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Authority, Religion, and Women Writers in the Italian Counter-Reformation: Teaching Diodata Malvasia's Histories

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Abstract: Recent decades have seen the rediscovery of a significant number of texts authored by Italian women between 1560 and 1630. And yet the commonplace that the Counter-Reformation silenced women writers has persisted. One figure useful for teaching a more nuanced vision of post-Tridentine Italy is the Bolognese nun Diodata Malvasia (c. 1532–post-1617). She authored a pair of histories recounting her convent's efforts to maintain their way of life amidst an era of convent reform, employing strategies that capitalized on their education, familial and civic connections, and position of spiritual privilege. Malvasia's writings demonstrate the ways in which women not only published in this period but began to speak with increasing authority. I offer some possibilities for how Malvasia's chronicles can be used to teach students about women writers' agency in post-Tridentine Italy, as well as the complex thinking with which one must approach a regime like the Counter-Reformation.

Keywords: Counter-Reformation; Italy; women writers; convent chronicles; Bologna; Diodata Malvasia

1. Introduction

If students know anything about the Counter-Reformation, they tend to know of its most infamous excesses: the Inquisition, perhaps the Index of Prohibited Books. One figure useful for teaching a more nuanced vision of post-Tridentine Italy is the Bolognese nun Diodata Malvasia (c. 1532–post-1617).¹ She authored a pair of chronicles, one in manuscript (*A Brief Discourse on What Occurred to the Most Reverend Sisters of the Joined Convents of San Mattia and San Luca*, 1575), the other in print (*The Arrival and the Miraculous Working of the Glorious Image of the Virgin*, 1617).² Taken together, the two histories, completed nearly four decades apart, record the ways in which Malvasia and her sisters negotiated post-Tridentine reforms. The women's responses centered on writing, from letter-writing campaigns to publishing projects designed to garner public support. The *Brief Discourse* and the *Arrival*, available together in translation (the former in its entirety, the latter as selections, as (Malvasia 2015)), can help students understand the voices and roles of women writers in Counter-Reformation Italy.

In particular, Malvasia is a strong example of the argument, increasingly recognized in recent years, that women not only wrote and published in Counter-Reformation Italy, but that they in fact began to infiltrate new genres and speak with increasing authority (Cox 2011). In the *Brief Discourse*, Malvasia documents the complex epistolary rhetoric that she and her sisters employed to engage the aid of male allies in Bologna and Rome. In the *Arrival*, Malvasia describes the special relationship

¹ On Malvasia, see (Graziosi 1996, pp. 319–20; Cox 2008, pp. 147–48; 2011, pp. 8–10, 214, 250; Callegari and McHugh 2011, 2015).

² Malvasia (n.d.), "Breve discorso," and (Malvasia 1617).

the convent maintained with one of Bologna's most prized religious icons, the painting known as the Madonna di San Luca, and expounds at length on weighty theophilosophical topics. These texts demonstrate how Malvasia and her sisters persuasively traded on their education and position of spiritual privilege to advance their agenda within networks familial, religious, civic, and cultural.

Increased recognition of Counter-Reformation voices that were neither rebels or victims is an important way that Italian literary scholarship has expanded in new directions since the publication of *Teaching Other Voices* (King and Rabil 2007), Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr.'s foundational teaching volume for religious writings from the long-running *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* series. Only in the last decade have researchers of early modern Italian literature begun to rethink the Counter-Reformation in ways that are by now familiar to historians and religious studies scholars.

I will conclude this essay by offering some possibilities for how Malvasia's chronicles can be used in various course settings, in relation to topics like Counter-Reformation gender dynamics, early modern convent life, Renaissance women's writing, and men and women's sense of identity in the pre-modern world. These thoughts include readings with which her histories might be paired, as well as sample assignments designed to lead students from close-reading rhetorical strategies to composing their own socially-engaged arguments in both traditional and digital formats.

2. The Counter-Reformation and Its Myths

Malvasia wrote her chronicles in the decades following the Council of Trent (1545–1563)—that is to say, she worked during the heart of the era that has come to be known as the Counter-Reformation. Coined by scholars in nineteenth-century Germany, the term was meant to denote all the blackest legends about the period: it was “against reform,” against progress and enlightenment.

In some fields, like History and Religious Studies, this negative view of the Counter-Reformation is unquestionably outdated.³ For several decades, scholars in these areas have begun to look at the Counter-Reformation as a parallel movement *alongside*—rather than against or beneath—the Protestant Reformation. Often adopting a bottom-up approach, they consider both great thinkers and ordinary citizens not as victims of an oppressive regime, but rather as participants who helped to shape those decades of history. Old prejudices about women's history, which often saw Catholic women as more oppressed by a patriarchic regime than their Protestant sisters, are also falling away. One emblematic study is Ulrike Strasser's examination of the connection between the state and regulations on women's sexuality in seventeenth-century Bavaria. Strasser rejects the old binary, emphasizing instead similarities between the two faiths, similarities that “evolved in a context of ongoing confessional rivalry that drove the escalation of moral politics” for decades (Strasser 2004, p. 11). Scholars of Protestant nations have come to similar conclusions: Lyndal Roper, for example, identifies the view that the Reformation had positive effects for women—and was perhaps even a protofeminist movement—as “a profound misreading of the Reformation itself” (Roper 1989, p. 1). Merry Wiesner-Hanks has noted how recent gender scholarship has stopped putting the Reformation to the “Glinda test” (is it a good confession, or a bad confession?), and has instead focused on the diverse factors that affected women's lives, as well as continuities with pre-Reformation Christianity (Wiesner-Hanks 2008, pp. 545–46).

As views of this period have changed, scholars have questioned the merits of the term “Counter-Reformation” versus the newer “Catholic Reformation.” Neither has proven adequate for connoting the full range of experiences and responses to this era of great change. John O'Malley, who has most thoroughly covered the debate, has suggested the need for a third, nonpartisan term, something along the lines of “early modern Catholicism” (O'Malley 2000, p. 5). Scholars such as Mary

³ (Laven 2006) provides a review of this sea change to the scholarship, updated in (Laven 2013).

Laven have suggested that recent historiography has redeemed “Counter-Reformation”—and that, besides, there is value in the older term’s forcing us to think about this period comparatively.⁴

And yet, while scholars of history and religion have been engaged in the process of deeply rethinking the post-Tridentine Catholic world, however, the field of Italian literature has lagged behind. There the common view still holds that little worthy of study could have flourished under the Church’s censorial regime. There are a few exceptions, but most are writers considered renegades: Marino, Galileo. And, of course, there is Tasso. But the scholarly situation surrounding this canonical giant, in fact, only proves the point, as the one text that has been most glaringly and uncomfortably neglected is surely, not coincidentally, also his most “Counter-Reformation” work: the *Gerusalemme Conquistata*. And so the quest to find a term to define this period has sometimes felt all the more pressing for scholars of Italian culture, as Abigail Brundin and Matthew Treherne have eloquently captured: “The term that is so much desired, yet still frustratingly elusive, is one that suggests a distinct, Italian experience of reform, taking place both within and outside the Catholic establishment” (Brundin and Treherne 2009, p. 3).

Happily, scholarly opinion is slowly beginning to evolve regarding Italian Counter-Reformation literature. Writing of all stripes is beginning to be recovered, examined, and redeemed.⁵ And one group that is advancing ahead of the curve is women writers. Essential in this regard has been Virginia Cox’s thorough unearthing of the true range of women’s publishing from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁶ Her encyclopedic project expands upon the work of literary scholars who have been studying and translating individual authors, as well as more panoramic undertakings, such as the *repertorio* of Italian women’s writings from the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries compiled under the direction of Gabriella Zarri (Zarri 1996, pp. 407–705). Through such efforts, Italian literary studies are coming more and more in line with the work of social and religious historians.

In summary, this is an exciting moment for teaching Counter-Reformation women’s writing. Remarkably, modern editions are more readily available for female authors than their male counterparts (Cox 2011, pp. xiv–xv). And here we can turn to Malvasia’s histories.

3. Malvasia’s Counter-Reformation World

Diodata Malvasia was born in Bologna in the early 1530s to a noble family; both her father and her mother belonged to important senatorial families.⁷ We do not know much about Malvasia’s early years. She was educated in vernacular reading and writing, either at home or at a convent school. She took her vows at San Mattia in 1547, joining a group of equally well-educated women from other influential families.⁸ She served as prioress four times, and sub-prioress on other occasions.

Malvasia wrote the manuscript *Brief Discourse* in 1575 and published the *Arrival* in 1617. One aspect of Bolognese culture that surely facilitated Malvasia’s career as a writer was its exceptional tradition of creative women. These included secular painters, most notably Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614); convent singers, composers, and musicians; and nuns who published prose and poetry, including the venerable Catherine of Bologna (1413–1463), one of the first writers of either sex to have her work published on Bolognese printing presses (*Le sette armi spirituali*, published between 1473 and 1475).⁹ Beyond creative composition, patriciate women in Bologna seem to have been able to negotiate opportunities to contribute in various ways to civic and cultural life in Bologna.¹⁰

⁴ (Laven 2006, p. 720).

⁵ (Quondam 2005) is foundational in this regard.

⁶ See (Cox 2011), as well as the significant body of relevant verse in (Cox 2013).

⁷ For the bibliography on Malvasia’s biography, see (Callegari and McHugh 2015, pp. 3–4).

⁸ Much has been written on women religious in Bologna. The essential starting point is (Zarri 1973); recently, see (Johnson 2014). Beyond Bologna, other essential bibliography in convent studies includes (Monson 1995; Zarri 2000; Laven 2003; Lowe 2003; Evangelisti 2007; and Strocchia 2009).

⁹ On nuns and music, see (Monson 1995, 2012). On women painters, see (Bohn 2004; and Rocco 2017); see (Murphy 2003) on Fontana. On Bologna’s convent writers, see (Cox 2008, pp. 147–48); and on convent writing more broadly, (Graziosi 1996, 2005).

¹⁰ (Murphy 1999) looks at laywomen, (Murphy 2003) at women as patrons of art. See also (Callegari and McHugh 2018).

The nuns of San Mattia were no exception. Their possession of privilege within the city stemmed from their possession of the painting known as the Madonna di San Luca.¹¹ A portrait of the Madonna and Child purported to have been created by Saint Luke, the object was believed to perform miracles, and was the focus of great civic pride. It was processed through the street on holy days and was the subject of a number of published histories.¹² The painting was housed just outside the city on a hilltop, the Monte della Guardia, in a small sanctuary known simply as San Luca, where it was cared for by a small group of elderly nuns from San Mattia.

This was the backdrop of Malvasia's life in 1573, when she and her sisters first became aware of how Counter-Reformation reforms might alter their lives. Among the Council of Trent's edicts related to the lives of monastic women specifically was that of *clausura*, or forced enclosure.¹³ Pope Gregory XIII (Ugo Boncompagni, 1502–1585) introduced the practice of apostolic visitations to ensure that enclosures were properly carried out. The sisters of San Mattia attracted attention quickly, as their caretaking of the icon attracted numerous pilgrims and also allowed them to move unusually openly between their primary residence and the smaller sanctuary on the hill. An apostolic visitor examined the sites in 1573, found numerous violations, and recommended not only strict enclosure, but also that the women be relieved of the Madonna entirely. All these events are recounted in the *Brief Discourse*.

The chronicle also catalogues the sisters' multi-pronged response—how they endeavored to maintain their freedom of movement and their hold on the object that defined their centrality in Bolognese religious and civic life.¹⁴ For one, the nuns allied themselves with their male compatriots in the Bolognese senate. With the exception of Rome itself, Bologna was the most important city in the papal states, and the senate had negotiated an inordinate degree of independent governance for itself.¹⁵ As events unfolded at San Mattia, the senators were embroiled in their own struggle against papal encroachment, with Rome seeking to limit the sovereignty of the troublesome local government. The men were apparently only too happy to join forces with the convent responsible for a cult object so important to both Bologna and Rome.¹⁶ Second, the sisters launched a letter-writing campaign designed to win support from powerful men at the papal court. As Gregory XIII was Bolognese, a number of the women had male relatives in his service. Finally, the women participated directly and indirectly in a series of publications designed to garner public goodwill, culminating with Malvasia's own published history, the *Arrival*.¹⁷

In summary, the full extent of the women's effort only becomes apparent when we look at the *Brief Discourse* and *Arrival* together, as well as at a collection of other documents in manuscript and print. When we do, what emerges is a complex story about a group of women who negotiated with surprising parity with powerful men in religious, political, and cultural spheres.

4. Authority in Malvasia's Histories

Silvia Evangelisti divides nuns' historical writings into two main categories: chronicles, which record community memory; and *vite* and registries of miracles, which treat the life of a single woman or object (Evangelisti 1992). Malvasia wrote one of each: the *Brief Discourse* and the *Arrival*, respectively. If we wish to fully comprehend all the genres in which Counter-Reformation Italian women wrote, such literature is crucial, because women rarely if ever wrote histories otherwise (Lowe 2003, pp. 52–57).

¹¹ (Fanti and Roversi 1993) provides a thorough history of the icon.

¹² Half a dozen such histories had been printed by the time Malvasia published her *Arrival*, and more would appear after.

¹³ On *clausura* and Tridentine convent reforms, see (Paolin 1996; Zarri 2000, pp. 100–17). Recent scholarship has emphasized women's negotiations within these restrictions. The essays in (Pomata and Zarri 2005) indicate that, though enclosure was surely a severe form of control, it did not impede nuns' contacts with cultural and civic life beyond convent walls.

¹⁴ For an account of monastic resistance in the Tuscan context, see (Evangelisti 2003).

¹⁵ (De Benedictis 1995) has famously described Bologna as a "republic by contract." For more on the balance of power between Church and state in early modern Bologna, see (Terpstra 2009).

¹⁶ On this alliance, which endured for decades, see (Callegari and McHugh 2018).

¹⁷ On the additional literary projects, see (Callegari and McHugh 2015, pp. 27–30); some of these are translated, (Malvasia 2015, pp. 126–28).

Malvasia's *Brief Discourse* shares several features in common with other writings of the genre. Almost all convent chronicles were manuscripts composed for internal audiences. The *Brief Discourse* also features multiple lists and an open ending, frequent attributes of extant chronicles.

Other attributes are less common. For one, when she composed the *Brief Discourse*, Malvasia was clearly and consciously aspiring to literary production. Unusually for a convent chronicle, her text bears a title, the author's name, and a dedicatory letter. Similarly, as Cox notes, the preface to Malvasia's *Arrival* exhibits a style that is "worldly and self-assertive," demonstrating the author's erudition by citing a number of writers from Greek and Roman antiquity (Cox 2011, p. 214). Such a tone is unusual but not singular. A sense of ambition or self-assuredness can be noted in published writings by nuns in this period, from the multi-volume meditations of Battista Vernazza (1497–1587) to an oration by Beatrice Gatti (fl. 1604) (Cox 2011, pp. 214, 216).

One manner in which the *Brief Discourse* is apparently unique among convent chronicles is that, beyond the traditional prose narration, it includes full transcriptions of the nuns' epistolary exchanges: with senators, prelates in Bologna and Rome, and the pope. Indeed, these letters are the centerpiece of the document, making up more than half its content. In the manuscript's dedicatory letter to the prioress and sisters, Malvasia explains that she records the events not for her contemporaries, who lived through them, but rather for future sisters, "so that they might see clearly and touch with their hands ... the manner in which we helped ourselves" (Malvasia 2015, p. 34). The *Brief Discourse* therefore functions as a sort of *ars epistolandi*, a handbook modeling the rhetorical art of letter-writing for the nuns who would, indeed, have to continue the battle over the image for decades.¹⁸ And so this text shows Malvasia venturing into two genres that were unusual for women writers: history and rhetorical instruction.

The chronicle often reveals that a sense of empowerment was felt among the women of the convent. Sometimes this comes out in the letters, as on one occasion when the women wrote to the Bolognese senate, warning what might happen were the painting to be removed from their care:

And as that most holy Virgin is pleased with [the sisters'] service, what end will come from displeasing her? ... Should she be wrongfully taken from this place, they prophesy the total ruin and extermination of this city; for as this Madonna came miraculously under their governance, miraculously again will she avenge this grave injury. (Malvasia 2015, p. 50).

Vindication in the form of the total ruin of the entire city: this is the threat that the aggrieved members of the convent make in their attempt to mobilize the senators on their behalf. They apparently feel justified in doing so because they believed the Virgin Mary herself had chosen them to govern her image. Nor is this the only instance in which the women show themselves to be emboldened to employ shocking language. One memorable letter, sent to the pope's chamberlain at the peak of the struggle, reads:

And if you knew how we have been treated, you would have compassion: were we so many whores, we would not have been forced to endure so many walls, so many restrictions, and so many strange provisions. (Malvasia 2015, p. 57).

Yet the women are also savvy about claiming gendered advantages where they can: at times, they appeal to pathos by employing language of feminine weakness. Their missives contain constant reminders that they are servants, that they merit little, that they are poor women of a poor convent. Signatures always feature tortuous variations of the women throwing themselves to the ground, kissing hands or feet, and begging for blessing, aid, or comfort. In other instances, the women report physical distress, playing into assumptions about the supposed physiological weakness of their sex. When the sisters first learn of the Church's attempts on the image, they describe their piteous state, both physical and emotional, to the pope in detail:

¹⁸ Various features of the arrangement of the letters further support reading the text as a purposeful rhetorical handbook, on which see (Callegari and McHugh 2011, pp. 32–33).

Think of the cries, the laments, the blows to the heart that this news brought to us, unfortunate and truly wretched women . . . We are quite sure that if Your Holiness saw the desperation of these aged mothers, if you heard the cries and the lamentations, you would be moved to pity. Here no one sleeps, no one eats; rather we remain in constant torment and tribulations. (Malvasia 2015, pp. 51–52)

In another letter, the prioress apologizes to the papal chamberlain for the fact that she is communicating with him in place of his aunt, Sister Margherita, but that she finds herself too ill to take up the pen (Malvasia 2015, p. 58). Of course, should that aunt receive good news regarding the state of the convent's fortunes, a fairly miraculous recovery is implied. In short, the nuns utilize their "poor" state as a surprising source of rhetorical power.

The letters' public professions of weakness are contrasted by the language that Malvasia uses in the prose sections of her chronicle, those reserved for the smaller, internal audience of the convent. That is not to say that those passages are bereft of descriptions of emotional and physical suffering; indeed, the prose or "official" description of the scene in the convent when the bad news arrived is very similar to the one communicated in the letter to the pope, describing the "cries," "pleas," and "laments" that rang out through the halls (Malvasia 2015, p. 49). But the overriding emphasis in the prose passages is on the women's fortitude, resourcefulness, and ability. In the dedicatory letter, Malvasia describes her sisters' "great spiritual tranquility," "great resolve," and "measured prudence," concluding that "to recount it, it almost seems a marvel" (Malvasia 2015, p. 33). Malvasia is similarly authoritative about her own act of writing. The dedicatory letter employs the humility tropes that one might expect: Malvasia describes how, at the beginning, she found herself "lacking, and hardly capable of such an undertaking" (Malvasia 2015, p. 34). Yet the very act of describing her composition this way—"tanta impresa" in the original Italian—belies any statement of insufficiency. Such passages suggest that, despite how the women often present themselves in their letters, they were not so much victims of reforms as eloquent manipulators of societal gender expectations. This sense is confirmed in one of the *Brief Discourse's* most memorable prose passages, the prologue that follows immediately after the dedication. As Malvasia sets the scene in the chronicle's opening pages, she describes the prioress and her sub-prioresses (one of whom, at the time, was Malvasia herself) as "all gentlewomen truly capable of governing and ruling a republic, let alone a convent of nuns" (Malvasia 2015, p. 35).

I have to this point focused on the *Brief Discourse*, in part because I have found it to be the text more adaptable to a wider variety of pedagogical settings. The prose is straightforward enough for lower-division coursework; the historical context and relevant secondary readings are rich enough to interest advanced students. Yet the *Arrival* also has much to offer. On the surface, the text appears to be a simple catalogue of miracles performed by the Madonna di San Luca, yet another iteration in the long sequence of chronicles written about the icon over the centuries. Upon closer examination, it reveals itself to be an ambitious work, full of learned imitations (not only religious sources, but also secular writings such as Giovan Battista Giralaldi "Cinzio"'s Indexed *Hecatommithi*), expansive philosophical digressions (how is Mary like a sphere?), and gendered interpretations of theological and Biblical texts, which together form a sort of idiosyncratic, protofeminist theology.¹⁹

One of the most remarkable is Malvasia's insertion of the *Brief Discourse* events. She tells the manuscript's entire story in condensed form, under the chapter heading, "How it pleased the Virgin to punish anyone who presumed to take her from the virgins of San Mattia" (Malvasia 2015, pp. 105–9). Malvasia even includes a selection of the carefully transcribed letters. Contemporary readers would have known from prior histories of the painting's litany of mysteries. Now they would know a new one: the "miracle" of the image choosing the sisters over Church decree. Malvasia sagely publicizes the women's custodianship as divinely ordained. She furthermore implies a sincere belief on the nuns'

¹⁹ On these elements and others, see (Callegari and McHugh 2015, pp. 22–25).

part that they are the Virgin's elect, an integral part of the divine order—or at least a conviction that they should be perceived as such.

In this same chapter, interestingly, Malvasia further discloses her personal connection with the icon in markedly intimate tones. Before moving into the account of the 1573 campaign, Malvasia opens with a paean to virginity and a description of the day that she took the veil, which she recalls with pride and nostalgia. She relates how the words of her confessor “remained in my heart as though inscribed, and they have served me as a shield and a solid defense in the tribulations that we have often suffered through the persecutions of some” (Malvasia 2015, p. 107). This juxtaposition of the two events—taking vows and crusading for the Madonna—illustrates how, for Malvasia, her sense of pride in her calling is interwoven with her devotion to the icon, both of which find expression in her act of writing. Malvasia describes a love for the image that elevates the monastic subject, a love she expresses throughout her twin histories in myriad ways.

Importantly, we have evidence that Malvasia's message also went beyond her convent's walls. It makes an appearance amidst the notable tradition of female painters in early modern Bologna. Two of these artists, Ginevra Cantofoli (1618–1672) and Lucrezia Scarfaglia (fl. 1678), are connected indirectly to the convent of San Mattia, because they created self-portraits in which they are painting the Madonna di San Luca with their own hands. In her studies of this artistic community, Babette Bohn has noted that Malvasia's *Arrival* is the key text to which we can attribute these painters' interest in the icon (Bohn 2004, pp. 268–69). As Bohn argues, by incorporating the Madonna di San Luca into their paintings, the artists were associating themselves with Saint Luke, both the idol's alleged creator and patron saint of painters. The conceit was a common one for male painters; Cantofoli's and Scarfaglia's decision to imitate this practice is a declaration of the legitimacy of their work as creative women. And so Malvasia's writing helped her contemporary sisters; it taught future nuns to see how to “help themselves”; and it also inspired the cultural production of other creative women in her city.

The frontispiece of Malvasia's *Arrival* is emblematic of this power. It portrays an aerial view of the city of Bologna, with the hilltop sanctuary of San Luca at the very center. In the air above, hovering in the heavens, is the Virgin Mary, holding the Christ child, in the same configuration in which they are found in the iconic, miraculous painting. Extending from the city up toward Mary is a banner upon which appear the words, “Da Dio data, me difendi e honori” (*God-given lady, defend and favor me*). The image, with its clear pun on Malvasia's first name (“Dio-data”), is a fitting final representation of Malvasia's role as textual ambassador between the world of her convent and the world beyond.

5. Themes and Lessons

What follows are a few pedagogical scenarios in which Malvasia's writings can add value. Her history writing fits into modules or courses with different emphases and themes, such as early modern monastic life, or women's writing in the Counter-Reformation. Her chronicles also work well in more general schemes: early modern religious life (as lived by both men and women), or Renaissance literature, culture, and history more broadly.

Because networks were so important to the sisters of San Mattia, it seems fitting to suggest ways that Malvasia's chronicles might be taught alongside other writers. I have chosen to focus on editions in *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, the series in which the modern edition of Malvasia appears. The recuperation of literature by Counter-Reformation Italian women writers is attributable in no small part to the labor and influence of King and Rabil. Of course, the efforts of many scholars both inside and outside the series have contributed to the current richness of our resources; the mention above of Gabriella Zarri's 300-page *repertorio* of women's writing should be enough to remind us of this fact. Yet for teaching, the *Other Voice* remains an invaluable tool, providing clear, modern translations that are ideal for students at a variety of levels. Given how expansive the series catalogue is at this point, scholars have questioned whether it is even accurate to continue labeling these authors as “the other voice”; but this potential paradox itself can be productive, an invitation for students to discuss the

extent to which these women seem to have been excluded from, or integrated into, intellectual, social, and religious networks.

Regarding various thematic options, if one is teaching early modern monasticism, Malvasia works well with multiple other texts. The *Other Voice* series now contains a substantial body of writing by nuns, from Italy to France, from Spain to the New World. Even limiting ourselves to Italy, we find fascinating potential pairings. Malvasia would go well with Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni or Sister Giustina Niccolini, both of whom also wrote chronicles, texts that provide insight into convent life in Venice and Florence, respectively (Riccoboni 2000; and Niccolini 2011).²⁰ Riccoboni's and Malvasia's chronicles both provide insights into the ways women could find spiritual and personal fulfillment within convent communities; Niccolini's and Malvasia's histories together have interesting tales to tell about monastic connections with the outside world, including responses to Tridentine reform. Interesting connections could also be made across national borders, including writing from within Reformed territories. Angélique de Saint-Jean Arnauld d'Andilly relates her sisters' own tale of resistance as they were placed under house arrest by the archbishop of Paris for refusing to condemn Jansenism (Arnauld d'Andilly 2015). Jeanne de Jussie's *Short Chronicle* describes her convent's experience of the Reformation in 1530s Geneva and the responses of both Catholic and Protestant women in the city (De Jussie 2006). Malvasia might also be read alongside her better-known monastic contemporary, Arcangela Tarabotti (Tarabotti 2004, 2013). Tarabotti's deep fury over her forced monachization is very different from Malvasia's description of happiness with her convent community. Yet both writers were, in different ways, vociferous advocates for women's self-governance, well-connected with influential men in the outside world. Together the two writers make a complex study of the range of women's reactions to taking the veil, as well as their intellectual and social pursuits behind cloistered walls.²¹

Another topic for which Malvasia is suited is writing of the Counter-Reformation. It is even easier to see how Malvasia's writings are representative of contemporary literary trends when she is read alongside other experimental and authoritative voices. Two promising options are Chiara Matraini and Lucrezia Marinella, both ambitious writers of texts sacred and secular.²² Matraini's translated writings include orations on love and war, didactic letters, and a Dantean underworld journey featuring a female pilgrim and guide (Matraini 2007), as well as a life of Mary (Matraini 2008). Marinella is most famous for her protofeminist polemic in defense of women, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women* (Marinella 1999), but she was a prolific writer in a variety of genres, including an ambitious religious epic (Marinella 2009). Also worth considering is Moderata Fonte's dialogue, *The Worth of Women* (Fonte 1997). Students tend to respond with enthusiasm to the lively *querelle des femmes* debate between the text's female interlocutors.

A third option is to teach Malvasia as part of a more expansive lesson or course on women or women's writing in early modern Italy. (If this is one module in a larger Renaissance course, it can be helpful to pair it with one on Renaissance masculinity, as a way to guide students away from "othering" women writers, and to get them to discuss how men also possess and perform a gendered identity, then as now.) In my experience, lively classroom discussion arises when Malvasia is grouped with Renaissance women who lived very different lives. I have successfully paired her with two such "stars" of early modern women's writing: the noblewoman Vittoria Colonna, with her sonnets of widowly and religious devotion (Colonna 2005), and the courtesan Veronica Franco, whose letters and *terza rima* poems describe desire, friendship, and hardship in early modern Venice (Franco 1998).²³ Moreover,

²⁰ Daniel Bornstein, editor of the Riccoboni account, has written a teaching companion article on the text (Bornstein 2007).

²¹ It would be impossible to list all the secondary texts that might accompany these primary readings. A few that my students have enjoyed include the playwrights in (Weaver 2002), the history in (Strocchia 2009), and the dramatic tales in (Monson 2010).

²² Cox calls these two writers "something of a high point" for the authoritative voice in Italian women's writing (Cox 2011, p. 250); see also (McHugh 2014) for a comparison of Matraini's and Marinella's underworld tales.

²³ For teaching articles on Colonna and Franco, see (Brundin 2007) and (Rosenthal and McHugh 2017).

connections drawn between these women also reinforce the important point that religious and secular spheres were well interconnected in the early modern world.

Finally, let me discuss briefly one evocative theme that arises from this last grouping, as well as a possible set of accompanying assignments. All three writers (Colonna, Franco, Malvasia) make excellent studies of how early modern thinkers constructed *identity*. In different ways, these women (and others, and their male contemporaries) cultivated both individual and group identity, crafted a particular public self through their use of rhetoric, and engaged in other modes of Renaissance self-fashioning.²⁴ Focusing on this topic can aid students in truly understanding the purposefulness and artistry behind early modern women's literary texts, when they might otherwise be inclined to read their writing as instinctive, emotional outpouring.

A simple close-reading assignment in which students are asked to analyze the rhetoric in the letters of the *Brief Discourse* can be quite useful in this regard.²⁵ One further step in getting students to appreciate how Malvasia and her sisters used writing to navigate the world is to ask them to do the writing themselves—to “translate” the nuns' epistolary rhetoric into a modern medium. There are many options; I chose social media, with the goal of getting students to reflect on the ways they read and write on a daily basis. I asked them to construct a Twitter account under the name of one of Malvasia's sisters—she lists them all in a roster in the *Brief Discourse* (Malvasia 2015, pp. 59–60)—and compose a series of tweets meant to imitate different aspects of the nuns' style, which they can describe in a short reflection paper. The students showed themselves to be impressively astute in reverse engineering the nuns' tactics: choosing modern elements of the digital lexicon to communicate the same pathos of the original letters; putting familial and civic connections on display by mentioning or “replying” to important members of the women's networks; and invoking the women's appeal to spiritual authority by highlighting their connection to Mary or other religious women in the body of the messages. The project also easily leads into discussions about identity and rhetoric in our own world (if one wants it to), and about the degree to which students are thinking critically when they take in information from politicians, journalists, celebrities, and unknown entities—not to mention whether students are being thoughtful about how they present themselves to the world. An assignment like this can be a way we ask students to move from thinking about the Renaissance to thinking about their own actions as modern-day global citizens.

6. Conclusions

In closing, it seems only appropriate that Malvasia's *Brief Discourse*, which she conceived of as a rhetorical handbook for younger sisters of the future, might be useful in teaching students today to consider how they are being persuaded by others, and how they can more effectively communicate their own beliefs. Her manuscript history, along with the ambitious published *Arrival*, are representative of the persistent agency of women writers in post-Tridentine Italy, as well as the increasing authority of their voices, as is evident in the *Arrival*'s dedicatory letter:

It remains now that if while reading you should find the occasional imperfection, you excuse the female sex for my particular error, certain that in women as a whole heroic virtue is to be found, and that all those virtues are perhaps even stronger in women than in men.²⁶ (Malvasia 2015, p. 71).

Malvasia's writings have much potential for teaching students about the complex thinking with which one must approach a period like the Counter-Reformation. They should also prove

²⁴ These concepts are usefully and clearly explained for students in (Cox 2015, pp. 110–31).

²⁵ This assignment might optionally be paired with Jane Tylus's analysis of the spiritual rhetoric in Catherine of Siena's writing (Tylus 2008), or Alison Thorne's study of English women's methods of epistolary persuasion when writing from *in extremis* situations (Thorne 2008).

²⁶ On the assertive tone of this passage, see (Cox 2011, p. 250).

themselves similarly valuable for scholars seeking to understand the literature of this era, too long neglected in Italian Studies. Literary scholarship is on a path that will doubtless lead to a bounty of more complex appraisals of the Counter-Reformation, like those found so much more readily in the fields of history and religious studies. As a more complete picture of Italian literary production of this period—especially writing by women—emerges, it will become ever clearer how Malvasia is representative of its best features: innovative in the uses to which she put her education and her writing, imbued with a sense of spiritual authority, canny in her negotiation of religious and civic networks, and “heroic” in her self-presentation.

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