

Renaissance Woman: The Life of Vittoria Colonna. Ramie Targoff.
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. 342 pp. \$30.

Vittoria Colonna was the most renowned Italian female writer of her day, and she was the first woman in Italy to see a collection of her poetry in print. She led a peripatetic life, leaving her birthplace in the Alban Hills for Naples when her father became grand constable of the Spanish-dominated kingdom, and thence to the island of Ischia. On Ischia in 1509, she was married to Francesco Ferrante D'Avalos, Marquis of Pescara, to whom, despite his long absences, she was devoted. There, too, at thirty-five, she received news from Milan of his death. Colonna traveled to Rome, seeking a vocation as a nun and the peaceful isolation of convent life. After sojourns in Ferrara, Orvieto, and Viterbo, she returned to Rome where, in 1547, she died.

Hers was a household name among Europe's political circles—she had ties to Charles V, Clement VII, Paul III, and Marguerite of Navarre—and she sustained famous friendships with ambitious, mercurial figures, including Michelangelo and Reginald Pole. Colonna maintained fruitful intellectual affiliations with Baldassare Castiglione, Paolo Giovio, and Pietro Bembo. Her commitment to her faith was constant and conspicuous. Her widely circulated writings, which seem to have increased after Ferrante's death, offer an astonishing picture of the work of grief and of her resistance to the possibility of reconciling religious passion with earthly love. We know from her poetry not only that she contemplated suicide after her husband's death, but also that writing became the means by which she came to a détente with loss, moving forward to embrace a personal and prescient activism on behalf of the project of Catholic reform.

Ramie Targoff tells Colonna's story with empathy and imagination, gracefully circumventing academic conceits and disciplinary boundaries. This is the kind of book that many of us dream of writing, a book without footnotes that wears its learning lightly. She does provide a fine, annotated bibliography for each of her thirteen chapters at the end. With winning transparency, she tells us how she came to her subject after encountering the extraordinary sonnets written after Ferrante's death. Describing a hot afternoon in the Colonna archives in Subiaco, she then takes her reader on a vicarious pilgrimage. Her study is loosely chronological, beginning with the poignant chapter, "The View from the Cliff," in which a messenger from Milan arrives on Ischia and makes his way to the unsuspecting young widow. In the final chapter, "Last Rites," Targoff describes the circumstances of Colonna's approaching death and her late meditations on paradigms of female piety, Catherine of Alexandria, and Mary Magdalene, whom she commissioned Titian and Michelangelo to paint. These meditations were quickly rushed into print. In a fascinating epilogue, Targoff narrates the history of the discovery of Colonna's name among the Roman records of the Inquisition in the archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Targoff's accessible book brims with intriguing vignettes and historical detail: the menu of a courtly wedding banquet; a day in the life of a convent; thumbnail descriptions of Neoplatonism, the Sack of Rome, the struggle for the Capuchin Order (of whom Colonna was a champion), and the format of a Renaissance book; salt taxes; and advice to pilgrims: "Dress poorly, so as to avoid having to pay endless tips" (129). Targoff is especially clear and incisive in her explication of poetry, mindful of the nonspecialist, and therefore helpfully elaborative on the originality of Colonna's works. A great achievement, in fact, apart from the fundamental one of making these materials available in English, is her interweaving of historical context with the exigencies of biography. This also constitutes an invitation for the specialist to rehearse and then question received wisdom, to recollect more fully the gritty realities of the past. Whether Colonna was a "Renaissance woman," or whether she embodies something quintessentially essential to the Renaissance, are perhaps ultimately irrelevant questions. What emerges in this prismatic portrait is the degree to which Colonna pursued a very public career and, equally, an enduring legacy, all the while refusing social norms such as remarriage and endeavoring to find refuge from the world among her sisters. All the while, too, she wrote as if her life depended on it.

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Vasari's Words: The "Lives of the Artists" as a History of Ideas in the Italian Renaissance. Douglas Biow.
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Douglas Biow's *Vasari's Words* seeks to make the case that the sprawling and intensively studied *Lives of the Artists* is a neglected chapter in the intellectual history of Renaissance Italy, hiding in plain sight. The *Lives* is a fat and digressive three volumes (in its 1568 edition), from which a slim set of ideas is struggling to get out. Five keywords are all Biow needs to articulate his view of the fundamental design of the *Lives*: profession, *ingegno* (genius), speed, time, and night. Many would place *disegno* not just on a short list of Vasari's key theoretical concepts, but as an overarching framework and undergirding principle of the *Lives* given institutional form in the founding of the Accademia del Disegno. Both *disegno* and artistic style are subsumed for Biow under a new understanding of art as a profession, a word with "the combined force of a command, declaration and promise" (42).

Genius, commonly critiqued now on the grounds of gender, social hierarchy, disciplinary exclusions, and cultural bias, is here advanced as an engine of explanation in the