

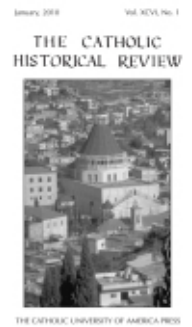


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*Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian
Reformation (review)*

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Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian Reformation. By Abigail Brundin. [Catholic Christendom, 1300–1700.] (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing. 2008. Pp. xiv, 218. \$99.95. ISBN 978-0-754-64049-3.)

Abigail Brundin's book centers on the doctrinal contents of two of Vittoria Colonna's verse collections, one of which was sent to Michelangelo in 1540 and the other presented to Marguerite of Navarre at about the same time. Although both manuscripts are used to illustrate Colonna's reformist beliefs, the second in particular is read to show the basis of a reformed Mariology that is taken to serve the poet in advocating a profeminist use of poetry as an evangelizing tool whose persuasive power was to reverberate to the end of the century.

To establish Colonna's evangelical persuasion the texts considered are the *Beneficio di Cristo* and the "Meditatione" writings, respectively reworked and authored by Marcantonio Flaminio during the Viterbo years. Tracing a direct derivation of poetry from any specific text is a difficult task, not only because of the allusive nature of poetry and because of the caution implanted in any proselytizing tract but especially because the very desire for renewal and topics of meditation such as the inspirational role of the Virgin and Christ's passion, the latter depicted either in suggestive physical terms or in a joyful mood, are common to devotional writings of all inclinations. What weakens the derivation argument is Brundin's disregard for chronology. The *Beneficio*, which was made ready in the 1540s, can hardly have influenced poems likely to have been written in the 1530s. Many evangelical implications must be read, as Brundin actually does, in the light of a general earlier Valdesian evangelism and of what the poet wrote or revised years later.

In the sonnets to Marguerite of Navarre Brundin views the Virgin as teacher and active participant in the life and passion of Christ, hence as the appropriate guide for Colonna's self-assigned role of disseminator of true faith, a role supposedly acknowledged by the queen and potentially extended to all women with an evangelizing mission. This thematic slant is retrospectively bolstered with a statement on the Virgin found in a letter sent by Colonna to Costanza d'Avalos and published in 1544. The entente between Colonna and Marguerite of Navarre is, of course, predicated on the assumption that the preparation of the gift manuscript was done by Gualteruzzi, the marquise's scribe and agent. In discussing that preparation, however, Brundin omits mentioning what for Carlo Dionisotti and Augusto Campana was the clinching argument against the attribution to Colonna's agent: i.e., the manuscript is not in his hand.

If slender evidence can be claimed for the poet's desired leadership in a communal religious advocacy, stronger doubts rise about her correspondents' acknowledgment of such role. Laudatory expressions of greeting in the artist's and in the queen's letters, Michelangelo's avowed admiration for the "man, in fact a god" in the "woman" (p. 74)—a hyperbolic take on a rather trite

compliment—give no ground from which to infer even an awareness of it. More dubious is the acknowledgment of Vittoria's assumed function on the part of Pier Paolo Vergerio and Cardinal Reginald Pole. Pole's explanation in answer to Colonna's remonstrations for his neglect of her, rather than as an expression of a reformist concept of a nonreciprocal gift (p. 70), should be read as follows: "Divine Will shall amply reward you as He rewards all those who are beneficent" (with *benefico* translated as "beneficent," not as "worthy"). Pole's was indeed a doctrinally unimpeachable reply and a tactful one in addressing a woman whose attachment to him was judged by friends to have morbid connotations.

Overall, Brundin's analysis confirms and amply illustrates Colonna's insistent need for religious assertion and investigation. The marquise went on to express her evangelical beliefs in both poetry and prose, but only in her last years did she assume an open stance of opposition to the authorities and of agreement with the Viterbo group, certainly in reaction to the latter's failure in advancing their plan of compromise and reconciliation with the reformists. As to the acceptance of Colonna's writings after her death, her poetry was certainly understood by those who were already of an evangelical persuasion, but to what extent it may have influenced people without similar concerns is a matter of conjecture. It is a fact that Colonna's sonnets remained in the mainstream of Petrarchism for centuries to come and only in our times, when a better knowledge of the evangelical movement was established, have scholars become alert to their specific religious content.

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Teresa de Ávila: Lettered Woman. By Bárbara Mujica. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press. 2009. Pp. xiv, 272. \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-826-51631-2.)

Bárbara Mujica has made a significant contribution to Teresian studies with her book on Santa Teresa de Jesús, better known in English as St. Teresa of Ávila. In the title Mujica plays with the sense of "lettered" as both a reference to the saint's learning as well as to her authorship of letters to a variety of people during her lifetime. Even as she examines Teresa's epistolary output within the context of the saint's life and times, she also reveals the pragmatism and the principles of the saint.

The book begins with a background history of the *devotio moderna*, the move to reform monastic practice in Europe as a whole and in Spain in particular, and, finally, of the Carmelite Reform specifically. Within this discussion, Mujica adds the function of letters as instruments of reform, especially in the case of St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits as well as with Teresa and her nuns. As she explains, "by examining Teresa's letters, we can watch the Carmelite reform unfold as it was experienced by Teresa herself" (p. 11).