



VERONICA FRANCO,
FAMILIAR LETTERS TO VARIOUS
PEOPLE (1580)

To the most illustrious and revered Monsignor Luigi d'Este, Cardinal

Because anyone, even though Fortune has set her in the lowest place, can honor and glorify almighty God with offerings and prayers in equal proportion to the wealthiest men, richly endowed with all good things; indeed, because people who make the smallest offerings often excel those who build temples and perform other lavish rites, since God, King of the universe, considers the spiritual eagerness and the ability of a donor rather than the particular quality of the gift; so in your divine presence, without hesitation, a person desiring to show you her soul's devotion finds some way or another to prove it in outward deeds, hoping through a small and feeble tribute that nonetheless includes matchless yearning and an enlightened, eager will to surpass the honor of whoever, unable to show signs of such reverent feeling, offers far more expensive things out of respect for your most excellent judgment—which, with the kindness of God, whose deserving and famous minister you are on earth, valuing the intention of the heart more than the pretension of things, cannot fail to accept a tiny sign of devotion more willingly than an endless effort toward some final, unattainable declaration of respect. This truth, which I have clearly understood in the light of your famous virtue and encountered directly in the match and fit between your fame and the dignity of your person, along with your blessed and divine intelligence, has so enflamed me that amidst the competition of many men famous for their learning, constantly addressing their wonderful works of science and elegant studies to you and also their compliments, in which the writer's judgment is more to be honored the more that he lacks the ability to praise you, I have not hesitated, though a woman untrained in the disciplines

and poor in invention and language, to dedicate to you this volume of letters written in my youth, which, with the help of your amazing courtesy and my deepest respect, ought to have that place in the blessedly fortunate shelter of your superhuman kindness, among the wealth of large and brilliant lights burning in the temple, that a well-trimmed and filled oil lamp used to have in heaven. Perhaps at a more propitious time, in better fortune and a more practiced style, with the help of your divine kindness, I will dare to try a greater undertaking, expressing more fully my soul and my gratitude than laying this little book at the feet of your high valor, through which you, holding out the arms of your courtesy from the lofty throne of your immense grace to accept and receive this little display, derived from my most fervent desire to acknowledge the duty I owe you, will win esteem for your kindness, all the greater the farther I am from deserving anything from your illustrious Lordship. Your kindness will lay upon me that command which, eagerly sought, is never without effect in the mind of someone who wants to work in pleasing and skillful ways.

May our Lord bless your most illustrious person.

From Venice, the second of August, 1580.

*Your most illustrious and most reverend Lordship's
humblest and most devoted servant,*

Veronica Franco!

*To the Most Unvanquished and Christian King,
Henri III of France and Poland*

To the immensely high favor that Your Majesty deigned to show me, coming to my humble house, by taking my portrait away with you in exchange for the living image of your heroic virtues and divine valor that you left deep in my heart—an exchange all too fortunate and happy on my side—I am unable to reciprocate, even in thought or desire; for what can be born from me worthy of the supreme height of your heavenly soul and your fate? Nor can I compensate even partly with any form of thanks for the infinite merit of the kindly and gracious offers you made to me on the subject of this book, which I am about to dedicate to you, offers more fitting to your greatness and most serene kingly splendor than to any talent of mine. And even so, as the whole world can be drawn in the small space of the narrowest page, I have, in these few verses which I send

1. Writing a woman's surname with a feminine ending was common practice in Franco's time

LETTERE
FAMILIARI
A DIVERSI
DELLA S. VERONICA
FRANCA.
ALL'ILLVSTRISS. ET
REVERENDISS. MONSIEG.
LVIGI D'ESTE
CARDINALE.



FIGURE 2
Frontispiece for
Veronica Franco's
Lettere familiari a diversi
(1580), dedicated to
Cardinal Luigi d'Este
and Henri III, king of
France.

with all respect to Your Majesty, set down a sketch, however cramped and rough, of my gratitude and my immense, burning desire to celebrate beyond the limits of any earthly hope the innumerable and superhuman gifts lodged, to their good fortune, in your generous breast. And with devoted and deep affection I bow down reverently to embrace your sacred knees.

Your Majesty's most humble and devoted servant,

Veronica Franco

SONNETS TO HENRI III

1

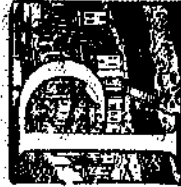
*Come talor dal ciel sotto umil tetto
Giove tra noi qua giù benigno scende,
e, perch' occhio terren dall'alt'oggetto
non resti vinto, umana forma prende:*



OME all'hor dal Ciel sotto hu-
mil terro
Gloria non qu'giubengno
scende,
Et perche occhio terren dall'
all'oggetto
Non resti uinto humana for-
ma prende:

Così venne al mio povero ricetto
Senza pompa real, ch'abbaglia, e splende
Dal fato Enrico a tal dominio eletto,
Ch'un sol mondo no'l cape, & nolcomprende.

Benche si sconoscano, anch'al mio core
Tal raggio impresso del diuin suo merito,
Che'n me s'estinse il natural vigore.
Di ch'ei di tant'affetto non incerto,
L'imagin mia di final', e di colore
Prese al partir con grat'animo aperto.



Prendi, re per virtù sommo et perfetto,
quel che la mano a porgerli si stende:
questo scolpito e colorato aspetto,
in cui'l mio uivo e natural s'intende.
E, s'a esempio si basso e si imperfetto
la tua vista beata non s'attende.
Poca favilla ancor gran fiamma accende.
E come'l tuo immortal diuin valore,
in armi e in pace a mille prove esperto,
m'empio l'anima di nobile stupore,
così'l desio, di donna in cor sofferto,
d'alzarti sopra'l Ciel dal mondo fore
mira in quel mio sembiante espresso, & certo.

E, s'a esempio si basso, & si imperfetto
La tua vista beata non s'attende,
Ritguarda a la cagion, non a l'effetto.
Poca favilla ancor gran fiamma accende.

E come'l tuo immortal diuin valore,
in armi, è in pace a mille prove esperto
M'empio l'anima di nobile stupore,

Così'l desio di donna in cor sofferto
D'alzarti sopra'l Ciel dal mondo fore
Mira in quel mio sembiante espresso, & certo.

FIGURE 3

Two dedicatory sonnets by Veronica Franco for Henri III, king of France, after his entry into Venice in 1574, in Franco's *Lettere familiari a diversi* (1580). Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice. Rari V. 494

così venne al mio povero ricetto
senza pompa real, ch'abbaglia e splende,
dal fato Enrico a tal dominio eletto,
ch'un sol mondo nol cape e nol comprende.

Benché si sconosciuto, anch'al mio core
tal raggio impresso del diuin suo merito,
ch'in me s'estinse il natural vigore.

Di ch'ei, di tanto affetto non incerto,
l'imagin mia di smalto e di colore
prese al partir con grat'animo aperto.

As from heaven down to a humble roof
Beneficent Jove descends to us here below,
and to avoid blinding mortal eyes
with such a noble sight, takes human shape:
so to my poor dwelling came Henri,
without royal show, which blinds and dazzles—
Henri, whom fate chose for such an empire
that one world alone cannot contain it.

Even so disguised, into my heart
he shone such a ray of his divine virtue
that my innate strength completely failed me.

So, assured of the depth of my affection,
he took my image, in enamel and paint,
away with him in a gracious, open spirit.

2

Prendi, re per virtù sommo et perfetto,
quel che la mano a porgerli si stende:
questo scolpito e colorato aspetto,
in cui'l mio uivo e natural s'intende.

E, s'a esempio si basso e si imperfetto
la tua vista beata non s'attende,
ritguarda a la cagion, non a l'effetto.

Poca favilla ancor gran fiamma accende.
E come'l tuo immortal diuin valore,
in armi e in pace a mille prove esperto,
m'empio l'anima di nobile stupore,

così'l desio, di donna in cor sofferto,
d'alzarti sopra'l ciel dal mondo fore,
mira in quel mio sembiante espresso e certo.

Take, king, sum of virtue and perfection,
 what my hand reaches out to give you:
 this carved and colored countenance,

in which my living, real self is represented.
 And if such a lowly and imperfect image
 is not what your blessed gaze expects,
 Consider my motive rather than the result.
 A small spark can still kindle a great flame.

And because your undying, celestial valor,
 tested by a thousand trials in war and peace,
 filled my soul with noble wonder,

So the desire felt in a woman's heart
 to raise you above heaven, beyond this world,
 see, expressed and proved, in this likeness of me.

Letter 4

FRANCO RETURNS A FRIEND'S ADVICE TO HIM IN HIS ADVERSITY

The words you said to me the other evening made me realize that your soul is seriously troubled and shaken by mishaps arising from your bad luck—so much so that I was dumbfounded to recall the many occasions on which I've found you to be a man of prudence and quite capable of defending yourself with the powerful shield of virtue against the blows of hostile fate. And because I, too, once suffering, as we do in the world, found you ready and willing to comfort me with your good advice, from which I benefited so much that my trouble almost turned to gain as I followed your wise warnings, I mustn't fail to perform the same duty of consoling you in your crisis. Doing this, on one hand, will be harder for me than you because I have so little experience with the reasoning on which, with sound doctrine, you have based your position. On the other hand, it will be easy for me because I have nothing to tell you except exactly what you once told me. And if my memory serves me as it should, I'll talk to you in your own words and say your own speech back to you. And be aware that in paying you what I owe you, I am paying you back in exactly the same coin you gave me. For the fair repayment of virtue requires that I proceed not only in a way like yours but in exactly the same way.

Vain and foolish is the man who thinks he can pass without troubles through this mortal life, into which we are first born crying, signifying that we have entered upon a demanding and difficult pil-

grimage, full of miseries and afflictions, which is wrongly called life but actually leads to life or death, according to whether we lean to the right or the left. What's more, the world by its nature is so full of grief and unhappiness everywhere that the man's considered best off who is least badly off. There's no question of goodness in this worldly exile. But not only is there nothing good in earthly life, there's nothing worth paying any attention to at all. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," the wise man said.

But if through human imperfection and the illusory desires of the flesh, which last less than a minute compared to time's eternity, anything should be valued, along with the philosopher thank divine goodness. For though He could have made you be born from the filthiest and lowest species of all the beasts, He gave you birth in the most perfect species—humankind—and of that species He gave you the male sex and not, as to me, the female one. And among men from different countries He gave you as a homeland a city neither barbarous nor enslaved, but gracious, and not only free, but mistress of the sea and of the loveliest region of Europe. A truly maiden city, immaculate and never violated, free from the taint of injustice, never harmed by an enemy force through the fires of war or the world's conflagration, in every revolution uniquely, miraculously preserved, not only whole but untouched by hostile attack, as if founded alone by a miracle in the midst of the sea, and with marvelous tranquility firmly established and constantly increased through endless time. A city full of marvels and surprises, and one that, described without being seen, can't be known or grasped by the human intellect.

And what if you'd been born in this city among the dregs of the people? The ancient annals are full of your ancestors' brave deeds, and your nobility down through an unbroken line is famous and pure. Do you by chance not have wealth? Look how little nature accepts as enough, to see how much she surpasses you. And if it seems to you that you are poor because another man is richer than you, if this is how wealth is measured, how many rich men must exist in the huge treasury of the whole world? And then tell me: would you exchange everything—fortune, material possessions, body, and soul—with anyone more powerful and more fortunate on earth? And if no man can be found who, however he complains about his situation, wants to exchange it all for another, what are you complaining about? But you want both to hold onto your wisdom and to change places with another man because of his good fortune. And if this can't be done, why not rejoice instead that you outdo him in the strength of your soul, thinking that he should envy you for this quality rather than envying him yourself for his wealth? Especially

since anyone has only the wealth that he spends, and no more? And if it doesn't seem to you that you have money enough for the habits of a world corrupted by excessive spending, consider how much less you might have and how much worse off you could be, lowering your gaze to examples at your feet, of which there are infinite numbers.

But man is so arrogant that when he should be lifting his eyes to heaven so as to lower them to earth and disdain in it all the things that are empty and vain compared to the undying, holy lights and the infinite order of stars strewn throughout such a stupendous machine, he looks up as if to compete with these celestial intelligences, daring to envy their fortune. How much better it is, and closer to the rule of reason, to scorn entirely, in the knowledge of eternity, the frail, corruptible body, which lasts so few years that a deer or a crow lives ten times longer than a man arriving at decrepit old age! And if man, as long as he lives on earth, can't avoid being stained with earthly mud, may the one who has most strength of mind be least soiled by it.

And if you, through the influence of a benign planet, have attained a good intelligence and made it disciplined and skillful through practice, how could you use it better than by wisely judging fortune's gifts, which are worthless things compared to virtue? This teaches you to feed your abilities by starving desire, purging your soul of empty and always damaging lust. And virtue not only teaches you how to have plenty in the midst of poverty, it shows you as well that true wealth consists in peace of mind and contentment. And the contentment of our soul is nothing else but the possession of virtue, easily recognized by its effects, which have the power to make man happy in the face of every hostile attack of misfortune. From the worst disasters, virtue draws the strength to exert itself further and so in this way to bless whoever possesses it. And this is why many truly courageous men have defied fortune, rivaling and overcoming her greatest enmity with the effects of strength and other virtues, which give to the man who possesses them, in comparison to whoever lacks them, the appearance of a living man, compared to a painted corpse. Perhaps speaking to you this way is redundant and, as they say, like carrying water to the sea, to the extent that I talk to you about matters which you understand perfectly well and about which you've enlightened and advised me.

Nonetheless, a duty born of love and gratitude compels me further to tell you that virtue inheres more in practice than in pretense. So when it comes to the values that you have so often taught me, you'll show that you no longer understand them or possess them if you don't apply them in your hour of need, which is never so urgent

that it surpasses the power of reason and prudence. With that, I cease to write to you, recommending myself—as always—most heartily to you.

Letter 6

THANKS TO A FRIEND WHO HAS SENT HER SOME SONNETS, TO WHOM SHE SENDS TWO OF HER OWN

Since I can't praise enough your Lordship's divine writing and the sonnets you have composed, conforming so closely to the strictures of rhyme, or even find the words to thank you as I should for the many honors and favors I've received from you, I'll keep silently in the depth of my soul my admiration of your skill and the memory of what I owe you. And I'll let it pass that you begin with ennobling comparisons of the lowliest possible object that can be chosen for praise so that the light of your famous style burns all the more brightly, though it doesn't need such help at all, and you continue to enjoy the pleasure that every really noble heart feels at behaving courteously, especially toward ladies. May your gentle thought be happy as you turn over in your mind the generous favor and great liberality you have granted me. If I fail to deserve them in any other way, I do because I need the help of another's kind praises when I lack any of my own, even though such praise makes me uneasy because I so admire the skill of its makers, equal (if any equal can be found) to your Lordship.

To whom as a sign of my gratitude, though warned against it by my judgment, I send two sonnets written in the same rhymes as your four. I, too, would have written four, which, though they wouldn't be worth a single one of yours, would at least show that I'm eager to learn. For I work so hard at them, longing to reveal my soul, which corresponds in such writing neither to the desire nor the need to return such graces and favors. May your Lordship make up for my lack with your skill, and wherever I may be, I will still be yours. Do me the favor, as your servant, of making me worthy of your commands, which I'm sorry not to be able to fulfill by coming to you today, as I'd planned to do, taking the occasion to visit my aunt the nun. But something has come up that keeps me from it. So, against my will, I must stay in this city for the time being.

Letter 9

A REQUEST FOR THE LOAN OF A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT
AND AN INVITATION TO A CONCERT

Trusting in Your Lordship's infinite courtesy and matching your noble soul with the ardent desire alive in me always to honor and serve you, I have summoned the courage to ask you a favor. Please grant me your harpsichord for several days, and if possible let me have it from eight o'clock tomorrow night, when I invite you to come and honor my house with your presence, at an occasion when I will be playing music. And please bring Messer Vincenzo with you. And if I am making trouble for you, may the blame for it fall upon the shoulders of your great kindness, which gives me confidence. Until then, I kiss your hands with all my heart.

Letter 13

AN INVITATION TO A MEAL AT HER HOUSE

Among the many favors I could receive through your kindness, the best of all will be that you do me the favor of enjoying some pleasant conversation today, along with your friend, who will be very eager to come. You see how this rainy weather invites all good folk to settle down inside by the fire, at least until evening. If you're willing to come, we can partake in mutual comfort, *sine fuco et caerimonis more maiorum* [without pomp and ceremony, in the manner of our ancestors],² of whatever food there'll be. And if you'd be so kind as to add a little flask of that good malmsey of yours, I am content and ask nothing more. This evening, then, I'll obey your order, a delight to me, to go to your friend's house. And whatever you choose to do, for my part, I'll always behave most lovingly toward you.

Letter 16

A LETTER OF CONGRATULATIONS TO A NEW MOTHER

In the end, the fatigue and pain of childbirth have turned out to be a sweet blessing to you. Now you have borne such a beautiful baby boy, which delights me as much as the difficulties of your pregnancy saddened me, all the more since they're no sooner felt than forgotten.

2. Franco cites but revises a line from Cicero's first letter to Atticus, "*sine fuco et fallacis more maiorum*" [without pomp or pretense, in the manner of our ancestors].

ten, and joy increases hand in hand with the life of the child, who, as he grows in beauty, will doubtless grow as well in kindness and strength. And because he's the offshoot of a stock that can't degenerate or produce any less than perfect fruit and he's growing up in the care of people who won't neglect a single detail of his perfect upbringing, these signs of eternal beauty, flourishing and growing, are surely lights that, shining out from his inner being, predict the joyful news of his successful attainment of goodness. This goodness, I pray Our Lord, will increase in your admirable family without end or limit through the actions of such a noble boy, so that in addition to the glory won by your ancestors' high deeds, it may shine like a celestial sun on earth in the new accomplishments of such a well-born little son. May his years, along with those of your Ladyship and the lord your husband, be long and happy.

Letter 17

ADVISING A YOUNG MAN THAT INTELLECTUALS WIN
HER AFFECTION

The things of this world, which are not ordered by an enduring law as is the fixed movement of the stars, are arranged so that, depending on chance, they can take various shapes and follow various patterns, according to whether they are directed well or badly, by caution or by lack of judgment. As a result they have various and contrasting outcomes. So something done one way would be delightful, which, done differently, would cause harm, and what, well handled, could be a shield and a defense, badly managed, wounds and kills. And without speaking of sword and fire, which are tools for good and ill depending on how they're used, or of wealth or beauty or high birth and other similar gifts, which take a good or bad form according to the ways they're used, but turning instead to our subject of love, there's no doubt that it acts as a stimulus in us, which, depending on how it's shaped by our feelings, is the source of opposite things. So while one man, carried away by the recklessness of his sex, ends in ruin and open shame, another, refraining from indecency so as not to offend his lady and setting his mind on virtue to win her favor, has accomplished impressive and memorable things.

And for this reason, the wise man said that to assemble an army that would be undefeated and always victorious, it should be made up of men who respect loving and being loved by each other.³ And

3. This is one of Socrates' arguments, as recorded by Plato in *The Symposium*.

if this is the conclusion of Socrates, who can never be praised too much because, though he was totally dedicated to philosophical study in leisure and peace, performed wonders of bravery in warfare and on the battlefield, in the presence and for the defense of the person he so loved, who though he was a woman in his delicate complexion and timid soul, was a young man in his sturdy body and forceful spirit, think how much more this brave lover would have done if he'd seen a lady in danger, unable at all to act to save herself by resistance or flight, because of her panic in the noise and heat of battle. An infinite number of other examples could show you how many great actions have been caused by love, and if some of the worst actions have also been born of it, this doesn't mean that a man of your stature should be alarmed or lose courage. For the fault is the misuse of love, and not love itself.

Instead, calm and appease your over-intense and anxious imaginings. And if you must put on spurs, don't put on the kind that push you wildly out of your homeland into a shiftless and pointless exile, but rather the kind that lead you to win virtue befitting your true worth. In this way, a man fully succeeds in enjoying honest leisure in his own country, among fellow citizens and in the presence of his beloved lady, trying to rival his peers in the theater of public competition by acquiring merit greater than theirs and hoping for a reward equal to his brave service.

You know full well that of all the men who count on being able to win my love, the ones dearest to me are those who work in the practice of the liberal arts and disciplines, of which (though a woman of little knowledge, especially compared to my inclination and interest) I am so fond. And it's with great delight that I talk with those who know, so as to have further chances to learn, for if my fate allowed, I would happily spend my entire life and pass all my time in the academies of talented men. This could be a great advantage to you, being industrious, as you are, in fine writing and in the flower of your youth, which, if you nourish and cultivate it well, will bear fruit to your perpetual praise and fame in the opinion of every wise and experienced person. Take advantage of these capacities, attend to your studies, and (if you're as eager as you say for my love—I hesitate to say whether I have a good or bad opinion of you—I assure you that your frenzies and wandering and ranting by day and night, intent on besieging me with your service, make me consider you an idle and empty-headed young man, more inclined to be ruined by your appetites than edified by reason) by living a settled life in the tranquillity of study and showing me the profit you gain from hon-

est learning rather than any of the world's goods, you could lead me to love and cherish you.

And if, through impatience, unwilling to spend your time winning my favor this way and unable to tolerate serving literature, you're determined to wander uselessly here and there, I warn you that if your love for me is not feigned, recourse to distance will do you harm—in the painful thoughts that will pursue you more closely the farther from me you go, renewing in your loving memory the pleasure that you could often have, almost as a lover, in seeing me and hearing me and sometimes being invited in to talk with me. And the farther you see yourself distanced from this, the more the desire to be near it will gnaw at you and consume you. And you'll discover through the bitter experience of sharp regret that the kind of love that at first can be conquered by flight before it really strikes, later, when you've fled with its iron still in your side, kills rather than comforts by flight. If you're really in love with me, what I've said about you will have the power to make you stay, if you think carefully; and if you leave, it will be clear proof that your love is false. And in that case, not only will I free myself from any duty to love you, but I'll be persuaded to laugh at you and make fun of you. I have nothing else to write to you. Think carefully about your situation and behave with good judgment and good sense. May our Lord protect you.

Letter 21

TO THE PAINTER JACOPO TINTORETTO

Signor Tintoretto, I can't bear to listen to people who praise ancient times so much and find such fault with our own, who claim that nature was a loving mother to men of antiquity but that she is a cruel stepmother to men today. How far this is from the truth I leave people of good judgment to decide, less biased, I think, than these. Among the other things they use to raise the ancients up to heaven is whichever art is most beautiful and noble, be it painting, sculpture, or bas relief, claiming that no one is found in the world today who matches the excellence of Apelles, Zeuxis, Phydias, Praxiteles, and other noble and famous painters and sculptors of those times—though on what basis, I don't know. I have heard gentlemen expert in antiquity and highly knowledgeable about these arts say that in our era and even today, there are painters and sculptors who must be acknowledged not only to equal but to surpass those of ancient times, as Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, and others did, and as you do today



FIGURE 4 A portrait of Veronica Franco by Jacopo Tintoretto. Oil on canvas, sixteenth century (1575?). Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass.; Austin S. and Sarah C. Carver Fund.

I don't say this to flatter you, you know, because it's common knowledge. If it doesn't seem so to you, it's because you close your ears to praise and don't care to know what men think of you, as other artists—painters and others—do. I think this happens because, having reached the summit of your art and knowing that no one else has

gone so far, like a man who refuses a guide who has never traveled his path before, you pay no attention to other people's judgments, whether they praise or blame. You concentrate entirely on methods of imitating—no, rather of outdoing—nature, not only in what can be imitated by modeling the human figure, nude or clothed, adding color, shading, contour, features, muscles, movements, actions, poses, curves, and structure conforming to nature, but by expressing emotional states as well. I don't think that Roscius⁴ was able to act as many feelings on stage as your wonderful, immortal brush paints on panels, walls, canvas, and other surfaces.

I swear to you that when I saw my portrait, the work of your divine hand, I wondered for a while whether it was a painting or an apparition set before me by some trickery of the devil, not to make me fall in love with myself, as happened to Narcissus⁵ (because, thank God, I don't consider myself so beautiful that I'm afraid to go mad over my own charms), but for some other reason unknown to me. So I say to you, and rest assured of this, that divine nature sees how skillfully you imitate, even surpass her, so much that what you gain in honor through your immortal works is her loss. So she will never dare grant to men of our time the high, bold intelligence required to explain in full the excellence of your art. In this way she hopes to avoid shame, in word and deed, in every age to come. And I, certain not to succeed in such a great enterprise myself, lay down my pen and pray to our blessed Lord for your happiness.

Letter 22

A WARNING TO A MOTHER CONSIDERING TURNING HER DAUGHTER INTO A COURTESAN

The fact that you go around complaining that I'm no longer willing for you to come to my house to see me, loving you as well as I do, bothers me less than the fact that I have a good reason for it. Since you see it as unfair and have complained about me endlessly, I would like to respond to you in this letter, making a last attempt to dissuade you from your evil intent, owing you greater friendship than ever before if you accept my truthful argument—or, if you don't, to take away any hope that you should ever speak to me again. I'm all the more eager to fulfill this duty toward you because

4. Roscius (d. 62 B.C.) was a famous comic actor in Rome; a friend to Cicero.

5. Narcissus, a beautiful young man, fell in love with his own reflection in a pool and died of starvation as a result (*Metamorphoses*, 3.407–510 ff.).

to the extent that I clear myself of your accusations, I also fulfill a humane obligation by showing you a steep precipice hidden in the distance and by shouting out before you reach it, so that you'll have time enough to steer clear of it. Although it's mainly a question of your daughter's well-being, I'm talking about you, as well, for her ruin cannot be separated from yours. And because you're her mother, if she should become a prostitute, you'd become her go-between and deserve the harshest punishment, while her error wouldn't perhaps be entirely inexcusable because it would have been caused by your wrongdoing.

You know how often I've begged and warned you to protect her virginity. And since this world is so full of dangers and so uncertain, and the houses of poor mothers are never safe from the amorous maneuvers of lustful young men, I showed you how to shelter her from danger and to help her by teaching her about life in such a way that you can marry her decently. I offered you all the help I could to assure that she'd be accepted into the Casa delle Zitelle,⁶ and I also promised you, if you took her there, to help you with all the means at my disposal, as well. At first you thanked me and seemed to be listening to me and to be well disposed toward my affectionate offer. Together we agreed on what needed to be done so that she'd be accepted there, and we were about to carry out our plan when you underwrote I don't know what change of heart. Where once you made her appear simply clothed and with her hair arranged in a style suitable for a chaste girl, with veils covering her breasts and other signs of modesty, suddenly you encouraged her to be vain, to bleach her hair and paint her face. And all at once, you let her show up with curls dangling around her brow and down her neck, with bare breasts spilling out of her dress, with a high, uncovered forehead, and every other embellishment people use to make their merchandise measure up to the competition.

I swear to you, by my faith, that when you first showed her so disguised to me, I could hardly recognize her, and I told you what friendship and charity required. But you, by taking my words as an insult, as though I'd spoken maliciously in my own interest, proved to me that I was right to be displeased—as, in fact, I've been ever since, so that I haven't made any effort to maintain the closeness we once shared. Rather, I've had you told that I wasn't at home or given you a chilly welcome. I've expressed my distress over you and your household to other people, thinking that complaining to them might

6. The Casa delle Zitelle was a charitable institution founded to shelter poor, unmarried girls, in order to prevent their loss of chastity and the ensuing loss of the possibility of marriage.

be some use to you if you heard about it and that if they repeated my words to you, they'd reproach you sharply. And I've been told that someone did carry out this duty, out of affection and the wish to do you good. But you, remaining stubborn and hardheaded, swore on one hand that your daughter was a saint while on the other you led people to believe that she has little concern for her honor through the gossip and scandal you, her mother, provoked.

Now, finally, I wanted to be sure to write you these lines, urging you again to beware of what you're doing and not to slaughter in one stroke your soul and your reputation, along with your daughter's—who, considered from the purely carnal point of view, is really not very beautiful (to say the least, for my eyes don't deceive me) and has so little grace and wit in conversation that you'll break her neck expecting her to do well in the courtesan's profession, which is hard enough to succeed in even if a woman has beauty, style, good judgment, and proficiency in many skills. And just imagine a young woman who lacks many of these qualities or has them only to an average degree! And because, persisting in your error, you might say that such matters depend on chance, I reply first that there's nothing worse that can be done in life than to let oneself become a plaything of fortune, which can as easily or more easily hand out evil as good. But anyone with good sense, to avoid being deceived in the end, builds her hopes on what she has inside her and on what she might be able to make of herself.

I'll add that even if fate should be completely favorable and kind to her, this is a life that always turns out to be a misery. It's a most wretched thing, contrary to human reason, to subject one's body and labor to a slavery terrifying even to think of. To make oneself prey to so many men, at the risk of being stripped, robbed, even killed, so that one man, one day, may snatch away from you everything you've acquired from many over such a long time, along with so many other dangers of injury and dreadful contagious diseases; to eat with another's mouth, sleep with another's eyes, move according to another's will, obviously rushing toward the shipwreck of your mind and your body—what greater misery? What wealth, what luxuries, what delights can outweigh all this? Believe me, among all the world's calamities, this is the worst. And if to worldly concerns you add those of the soul, what greater doom and certainty of damnation could there be?

Pay attention to what people say, and in matters crucial to life on earth and to the soul's salvation, don't follow examples set by others. Don't allow the flesh of your wretched daughter not only to be cut into pieces and sold but you yourself to become her butcher.

Consider the likely outcome; and if you want to observe other cases, look at what's happened and happens every day to the multitude of women in this occupation. If you can be convinced by reason, every argument about this world and all the more about heaven opposes you and urges you to avoid this fatal course. Turn your hopes to God and take advantage of the help your friends offer you.

As for me, besides the promises I've already made you, which I have every intention of keeping, ask me to do anything I can and I'll be ready immediately to help you in any way possible—as I now beg you, as much as I can, to avoid this dire possibility before it's too late. For once you've thrown the stone into the water, you'll find it very hard to get it out again. If you do this, I could be a closer friend to you than ever. By the same account, if you do otherwise, you'll have no cause to blame me for withdrawing from your friendship, for if you persist in such unfriendly behavior, the more chance and reason you give others to flee you the more they love you, because they can't bear to see you in such misfortune without being able to help you. It won't be long, perhaps, before your daughter herself, recognizing the great harm you've done her, will flee from you more than anyone else does—all the more because, as her mother, you should have helped her and you'll have exploited and ruined her instead. And this may be only the beginning of your torment. May Our Lord save you from your obvious intention to ruin and corrupt what you created from your own flesh and blood. However much I could say to you, I'd still have more to say on this subject. So I'll go no further but leave you to think carefully before you come to any decision.

Letter 31

THANKS TO A MAN FOR PRAISING HER IN HER ABSENCE
TO COUNTER THE ATTACK MADE ON HER BY ANOTHER

My bad luck of rightly continuing to feel offended by that friend of mine was not as great as the much greater good luck of having your courteous protection on my side in my absence—protection that was not only a shield supplying me the surest defense against those insults, but also, because it sheltered me from the onslaught of hostile accusations rather than support my arguments, succeeded in making me the winner through praise. This praise, given me by your authority, was affirmed in the opinion and speech of everyone who was there, so I was assured by one person present at the scene, who

told me that in this controversy my opponent had lost a great deal and I had come out well ahead. I attribute this entirely to your kindness, though my cause itself was so just that when the reckoning came, it could hardly have ended any other way.

Yet I am still pained by the error and stubbornness of that gentleman, on his account because I neither can nor want to make up my mind not to love him, and on my account because I've been not only deceived but also reproached by the judgment that led me to invent such a great fantasy about him. Though who wouldn't have made a mistake? But everyone can be wise after the fact. Still, who wouldn't have been moved and persuaded by those manners and by those words, adroitly spoken from the mouth of a gentleman of such rank and quality? And if, beyond that, you had heard the promises he not only made on faith but affirmed with the strongest oaths, I'm sure you'd have taken me for a woman of little spirit and less faith if I hadn't believed, on my side, that he'd keep the promises I'd also made, with less ceremony. And so sometimes, through Nature's kindness, someone is mocked and fooled, though the man who mocks and fools her this way mocks and fools himself more than anyone else. In the end these blows fall on the head of the man who deals them out, and as far as the person they're aimed at is concerned, they drift away into the air and the wind.

I prefer by far having been deceived by a gentleman to having anyone able to say that he's been deceived by me. And it isn't enough to avoid being deceptive only in order to avoid being deceived; good conduct is more praiseworthy the less it is aimed at a particular end but is contented in itself and exists for its own sake. Even so, I'll make an effort, based on these lessons, to be more careful in the future; and perhaps—I hope—this misfortune will be the source of countless benefits. That is, I hope through divine justice, as solace to me and shame to the man who's been unfaithful to me, that in well-deserved retribution he won't escape vain regret and a constant eating away at his heart, like Tityos's,⁷ whose tale was told in antiquity to express the pain the soul feels when it recognizes its wrongdoing. And even if I'm unable to pay the debt I owe your Lordship, Heaven will make up for it, multiplying infinite favors toward you, as I fondly and devoutly pray.

7. Tityos, mentioned by the Greek poet Pindar, was a giant, killed by Apollo and Diana for attempting to rape their mother, Leto. Virgil puts him in Tartarus, the lower depth of the underworld, where his liver is constantly gnawed by a vulture (*Aeneid*, 6.789–96).

*Letter 37*THANKS TO A GENTLEMAN FOR HIS LETTERS AND
FAVORS TO HER

In the letters that come from your Lordship, written laconically, I understand and consider more than asiatically the real extent of your wonderfully abundant courtesy, which, in the manner of a swollen torrent that breaks its banks and floods the countryside, refusing the narrow bed of such a short letter and leaping beyond its course, widens and surges forward in a way that leaves me overwhelmed and outdone. Lacking the strength to resist the power of such a flow, it's best that I retreat and make up with the fullness of my eagerness and desire for the lack in my attempts to respond to the generosity of such kind writing and for the lack, as well, of any words capable of thanking your Lordship sufficiently. On this subject, too, I will proceed with laconic reserve, for any degree of lavish eloquence would still be surpassed by the infinite quantity of your merit, valor, and noble amiability, through which you have obliged me to be so entirely yours that nothing is as deeply printed in my heart as the image of your courtesy, accompanied by a burning desire, living inextinguishably in me, always to please and serve you. Please command me and make use of my service, increasing your dignity through your honored demands and allowing me the more than infinite satisfaction of responding to your high worth. Nor can I say anything on this subject, overcome by emotion as I am, except that among all the signs I could have that my devotion is not unwelcome to you, the best would be always to see you, in loving confidence, freely making use of my accomplishments, considering them as thoroughly yours as I am myself, won over by your immeasurably precious qualities—on whose behalf, since I always think, speak, and write willingly of them, I beg your Lordship to remember my affection now and then and to write to me from time to time in your absence. During it, following you continually in my mind and all my thought, I shall make every effort to be with you physically as well, as occasion permits, intimately enjoying your sweet conversation, which at this distance I love and long for with all my soul. With which from here I bow and kiss your Lordship's most revered hands, begging you to give your most honored colleague the ever increasing best wishes of the lady left behind.

*Letter 39*A REQUEST TO A FRIEND TO CONTRIBUTE POEMS TO THE
MEMORIAL ANTHOLOGY FOR ESTORE MARTINENGO

Although I've let my pen lie idle from writing to your Lordship for a while, I deserve not only that you excuse me but that you defend and pity me, for I've neglected writing to you not by choice but against my will, since the misfortune has befallen me of my two young sons' illness these past days—one after the other has come down with fever and smallpox—along with other crises that have kept me busy and worried beyond all measure. Now that, by God's mercy, they're a good deal better, as soon as I could catch my breath in order to fulfill my duty to answer your very gracious letters, and to please myself in no small measure, I've taken pen in hand to write to you, if not as much as I would like, given my other occupations—which like a many-headed serpent, the more I cut them off, the more they multiply—at least enough to pay you the respect I owe.

And I beg you to indulge me by agreeing to use your most refined skills in the composition of whatever number of sonnets that time and my entreaties permit you, on the occasion of the death of the illustrious Count Estore Martinengo, whom I hold in great respect. And in addition to the sense of duty I feel to commemorate him and the surviving members of his whole family, I've been asked by a man whose wish is my command to compose some sonnets myself and to have all my friends and lords write on this subject. So, not dawdling at all in the task of commissioning such works, I've begged the favor of writing from many other noble spirits, and many whom I've asked have already written. So I want to move ahead quickly and do it well, if I can. You'll have these men, your Lordship, as your valiant companions in this undertaking. And you'll be doing me a very great favor. And the opportunity to request this of you has been almost a pleasure for me, by increasing your willingness to prevail upon me for anything I can and wish to do for you. I am always ready to serve your Lordship.

Letter 41

A REQUEST FOR HELP IN REVISING HER LETTERS

Trusting in your Lordship's kindness, on a par with the immense affection and respect I feel for you, I'm sending you this volume of my letters, which I've collected as best as I could, so that you may read it, and by compensating with your wisdom for my imperfec-

tions, you'll partly excuse and partly correct my mistakes. I also hope that you'll forgive my presumption not only in sending you these trifles of mine to look at, but also in wanting to see and talk to you in person, and that you'll set aside any consideration of the difference between your skill and my unworthiness. Still, given that this is caused by a most powerful love—for otherwise I wouldn't dare to request it of you—I beg you with all my heart to favor me with whatever sort of correspondence suits your kindness, by allowing me as soon as possible to spend two hours of whatever day suits you in talking to you in person and through good fortune enjoying pleasant conversation with your Lordship. To whom I affectionately send my regards.

Letter 44

A REQUEST TO DOMENICO VENIER FOR THE LOAN
OF A WHEELCHAIR

Fortune favors me by giving me an ailment of the limbs similar to your Lordship's, having made me almost lose a leg, as if nature and art were opposed and unwilling to make me resemble you in spirit and intellect. May the wound to my body make up for the weakness of my spirit! A welcome offense, since in addition to imitating your Lordship's indisposition in this way, I'll also enjoy some of your esteemed cast-offs in my need—for example, one of those wheelchairs of yours, which I beg you to send me by the bearer of this letter, so that I may profit from it in the unlucky accident to my knee, whose muscle I've pierced, I don't know how, with a hair pin.⁸ And this has kept me from coming to pay you my respects in person, which I constantly do in my heart.

Letter 47

AN APOLOGY TO A MAN FOR SUSPECTING HIM OF
BEING THE AUTHOR OF THE SATIRIC VERSES
WRITTEN BY ANOTHER

Rumor, which reports events with less concern for what is true than for what might seem true, made me believe with convincing reasons that your Lordship was the author of that satire, considering that men who have talent similar to yours try to prove themselves by discussing subjects void of any interest and to make up for their scant

8. *Ago da treccia* may also mean embroidery needle.

material with an abundance of good judgment and invention. This is exactly what was done by the man who has written those verses against me, for if I don't deserve great praise, neither certainly do I deserve blame so much that someone I've never harmed and who doesn't know me should write against me with such venom—proof, no doubt, of his great intellect, and greater than praising me would have been, given that I'm a woman and have always tried to please kind and valorous men, without ever displeasing anyone. And if I am not highly skilled myself, I'm at least a lover of skill in people who are gifted with it, as is your Lordship, for whom on this account I've always felt great affection and respect. And for this reason I was truly astonished to be paid back for my devotion with such defamatory libels. And I also didn't wholly want to believe that this was your doing, once I had seen the imperfection of the work, full of errors, and for other reasons, too, not a worthy offspring of your noble intellect. Still, I remained in doubt because of several accounts I had had of it, now leaning toward thinking yes, now no. And in this indecision, it occurred to me for my own amusement to write the *capitolo*, which has so pleased me, given that you have been willing to keep it, that I was even glad it was sent to you by mistake.

And in the certainty that it happened this way and that a gentleman as honorable as you are wouldn't say one thing and mean another, I no longer have a reason for a duel or a challenge. Rather, I thank you for your offer of acting as my second in the duel, which, coming to me from such a great patron, I accept as an extraordinary favor. And because I need it, I'll take advantage of it with the same confidence that I want you to have in me. And I'll avail myself of it especially against whoever wrote that composition attacking me, if he ever comes to light. In the meantime, so as not to abandon the training in arms that I need, I entreat your Lordship, as the perfect instructor, to teach me some secret stroke, or, rather, to take the sword into your own hand, not one with a sharp edge but one for play, and to engage with me in a duel as virtuoso as you like, challenging me to a response by sending me whatever opening lines are convenient for you, in whatever language suits you. And if you deign to do this, I'll be grateful to you and make every effort to answer as quickly as I read profitably what you send me. And let this be the answer to your highly appreciated letter, which I've read several times with the greatest pleasure at receiving your Lordship's courteous pledge of skill and favor. I entrust myself to you.

ACCOMPANYING A SET OF PAGES, A REQUEST
FOR REVISIONS

I thank your Lordship for your praise of my book, because more than from any merit of mine, it comes from the kind of affection I have wanted to repay in a similar way, an affection I feel in all reverence for your valor and many other virtues. Blessed be Our Lord God that in the hardest ice and the indestructible diamond of your reason, completely free and detached from the power of inflamed senses, you have still received the imprint and stamp of that image of charitable love with which I love your Lordship most sincerely, keeping carved in my heart the living likeness of that virtue and courtesy of yours, which gives me confidence in your favor and your beneficence. And if the fire of love, which conquers men and gods, of which you write at the end of your letter is the ardor of a courteous desire to assist me in my need and according to your promises, I praise you and give you infinite thanks for your kindness.

Now I send you the second set of ten pages in compliance with your request, so that it, too, may receive the favor of your stripping it down to its doublet, as did the first. I'd certainly be very happy if in your leisure, having taken off your clothes, you took the trouble to correct this work, which you need to do—because otherwise, just sitting there undressed and unoccupied, you might catch cold! And by doing so, you'd increase my will to arrange quickly for the transcription of other books of mine, so far only in the form of rough drafts, by sending them to you, making up in part for this way of keeping you busy, and getting even with you for your great idleness in all the time that you haven't written me, and also by pestering you with the annoying task of reading these lines!