THE RENAISSANCE OF LETTERS:
KNOWLEDGE AND COMMUNITY, 1300-1650
Co-organized by
Paula Findlen (Stanford University) and Suzanne Sutherland (Middle Tennessee University)
Stanford Humanities Center, Levinthal Hall
May 13-14, 2016

FRIDAY, MAY 13

9:00 am  Coffee and pastries available

9:30 am  Welcome (Paula Findlen and Suzanne Sutherland)

10:00 am - 12:00 pm Session 1: Worlds of Commerce and Scholarship

Chair, Daniel Stolzenberg (UC Davis)

Jeffrey Miner (Western Kentucky University)
“One Network or Many? The World and Writing of Francesco di Marco Datini and his Correspondents”

Francesco di Marco Datini, the so-called Merchant of Prato, may be the best-documented correspondent in the premodern world. From humble beginnings as a trader in Avignon, Datini carefully nurtured his social and economic resources until late in life he sat at the center of an economic network that employed a heterogeneous group of friends, countrymen and business associates in all the major ports of the western Mediterranean. Letter-writing was at the center of his business practice and the surviving corpus of his letters is truly monumental, comprising over 150,000 individual items. The Datini archive, though, also preserves correspondence that might be categorized as social rather than economic – letters to his absent wife and other personal friends. This paper will consider both mercantile and personal letters from the Datini archive as a way to think about the network as a tool of analysis, as well as to consider the role of letters in managing trust and interpersonal relationships in the premodern world.

Brian Brege (Stanford University)
“A Florentine Humanist in India: Filippo Sassetti, Medici Agent by Annual Letter”

In the 1580s, the annual monsoon that linked and divided Europe and India shaped the correspondence of Filippo Sassetti (1540-1588). This well-connected Florentine humanist merchant in India wrote a series of eloquent letters to his friends and patrons in Europe. His correspondence reveals the possibilities and limitations of an intellectual epistolary relationship constrained by a difficult environment and considerable distance. This extraordinary series of letters contain accounts of his innovative linguistic and scientific investigations and his wide-ranging observations of India. They show Sassetti’s role not only as a Medici analyst and informant, but also as a collector of rare luxury items and botanical goods. A montage of travel accounts, scientific observations, avvisi, political and social analysis, patronage requests, and
more, the letters must be understood as part of an extended conversation. They were shaped by
the context of friends moving to and from India, Sassetti’s contacts in the Estado da Índia, and
his plans to return to Europe by heading east from India through the Iberian possessions in Asia
and the Americas. Abruptly terminated with Sassetti’s death in India, the letters preserve
fragments of an extended and ultimately incomplete conversation, one that took place in private,
with the Tuscan elite, and as part of the emerging Republic of Letters.

Rosemary Lee (University of Virginia)

As polymaths like Athansius Kircher and Peiresc created a European “republic of letters,”
commerce and diplomatic exchange with the wider world exposed them to new patterns of
learned sociability outside of Europe. “Creating a Global Republic of Letters” explores how
European polymaths imagined, discussed, and appropriated extra-European “republics of letters”
through a case study of the Roman polymath Pietro della Valle. Della Valle, a Roman
nobleman, began his studies of Islam and the natural world in Neapolitan academies. As a young
man, he undertook a journey through the Middle East and India, documenting his interactions
with indigenous learned practitioners. Examining Della Valle’s correspondence with European
polymaths during and after his travels will reveal how he encouraged Italian scholars to view
scientific achievements outside of Europe. Ultimately, Della Valle would incorporate the
findings of Safavid scholars in his orientalist writings. In the process, Della Valle and his
correspondents created a global republic of letters that recognized the usefulness of Middle
Eastern and European savants for the study of Middle Eastern cultures and societies.

12:00-1:30 pm  Lunch Break

1:30-3:00 pm  Session 2: Humanism, Courts, and Society

Chair, David Lummus (Stanford University)

Roberto Vetrugno (Nicolaus Copernicus University of Toruń)
“Mapping Castiglione’s Letters”

The 1779 letters of Baldassar Castiglione can be studied and visualized through three different
approaches. The first concerns textual criticism and the history of the texts: It will be possible to
see how many and what types of letters (autographs, copies, “registri”; editions etc.) we can read
today, and also we can study the diffusion of Castigliones’ letters through the itineraries of the
manuscripts and mostly the chronological order of the editions of letters in Europe (see the
“Libri di Lettere” with the consequent transmission of an important pattern of the
epistolography).

The second approach concerns the study of the letters from the semantic point of view: some
visualizations could show us the trends of certain thematic areas (medicine, food, war etc.), with
linked lists of original words. This will ease the understanding of what the real courtier
Castiglione writes in comparison with the ideal courtier described in the Libro del Cortegiano.
The third approach mainly focuses on the Republic of the letters in the first period of the Renaissance and raises fundamental questions: which kind of relationship existed between the diplomatic network of the Italian and European courtiers and the network of Italian and European men of letters? By making use of plots and maps, the structure and main characters of the diplomatic network of Castiglione, it will be shown also with reference to the network of men of letters such as Pietro Bembo. The hypothesis is that in the first decades of the XVI century the development of the Courtiers’ network prepared and facilitated the network of the men of letters: the world of the gentiluomini letterati opened the way to the republic of letters.

William J. Connell (Seton Hall University)

“Mind the Gap: Exploring Lacunae in the Correspondences of Erasmus and Machiavelli”

Plotting correspondences chronologically tells us a great deal—but not everything—about the ways individuals promoted themselves and about the extent and depth of their social connections. Such plotting incidentally highlights periods for which few or no letters survive. This contribution looks carefully at two important periods of “drought” in the correspondences of Erasmus and Machiavelli. For Erasmus we’ll be looking at the months of his Florentine visit, in the fall of 1506, at the start of his Italian sojourn of 1506-1509. For Machiavelli we’ll study the period 1515-1520, when the ex-Secretary frequented the Rucellai Gardens and wrote the Discourses, Mandragola and Art of War. Contrary to what the scholarship based almost entirely on the correspondences of these two men has long argued, the social networks of Machiavelli and Erasmus will be shown to have intersected in important ways that certainly affected in important ways the writing of their major works and present a challenge to the longstanding paradigm that distinguishes Northern from Italian Humanism.

3:00-3:30 pm Coffee Break

3:30-4:30 pm Student Session: Exploring the Renaissance of Letters in Stanford’s Special Collections

Chair, Ruth Ahnert (Queen Mary College, University of London)

Chris Bacich, (Stanford University)

“The Letter and Diplomacy, An Example: The Florentine Mission Entrusted to Francesco Vettori in 1507”

A brief letter from 1507 in the possession of Stanford Libraries acts as a focal point that links some of the most important events in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Europe with a number of their protagonists. The fortunes of the Florentine Republic and three different invasions of Italy—two French and one German—are all implicated in this brief missive as Machiavelli, Piero Soderini, Emperor Maximilian, and Pope Julius II. This single sheet of paper and the mission inscribed upon it demonstrate the importance of the letter in the development of early modern diplomacy and statecraft.
Demetrius Loufas (Stanford University)

“The Cardinal’s Dearest Son: Venetian Empire and the Career of Giovan Matteo Bembo”

Unlike his illustrious uncle, Pietro Bembo, Giovan Matteo Bembo followed a more conventional path for an early modern Venetian patrician. Giovan Matteo’s life revolved around a steady series of appointments to governmental positions, from his first (wine customs official) to his last (Doge of Candia). Pietro’s frequent and frank correspondence with his nephew provides a rich picture of the career of a Venetian patrician and life in the republic’s eastern reaches. Their letters help add texture to the highly personal and fraught nature of Venetian colonial rule, as well the intimate bonds that linked Venice’s scattered possessions.

Rachel Midura (Stanford University)

“Ottavio Codogno and the Ordinary Post”

Over the course of the seventeenth century, the trans-European post was revolutionized by new technologies, and served more diverse clients than ever before. Ottavio Codogno's Nuovo Itinerario presented an eclectic guide in three books, listing routes and offering advice on such diverse subjects as traveling to the New World and the correct secretarial style. Published across a tumultuous century, the guide offers unique insight as to navigating the post, and by extension, the seventeenth-century world.
SATURDAY, MAY 14

9:30-10:00 am Coffee and pastries

10:00am-12:00 pm Session 3: Mind, Belief, and Community

Chair, Hannah Marcus (Stanford University)

Tamar Herzig (Tel Aviv University)

“Letters and the Problem of Jewish Conversion to Christianity in Renaissance Italy”

Jewish conversion to Catholicism in Renaissance Italy has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Renata Segre has pointed to the correspondence of Carlo Borromeo and other prelates as a window into their understanding of Jewish conversion and their efforts to facilitate it. Nonetheless, the importance of letter-writing by members of the lay elites, as well as by women and men of humbler social groups, for the debate about Jewish conversion remains largely neglected in current scholarship. Focusing on a corpus of unpublished letters pertaining to the baptism of seven Jews in Ferrara and Mantua in 1491, I argue that letter-writing played a fundamental role in this Renaissance debate. Letters allow us to grasp the complex and dramatic dynamics that came into play in individual cases, that were typical of a society in which Jewish conversion never became a mass phenomenon. They reveal, *inter alia*, the involvement of women in securing conversions; the recourse of lay women, and also of impoverished, unlearned Jews to theological arguments concerning the Christian justification for conversionary activity; attitudes of Jews and Catholics towards neophytes; and shared notions regarding the limited effect of baptism that surprisingly come up in letters written by members of both communities of faith.

Sarah Ross (Boston College)

“The Literary Lives of Health Workers in Late Renaissance Venice”

We tend to assume that the medical profession – or at least physicians – had earned a secure place in the res publica litterarum by the end of the sixteenth century. Yet the sources tell a different story. Venetian physicians struggled for cultural legitimacy even in the late Renaissance. This paper begins by unraveling the humanistic special pleading in physicians’ printed letters. As Nancy Siraisi has taught us, medical doctors often published their advice (consilia) using the humanist form of the letterbook. We will anatomize that phenomenon in the case of the surgeon-cum-physician Nicolò Massa and his *Epistolarum medicinalem* (1558). Thereafter, we will turn to household accounts and final testaments as alternative media in which a variety of health workers left traces of their commerce with literature and literary networks. As we will see in the account books of the physician Alberto Rini (d.1599), and the wills and inventories of barbers and pharmacists, these documents can be as eloquent concerning the lives of minds and as revealing about intellectual communities as letters. In this occupational category, moreover, archival trails appear in greater abundance than epistolary writing.
Celebrated for her epic poem, Scanderbeide, the poet and natural philosopher Margherita Sarrocchi (1560-1617) was also deeply engaged in the debates over Galileo’s discoveries that animated Roman intellectual circles. Sarrocchi met Galileo in 1611 when he came to Rome to publicize and defend his Sidereus Nuncius; after his return to Florence they began a wide-ranging correspondence in which they discussed Galileo’s telescopic observations, Sarrocchi’s revisions to her Scanderbeide, and their mutual interest in judicial astrology. Their epistolary interaction was fueled by complementary agendas: Sarrocchi was eager to find an authoritative mentor with a command of literary Tuscan and powerful court connections, while Galileo needed to shore up support for his discoveries – in particular, of Jupiter’s satellites, the “Medicean stars” named for his patron in Florence. Although it has received limited critical attention, the correspondence of Sarrocchi and Galileo attests to the complex intersections of literature and science in early modern Italy and to the crucial role of epistolary partnerships in building scientific communities that were more diverse than is often thought. Their letters offer new perspective on the hybrid nature of early modern networks of knowledge, the dynamics of cultural patronage in Renaissance Italy, and the participation of women in scientific culture.

12:00-1:30 pm  Lunch Break

1:30-3:30 Session 5: Politics, War, and Power

Chair, Katharina Piechocki (Harvard University)

Deanna Shemek (University of California, Santa Cruz)
“'The Inkwell and the State: Isabella d’Este as a Master of the Letter’”

Examining Isabella’s correspondence as both documentary evidence and textual performance, my book-in-progress also explores the early modern letter as a technology: a tool and a medium for investigating, persuading, and reporting, but also for the circulation and confirmation of the writer’s persona within the many speech acts letters are designed to perform. Beyond the historical information they contain, letters like those of Isabella d’Este (1474-1539), marchesa of Mantua, inform us about early modern communicative networks, about the routine tropes of epistolary exchange, about relations between the cultures of orality and literacy, and about correspondence as a medium for personal contact, political agency, news-gathering, and self-construction. Two example letters from 1503 will help me illustrate these points. Both may be found also at IDEA: Isabella d’Este Archive and in my forthcoming edition (2016) of 830 letters of Isabella d’Este, translated into English.

Suzanne Sutherland (Middle Tennessee State University)
“'News from the Front: Military Men and Their Letters’”

During the seventeenth century, roughly 25% of Austrian Habsburg military commanders were Italian. This highly mobile elite traveled frequently and rapidly to battlefields across Europe and...
wrote thousands of letters to friends, family members, and patrons back home. Their efforts were part of a European-wide explosion in military correspondence that coincided with a revolution in military thought and practice, a surge in the publication of military treatises, and a broader expansion of the Republic of Letters. This paper examines letters received by Mattias de Medici (1613-1667), the brother of the reigning Grand Duke of Tuscany, from an international group of Medici clients and would-be clients in the Austrian army. It argues that Mattias de Medici’s own experience as a Thirty Years War general was instrumental in shaping his network of contacts and the information he gained about the world. This paper also investigates the kind of information soldiers shared and the effects of such far-ranging, private military networks.

Filippo de Vivo (Birkbeck College, University of London)
“Archival Intelligence and the Afterlives of Letters, 1500-1650”

The long sixteenth century saw a massive surge in letter-writing as thickening networks of correspondents exchanged news over longer distances about a widening range of subjects: from famines to epidemics, battles, revolts, discoveries, publications, constructions. Historians justly inscribe this phenomenon in the early modern information revolution. But news only turn into information – and information into useful knowledge – if they can be summarised, juxtaposed, collated, and if necessary retrieved for re-circulation. Information growth requires new management techniques, as Ann Blair recently underlined for scholarship. But information processing was honed on the largest scale in archival offices by chancellors and secretaries. Archives were centres of information long before they became repositories of sources for historians. Focusing on diplomatic letters, I will compare how correspondence management developed in republics and principalities across Italy in the period 1500-1650, when wars and conflicts required increasing reliance on epistolary contacts. By looking at successive stages – reception, processing, recirculation – I will analyse early modern archives as not just institutions for information storage, but as laboratories for knowledge production. The arrangement of letters was dictated by the use that recipients intended to make of them – a use that far exceeded the letters’ immediate circumstances and gave them long and important afterlives.