



Framing the “Tenth Muse”: Gendered strategies of intellectual legitimacy in the case of Maria Selvaggia Borghini (1654-1731)

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Abstract

Recent scholarship in the history of science and gender studies has increasingly interrogated the structural exclusion of women from early modern institutions of knowledge, while also illuminating the multifaceted strategies through which they negotiated intellectual authority. This article contributes to this historiographical field by examining the case of Maria Selvaggia Borghini (1654-1731), a Pisan poetess who actively participated in the literary, philosophical, and scientific culture of seventeenth-century Tuscany.

Drawing on a corpus of letters exchanged with figures such as Francesco Redi, Alessandro Marchetti, and Antonio Magliabechi, alongside Borghini's decision to translate part of the Tertullian's work, this study traces the rhetorical, epistemic, and social strategies through which she crafted and asserted her intellectual persona. Borghini's case invites a rethinking of early modern knowledge production not merely as a space of female marginalization, but as one actively negotiated through poetic and philosophical agency, rhetorical humility, and epistolary sociability.

Keywords

Maria Selvaggia Borghini, seventeenth century, Tuscany, women, poetry, natural philosophy

How to cite this article

Di Tommaso, Noemi. “Framing the ‘Tenth Muse’: Gendered strategies of intellectual legitimacy in the case of Maria Selvaggia Borghini (1654-1731)”. *Galilæana* XXII, 2 (2025): 97-137; doi: 10.57617/gal-73.

Funding

This work is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) within the framework of the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (TACITROOTS, PI: Giulia Giannini, Grant agreement No. 818098).

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Article data

Date submitted: March 2025

Date accepted: May 2025

Introduction

The Accademia del Cimento flourished, daring to question Nature through repeated experiments and forcing her to reveal her hidden secrets, while the Accademia della Crusca, gathering the finest flower of the Tuscan language, fashioned from it a precious treasure in the great Vocabolario. At that time, to mention but a few, arose the Magalottis, the Averanis, the Salvinis, the Menzinis, the Magliabechis, the Fagiuolis, the Filicaia, the Redis, and the Bellinis [...] And certainly, it must have been an easy task for the keen intellect of Borghini to enrich her mind with new and most useful knowledge in such a flourishing intellectual exchange, perhaps no less so through the literary correspondence, which took pride in being maintained with her by the greater part of those most learned men.¹

Amid the stark contrasts between significant scientific advancements and the cultural repression imposed by post-Tridentine pressures, Maria Selvaggia Borghini exemplified the status to which learned women were relegated in the modern period.² A poetess and an advocate of the experimental approach to science that defined her century, she combined a refined mastery of language and knowledge of science with a keen ability to navigate the social fabric of late seventeenth century Medicean Tuscany and beyond. Indeed, Borghini had devoted a substantial portion of her sonnets not only to prominent figures of the cultural milieu of her time, but also to various rulers, as in the case of Louis XIV, Philip V King of Spain,³ Leopoldo de' Medici, Vittoria della Rovere, wife of Grand Duke

¹ Giovanni Simonelli, “Maria Selvaggia Borghini”, in *Memorie storiche di più uomini illustri pisani*, 4 vols., ed. by Angelo Fabroni *et al.* (Pisa: Raniero Prosperi, 1790-1792), III, 376: “Fioriva l'Accademia del Cimento, che osando interrogar la Natura con replicate esperienze, a svelar la forzava i suoi reconditi arcani, mentre l'Accademia della Crusca cogliendo il più bel fiore della Toscana favella, ne formava prezioso tesoro nel gran Vocabolario. Sorsero allora, per tacere di molti, i Magalotti, gli Averani, i Salvini, i Menzini, i Magliabechi, i Fagiuoli, i Filicaja, i Redi, i Bellini [...] E certamente agevol cosa riuscir dovea al perspicacissimo ingegno della Borghini l'arricchir la sua mente di nuove utilissime cognizioni in un commercio così dovizioso, e forse non meno nel Letterario carteggio, che si gloriava di mantenere con lei la più gran parte di quei dottissimi Uomini”. [All translations, both from Italian and Latin into English, are mine unless otherwise specified].

² Maria Pia Paoli, “Come se mi fosse sorella: Maria Selvaggia Borghini nella repubblica delle lettere”, in *Per lettera: la scrittura epistolare femminile tra archivio e tipografia: secoli XV-XVII* (Roma: Viella, 1999).

³ It should be noted that the sonnet in honor of Philip V of Spain was not published in any collection during the poetess' lifetime or posthumously. The original manuscript of the sonnet, preserved in the ASF, ms. Magalotti 178, appears to have remained unknown as well as unpublished until now. Nonetheless, it is of some significance, as it demonstrates Borghini's substantial engagement in composing encomiastic sonnets addressed to political authorities. Moreover, together with this sonnet, eight previously unknown and unpublished letters sent by

Ferdinando II, and Gian Gastone de' Medici.

Most likely introduced to the Medici court by one of her mentors from the Pisan intellectual milieu, Borghini established a personal relationship with Vittoria della Rovere (1622-1694). In fact, in two different letters addressed to the Arcadian Giovanni Mario Crescimbeni (1663-1728), Borghini referred to the Grand Duchess as "my most gracious patroness".⁴ As Modesti has shown, Vittoria della Rovere devoted a significant portion of her resources to cultural patronage, with particular attention to supporting women. In fact, in 1654, the Grand Duchess founded a female academy under her patronage: the Accademia delle Assicurate, the first women's academy in Italy.⁵ The Grand Duchess also seemed to embrace a somewhat interdisciplinary approach to knowledge and, apparently, sought to involve her protégées in one another's – albeit diverse – activities. Writing to Redi, in fact, Borghini reported having gone "by order of Her Serene Highness the Grand Duchess to the Commedia."⁶ Furthermore, to Maria Selvaggia, Vittoria della Rovere had requested the creation of several poetic works and more. As can be easily inferred from a letter Borghini addressed to the Florentine poet Giovanni Battista Fagiuoli (1660-1742) in February 1691, she had urged the Pisan poetess to compose both a "composizioni de' vaiuoli" and an "Oratorio".⁷

Borghini dedicated nearly thirty sonnets to Vittoria della Rovere – over ten of which were composed in commemoration of the Grand Duchess's death in 1694. Moreover, on June 21, 1681, Borghini addressed to her the only extant letter she is known to have written to a woman.⁸ As will be seen, Borghini's correspondence, characterized by refined erudition and the formulaic expressions typical of academic discourse, was directed predominantly to men, the majority of whom were scientists and poets.⁹ However, when ad-

Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Lorenzo Magalotti between 1695 and 1710 are also preserved.

⁴ *Saggio di poesie di Maria Selvaggia Borghini nobile pisana e testimonianze del di lei valore*, ed. by Domenico Moreni (Firenze: Magheri, 1827), 255 and 260.

⁵ Cf. Adelina Modesti, *Women's Patronage and Gendered Cultural Networks in Early Modern Europe. Vittoria della Rovere, Grand Duchess of Tuscany* (New York: Routledge 2020); Assunta Vitale, "Levare il governo del regno d'Amore dalle mani de' cavalieri e porlo nelle dame". *L'Accademia delle Assicurate di Siena (1654-1714 ca.)*, in *Le accademie toscane del Seicento fra arti, lettere e reti epistolari*, ed. by Claudia Tarallo (Siena: Edizioni UniStra, 2020), 97-116.

⁶ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 222-223 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Francesco Redi, January 31, 1688): "andai per ordine della Serenissima Granduchessa alla Commedia".

⁷ *Ibid.*, 265-266 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Giovanni Battista Fagiuoli, February 26, 1691).

⁸ The sonnets, unlike the letters, were also addressed to other women, such as Marchesa Laura Salviati, Signora Lisabetta Ambra, and Marchesa Teresa Strozzi. Cf. Maria Selvaggia Borghini, *Saggio di Poesie di Selvaggia Borghini nobile pisana e testimonianze del di lei valore*, ed. by Domenico Moreni (Firenze: Magheri, 1827), 96-103 and 120.

⁹ James Daybell, Andrew Gordon, *Women and Epistolary Agency in Early Modern Culture (1450-1690)* (London: Routledge, 2016).

dress the Grand Duchess, the slightly over twenty-year-old Borghini used the following bold yet reverent words that already anticipate the strategic combination of humility and assertiveness that Borghini would always deploy:

Having, in previous months, received the favor of Your Serene Highness through those few verses in which I ventured to exercise my modest abilities in reflecting upon the exalted and distinguished qualities of the Most Serene Lady Princess, and having, moreover, been granted the singular honor of being allowed to kiss Your royal robe through Your exceptional generosity, these extraordinary favors have been deeply engraved in my thoughts.¹⁰

This contribution aims to reconstruct the trajectory through which Maria Selvaggia Borghini rose to prominence – both within Grand Ducal Tuscany and on a broader European scale – while shedding light on the strategies, often developed in concert with her correspondents, that underpinned the construction of her intellectual authority.

The study begins with a survey of recent scholarship on women’s participation in the cultural and scientific domains of the early modern period.¹¹ It then outlines Borghini’s education and her involvement in various learned academies. Thereafter, particular attention is given to her correspondence with Francesco Redi (1626-1697), which sheds light on the construction of her literary authority – most notably her symbolic elevation to the role of “tenth Muse” – within the Medicean court. This is followed by an analysis of her

¹⁰ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 217-218 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Vittoria della Rovere, June 21, 1681): “Avendo l’Altezza Vostra Serenissima a mesi passati gradito quelle mie poche rime con le quali io aveva ardito di esercitar la mia mente debilmente nella considerazione dell’eccelse e preclare doti della Serenissima Signora Principessa ed essendoci oltre a ciò motivo di sua singolare generosità degnata d’ammetermi a baciare la sua real veste, si sono così vivamente impressi nel mio pensiero questi altissimi favori”.

¹¹ This essay builds upon a substantial body of scholarship that has explored the intersection of gender and scientific culture in early modern Europe. These works, taken together, provide an essential framework for reassessing women’s scientific agency not merely as marginal or derivative, but as constitutive of early modern knowledge-making. See: Stephen Kolsky, *The Ghost of Boccaccio. Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005); Florike Egmond, “Female Experts: Elegance and Rivalry”, in *The World of Carolus Clusius: Natural History in the Making, 1550-1610* (Pickering & Chatto, 2014), 59-72; Elaine Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge. Medicine, Science and the Household in Early Modern England* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018); Anna Marie Eleanor Roos, *Martin Lister and His Remarkable Daughters: The Art of Science in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2019); Sharon T. Strocchia, *Forgotten Healers. Women and the Pursuit of Health in Late Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 2019); Nataša Raschi and Cristina Trinchero, *Femmes de science. Quatre siècle de conquêtes, entre langue et littérature* (Roma: Carrocci, 2021); Francesca Antonelli and Paolo Savoia, “Introduction Gender, History, and Science in Early Modern Europe”, in *Gendered Touch* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

epistolary exchanges with Alessandro Marchetti (1633-1714) and Antonio Magliabechi, highlighting the tactics through which Borghini shaped her public persona, oversaw the publication of her works, and engaged poetically with the scientific discourse of her time.

Indeed, a particular emphasis will be placed on what is here defined as the “strategy of modesty”, a binary strategy, generally understood to have consisted of a *pars destruens* and a *pars construens*. The *pars destruens* relied on the use of modesty as a rhetorical device, involving the reduction or effacement of the authorial self – a tactic widely adopted by early modern women writers to pre-empt criticism and gain legitimacy in male-dominated intellectual spaces. The *pars construens*, by contrast, entailed a practice of self-affirmation and self-consciousness, enacted through the cultivation of epistolary *sociabilité* and through the very material act of writing – whether poetic, philosophical, or translational.¹²

Finally, the article addresses her decision to dedicate herself to the vernacular translation of Tertullian, that emerges as a particularly revealing gesture, offering a privileged lens onto the gendered and intellectual tensions of her historical moment.

Women in early modern scientific and literary culture: a historiographical framework

As early as the late 1680s, Borghini's fame had crossed Italian borders and reached France. In 1688, the famous physician from Arezzo Francesco Redi wrote to her: “Your Most Illustrious Ladyship may be assured that I feel a certain shame in showing you that you are justly one of the foremost glories of our Italy, indeed of Europe.”¹³ Indeed, her reputation reached the critical attention of the French poet Gilles Ménage (1613-1692):

Your glories are known not only throughout Italy but also in France, and particularly in Paris [...]. To ensure that your virginal modesty may not have any hesitation in believing this truth, I wish to transcribe here what Monsieur Menagio has written about Your Ladyship. [...] ‘Signora Maria Selvaggia Borghini, highly versed in philosophy, mathematics, and who composes well in Latin verses and excellently in Tuscan’. What more could one ask for?¹⁴

¹² See Joan Kelly, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?”, in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. by Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 137-164; Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400-1650* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Ead. *The prodigious Muse. Women's writing in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011).

¹³ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 181 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, January 25, 1693): “si accerti Vostra Signoria Illustrissima che ho rossore nel fargli vedere che giustamente si è una delle prime glorie della nostra Italia, anzi dell'Europa”.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 172 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, June 23, 1691): “le quali son note [i.e. le sue glorie] non solamente per tutta Italia, ma ancora in Francia e particolarmente Parigi [...].”

In the *Historia mulierum Philosopharum* published by Gilles Ménage in 1690, Maria Selvaggia was mentioned alongside other women: “In addition to our Madonna Giustina, Italians have Vittoria Colonna, wife of the great Marquis of Pescara, Laura Battiferri from Ferrara, wife of Master Bartolomeo, a Florentine sculptor, Isabella Andreini, known as *Comica Gelosa*, who died in France in the city of Lyon, Veronica da Gambaro, so dear to Phoebus and the holy Aonio Choro. Also, Arcangela Tarabotti, who wrote *La Semplicità Ingannata*, published under the name of Galerana Baratotti. And finally, Elena Cornara Piscopia, that great Venetian luminary, who is the ornament and glory of all Italy, not just her homeland, in our times. And Maria Selvaggia Borghini of Siena, highly versed in philosophy, mathematics, and who composes well in Latin verses and excellently in Tuscan”.¹⁵ Regarding the mistake about Borghini’s origin, Anton Maria Salvini (1653-1729) addressed the issue in his *Discorsi accademici*, stating: “Ménage, a man of rare and pleasing learning, made a Latin book about female philosophers in which, by mistake, he listed Signora Selvaggia Borghini as Sienese, whereas she is from Pisa”.¹⁶ In any case, there is no doubt that Ménage perceptively grasped the core of the matter: Borghini was a figure of considerable intellectual stature, whose work aligned with the “invisible” but well-established tradition of Italian learned women.

Before undertaking a detailed analysis of Borghini’s case, it is essential to situate her within a broader constellation of early modern women intellectuals, as her trajectory was by no means isolated.¹⁷ Ménage himself mentioned several female names, a clear sign that

Ed acciocché la sua virginal modestia non abbia ad aver renitenza veruna a credermi questa verità voglio trascriverle qui ciò che di Vostra Signoria ha scritto Monsu Menagio. [...] *La Signora Maria Selvaggia Borghini versatissima nella filosofia, nelle matematiche e che compone bene in versi latini e benissimo in toscani*. Or che vuol ella di più?”

¹⁵ Gilles Ménage, *Historia mulierum philosopharum* (Lyon: Anisson & Posuel, 1690), 60: “Anno [sic] gli Italiani, oltre la nostra Madonna Giustina, la Signora Vittoria Colonna, moglie di quel gran Marchese di Pescara, Laura Battiferri da Ferrara, moglie di Maestro Bartolomeo, Statuario Fiorentino: Isabella Andreini, cognominata Comica Gelosa; che morì in Francia nella Città di Lione. Veronica da Gambaro è con loro, sì grata a Febo, e al Santo Aonio Choro. E Arcangela Tarabotti la quale scrisse la *Semplicità Ingannata*, che va sotto nome di Galerana Baratotti. E finalmente, la Signora Elena Cornara Piscopia quel gran lume Veneziano che di tutta l’Italia, non che della sua patria, è nei tempi nostri l’ornamento e la gloria. E la Signora Maria Selvaggia Borghini Senese versatissima nella Filosofia, nelle Mathematiche, e che compone bene in versi latini e benissimo in Toscani”.

¹⁶ Anton Maria Salvini, *Discorsi accademici del Sig. Abate Anton Maria Salvini* (Firenze: nella Stamperia di S.A.R. per Vincenzo Vangelisti, 1712), 62-67: “Delle donne filosofe ne fece un libro latino il Menagio uomo di rara ed amena dottrina nel quale per errore mise per senese la Signora Selvaggia Borghini pisana”.

¹⁷ See Marta Cavazza, “Les femmes à l’académie: le cas de Bologne”, in *Académies et sociétés savantes en Europe (1650–1800)*, ed. by Daniel-Odon Hurel and Gérard Laudin (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000); Sienna Star Hopkins, “Female Biographies in Renaissance and Post-Triden-

this female output did not always remain disconnected from the male one, neither in Italy nor in the rest of Europe. Recent studies have shown that women participated in the production and circulation of knowledge in a variety of roles – as correspondents, translators, patrons, and practitioners – although they were still widely excluded from universities and scientific academies.¹⁸

Early modern women who gained intellectual recognition were often described as “wonders of their sex” – a rhetorical dissociation of intellect from gender.¹⁹ Yet many actively challenged this trope, especially through direct participation in the *querelle des femmes*, a centuries-long debate over women’s intellectual and moral status. The *querelle* intensified across Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with Italy playing a central role in its literary and philosophical elaboration. While often associated with contests in moral philosophy and theology, the *querelle* also intersected with the emerging authority of natural philosophy, which was mobilized to challenge notions of female inferiority. Within this framework, natural philosophy did not simply serve as a backdrop to the *querelle* but became a strategic terrain where claims about gender equality could be substantiated.

Probably the most closely related example to Borghini’s case was the figure of the poetess Margherita Sarrocchi (ca. 1560-1617) from Campania.²⁰ Sarrocchi – author of the first epic poem written by a woman – entertained relations with members of scientific academies such as the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome. Moreover, in 1602, Sarrocchi was affiliated with the Accademia degli Umoristi in Rome,²¹ and in 1611 with the Accademia degli Oziosi in Naples. Not only that, but together with Giulio Strozzi (1583-1652), in 1608, Sarrocchi co-founded the Accademia degli Ordinati in Rome. She also corresponded with Galilei about scientific matters, focusing mainly on his discovery of

tine Italy” (PhD diss., University of California, 2016), 155-230.

¹⁸ Cf. Elisabetta Graziosi, “Revisiting Arcadia: Women and Academies in Eighteenth-Century Italy”, in *Italy’s Eighteenth Century: Gender and Culture in the Age of the Grand Tour*, ed. by Paula Findlen, Wendy Wasssyng Roworth, and Catherine M. Sama (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2009); Virginia Cox, “Members, Muses, Mascots: Women and Italian Academies”, in *The Italian Academies 1525-1700*, ed. by Jane E. Everson, Denis Reidy and Lisa Sampson (London: Routledge, 2016): 130-167.

¹⁹ As Graziosi has noted, Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia, for example, was described as alien to her own sex “*in ea praeter sexum nihil muliebre*” (“in her, apart from her sex, there was nothing feminine”). Cf. Graziosi, “Revisiting Arcadia”, 135.

²⁰ Cf. Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 131-155; Ead., “Statecraft and the Politics of Knowledge in Margherita Sarrocchi’s *Scanderbeide*”, *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, 25/2 (2019): 475-491.

²¹ It should be emphasized that the founding of this Academy was promoted not only by the Roman nobleman Paolo Mancini (1580-1635) but also by his wife, Vittoria Capocci (c. 1592).

Jupiter’s satellites and his literary work.²² Sarrocchi’s work demonstrates the existence of an already established significant dialogue with the male scientific réseau.

Moreover, in her *Daughters of Alchemy*, Ray highlights the pivotal role played by certain sixteenth century women in shaping our understanding of the growing female engagement in the development of the natural sciences. Among these figures is Camilla Erculiani, who published *Lettere di philosophia naturale*,²³ the first printed collection of letters on natural philosophy authored by a woman.²⁴ Another similar case was that of Isabella Cortese (fl. 1561), author of *I Secreti de la Signora Isabella Cortese* (1561), which demonstrated how women could participate in the production and circulation of scientific knowledge through everyday practices and vernacular writing.²⁵ Finally, the figure of Francesca Fontana, second wife of the Bolognese naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605), serves as a valuable example of how key female figures had helped to shape scientific culture of the early modern period.²⁶ Nevertheless, in all these cases, these were women who contributed to scientific reflection not only through theoretical insights but also through practices tied to the material culture of science.²⁷

Finally, two well-known explicit contributions to the *querelle des femmes* were those of Lucrezia Marinella (1571-1653) and Moderata Fonte (1555-1592). Marinella authored a book with an evocative title: *La nobilità et eccellenza delle donne, co’ difetti et*

²² Cf. Margherita Sarrocchi, “Lettere a Galilei (1611-1612)”, in *Corrispondenze scientifiche tra Cinque e Seicento*, ed. by Sandra Plastina (Lugano: Agorà, 2016). Meredith K. Ray, *Margherita Sarrocchi’s Letters to Galileo: Astronomy, Astrology, and Poetics in Seventeenth-century Italy* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

²³ See Eleonora Carinci, “Una ‘speziala’ padovana: Lettere di philosophia naturale di Camilla Erculiani (1584)”, *Italian Studies* 68/2 (2013): 202-209; Sandra Plastina, “Considerar la mutatione dei tempi e delli stati e degli uomini: ‘Le lettere di Philosophia Naturale’ di Camilla Erculiani”, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 20/1 (2014): 145-156; Camilla Erculiani, *Letters on Natural Philosophy: The Scientific Correspondence of a Sixteenth-Century Pharmacist, with Related Texts*, ed. by Eleonora Carinci, trans. by Hannah Marcus, with a foreword by Paula Findlen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

²⁴ See Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy*, 162-170; Ead., *The Prodigious Muse*, 211-212; Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy*, 111-155.

²⁵ See Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy*, 73-110.

²⁶ Cf. Paula Findlen, “Masculine Prerogatives: Gender, Space, and Knowledge in the Early Modern Museum”, in *The Architecture of Science*, ed. by Peter Galison and Emily Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 29-57; Noemi Di Tommaso, “Sailing the ocean of nature: Francesca Fontana Aldrovandi in early modern Bologna”, *Annals of Science* 82/1 (2025): 44-73.

²⁷ For an in-depth look at the presence of women in the cultural context of the previous century cf. Joan Kelly, “Early Feminist Theory and the ‘Querelle des Femmes’, 1400-1789”, *Signs* 8/1 (1982): 4-28; Martin Craig, “Meteorology for Courtiers and Ladies: Vernacular Aristotelianism in Renaissance Italy”, *Philosophical Reading* 4/2 (2012): 3-14.

mancamenti de gli huomini (1600),²⁸ while Fonte entitled her contribution to the *querelle*, *Il merito delle donne. Ove chiaramente si scopre quanto elle sono degne e più perfette degli huomini* (1600).²⁹ Unlike Erculiani, Cortese, Marinella, and Fonte, Borghini never explicitly took part in the *querelle des femmes* by writing texts that affirmed the intellectual equality of women and men. Nonetheless, the Pisan poetess consistently acted in ways that implicitly conveyed this conviction of gender parity. Her knowledge of science and philosophy, her boldness in making personal life choices, her determination in navigating the intellectual networks of her time, and her commitment to her niece's education all reveal a woman who lived independently and refused to let her status as a woman constrain her in any way.

Forging authority as a woman: education, reputation, and academic affiliation

Maria Selvaggia Borghini was born in Pisa on February 7, 1654. She was the daughter of Piero Antonio Borghini and Caterina Cosci, the daughter of the Florentine jurist Santi Cosci. A precocious talent, Borghini, who studied alongside her brother Cosimo, was immediately surrounded by the finest tutors of the time.³⁰ Initially, her Latin studies were guided by Giovanni Farinati Uberti of Cutigliano, who was, at the time, the governor of the Collegio Ricci in Pisa. Later, she pursued the humanistic and literary studies under the guidance of the Flemish professor of eloquence, Peter Adrian Van der Broeck, at the University of Pisa.³¹ Van der Broeck addressed an important Latin letter to her, titled *Suavissimae, cultissimae Virgini Mariae Sylvagiae de Borghinis*:

You are the pride of Italian women! Surely, you are the delight and admiration of Etruria, who, having scarcely turned eleven, address me in Latin with such refined and graceful eloquence. [...] Indeed, we, who have spent our lives in these humanistic disciplines, are far surpassed by you, and you raise the glory of your sex above the honor of men.³²

²⁸ Cf. Prudence Allen and Filippo Salvatore, "Lucrezia Marinelli and Woman's Identity in Late Italian Renaissance", *Renaissance and Reformation* 16/4 (1992): 5; Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy*, 73-110.

²⁹ See Virginia Cox, "The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage Market in Early Modern Venice", *Renaissance Quarterly* 48/3 (1995): 513.

³⁰ Maria Selvaggia Borghini, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, XII (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1970), 676-677.

³¹ Cesare Tribolati, *Maria Selvaggia Borghini: studio biografico con poesie inedite* (Pisa: Tipografia Nistri, 1882), 11-12.

³² *Petri Adriani Vandenbroecke belgae a Tenaramonda Epistolarum libri tres* (Lucca: apud Hyacinthum Pacium, 1684), 344-346 (Peter Van der Broek to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, June 14, 1669): *Quae tu es Virgo, Italidum puellarum decus! Amor certe, atque amabilis Hetruriae stupor, quae vix annum egressa undecimum, tam culto, tam ingenuo obsequio Litterarum, me prior latine*

From an early age, Borghini demonstrated a remarkable aptitude for Latin prose, foreshadowing the glory she would ultimately achieve thanks to her translation of Tertullian's work. However, Borghini did not restrict herself to the study of literature and poetic composition, in which she undoubtedly excelled, but also pursued scientific disciplines. Under the guidance of Giovanni Francesco Maria Poggi (1647-1715), she studied logic and theology. Additionally, under the renowned mathematician Alessandro Marchetti, with whom she had studied for six years, Borghini was introduced to the study of mathematics. Finally, although the specific mentor remains unclear, she also studied Greek, as attested by a verse from Giovanni Battista Fagioli.³³ This piece of information is also corroborated by another unpublished document that briefly summarizes Borghini's life, and notes that she devoted herself to the study of the Greek language in 1694.³⁴ However, even in this case, it remains unclear under whose guidance.

After her studies, Borghini soon became well-known within the intellectual circles of her time, receiving numerous accolades from some of the most celebrated scholars and men of letters and science of the period. It is therefore unsurprising that the praises directed toward her came from notable figures such as Anton Maria Salvini, Benedetto Menzini (1646-1704), Francesco Redi, Vincenzo da Filicaia (1642-1707), Lorenzo Magalotti (1637-1712), Lorenzo Bellini (1643-1703), Antonio Magliabechi, Giovanni Battista Fagioli, and many others. Borghini thus enjoyed the considerable support of the leading intellectuals associated with the Medici court. This support granted her a degree of social and cultural freedom that, while unique for her time, only partially anticipated the freedoms extended to notable women in the eighteenth century, such as Laura Bassi (1711-1778) and Anna Morandi Manzolini (1714-1774) in the context of Bologna.

It nevertheless seems essential to consider which academies and institutions were the first to open their doors to women. The first women to become a member of an academy was likely the Brescia-born poetess Veronica Gambara (1485-1550), who became affiliated with the Sonnachiosi of Bologna in the 1540s. According to her biographer, Rinaldo Corso (1525-1582), Gambara's household effectively functioned as an Academy.³⁵ Later, in 1550, the Neapolitan poetess Laura Terracina (1519-1577)

appellas? [...] Immo nos ipsos, qui totum aevum in his humanioribus disciplinis pene exegimus, longe exuperas, tuique sexus gloriam supra virile decus attollis.

³³ There is a testimony by Giovanni Battista Fagioli regarding Maria Selvaggia's progress in the Greek language: "Voi, ch'oltre a questo, familiare avete ed il Latino, e l'Attico parlare, Di quanto propos'io la prova siete". Tr. eng.: "You, who are equally familiar with both Latin and Attic speech, are the proof of all that I have proposed". (Cf. *Fagiolaja*, IV, Chapter 145).

³⁴ ASF, ms. Miscellanea Medicea 7/4, n.n.

³⁵ For a general overview of the presence of women in Academies during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Cox, "Members, Muses, Mascots", 130-167.

became a member of the Accademia degli Incogniti in Naples.³⁶ Then the poetess Laura Battiferri Ammanati (1523-1589) was welcomed into two prestigious institutions: the Intronati of Siena and the Assorditi of Urbino.³⁷ Notably, another Siennese poetess, Laudomia Forteguerri (1515-1555), quickly gained recognition as one of the most prominent poets of the city, sharing this reputation with Aurelia Petrucci (1511-1542), both academicians of the Intronati.³⁸ Other prominent female writers of the sixteenth century claimed membership in literary academies.³⁹ Among them was the renowned comedic actress Isabella Andreini (1562-1604),⁴⁰ who, in 1601, joined the Accademia degli Intenti of Pavia under the pseudonym *l'Accesa*. The Ricovrati of Padua accepted Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia (1646-1684) in 1669.⁴¹ Lastly, the already mentioned Accademia delle Assicurate, established in 1654 under the protection of Vittoria della Rovere,⁴² was explicitly dedicated to women.

Maria Selvaggia Borghini was an Academician in every respect, particularly because her affiliation with various academies fulfilled all four criteria for effective Academic membership outlined by Virginia Cox:⁴³ (1) she was mentioned in the official records of the academies;⁴⁴ (2) she identified herself as an academician in her publications; (3) she was involved in multi-author academic publications;⁴⁵ and (4) references to her memberships

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 132. See also Diana Robin, "Women on the Move: Trends in Anglophone Studies of Women in the Italian Renaissance", *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 16.1/2 (2013): 13-25; Amelia Papworth, "Pressure to Publish: Laura Terracina and Her Editors", *Early Modern Women* 12/1 (2017): 3-24.

³⁷ See Victoria Kirkham, "Sappho on the Arno: The Brief Fame of Laura Battiferra degli Ammanati", in *Strong Voices, Weak History: Early Modern Women Writers and Canons in England, France, and Italy*, ed. by Pamela J. Benson and Victoria Kirkham (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 174-196.

³⁸ Cf. Jane Stevenson, *Women Latin Poets: Language, Gender, and Authority from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2005; online ed. Oxford Academic, 2007), 279-323.

³⁹ For a comprehensive list of the women who took part in the life of the academies in the early modern period see Cox, "Members, Muses, Mascots", 131-133.

⁴⁰ See Richard Andrews, "Isabella Andreini and Others: Women on Stage in the Late Cinquecento", in *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), 316-333. Cf. Cox, "Members, Muses, Mascots", 136.

⁴¹ Graziosi, "Revisiting Arcadia", 104-105.

⁴² Cf. Modesti, *Women's Patronage and Gendered Cultural Networks*, 156.

⁴³ Cox, "Members, Muses, Mascots", 131-133.

⁴⁴ Cf. BRF, Riccardiano 3445, ff. 126r-v.

⁴⁵ Giovanni Mario Crescimbeni, *L'istoria della volgar poesia* (Roma: Chracas, 1698), 536; Id., "Sonetto di Filotima", in *L'Arcadia del canonico Giovanni Mario Crescimbeni, custode della medesima Arcadia* (Roma: Antonio de' Rossi, 1711), 228; Id., "Rime di Filotima Innia P. A.", in *Rime degli Arcadi*, voll. 4 (Roma: Antonio de' Rossi, 1717), 108-123.

appear in her informal literary production, such as her correspondence.⁴⁶ Throughout her career, in fact, Borghini was involved in the activities of several academies, including the Arcadia of Rome, where she became the second female member, joining in 1691 under the name *Filotima Innia*. Her admission to the Arcadia,⁴⁷ which coincided with that of Lorenzo Bellini, was also marked by a letter from the Arcadian Benedetto Menzini, under the Arcadian name *Euganio Libade*:

These Academicians (of the Arcadia of Rome) have deemed it a great honor to enroll you in their assembly under the esteemed name of Your Illustrious Ladyship and have asked me to convey this news to you, as well as to the most learned Lorenzo Bellini.⁴⁸

Moreover, *Filotima Innia* was requested to establish a branch of the Arcadia in Pisa, named “Alfea”. It was an extraordinary mark of esteem. Appointing a woman to lead a branch of an Academy went far beyond a mere acknowledgment of Borghini’s poetic talent. Through this gesture, she was granted decision-making autonomy in both administrative and managerial matters. Borghini, shielding herself behind her modesty, courteously declined this opportunity, and thus she wrote to Crescimbeni, *Alfesibeo Cairo* in the Arcadia:

In responding to the request to establish an Arcadian colony here to hold the same singing congresses as you do there, I reply that, due to my solitary life in my humble cabin, I would be of little use in this matter.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, her relationships with the Arcadians Crescimbeni and Menzini were flourishing and documented through a lively and affectionate correspondence. As would also

⁴⁶ Cf. Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 251 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Giovanni Mario Crescimbeni, Pisa, July 16, 1693): “Al Gentilissimo, e valorosissimo Pastore Arcade Alfesibeo Cario (Giovanni Mario Crescimbeni) Filotima Innia (Maria Selvaggia Borghini) rimanda salute”.

⁴⁷ Cf. Maria Conforti, Maria Pia Donato, “Vite degli Arcadi di scienza: una lettura ideologica e antropologica”, in *Scienza e poesia in Arcadia (1690-1870)*, ed. by Elisabetta Appetecchi, Maurizio Campanelli, Alessandro Ottaviani and Pietro Petteruti Pellegrino (Roma: Accademia dell’Arcadia, 2022), 151-152.

⁴⁸ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 188-189 (Benedetto Menzini to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, undated): “Questi Accademici (dell’Arcadia di Roma) hanno stimato lor pregio lo insignire la loro Aduanza col reverito nome di Vostra Signoria Illustrissima e mi han pregato a volergliene trasmettere la notizia, come anche al dottissimo Signor Lorenzo Bellini”.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 251-252 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Giovanni Mario Crescimbeni, July 16, 1693): “In ordinarmi di cercare di stabilire qua una colonia di Arcadi ad effetto di potere fare in queste campagne gli stessi congressi di canto, come son fatti da voi costà, io vi replico che per istare io nella mia capanna con molta solitudine, poco sarei valevole a poter operare in quest’affare”.

be the case with Marchetti and Magliabechi, Crescimbeni too personally advocated for the publication of some of the poetess's sonnets. Indeed, as we shall see, some of her poems were included in collections curated and published by Crescimbeni himself:

Although I have never wished, for various reasons, for my works to be published, since this has been requested by you, whom I can obey with complete freedom, I would consider it an undue use of your generous and obliging kindness if I did not immediately comply with your most gracious request.⁵⁰

Borghini once again displayed her refined humility, underlining that she would never have published her compositions without the encouragement of a respected colleague like Crescimbeni. Furthermore, this letter displays both components of the rhetorical strategy of modesty. In its *pars destruens*, modesty functions as a *conditio sine qua non* for gaining acceptance into a predominantly male arena. Yet only a few lines later, she shifts to the *pars construens* of the strategy, presenting herself as not only assertive but also determined to retain full control over the publication of her work: "Therefore, your foreign friend [i.e.: the publisher] may print at his discretion those compositions that have come into his hands. However, if I may be so bold, I would like to know which ones, as it is possible that among them there may be something I do not currently approve of".⁵¹ This need for strict control over the publication of her sonnets also stemmed from the poetess' dismay at the inclusion of five of her sonnets in the anthology of women poetesses published by Antonio Bulifon (1649-1707) in 1693. In fact, she lamented that these five sonnets had been published riddled with errors.

Borghini also became a member of the Accademia degli Apatisti of Florence, the Accademia dei Ricovrati of Padua,⁵² the Accademia degli Spensierati of Rossano, the Accademia de' Pigri of Bari, and the Accademia degli Stravaganti of Pisa. Finally, her membership in the Accademia degli Innominati of Bra, where she was known as *Adattabile*, is documented in a circular letter from the academy (fig. 1). Written by Giuseppe Antonio

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 254-255 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Giovanni Mario Crescimbeni, June 7, 1694): "Benché io non abbia mai per vari miei fini desiderato che l'opere mie sieno date alla luce, nondimeno essendomi ciò richiesto da voi, che mi potete comandare con ogni libertà, mi parrebbe d'abusar troppo della vostra obbligate e generosa cortesia se non condescendessi subito alle vostre gentilissime domande".

⁵¹ *Ibid.*: "Può dunque quel vostro amico forestiere stampare a suo piacimento quelle composizioni che di mio gli sono pervenute; ma se non fussi troppo ardita avrei il desiderio di sapere quali sono veramente potendo essere che tra esse si ritrovi qualche cosa che io al presente non approvi".

⁵² Borghini dedicated a sonnet to the esteemed members of the Accademia dei Ricovrati of Padua, which is preserved among the manuscript papers of Redi in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (BML) and was published in Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 131.

Zorgnotto, the *Sottomesso*, on August 4, 1718, and addressed to Giovanni Battista Fagioli, this printed letter introduced the topic for the upcoming meeting and communicated the names of the new members.

At that time, there were four new female members in the Accademia degli Innominati: Maria Selvaggia Borghini, Aurora Sanseverino (1669-1726), Duchess of Lamenzano, who was named *la Perenne*, Aurelia d'Este (1682-1719), Duchess of Limatola, known as *Concentrata*, and Ippolita Cantelmo Stuart (1677-1754), Princess of Roccella and Duchess

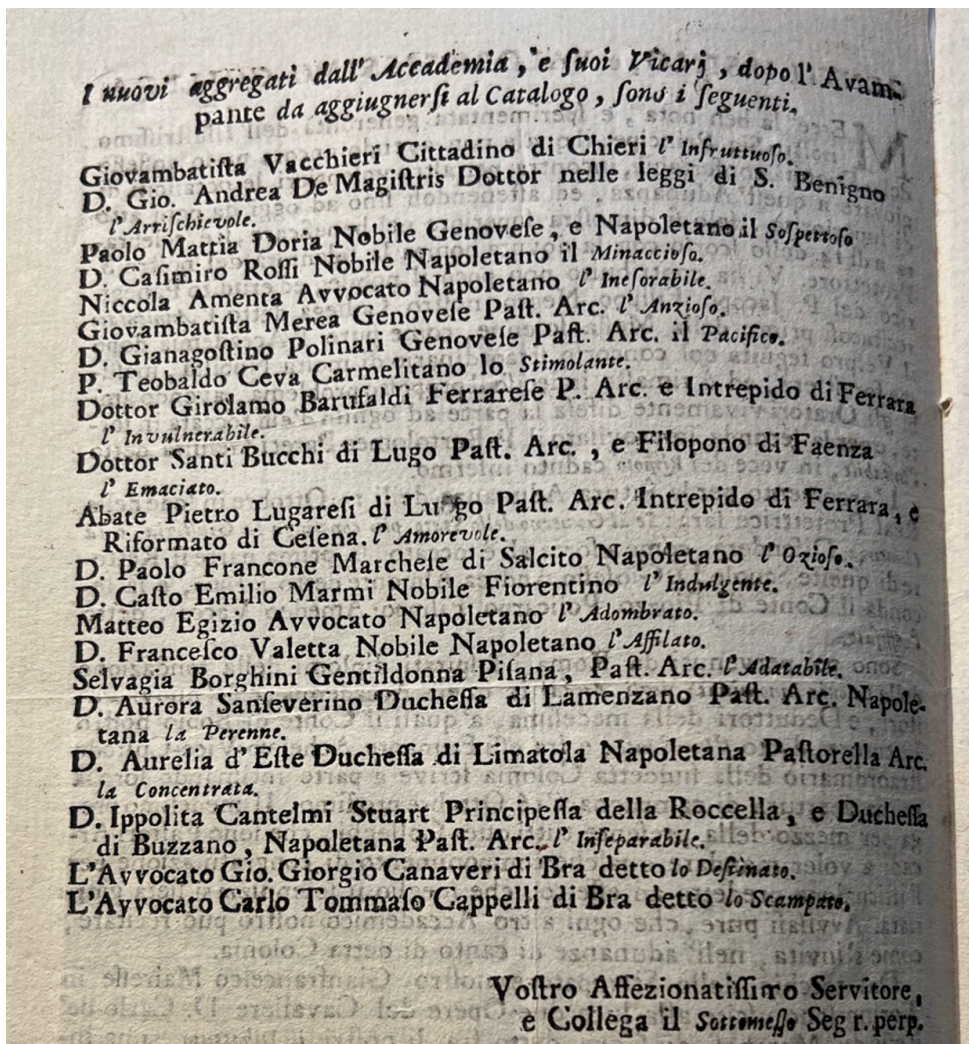


Fig. 1 – BRF, Fondo Riccardiano, ms. 3445/2, ff. 126r-v.

of Buzzano, who was referred to as *l'Inseparabile*. The Accademia degli Innominati of Bra thus appeared to be one of the most open to female participation.

Nevertheless, Borghini was never able to join the most renowned literary academy of the time: the Accademia della Crusca. It is worth noting that even Anton Maria Salvini, for instance, expressed his discontent with the excessive celibacy of the Accademia della Crusca both in a letter addressed to Crescimbeni and in his *Prose toscane*. Indeed, in the *Cicalata prima dell'anno MDCXCVIII* Salvini states: "but our academy is a kind of semi-cloister, and from what one can tell, it does not welcome women".⁵³

The making of a muse: Francesco Redi and the shaping of Borghini's literary authority

Oh, tu Selvaggia, che si dolce spandi
 Il divin suono delli carmi tuoi,
 Che dell'oblio oltra i confin li mandi,
 Tu, ch'hai lo stil per favellar d'Eroi,
 Favella pur del Redi, ah tu racconta
 L'opre sue degne, e falle eterne a noi.

(Giovanni Battista Fagioli, *Fagiulaja*, II, 68)

Maria Selvaggia Borghini's fame was the outcome of a collective enterprise to build her authority. Both the talent and ambition of the Pisan poetess were matched by what we might call a fully-fledged system for disseminating her work, devised and directed by the leading figures of seventeenth century Tuscany. The principal promoter of her work was undoubtedly the physician and poet Francesco Redi, court physician to Grand Dukes Ferdinando II and Cosimo III. Traces of the relationship between Borghini and Redi begin to emerge in the second half of the 1680s, when he was nearly sixty and she was just over thirty. In their extensive correspondence, Redi's deep admiration for his pupil is clear. Borghini, for her part, was fully aware that her fame was largely due to Redi's benevolence in promoting her work. Indeed, in one of her sonnets dedicated to Redi, Borghini expressed profound gratitude towards the Aretine physician: "Now what name can I give you, / To express your value, / If not calling you Father and Creator?"⁵⁴ Redi, in this highly refined poetic imagery, was both "creator" and "father", acting as the benevolent architect of her glory.

⁵³ *Prose toscane di Anton Maria Salvini lettore di lettere Greche nello Studio Fiorentino e Accademico della Crusca* (Firenze: 1715), 102: "ma la nostra accademia è una mezza clausura e per quel che s'è potuto vedere, non ci vuol donne".

⁵⁴ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 13: Or qual nome degg'io / Dare a te mai, ch'esprima il tuo valore, / Se te Padre non chiamo, e Creatore?

An initial and significant step in promoting the poetess was the strategic circulation of her sonnets among prominent literary figures. On February 21, 1687, Redi sent a letter to Vincenzo da Filicaia, in which he devoted almost the entire content to praising the poetic talents of the young poetess, comparing her to the renowned Greek poetess Sappho:

Please bear with me as you read this letter. I do not wish to say anything more than this: just as God has granted our age the glory of a Pindar in the person of Your Most Illustrious Lordship, so too has He granted it the glory of Sappho in the young Maria Selvaggia Borghini, the Pisan maiden. Your Most Illustrious Lordship may laugh at the second part of my statement, but I ask that you not laugh immediately. Instead, first read these six sonnets enclosed, written by this new and marvelous poetess, in praise of the Most Serene Princess of Tuscany. Then, if you are still inclined to laugh, feel free to do so, as I grant you full permission in the manner of a formal court.⁵⁵

This letter, first and foremost, draws attention to the perceived oddity of praising a woman's work to such an extent. Indeed, Redi immediately expressed concern that Filicaia might mock him for his “recommendation of the poetess.” At the same time, Redi stressed that the only way to overcome such a social prejudice is to read the poems themselves. On March 2, 1687, approximately two weeks later, da Filicaia responded to the letter, expressing his sincere astonishment:

I have read with amazement the sonnets of Signora Borghini, and I confess that I did not know that women could reach such heights. Typically, women's compositions tend to be weak and lacking vigor, but in these, one can observe a remarkable strength and a certain charm.⁵⁶

This amazement had led da Filicaia himself to circulate copies of Borghini's sonnets. In

⁵⁵ Francesco Redi, *Opere di Francesco Redi* (Milano: Società Tipografica de' Classici Italiani, 1811), 280-281 (Francesco Redi to Vincenzo da Filicaia, February 21, 1687): “Abbiamo un poco di pazienza a leggere oggi questa mia lettera. In essa io non voglio dir altro se non che, siccome Iddio ha voluto, che il nostro secolo abbia le glorie di un Pindaro nella persona di Vostra Signoria Illustrissima così abbia parimente quelle di Saffo nella Signora Maria Selvaggia Borghini Fanciulla Pisana. Si riderà Vostra Signoria Illustrissima della seconda parte di questo mio detto: non se ne rida così subito subito, ma legga prima questi sei sonetti qui annessi, fatti da questa nuova e maravigliosa Poetessa, in lode della Serenissima Signora Principessa di Toscana e poscia, se può ridersene, se ne rida altamente, che le ne do un'ampia licenza *in forma Camerae*”.

⁵⁶ Francesco Redi, *Opere di Francesco Redi* (Venezia: Gio. Gabriello Hertz, 1728-1742), IV, 183 (Vincenzo da Filicaia to Francesco Redi, March 2, 1687): “Ho letto con maraviglia i sonetti della Signora Borghina e confesso ch'io non sapeva che il sesso donnesco giungesse a tanto. Sogliono i componimenti delle donne esser per lo più esangui e snervati, ma in questi si vede una felice robustezza e una certa amenità”.

fact, da Filicaia, initially skeptical, even dedicated a sonnet to Borghini, to which the poetess responded with her own composition.⁵⁷

In April 1688, Redi wrote to Borghini to inform her that the Grand Duke himself had taken the initiative to circulate her already mentioned sonnets on behalf of the Grand Duchess, ensuring they were also sent to Cardinal Giovanni Delfino (1617-1699). The Cardinal had responded with words of praise and appropriate recognition for Borghini, prompting Redi to forward her his letter as a token of deep admiration. In fact, Cardinal Delfino likened Borghini's poetic talent to that of Francesco Petrarca, writing: "The fortunate spirit of Petrarca will rightly rejoice to live in the mind of such a virtuous young lady, so worthy of his affections, as she renders herself deserving through the glory of a most fortunate imitation."⁵⁸

As will be discussed, the comparison to Petrarca became a recurring theme in the praise directed towards Borghini's work and poetic talent. In response to Redi's letter, which included that of Cardinal Delfino, Borghini penned remarks that clearly laid bare the mechanisms underpinning the construction of her poetic authority, that is, in this specific case, the *pars destruens* of her strategy of modesty:

I have received, through your kind addition, the copy of the letter from the Eminent Cardinal Delfino. If I deny feeling the joy that is due, I would be saying something quite incredible and unreasonable. However, it is true that, considering the generous praises His Excellency bestows upon me through his own kindness, I can only respond with the desire to deserve at least a small part of them. Thus, I attribute the entire recognition to the benevolence of our most Serene Grand Duke and to the cordial and effective support of Francesco Redi, whose unique kindness my limited abilities will never fully repay.⁵⁹

Redi continued his efforts to promote the circulation of Borghini's poetic works among other literary figures. In a letter to Carlo Enrico of San Martino, Redi himself compared

⁵⁷ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 67. Another sonnet directed to Vincenzo da Filicaia in response to his sonnet "Dai chiari orrori di quel puro inchiostro ec" can be found on 129.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 149 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, May 1, 1688): "Goderà ben a ragione lo spirito fortunato del Petrarca di vivere nella mente di così virtuosa fanciulla tanto degna de' suoi amori, quanto ella se ne fa benemerita colla gloria di una imitazione, la più felice".

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 218-220 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Francesco Redi, April 16, 1688): "Ricevo dalla gentilissima sua aggiunta la copia della lettera dell'Eminentissimo Signor Cardinal Delfino. Se io negassi di non n'aver sentito quel contento, che si conviene, direi forse cosa incredibile, e fuori di ragione; è bene vero, che alle lodi delle quali Sua Eccellenza così prodigamente mi favorisce per sua sola benignità non arrivando io se non col desiderio sarò da qui in avanti in obbligo di fare ogni sforzo per meritarme una piccola parte; pertanto il tutto riconosco dalla bontà del Serenissimo Granduca nostro signore e dalla cordiale ed efficace protezione del Signor Francesco Redi la di cui singolare benignità non potrà mai il mio scarso potere compensare in alcun tempo secondo il debito".

her to Francesco Petrarca and, above all, asserted that she surpassed most men in poetic talent:

There are few men who excel as this young woman does, having taken it upon herself to follow in the footsteps of Petrarca, and I dare say, she is not far from matching him. [...] I see Your Illustrious Lordship is eager to know the name of this poetess, so I add that she is a noble young woman from Pisa named Maria Selvaggia Borghini.⁶⁰

In the spring of 1688, the Arcadian poet Benedetto Menzini also expressed his genuine admiration for Borghini after receiving two sonnets she had written for him. In this case, Redi, commenting on the sonnets dedicated by the poetess to their mutual friend, even employed the phrase: “such well-crafted sonnets that they could have made Petrarca himself envious when he was alive, had he not been captured by a sweet and proud complacency in seeing that Your Ladyship did not disdain to walk in the very same footsteps he had first left with such honor”.⁶¹ And he went on: “I have shown two of your sonnets to many literary friends, and they all unanimously declare that Your Ladyship is one of the foremost and most graceful pens in Italy, and that, without flattery, you can truly be called the tenth Muse”.⁶² Finally, Redi concluded this richly detailed letter to the poetess by informing her that he had sent copies of her sonnets to the Grand Duchess Vittoria, to Paris,⁶³ and to Venice and Vienna.

Surpassing Petrarca in versification had elevated her to the status of the “tenth Muse”.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Redi, *Opere di Francesco Redi* (Venezia: Gio. Gabriello Hertz, 1728-1742), IV, 294-296. (Francesco Redi to Carlo Enrico, May 1, 1688): “Vi sono pochi uomini che facciano bene come questa fanciulla che si è presa a camminare dietro alle sole pedate del Petrarca, e sto per dire, che lo raggiunge. [...] Veggio Vostra Signoria Illustrissima tutta curiosa per sapere il nome della Poetessa, e però le soggiungo, che ell'è una fanciulla nobile Pisana nominata Maria Selvaggia Borghini”.

⁶¹ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 149-150 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, May 1, 1688): “sonetti così ben condotti che avrebbero potuto fare invidia al Petrarca allor ch'ei viveva, se egli non fosse stato rapito da una dolce insieme e superba compiacenza nel vedere che Vostra Signoria non isdegnava di camminare per quelle stessissime orme che da lui con tanto onore furono da prima impresse”.

⁶² *Ibid.*: “Ho fatto vedere due sonetti a molti amici letterati e tutti a una voce esclamano che Vostri Signoria è una delle prime e delle più gentili penne della nostra Italia e che senza adulazione può dirsi la decima musa”.

⁶³ In Paris, Borghini's verses were likely addressed to Gilles Ménage and Abbot François-Séraphin Régnier-Desmarais (1632-1713), both of whom were her admirers.

⁶⁴ Redi reiterated Borghini's poetic superiority over Petrarch in another letter addressed to her: Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 160-162 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, January 4, 1688): “questi suoi sonetti, i quali sono belli, bellissimi ed a tal segno bellissimi che da me in ogni luogo più opportuno viene altamente esclamato che il Petrarca medesimo non gli avrebbe

It was a form of high praise, articulated in terms that bordered on the hyperbolic and positioned Borghini within one of the most emblematic figures of poetic authority. The same expression also appeared in the sonnet composed by Anton Maria Salvini for Maria Selvaggia:

Tenth Muse, fourth Grace, and new
Sappho, I beheld in the Pisan lands,
Shining, and all that Tuscan Athens
Admiring the illustrious proof of a Woman.⁶⁵

Thus, the *topos* that aligned her with Petrarca – and even positioned her as surpassing him – led many to associate her with the emblematic figures traditionally linked to poetry: the Greek poetess Sappho of Lesbos, or the Muses, and the Graces. Redi also endorsed Federigo Nomi's (1633-1705) comparison of Borghini to the renowned poetess Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547):

Furthermore, Your Lordship was right to place Borghini alongside the famous Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara, and, in fact, Borghini is by no means inferior to Colonna; on the contrary, I personally believe she surpasses her both in poetry and in her knowledge of all the other fine Arts and Sciences, particularly in Mathematics and the new Philosophies.⁶⁶

Although, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Borghini's figure closely resembled that of Margherita Sarrocchi – particularly in terms of the nature of the subjects they addressed – the two were never associated. Conversely, she was linked to the figure traditionally recognized as the foremost female poetess of the Renaissance: Vittoria Colonna. Borghini was not only likened to such a highly esteemed poetess but was also implicitly acknowledged as superior in virtue of her knowledge of natural philosophy and, more broadly, of scientific culture.

Redi expressed not only great esteem but also a personal affection for the Pisan poetess. This affection emerged in his explicit willingness to read and evaluate her poetic

potuti fare così belli, anzi, che per avventura sono in uno stile più sostenuto e più robusto di quello del mentovato Petrarca". The original version of this letter is preserved in BMaF, ms. Redi-Cestoni 8, ff. 165r-v.

⁶⁵ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, XXIII: Decima Musa, e quarta Grazia, e nuova / Saffo vid'io nelle Pisane Arene / Splendere, e tutta quella Tosca Atene / D'una Donna ammirar l'inclita prova.

⁶⁶ Redi, *Opere di Francesco Redi*, 247 (Francesco Redi to Federigo Nomi, undated): "Del resto, Vostra Signoria ha avuto gran ragione a mettere la Signora Borghina in compagnia della famosa Vittoria Colonna Marchesa di Pescara, e di fatto la Signora Borghina non è punto inferiore alla Colonna, anzi io per me credo che la superi e nella Poesia e nella cognizione di tutte le altre belle Arti e Scienze, e particolarmente nelle Matematiche, e nelle nuove Filosofie".

compositions: “with the same complete satisfaction with which I have always read the most gracious works of my most virtuous Signora Borghini”.⁶⁷ The mere use of the possessive adjective “my” is sufficient to cast their relationship in an exceptionally affectionate and personal light. However, even more telling than his eagerness to read and refine Borghini’s verses is the fact that Redi sent his own sonnets to her, seeking her corrections: “I enclose two of my *strambotti*, so that you may revise them. You may also show them to Signor Dottor Bellini for the same purpose of correction”.⁶⁸ This clearly reflected a form of deep esteem: it was unusual for a scientist and poet of Redi’s stature, already over sixty, to seek revisions from a much younger pupil (at the time, still under forty) which, moreover, was a woman.

The strong sense of protection Redi felt for his pupil was particularly evident in the reassurances he offered regarding her favor within courtly circles. In July 1688, Redi acted as a mediator for a gift from the Grand Duchess to Maria Selvaggia, writing to her in a letter:

With her magnanimous kindness [i.e. the Grand Duchess] took pleasure in offering me a new encomium for the most beautiful sonnets of Your Ladyship and once again expressed her kind appreciation. As a token of this, she removed a ring with fifteen noble diamonds from her finger and instructed me, in the name of Her Serene Highness, to send it to Your Ladyship, wherever you may be in Pisa.⁶⁹

Redi even explained to Borghini the most appropriate way to respond to such a gesture. He urged her, in fact, to write a letter of thanks as soon as possible and noted that, should she wish to include a few verses composed for the occasion, they would no doubt be well received.⁷⁰ Redi did not act solely as an intermediary in the relationship between Borghini and the Grand Ducal Court, but also between the poetess and certain academic circles.⁷¹ His efforts to promote her sonnets quickly yielded results, and by November 1689, Borghini had been invited to join the Accademia degli Stravaganti of Pisa. Redi congratulated

⁶⁷ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 158-159 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, August 28, 1688): “con quella intiera soddisfazione con la quale ho letto sempre le Opere gentilissime della mia virtuosissima Signora Borghini”.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 164-165 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, June 6, 1690): “Le mando qui scritti due de’ miei strambotti, acciocché possa emendarli. Potrà mostrargli ancora al Sig. Dottor Bellini con lo stesso fine dell’emendazione”.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 155-156 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, July 13, 1688): “si compiacque [i.e. la Granduchessa Vittoria] con la sua magnanima bontà di farmi un nuovo encomio de’ bellissimi sonetti di Vostra Signoria e di nuovo mi esprese il suo benigno aggradimento; in testimonianza del quale, cavandosi di dito un Anello con quindici nobili Diamanti, m’impose che in nome di Sua Altezza Serenissima io lo mandassi a Vostra Signoria costi in Pisa”.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 156-157 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, July 20, 1688).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 168-169 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, September 23, 1990).

her on this significant achievement, highlighting how “the esteemed Academicians, with your name, have brought such brilliant luster to their Academy”.⁷²

Redi also actively defended and consoled her when, as might have been inevitable, her poetic greatness led to direct attacks. In the spring of 1691, a satirical poem began circulating in Pisa against the Accademia degli Stravaganti, in which Borghini was ironically referred to as “Musa Selvaggia”. Thus, giving rise to an offensive pun that combined her epithet as the “tenth Muse” with her given name “Selvaggia”. In response to this discontent, Redi sought to comfort her with the following words: “You asked for my advice on how you should respond to the sonnet circulating in Pisa against the noble Academy of the Signori Stravaganti, in which Your Ladyship was also mentioned under the title of *Musa Selvaggia* [...] I sincerely tell you that my advice is to mock this sonnet, laugh at it, and pay it no attention – none whatsoever, absolutely none – and once again, none”.⁷³ This approach was driven by sincere affection and a desire to protect his pupil from any discomfort that might cause her to doubt or hesitate regarding her work and her talent, which should instead be pursued and developed. Unlike the Pisan poetess, Redi allowed himself an informal communication of his affection: “I rejoice with Your Illustrious Ladyship from the bottom of my heart because I love you as if you were my sister and I honor your virtue in this world as much as is possible”.⁷⁴

On March 1, 1697, Redi passed away, leaving his pupil with a sorrowful awareness of the master’s contribution to shaping who she had become. Twenty days later, the words that Borghini wrote to Fagioli, their mutual friend, were a clear trace to this (fig. 2):

One of the noblest spirits must surely be awakened in the face of one of the greatest losses to mourn the common damage; thus, for the death of our never sufficiently mourned Francesco Redi.⁷⁵

⁷² *Ibid.*, 162-163 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, November 30, 1689): “essi Signori Accademici col suo nome hanno dato un così fulgido lustro alla loro Accademia”.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 169-173 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, June 23, 1691): “Mi domanda consiglio di come ella dovrebbe contenersi nella congiuntura del sonetto costi in Pisa fatto contro la nobilissima Accademia de’ Signori Stravaganti, quel qual sonetto è stata nominata ancora Vostra Signoria sotto nome di Musa Selvaggia [...] Le dico sinceramente che il mio consiglio si è che di questo sonetto Vostra Signoria se ne burli, se ne rida, e non ne faccia conto veruno, veruno veruno, e poi di nuovo veruno”.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 158-159 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, August 28, 1688): “Io me ne rallegro con Vostra Signoria Illustrissima di vero cuore perché l’amo come se mi fosse sorella e riverisco quanto mai si può in questo mondo la sua virtù”.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 270-272 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Giovanni Battista Fagioli, March 22, 1696): “Ben si doveva in una delle maggiori perdite risvegliare uno de’ più nobili spiriti per piangere degnamente il danno comune; onde per la morte del nostro non mai abbastanza sospirato Signor Francesco Redi”. The original letter is preserved in BRF, ms. Riccardiano 3445/1, ff. 15r-v.

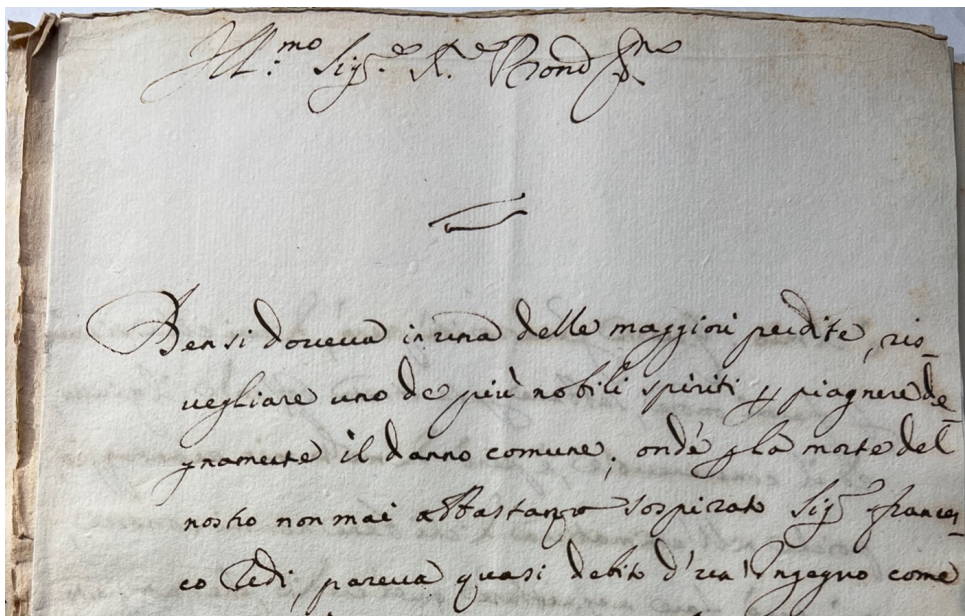


Fig. 2 – BRF, Fondo Riccardiano, ms. 3445/1, f. 15r.

Thus ended one of the most significant affective relationships in the lives of both the Aretine physician and the Pisan poetess. Redi had protected Borghini from malicious voices and envy, comforted and supported her, praised and reassured her. This, far beyond the promotion of her works, represented the true essence of their relationship. In the over 40 letters Redi sent to Borghini between 1686 and 1696, one can trace the cultural and social rise of the young poetess, to whom Redi never ceased, until his final letter, to remind her that she was “the greatest honor that all of Italy has”⁷⁶

Voicing the intellectual self: correspondence with Alessandro Marchetti and Antonio Magliabechi, publication strategies, and scientific poetry

As previously noted, Alessandro Marchetti was one of Maria Selvaggia’s mentors and, above all, the one who introduced her to the world of experimental sciences. Much like Redi, Marchetti held great esteem for his pupil and, similarly to the Aretine physician, he personally took on the task of promoting and disseminating her poetic work. In 1687, Marchetti formally introduced his pupil to Antonio Magliabechi, the librarian of Palazzo Pitti under Ferdinando II de’ Medici:

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 187-188 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, December 19, 1695).

I take the liberty of sending you another of her sonnets. [...] I hope she will finally decide to allow some of her work to be shown publicly. Since she places great trust in me, having been her teacher in philosophy and mathematics for nearly six years, and having continuously discussed poetry with her on such occasions, it is possible that she might entrust me with her works when I come to Florence next summer, and that she would grant me permission to make a selection and have it published according to my discretion.⁷⁷

In promoting Borghini's work to Magliabechi, Marchetti underscored not only her exceptional literary talent but also her marked reluctance to publish her poems. He presented his own intervention as the only effective means of overcoming her resistance – an approach made possible by the bond of trust that had developed over six years of a mentor-pupil relationship. This personal connection was, in his view, essential to persuading her to share her work more widely.

As Marchetti promptly informed Borghini, Magliabechi had personally acknowledged the evident talent of the poetess, and she was particularly gratified by the librarian's favorable judgment. Indeed, Marchetti wrote to Magliabechi:

I do not cease to continue my entreaties to the said lady, urging her to resolve to send at least a sample of her works to the public light. To further encourage her in this, I took the liberty today of reading to her the part of your letter in which Your Illustrious Lordship speaks of her with such praise. She, her face flushed with modesty, replied that she is aware she does not deserve the honor that Your Illustrious Lordship graciously accords her.⁷⁸

As a matter of fact, this exchange centered on Marchetti's effort to convince Maria Selvaggia Borghini to publish some of her sonnets, seeking to overcome her reluctance, which stemmed from the *pars destruens* of her strategy of modesty.

⁷⁷ BNCF, ms. Magliabechi VIII, 748, f. 88 (Alessandro Marchetti to Antonio Magliabechi, January 27, 1687): "Mi piglio l'ardire di inviarle un altro suo sonetto [...]. Io spero ch'ella finalmente si risolverà a lasciar vedere in pubblico qualche sua cosa e confidando ella molto in me per essere stato per lo spazio di quasi sei anni suo maestro nella filosofia e nella matematica ed avere con tale occasione discorso anco seco, per così dire, continuamente di poesia, potrebbe esser ch'ella desse a me le sue opere quando io nella prossima futura state vengo a Firenze e che di più mi concedesse licenza di farne una scelta a mio modo e darla alle stampe".

⁷⁸ BNCF, ms. Magliabechi VII, 748, f. 165r (Alessandro Marchetti to Antonio Magliabechi, December 31, 1687) Published in Paoli, "Come se mi fosse sorella", 513: "Io non manco di continuare le mie istanze alla detta Signora acciò ella si risolva di mandare almeno un saggio delle sue cose alla pubblica luce e per invogliarla maggiormente a ciò fare mi son preso appunto oggi l'ardire di leggerle quella parte della sua lettera nella quale Vostra Signoria Illustrissima parla con tanta lode di lei al che ella tutta tinta di un modesto rossore ha risposto che conosce di non meritare l'onore che Vostra Signoria Illustrissima si compiace di compartirle".

In 1688, Magliabechi and Borghini finally established their own direct epistolary relationship, no longer mediated by Marchetti. In this case too, Borghini employed the rhetorical strategy of modesty. An initial expression of reluctance to publish her compositions (*pars destruens*) was soon followed by a gesture of independent self-assertion (*pars construens*), embodied in her decision to establish a direct and autonomous relationship with an influential figure like Magliabechi (which would instead prove crucial to the publication of some of her works). As is clearly apparent, Borghini wrote her first letter to Magliabechi with noticeable enthusiasm and a strong awareness:

If it were possible to reveal the feelings I experienced when I received your first most courteous letter, accompanied by such a noble sonnet, I must confess to Your Illustrious Lordship that my ambition was no small thing, seeing myself honored in such a manner by a person of such fame as Your Illustrious Lordship.⁷⁹

On January 1, 1688, thanks to their now direct relationship, Magliabechi had been able to inform Giovanni Battista Fagioli that a sonnet by Borghini had recently been published in the Netherlands (fig. 3). Even though she consistently appeared hesitant, several of her compositions, as we shall see, were published while she was still young.

Thus, the relationship with both Marchetti and Magliabechi – just like that with Crescimbeni – had been decisive for the publication of some of her poems. As she herself stated in a letter, the effort by Marchetti and Magliabechi to encourage her to publish had taken on the character of a veritable campaign orchestrated by the two: “Marchetti wrote to me some days ago that he had arranged with Your Most Illustrious Lordship to present those latest sonnets of mine to the French Envoy. I replied that I would defer to him, as he could see much farther than I could.”⁸⁰ Indeed, the publication of Borghini’s sonnets in honor of King Louis XIV of France was made possible through Magliabechi’s support.⁸¹ Magliabechi must have greatly appreciated these sonnets (fig. 4),⁸² as evidenced in a letter

⁷⁹ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 229 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Antonio Magliabechi, October 28, 1688): “Se fosse lecito il palesare i sentimenti che provai quando ricevei la sua prima cortesissima lettera accompagnata da sì nobile sonetto dovrei confessare a Vostra Signoria Illustrissima che non piccola fu allora la mia ambizione, vedendomi onorata in tal forma da un soggetto di tanta fama come è Vostra Signoria Illustrissima.”

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 239-240 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Antonio Magliabechi, July 3, 1691): “Il Signor Dottore Marchetti mi scrisse ai giorni passati che aveva concertato con Vostra Signoria Illustrissima di presentare quegli ultimi miei sonetti al Signor Inviato di Francia. Io gli replicai che mi rimetteva in lui che vedeva più lontano assai di me.”

⁸¹ A manuscript version of the sonnets by Maria Selvaggia Borghini dedicated to Louis XIV, King of France, is currently preserved at the BNCF, ms. Panciatichiano 244, ff. 82r-87v, and another one, is in Biblioteca Moreniana of Florence (BMA), ms. Bigazzi 249, ff. n.n.

⁸² The sonnets in honor of King Louis XIV of France are also published in Borghini, *Saggio di*

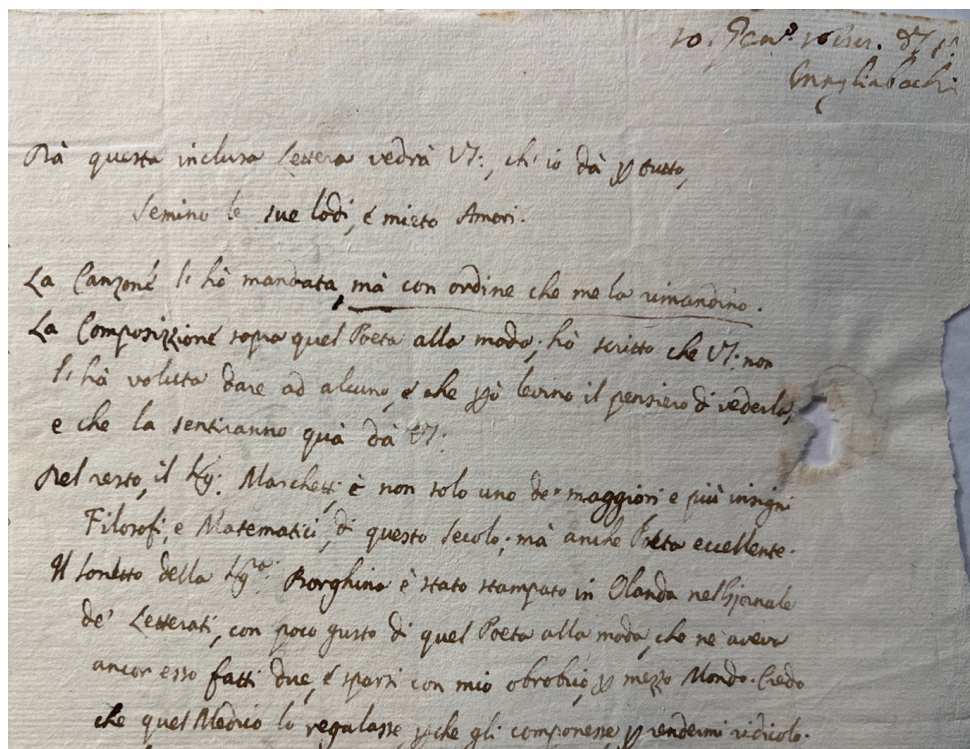


Fig. 3 – BRF, Fondo Riccardiano, ms. 3447, ff. 201r-v.

to Giovanni Battista Fagioli: “I am infinitely pleased that from time to time you have the opportunity to engage in learned conversation with the most erudite Signora Borghini, who is certainly one of the greatest glories of Tuscany, indeed of Italy. Your Lordship should read the sonnets she has recently composed in praise of the Christian King, which are truly admirable in every respect”.⁸³ For this fundamental recognition, Borghini expressed her gratitude writing: “I have heard from Alessandro Marchetti that Your Most Illustrious Lordship has kindly consented to have my sonnets in praise of the King of France published, and for this, I offer Your Most Illustrious Lordship my heartfelt thanks”.⁸⁴

poesie, 72-95.

⁸³ BRF, Riccardiano, ms. 3447, ff. 176r-177v (Antonio Magliabechi to Giovanni Battista Fagioli, October 21, 1691): “Mi rallegro poi infinitamente che talora si trovi in eruditissima conversazione con la dottissima Signora Borghini che è certo una delle maggiori glorie della Toscana anzi dell’Italia. Vostra Signoria si faccia leggere i sonetti che ultimamente ha composti in lode del Re Cristianissimo che certo sono ammirabili per ogni capo”.

⁸⁴ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 245-247 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Antonio Magliabechi, May 5,

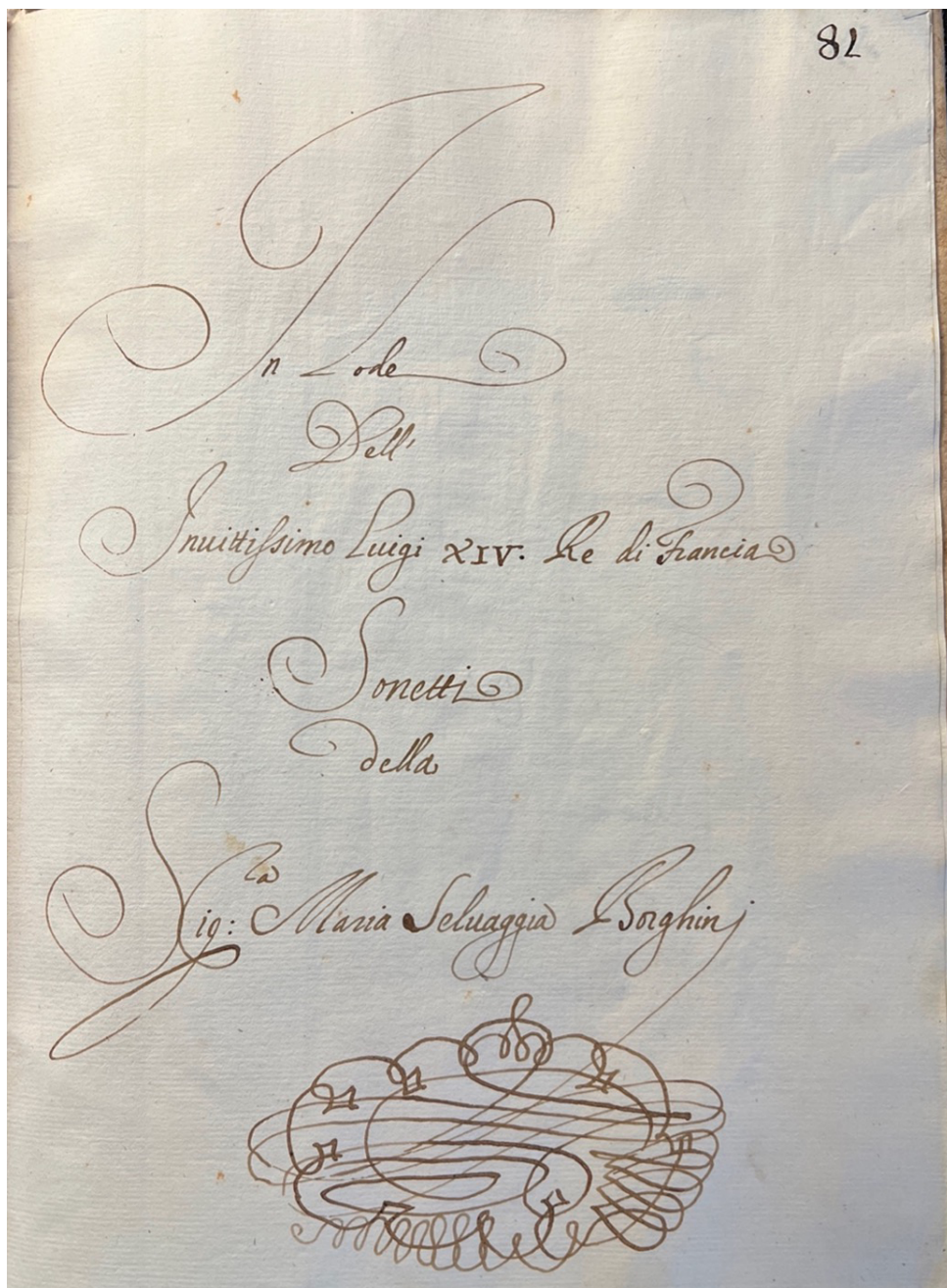


Fig. 4 – BNCF, Fondo Panciatichiano, ms. 244, f. 82r.

In this case as well, just as with the publication of her sonnets overseen by Crescimbeni, Borghini was deeply concerned with maintaining control over the accuracy of her poetic compositions: “Indeed – she wrote – not knowing whether the copies of my aforementioned composition that have reached Perugia are correct, I would like to know who exactly revised them in that city, because from this I might determine whether they are as they should be; since I would not want the same thing to happen to me as in Naples, where they printed five of my canzoni full of errors and even left in entire stanzas.”⁸⁵

During her lifetime, several printed collections featured poems by Borghini. In 1693, a selection of her verses appeared in a volume published in Naples by the Italo-French printer Antonio Bulifon: *Rime della Signora Lucrezia Marinella ... con giunta di quelle fin'ora raccolte della Signora Maria Selvaggia Borghini*. Two years later, Bulifon included her sonnets again in *Rime di cinquanta illustri poetesse di nuovo date in luce*. Other appearances include a devotional sonnet in *Applausi divoti* published in 1697, and a poem in Crescimbeni's *L'istoria della volgar poesia* published in 1698. Crescimbeni also included a “Sonetto di Filotima” in *L'Arcadia* in 1711, and further verses in *Rime degli Arcadi*, vol. 4 in 1717. In 1716, two sonnets were featured in Giovanni Battista Recanati's *Poesie italiane di rimatrici viventi*. Lastly, in 1726, the poetess Luisa Bergalli (1703-1779) included seven of Borghini's sonnets in her *Componimenti poetici delle più illustri rimatrici*.

Borghini's sonnets, as is often the case with things that remain in the spotlight for a long time, soon became the subject of heated disputes, with Borghini accused of plagiarism. On March 24, 1687, Marchetti himself wrote to Magliabechi: “Envy, that always fierce and bitter enemy of life, which, as Petrarca so divinely sang, ‘happily opposes beautiful princes,’ has spread through Pisa with sacrilegious and false tongues, claiming that the sonnets I published by Signora Borghini, my pupil, are not hers.”⁸⁶ In a letter addressed by the poet Federigo Nomi to Magliabechi a trace of this accusation still lingers. Moreover, in this very letter, Nomi – likely influenced by his friends Francesco Redi and

1695): “Sento dal Signor Alessandro Marchetti le notizie che Vostra Signoria Illustrissima si contenta di porgermi in ordine alla stampa de' miei sonetti in lode del Re di Francia, onde ne rendo a Vostra Signoria Illustrissima vivissime grazie”.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 245-247 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Antonio Magliabechi, May 5, 1695): “bene è vero che non sapendo se le copie, che sono andate a Perugia della mia sopraddezza composizione, sieno corrette, io desidererei sapere chi veramente l'ha corrette in quella città, perché da questo potrei venire in cognizione se stanno a dovere; poichè non vorrei che m'intervenisse come a Napoli dove hanno stampato cinque mie canzoni piene d'errori e v'hanno lasciato fino le strofe intere”.

⁸⁶ BNCF, ms. Magliabechi VIII, 748, f. 90 (Alessandro Marchetti to Antonio Magliabechi, March 24, 1687). Published in Paoli, “Come se mi fosse sorella”, 507: “L'invidia sempre fiera ed acerba nemica della vita e che sempre come divinamente cantò il Petrarca A' bei principi volentier contrasta' a con lingua sacrilega e bugiarda sparso per Pisa che i sonetti ch'io ho dato fuori di questa Signora Borghini mia discepola non sono suoi”.

Anton Maria Salvini – described Maria Selvaggia Borghini as “fourth Grace” and “tenth Muse”:

I have always known Borghini to be a highly learned woman, and I used to call her “the fourth grace” because of her charm. However, if now she is the subject of the common people’s disdain, she must be called the Tenth Muse. It is, however, a great compliment to her that her poems are so highly esteemed that it is almost unbelievable that they could be composed by her. At least, it is the fortune of good literature that, in her displeasure, she has written a sonnet that, in my opinion, is truly beautiful.⁸⁷

The *topos* of association with the Graces and the Muses re-emerged, as such references were among the most conventional means of legitimizing female authorship. As seen also in the comparison with Colonna, carried out by Federigo Nomi himself, Borghini’s authority was framed not only in terms of poetic talent, but also through her command of philosophical and natural knowledge. It was precisely her scientific expertise that endowed her with a singular distinction. Yet in what arena had this knowledge been effectively put into practice?

On June 10, 1690, Redi wrote to Borghini expressing his admiration for the verses she composed for the translation of Lucretius by Alessandro Marchetti: “Beautiful, truly beautiful is the song that Your Most Illustrious Lady has made in honor of Alessandro Marchetti.”⁸⁸ Marchetti, indeed, had worked on a new translation of *De rerum natura*, a project that was probably completed around 1668. However, the publication of this translation encountered significant obstacles. In 1673, Prince Leopoldo, brother of Ferdinando II, Grand Duke of Tuscany, decided to prevent Marchetti from publishing a text that could easily be condemned as heretical, such as the vernacular edition of Lucretius. The following Grand Duke, Cosimo III, in the same year, postponed the decision regarding the publication of Marchetti’s translation until it was approved by the Sacred Congregation of Rome, which was expected to deliver a prohibitive verdict. In this climate of stagnation, the Roman Sacred College issued its veto against the full publication of the work in December 1675. Despite this, the translation’s lack of formal publication did not prevent it

⁸⁷ BNCF, ms. Magliabechi VII, 525, ff. 34r-34v (Federigo Nomi to Antonio Magliabechi, June 20, 1688): “La Signora Borghini l’ho conosciuta sempre litteratissima e fui solito chiamarla per la sua leggiadria la quarta grazia, ma se ora dei concetti della plebe piglia muso, bisognerà dirla la Decima Musa, ma è sua somma lode che siano tanto stimate le di lei poesie che appena si creda possibile potersi da lei comporre; almeno è fortuna delle buone lettere che ella per lo sdegno abbia fatto un sonetto che a mio giudizio è bellissimo”.

⁸⁸ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 165-167 (Francesco Redi to Maria Selvaggia Borghini, June 10, 1690): “Bella, bella, ma bella da vero è la canzone che Vostra Signoria Illustrissima ha fatto in onore del Signor Alessandro Marchetti”.

from circulating in manuscript form, securing a place in the libraries of the era's leading scientists and intellectuals.

The poetic composition that Borghini dedicated to Marchetti's work was situated within the broader context of an awareness of the centrality of the subject matter. For this reason, Redi acknowledged Borghini's necessary expertise to understand the significance of that work:

But returning to the Canzone for Signor Marchetti, I once again tell you that it is beautiful and full of thoughts and striking, elevated, and noble comparisons that can only be conjured by a great poet who, at the same time, is also a great philosopher, one who has studied in the finest schools of philosophy.⁸⁹

Borghini's scientific and philosophical competencies were, once again, explicitly foregrounded. Indeed, she demonstrated the scientific expertise necessary to fully appreciate the value of the translation of Lucretius by her former teacher. The seventh and eighth stanzas of the sonnet were the true heart of the composition dedicated to Marchetti:

However, within these learned, exalted, and sacred
verses, with a new and superhuman style,
Unknown principles and hidden marvels
Will appear clearly through you, and if before
You, the great Roman wrote so sweetly
About the nature of things,
You, joyful, will go further,
To more worthy and famous works,
As you explain with the highest truth,
On the secure wings of knowledge.

Indeed, at that time, you were able to grant him new life,
And adorn him with eternal brilliance,
Turning his words into your native tongue.
I know well that your heart,
Generously moved by compassion, often overcame,
As sometimes, the light of his mind

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*: "Ma tornando alla Canzone pel Signor Marchetti, le dico di nuovo che è bellissima e tutta piena di pensieri e di similitudini pellegrine, sostenute e nobilissime che non possono sovvenire se non ad un gran Poeta il quale in uno stesso tempo sia gran filosofo e filosofo nelle scuole della miglior filosofia".

Could dim, leading him astray,
And making him guilty in the eyes of heaven.⁹⁰

These verses are crucial for shedding light on various aspects of Borghini's poetic output, her broader intellectual formation, and the context in which these verses were produced. Firstly, the poetess's thorough grasp of Lucretian ideas is immediately evident, as is her desire to give them a new circulation. Secondly, in the eighth stanza, the expression “I know well that your heart” highlights the personal and intellectual intimacy between the author and her mentor Alessandro Marchetti. Then, this sonnet stands as an important trace of the manuscript circulation of Marchetti's *De rerum natura* translation, which was only published posthumously in 1717. Remarkably, the sonnet that Borghini dedicated to Marchetti's translation of Lucretius was published in Antonio Bulifon's 1693 collection – nearly twenty-five years before the translation itself appeared in print. Borghini was therefore publishing, among other compositions, a poem referring to a text that had not yet been officially released to the public. Finally, the seventeenth century's trend towards epistemological reflection in verse is well-documented, with notable examples ranging from the work of Galileo Galilei to that of Alessandro Marchetti. In this sense, Borghini aligned herself with an already established tradition typical of her century, once again demonstrating how, behind a particularly refined modesty, lay a profound awareness of not being any less capable than her male contemporaries who had engaged in similar practices.

However, Borghini remained cautious when dealing with themes or books that might be placed on the *Index librorum prohibitorum*. In a letter dated April 28, 1691, addressed to Antonio Magliabechi, she expressed concerns about potential accusations and her intentions to avoid any trouble:

I come to request that you kindly inform me whether you think that your brother [...] might take the trouble to help me obtain a broader license, as extensive as possible, for books suspended or prohibited by the Sacred Congregation [...] But when various poetic, historical, and scientific works occasionally come into my hands, not knowing whether they are permitted, I read them with little peace of mind.⁹¹

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19: Però che dentro saggi, eccelsi, e santi / Carmi con nuovo modo, e sovrumano / Principi ignoti, e meraviglie ascose / Chiari per te vedransi, e se davanti / A te sì dolcemente il gran romano / Scrisse della Natura delle cose / Di più degne, e famose / Opre tu lieto andrai, che al vero lume / Spieghi per l'alta via sicure piume. / Anzi allora, che tu vita novella / A lui donar potesti e di splendore / Eccelso farlo adorno eternamente / Volgendo nella tua natia favella / I detti suoi, a te ben so, che il cuore / Generosa pietà vinse sovente, / Mentre della sua mente / Il bel lume talora, error poteo / Render men chiaro, e incontro al ciel far reo.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 237-238 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Antonio Magliabechi, April 28, 1691): “Vengo a supplicarla a volersi contentare di avvisarmi se pensa che il suo Signor fratello [...] si prendesse

A few years later, Borghini urged Anton Francesco Marmi (1665-1736) to remind Magliabechi to send her the license.⁹² This tension between scientific ambition and religious caution marked much of Borghini's trajectory. While she actively participated in the literary academies and scientific climate of her time, she also sought to shield herself from potential accusations concerning her philosophical views. Her interest in theology and her later work on Tertullian probably reveal an effort to reconcile intellectual independence with spiritual restraint.

Clavo clavum trudam: *theology, gender, and literary strategy*

In less than two decades, Borghini had firmly established a strong and lasting reputation within the intellectual circles of late seventeenth century Italy. However, the career of an unmarried woman was far from assured at the time and, in fact, represented a notable anomaly in the biography of the Pisan poetess. Her decision not to marry contravened the social norms of post-Tridentine Italy.⁹³ This choice prompted a range of reactions – from admiration to irony – among her contemporaries. Giacinto Gimma (1668-1735), founder of the Accademia degli Spensierati in Rossano in 1695, of which Borghini was a member, recalled the poetess as one of the “*valentuomini*” who had corresponded with the Neapolitan Andrea di Milo: “He was worthy of receiving honorable letters from Marcello Malpighi, Francesco Redi, Antonio Magliabechi, Maria Selvaggia Borghini, Giovan Francesco Bonomi, and other *distinguished men*.”⁹⁴ As noted at the outset of this study, women were often dissociated from their gender in order to be intellectually accepted. This dissociation was achieved either by likening them to transcendent figures such as the Muses and the Graces, or by aligning them with male intellect, or even through a marginalization as an “exception to their gender”.

Lorenzo Bellini had even dedicated a poem to her on the theme of marriage, playfully teasing the provocative tones of the matter (fig. 5).⁹⁵ Although it was a burlesque poetic composition, Bellini seemed sincere in some of his verses, especially when he directly addressed the dedicatee, urging her to marry: “Become a wife, my little Selvaggia, / And you

ad istanza la briga di farmi ottenere una licenza più generale che fusse possibile de' libri sospesi e proibiti da quella Sacra Congregazione [...] Ma venendomi alle volte alle mani varie opere poetiche, istoriche e di scienze né ben sapendo se sieno permesse io leggo con poca quiete”.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 225-227 (Maria Selvaggia Borghini to Anton Francesco Marmi, April 29, 1693).

⁹³ Cox, “The Single Self”, 513-581.

⁹⁴ Giacinto Gimma, *Elogi accademici della Società degli Spensierati di Rossano*, 1703, 312: “fu degno di ricevere lettere onorevoli da Marcello Malpighi, da Francesco Redi, da Antonio Magliabechi, da Maria Selvaggia Borghini, da Giovan Francesco Bonomi e da *altri valentuomini*” (my italics).

⁹⁵ Francesco Berni *et al.*, *Il Terzo libro delle opere burlesche* (Usecht al Reno: Jacopo Broedelet, 1760), 292.

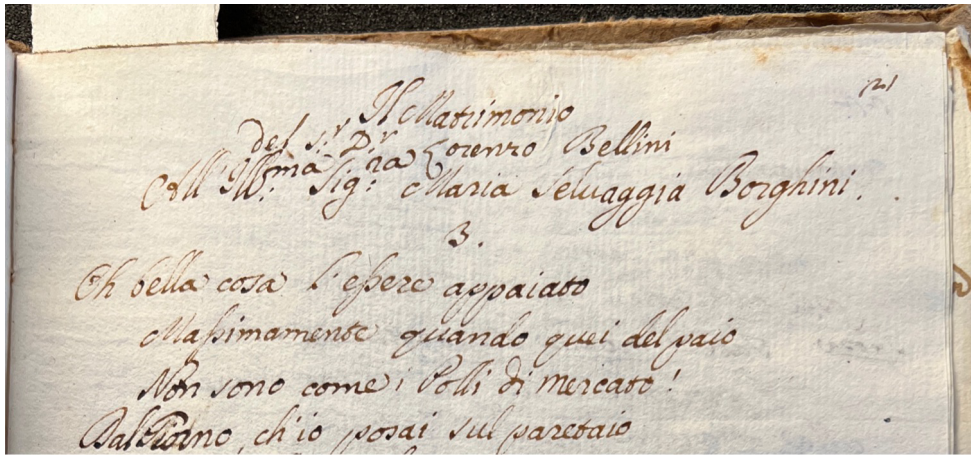


Fig. 5 – BNCF, Fondo Panciatichiano, ms. 328, f. 21r.

will find in yourself that the clear foundations / Are clear only through theology, / Crafted specifically for your mind / That is all science and all hypochondria.”⁹⁶ The last two verses are especially rich. They suggest a mind that is both rigorously intellectual (“all science”) and excessively introspective or anxious (“all hypochondria”). This contrast partly reflects the two poles of Borghini’s strategy of modesty: hypochondria as the *pars destruens*, and science – also understood more broadly as ambition – as the *pars construens*. Finally, the refrain returned, slightly varied, a few verses later (fig. 6) describing marriage as a “medicine against the Devil.”⁹⁷

Maria Selvaggia never married though this did not exclude her from leading a “family life”. In fact, she devoted significant attention to the education of her niece, Caterina Borghini, daughter of her brother Cosimo and his wife Laura. Like her aunt, Caterina became deeply engaged in the study of Latin and was later recognized as a distinguished member of the Arcadia Academy, adopting the name *Erato Dionea*. Moreover, like Maria Selvaggia, she remained unmarried. The educational framework that Maria Selvaggia provided to her niece became a model for many women in the eighteenth century, who increasingly sought to assert themselves in the intellectual domain. The Sienese scholar Aretafila Savini de’ Rossi (1687-1731), in her *Apologia in favore degli studi delle donne* (1729), specifically referred to Borghini’s contributions: “And who knows if some of these mothers did not take it upon themselves to instruct their children, as we have seen done

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 293: Fatevi Sposa, Selvaggiuccia mia / E proverete in voi che le fon chiare / Ma chiare a forza di Teologia, / E fatte a posta pel vostro cervello / Ch’è tutto scienza e tutto ipocondria. The manuscript version is preserved in BNCF, ms. Panciatichiano 328, ff. 21r-28v.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

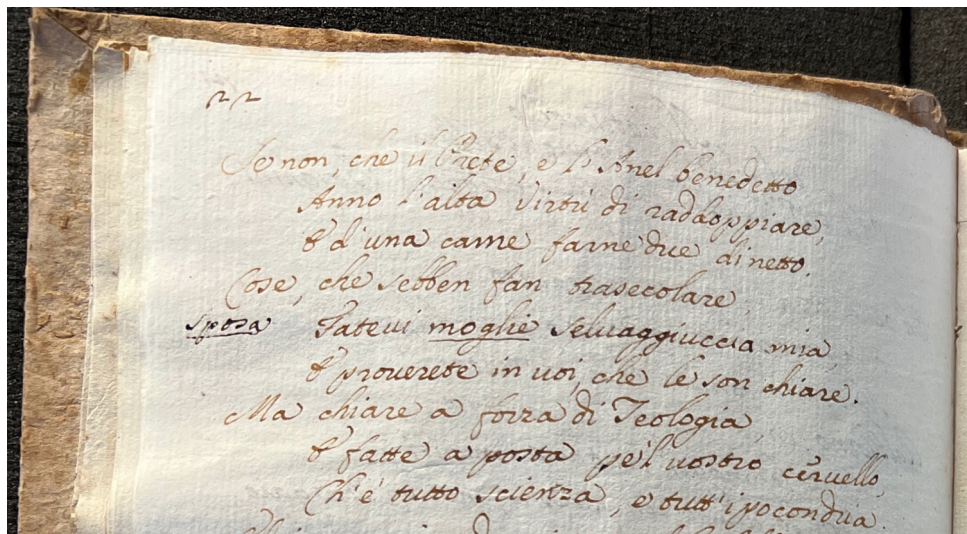


Fig. 6 – BNCF, Fondo Panciatichiano, ms. 328, f. 22v.

by an aunt to her nephews, the learned Signora Selvaggia Borghini, the esteemed lady from Pisa, who not only taught them the humanities and pleasant letters but also the most challenging and rigorous sciences?”⁹⁸ Thus, Borghini became a veritable symbol for those women who were engaged in the ongoing *querelle des femmes*.

Not only did her unmarried status elicit surprise, but so did her decision not to enter monastic life – especially given her deep engagement with theology. Borghini’s passion for theological studies was well-known, and it was this passion that led her to undertake the translation of selected works by Tertullian.⁹⁹ Equipped with perseverance, she would often respond to those who advised against taking on such a difficult endeavor: “This task does not burden my spirit but lifts it: let me drive out one nail with another.”¹⁰⁰ By so doing, Borghini aligned herself with the tradition of Tertullian commentators, such as Beatus Renanus (1485-1547), Latino Latini (1513-1593), Guido Panciroli (1523-1599), Jacobus

⁹⁸ *Discorsi accademici di vari autori viventi intorno agli studi delle donne la maggior parte recitati nell'Accademia dei Ricovrati di Padova*, 1729, 58: “E chi sa che taluna di queste madri da sé stessa non si ponesse ad istruire i propri figliuoli come abbiamo veduto farsi da una zia a’ nipoti, la quale è stata la Signora Selvaggia Borghini dottissima dama pisana che gli ha addottrinati non solo nelle umane lettere e piacevoli ma ancora nelle scienze più difficili e severe?”

⁹⁹ *Opere di Tertulliano tradotte in Toscana dalla Signora Selvaggia Borghini*, Nobile Pisana, ed. by Giovanni Gaetano Bottari (Roma: Pallade, 1756).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 8: “Questa fatica non opprime il mio spirito, ma lo solleva: lasciate, che io *clavo clavum trudem*”.

Pamelius (1536-1587), Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614), and Nicolas Rigault (1577-1654), also known as Rigaltius, among others. Borghini once again showed no fear of comparison with men; on the contrary, she made it clear that behind her rhetorical modesty lay a firm ambition grounded in a concrete awareness of her own abilities.

What about women translators in Italy? Aside from Borghini, two other women, during that period, had also engaged in the translation of significant literary and philosophical works. Luisa Bergalli Gozzi (1703-1779) had worked on a translation from Latin and, more specifically, on Terence. Giuseppa Eleonora Barbapiccola (1702-1740),¹⁰¹ known as *Mirista* among the Arcadians, had translated the work of René Descartes: *The Principles of Philosophy by René Des-Cartes. Translated from the French with comparison to the Latin in which the Author originally wrote them.*¹⁰² As has been noted, “in Italy, among those who performed this unrewarding toil between 1650 and 1850, there were several women, such as the actresses Angiola D’Orsi (active in the second half of the seventeenth century), Brigida Bianchi (1613-1703), and Orsola Cortesi Biancolelli (c. 1632-1718), who translated and imitated Spanish.”¹⁰³

Borghini’s *Tertulliano Volgarizzato* garnered significant approval and admiration from numerous scholars, especially for the accuracy of the translation and the challenge presented by the Latin in which Tertullian’s work was originally written. The translation was posthumously published in 1756 by Giovanni Bottari (1689-1775), who oversaw the edition; and again in 1783, also by Bottari, in Rome, as evidenced by a manuscript copy of the work preserved in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (fig. 7).¹⁰⁴

Although it was published only posthumously, some confirmation that Borghini intended to publish this work can be found in the “letter to the reader” written by the author herself, which, however, was not included in Bottari’s editions:

I place before you, O courteous Reader, the great Tertullian. Yet, it seems to me as though I see him blushing, having, so to speak, after so many centuries, changed his attire, and not making his usual appearance. This, indeed, is the fault of my pen, which, unable to clothe

¹⁰¹ See Paula Findlen, “Translating the New Science: Women and the Circulation of Knowledge in Enlightenment in Italy”, *Configurations* 2 (1995): 167-206; Ead., “Giuseppa Eleonora Barbapiccola”, in Rebecca Messbarger, Paula Findlen, *The Contest for Knowledge Debates over Women’s Learning in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago&London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 35-66.

¹⁰² Giuseppa Eleonora Barbapiccola, *I principi della filosofia di Renato Des-Cartes. Tradotti dal Francese col confronto del Latino in cui l’Autore li scrisse da Giuseppa-Eleonora Barbapiccola, tra gli Arcadi Mirista* (Torino, 1722).

¹⁰³ See Natalia Costa-Zalessow, “Teresa Carniani Malvezzi as a Translator from English and Latin”, *Italica* 76, no. 4 (1999): 497-511.

¹⁰⁴ BNCF, Fondo Nazionale, ms. II.II.275.

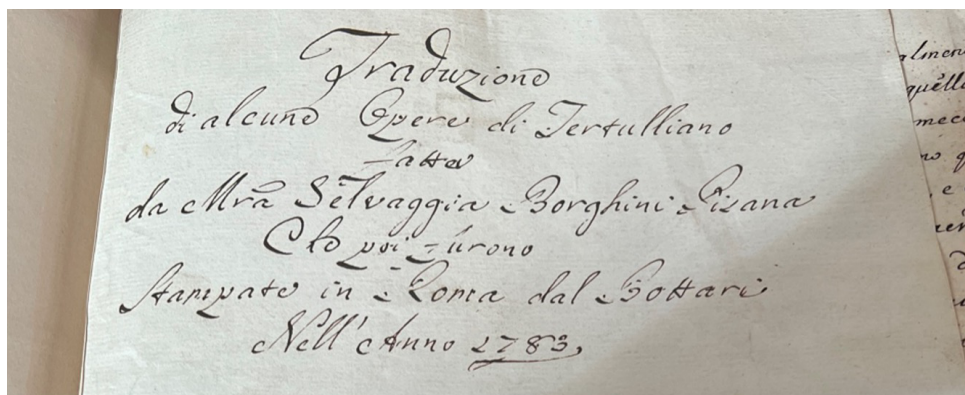


Fig. 7 – BNCF, Fondo Nazionale, ms. II.II.275.

him in a fitting garment in our vulgar tongue, causes him to fall short of his majesty and perhaps presents a more ordinary character.¹⁰⁵

In this instance too, Borghini's customary modesty was immediately apparent. As in other cases, it is worth questioning to what extent this humility responded to specific rhetorical needs. Indeed, translating Tertullian meant engaging with a long-standing tradition of male translators, most of whom were theologians. The choice to translate Tertullian was likely motivated by two main factors.

Firstly, Tertullian, one of the most prominent Christian apologists of the 2nd century CE, developed one of the most complex and rigorous theological and moral systems of his time. Embarking on the translation of such a work was, in part, an engagement with deep theological reflection, which, to some extent, ensured a favorable reception from the religious and inquisitorial context of the time. As a woman, unmarried and raised with the mathematical education of Alessandro Marchetti, Borghini found herself in a particularly delicate position within the social structure of her time. Evidence of this is found in a sonnet she composed for Marchetti's translation of Lucretius, in which, in one of the final stanzas, she writes: "Though wise; / It is no wonder if, at times, in thought, / He strayed far from the truth."¹⁰⁶ It is apparent that the poetess was seeking to distance herself from

¹⁰⁵ Borghini, *Saggio di poesie*, 261-263: "Io pongo, o Lettor cortese, sotto i tuoi occhi il gran Tertulliano: Parmi però di presente di vederlo in certo modo dipinto di rossore per avere, per così dire, dopo tanti secoli cangiato abbigliamento e non fare perciò la sua solita comparsa. Questa in vero è colpa della mia penna, che non avendo saputo nel trasportarlo nel volgar nostro, intessere al medesimo un abito condegno lo fa decadere dalla sua maestà e gli fa forse rappresentare un personaggio più comune".

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 18: benché saggio; / Meraviglia non è, se col pensiero / In ciò tal'ora errò lungi dal vero.

any accusations of atheism. To be a learned woman in the sciences required a delicate balance within the social framework. Whether Borghini intentionally cloaked her work in religious overtones to maintain her secular unmarried status, or whether she genuinely struggled with deep moral doubts concerning faith, remains unclear.

Secondly, Tertullian was widely regarded as an author whose works were notoriously difficult to read and interpret, which allowed Borghini to highlight her refined skills as a philosopher and translator. It is therefore plausible that her decision to translate Tertullian was part of a broader strategy to promote her intellectual and social standing. By clarifying her scholarly and social contributions, she sought to reinforce the fame and recognition she had earned, strategically managing her position within the intellectual circles, particularly in the eyes of the Medici court, which had long supported and endorsed her.

Maria Selvaggia Borghini died in Pisa on February 22, 1731, fifteen days after turning seventy-seven. Her body was laid to rest in the Church of the Carmine in Pisa. An – until now – unknown document notes in the margin: “It is said, not without some foundation, that before long a suitable cenotaph will be erected for her in the Camposanto of Pisa.”¹⁰⁷ According to the record drafted in 1986 and updated in 2006 in the General Catalogue of Cultural Heritage, such a monument was erected in 1829 by the Pisan sculptor Enrico Van Lint (1808-1884), nearly a century after the poetess’ death. The honorary sculpture, regarded as the artist’s first work and originally placed to the left of the Medici monument (west corridor), was dismantled in 1935. The white Carrara marble plaque bore the following inscription: M. SELVAGGIAE BORGHINIAE DOMO PISIS ORTU / PATRICIO POETRIAE SUI TEMPORIS PRÆSTANTISSIMA... VIXIT A. LXXXVI OBIT VIII KAL. MART. A.D. MDC-CXXXI / FABIVS ET ALEXANDER FRATRES BORGHINI NE TANTUM FAMILIÆ SUÆ DECUS MONUMENTI HONORE CARERET MARMOR CUM ELOGIO P.P.A. MDCCCXXXIX. Moreover, this monument represents the only surviving iconographic record of the poetess. The marble-carved profile may have been derived from a portrait that is now lost or remains unknown. In this way, both the visual and intellectual memory of this extraordinary poetess gradually waned.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Maria Selvaggia Borghini’s case offers a valuable lens through which to examine the gendered dynamics of intellectual authority in late seventeenth century Italy. Far from being a marginal figure, Borghini actively participated in the cultural and scientific exchanges of her time, positioning herself within a dense network of correspondents, patrons, and

¹⁰⁷ ASF, ms. Miscellanea Medicea 7/4.

¹⁰⁸ C. Casini, “Selvaggia Borghini (monumento)”, scheda OA 09-00149901, 1986 (rev. 2006). See also <https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/PhotographicHeritage/0900601147#lg=1&slide=0>

academies. Her poetic production – ranging from courtly celebration to scientific reflection – alongside her epistolary and translational practices, reveals the strategies through which a learned woman could inhabit, negotiate, and subtly redefine the spaces of knowledge traditionally reserved for men. In navigating the intersections of literary expression, theological orthodoxy, and scientific knowledge, Borghini constructed an intellectual persona that was both culturally legitimate and socially resonant. As had been stressed, at the heart of Borghini's intellectual project probably lied a finely calibrated strategy of modesty. By combining self-restraint with intellectual resolve, Borghini transformed modesty from a constraint into a resource.

Her trajectory underscores how early modern women could participate in the making of scientific culture not despite, but through, their engagement with genres. In refusing both matrimonial and monastic models of female selfhood, Borghini carved out a third path – one grounded in erudition, rhetorical tact, and a deliberate modulation of visibility.

Acknowledgments

For this contribution, I would first and foremost like to thank Meredith K. Ray and Natacha Fabbri for brilliantly coordinating this volume. I would also like to thank Lia Markey. I am also deeply grateful to Giulia Giannini for the essential support she has always provided throughout my research. My sincere thanks go to the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, and the Biblioteca Corsiniana and Riccardiana. A heartfelt thank you goes to Paula Findlen, whose work and ongoing dialogue have inspired my reflections on the intersections between the history of science and gender history in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Lastly, I extend special thanks to the reviewers of this contribution, whose insightful suggestions have been instrumental in shaping a more substantial piece.

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ASF = Archivio di Stato, Firenze, fondo Magalotti.

BNCF = Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Firenze, fondo Panciatichiano, fondo Magliabechi, fondo Nazionale, Miscellanea medica.

BRF = Biblioteca Riccardiana, Firenze, fondo Riccardiano.

BMaF = Biblioteca Marucelliana, Firenze, fondo Redi-Cestoni.

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