. My study should also be seen in line with Diana Robin’s Publishing Women (2007) for the contribution it makes to mapping out the networks that encouraged, supported, and disseminated women’s writings in Italy. As in the case of the Gonzaga-d’Avalos women studied by Robin, a number of the Sienese women were related to each other by blood or by marriage. Similarly, they were part of a “virtual salon” (to use Robin’s fortunate phrase) that, in this case, comprised not only women but also men, not only educated laypersons but also academicians. My first chapter on the tenzone between Alessandro Piccolomini and five Sienese women highlights this poetic dialogue across genders, space, and opinions and underlines the active involvement of contemporary women writers in (traditionally) male discourse on the question of fame.

The most important difference between the Sienese women and most other Italian women writers is to be found, however, in their active involvement in the political, religious, and social questions of the time. From the internecine struggles tearing Siena apart to the reform movement spreading silently across the peninsula, from the social constraints faced by many of the women in the group to the same-sex affections motivating at least one of them, the poems composed by these women blurred the line between literature and reality, between fictional and actual. Because of this, my study echoes Deanna Shemek’s “understanding of literature as embedded in multiple contexts and in many other discourses.”3 It also follows closely Guido Ruggiero’s advice to engage in “a cooperative effort between those who study the texts of literature and those who read the texts of history, especially in the archives,” so as to carry out a “close analysis of texts in their historical perspective common to much of the new social history and the new cultural poetics of criticism.”4 As a result, my analysis of the poetry composed by these Sienese women is firmly grounded in archival research and in a sensitive awareness of the contemporary historical context, be it political or
religious, social or sexual. In the words of Sarah Gwyneth Ross, I have sought “to merge rhetoric with lived experience.” Such an approach has allowed for a variety of voices, interests, and lives to come to the fore and thus to illustrate the richness of women’s presence on the Sienese cultural landscape.

As diverse and perhaps unprecedented as the Sienese case was, it has passed generally unnoticed in the study of Italian history and letters. Apart from some brief and fairly generic references to these women in literary histories and biographical dictionaries (which, for the most part, originated from a local Sienese context), Italian scholars on the whole have remained strangely silent about this exceptional moment of female participation in and engagement with the Italian literary canon from Dante to Bembo, or with the sociopolitical crises of the final years of the Republic of Siena, or with the reform movement in Italy.

The major reason for this silence is, without a doubt, the serious lack of reliable biographical information on these women. Sienese archives provide, at best, only birth and marriage records for them, while manuscript collections in Italian libraries offer even less. The few printed books that mention them merely repeat the same generic platitudes and, worse still, advance unsubstantiated information that, over the course of time, has misled more than one reader. As a result, scholars have tended to ignore these women poets as persons and to dismiss them as writers. The first eminent historian of Italian literature, Girolamo Tiraboschi (1731–94), librarian to Duke Francesco III d’Este, complained that lack of information on Virginia Salvi and other women poets of her time had forced him to remain silent about them in his multivolume history of Italian letters. Clearly exasperated and mindful of the amount of time and energy he would have had to expend in order to remedy this situation, Tiraboschi exclaimed: “But I cannot go searching minutely through everything, and so I must pass over in silence many more women who, as practitioners of vernacular poetry, are praised by the writers of those times, even though none or very few of their poems survive.”

Tiraboschi was not alone in ignoring these women writers—nearly all scholars of Italian literature who followed him have done the same. To defend themselves, some have suggested that these women’s work
was mediocre and uninteresting and therefore should be ignored—an attitude that has not only excused but even sanctioned a scholarly lack of interest in doing archival research on these women, producing reliable critical editions of their works, or advancing scholarship on them. One example of these naysayers is the late nineteenth-century scholar Eduardo Magliani, who exclaimed, in an obvious fit of irritation:

What is all this chatter about love and this monotonous and cold procession of verses that sound like so many ideas strung together one after the other without any feeling? Emptiness: the emptiness that was in their souls. Naturally, the poetry of [Isotta] Brambatti Grumelli, so full of subtleties and strange, obscure images, yet another labyrinth, displays the same characteristics; and so does the poetry of Lucrezia Marcelli, who engages in insipid and ineffectual descriptions, and that of Virginia Salvi, who even seems to imitate the aforementioned [Isabella] Andreini:

Sweet disdains and sweet wraths
Soft truces and peace
That make sweet every bitter, wicked suffering,
Oh, happy flames of love,
That burn your breast and mine
With such a welcomed fire
That suffering is sweet to me, death is a game . . .

You can hear in these verses a laxity and a monotony that, in the end, must have bored them, too.7

Magliani was clearly not interested in lifting his critical gaze beyond the standard Petrarchism of these women writers in order to put his scholarly skills to use in a more comprehensive examination of their lives and works. Indeed, he was also so unconcerned with historical precision that he nonchalantly claimed that Salvi “imitated” Andreini, even though Salvi (b. ca. 1510) lived two generations before Andreini (b. 1562). Setting aside Magliani’s intertemperate judgment and his cavalier approach to historical fact, it is very much worth our while to consider these women and their poetry more patiently and attentively so as to gain a more
nuanced insight into the literary, intellectual, political, and social culture of the sixteenth century, especially as it affected literate women.

To start the process of filling the enormous void with knowledge similar to what we have for the canonical writers of their times, this volume will focus on the women themselves, their works, their place in contemporary culture, and their contribution to it. It will present what little biographical information is available for them in archival and manuscript sources, dispelling, when necessary, incorrect information or fabricated and unsubstantiated stories that have infiltrated the literature over the centuries. Because the vast majority of these women’s works survive only in manuscript or in sixteenth-century editions, when poems are discussed this study will provide the complete text of these works either in the chapters or in the Appendix. They will be given in modern spelling and will be followed by an English translation so as to make them readily accessible to both Italian and non-Italian readers. The English translation will also offer, when necessary, a plausible rendering and interpretation of difficult passages. The women and their works will be contextualized in the political and social context of their time so as to provide a historical and cultural frame for their poetry and its message. Finally, the poems themselves will be expounded in an attempt to begin an interpretative process that, we hope, will be continued by subsequent scholars. Because many of these women were not only producers but also recipients of literary creativity and cultural products, this study will survey the works other writers composed for or dedicated to them. This will help us contextualize more fully these women’s participation, both active and passive, in the culture of sixteenth-century Italy and will grant us an insight into the gendered dialogue between the majority male writers and their minority female counterparts.

The first chapter will begin the process by examining one very special poetic event—the sonnet exchange, or tenzone, between the young Sienese scholar Alessandro Piccolomini and five of his Sienese women friends. The occasion for the exchange was offered by the pilgrimage Piccolomini made in August 1540 to Petrarch’s tomb in the sleepy Venetian town of Arquà and the sonnet he composed to mark the event. Five Sienese women responded “rhyme for rhyme” to Piccolomini’s sonnet, and he, not to be outdone, responded “rhyme for rhyme” to
each of theirs. The exchange is clearly a gendered dialogue colored by reciprocal respect and personal affection, by charming gallantry and subtle reprimands, by wishes and restrictions. It provides us with an insight into the social realities that conditioned the daily life of a noble Sienese woman and the level of literary knowledge such a woman might enjoy. The exchange also marks a debut, of sorts, for Sienese women writers who, starting in these years, suddenly begin to engage, firsthand, in poetic composition in the Italian vernacular in a manner and to an extent previously unseen either in Siena or elsewhere in Italy.

Admittedly, Vittoria Colonna, Marquise of Pescara, had by this time composed a significant number of poems and had recently seen them published as a collection (1538), but as a woman poet she operated primarily on her own, not within a group of literate women from a well-defined civic or cultural circle, as did the Sienese women who engaged with Alessandro Piccolomini in the tenzone of 1540. And in spite of her sex Colonna was also very much a part of a male, not a female, circle of intellects, very much the gendered anomaly in a group that included the likes of cardinals Reginald Pole and Gasparo Contarini; reformers such as Juan de Valdés, Pietro Carnesecchi, and Bernardino Ochino; literati such as Pietro Bembo and Baldassare Castiglione; and artists such as Michelangelo Buonarroti (who, in a sonnet, famously described her as “a man inside a woman, in truth, a god”).

The Sienese women poets, on the other hand, formed part of a loosely knit familial and social ensemble of literate noblewomen, several of whom were related by blood or by marriage to each other, and many of whom were, in fact, rather young—in their twenties and thirties. Although only five women participated in the tenzone with Alessandro Piccolomini, in those decades in Siena at least a dozen or more women were composing poetry, and they included Ermellina Arringhieri de’ Cerrettani (b. ca. 1520–25), Pia Bichi (pre-1559), Laura Civoli (doc. 1553–54), Atalanta Donati (1530–88), Lucrezia Figliucci (pre-1559), Laudomia Forteguerri (1515–55?), Virginia Luti Salvi (b. 1513), Eufrazia Marzi Borghini (b. 1512), Onorata Tancredii Pecci (1503–post-1563), Camilla Piccolomini de’ Petroni (b. 1506), Aurelia Petrucci (1511–42), Cassandra Petrucci (doc. 1530s–40s), Girolama Biringucci de’ Piccolomini (b. ca. 1500), Silvia Piccolomini (b. 1526?), Virginia Martini Casolani Salvi (doc. 1530s–70s), and Ortensia Scarpi (pre-1559). The 1540 tenzone...
thus points to the presence in Siena of literate women who dabbled in poetry and willingly engaged in poetic dialogue with their male counterparts. The sonnet exchange allows us to contextualize this world of local letters and then move forward with a more detailed examination of three women in particular, each in her own way, could be seen as emblematic of literate women in the final years of the Sienese Republic. These three women will form the basis of our three subsequent chapters.

Aurelia Petrucci, who left us only two sonnets of her own, is the focus of the second chapter. Petrucci was not only an exceptional beauty but also a keen observer of contemporary politics and an extremely well-connected person. With a sequence of lords of Siena on her paternal side and two popes and several high prelates on her mother’s side, she seemed to have been blessed by fortune. Yet fortune was unkind to her, first by dispossessing her birth family of political power in Siena and then by allowing her to die young at only thirty-one years of age (1542). In her brief life, however, Petrucci managed to attract significant interest from Sienese literati, who dedicated several of their works to her and, at her death, composed a number of poems and an eulogy in her memory. Possibly part of a frivolous brigade of noblewomen who enjoyed dressing with great elegance, Aurelia was also a politically savvy person who realized that internecine fighting between the various Sienese factions was opening the way to a foreign invasion that would bring about the end of the centuries-old republic. Her sonnet on the political strife that was tearing Siena apart is not only a moving patriotic composition but also a poignant analysis of the current political situation. Within a few years her analysis proved to be correct not only for Siena but for all of Italy. At this point her sonnet became a lament for all of Italy, divided within itself and dominated by a foreign power. In 1559 the polymath Ludovico Domenichi used it as the opening poem for his groundbreaking variorum collection of women’s poetry (the first ever published in any European language), thus bringing Petrucci’s sonnet to the attention of readers across the peninsula and beyond. The French expatriate Antonio Bulifon, working as a printer/publisher in Naples, used it in the same way for his 1695 edition of women’s poetry, thus attesting to the longevity of Petrucci’s sentiments and the continuing Spanish political influence in Italy. Although it is
tempting to see Petrucci as a maverick, her personal life reveals that she was not, by any means, a rebel. Admittedly a complex individual, in her personal life she clearly accepted current social conventions and obediently carried out her familial obligations as daughter, wife, and mother. She inspired a number of male writers and received several dedications in books, but she did not step outside the limits imposed upon her by her society and her times. This would be done, instead, by her distant cousin on her mother’s side—Laudomia Forteguerri.

Laudomia Forteguerri broke all sorts of conventions—from social to sexual, from literary to religious, from intellectual to practical. Forteguerri was, in fact, a maverick. In her first appearance in literature, as an interlocutor in Marc’Antonio Piccolomini’s dialogue on whether Nature creates perfect beauty by chance or by design (1538), Laudomia was cast as a heterodox thinker who claimed that Nature did not have a plan but worked by chance—an assertion that was tantamount to denying the existence of a providential design. In a city still rife with heterodox religious ideas advanced by the likes of the reformers Bernardino Ochino, Aonio Paleario, and various men from the Sozzini family, Forteguerri’s stand on the question of a providential design, fictive though such a stand might have been, could certainly have been problematic for the young woman and her family. Two years later, Marc’Antonio’s cousin Alessandro Piccolomini redressed in part his cousin’s wrong to Laudomia’s image when he dedicated to her a compendium of astronomical information that he had composed in Italian so that she might use it to advance her own studies. While in this case the gesture of dedicating a scientific compendium to a woman would not damage her reputation, what Alessandro said of Laudomia in his dedicatory letter to that compendium did continue to paint a somewhat unusual picture of her, depicting her as a woman who expounded Dante’s Paradiso to other women and as someone who was keenly interested in astronomy. This is not the usual picture of a literate woman reading Petrarchan poetry or spiritual works of a pietistic nature. It is, instead, the image of a woman eager to advance her knowledge of matters normally reserved for male scientific inquiry and ready to share her critical understanding of Dante’s most complex and abstract canticle with her women friends. Clearly, this Laudomia was a woman who read, not
octavo-sized books such as Alessandro Velutello’s *Il Petrarcha*, but quarto-sized works such as Piccolomini’s compendium or Cristoforo Landino’s commentary on the *Divine Comedy*. So while at first glance Piccolomini’s dedication of his astronomy compendium to Laudomia appears to offer a favorable, positive image of her, in the final analysis it is, in fact, a somewhat dubious image that reveals a young woman who did not really conform to the norms of feminine behavior and interests for her times.

Forteguerri’s reputation was put on the line once again the following year (1541), when an unauthorized edition of Alessandro Piccolomini’s exposition of one of her own sonnets was published in Bologna. In this *Lettura*, Piccolomini revealed publicly that Forteguerri was in love with another woman, Margaret of Austria, and that this love was reciprocated. Piccolomini described the two women’s first meeting, how they fell immediately in love with each other, how they continually sought each other out, and how they maintained their love in spite of the physical distance that separated them (Laudomia had remained in Siena while Margaret had been obliged by family politics to move to Rome). Admittedly, Piccolomini did contextualize Laudomia’s affection for Margaret within the parameters of contemporary Neoplatonic love theories, but his choice of words alluded to a more physical and less platonic relationship between the two women. Piccolomini’s “outing” of Laudomia and Margaret caught the imagination of his contemporaries both in Italy and abroad, who repeated, reused, and embellished the narrative until, in the hands of the French scandal-monger Pierre de Bourdeille, Seigneur de Brantôme, it became a story of illicit “lesbian” sexuality founded on an abuse of power.

In the end, however, whatever Forteguerri’s sexuality might have been, her maverick character is best exemplified, not by what literati said about her or by the love sonnets she composed for Margaret of Austria, but by her alleged involvement in the defense of Siena just before the fateful siege of 1554–55. In this narrative, Forteguerri becomes a quasi-military leader who organizes the women of Siena into veritable troops of workers to help shore up the city’s defenses in anticipation of the forthcoming siege. This episode of “the women of Siena” has become emblematic of Sienese valor at the end of the republic. Constantly
elaborated over the centuries by writers with ever-increasing imaginations, this episode eventually created an image of Laudomia Forteguerri as a strongly patriotic woman with exceptional leadership skills, dauntless courage, great determination, and a ready willingness to sacrifice her life for her city’s freedom. Such an image may well be far from the truth, but it does point to the existence of an intriguing maverick among the women poets of Siena.

With the fall of Siena in 1555 we lose track of Laudomia Forteguerri, who may well have died in the siege, but another courageous woman poet takes her place and carries the flag for the fallen republic—Virginia Martini Casolani Salvi. Chapter 4 looks at this controversial figure, who, probably alone of all our poets, died in exile from her beloved homeland. Married into one of the most turbulent and bellicose families in Siena, Virginia followed the Salvi brothers in their firmly pro-French politics and in their uncanny penchant for getting into trouble. Arrested in 1546 on charges of sedition against the state because of some sonnets she had composed that were critical of the current government, Salvi’s life was spared only thanks to Imperial intervention. In spite of such grace, Virginia remained firmly anti-Spanish in her politics and wrote many a poem to the French royal house begging them to remove the hated Spaniards from her city. She even tried to convince Catherine de’ Medici, queen of France, to evict Cosimo I de’ Medici from Florence and seize the city for herself. Virginia addressed her sonnets not only to Henri II of France, his sister Margaret of France, and his wife, Catherine de’ Medici, but also to a number of cardinals with declared and undeclared pro-French leanings, all in an effort to garner support for a war of liberation by the French in favor of Siena. But that was not to be. With the final settlement of the Italian question brought about by the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis (1559), the political situation in Italy stabilized in favor of Spain. Virginia quickly realized that Spanish hegemony over the peninsula and Medicean control of Tuscany were now unalterable facts of life. At this point she tried to mend her ways and declared her loyalty to the new ruler of Siena, Cosimo I de’ Medici, asking him to allow her to return and serve him as a loyal subject; but Cosimo denied her petition and Virginia remained in exile in Rome until the early 1570s, when we finally lose track of her.
Though a highly political poet, Virginia was also a gifted Petrarchist. Many of her more than sixty extant poems speak in Petrarchan terms of love, loss, absence, and suffering. The beloved (male, in her case) is never identified, so we are unable to determine the exact nature of this affection. Unlike Vittoria Colonna, who mourned the death of a beloved husband, or Gaspara Stampa, who lamented the inconstancy of a previous lover, Virginia Martini Salvi seems to have had no one in particular in mind. Pending the discovery of biographical information to the contrary, her love poetry seems to be addressed to a fairly generic lover who may or may not have existed. So in composing love poetry Virginia may have merely been exercising her poetic skills rather than expressing her heartfelt personal feelings. Though lacking a personal emotional inspiration, her love poetry did not, however, lack technical ability. Her command of the Petrarchan idiom and of the necessary linguistic skills is clearly evident in a number of compositions, one of which even elicited a response from the great arbiter of literary taste Pietro Bembo. In another poem, Salvi glossed Petrarch’s poem 134, “Pace non trovo e non ho da far guerra,” as a fourteen-stanza octave sequence. Her gloss met with such success among her contemporaries that it was set to music, first in the 1550s in Rome by Giovanni di Pierluigi da Palestrina, the chapel master of the Cappella Giulia at the Vatican, and then in the 1580s in the Netherlands by Jean de Turnhout, maître de chant at the royal chapel in Bruxelles. In his Dialogo della musica, the Florentine literato Anton Francesco Doni reveals that as early as 1543, at a meeting of the Academy of the Ortolani in Piacenza, one of Salvi’s poems was extemporaneously set to music by Count Ottavio Landi, a proficient amateur musician who sang and accompanied himself on a viuola. In short, Salvi’s exercises in Petrarchan poetry were circulating throughout Italy and even beyond the Alps and were attracting the interest of contemporary musicians who set some of them to music. Not surprisingly, the members of the Florentine Academy praised Virginia Salvi as a poet, calling her an “immortal woman” who had gained eternal fame from her “worthy and discerning rhymes.”

Alessandro Piccolomini’s tenzone with his five Sienese women friends and the very individual poetry of Aurelia Petrucci, Laudomia Forteguerri, and Virginia Martini Casolani Salvi point to a closely knit world
of literate women who, in the brief span of about two decades, made a
significant mark on their city’s literary culture and establishment. Al-
though, for the most part, these Sienese women poets composed verses
fully in line with the dominant Petrarchism of the times, it is clear that
Petrarch and Petrarchism could, and did, offer them the opportunity to
engage with the Italian lyric tradition in a novel and distinctive manner.
While the \textit{tenzone} may well be nothing more than a gracious exchange
of lavish compliments, it points to a poetic dialogue between men and
women that is not, at least this time, about pining away for unrequited
love or lamenting for deceased beloveds. Instead, it grants the women
poets of Siena the chance to discuss the topic of poetic fame and,
within their own limits, to participate in it. Aurelia Petrucci’s participa-
tion in the literary culture of Siena points to the respect and admiration
a talented woman could garner among her fellow citizens, both male
and female, and to the political perspicacity that even a young woman
could have at that time in Siena. Laudomia Forteguerri’s ambivalent
position as poetic muse for Alessandro Piccolomini and as poetic lover
of Margaret of Austria provides us with an unparalleled insight into
the ambiguous world of sixteenth-century women, constantly objec-
tified by the men around them but, at the same time, sentient subjects
of their own emotional life. Although Forteguerri framed her feelings
for Margaret firmly within the Petrarchist dialectic that governed such
poetic expressions at the time, the fact that she voiced those feelings
poetically and that contemporary literati acknowledged and even praised
them opens a fascinating window into premodern same-sex female
affection. The poetry of Virginia Martini Salvi, the most prolific and
eventually the most famous of these Sienese women, is both versatile
and intricate. From her home in Siena or from her exile in Rome, Salvi
corresponded incessantly with poets, prelates, and rulers in verses that
reveal a thorough command of the poetic idiom and an extensive net-
work of political, ecclesiastical, and cultural contacts available to a woman
of her rank and class. With Salvi we draw closer to the contemporary
male Petrarchists who seemed naturally predisposed to jot down a son-
net at the drop of a hat.

Whatever the inspiration and whatever the result, the poetry of these
and other women of mid-sixteenth-century Siena opens a fascinating
new window into the cultural, literary, social, and political world around
them. At the same time, their poetry provides us with invaluable insights
into their own network of contacts and into their own interior world.
Their works may not have entered the (overwhelmingly male) canon of
Italian literature, but in this postfeminist era they may well help modern
scholars gain a more nuanced insight into the lives of educated and tal-
eted women who clearly enjoyed writing poetry, conversing with intel-
lectuals, and participating in the world around them.