

Brigida Baldinotti and Her Two Epistles in Quattrocento Florentine Manuscripts

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INTRODUCTION

This study casts light on both the vexed question of women's vernacular literacy as well as women's wider participation in literary culture during the Italian quattrocento. For decades now, scholars have puzzled over the phrase dealing with women's literacy in Giovanni Villani's *Chronicle*, where he states that in Florence between "eight thousand to ten thousand boys and girls are learning to read."¹ Feminist scholars in the 1980s in particular took an extraordinarily pessimistic stance on women's literacy in quattrocento Florence. Women's ability not only to read but also to write was called into question. "A girl who could read, and especially, write, was cause for amazement," wrote Christiane Klapisch-Zuber.² Luisa Miglio considered women's writing in the quattrocento to have been both extremely rare and to have constituted a kind of "transgression." "I do not know," wrote Miglio, "if Margherita Datini or Alessandra Macinghi or other lesser known women who took a pen in hand were aware that theirs was an act of transgression, if they were truly able to measure the significance of that action, almost a theft or at least the appropriation of an instrument reserved to the male universe by the society in which they lived."³

But was it really so "amazing" or "transgressive" for women to be able to read or write in fifteenth-century Florence? The documents suggest otherwise. A recent study documents scores of manuscripts owned by women as well as

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¹ "Trovamo che' fanciulli e fanciulle che stavano a leggere del continuo da 8000 in 10000": Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, ed. Giuseppe Edoardo Sansone and Giulio Cura Curà (Rome: Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2002), 864. On various interpretations of Villani's figures see Armando Petrucci and Luisa Miglio, "Alfabetizzazione e organizzazione scolastica nella Toscana del XIV secolo," in *La Toscana nel secolo XIV caratteri di una civiltà regionale*, ed. Sergio Gensini (Pisa: Pacini, 1988), 474 n. 21; also Ronald Witt, "What did Giovannino Read and Write? Literacy in Early Renaissance Florence," *I Tatti Studies: Essays in the Renaissance* 6 (1995): 83–114. This translation and all others used here are my own, unless otherwise noted.

² Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "Le chiavi fiorentine di Barbablù: L'apprendimento della lettura nel XV secolo," *Quaderni storici*, n.s., 57 (1984): 765–92, at 775.

³ "Non so se Margherita Datini o Alessandra Macinghi o le altre meno note che presero in mano la penna si resero conto che il loro era un atto di trasgressione, se erano veramente in grado di misurare la portata di quell'azione, quasi un furto o almeno l'appropriazione indebita di uno strumento che la società in cui vivevano riservava all'universo maschile": Luisa Miglio, "Leggere e scrivere il volgare: Sull'alfabetismo delle donne nella Toscana tardo medievale," in *Civiltà comunale: Libro, scrittura, documento. Atti del convegno, Genova, 8–11 novembre 1988* (Genova: Società ligure di storia patria, 1989), 356–83, at 364–65.

quattrocento *zibaldoni* anthologies copied by women in their own hands.⁴ The women who copied these books came from a wide variety of social backgrounds, from the elite as well as from the *popolo*, and they lived both secular and cloistered lives. Those who were nuns were often highly literate, some working as professional copyists.⁵ The female convent population alone was over 2,500 in Florence and its surrounding areas by the early sixteenth century, comprising a significant proportion of the female population.⁶ Literacy had to be common among patrician women, as we are told that they taught their own small children to read and write (and presumably they taught their girls as well as their boys), but we know relatively little about the literacy of women further down the social ladder. Is it impossible that merchants' and artisans' wives learned to read, either in order to help their husbands in their work, to be able to correspond with distant loved ones, or merely for their own enjoyment and edification? Through necessity, women's natural resourcefulness must often have led them to find alternative routes to literacy, outside of the schoolroom. As Ann Crabb writes, describing how Margherita Datini essentially taught herself, "[I]t can be supposed that Margherita reached full literacy through practice and by building on what she already knew, rather than by learning through formal lessons from ser Lapo or anyone else."⁷ Margherita Datini is certainly the most well documented, but she is unlikely to have been the only woman determined to learn how to write who discovered unconventional methods for learning.

Not only was it not unusual for women to read and write, but contemporaries also viewed female literacy as widespread. The context of Villani's passage is located in the chapter entitled "Ancora della grandezza e stato di Firenze," in which the chronicler attempts to portray for posterity not only the size but the grandeur of his city. In this passage he celebrates the literacy of its citizens, specifying

⁴ Lisa Kaborycha, "Copying Culture: Fifteenth-Century Florentines and Their *Zibaldoni*" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2006), 54–55.

⁵ Sharon Strocchia, for instance, has documented the literary activities of the nuns in the Convent of Sta. Maria del Fiore, whom she describes as having a "thriving literate culture." "By the 1380s," Strocchia writes, "the house had a flourishing scriptorium with at least three active scribes—Sisters Vangelista, Bartolomea and Maria—who produced books for sale": Sharon Strocchia, "Learning the Virtues: Convent Schools and Female Culture in Renaissance Florence," in *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe: A History, 1500–1800*, ed. Barbara Whitehead (New York: Garland, 1999), 3–46, at 8. For information on the prolific copying of the nuns at the convent of Le Murate in Florence, see Kate Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Not only professional copying of manuscripts but also nuns' involvement in the early stages of printing is discussed in Mina Gregori and Giuseppe Rocchi, eds., *Il "Paradiso" in Pian di Ripoli: Studi e ricerche su un antico monastero* (Florence: Centro Di, 1985).

⁶ For 1427: "553 female religious within the city walls and 353 in the outlying areas, totaling 906. Although that figure may be too high for the 1420s, it was certainly surpassed by mid-century, and by 1500, the number of female religious in the city and its environs had grown to over 2,000. By 1515 the fifteen largest convents housed 1,467 professed nuns, and the total almost certainly exceeded 2,500": Gene A. Brucker, "Monasteries, Friaries and Nunneries in Quattrocento Florence," in his *Renaissance Florence: Society, Culture and Religion* (Goldbach: Keip, 1994), 281–302, at 286.

⁷ Ann Crabb, "'If I could write': Margherita Datini and Letter Writing, 1385–1410," *Renaissance Quarterly* 40 (2007): 1193–94.

both male and female children—“fanciulli e fanciulle”—where he could have simply used the inclusive, gender-neutral *fanciulli*. While much effort has been devoted to counting the number of school-age girls and identifying female teachers and various types of educational institutions, I would like to call the reader’s attention to the simple fact that Villani’s passage demonstrates that contemporaries took it for granted that Florentine women were literate, a phenomenon that Villani proudly highlights. Rather than constantly rehashing Villani’s statistics, Judith Bryce proposes “to revisit the topic of female literacy in quattrocento Florence, not by challenging the idea of quantitative or qualitative discrepancy between male and female competencies in this area, something that is probably indisputable, but by adopting a more positive approach to the existing evidence as well as adding to that evidence.”⁸ So perhaps it is time for a new approach to women’s literacy in quattrocento Florence. The case study undertaken here focuses on two vernacular epistles of Brigida Baldinotti. One, addressed to “the women religious of the hospital of Sta. Maria Nuova in Florence,” and the other, to “a daughter of the Bardi,” circulated widely in Florence throughout the quattrocento in popular manuscript collections known as *zibaldoni*. I have identified thirty manuscripts that contain at least one of Baldinotti’s epistles, mostly copied in the fifteenth century during her lifetime.⁹ Though this may not seem an astronomical figure at first glance, it is good to keep in mind that the *Libro della famiglia*, written by Brigida’s contemporary, Leon Battista Alberti, circulated in only a handful of fifteenth-century manuscripts during his lifetime. As Anthony Grafton points out, this work of Alberti’s “reached a limited public in his own day: only three complete manuscripts and several partial ones, as well as others containing a later adaptation of the original text, survive.”¹⁰ One of the most popular texts copied in *zibaldoni* throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is the *Fior di virtù*, a collection of moral maxims and stories that is found in thirty-eight Florentine manuscripts.¹¹ However, numbers alone cannot give an idea

⁸ Judith Bryce, “Les livres des Florentines: Reconsidering Women’s Literacy in Quattrocento Florence,” in *At the Margins: Minority Groups in Premodern Italy*, ed. Stephen J. Milner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 133–61, at 134.

⁹ One or both of her epistles are to be found in the following manuscripts: Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale: MSS BNCF II, I, 71; II, II, 81; II, IV, 80; II, IV, 106; MSS Magl. VII, 1014; VIII, 1373; XXI, 155; XXIII, 43; XXXVIII, 48; MSS Palat. 51; 81; MS Palat. Bald. 224; Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana: MS Plut. 41.39; MSS Redi 113; 143; Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana: MSS Ricc. 1074; 1080; 1090; 1105; 1133; 1313; 2272; 2278; 2322; 2544; 2957; Genoa, Biblioteca Universitaria, MS E V 10; Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, MS Pal. 245; Siena, Biblioteca Comunale, MS J VI 25; Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 3215. Most of these are listed in Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Iter Italicum: A Finding List of Uncatalogued or Incompletely Catalogued Humanistic Manuscripts of the Renaissance in Italian and Other Libraries* (London: Warburg Institute; Leiden: Brill, 1963–1997).

¹⁰ Anthony Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti: Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 152.

¹¹ *The Florentine Fior di Virtù of 1491*, trans. Nicholas Fersin (Philadelphia: E. Stern, 1953), vii. “Ubiquitous in Quattrocento manuscripts were extracts from the thirteenth-century *Fior di virtù*”: Dale Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 86.

of the circulation of a particular text, given what Armando Petrucci has described as the “perishability of such popular vernacular collections.”¹² These informal collections, though treasured by their owners and handed down to heirs, were usually written on paper, often carelessly bound and lacking attractive illuminations, and had little sentimental or market value after several generations. Hence there is no way of calculating how many of these ugly-duckling manuscripts simply fell apart and were discarded. By and large, it is in these more humble, popular anthologies, rather than in large luxury codices, that Brigida’s epistles are to be found. By any measure, then, the existence of thirty manuscripts containing Brigida’s letters indicates a wide contemporary circulation.

Not just the survival of Brigida’s letters is meaningful, but also their juxtaposition beside works of the highest cultural significance. This woman’s letters, as they were copied into *zibaldoni*, were sandwiched between classical works, such as Aristotle’s *On the Nobility of Man*, Cicero’s *On Friendship*, St. Paul’s *Epistle to Philomene*, and edifying works of more recent date, such as Domenico Cavalca’s *Medicine of the Heart* and the civic orations of Stefano Porcari. Most often referred to by copyists as “the venerable Madonna Brigida, widow of Niccolò Baldinotti of Pistoia,” she was evidently held in the highest esteem both as an author and a moral authority. Indeed, one copyist confuses her with a saint, attributing her epistle to St. Bridget of Sweden. To underscore the high respect awarded her by her contemporaries, it is worthy of note that the only other two women whose vernacular writings were copied as frequently in quattrocento *zibaldoni* are St. Catherine of Siena and St. Bridget of Sweden. Finally, although many of her copyists were anonymous; of humble origin; or were serving time in the Stinche prison, Brigida’s writings also came to the attention of some of the most distinguished members of Florentine society. Filippo Manetti copied her epistle to the women who served at Sta. Maria Nuova into his *zibaldone* alongside reports of diplomatic missions he was involved in and other texts of civic importance.¹³ A copy of that same epistle also appears in a fifteenth-century manuscript belonging to the Medici.¹⁴ Such attention and respect on the part of Florentine copyists for a woman who was neither a saint nor a nun, but who lived a secular life as wife and mother in the provincial town of Pistoia, is rather remarkable.

¹² “Vernacular books possessed by private readers were mostly made of paper rather than parchment, and poorly bound. Such circumstances, together with the disorder and precariousness of their preservation, condemned them to rapid destruction.” Armando Petrucci, *Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy: Studies in the History of Written Culture*, ed. and trans. Charles M. Radding (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 224.

¹³ Magl. VII, 1014.

¹⁴ Med. Laur. Plut. 41.39. Brigida’s epistles were copied here along with Dati’s *Sfera* and assembled in a composite manuscript described by Lucia Bertolini, “Censimento dei manoscritti della ‘Sfera’ del Dati,” *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, ser. 3, 12 (1982): 672–74. By looking at the inventories of the belongings of Cosimo, Piero, and Lorenzo it is impossible to determine to which member of the Medici family this volume belonged. “More ambitious book collectors such as the Strozzi and the Medici, dedicated to the acquisition of fine manuscripts of classic antique and Christian works, did not include vernacular compilations in their formal inventories”: Kent, *Cosimo*, 78.

BRIGIDA'S LIFE

Very little is known of the life of Brigida Baldinotti. In his *Lettere di Santi e Beati Fiorentini*, published in 1736, Antonio Maria Biscioni tells us that she “flourished in the fifteenth century, towards the beginning,” speculating that she may have been a “Florentine lady.”¹⁵ Though there was a Florentine branch of the Baldinotti family, all the archival evidence shows that Brigida herself was born and raised in Pistoia. One can only suppose Biscioni includes this comment in order to justify the inclusion of her writings in a collection devoted to works of mostly male Florentine religious figures. The only other woman whose writings are included in the collection is the Florentine saint of noble extraction, Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi (1566–1607). Brigida Baldinotti, neither sainted nor blessed, finds a place in this anthology precisely because of her strong presence in Florentine manuscripts; yet her origins are undeniably Pistoian. Biscioni provides no other background information on this important female literary figure. Since his time, moreover, next to nothing has been written about her. Maria Bandini Buti, in a twentieth-century anthology on Italian women writers and poets, merely informs us that “there is no precise biographical information about this literary woman; we know that she lived at the beginning of the fifteenth century, that she was born in Pistoia, and that her father’s name was Niccolò.” Aside from the misinformation about Brigida’s father—it was her husband who was named Niccolò, not her father—and the restoration of Brigida’s Pistoian identity, this note adds nothing to the already scanty material provided in the eighteenth century by Biscioni.¹⁶ The *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, that vast compendium of Italian notables, while going into some detail on a number of her male relatives, makes no mention of Brigida Baldinotti whatsoever.

In order to piece together basic biographical details about her life it is necessary first of all to consult tax records, as there are no surviving baptismal records for Pistoia during this period. In his report in the 1427 *catasto*, Niccolò Baldinotti lists as a dependent “my wife who is pregnant.” Unlike most tax declarations, in which the name and age of each dependent is provided, Niccolò’s report does not include those details. In his 1456 *catasto* report, Brigida’s son Piero gives his mother’s age as forty, which would have made her only eleven years old at the time of her 1427 pregnancy. As this is clearly impossible, it is reasonable to assume that Brigida was no younger than fifteen when she became pregnant with

¹⁵ “Nonostante ella fosse stata maritata in Casa Baldinotti di Pistoia; non sapendosi di qual famiglia ella fosse, non è improbabile poter essere stata Dama Fiorentina; essendo già usato fin nel secolo xiv da quando la prima volta si diede quella città alla Repubblica di Firenze, il farsi scambievoli parentadi fralle nobili famiglie d’ambidue queste città. In oltre l’aver Ella scritte le sue Lettere, una alle Donne di S. Maria Nuova, e l’altra a una Fanciulla de’ Bardi, o come altri vogliono, maritata in quella Casa, ci presenta argomento, per congetturare, ch’ella potesse essere di Fiorentina prosapia.” Antonio Maria Biscioni, *Lettere di Santi e Beati Fiorentini* (Florence: Moucke, 1736), xlix-l.

¹⁶ Maria Bandini Buti, *Enciclopedia biografica e bibliografica Italiana*, ser. VI, vol. 1, *Poetesse e scrittrici* (Rome: E.B.B.I., Istituto Editoriale Italiano B.C. Tosi, 1941), 55.

the child mentioned in the 1427 *catasto*.¹⁷ Fifteen seems to have been considered an appropriate age for marriage for women in Pistoia, to judge by two other examples within the Baldinotti clan: first, in their *catasto* statement Niccolò and his brothers explain with some urgency that they have an illegitimate sister to marry off, her age being “fifteen years or more”; second, Brigida’s brother-in-law, Baldinotto, had a wife, Caterina, who was sixteen years old and already pregnant by 1427.¹⁸ As for Brigida’s son having given an incorrect age for his mother in his *catasto*, as Herlihy has noted, in filling out their tax reports Pistoians had “a strong propensity to round ages, to report them, after ages 25, as multiples of ten (30, 40, 50 and so forth).” Herlihy specifically refers to their “pronounced tendency to round ages particularly at age 40 and older.”¹⁹ Thus it is reasonable to assume that Brigida was forty-four, not forty, at the time of the 1456 *catasto*; that she was fifteen when she married; and that she was born in 1412.

One detail about his wife that Niccolò does mention is that his father-in-law, Piero di Benedetto di Messer Rinuccio, still owes him a substantial payment—nine hundred florins—on his wife’s dowry. This information is confirmed by Brigida’s father in his *catasto* report of the same year, in which he declares that he is indebted to his son-in-law “for the remainder of my daughter’s dowry in the amount of nine hundred florins, which has been invested in business endeavors” (“a uso di mercatantia”).²⁰ Though the entire amount of Brigida’s dowry is not mentioned, it may have exceeded nine hundred florins and may possibly have included property of various kinds. This was a large sum, even by the standards of the Florentine patriciate of the time, for whom the average dowry was six hundred florins. In 1431 Palla di Nofri Strozzi, the wealthiest man in Florence according to the 1427 *catasto*, paid 1,200 florins when he married his daughter to Giovanni Rucellai.²¹

That Brigida’s father, Piero di Benedetto, was extremely wealthy is confirmed by his tax declaration, which runs to several pages and mentions much land in and around Pistoia. In that document Piero estimates his real estate, not including the home he lived in, to be worth 7,350 florins.²² This would have made him

¹⁷ Florence, Archivio di Stato, *Catasto* 226. Fifteen was the age at which girls began to marry in 1427, with the mean age of girls at first marriage being eighteen. David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Catasto of 1427* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 80, 206, 215.

¹⁸ “Abbiamo a maritare una nostra sorella bastarda che tra corredi e dote vorà fiorini quattrocento e la fanciulla a quidici anni o più, sichè bisogna maritarla”: Pistoia, Archivio di Stato, *Catasto* comune 9, fol. 20r (for the year 1424).

¹⁹ David Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia: The Social History of an Italian Town, 1200–1430* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 81–82. Herlihy also adds that “ladies in 1427 were doing what women have often done in censuses; they were being less than frank about their ages.” The subject of women’s ages being deliberately falsified is also dealt with by Anthony Molho, “Deception and Marriage Strategy in Renaissance Florence,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 41 (1988): 193–217.

²⁰ Florence, Archivio di Stato, *Catasto* 226, fol. 325r.

²¹ Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans*, 224.

²² Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia*, 192 lists the fifteen richest families in Pistoia in 1427. I do not know why Herlihy did not include Benedetto di Ser Rinuccio in this list.

one of the richest citizens of Pistoia. Indeed, he regularly lent money to, and purchased property from, various notables; among his debtors he lists the heirs of Agnolo Panciatichi. No profession is registered for Piero, though he owned several shops for stretching and preparing woolen cloth and may have made his fortune in the wool trade. Probably his largest source of income came from the grains, beans, and wine produced on his country estates. Despite his wealth, Piero di Benedetto was not a member of the patriciate of Pistoia; in his *catasto* report he refers reverently to one of his litigants as “powerful, rich, and of great family.”²³ His father, Messer Rinuccio, had been either a notary or a lawyer; and the fact that they have no surname, only a patronymic, indicates that the family was nouveau riche.

The history of the family that Piero’s daughter Brigida would marry into was quite different. The Baldinotti descended from a very old Tuscan lineage, the founder having been the lord of Volterra under the German emperor Otto the Great (d.973). They belonged to the Guelf faction, and there were branches of the family in Florence, Rome, and Lucca, as well as Pistoia.²⁴ The coat of arms of the Pistoian branch of the Baldinotti—a white or silver diagonal stripe across a blue field with the motto “probos probat”—is displayed prominently in various locations throughout the city. Brigida’s husband, Niccolò, his brothers, and his father all held prominent offices in the city government: Niccolò served as prior in 1430, his father Antonio and brother Baldinotto as standard-bearers of justice (*gonfalonieri di giustizia*) in 1392 and 1453 respectively, and his brother Scipione as counselor (*consigliere*) in 1430.²⁵ In addition to its noble lineage and political clout, the Baldinotti family had several members who were distinguished for their learning, most notably Antonio Baldinotti, a jurist who had lectured in Florence. Two of his nephews would also distinguish themselves for their learning, Bartolomeo as a professor of law in Pisa and Tommaso as a poet.²⁶ In addition to Brigida, there was another notable woman in the family: Laura Baldinotti was mentioned in a work entitled *La nobiltà delle donne* in 1549.²⁷ Most telling, perhaps, of the status of the Baldinotti in Pistoian society is their presence in the church of San Domenico. There were two principal religious foundations that appealed to the ruling classes in Pistoia: San Francesco and San Domenico.

²³ “O affare con messer Bartolomeo Bartolini, el quale acomperatomi adosso queste azione da questa donna; è potente e richo e di gran famiglia ...”: Florence, Archivio di Stato, Catasto 226, fol. 325r.

²⁴ Giovanni Battista di Crollanza, *Dizionario storico-blasonico delle famiglie nobili e notabili italiane estinte e fiorenti*, 2 vols. (Bologna: A. Forni, 1965; repr. of 1886–90 ed.), 1:83. For a detailed genealogy of the Baldinotti, see Eugenio Gamurrini, *Istoria genealogica delle famiglie nobili toscane et umbre* (Florence: Francesco Onofri, 1685), 359–381.

²⁵ Pistoia, Archivio di Stato, Fondo Rossi-Cassigoli, “Alberi genealogici delle famiglie nobili e civili della città di Pistoia,” ed. Tommaso Caramelli.

²⁶ Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia*, 262–63.

²⁷ “Illustrono questa famiglia Baldinotta non solo gl’uomini Cavalieri di esperimentato valore si nelle Lettere, come nelle Armi, ma anco le Dame non tanto nelle Lettere, quanta in una esemplarità di vità, e particolarmente Laura Baldinotti posta da Lodovico Domenichi nel suo Libro intitolato *La nobiltà delle Donne*, Stampato in Venezia l’anno 1549”: Gamurrini, *Istoria*, 381. Domenichi mentions Laura Baldinotti on 255v, among notable women from Pistoia.

Whereas the Franciscan church tended to attract wealthy merchant and banking families, the older noble families preferred the Dominican institution, favoring it as their place of worship, as the object of their charitable donations, and most importantly as their chosen place of burial. (One notable exception to this tendency is Brigida's father, Piero di Benedetto, who left San Domenico four florins a year in perpetuity in memory of his father.²⁸) This was the main burial church of Pistoia, where the flower of that city's nobility has its final resting place. Even the notoriously feuding Panciatichi and Cancellieri clans, as Lucia Gai notes, face each other across the choir stalls of San Domenico, awaiting the Day of Judgment together.²⁹ Antonio Baldinotti, who died in 1423, stipulated in his will that he wished to be buried there as well. Despite the fact that the tax records of each of the brothers demonstrate substantial financial hardship for that year, they managed to have an impressive tomb with their father's effigy on it built in the church.³⁰

It is safe to assume that, in marrying his daughter into the noble and influential Baldinotti clan, Brigida's father was involved in social climbing. The alliance of the two families was probably facilitated by the fact that they were neighbors in the Porta Lucchese district of Pistoia. It is also likely that Brigida herself established close connections with the Baldinotti through her association with the Dominican convent of Sta. Lucia. Of all the religious houses in the city, this was most frequented by the daughters of the elite families of Pistoia, including the Cancellieri, Bracciolini, Fioravanti, and Baldinotti. Founded in 1328, this Dominican house saw an enormous growth in membership between 1335 and 1539 as elite families competed to have their daughters admitted there.³¹ Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Sta. Lucia remained the most populous

²⁸ Pistoia, Archivio di Stato, Catasto comune 8, fol. 87v.

²⁹ "Nello spazio raccolto e severo della navata di S. Domenico, ingentilito soltanto dalla luce discreta della polifora absidale, riposavano i nobili, disponendo sull'asse mediano le loro splendide e sobrie lastre tombali quattrocentesche, come in processione, di fronte all'altare maggiore": Lucia Gai, "Centro e periferia: Pistoia nell'orbita fiorentina durante il '500," in *Pistoia: Una città nello stato mediceo* (Pistoia: Edizioni del Comune, 1980), 9–145, at 72.

³⁰ The tomb can still be seen today on the wall, located at the third altar on the right-hand side of the church under the Chapel of the Magi. It consists of a large stone bas-relief representing Antonio Baldinotti recumbent, and the date reads "mccccxxiii." Carderi provides an accurate description of the location of the tomb, but misreads the date as 1623: Benedetto Carderi, *San Domenico in Pistoia*, vol. 1, *La Chiesa* (Pistoia: Quaderni di Koininia, 1998–99). According to Girolamo Baldinotti, San Domenico had long been the family's ancestral church, and many Baldinotti were buried there. He notes that over time their habits changed and the family later became attached instead to the Chiesa de' Servi di Maria: "Lasciata nel 1518 quella vecchia sepoltura, si elesse nella loro Chiesa altro luogo al riposo delle sue ceneri per opera di Bartolomeo e Jacopo fratelli Baldinotti, come ci avverte l'iscrizione, che ancor si legge sul margine di questa tomba": Girolamo Baldinotti, *Discorso genealogico toccante la famiglia Baldinotti e coerentemente altre illustri famiglie di Pistoia* (Florence: Albizziniana, 1758).

³¹ Maria Cacelli, *Il monastero di Sta. Lucia di Pistoia* (Tese di laurea, Università degli studi di Firenze, 1980–81), 7. Compared to the other Dominican convent in Pistoia, Sta. Caterina, Sta. Lucia is referred to as "più antico e di maggior prestigio" by Elettra Giaconi, "Il monastero domenicano di S. Caterina da Siena a Pistoia dalla Fondazione alla soppressione (1473–1783)," *Memorie Domenicane*, n.s., 36–37 (2005–6): 1–614, at 23.

monastic institution, male or female, in Pistoia, having seventy nuns in 1576, sixty-seven in 1627, and fifty-eight in 1680.³² Known for its strict, observant piety, Sta. Lucia was distinguished by the archbishop of Florence, Antonino Pierozzi (1389–1459), when he selected two of its nuns to reestablish the convents of Sta. Lucia and Sta. Caterina in Florence; in 1448, five more nuns from Sta. Lucia were sent to Rome to reform the convent of Sto. Sisto.³³

Did Brigida receive her education at this renowned Dominican institution? Though there is no surviving documentation that Sta. Lucia provided schooling for lay persons, Brigida's two *Epistles* demonstrate that she was well versed in the Bible and the writings of the church fathers in Latin, knowledge that she would have been unlikely to acquire if she had been raised solely in a secular environment. If, as is likely, Sta. Lucia provided *serbanza*, or custodianship for girls, Piero, a widower, might have wanted to place his daughter in the care of such a highly regarded convent.³⁴ He would have done this not only out of a concern for Brigida's education but also to protect her honor; it was often considered preferable for a motherless daughter to be raised in a convent setting than to live in a male household. Moreover, we can assume that a rich man, such as Piero, interested in improving the family's social standing, would not have failed to send his young girl to the most prestigious convent in Pistoia, where she would make the acquaintance of the cream of Pistoian society. Several Baldinotti girls took the veil at Sta. Lucia, including Brigida's own daughter, who would become Sister Orsola in 1436; and her niece, Clemenza Baldinotti, in 1457.³⁵ The close family ties between the Baldinotti and the convent are demonstrated in a letter written by Brigida later in her life, in which she reminds her son to be generous to the sisters there, urging him to "arrange to send or bring some things for Lent and remember those who have remembered you." She mentions some of the kindnesses shown by the nuns at Sta. Lucia to their family: "The sisters of Sta. Lucia, together with Sister Orsola, have been continually saying psalms of the angel Raphael for you—every day, day and night, they have prayed for you."³⁶ Brigida's

³² Giuliano Pinto, ed., *Storia di Pistoia*, vol. 3, *Dentro lo stato fiorentino, dalla metà del XIV alla fine del XVIII secolo* (Florence: Monnier, 1999), 242–43, 277, 296.

³³ Cacelli, *Il monastero*, 17–19.

³⁴ Unfortunately, the chronicles of the Convent of Sta. Lucia that are cited in Giuseppe Dondori, *Della pietà di Pistoia in grazia alla sua latria* (Pistoia: Fortunati, 1666) are missing. However, it is highly likely that a *serbanza* system existed in Sta. Lucia, as it was common in two other Pistoian convents, Sta. Chiara and Sta. Maria ad Nives ("Le Vergini") which provided *serbanza*, as documented in the sixteenth century. On *serbanza* at these Franciscan convents see Elissa Weaver, "Convent Comedy and the World: The Farces of Suor Annalena Odaldi (1572–1638)," in *Women's Voices in Italian Literature*, ed. Rebecca West and Dino S. Cervigni, *Annali d'Italianistica* 7 (Chapel Hill: Annali d'Italianistica, 1989): 182–92, at 182 n. 3; Elissa Weaver, *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25 n. 38 and 174. On *serbanza* in the late fifteenth century in Florence, see Sharon Strocchia, "Taken into Custody: Girls and Convent Guardianship in Renaissance Florence," *Renaissance Studies* 17 (2003): 177–200.

³⁵ Dondori, *Della pietà di Pistoia*, 255–56.

³⁶ Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS BNCF Rossi-Cassigoli V, VI, B, fol. 43. See the Appendix for the full text of this letter.

association with this convent also locates her within the ambit of what Virginia Cox has described as “the rich seam of mainly vernacular convent writing in this period.”³⁷ Indeed, Katherine Gill states that most female authors of religious literature of the time were associated with female religious communities: “Almost all the Italian vernacular authors and translators had some sort of close connection with religious women. Thus one finds with new texts, as with new saints in this period, that when you scratch one you find immediately a community, or a nexus of communities.”³⁸

Friendships formed in the convent, a father’s social ambitions, and neighborhood affinities in this most factional of cities may have all played a part in the marriage alliance between the daughter of Piero di Benedetto and the son of Antonio Baldinotti. Brigida and Niccolò Baldinotti’s wedding probably took place sometime in 1425 or 1426, given that she was already pregnant by 1427. Despite their elite status in Pistoian society, however, the couple did not have an easy life. The year 1427, in particular, was full of troubles for Niccolò and Brigida, as they endured straitened financial circumstances exacerbated by a fire that burned down their home in July. The fire broke out in the evening, destroying all the family’s belongings; Niccolò estimated the total loss to be 150 florins.³⁹ The two were probably forced to move into the villa outside Pistoia owned jointly by the three Baldinotti brothers. Niccolò’s brother Scipione was already living there at the time with his wife, who, like Brigida, was pregnant.⁴⁰ During this period Niccolò and his brothers Baldinotto and Scipione tried to make ends meet while putting together the money pledged to pay for their father’s tomb in the church of San Domenico, as requested by Ser Antonio in his will.

Conditions only worsened for the Baldinotti over the course of the next decade; Niccolò complained in his 1439 *catasto* report that he had to take in paying lodgers “in order to feed my family, since fortune has been very cruel.”⁴¹ Even when we take into consideration the verbal histrionics customarily employed in *catasto* reports, the large number of debts listed by Niccolò—including one to his father-in-law in the amount of ninety lire—eloquently attest to the family’s financial difficulties. In the margin of the same tax report, there is a note of a payment to the convent of Sta. Lucia as dowry for a daughter who has become a nun—presumably the same Sister Orsola, who would become renowned for her piety. About Orsola, Dondori tells us that she took the veil at eleven years of age, against the wishes of the mother superior, so strong was her vocational calling. From an early age the girl demonstrated great piety and engaged in acts of

³⁷ Virginia Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy 1400–1650* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 2.

³⁸ Katherine Gill, “Women and Religious Literature in the Vernacular,” in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance*, ed. E. Ann Matter and John Coakley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 64–85, at 70.

³⁹ “Arsomi la casa a di XXVI di luglio ale due hore di notte e pigioromi il fuocho la casa e arsa e maserizie sono arse e di mio danno fiorini cento cinquanta siche signori abiate buono riguardo e misericordia di me”: Florence, Archivio di Stato, Catasto 226, fols. 741r–749r.

⁴⁰ Florence, Archivio di Stato, Catasto 226, fols. 742r–743r.

⁴¹ Florence, Archivio di Stato, Catasto comune 10, fols. 244r–245r.

abstinence. Pious or not, Orsola may have been placed in the convent for financial reasons. The burden of paying the dowry required for a respectable marriage may have simply been too much for the family at this time. Indeed, the family was unable to pay even the relatively modest dowry required by the convent, giving the nuns instead a piece of their property at Ramini.⁴² The family's difficulty in funding dowries for their daughters is demonstrated by Niccolò's brother (Brigida's brother-in-law) Baldinotto in his tax report. Baldinotto, who had been selling off parcels of land throughout this period, mentions in 1439 a debt of three hundred lire to marry a sister to "Domenico the blacksmith."⁴³ The money was lent to him by Cosimo de' Medici. The disgrace of a family's not having enough money to afford even a modest dowry for a noble girl to marry a blacksmith is left unspoken.⁴⁴

Brigida was widowed sometime after 1439. Her husband, who was still alive in 1430 when he served his term as *gonfaloniere*, filed his *catasto* report in 1439. However, after that date there is no further record of Niccolò, and manuscripts containing the two *Epistles* that refer to the author as the widow of Niccolò Baldinotti begin to appear around mid-century. Brigida would have been in her late twenties to early thirties when she lost her husband. Though she could have remarried, she did not; by 1456 she was living with her son, Piero, waited on by a single servant in a home in the Porta Luchese neighborhood of Pistoia.⁴⁵ In Piero's *catasto* statement of 1456 he gives his age as nineteen, which would mean that he was born in 1437, just two or three years before his father's death.

The small household of mother and son was soon to increase. From 1455, arrangements had been under way for Piero's marriage to Candida Bracali, the daughter of a nearby landowner, Cipriano Bracali. In his 1456 *catasto* statement Cipriano gave his daughter Candida's age as thirteen, and she was married by the time she was fourteen or fifteen in 1457. The marriage had certainly taken place by 1458, for in May of that year, Brigida was already involved in legal proceedings on Piero's behalf to have access to six hundred gold florins from Candida's dowry. At that time, Brigida was living in the village of Lizzano, high in the mountains above Pistoia—presumably alone with her daughter-in-law, as Piero was away.⁴⁶ The women may have taken refuge in this remote area, as 1457–58 were plague years in Pistoia.⁴⁷ Perhaps Piero was away on business and needed access to the dowry money for investment purposes. Several years later, Brigida writes to Piero, who has just returned to Pisa from a voyage in a galley, which could indicate his involvement in long-distance trade. In that same

⁴² *Ibid.*, fol. 244v.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, fols. 179r–181r.

⁴⁴ It is of course possible that this is the same "bastard sister" mentioned above whom the brothers were in such a hurry to marry off. She would, however, have been around thirty years old by this time.

⁴⁵ Florence, Archivio di Stato, Catasto 898, fol. 93r.

⁴⁶ Florence, Archivio di Stato, Notarile Antecosimiano 9173, fols. 1r–2r.

⁴⁷ Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia*, 105.

letter, Brigida informs her son that Candida has given birth to a “beautiful girl.” Brigida has already seen to the wet nurse and, though worried over the investment in the *monte*, she assures Piero that “as far as it has been possible for me, I have seen to it that your little family has lacked nothing.” She goes on to give him news of his little son, Niccolò, who is “healthy and a good boy.” Unable to restrain her grandmotherly pride, she brags that the toddler has “the tongue and intellect of a six-year-old.”⁴⁸

All was not well, however, for Brigida’s son and his “little family.” Constantly strapped for cash, Piero sought to increase the family’s holdings in the *contado* of Pistoia with the help of Medici influence. Despite the Baldinottis’ long ties to the Medici, by the mid-1470s Piero had a falling-out with Lorenzo. He apparently felt that the Magnifico was not favoring his interests involving some of the family’s land in the area of Ramini. As a result, relations between the Baldinotti and the Medici became tense.⁴⁹ When Piero was exiled to Bologna in 1475, he became further enraged with Lorenzo for not assisting him in returning to Pistoia.⁵⁰ Along with other members of the anti-Medicean faction, Piero began to plot against Lorenzo, undoubtedly encouraged by the murder of Lorenzo’s brother Giuliano on April 26, 1478. Though the Pazzi conspirators failed to assassinate Lorenzo, their challenge to Medici hegemony provided a rallying point for enemies of the Medici. Before the year was out, Piero and his allies would mount their own conspiracy.⁵¹

In the months following the Pazzi conspiracy, the Medici closed ranks, tightening security and taking brutal retaliation on their enemies. The thought of freeing the troublesome Baldinotti from exile and repatriating him to Pistoia was probably the last thought on Lorenzo’s mind. Adding to Lorenzo’s concerns was the desire to protect his immediate family from a particularly virulent outbreak of pestilence in Florence in the summer of 1478. His thoughts turned to Pistoia, which was relatively healthy at the time. He requested hospitality for his wife and children from the Panciatichi family in August. The Panciatichi obliged, lending their entire palazzo to the Medici household for the next two months. Lorenzo also joined his family in Pistoia on a number of occasions during this period.⁵² On August 23 Lorenzo’s wife, Clarice Orsini, feeling that their family was at risk, wrote to him complaining of the lack of security in the Panciatichi home.⁵³ Clarice’s fears turned out to be well grounded: in

⁴⁸ BNCF Rossi-Cassigoli V, VI, B, fol. 43. See the Appendix for the full text.

⁴⁹ William J. Connell, *La città dei crucci: Fazioni e clientele in uno stato repubblicano del '400* (Florence: Nuova Toscana, 2000), 98–99.

⁵⁰ Stephen J. Milner, “Lorenzo and Pistoia: Peacemaker or Partisan?,” in *Lorenzo the Magnificent: Culture and Politics*, ed. Michael Mallett and Nicholas Mann (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1996), 235–52, at 251; Connell, *La città dei crucci*, 98.

⁵¹ The year for the conspiracy is mistakenly reported as 1485 by Alfredo Chiti, *Tommaso Baldinotti poeta pistoiese: Notizie della vita e delle rime* (Pistoia: Niccolai, 1898) and repeated in Pinto, *Storia di Pistoia* and other sources. For a full discussion of the correct dating of the conspiracy see Connell, *La città dei crucci*, 99 n. 67.

⁵² Pinto, *Storia di Pistoia*, 56.

⁵³ Letter of Clarice Orsini cited in Pinto, *Storia di Pistoia*, 56 n. 256.

November Piero was apprehended for his central role in a plot against the Medici. In his confession, extracted under torture, Piero revealed that the plan had been to reenter Pistoia in an attempt to capture Lorenzo, his wife, and their children. If Lorenzo had not been there, the conspirators were to have kidnapped Clarice, forcing her to write to her husband and telling him to come immediately.⁵⁴ The objective of this plot was (in Lorenzo's words) "to turn Pistoia over to the king [of Naples] and the pope."⁵⁵ When Piero was apprehended and tortured, he made a full confession. He was sentenced to death, and despite efforts to save him made by the influential Cancellieri family of Pistoia, Piero Baldinotti was hanged in Florence on December 3. Piero's son, Niccolò, who was also involved in the conspiracy, was condemned to life imprisonment in the Stinche.⁵⁶

What became of Brigida after this personal tragedy? Did she join a convent or live out her life alone as a widow? Alfredo Chiti speculates that "after the death of her husband she became a nun, or at least, as there is no mention of her taking vows, she dedicated herself to pious works."⁵⁷ If she had joined a convent, either by becoming a nun or merely living there as a widowed boarder, Sta. Lucia in Pistoia would have been the obvious choice, as both her daughter and her niece Clemenza were nuns there.⁵⁸ Indeed, by 1470 her daughter Orsola served as abbess.⁵⁹ Like her mother, Orsola had a reputation for intellectual accomplishment, possessing a "tenacious memory"; she was known for her capacity for writing down a sermon by heart as soon as she had heard it.⁶⁰ Under Orsola's direction, the high standards of education at Sta. Lucia could only have improved. The atmosphere in this convent would have been congenial to a woman such as Brigida not only for its reputation as a center of learning, but also for

⁵⁴ "Et caperent uxorem Laurentii ... et facerent quod ipsa scriberet Laurentio quod statim veniret Pistorium ...": Florence, Archivio di Stato, Podestà 5160, fol. 152r.

⁵⁵ Lorenzo de' Medici, *Lettere*, vol. 3, 1478–79, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Florence: Giunti-Barbèra, 1977), 292.

⁵⁶ Connell, *La città dei crucci*, 97–98 cites many documents that corroborate these events, including Giusto Giusti's *Cronaca*, preserved in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS BNCF II, II, 127 quadernuccio T, fols. 129r–v. The Cancellieri letters on behalf of Piero are in Florence, Archivio di Stato, MAP XXXVI, 1279 (Nov. 21, 1478) and MAP XXXVI, 1357 (Dec. 12, 1478); and are also cited in Milner, "Lorenzo and Pistoia," 250.

⁵⁷ Chiti, *Tommaso Baldinotti*, 27.

⁵⁸ "Suor Clemenza Baldinotti, nipote della soprannominata Suor'Orsola, di robusta complessione, ma più gagliarda di spirito ... si vestì nel 1457 e morì di 30 anni": Dondori, *Della pietà di Pistoia*, 256. Though in the sixteenth century more than two women from the same family were increasingly prohibited from joining the same convent, this was not yet the case in Tuscany in the quattrocento. Sharon Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 54–56 cites a number of cases of several kinswomen belonging to the same Florentine convent in the fifteenth century; she singles out aunts and nieces as a particularly common combination.

⁵⁹ Florence, Archivio di Stato, Notarile Anetcosimiano 9177, fol. 116r. This is a document in which a couple arranges for their daughter to join the convent of Sta. Lucia and they list all the nuns present. At the top of the list is "Soror Ursula di Niccolò Baldinotti, priora ipsius monasteri."

⁶⁰ Dondori, *Della pietà di Pistoia*, 255.

its other cultural activities. Despite being a strict, observant Dominican house, its nuns wrote and produced plays.⁶¹ There was also a musical tradition at the convent, and Orsola was known for writing choral books and teaching music to the younger nuns.⁶²

There is no record that Brigida ever actually joined the convent, either as a nun or as a boarder. However, the family connection with Sta. Lucia did continue after Piero's death, as evidenced by a bequest of land made to the nuns "by the heirs of Piero Baldinotti" in 1478. According to the nuns' *catasto* statement in that year, the convent of Sta. Lucia was reduced to only twenty-six cloistered nuns and three lay sisters or servants. The nun who recorded this information added that "we almost constantly have many sick women and many debts."⁶³ Either the pestilence that was raging in Florence or some other disease must have reached the convent, decimating its population.⁶⁴ Did it also carry off Brigida's daughter and niece?

Rather than choosing to live in the convent, Brigida may have decided to live on her own. Though it was relatively rare among women of her social standing for a widow to live independently, it is possible that Brigida followed this course. At the death of her husband, Antonio, Brigida's mother-in-law, Madonna Verde Baldinotti, decided to live alone. Antonio's widow stated in a notarized document that she chose a solitary life, rather than share her home with her sons, because she was unable to "live peacefully" with them.⁶⁵ Brigida may have chosen to follow in her mother-in-law's footsteps, to lead a life of independent widowhood. The question arises whether she would have remained in Pistoia or perhaps have followed her beloved grandson to Florence, where he was living under his sentence of life imprisonment. She may have felt that by being nearby she could help him, whether through using her influence in elite Florentine circles or by providing him with food and other essentials. Whether or not Brigida had actively solicited assistance on her grandson's behalf, Lorenzo apparently did pardon Niccolò. In a letter dated April 14, 1481, Lorenzo wrote to the priors of Pistoia, requesting them to allow Niccolò to return to his studies. By December of that year, Lorenzo had also written a letter of recommendation for Candida, Piero's widow.⁶⁶ Even after her grandson's release and the Baldinotti family's return to the good graces of the Medici, Brigida may have lived in Florence. There is mention in obituary documents of the death of a certain "wife of Ser Nicholao of Pistoia" in Florence in 1491. The fact that the quarter and neighborhood in which the woman died was the traditional home of the

⁶¹ Weaver, *Convent Theatre*, 61, 104–5.

⁶² "Era dispostissima nel canto e di suo mano si trovano anche dei libri da coro, scritte a lettere formate, i quali esercizi insegnava con molta pazienza alle monache giovani": Dondori, *Della pietà di Pistoia*, 255.

⁶³ Florence, Archivio di Stato, Catasto 991, fols. 112r–v.

⁶⁴ Emanuele Repetti, *Dizionario geografico fisico storico della Toscana* (Florence: Mazzoni, 1841), 423, relates that plague and famine struck Pistoia as a whole in the years 1482–83.

⁶⁵ Florence, Archivio di Stato, Notarile Anetcosimiano 16149.

⁶⁶ Marcello Del Piazzo, ed., *Protocolli del carteggio di Lorenzo il Magnifico per gli anni 1473–74, 1477–92* (Florence: Olschki, 1956), 142, 175. Lorenzo's complex relations with the Baldinotti family and these two letters are discussed in Milner, "Lorenzo and Pistoia," 250–51.

Florentine branch of the Baldinotti family makes it likely that the woman referred to was Brigida.⁶⁷

This much is certain: a learned woman by the name of Brigida Baldinotti of Pistoia wrote two vernacular epistles that circulated widely in the manuscript culture of fifteenth-century Florence. The presence of these letters in that city can be explained, in the first place, by the fact that the addressees in both cases were Florentines: the women serving at the hospital of Sta. Maria Nuova, and the daughter of Gualterotto de' Bardi.⁶⁸ Though she was not in Florence when she wrote the letter to the women of Sta. Maria Nuova ("although my body could not be with you, at least I could meet with all of you by means of this letter"), Brigida appears to have known them very well. It is possible that at one time she had been a patient there, or that she was otherwise personally acquainted with one or more of the women who served there. Though many members of the nursing staff were permanent hired servants, other women, who came from Brigida's social milieu, served as volunteers. These were the "noble women in veils" mentioned by Martin Luther, who was cared for at Sta. Maria Nuova.⁶⁹ In her letter to these women, Brigida demonstrates not only familiarity with their daily tasks but also refers to one of their former patients by name, a certain "Maddalena, whose infirmities you so tenderly cared for."

In a similarly personal vein, the connection between Brigida and the Florentine Bardi family is established at the outset of that letter: "Because I recognize my obligations to your reverend mothers, and to you and all your family, from whom I have received many kindnesses ... , it seems to me that, now that you are a new bride, I ought to give you something ...". There are further indications that the young bride-to-be was kept in *serbanza* ("from the cradle you were raised by your reverend mothers") and was then removed from the convent to be married ("As long as you were with your reverend mothers you could not exceed the proper bounds, but now you must be careful"). It is possible that the Bardi girl had been raised at the convent of Sta. Lucia in Pistoia, as many of the girls there were of Florentine origins. Of the nine sisters listed in the 1427 *catasto* report, four are Florentines.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Florence, Archivio di Stato, Grascia 190, fol. 6. The death is recorded in the quarter of Ognissanti in Florence on Jan 23, 1490 (1491), with the woman's identity given as "La donna di Ser Nicholao in Pistoia." There is no mention of her among the death records of the family's church of San Domenico in Pistoia.

⁶⁸ Most manuscripts containing this epistle identify the girl as "a daughter of the Bardi." In one manuscript (Magl. XXI, 155, fol. 167r), however, the bride is identified as Francesca, the daughter of Tommaso Soderini: "Epistola di detta Brigida la quale mando a una nuova sposa exortatoria all'onesta del sancto matrimonio della Francescha figliuola di Messer Tomaso Soderini Moglie oggi di Francesco D'Antonio Antinori. Andone a chasa dello predetto Francesco a di xiiii di settembre MCCCCCLXX." In yet another manuscript (Magl. XXXVIII, 48, fol. 77r) the girl is identified as "vergine Margherita novella sposa di Jacopo ditto, herede d'Altino de' Bardi e figliuola di Ghalterotto Ghaulterotti."

⁶⁹ John Henderson, *The Renaissance Hospital: Healing the Body and Healing the Soul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 186.

⁷⁰ These are "Suora Appolonia da Firenze d'anni 17 o circa, Suora Bartolomea da Firenze d'anni 14 o circa, Suora Margherita da Firenze d'anni 14 o circa, Suora Giovanna da Firenze d'anni 11 o circa": Florence, Archivio di Stato, Catasto 189, fol. 597r.

That Brigida, a Pistoian woman, had many Florentine social connections is clear; how her letters came to be copied and circulated so widely in Florence is less obvious. Could the nuns of Sta. Lucia, once they had seen the letter to the young Bardi woman, have been so pleased by it that they made sure to circulate it in Florentine circles as a kind of marketing device—or that one or more of Brigida's friends at Sta. Maria Nuova proudly showed her missive around? By one means or another, it is likely that erudite and pious letters such as this, written by a woman, would come to the attention of the circle of Lucrezia Tornabuoni, especially as, until their disgrace, the Baldinotti had close connections with the Medici. A copy of the epistles may have been sent to the Medici, or as is more likely, introduced personally by Brigida's nephew, the poet Tommaso Baldinotti (1451–1511). Living in Florence from 1473 through 1478, Tommaso was a member of Lorenzo's close inner circle, known as the *brigata*, and counted among his friends Angelo Poliziano and Luigi Pulci. As, on the one hand, Tommaso wrote love poems and burlesque pieces to divert Lorenzo and his friends, on the other hand he may have shared his aunt's writings with Lorenzo's pious mother, Lucrezia Tornabuoni. Indeed, a copy of Brigida's *Epistles* is to be found among the books owned by the Medici.⁷¹ It was almost certainly by way of exposure in the Medici household that the Pistoian author's writings became well known in Florence. But to understand their patronage is only one part of understanding their impact on Florentine society.

BRIGIDA'S EPISTLES AND THEIR PLACE IN THE LITERARY TRADITION OF FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE

In order to more fully appreciate Brigida's writing and to understand why it was so popular among Florentines, it is necessary to place these two epistles within the context of the literary culture of her day. Florentines in the mid-fifteenth century collected in their *zibaldoni* anthologies a vast number of vernacular texts from their own and the previous century. They copied both the Latin classics, translated into *volgare*, as well as the more recent vernacular works of such writers as Dante, Compagni, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Alberti, Palmieri, Poliziano, and Pulci. In addition to these well-known writings, many other literary texts were being read. The celebrated classics of the Italian trecento and quattrocento that have come down to us in the official canon represent only a fraction of all the vernacular literature that circulated in the fifteenth century. For every major literary figure there are scores of lesser-known authors of poetry and prose, the so-called *minori*: writers like Passavanti, Faitinelli, Bianco da Siena, Cecco Nuccoli, Fazio degli Uberti, Sacchetti, Giovanni Fiorentino, Il Za, and Pucci.

Yet even the number of works produced by these *minori* pales in comparison with the hundreds of texts that were written by obscure or anonymous individuals. Although the literary output of Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was large, the number of literary works is dwarfed by the paraliterary writings produced in the vernacular by a wide segment of society in the Italian

⁷¹ Med. Laur. Plut. 41.39; see n. 14 above.

peninsula. For even further down the literary ladder is a third tier of writings, which were widely copied. Teresa Poggi-Salani describes the spectrum of these texts: “Beyond literature, which comprises the lesser, if better-known pages of past centuries, there are the many, many vernacular writings without formal ambitions, at times meant for private use, at other times directed to a specific public—from letters to books of arithmetic, from cooking recipes to astronomy/astrology, from official statutes to more modest edifying literature, from pharmaceutical receipts to professional manuals.”⁷²

Brigida’s epistles fall within this third group, which proliferated throughout Italy, particularly in the cities of Tuscany, during the fifteenth century. Tuscany in this period has been called “the region with a pen in its hand” by Duccio Balestracci, who writes, “At the end of the Middle Ages, urban Tuscans seemed stricken with a writing fever, a desire to note down everything they saw.”⁷³ This collective graphomania can be explained in a variety of ways: first and foremost, by the astonishingly high literacy rates in the region, motivated in large part by merchants’ need to educate their children in the vernacular.⁷⁴ These same merchants needed to keep track of their expenses in register books or to write letters when traveling on business; and they soon developed a collective culture of recording their life experiences in *ricordi*, or memoirs. This passion for writing was not limited to the merchant class but was widespread throughout most of the urban population in Tuscany. Studies of the Florentine *catasto* demonstrate that literacy was common throughout all strata of society and that “literacy was universal among men of the *popolo*, and nearly so among its women.”⁷⁵

Tuscan men and women were reading and writing an extraordinarily wide variety of vernacular texts, among which the epistolary genre stands out.⁷⁶ One of the most popular genres in the quattrocento, epistles are omnipresent in *zibaldoni*. Two of the most popular were Pseudo-Bernard’s *Epistle to Raymond*, with its practical advice on managing a household, and Boccaccio’s *Epistle to Pino*

⁷² “Al di là della letteratura, che è solo la parte minore anche se la più conosciuta delle pagine dei secoli passati, ci sono le tante e tante scritture volgari senza ambizioni formali, ora d’uso private, ora dirette a un loro specifico pubblico, dalle lettere ai libri d’aritmetica, dalle ricette di cucina all’astronomia-astrologia, dagli statuti alle più modeste scritture edificanti, dalle ricette di farmaci ai manuali dei mestieri”: Teresa Poggi Salani, “La Toscana,” in *L’Italiano nelle regioni*, ed. Francesco Bruni (Turin: UTET, 1992), 402–61, at 408.

⁷³ Duccio Balestracci, *The Renaissance in the Fields: Family Memoirs of a Fifteenth-Century Tuscan Peasant* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 1.

⁷⁴ For a general overview of literacy and education in Italy during this period see Robert Black, “Education and the Emergence of a Literate Society,” in *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance*, ed. John Najemy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18–36.

⁷⁵ John Najemy, “Introduction: Italy and the Renaissance,” in *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance*, ed. Najemy, 1–17, at 10. In his recent study, Robert Black estimates Florentine literacy to be “at least 69.3% of the adult male population,” *Education and Society in Florentine Tuscany: Teachers, Pupils and Schools c.1250–1500* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 42. On the literary activities of merchants see Christian Bec, *Les marchands écrivains, affaires et humanisme à Florence, 1375–1434* (Paris: La Haye, Mouton & Co., 1967) and Vittore Branca, ed., *Mercanti scrittori: Ricordi nella Firenze tra Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Milan: Rusconi, 1986).

⁷⁶ For a broad overview of the contents of fifteenth-century *zibaldoni* see Kent, *Cosimo*, chap. 6 and also Kaborycha, “Copying Culture.”

de' Rossi, in which the author of the *Decameron* exhorts his countryman to endure exile with fortitude. There were many ancient Latin epistles translated into *volgare*, such as those of Catiline to Lentulus; Seneca to Lucilius; Hannibal to Scipio Africanus; many of Cicero's letters, especially to Atticus; as well as those composed by more recent historical figures, such as Robert of Anjou to Walter of Brienne, the Duke of Athens; and Emperor Charles IV to Clement VI.⁷⁷ There were letters written by the church fathers—epistles of Paul, Jerome, and Augustine—as well as the correspondence of more modern religious figures, such as Giovanni dalle Celle, Giovanni Domenici, and Catherine of Siena. Other more or less contemporary epistles often copied, in addition to those of Petrarch, include letters of Leonardo Bruni, Coluccio Salutati, Forese di Taddeo, Tommaso di Giunta, and Fazio degli Uberti. Epistles penned by sage or “venerable” authorities were considered ideal containers of moral advice. The phenomenon of the epistolary genre's popularity fits into the larger category of what Dale Kent refers to as “the vast literature of guidance to the virtuous Christian life” that circulated in quattrocento *zibaldoni*.⁷⁸

Readers of these epistles expected to be instructed and morally edified, but they were often also looking for more specific practical information. One example is found in the compilation of sixty-five erotic letters known as the *Formulario di epistole amoroze*, selections of which are often to be found in fifteenth-century *zibaldoni*. These letters, which vary in tone depending on the situation and the social status of the recipient, were meant to be used as templates for writing persuasive love letters.⁷⁹ Similarly, Ovid's *Heroides*, titled simply in most manuscripts *Le pistole d'Ovidio*, circulated in a variety of prose and verse translations.⁸⁰ These imaginary letters, written by mythological heroes and heroines to their lovers, are found in a surprisingly large number of *zibaldoni*. The language of Ovid's fanciful letters, particularly in vernacular prose translations, resembles that of the *Formulario*, leading one to suspect that the *Heroides*, too, had its practical applications.⁸¹

No less important than love letters, business correspondence played a role in quattrocento merchant culture; skill in written communication was essential to maintaining relations over long distances. Moreover, individuals from every sector of society recognized the usefulness of being able to write flattering, persuasive letters to social superiors, as evidenced by the quattrocento missives

⁷⁷ Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius* and other Latin epistles translated into *volgare* which circulated in Florentine *zibaldoni* are described in Alison Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy: Illiterate Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 75.

⁷⁸ Kent, *Cosimo*, 86.

⁷⁹ Several of these letters are to be found in Vittorio Cian, *Lettere d'amore e segretari galanti del tempo antico: Appunti storici e florilegio* (Pisa: Fratelli Nistri, 1905) and Jole Scudieri Ruggieri, “Due lettere d'amore,” *Archivum romanicum* 29 (1940): 92–94.

⁸⁰ On Ovid's *Heroides* in the quattrocento manuscript tradition see Giovanna Lazzi, *Di Ovidio le Metamorphosi & presenze ovidiane manoscritti ed edizioni a stampa dal XV al XIX secolo nelle collezioni della Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze* (Florence: Fos, 1994); also Cornish, *Vernacular Translation*, 27, 40.

⁸¹ Indeed, in one manuscript (Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS Ricc. 2729, fol. 69r) one of the formulaic love letters is copied immediately after Hero's letter to Leander.

addressed to the Medici that fill the Mediceo avanti il Principato collection in Florence's Archivio di Stato. Several highly practical texts that circulated in *zibaldoni* were intended to assist the reader in writing letters and formulating arguments. One of these texts lists dozens of individuals from the pope down to nobles, civic dignitaries, business acquaintances, family members, countesses, and finally, at the bottom of the list, to "a nun of holy life," giving the appropriate form of address for each.⁸² Others concentrate on constructing persuasive arguments: these include the *Libro delle dicerie*, attributed to Filippo Ceffi; the anonymous *Trattatello di colori rettorici*; Bono Giamboni's *Fiore di rettorica*, a vernacular adaptation of Cicero's *Ad Herennium*; and Guidotto da Bologna's reworking of Giamboni's treatise.⁸³ These works provide a variety of examples of how to delight and persuade effectively, adapting the ancient authors' precepts to diverse contemporary social situations involving writing or speaking.⁸⁴

Readers' interest in epistles, then, was twofold: while they appreciated eloquent writing, delighting in choice turns of phrase, they also expected to be edified by the content. They tended not to make distinctions between merely "entertaining" letters and "educational" ones, as is evident from this typical preface to Ovid's *Heroides*: "So that you, reader, may have a clear understanding of this book, know that Ovid wrote these *Epistles* to instruct young men and young women how to love wisely. And yet he presents many examples of both honest and dishonest love: the honest to be followed by them, the dishonest to repel them."⁸⁵ The most popular epistles were the ones that successfully combined an uplifting content with a good literary form that could be admired and imitated.

Brigida Baldinotti's two epistles were undoubtedly considered exemplary in both these regards. The form of her *Epistle to the Women Religious of the Hospital of Sta. Maria Nuova*, written in a tone of respectful and sustained admiration, is a model of encomium. It incorporates all the elements of the *ars dictaminis*, or rhetoric applied to the writing of letters. All the elements of good epistolary

⁸² This text is attributed to Leonardo Bruni by the copyist of one manuscript, Ricc. 2278, fol. 74v.

⁸³ For an overview of these vernacular rhetorical treatises see Stephen J. Milner, "Le sottili cose non si possono bene aprire in volgare": Vernacular Oratory and the Transmission of Classical Rhetorical Theory in the Late Medieval Italian Communes," *Italian Studies* 64 (2009): 221–44. On the *Dicerie* see Giuliana Giannardi, "Le Dicerie' di Filippo Ceffi," *Studi di filologia italiana* 6 (1942): 5–63, at 63; on the *Trattatello* see *Trattatello di colori rettorici*, ed. Francesco Zambrini (Imola: Galeati, 1851) and Antonio Scolari, "Un volgarizzamento trecentesco della 'Rhetorica ad Herennium': il 'Trattatello di colori rettorici,'" *Medioevo romanzo* 9 (1984): 215–55. On vernacular readership of rhetorical texts see also Cornish, *Vernacular Translation*, 30–31.

⁸⁴ "Italian dictatores used *De inventione* and *Ad herennium* idiosyncratically to produce their own letters": Ronald Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovati to Bruni* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 204.

⁸⁵ "Accio che ttu lettore abii apertamente il conoscimento di questo libro, sappi che Ovidio fecie queste pistole per amaestrare li giovani huomini elle giovani donne di saviamente amare. Et pero introducie e racconta molti essempli d'amore onesti e disonesti. Li onesti perche si seghuano li disonesti perche si schifino ...": Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS BR 47, fol. 43r. For similar examples of *accessus ad auctores* see Vanna Lippi-Bigazzi, *Volgarizzamenti trecenteschi dell' 'Ars amandi' e dei 'Remedia amoris,'* 2 vols. (Florence: Accademia della Crusca, 1987).

style—the *salutatio*, *exordium* (*captatio benevolentiae*), *narratio*, *petitio*, and *conclusio*—are present in this epistle.⁸⁶ Stylistically, an august tone is conveyed by means of lengthy sentences adorned with multiple stately clauses. Various extended metaphors are employed, particularly of foods, flowers, and the garden. Brigida cites many authorities as well, among them Augustine, Paul, Ambrose, and Jerome. The erudition, however, is tastefully undercut by the author's professions of humility. The other epistle, to a daughter of the Bardi family, is a model for how to write a gracious letter of advice and praise to a person who, though quite young, belongs to a family of the highest social standing. The *salutatio* of this letter is extremely formal, written in Latin rather than vernacular; and throughout, literary authorities are consistently cited in Latin, honoring the education of the young woman as well as the "reverend mothers" who taught her. The entire letter is self-consciously designed as a tribute to the bride and the bride's family. Furthermore, the author describes her gift in the opening paragraph in these words: "It seems to me that, now that you are a new bride, I ought to give you something. However, when I saw that I lacked the means, I became pained and troubled. While reading in these past days, I came upon some material that is wholly appropriate to the state of matrimony in which you newly find yourself. I considered that the Lord had prepared this material for me in order that I present it to you as a gift." Brigida wrote this epistle as one would craft a precious artifact. Given as a wedding present, it is an object to be admired and treasured for its beauty, as would be the gift of a costly missal or a piece of fine brocade.

No less than for their form, Brigida's epistles were prized for their pious content. The message in the letter to the sisters at Sta. Maria Nuova is praise of charity, virginity, and self-sacrifice in the name of Christ, while the other letter advises a highborn Florentine girl how to lead a worldly married life with dignity and in accordance with Christian teachings. Several important themes stand out in Brigida's writings; in particular, the contemporary concern for the role of the pious laity is very strong in both the *Epistles*. Specifically, the involvement of the laity in charitable institutions is a theme that Brigida addresses in the Sta. Maria Nuova letter, as indeed the women who worked there were not nuns but were similar to tertiaries in that they did not take holy orders.⁸⁷ In this letter she draws on the examples of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, who fed the poor with her own hands; and of St. Catherine of Siena, who licked clean the leper's sores. Neither of these two saints had been cloistered nuns—Elizabeth was married, and

⁸⁶ For a concise description of the elements of the *ars dictaminis* see Judith Rice Henderson, "Erasmus on the Art of Letter Writing," in *Renaissance Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric*, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 331–55, at 333. For a discussion of an elite quattrocento Florentine woman's vernacular letter writing that employs the *ars dictaminis* see Ann Crabb, "How to Influence Your Children: Persuasion and Form in Alessandra Macigni Strozzi's Letters to Her Sons," in *Women's Letters Across Europe, 1400–1700: Form and Persuasion*, ed. Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 21–42, at 36–37.

⁸⁷ "S. Maria Nuova had by 1374 a range of resident staff called 'conversi, oblati, familiari, servigiali perpetui.' Their status was similar to members of the Third Orders, many of whom themselves ran hospitals": Henderson, *The Renaissance Hospital*, 187.

Catherine was a Dominican tertiary—so their examples would have had strong resonance with Brigida’s contemporaries. Care for the sick, orphaned, and impoverished was a major concern at this time; Lucia Gai documents no fewer than twenty-five *ospedali* in Pistoia. By the mid-fifteenth century these works came to be concentrated in Pistoia’s civic hospital, the Ospedale del Ceppo and its founding home, the Ospedale di San Gregorio, which had their equivalents in Florence’s Sta. Maria Nuova and the Ospedale degli Innocenti.⁸⁸

Brigida implies that, though not superior to the *vita contemplativa* of the cloistered nun, the *vita activa* practiced by the lay sisters in the hospital is a surer path to salvation and more useful: “He has given you continuous exercise, as leisure is the enemy of such a virtue. Thus we see many very delicate virgins, who, lacking exercise to weary them, mortify their delicate bodies with fasts, vigils, and other forms of abstinence in order to be able to preserve that immaculate treasure for God.” She underlines this point by reminding the lay sisters that it is not enough to wear themselves out in their self-sacrifice; rather, even while performing works of charity, they must concentrate on thoughts of divine love: “Surrounded by Christ’s poor, by exerting yourselves you shall receive the glorious reward not according to the amount of toil, but according to the greatness of the love which you bring to caring for their needs.... In vain does a person tire herself out, possessing all the laudable and gracious virtues, if there is no holy charity, without which none of our works can be pleasing to God.”

Thus with the right intentions a laywoman can achieve salvation as well as a nun. This lesson is plainly conveyed when, citing Augustine, Brigida writes, “a humble wife is better than a proud virgin.” Her letter to the newly married young Bardi woman elaborates on this theme. It also carries a message advocating dedicated lay piety for women, but this message is more subtle, directed as it is to an elite audience. Brigida does not suggest to the young heiress that she lick the sores of lepers or change bandages, but she does urge an active spiritual involvement. Rather than being admonished to reach out to the poor, the bride is advised to direct her attention inward, while at the same time providing through her good behavior a positive example for other girls of her class. The models Brigida gives her elite young reader are three saints of noble extraction: Cecilia, Catherine of Alexandria, and Ursula. Stressing the fine clothes, beauty, and education enjoyed by each, Brigida points out that such advantages early in life did not impede the spiritual growth of these saintly women. Despising the outward trappings of their privileged lives, these women were able to focus their minds on God, attaining sainthood.

Brigida was clearly familiar with the trappings of the privileged of her day and described in knowing detail the many temptations to vanity to which elite girls were exposed. She portrays the transition from the quiet life of maidenhood to the moment when girls were trotted out onto the showy marriage market as a particularly treacherous time: “those little girls who stay at home for a certain time, dressed in simple clothes, but then, decked out by their fathers and mothers and paraded around in great pomp—oh, how rapidly the dangerous wind of

⁸⁸ Gai, “Centro e periferia,” 73–75.

vainglory bends them down to earth.” The girls are suddenly plunged into a whirl of parties (“upon entering the state of wedlock every kind of immoral behavior, every excessive habit, and every vain pleasure of dancing and singing is permitted” to them), indulgence in fancy hairstyles (“in a short time she will change her hairstyle many times over, caring neither about the great expense, nor about the offense to God, nor about the bad example”), and encouraged to wear “indecent and excessive dress.” On this latter topic she even includes a practical warning that heavy clothing can actually induce miscarriage: “I do believe that because of these excessive garments and the great heat, many lose children they have already begotten and do not even realize it.”

Brigida is also concerned with the dangers of indecent passion within marriage. After the passage where she enumerates the nine reasons why marriage is to be held sacred, she compares matrimony to the Eucharist, writing that “it is just as grave a sin to violate matrimony as to throw the sacred Host off the altar into the mud.” Matrimony is meant to cleanse sin, rather than to be the source of greater immorality. To drive home her point, in the following sentence the author advises her reader to “consider the advice the angel Raphael gave young Tobias when he joined in matrimony with Sarah.” This very popular biblical tale tells of Tobias’s long and arduous journey, on which he was accompanied by the angel Raphael, and of his subsequent marriage to Sarah. Sarah had been wed seven times previously, but each of her husbands died on the wedding night because, possessed by a demon, they were overly lustful. Tobias and Sarah overcame the curse by heeding Raphael’s advice: “Then the angel Raphael said to him: ‘Hear me, and I will show thee who they are, over whom the devil can prevail. For they who in such manner receive matrimony, as to shut out God from themselves, and from their mind, and to give themselves to their lust, as the horse and mule, which have not understanding, over them the devil hath power. But you when you shall take her, go into the chamber, and for three days keep yourself continent from her, and give yourself to nothing else but to prayers with her.’”⁸⁹ Any fifteenth-century Florentine would have been familiar with the story, as it was the subject of numerous paintings (for example, by Neri di Bicci, Benozzo Gozzoli, Filippino Lippi, Andrea Pollaiuolo, Botticini, and Verrocchio), of *sacre rappresentazioni*, and of vernacular retellings, most notably Lucrezia Tornabuoni’s *Life of Tobias*.⁹⁰ The lurid deaths of Sarah’s husbands and the bride’s humiliation would have stood as a clear warning to anyone reading this text, and thus Brigida had no need to mention sexual passion explicitly.

Brigida emphasizes that the transition from the unmarried to the married state is not a renunciation of austerity in favor of indulgence, and that a girl ought to retain her dignity, maintaining the values inculcated in her convent education rather than losing her head when so many worldly temptations are set before her. To do this a girl must use her judgment, and here is perhaps the strongest

⁸⁹ Tob. 6.16–18.

⁹⁰ Jane Tylus comments on the omnipresence of the Tobias story during the quattrocento, writing “it appears that the topic had acquired unprecedented importance”: Lucrezia Tornabuoni, *Sacred Narratives*, ed. and trans. Jane Tylus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 72.

message that Brigida wishes to convey: a girl's intelligence, her use of reason, is her most valuable asset. Over and over Brigida speaks of a woman's powers of intellect. The older woman reminds her young reader that she has been "endowed with a noble and gentle mind," and admonishes her to "raise then, daughter, that gentle mind that God has given you." "He gave you neither your distinguished birth, nor riches and worldly pomp," writes Brigida, "[but] your gentle mind, lit by enlightened reason." And she exclaims, "Oh this noble and precious dowry of intellect and discretion, which is superior to all riches!" Unlike others who maintain that girls are thoughtless and have no responsibility for their deeds, Brigida stubbornly insists on a young woman's power of self-determination: "They say, 'She is a girl; God will pardon her.' I believe that sin will be judged at all times, in all conditions, at all ages, according to the understanding and discretion of the one who has committed it.... Let us understand each other: is this really not to be punished?"

Given their strong content directed towards women, one would expect Brigida's epistles to have been included in manuscript collections with an emphasis on feminine themes. There are, indeed, two *zibaldoni* into which Brigida's writings were copied along with a vernacular translation of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*.⁹¹ However, for the most part no specifically female gender orientation can be identified in the collections in which her letters are found. One or both of Brigida's epistles were often included in large quattrocento epistolary anthologies whose contents are cataloged as "epistole e dicerie," among which there are no specifically feminine themes, and in which the only female author is Brigida.⁹² Indeed, if the epistles copied alongside Brigida's have a specific gender theme, it is a misogynist one, such as that found in the *zibaldone* created in the cloth workshop of Ser Francesco Ciai in 1470. In that collection, Brigida's letters are immediately preceded by a selection from Secundus the Philosopher against women; Theophrastus's *On Marriage*; the extremely popular *canzone* by Antonio Pucci entitled *A New Poem on Women's Sinfulness*; and the *frottola* "Shall I counsel you as a friend? Do as I say and do not take a wife."⁹³ The presence of the writings of "the venerable Brigida Baldinotti" in these collections demonstrates that, despite the negative attitudes quattrocento men may have harbored against women, their misogyny did not necessarily extend to the writings of female authors.

⁹¹ BNCF II, IV, 80 and Magl. XXII, 43.

⁹² Several examples of this kind of epistolary anthology would be Ricc. 1074; Ricc. 1080; Ricc. 2272; Ricc. 2322.

⁹³ Magl. XXI, 155. On Secundus: Ben Edwin Perry, *Secundus the Silent Philosopher* Philological Monographs of the American Philological Association 22 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964). On Theophrastus: *Trattato sopra il torre moglie o no, secondo Teofrasto sommo filosofo, scrittura del secolo XIV*, ed. Giuseppe Chiarini (Florence: Cellini, 1859); published also in the journal *Poliziano* (Feb. 1859): 121–128. In this manuscript Pucci's poems have the following incipits: "Nuova canzone di femina tristiza" and "Vo tu chiti consigli com'amicho or fa que' ch'io dico di non prendere moglie." There is a printed edition of Pucci's poem, which is sometimes entitled *Il contrasto delle donne*, ed. Alessandro D'Ancona, "Una poesia ed una prosa di Antonio Pucci," *Il Propugnatore* 2 (1869): 412–38.

CONCLUSIONS

While these texts will never join the high literary canon of the quattrocento, and while our biographical information about their author is frustratingly scanty, nevertheless study of Brigida Baldinotti's life and her writings must open up a number of important new avenues of research. Specifically, fresh perspectives can be gained on the popular culture of the quattrocento; on female education in provincial Tuscany; and on women's role in the literary culture of this period.

In regard to popular culture, Brigida's two *Epistles* contain much that is potentially of interest and value to both the student of Italian literature and the social historian. Very little work has been done on what I have termed a "third tier" of literary production. If we want to discover more about the attitudes and beliefs of fifteenth-century Tuscans, what better place to begin than with the texts they chose to copy most often? More than the most elegantly crafted sonnets or sophisticated humanist commentaries, "best sellers" like Brigida's epistles tell us what was on most people's minds during this period. Certain themes recur repeatedly; it is not a coincidence that the story of Tobias and the angel play a central role in the works of both Brigida and her contemporary Lucrezia Tornabuoni, for instance. Brigida also mentions Elizabeth of Hungary and Catherine of Siena, figures who are omnipresent in fifteenth-century popular collections. A thorough study of these types of themes could reveal more about the common preoccupations and aspirations of people at the time than any amount of research on the writings of Poliziano or Valla.

Our awareness of the learning on display in Brigida's writing encourages us to formulate new questions concerning female education in her era. Where did Brigida gain such erudition, in particular her knowledge of Latin? Brigida's command of the classical language does not reflect the elegant humanist Latin employed by daughters of scholars in this period.⁹⁴ Rather, her writing demonstrates a serviceable familiarity with the Latin writings of the church fathers. The little we do know about Brigida's connection with the Dominican convent of Sta. Lucia suggests that she may have learned Latin there. The text of her *Epistle to a Daughter of the Bardi*, peppered with quotations in Latin, implies that the author expected the convent-raised bride to whom it is addressed to understand the language. Typically, parents who left their girls in *serbanza* expected the convent simply "to teach them the virtues, to train them, and to provide them with food and lodging."⁹⁵ In other words, the nuns provided their boarders with religious education and training in modesty and comportment, and also taught such skills as sewing, along with the rudiments of vernacular reading. It could not, however, have been uncommon for learned nuns to have taught Latin to especially gifted pupils. We know, for example, that the humanist Laura Cereta

⁹⁴ On women writing humanistic Latin see Margaret King and Albert Rabil Jr., eds. *Her Immaculate Hand: Selected Works by and about Women Humanists of Quattrocento Italy* (Binghamton: Center for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies, 1983).

⁹⁵ Strocchia, "Learning the Virtues," 16.

(1469–99) received Latin instruction from a nun.⁹⁶ Closer examination of such instances could lead to a reassessment of the educational opportunities that secular students were exposed to within the convent setting.

Brigida Baldinotti's writings ought to be viewed in this light as adding to the evidence for learned women's writing in the vernacular. That her works were widely admired by contemporaries of both sexes is significant. Florentine men copied her epistles throughout the fifteenth century, evidence that challenges our assumption that, in a society in which women's social opportunities were strictly controlled, their literary expression was always equally restricted. If the writings of Brigida Baldinotti can have been hidden in plain sight for over five hundred years in manuscript anthologies and are only now being explored, who knows how many other women's writings might be waiting to be similarly discovered?

APPENDIX: THREE LETTERS OF BRIGIDA BALDINOTTI

Of the following letters, the first—the *Epistle to the Women Religious of the Hospital of Sta. Maria Nuova of Florence*—was copied with almost twice the frequency of the other, the *Epistle sent by Donna Brigida to a Daughter of the Bardi*. As the original Italian can be found in Biscioni's volume, I have limited myself here to translating the two *Epistles* into English.⁹⁷ In the manuscript tradition these two epistles are given various titles. The first is often referred to as *Epistola alle donne che servono in Santa Maria Nuova in Firenze* or *Epistola alle donne dello spedale di Santa Maria Nuova*, the other as *Epistola mandò donna Brigida a una fanciulla* and similarly formulated titles. For the sake of clarity I have chosen to adopt the titles given in Biscioni's edition.

I have also included a personal letter of Brigida to her son that I discovered in the Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence.⁹⁸ Since this autograph letter has never been printed before, I provide both a transcription of the Italian and an English translation. Aside from the signature "Brigida" at the bottom and a librarian's notation, "Brigida Baldinotti," beneath it, several intertextual and biographical references indicate that the author of the *Epistles* and the author of this letter are one and the same: 1. There are references to the angel Raphael, from the book of Tobias, in both the letter and in the second *Epistle*.

⁹⁶ Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, ed. and trans. Diana Robin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

⁹⁷ I have made the translation of the two epistles from Ricc. 1133, the same manuscript from which Biscioni makes his transcription. The majority of this *zibaldone*, containing Petrarch's *Trionfi* and other miscellaneous works, was copied by Jacopo di Niccolò di Cocco Donati in 1441. Donati did not, however, copy the Brigida portion, as Biscioni mistakenly reports. Her two epistles were copied in a different hand by an anonymous copyist who added these sections while doing time in the Stinche prison in June 1451: Salomone Morpurgo, *I manoscritti della R. Biblioteca Riccardiana di Firenze* (Rome: Presso I Principali Librai, 1893), 162; Teresa De Robertis and Rosanna Miriello, *I manoscritti datati della Biblioteca Riccardiana di Firenze*, vol. 2 (Florence: SISMEL- Edizioni del Galluzzo, 1997), 16. The copyist in the Stinche was the same one who copied Ricc. 1080, which contains both of Brigida's epistles, as well as Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS BNCf II, III, 67, also copied in the Stinche in August 1456.

⁹⁸ Rossi-Cassigoli V, VI, B, fol. 43. This short letter in Brigida's own hand is addressed on the back to "Dilecto filio Piero di Nicholo in Pisa." This letter is unfortunately undated. Since Piero and Candida were married in 1457 and this letter describes the birth of their second child, it could not have been written before 1459.

2. The proverb that appears in the letter to her son in the form “Ingratitude dries up the fountain of mercy” is echoed in a more literary register in both the *Epistle to the Women Religious of the Hospital of Sta. Maria Nuova* (“But take care that ingratitude, that ruinous wind, which dries up the fountain of mercy, does not deprive you of such great eternal good”) as well as in the *Epistle to a Daughter of the Bardi* (“Beware, daughter, of the iniquitous wind of ingratitude that dries up the fountain of divine mercy”). 3. One recognizes Brigida’s sententious style again in another proverb she includes in her letter: “Discretion is the mother of all the virtues.” 4. The references to the Dominican St. Catherine of Siena, to the girl Maddalena who joins “the excellent and devout convent of the rule of St. Dominic,” and to the strictly observant nuns described in the first *Epistle* call forth an image of the convent of Sta. Lucia in Pistoia mentioned in the letter. Reinforcing the author’s connections to the renowned Dominican convent is the presence of the virtuous sisters in the first *Epistle*, but especially the learned reverend mothers everywhere referred to in the second *Epistle*.

1. EPISTLE OF THE VENERABLE WIDOW, BRIGIDA BALDINOTTI,
THE WIDOW OF NICCOLÒ BALDINOTTI OF PISTOIA, SENT TO THE WOMEN
RELIGIOUS OF THE HOSPITAL OF STA. MARIA NUOVA OF FLORENCE

Reverend Mothers and dearest Sisters in Christ,

May that divine grace, which makes our works acceptable in the eyes of God, be ever in your souls, and may they be worthy dwelling places for the Holy Spirit. May your souls be a gracious garden for God, for certainly the fresh garden in May adorned with a variety of flowers is never so pleasing to human eyes as is the gracious garden of the soul to eternal God, who is its true gardener. It is worked through sacred contrition, bathed by the supernal dew of devout tears, and bears the whitest roses of virginity as well as the reddest roses of charity, and many perfumed flowers of diverse virtues. How much this delights our heavenly king, hear from what he said with his own holy mouth: “My delights are to be with the sons of man.” [Prov. 8.31] And in contemplation [of those words], a soul that loved Jesus Christ cried out, saying: “Come, my darling, into his orchard, and eat of his fruits and apples.” [Song of Sol. 4.16] He did not say “my garden,” but “his,” because he has worked it and ordered it, and adorned it so nobly with virtue that it is from him that we have all that is good within ourselves. Moreover, St. Paul says that we are not able to think of any good work on our own, but that our abilities derive from our Lord God. And though our earthly minds, weighed down by sins and worldly affections, are not capable of rising up to consider the order and magnificence of the blessed life, nonetheless, as St. Paul the apostle says: “When the creature considers and understands all these lower things, which are visible to us, created by God, by raising up the intellect to these things, one can come to meditate upon the invisible things of God.” [Rom. 1.20]

As we see in this life, when a great lord or temporal king loves one of his servants, he places that servant in a worthier post, so that he will be honored at court. Oh, most beloved of Jesus Christ, with most ardent love and inflamed affection raise up your mind’s eye, giving thanks to God on high, the supreme king, who has chosen you for two of his worthiest offices, and the most honorable in all his court, so that the celestial *patria* may be fittingly honored. One, if I have considered correctly, is the office of holy virginity. How glorious and beloved of God is this virtue. My weak intellect and miserable tongue fail to express all its dignity; but such is its greatness that the Holy Scriptures marvelously exalt it. Heed St. Ambrose, who says: “Virginity takes precedence before all other human qualities for which men are likened to angels.” [De virgin. 1.7] The victory of virgins is greater than that of the angels, because, being spirits, angels live without flesh, whereas virgins triumph over the flesh. Thus it is certain that where there is a greater battle, there is also the greater triumph; hence the humble virgin, she who is a true virgin in body and mind, is surely an angel on earth.

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But well does Augustine say that a humble wife is better than a proud virgin, as it is most displeasing to God that his own creature would exalt herself in pride for graces and gifts which she does not, in herself, possess, but which come from God; these are granted by him out of his goodness, not through our own merit. Oh, ineffable mercy of God, who in so many inscrutable ways provides for his elect! So that you may keep such a precious treasure whole and immaculate, he has given you continuous exercise, as leisure is the enemy of such a virtue. Thus we see many very delicate virgins, who, lacking exercise to weary them, mortify their delicate bodies with fasts, vigils, and other forms of abstinence in order to be able to preserve that immaculate treasure for God.

As for the second office, for which you have been elected through divine clemency, may it be grand and noble, as we may consider by its result: that on that terrible day of final judgment when we receive the ultimate reward for our works, in all the Holy Scripture there is not to be found anything else by which the highest judge shall examine us if not by our works of mercy, and most of all those done on behalf of the poor. By putting yourselves in the person of the pauper, surrounded by Christ's poor, by exerting yourselves, you shall receive the glorious reward not according to the amount of toil, but according to the greatness of the love that you bring to caring for their needs. Yet it is necessary that charity be mistress and ruler of such an office, so that it will be acceptable to God on high. In vain does a person tire herself out, even if she possesses all the laudable and gracious virtues, if she has no holy charity, without which none of our works can be pleasing to God. Such is its exalted nature that, lacking it, God's creature lacks every other virtue; only excellent charity lives and triumphs with souls in that eternal glory.

Rejoice, therefore, Oh beloved brides and ministers of Jesus Christ, and render him infinite thanks, that through his clemency he deigns to let grace dwell within you. And among yourselves be like the pauper, saying: "What you do unto the lowest beneath me, do unto me." [Matt. 25.40] And it never has happened that he has appeared to one of his servants in this life in pomp or as a powerful king, but many a times as a *poverello*, as he appeared to St. Gregory and to St. Paul and to others. And this great favor and boundless love is demonstrated to us every year by the holy church when we sing, on the day of the glorious Nativity of Christ, "Born to us is the redeemer of the world, not as king of glory but as a poor, naked little child; and upon the straw between two animals." And he lived in distress as a poor man for our sins. And finally, for the sake of us miserable ones, we who are ungrateful for so many kindnesses, he from whom all treasures are created died naked upon the Cross. Oh, what agreeable joy your minds will feel, if you think that God eternal decided to leave behind celestial riches, and not out of obligation, but inflamed with love for our well-being, made himself poor and obedient to his creatures! Oh, what inestimable and peaceful jubilation you will savor if, while caring for the sordid wounds of the infirm, you think how Christ desired to be wounded for our sins! This gentle jubilation and most fragrant perfume was experienced by our St. Elizabeth, and so she always desired to care for the wounds of the sick with her own hands. This boundless sweetness was felt by Catherine of Siena, who, caring for a leprous woman, though it seemed to her that the sensuality was somewhat forbidden, assailed by the flame of celestial love, did not so much use her hands to wash it, but putting her mouth there, licked her [wounds clean]. Oh precious, oh pious transformation of lofty God, that, through the stinking wound of his creature, he desired her to put her lips to his most holy rib, to draw out such sweetness and such gentle aroma that never again did she take corporeal food!

This is that vast field from which, when sprinkled with pious tears, you will harvest joy, whereas this miserable life resembles winter, with its tempests and many tribulations. It is time to sow with plentiful tears and meritorious acts, so that in the next life, which resembles summer all serene and gracious, we can gather the fruits of our labors. And so glorious God says to one of his beloved souls: "Come to me, my beloved, winter has already passed, and summer has come." [Song of Sol. 2.11–12] May such contemplations be awakened in your minds, and your hearts be lit aflame in the

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furnaces of divine love, and living together, all in charity, you will do your work piously and joyously. And by so doing, you will fulfill the words of the prophet who says: "Serve the Lord with joy, because it is not out of fear, but out of love that he wishes to be served." Out of love he gave everything to us, even bitter death on the Cross, and from us he asks nothing but love, saying, "Son, give me your heart." [Prov. 23.26] By this he meant not the heart of the flesh, but the effect of the heart, which is love. Thus, not through any corporeal action, but only loving with true love can his creature join with God on high, while in a mortal body; such is the force of this pure and holy love that it transforms the beloved into the lover. Thus one reads of many of God's servants, and I believe that they do still exist, who are so compelled and inflamed by that celestial love that their souls, by force of love, are lifted upwards, joining with that highest good that they love so much; and the body, as if it were dead, remains immobile.

But you must know that such heights cannot be reached if all God's creatures do not love each other out of love of the creator. And yet, beloved daughters and brides of God eternal, if you desire such a priceless gift with charity and love, with a single will, living all together, think how all of you are with God, in his house, selected for the same life and office, and for the same glorious end. Let your hearts and wills then be united in such unity of purpose, and with joy think upon your corporeal toil and its limits, for this life lasts but briefly; indeed, it is almost like a shadow, and the reward is eternal and without end. Rejoice in the saying of the apostle Paul, who says that these corruptible bodies, which shortly will return to ashes and food for the worms, will be clothed anew with the light of glory. Oh sweetest mothers and sisters in Christ, if you diligently carry out your pious office, committed to you by God, with what happiness you may expect to see, once and for always, yourselves all united in that blessed life. In youthfulness and with gracious appearance, dressed not in rough fabrics but in the light of glory, you will shine unbearably, more than the sun. No longer will you nourish the poor, but you shall be nourished by celestial God on a food of ineffable beauty; all of our beatitude is contained in that blessed vision. Oh how you will take joy together in the burdens that you have borne when you see yourselves in the company of angels and such multitudes of saints, and not just for a short time, but you will surely remain forever in that inestimable happiness and eternal repose.

You will feel the marvelous joy of beatitude all over again when you see, decked out in such great glory, that multitude of paupers, those you yourselves once cared for with such charitable hands. You once saw them vile and despised on earth, now by merciful God marvelously rewarded. You shall know that many who would have died like beasts, desperate, have attained the blessed life on account of your help and care. They pray for you who have been responsible for their welfare; among those I hope you will surely see your Maddalena, whose infirmities you so tenderly cared for. This woman, not wishing to be ungrateful for the favors she received from God and from you, persevered in her good purpose. Merciful God decreed that her desire be fulfilled; thus not only did he will her to give her virginity to her spouse, Jesus Christ, but now in this most holy Easter, by the grace of God, that she should give her whole self to that sweet God who was born for us on that glorious day, poor and full of humility. Stripping herself of worldly things and her own will, clothing herself anew in the holy faith and in humility, she will enter an excellent and devout convent of the rule of St. Dominic. There she will find venerable nuns who never are to be seen, nor ever eat meat, and live in great fear of God. As St. Paul says, "having nothing, they possess everything." Believing as you do, that Maddalena effectively prays to God for you, ah, to think that if she had not been cared for by you she could never have attained holy religion!

Now you see of how much good you were the cause. You must believe that such charity will not pass the sight of God unnoticed. I take the highest pleasure in this, and I feel within myself a most delicate joy at the thought of your spiritual and temporal deeds, to such a degree that I never tire of speaking of your charity and solicitude for the sick. I tell you this not in order that you raise yourselves in pride, but to praise

God, as every good deed that is praised grows if it is well grounded in humility. But take care that ingratitude, that ruinous wind which dries up the fountain of mercy, does not deprive you of such great eternal good. Think, my beloved ones, if you remain in true humility, of what vast gifts you will continuously receive from the highest donor, God. Think how many of God's creatures must sweat in the fields all day under great and terrible heat, and also in the greatest cold, badly dressed, and fed even worse; yet all this toil of theirs is worthless because they are not moved by love or fear of God, only by the desire to gather. Now, thinking about this, you will realize how much grace you have received from God eternal, and that if he has placed you in a situation of toil, you cannot take a step that is without great merit if you take it with saintly obedience and with right intentions. Let your souls be nourished by this food, never to be destroyed by thunderstorms, nor the fruit lost to hail. And as our merciful Father has abundantly seen to providing your bodies with the necessities, do not be ungrateful to the supreme giver, all you who are desirous, each according to your ability, to satisfy him and humbly thank him, praying him that he will keep you all together in his holy peace. Since wherever there is peace, there God abides; and whoever has true peace has the foretaste of paradise. Discord is the threshold of that miserable region where there will never be repose. The more one knows and is aware, the more that person must praise God's working and have compassion for those who do not know, while always recognizing indebtedness to God. To whom more is given, more is required. God created everyone, but differently and for different reasons that are evident only to him. Nevertheless, do as St. Paul says: let each one bear the burden of her companion, and thus you shall fulfill Christ's law, which God in his mercy has granted you.

I beg of you, most beloved [sisters] in Jesus Christ, that it please you to pray to God for my miserable little soul. I am always with you in true love, and I rejoice thinking of you, of the welfare of your souls as of my own. And, compelled by your love, I resolved that although my body could not be with you, at least I could meet with all of you by means of this letter so that you might remember me in your prayers. And pray God that, leaving aside every other thing, I may do his will. For now, nothing else occurs to me to relate. May Christ's peace and the profound emotion of the Holy Spirit be always within your souls.

2. EPISTLE SENT BY DONNA BRIGIDA TO A DAUGHTER OF THE BARDI

Honoranda ac filia prae dilecta, with all customary salutations, etc.,

Because I recognize my obligations to your reverend mothers—and to you and all your family, from whom I have received many kindnesses—though I could never repay [them], yet I still wish to do so. It seems to me that, now that you are a new bride, I ought to give you something. However, when I saw that I lacked the means, I became pained and troubled. While reading in these past days I came upon some material that is wholly appropriate to the state of matrimony in which you newly find yourself. I considered that the Lord had prepared this material for me in order that I present it to you as a gift. But knowing that you were raised by such prudent mothers, who are capable not only of helping you but of giving guidance and counsel even to a person more expert and learned, I was uncertain of what to do. But as Lord Jesus said to St. Paul: “*Durum est tibi contra stimulum calcitrare*,” [Acts 26.14] so I decided to put up no further resistance.

Sweetest and most darling daughter, all things have been created and ordered by eternal God in their highest perfection and with a determined end, all for the use and benefit of man, as St. Augustine says: “*Omnia creavit Deus propter hominem, hominem autem propter se*.” And no other thing produces such precious fruits as does man in respect to his end, which is endless, serving God. Though it is very true that like plants, as noble and precious as they may be, when their roots are corrupt no fruits that are born from them will be able to reach perfection, thus being similarly flawed the fruits of the plant of holy matrimony rarely reach their decreed perfection.

And because the more a thing is recognized as noble and precious, the more it is loved and treasured, I wish to make known to you how great [is] the worthiness of

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holy matrimony, according to the holy doctors of the church. First of all, you should understand the nature of the sacrament. “Sacramentum est sacre rei signum” [Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 3.60.2], which clearly demonstrates that it is the sign of a sacred thing, because matrimony stands for the union that Christ made with the holy Church, and this is represented by the benediction that young girls are given at the nuptial mass. The second distinction is that matrimony is the noblest of the seven sacraments, because it was ordained *in principio mundi*; it was ordained by God in a state of innocence. The third distinction is demonstrated by its place, that it was ordained in earthly paradise; the fourth, that God made his first miracle, changing water into wine, at a marriage. This miracle means that water, that is carnal sin, which without matrimony is a mortal sin, is changed into wine, that is, into grace, for through matrimony it is not even a venial sin. The fifth distinction is that when God chose to become incarnate in Our Lady, he wanted her to be married, so that matrimony would be a cloak under which that divine mystery could be concealed. The sixth is that it was ordained to remedy carnal sin. The seventh is the engendering of children. What earthly thing produces more noble fruit than matrimony? And as St. Jerome says: “Laudo matrimonium, quia virgines mihi parit.” [Jerome, Epist. 22] The ninth distinction is that [made] at the time of the Flood, when everyone perished except Noah and his wife, and their sons and their wives, because they lived contentedly and in saintly manner in matrimony. And take note that there were two sacraments that Christ ordained: one was holy matrimony, and the other was the sacrament of his most precious body. And so, say the doctors, it is just as grave a sin to violate matrimony as to throw the sacred Host off the altar into the mud. And if in all the sacraments one seeks the cleansing of sins and confession, I believe it to be no less so in this.

Well ought one to consider the advice the angel Raphael gave young Tobias when he joined in matrimony with Sarah; as a consequence of this advice they lived in sacred happiness and peace in this life and possessed the other, namely blessed, life. Let those unhappy girls learn, they who through a thousand uncontrolled vanities consecrate themselves to the devil. Immersed in these [vanities], they are then joined in marriage, in which deservedly one hears of little else than bitterness and troubles. Thus they begin in this world to receive the reward for their miserable vanity. Oh, unhappy and insensate human frailty, that changes such dignity and sacrament into a thousand offences to your creator! You seem to feel that, upon entering the state of wedlock, every kind of immoral behavior, every excessive habit, and every vain pleasure of dancing and singing is permitted: “Quibus repentina tristitia succedit.” [Innocent III, *De miseria*] Well did Solomon understand, when he said: “Risus dolore miscbitur, et extrema gaudii luctus occupat.” [Prov. 14.13] And Augustine: “Vae tibi, flumen moris humani, quis tibi resistet?” [Conf. 1.16] Alas! That the time is now arrived, predicted by the apostle Paul when he wrote to Timothy: “Erit enim tempus, cum sanam doctrinam non audient; sed ad sua desideria coacervabunt sibi magistros prurientes auribus.” [2 Tim. 4.3] The truth of this is shouted from the pulpits every day, trumpeted forth by the Holy Spirit, yet even if they hear it, they do not understand it. If you were to see a girl, no matter how pretty, some hairdresser or other will say of her: “Oh, if that girl had her hair styled in another manner how much more beautiful she would appear!” And how these words please the ears of the girl concerned; yet the experience is only half complete, for in a short time she will change her hairstyle many times over, caring neither about the great expense, nor about the offense to God, nor about the bad example, nor about its being the cause of many evils, nor about the fact that by her outward frivolity she shows her frivolity within.

Oh, poor and senseless girls, who in Holy Baptism had renounced the devil’s pomp, and having reached the perfect age when you ought to have the use of true reason with which to perform meritorious acts, you seem to have renounced every divine law and to have chosen all diabolical displays! Ah, my Lord, does it not seem that your holy and divine law be neither heard nor understood, but that they have made from every one of their views and opinions a certain and true law! Every [trace of] moral life seems extinguished; all fear of God is dead in them. The cause is perverted, and perverted are

the effects. Where, however, one ought to find peace in sacred matrimony, today there seem to be thousands of quarrels. Where there ought to be a sincere and most sweet love, it all seems deceptive and false. Out of which [marriage] righteous, sweet, and peaceful children ought to usher, instead such are born who are enemies of their father's and mother's body and soul. They are the avengers of the sins committed within the sacrament of marriage.

Beloved daughter, you have received many special graces from God; you may say that from the cradle you were raised by your reverend mothers in true fear of God, endowed with a noble and gentle mind. Growing up this way, you have been adorned with all those virtues that make his creatures grateful in the sight of God and of virtuous men. Beware, daughter, of the iniquitous wind of ingratitude that dries up the fountain of divine mercy. As long as you were with your reverend mothers you could not exceed the proper bounds, but now you must be careful, because the cunning of that ancient serpent is not dead, the one who sowed in the first saintly and pure marriage the grave misdeed with which we are all infected. Alas! How many persons arrive at this pass who, I do declare, so thoughtlessly join themselves almost bestially in holy wedlock! Daughter, keep your mind's eye open to diabolical attacks, for as it brings greater joy to the angels when a sinner returns to penitence than when ninety-nine righteous ones do, thus does it bring more joy to the devil when he is able to ruin a righteous soul than many sinful ones. The more tender plants are when they are freshly planted in rich soil, the sooner they are harmed by the wind; some are bent to the ground, but rapidly rise up again. These, it seems to me, are those little girls who stay at home for a certain time, dressed in simple clothes, but then, decked out by their fathers and mothers and paraded around in great pomp, oh how rapidly the dangerous wind of vainglory bends them down to earth so that they can no longer see reason! But before long, either through the death of kin, which happens very often through divine providence, or by means of some other disaster, these newlyweds leave off their showy behavior and soon direct their steps to God. Others are shattered, but once they are bound again [to him], they also bear fruit. It seems to me that the ones who persist in their vanity their whole youth and then return to God, binding themselves once again to divine law through true contrition, also produce fruits that are pleasing to God. But woe to those who have missed that gracious season in which they would have produced more natural and better fruit. Those girls uproot themselves; they seem to me to be the ones who persist in their vanity and bestial way of living into old age. They are those unlucky plants about whom the Lord says: "Omnis planta, quam non plantavit pater meus coelestis, eradicabitur." [Matt. 15.13]

Sweetest daughter, I am not saying that the basic use of all created things, each according to the manner and the condition of the one who uses it, is reprehensible, but the abuse of such is detestable in God's sight and I believe many are punished for it in this life. How many are there who once possessed such excess of embroideries and other fineries, who today hold dear a simple shift that once they would have considered vile; and how many are those who now find themselves in need of bread, who once were not sated with many fine dishes? These are voices that shout: "Redite, praevaricantes, ad cor: non est pax, nec requies, ubi eam quaeritis." [Isa. 46.8; Augustine, Conf. 4.18] It is most useful to use things that have happened in the past as a mirror for yourself: in it you will see that those who seemed raised very high have become short little plants. And thus, *e converso*, look at the lives of those like yourself in age and gentility. Their reputation will bloom until the end of the world because they are well planted and well rooted in eternity, and in the gracious garden of eternal life they flower continuously. From the abundance of their precious flowers and sweet fruits, miracles and exempla are continuously produced in this lowly world.

Look at [St.] Cecilia, dressed in golden brocades. You do not read that she rent [and cast] them to the ground (which would have been a detestable abuse); nor did her beauty, riches, and pomp cause her to depart from God, or to forgo blessedness. Indeed, she did as Paul the apostle says: "Quae invisibilia Dei per ea, quae facta sunt visibilia a creatura mundi intellecta conspiciuntur." [Rom. 1.20] Moved by the beauty of creation,

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raising her mind to the sweet creator, Catherine, dressed in royal clothes, crowned as a queen, most accomplished in all fields of learning, with so much nobility, never offended her creator. But burning with the most saintly pride, she scorned all earthly kings, and with the most ardent zeal to the eternal king alone did she give herself in marriage. Did not glorious Ursula continually remain in the royal palace, dressed as her station required? She did not raise herself up in pride or vainglory because of this, nor offend sweet Jesus with her magnificence, but she ruled and governed the upper and lower part with such prudence that not only she herself but many thousands were married and united with the eternal king. The day of the holy wedding arrived and they went up to heaven singing: “In odorem unguentorum tuorum currimus, adolescentulae dilexerunt te nimis.” [Song of Sol. 1.3–4] Oh, happy and joyful nuptials, in which there will never be sadness or pain! Oh, purest and holy wedding, in which the brides, like candid lilies of purity, give off a most delicate scent in the glorious garden of eternal life! Oh, most fecund marriage that continuously bears children of joy and jubilation in the beatific vision of eternal God! Therein are holy desires appeased, in that fountain is the insatiable thirst of saintly souls quenched and continually renewed.

Dearest daughter, see that delight in worldly displays does not too much draw your tender sensuality toward their fleeting pleasure. Let not that illuminated reason—of which the psalmist says, “Signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui, Domini,” [Ps. 4.7]—be impeded and clouded by them. The opinions and excuses of vain creatures will have no value in the sight of the eternal judge. But they say, “She is a girl; God will pardon her.” I believe that sin will be judged at all times, in all conditions, at all ages, according to the understanding and discretion of the one who has committed it. If God has graced you with such light in your tender girlhood, as others are [given] in the flower of their youth or old age, should one use such a gift at that age in contempt of God’s honor, as is done nowadays? Let us understand each other: is this really not to be punished? Raise up then, daughter, that gentle mind that God has given you; consider how great is the vanity of this miserable world, and listen to the supreme truth: “Quid prodest homini, si universum mundum lucretur; animae vero sue detrimentum patiat?” [Matt. 16.26] Ah, beloved daughter, of what worth to us is vain beauty, which at some point is lost, whether through infirmity or old age, and passes away more swiftly than a flower? Oh, with what purpose this indecent and excessive dress that the body bears with much distress? Of the passion for headgear, for exaggerated hairstyles I say nothing, and I believe that many become ill from such lack of moderation. They bear the punishment of sin, and not with merit; but with [every] punishment, the punishments increase. Worse, I do believe that because of these excessive garments and the great heat many lose children they have already begotten and do not even realize it. Oh, how many souls are ruined, having arrived at the perfect age! How vain the happiness and pleasure in riches and worldly conditions! Here there is no need to read other books, for there is indisputable experience, which can constantly be seen: today rich, tomorrow poor; today of high estate, tomorrow no one will greet him. Thus is it demonstrated to the insatiable hunger of mortals that these things are not our property; we are not their possessors, rather, their distributors. And he who distributes badly, or actually appropriates for himself, in great anguish will be deprived of his position by the eternal king.

However, beloved daughter, if it has pleased God to place you in the fertile and abundant garden, use the variety of fruits soberly, since excess causes trouble and sorrow. If you were to use them indiscreetly, you would provoke to wrath the Lord, to whom those possessions belong; and perhaps you would hear that irreproachable voice: “Ah serve nequam, quanta feci tibi!” [Matt. 18.22] When you see yourself much adorned, and it seems to you that you are beautiful, turn to yourself—as there is no literary maxim truer than one’s interior conscience—and say: “Who made me like this, and another so feckless? ‘Ipse fecit nos, et non ipsi nos.’ [Ps. 100.2] Why should there be so many clothes for me and that other girl [is] almost nude and hardly has enough bread to fill herself? Oh, this noble and precious dowry of intellect and discretion—which is superior to all riches—why [was such understanding given to] me and that of an animal to another of

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perfect age?" Oh, singular gift of God eternal! If we were to ponder every created thing, what more than this makes us unlike brute animals: that by means of the intellect, as Augustine says in his *Confessions* [Conf. 6.10], one finds and may know God? Do then as St. Paul says [1 Thess. 4.3–5]: do not go according to the passion of your desire, like those people who do not know God.

Ah, daughter, what a precious thing is time! One does not recognize it while one is granted it. How many, I believe, arriving at their final moment, would not buy back a brief point in time, the greatest treasure in the world? Thus, beloved daughter, now that the time for grace is most abundant, use the special benefits and gifts you have received to praise the Lord: "Quae sunt Dei, reddantur Deo: quae sunt Caesaris Caesarari." [Mark 12.17] He gave you neither your distinguished birth, nor riches and worldly pomp, [but] your gentle mind, lit by enlightened reason. The infinite goodness and wisdom of God—which is his—you give to him and use in his praise. The vain display of this world—ephemeral and fleeting riches—remain in this world; naked we are born and almost naked to the earth we return. If you think on this, you will pass your youth in a way praiseworthy to the world in the eyes of virtuous men; your end will be glorious in heaven.

If, by writing so much, I have wearied your mind, forgive me, [as I am] solicitous of your health. But if you can put to use any fruit or find delight, then give praise to benign God, since the viler the instrument he employs, the more marvelously through it shine the wisdom and glory of God's acts. *Vale, et pro me ora. Deo gratia, Amen.*

3. LETTER FROM BRIGIDA BALDINOTTI TO HER SON PIERO DI NICCOLÒ IN PISA

Jehus.

In questa ora a dì 6 di marzo abbiamo sentito che le galee sono tornate a salvamento, sia laudato iddio, da cui ogni gratia procede. Per altra t'avisai siamo sani e a dì otto di novembre parturi la Candida una bella fanciulla, e subito fu nata, la detti a balia sicchè la tua famigliuola per quanto sia stato a me possibile, non li è mancato niente, nè in nel parto nè poi. Io sono viva che a voluto iddio; consumata sono de' fatti del monte, sentirai de Piero Vespucci. Nicholo è sano e buon figliuolo con una lingua e intelletto di sei anni. La Domenica s'è con esso noi ancora; sai è ora uno anno ci è stata; a avuto in tucta due paia di scarpette, uno paio ne pagò in ne di passato altra di suo filato che ne fui contenta perch'io non aveva che filare, sicchè se costi fussi cosa buona è buona derata per farle uno guarnello; sai a sempre a voluto calzare e vestire. La discrezione è madre delle virtù—fa che ti piacie. Apressa sai la istentata [stentata] quaresima si fa qui; provedi di mandare o regare [recare] delle cose da quaresima e ricordati di chi s'è ricordata di te. Le suore di Sancta Lucia di continuoovo ogni dì anno detto insieme con suora Orsola i salmi dell' angelo Raphaello e in comune tutte te [notte] e di della settimana anno fatto oratione per te. La ingratitude secca la fonte della misericordia; tu sei savio fa che tti pare. Ne altro per ora xpo ti guardi in Pistoia a di 6 di marzo.

Brigida

This hour, on the sixth of March, we have heard that the galleys have safely returned, praise be to God, from whom every grace issues forth. By another letter I informed you that we are well and that on the eighth of November Candida gave birth to a beautiful girl. As soon as she was born I gave her to a wet nurse, so that as far as it has been possible for me I have seen to it that your little family has lacked nothing, whether during labor or after. I am alive, God willing, consumed by the business of the *monte*, as you will hear from Piero Vespucci. Niccolò is healthy and a good boy, with the tongue and intellect of a six-year-old. Domenica is still with him; you know it has been a year now that she's been here. She has had, in all, two pairs of slippers—one I bought for her some days past, the other was of her yarn, of which I was glad, because I did not have to spin, so if that was a good thing [to do] it is good merchandise for making her a smock—you know she always wants shoes and clothes—discretion is the mother of

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all the virtues; do as you see fit. As you know, a difficult Lent is approaching here; arrange to send or bring some things for Lent and remember those who have remembered you. The sisters of Sta. Lucia, together with Sister Orsola, have been continually saying psalms of the angel Raphael for you—every day, day and night, they have prayed for you. Ingratitude dries up the fountain of mercy. You are wise; do as you see fit. That is all for now; may Christ watch over you. The sixth of March, in Pistoia,

Brigida

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