



Formulae, gender, and
writing experience in
Renaissance Florence:
an analysis of the
Ricasoli private letters

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Abstract With private letters having become a genre of choice in historical sociolinguistics, epistolary formulae have attracted increasing attention. Cross-linguistically, studies showing that women letter-writers relied heavily on formulae have hypothesised that formulae served primarily as aids for little experienced writers. However, other studies have shown that formulae could perform different functions, related to group practices and self-representation. I investigate this issue in the context of 16th- and early 17th-century Florence, where letter writing was becoming increasingly codified. Drawing on little-known archival material and focusing on the epistolary closing, this article tracks the use of formulae across the private letters of three women from subsequent generations of one family, the Ricasoli, and compares it to their brothers' use. These women differed markedly in their degree of writing experience, in keeping with the increase in female literacy that was occurring across the patriciate. The results show that the woman of the last generation used more formulae, suggesting that these items functioned more as social conventions than formulation aids. The comparison with men's letters suggests that different models were available to women and men, and that upper-class women might have been more receptive to the new epistolary model that was promoted in those years.

Keywords epistolary formulae, writing experience, gender, private letters, genre, historical sociolinguistics, women's literacy

1. Introduction¹

Private letters, offering access to the language of a range of individuals from different social backgrounds, have become the genre of choice for exploring

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variation and change in past language stages. These ego-documents enable scholars to reconstruct language histories that are not solely based on the varieties used by social elites and male individuals, and that are not merely confined to formal genres (Elspaß 2012a; van der Wal & Rutten 2013). In the growing body of studies on the language of historical private letters, discussion has arisen around the role and social functions of epistolary formulae.

Epistolary formulae are conventional expressions that perform one or more pragmatic functions within the ‘letter’ text type. Formulae are not simply a static stock of word strings, but rather a dynamic response to the demands of language use and, as such, manifest differently from context to context and from speaker to speaker (Wray 2002: 4–5). In historical sociolinguistics, they have been found to be used differently by different categories of writers and, in a range of studies conducted on the history of Germanic languages (Austin 2004; Elspaß 2005, 2012b; Rutten & van der Wal 2012, 2014) and French (Große *et al.* 2016), their use was found to correlate with social class and gender. In these traditions, letter writers from the lower classes and female letter writers have been shown to employ more formulae than upper-class and male writers respectively. Considering that literacy and schooling, historically, were both socially stratified and gender-dependent, this correlation has been explained by recurring to the notion of writing experience: in this view, epistolary formulae functioned primarily as a ‘safe option’ (Rutten & van der Wal 2012: 183) that aided less experienced writers in formulating a text. In contrast, more experienced writers could count on a higher degree of compositional creativity. Evidence that the frequency of epistolary formulae decreased diachronically through the early modern and late modern period (Austin 2004; Rutten & van der Wal 2014: 172) has also been adduced to support this claim, since this decrease would have gone hand in hand with an increase in population literacy.

However, other works have shown that formulae, at times, served other functions besides that of aiding less experienced writers. Formulae could be used as markers of social roles and group practices by the little literate and

learned individuals alike (Laitinen & Nordlund 2012; Rutten & van der Wal 2014: 185–187; Conde-Silvestre 2016; Evans 2020: 75). They could serve as a means to engage in self-representation and identity construction (Pietsch 2015; Auer 2015; Bentein 2023b). Still other scholars have emphasised the importance of formulae in creating and maintaining a textual tradition with its own social and cultural meanings (Evans 2020: 82). Studies on the ancient classical epistolary tradition have shown that the number of formulae could fluctuate significantly as a result of changing genre traditions, so that, for example, omitting the epistolary frame became progressively more common in the Late Antique period (Nachtergaele 2015: 9, n. 27).

This interplay between the role of writing experience, group practices, identity construction, and genre conventions in the use of formulae remains unclear. As will be shown in Section 2, the early modern Italian context offers fertile ground to investigate it, both for its relatively high literacy rates and for the distinctively normative character that letter writing acquired in this tradition.

In this paper, I focus on the practice of private letter writing in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Florence to explore the relationship between the use of epistolary formulae, gender, and writing experience. Bringing to light little-known archival material, I analyse the epistolary formulae used in the private correspondence of three women who belonged to three subsequent generations of one family, the Ricasoli Baroni: these letters were produced by Lucrezia di Matteo Albizzi (written 1539–1565), her daughter Maddalena (written 1553–1587), and her granddaughter Cassandra (written 1588–1604). As will be seen in Sections 2 and 6.1, these women differed markedly in their degree of writing experience, reflecting a more general increase in women's literacy over the course of the sixteenth century. This focus on successive generations will allow me to assess the relationship between women's writing experience and their use of formulae. At a second stage, a comparison of these women's letters with letters written by their brothers will allow for further examination of the relationship between gender and use of formulae.

This article is structured as follows. Section 2 contextualises the practice of letter writing in early modern Italy and Florence. After formulating the study's main research questions in Section 3, Section 4 presents the corpus

that has been selected and transcribed for analysis. Section 5 identifies the features that are the object of the research, i.e. optional epistolary formulae used in letter closings, defines and operationalises the notion of epistolary formula, and draws up an inventory of formulae. The analysis is presented in the following two sections: Section 6 investigates the relationship between women's degree of writing experience and their use of formulae, and Section 7 delves into the relationship between writing experience, use of formulae, and gender by also including male letter writers in the picture. Finally, Section 8 reflects on the light this study sheds on the functions of epistolary formulae, and puts forward hypotheses that call for further research.

2. Letter writing, epistolary formulae, and women in early modern Florence

There are several reasons why sixteenth-century Italy offers fruitful ground to explore the functions of epistolary formulae. First, here, more than in other traditions, vernacular letter writing was becoming an increasingly conventionalised genre. With its expanding printing market and increasing literacy rates (Richardson 2002: 19), early modern Italy saw the circulation of a range of works aiming to teach how to write letters in Italian and offering model letters and even lists of formulae to be imitated. Early examples are Bartolomeo Miniatore's *Formulario*, first published in 1485 and reprinted more than forty times in the sixteenth century, and Giovanni Antonio Tagliente's *Componimento di parlamenti* (1531), which ran to twelve editions in the sixteenth century. Francesco Sansovino's letter-writing treatise *Del Secretario* (1564), which enjoyed tremendous success both in Italy and abroad, inaugurated a new season of 'segretario' treatises, as it was followed by countless, subsequent attempts at popularisation (see Matt 2005: 22–39). At the same time, Pietro Aretino's decision to print his own epistolary in 1538 inaugurated the new genre of vernacular letter books: the printing market quickly became saturated with letter collections by well-known authors and with letter anthologies compiled by printers, the first of which was Paolo Manuzio's *Lettere volgari di diversi nobilissimi huomini*, first published in 1542 (Braidà 2009: 7).

The success of letter books and manuals proves that, in this context, a strong need was felt for explicit norms to codify and regulate letter-writing practices. It is therefore likely that, in such a context, formulae would assume other functions besides that of *Formulierungshilfe* (Elspaß 2005: 157), serving instead as conventions related to group practices and means of self-representation. It is noteworthy, in this sense, that despite the attention paid, for several decades, to the language of the ‘semicolti’ [semi-literate],² the notion of epistolary formula as *Formulierungshilfe* has been virtually absent in Italian linguistic historiography. While a few observations on the correspondence of less experienced writers have suggested a surprising familiarity with epistolary conventions (e.g. Fresu 2014: 201; Telve 2019: 246), these findings have usually been interpreted by hypothesising an effect of the widely circulating letter books and formularies aimed at the less learned. The few studies that have investigated the use of formulae diastatically in this tradition have in fact suggested that more experienced writers used a higher, not lower, number of certain types of formulae, as they would rely more frequently on conventionalised expressions to structure the body of the text. Conversely, the less learned would rather signal the introduction of new information through a marked order of constituents (Palermo 1994: 116; Magro 2014: 129–130).

By contrast, studies in the Italian tradition have mostly tended to place emphasis on the nature of epistolary formulae as social conventions, for example by noting that some formulae were used to signal one’s social identity (Barucci 2009: 10), or that lack of knowledge of the appropriate formulae to use, for example by women, could incur social stigma (d’Amelia 1999: 86–87). In a recent study that I conducted on Michelangelo Buonarroti’s use of a set of epistolary formulae that served to end discourse (Serra 2023), formulae did not emerge as primarily *Formulierungshilfe*, as their frequency did not decrease as Michelangelo’s writing experience grew. Formulae instead seemed to function as in-group conventions, forming part of an informal register linked especially with family practice.

2 For a review on the literature on the *italiano dei semicolti*, see Fresu (2014, 2016).

Perhaps due to the success that vernacular letter books gathered in this tradition, Italian scholars have frequently insisted that private letters – even the most informal – constitute a genre in their own right, so that even elements that would appear to be markers of orality have at times been interpreted as clichés responding to specific textual expectations.³ It is within this interpretation of private and everyday letters as a conventionalised text type that scholars have postulated the existence of a progressive change in epistolary conventions. Petrucci has identified a gradual shift away from mercantile conventions – which, in terms of formulaic expressions, would have entailed a reduced formulary stripped to a bare minimum – towards a more baroque and elaborate style. He relates this shift, among other things, to the influence of public and official correspondence – which became more and more formalised in the late Renaissance – as well as to the diffusion of manuals (Petrucci 2008: 89–90).

All of this calls for an investigation into the functions of epistolary formulae in the Italian context, and into the interplay between the role of writing experience and social (and genre) conventions. In this respect, letters by women in the sixteenth century are particularly illuminating because this period saw a sharp increase in female literacy (and, consequently, in women’s writing experience).

If early modern Italy was a remarkably literate society (e.g. Burke 1987: 112), Florence in particular, on which this study focuses, was in all likelihood the most literate city in late medieval and early modern Europe (Kent 2002: 111). Here, for centuries, the needs of trade and banking had resulted in a democratisation of literacy, so that even the sons of butchers, shoemakers, and tailors had learned to put pen to paper. However, in the late Middle Ages this process had largely excluded women (Miglio 2008: 62). The situation changed quite drastically in the sixteenth century, as far as the middle and upper classes were concerned, thanks to a constellation of factors. Some of these factors, such as the establishment of the vernacular as the main literary language and the development of the printing press (Plebani 2019: 58), applied to the whole peninsula. Other factors were more local: the establishment

3 See Trifone’s examination of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi’s letters (Trifone 2006 [1989]: 127).

of the grand duchy, including the powerful Medici women, encouraged the production of literature and art in celebration of women (Cox 2008: 185–186). In this context, literacy skills gradually became a requirement for patrician girls who aspired to a place at the Medici court (Barker 2015: 124–125).

It is in this context that more and more women from the Florentine patriciate, no longer content with simply dictating their letters to a scribe, began to take up a pen and write letters in their own hand. This happened more in private correspondence than in any other genre (Plebani 2019: 75). In this respect, sixteenth-century Florentine correspondence represents an ideal locus to study the relationship between women, writing experience, and use of formulae.

3. Research questions

My aim is to investigate whether optional epistolary formulae functioned primarily as a ‘safe option’ for less experienced writers in sixteenth-century Florence. In this paper, this objective translates into two research questions.

First, I ask whether an inverse relation existed between Florentine women’s use of formulae and their level of writing experience. As seen before, in other linguistic traditions women have been found to consistently use more formulae than men (Austin 2004; Rutten & van der Wal 2012, 2014) and, considering the impact that a writer’s sex had, historically, on literacy and schooling, this correlation has been interpreted by recurring to the notion of writing experience: that is, women use more formulae because less experienced writers use more formulae. Gender, however, is only an indirect index of writing experience. In this paper, I assess three women’s degree of writing experience on the basis of more direct indices, i.e. their graphic competence and their actual involvement in written practices, and ask whether it was indeed the case that the women with lower degrees of writing experience used more formulae. A positive answer would be expected if formulae, in this tradition, functioned primarily as aids for less skilled writers.

Second, returning to the extra-linguistic factor of gender as a more indirect (and more commonly used) index of writing experience, I ask whether Florentine women used more formulae than men, as has been found for

other traditions. Once again, a positive answer would support the claim that formulae functioned primarily as aids for less experienced writers.

On the other hand, negative answers to these questions would suggest that in this tradition formulaic language performed other important functions, such as tools of self-representation or markers of in-group membership or of text type.

As already noted, this paper focuses on three generations of one family. The family unit has frequently been employed as the object of analysis in historical sociolinguistics (e.g. the Paston family in Bergs 2005; the Walpole family in Henstra 2008; the Johnson family in Nevalainen 2015), including when investigating the use of epistolary formulae (e.g. the Clift family in Austin 1973). The study of the family unit enables one to rule out a range of extra-linguistic factors that might have influenced formulaic usage.

4. Selecting the data: the Ricasoli corpus

The data analysed here is a corpus of family letters that I have selected and transcribed from a family archive, the fondo Ricasoli, housed in the Florentine State Archive (ASF). The Ricasoli were a Florentine patrician family that belonged to the old feudal aristocracy, who, in the late thirteenth century, had been given magnate status with the enactment of the Ordinances of Justice (Passerini 1861: 5–6), which barred the nobility from holding any political office. By the sixteenth century, however, they had largely assimilated into the new ruling, mercantile elite (Moran 2017: 387). The family's income was predominantly based on the trade of agricultural products – including wine, for which the Ricasoli are still famous today – as the family owned vast stretches of land in the areas of Chianti, Mugello, and southern Valdarno.

A vast quantity of family correspondence survives, and not only does it span several generations, but also preserves many letters written by women. For the purposes of this study, I retrieved letters by Lucrezia di Matteo Albizzi Ricasoli (who was likely born in the last decade of the fifteenth century), by her daughter Maddalena Ricasoli (born in 1522), and by her granddaughter (and Maddalena's niece) Cassandra Ricasoli (born in 1566). This allowed me to track the use of formulae across women of successive generations, during

a time that is known to have witnessed a sharp rise in Florentine women's literacy.

Whereas these women's biographical profiles and their degree of writing experience will be explored in some detail in Section 6.1, here I explain my rationale for corpus building and provide an overall description of the corpus.

For each woman, I selected the same number of letters – which was set at eighteen – according to several criteria. First, the letters selected had to be autograph. I was able to assess autography with certainty through a combination of criteria. All three women's hands remained the same across several decades, and differed from the hand of any worker or other members of their family. Moreover, in the case of Lucrezia, further proof of autography came from her autograph signature, placed below a letter that she had dictated to a delegate writer (Ricasoli Filze 40-I-V, c. 76), and from her extremely low level of graphic competence (see Serra 2024). In the case of Maddalena and Cassandra, their account books include several autograph receipts that could be compared with the hand used in their letters.⁴

Second, since my aim was to compare these women's use of formulaic language, I had to keep the tenor (i.e. the relationship between writer and recipient) as constant as possible. This was crucial as the number of formulae used is known to vary depending on the social and power relationship between the interlocutors (Elspaß 2005: 195; Clarysse 2017). Hence, I only selected letters sent to close family members: this meant only including letters addressed to siblings, parents, sons and daughters, and, in the case of Cassandra, also to the aunt who had raised her after her mother's death.

4 See, for example, the note written in 1559: 'Io Madalena R[icasol]i Arrighucci ò riceuto da Piero Valoriani [lire] 20 p[er] parte di quello mi à dare questo dì 31 di agosto' [I Maddalena Ricasoli Arrighucci have received from Piero Valoriani 20 lire as part of what he owes me, on this day 31 August] (Ricasoli Amministrazione 270). At least in the Tuscan context, palaeographers consider the use of 'io' as a sign of autography (Balestracci 2010[2004]: 29). For Cassandra, see, for example, the receipt written on 20 October 1611, no. 164: 'Io Cassandra Ricasoli Baroni ne Tornaboni ò riceuto (d)a sig[no]^{re} Bindacco mio fratello sciudi cento (...) questo dì a l'anno sopra deto di mia mano propio' [I, Cassandra Ricasoli Baroni Tornabuoni, have received from Signor Bindaccio my brother 100 scudi (...) on this day of the aforementioned year, written in my own hand] (Ricasoli Filze 127, c. 142^r).

Of the letters I selected, the eighteen written by Lucrezia were addressed to her sons Matteo (fifteen) and Braccio (three) and were written across a timespan of twenty-seven years (see Table 1). The eighteen letters by Maddalena, addressed to her brother Braccio (thirteen) and her mother Lucrezia (five), spanned thirty-five years (see Table 2). The eighteen letters by Cassandra, spanning eighteen years, were addressed to her aunt Maddalena (eleven), to her father Braccio (three), to her sister Lucrezia (three), and to her half-brother Cosimo (one) (see Table 3).

This corpus allowed me to compare the frequency and types of formulae used by women across three generations (see Section 6). I then retrieved and transcribed letters by these women's brothers, so as to compare women's usage with male usage across the generations (see Section 7). Studies on siblings allow the researcher to rule out a range of extra-linguistic factors that might account for differences in linguistic behaviour, and are therefore particularly favoured in historical sociolinguistics (e.g. Conde-Silvestre & Hernández-Campoy 2004; Bergs 2012: 94–95). Hence, systematic differences found between brothers and sisters will most likely come down to gender. These letters, once again, had to be autograph and had to be addressed to close family members.

I was able to retrieve four letters written to close family members by Lucrezia's brother Andrea di Matteo Albizzi (born in 1486), two of which addressed to Lucrezia, one to his mother Nanna, and one to his brother Niccolò (see Table 4). The low number of letters for this writer is regrettable, but although there were other letters sent by Andrea to his brother-in-law, I excluded these as in-laws were not considered close family in my analysis. Note that Andrea's letters were written at an earlier time than Lucrezia's, i.e. from 1523 to 1528.

As for the second generation, Maddalena Ricasoli had several brothers (Matteo, Raffaello, and Braccio) whose letters still survive. I chose to compare the eighteen letters by Maddalena with an equal number of letters by Braccio (born in 1525), since he was in all likelihood Maddalena's closest sibling.⁵ The

5 See, for example, the letter of condolences Maddalena receives on her brother's death from a close friend, the nun Virginia Franchi, who refers to God having taken away 'el fratello quale amavi ta[n]to' [the brother you loved so much] (Ricasoli Filze

selected letters by Braccio are addressed to his sister Maddalena (nine), to his brother Matteo (eight) and to his mother Lucrezia (one) (see Table 5).

For the third generation I could not retrieve any correspondence by Cassandra's full brothers, so I selected and transcribed eighteen letters by Cassandra's younger half-brother Cosimo, all of which addressed to his mother (see Table 6). It should be noted that in this case there was a considerable age difference, as Cosimo, who was born in 1586 out of Braccio's second marriage to Cassandra di Antonio Rucellai, was twenty-two years younger than his sister. In order to qualitatively check for the soundness of this comparison, I also transcribed a handful of letters by Cassandra's half-siblings and Cosimo's full siblings Bindaccio (b. April 1584) and Virginia.⁶

I was able to confirm the autograph status of the men's letters by checking that their hand was different from the hand of other family members or workers, and that it remained the same throughout the years. In the case of Braccio, proof of autography also came from a 1557 financial declaration written 'di mia p[ro]pia mano' [in my own hand] (Ricasoli Filze 127, cc. nn.). These men's biographical profiles will be discussed in Section 7.1.

This left me with an overall corpus of over 27,000 words, made up of 94 letters. In Tables 1 to 6, letters by each writer (Lucrezia, Maddalena, Cassandra, Andrea, Braccio, and Cosimo) are listed in chronological order. To facilitate data retrieval, I attributed an ID number to each letter. These codes were assigned within the context of a bigger dataset that I have built, and will be used to cite the letters from now on. Dates have been modernised according to today's calendar, as the Florentine year began on 25 March. The number of words, which excludes the superscription, was counted after modernising word division. The label 'Archival location' specifies the letters'

49-I-I, c. 25). A vast amount of correspondence exchanged between the two siblings survives, showing that the two cooperated closely in the running of the family business: see, for example, the many letters preserved in Ricasoli Filze 40-II-IX.

6 I transcribed three letters by Virginia di Braccio Ricasoli (Ricasoli Filze 40-III-I, cc. 50, 52, 55) and two letters by Bindaccio di Braccio Ricasoli (Ricasoli Filze 41-III-IV, cc. 22, 45).

location within the Florentine State Archive, Fondo Ricasoli, Parte Antica Filze. The genealogical relationship between the six writers of the corpus (in bold) and their correspondents is shown in Figure 1 below.

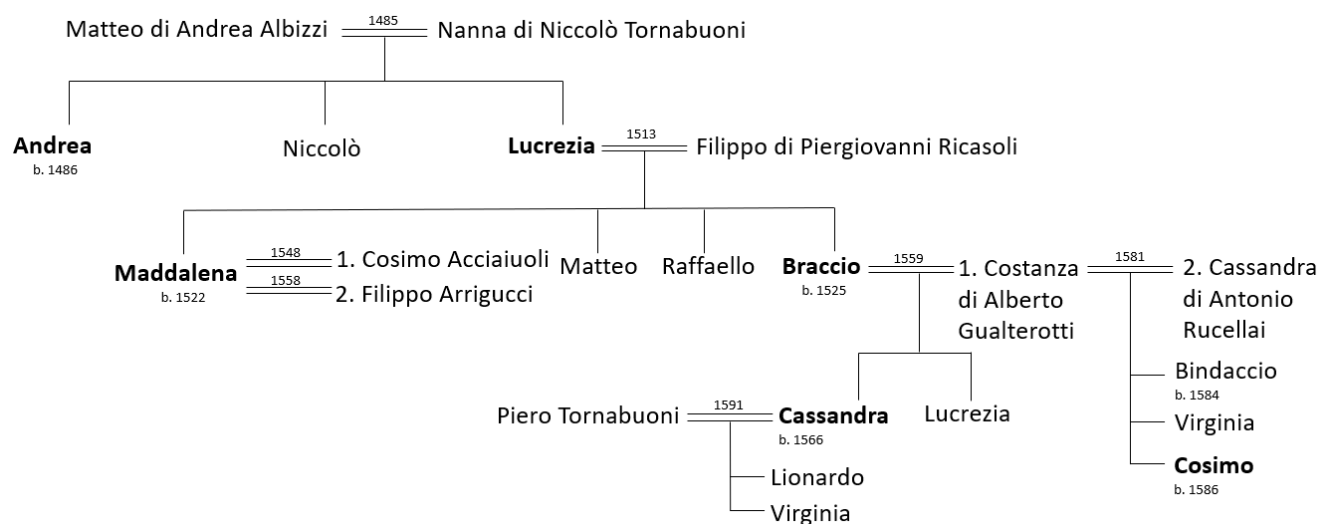


Figure 1. This tree shows the genealogical relationship between the corpus' six writers, highlighted in bold. It is not a complete family tree, as it only includes the other Ricasoli members mentioned in this paper. The dates of birth were retrieved or (in the case of Braccio) checked in the baptismal records of San Giovanni (and follow today's calendar). The dates of the marriages are drawn from secondary literature (Litta 1836, 1876; Passerini 1861; Moran 2018).

Table 1. Lucrezia's letters.

ID number	Date	Addressee	Addressee's role	No. words	Archival location
#r511	11/10/1539	Matteo	son	569	46-I-IV, c. 63
#r221	2/07/1542	Matteo	son	298	40-III-IV, c. 1
#r224	18/07/1542	Matteo	son	238	40-III-IV, c. 6
#r237	28/10/1542	Matteo	son	1857	40-III-IV, c. 38
#r240	20/11/1542	Matteo	son	921	40-III-IV, c. 45
#r242	4/12/1542	Matteo	son	427	40-III-IV, c. 48
#r243	14/12/1542	Matteo	son	574	40-III-IV, c. 49
#r246	2/01/1543	Matteo	son	1152	40-III-IV, c. 55
#r247	10/01/1543	Matteo	son	426	40-III-IV, c. 56
#r690	29/10/1549	Braccio	son	271	41-II-III, c. 72
#r271	1/02/1550	Matteo	son	470	40-III-VI, c. 37
#r302	17/02/1554	Braccio	son	218	32-I-VI, c. 26
#r335	29/04/1554	Braccio	son	246	32-II-II, c. 93
#r16	3/09/1565	Matteo	son	393	40-II-V, c. 46

#r17	5/09/1565	Matteo	son	316	40-II-V, c. 47
#r18	7/09/1565	Matteo	son	188	40-II-V, c. 48
#r19	8/09/1565	Matteo	son	198	40-II-V, c. 49
#r20	8/09/1565	Matteo	son	89	40-II-V, c. 50

Table 2. Maddalena's letters.

ID number	Date	Addressee	Addressee's role	No. words	Archival location
#r334	13/05/1553	Braccio	brother	71	32-II-II, c. 86
#r555	21/05/1553	Braccio	brother	80	32-II-II, c. 87
#r336	4/06/1554	Braccio	brother	64	32-II-II, c. 94
#r337	4/08/1554	Braccio	brother	84	32-II-II, c. 95
#r44	12/11/1558	Lucrezia	mother	229	40-II-I, c. 11
#r45	9/12/1558	Lucrezia	mother	188	40-II-I, c. 12
#r512	7/03/1562	Lucrezia	mother	93	46-I-IV, c. 120
#r513	30/08/1562	Lucrezia	mother	205	46-I-IV, c. 121
#r514	4/09/1562	Lucrezia	mother	167	46-I-IV, c. 122
#r157	29/03/1582	Braccio	brother	113	40-II-IX, c. 40
#r158	13/10/1583	Braccio	brother	148	40-II-IX, c. 45
#r159	19/10/1583	Braccio	brother	353	40-II-IX, c. 49
#r160	7/08/1584	Braccio	brother	143	40-II-IX, c. 58
#r496	23/06/1585	Braccio	brother	145	41-III-V, c. 10
#r163	25/06/1585	Braccio	brother	245	40-II-IX, c. 68
#r166	27/02/1587	Braccio	brother	220	40-II-IX, c. 75
#r167	21/05/1587	Braccio	brother	179	40-II-IX, c. 76
#r169	12/08/1587	Braccio	brother	151	40-II-IX, c. 78

Table 3. Cassandra's letters.

ID number	Date	Addressee	Addressee's role	No. words	Archival location
#r484	7/12/1588	Braccio	father	219	41-III-V, c. 18
#r485	11/01/1589	Braccio	father	230	41-III-V, c. 20
#r604	23/01/1589	Lucrezia di Braccio Ricasoli	sister	205	49-I-VI, c. 11
#r42	9/02/1589	Braccio	father	212	40-II-III, c. 42

#r606	29/05/1589	Lucrezia di Braccio Ricasoli	sister	253	49-I-VI, c. 13
#r607	17/06/1589	Lucrezia di Braccio Ricasoli	sister	198	49-I-VI, c. 14
#r487	21/12/1593	Maddalena	aunt	166	41-III-V, c. 31
#r488	13/05/1594	Maddalena	aunt	426	41 III-V, c. 36
#r489	7/03/1595	Maddalena	aunt	564	41-III, V, c. 40
#r490	24/05/1595	Maddalena	aunt	553	41-III-V, c. 41
#r360	22/06/1595	Maddalena	aunt	112	32-II-IV, c. 14
#r412	28/07/1595	Maddalena	aunt	552	56-I-IV, c. 44
#r491	2/08/1595	Maddalena	aunt	748	41-III-V, c. 45
#r492	3/09/1595	Maddalena	aunt	172	41-III-V, c. 47
#r493	6/11/1602	Maddalena	aunt	155	41-III-V, c. 54
#r204	16/10/1602	Maddalena	aunt	148	40-III-II, c. 60
#r495	21/02/1604	Maddalena	aunt	214	41-III-V, c. 56
#r14	20/08/1604	Cosimo	brother	195	40-II-VI, c. 7

Table 4. Andrea's letters.

ID number	Date	Addressee	Addressee's role	No. words	Archival location
#r321	31/03/1523	Lucrezia	sister	144	32-II-II, c. 1
#r613	3/02/1524	Lucrezia	sister	505	49-I-III, c. 7
#r400	13/02/1524	Nanna	mother	471	56-I-IV, c. 14
#r385	26/01/1528	Niccolò	brother	577	56-I-I, c. 135

Table 5. Braccio's letters.

ID number	Date	Addressee	Addressee's role	No. words	Archival location
#r227	2/08/1542	Matteo	brother	343	40-III-IV, c. 10
#r676	4/10/1542	Matteo	brother	362	40-III-IV, c. 32
#r237bis	2/11/1542	Matteo	brother	893	40-III-IV, c. 40
#r103	25/07/1546	Matteo	brother	965	40-III-VII, c. 47 (part 1)
#r104	25/07/1546	Lucrezia	mother	139	40-III-VII, c. 47 (part 2)
#r300	7/11/1548	Matteo	brother	158	32-I-VI, c. 18

#r622	17/11/1549	Matteo	brother	441	49-I-III, c. 50
#r26	26/04/1550	Matteo	brother	206	40-II-V, c. 7
#r28	14/11/1551	Matteo	brother	304	40-II-V, c. 15
#r137	30/01/1559	Maddalena	sister	301	40-II-IX, c. 1
#r138	13/03/1579	Maddalena	sister	87	40-II-IX, c. 2
#r477	6/04/1581	Maddalena	sister	457	41-III-V, c. 4
#r142	12/10/1583	Maddalena	sister	260	40-II-IX, c. 43
#r144	14/10/1583	Maddalena	sister	167	40-II-IX, c. 46
#r357	5/11/1584	Maddalena	sister	72	32-II-IV, c. 7
#r149	2/03/1585	Maddalena	sister	172	40-II-IX, c. 66
#r155	18/08/1587	Maddalena	sister	426	40-II-IX, c. 81
#r156	3/11/1588	Maddalena	sister	437	40-II-IX, c. 77

Table 6. Cosimo's letters.

ID number	Date	Addressee	Addressee's role	No. words	Archival location
#r456	25/05/1601	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	121	41-II-IV, c. 12
#r457	26/08/1601	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	84	41-III-IV, c. 15
#r458	16/10/1601	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	83	41-III-IV, c. 16
#r459	4/12/1601	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	236	41-III-IV, c. 17
#r460	5/12/1601	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	129	41-III-IV, c. 18
#r461	10/12/1601	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	106	41-III-IV, c. 19
#r462	14/01/1602	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	179	41-III-IV, c. 20
#r188	2/08/1604	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	195	40-III-I, c. 13
#r463	23/08/1605	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	113	41-III-IV, c. 29
#r464	26/04/1606	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	138	41-III-IV, c. 44
#r465	28/07/1606	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	96	41-III-IV, c. 50
#r189	22/11/1611	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	133	40-III-I, c. 56
#r193	27/07/1612	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	70	40-III-I, c. 61
#r192	10/01/1612	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	165	40-III-I, c. 59
#r190	28/11/1613	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	166	40-III-I, c. 57
#r191	28/12/1613	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	147	40-III-I, c. 58
#r194	2/02/1614	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	80	40-III-I, c. 62
#r195	23/06/1616	Cassandra Rucellai	mother	137	40-III-I, c. 84

5. The object of research: optional epistolary formulae

This section identifies the object of research: first it defines the notion of epistolary formula and the criteria underlying it (Section 5.1), then it presents the rationale for limiting the analysis to optional formulae found in letter closings (Section 5.2), and finally it draws up an inventory of the formulae found in this corpus (Section 5.3).

5.1 Defining and operationalising the notion

To carry out this analysis I first needed to provide a clear definition and operationalisation of the notion of epistolary formula. It is sometimes difficult to determine where epistolary formulae end and the rest of the text begins (Große *et al.* 2016: 2). On the one hand, identifying formulaic language is not straightforward: whereas some instances are relatively unproblematic, there are many grey areas, such as discontinuous expressions and fillable slots (Wood 2015: 9). On the other hand, epistolary formulae are not the same thing as formulaic language in general, so there is the question of how to articulate this distinction. Following Wray's suggestion to identify a 'suit of features' rather than a single criterion to detect formulaicity (Wray 2002: 43), I use a combination of the following criteria: pragmatic function, conventionalisation, and positionality.

As for function, in Buerki's typology of formulaic language, formulae are described as a specific subtype that is distinguished by its functional character (Buerki 2020: 8). I take from this that epistolary formulae must perform a particular pragmatic function within the letter text-type. Building on Wray (2002) and Elspaß (2005), Rutten and van der Wal (2012, 2014) have proposed a functional/pragmatic categorisation of epistolary formulae that has also been adopted in other linguistic traditions, including Romance ones (specifically, French: see Große *et al.* 2016). While acknowledging that many epistolary formulae can perform more than one function, this framework distinguishes between the following main types:

- text-type formulae, such as the signature, date, address formulae, and opening formulae, which serve to identify the text as a letter;
- text-structural formulae, which serve to realise the transition from one part of the discourse to the next;
- intersubjective formulae, such as health formulae and greetings, which perform the function of ‘interaction’ by focusing on the relationship between writer and addressee;
- Christian-ritual formulae, which focus on the relationship between the writer, the addressee, and the divine world, by placing the writer and/or the addressee under divine protection.

Rutten and van der Wal (2012: 84) attribute Christian-ritual formulae a function of their own in epistolary discourse, but they note that these may also be considered a subset of intersubjective formulae.⁷

In implementing my analysis, word strings had to perform at least one of these functions in order to be identified as epistolary formulae. Take, for instance, the ending of this letter addressed to Maddalena by Cassandra:

La zia Maria sta bene e m[esser] Dionigi e tui gl’atri, e vi si racomando, e così io e Lionardo e la Virginia e la Virginia de Ricasoli e m[onn]^a Lucrezia tuti, e da mia parte salutate e mia fratelli e sorelle e m[onn]^a Camilla. Se poso p[er] voi nulla avisate. Con questo fine il Sig[no]^{re} Dio vi doni la sua grazia. Di Firenze dì 7 di marzo 1594.
V[ostra] nipote Cassandra

[Aunt Maria is well and so is messer Dionigi and all the others, and they commend themselves to you all, and so do I and Leonardo and Virginia and Virginia da Ricasoli and monna Lucrezia. And greet my brothers and sisters and monna Camilla from my part. If I can do

⁷ As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, some Christian-ritual formulae could also perform the function of text-type formulae. I have not considered Christian-ritual formulae as text-type formulae as they were optional elements in my corpus (whereas text-type formulae are usually obligatory).

anything for you, let me know. With this end, may God give you His grace. From Florence on day 7 March 1594. Your niece Cassandra] (#r489)⁸

This closing includes text-type formulae, i.e. the location and date ('Di Firenze dì 7 di marzo 1594') and the signature ('V[ostra] nipote Cassandra'). It includes one text-structural formula, used to end discourse ('Con questo fine'), as well as one Christian-ritual formula ('il Sig[no]^{re} Dio vi doni la sua grazia'). Finally, there are several intersubjective elements, including health statements ('La zia Maria sta bene e m[esser] Dionigi e tui gl'atri') and multiple greetings ('e vi si racomadono, e così io e Lionardo e la Virginia e la Virginia de Ricasoli e m[onn]^a Lucrezia tuti, e da mia parte salutate e mia fratelli e sorelle e m[onn]^a Camilla').

However, pragmatic function alone was not sufficient to operationalise the notion, as formulae also need to be conventionalised ways of performing those functions. By definition, formulae 'manifest only one – or only a few – of the various formal structures that the language allows for the expression of their meaning' (Corrigan *et al.* 2009: xxiii–xxiv). This can be captured by relying on the notion of frequency of form: Austin (1973: 11) stresses that epistolary formulae are 'used repeatedly and by more than one writer'; according to Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 75), epistolary formulae are 'formulaic strings found repeatedly in letters'. In my analysis, therefore, word strings that performed one or more pragmatic functions within letters were considered formulae only if the same formulation recurred (with the same function, and in the same context) in more than one letter and/or in letters by more than one writer. To this end, I made use not only of the corpus at hand but of other corpora, in which I searched for the recurrence of the same formulae in similar contexts by means of keywords and/or collocations. These corpora were:

8 The corpus has been transcribed using conservative criteria. However, some modifications have been made for ease of reading: the use of capital letters, punctuation, and word division has been modernised; *u* and *v* (as well as *s* and *z*, which in Lucrezia's letters are represented by the same grapheme) have been distinguished and *j* has been rendered as *i* according to modern usage.

- another corpus of private letters by Florentine men and women (1540–1609) that I have built;⁹
- the private correspondence of the Buonarroto family;¹⁰
- the edited family correspondence of Caterina de' Ricci (Guasti 1890);
- the numerous sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century letter anthologies and epistolaries that are available online through Google Books and searchable through OCR.

It is true that this methodology meant excluding some idiosyncratic strings which could have been relevant, such as the expression 'E di tanto vi dicho' used once by Lucrezia (#r221).¹¹ However, at the cost of leaving out a few relevant occurrences I preferred a methodology that was not based on intuition, which is a tricky criterion to use for detecting formulaicity (Wray 2002: 20–23), especially when investigating past language stages for which we cannot rely on native speaker intuition.

This method also allowed for some degree of variation in the order of constituents as well as lexical insertions or substitutions, as is common in other studies on epistolary formulae (e.g. Austin 1973, 2004; Elspaß 2005; Rutten & van der Wal 2014). It was preferred to a frequency-based approach based on lexical bundles (like the one used by Evans 2020), which would have been problematic because of the small size of the corpus at hand, the issue of non-standard orthography (on which see Kopaczyk 2012), and the fact that formulae with fillable slots pose challenges to corpus analysis software (Wood 2015: 24). Moreover, in Renaissance Italy, some degree of variation of

9 This comprises 143 autograph letters addressed to close family members by sixty-five writers belonging to over thirty Florentine patrician families in the period 1540–1609 (of these writers, twenty-four are men and forty-one are women).

10 This corpus, based on the editions by Barocchi & Ristori (1965–1983) and Barocchi *et al.* (1988–1995), was kindly given to me by the Memofonte Foundation. It is freely available for consultation, through a search interface, at the Memofonte Foundation's website: <www.memofonte.it/ricerche/michelangelo-buonarroti> (last accessed on 28 Sept 2023).

11 In Serra (2024), I treated this as a formula. The idiosyncratic nature of this item probably had to do with this semi-literate writer's desire to reproduce formulae she commonly encountered, such as 'E di tanto vi avviso' (Ricasoli Filze 40-III-IV, c. 1).

formulaic material was to be expected because it was explicitly encouraged in letter-writing manuals.¹²

Finally, I adopted the criterion of positionality, since formulae tend to be found in particular parts of the text (Wood 2015: 25), and most are found specifically at the beginning and end of letters (Austin 1973: 11). For example, the intersubjective health formula *sano, così spero di voi* [(I am) healthy, so I hope of you] could, in principle, appear anywhere, but I only ever find it used in letter closings (e.g. Barocchi & Ristori I, 1965: 3; Barocchi *et al.* I, 1988: 52–53). As I explain in the next section, my analysis focuses on letter closings only, making positionality a key criterion in this study.

In summary, I define epistolary formulae as conventionalised expressions that perform one or more pragmatic functions within the letter text-type, and that are often restricted to specific parts of the letter.

5.2 The object of analysis: optional formulae in letter closings

In this paper, the analysis focuses on optional formulae used in letter closings. Although epistolary formulae (and especially text-structural formulae) may occur anywhere in the text, the body of the letter is largely non-formulaic (Rutten & van der Wal 2014: 86), whereas most epistolary formulae are restricted to the opening and closing of letters, i.e. the part of the letter that has been termed the pragmatic frame (Palermo 1994: 113) or epistolary frame (Bentein 2023a: 433). This is the part of the text that is more constrained both in terms of formulaic usage and themes (Palermo 1994: 113–119).

The decision to focus exclusively on the pragmatic frame allowed me to avoid potential pitfalls in calculating the number of occurrences. A methodology relying on a normalised frequency count calculated on the basis of the whole letter would have been problematic because letters by different writers vary greatly in length and formulae are mostly concentrated in the epistolary frame. Another option would have been to count the number of letters in which a given formula appeared. This methodology, which is

12 For example, the polygraph Orazio Toscanella, who wrote his *Concetti* (1560) to give his readers formulae that could be used in their letters, insisted that it was important to vary them in order to ‘personalise’ them (Toscanella 1560: fol. a7^r).

adopted in Bijkerk (2004) and Serra (2023), is sound as long as formulae appear once per letter, but it would not have worked for the present study since certain types of formulae – for example greetings, but also discourse-ending formulae – can recur multiple times in one letter. Instead, I chose to focus exclusively on the letter closing, counting the number and the types of formulae used there.¹³

I focused on the closing, rather than the opening, since the latter is more often dependent on a range of communicative factors that cannot always be maintained constant. As shown by the following three examples from Braccio Ricasoli's correspondence, the opening may include different types of formulae depending on whether the letter constituted a reply (example a), initiated an epistolary exchange (example b), or was meant to follow up on another letter that had not yet been answered (example c).

- a) C[arissi]mo fratello, per Niccolò hebbi la vostra e intesi q[uan]to dite ... [Dearest brother, through Niccolò I have received your (letter) and understood what you say ...] (#r103)
- b) Caris[sim]o fratello, questa per avisarvi come... [Dearest brother, this is to let you know that...] (#r237bis)
- c) Car[issi]^{mo} fratello, vi scrissi ultimame[n]te qua[n]to mi occorreva, et molto mi sono meravigliato ch[e] voi no[n] mi habbiate risposto né mandato danari. [Dearest brother, I wrote to you before what I needed, and it greatly surprised me that you never answered nor sent me money.] (#r676)

The closing, by contrast, was less influenced by the circumstances of the epistolary exchange (although it could be influenced by other factors, such as the writer's emotional state or hurry).¹⁴ Moreover, previous studies have

13 What I define as 'letter closing' coincides with what Rutten and Van der Wal (2014: 86) call 'ending', as they use the term 'closing' in a much more restricted sense.

14 The impact of hurry and emotional state is evident in the following example from the closing of a letter by Cassandra Ricasoli, written when her daughter was ill: 'P[er]

emphasised that, in the Italian tradition, letter closings presented a higher degree of variation than openings (Antonelli 2004). This made it the ideal locus to study the frequency and distribution of formulae.

However, it is not always easy to identify where the ending of the letter begins (Antonelli 2003: 59). In his study of the sixteenth-century mercantile letter, Massimo Palermo has identified discourse-ending formulae that mark the beginning of the letter closing: he calls these formulae signals of *chiusura parziale* (Palermo 1994: 118–119).¹⁵ After inspecting my data, I identified the letter closing as beginning with either a discourse-ending formula or an intersubjective formula of the ‘if you need anything’ type, which I term a ‘service formula’. When these formulae were immediately preceded by other epistolary formulae, these were also considered as belonging to the closing.

Finally, my analysis focused exclusively on optional formulae since these were the formulae whose frequency was expected to vary across writers. As noted by Rutten & van der Wal (2012: 183), text-type formulae – such as form of address, date, and signature – are obligatory in letter composition (although socio-pragmatic factors can influence their form): these formulae were therefore excluded from the analysis.

5.3 An inventory of formulae

Based on the criteria mentioned above (function, conventionalisation, and positionality), I obtained a full inventory of the formulae used in the closings of letters by the Ricasoli family members. As previously explained, I excluded from this inventory all text-type formulae. The inventory of optional formulae, categorised according to Rutten and van der Wal’s framework, is given in Table 7 below.

freta no[n] dirò altro, e anche ò tanto travaglio ch[e] sono fora di me’ [I will not say anything else because I am in a hurry, and also I am so anxious that I am out of my mind.] (#r360)

15 The structure proposed by Palermo was subsequently adapted by Antonelli (2003: 59) and Magro (2014: 132–133) to describe the typology of private letters.

Table 7. Inventory of optional formulae used in the closing. Stars are used to signal those formulae that need to be attached to other elements, creating more complex structures.

	Formula	Writer (number of occurrences)
Text-structural formulae		
Discourse-ending formulae	<i>Altro (per hora) non iscade</i> [Nothing else happens (for now)]	Braccio (3)
	* <i>Altro non avendo che dire</i> [Not having anything else to say]	Braccio (1), Maddalena (2)
	<i>Altro non mi occor(r)e</i> [Nothing else happens/I don't need anything else]	Cosimo (8)
	* <i>Altro non mi occorrendo</i> [Not needing anything else]	Braccio (2), Maddalena (1), Cassandra (4)
	<i>Altro no so che mi dire</i> [I don't know what else to say]	Maddalena (1)
	* <i>Con questa/tale fine</i> [With this end]	Cassandra (11)
	<i>Farò/fo fine</i> [I (will) end]	Lucrezia (2), Braccio (3), Maddalena (1), Cassandra (1)
	<i>Né in altro mi distenderò (salvo...)</i> [Nor will I write longer (except...)]	Andrea (1)
	<i>Non/né altro</i> [Nothing else]	Lucrezia (18), Braccio (12), Maddalena (16), Cosimo (10)
	<i>Non (ti/vi) dirò altro (salvo...)</i> [I will not say anything else (except...)]	Andrea (3), Cassandra (1)
	<i>Non sarò p(i)ù lu(n)ga</i> [I will not be longer]	Lucrezia (2), Cassandra (7)
<i>Ora non posso badare</i> [I cannot wait now]	Cosimo (1)	

Intersubjective formulae		
Greetings	A __ <i>mi raccomando/ ci racomadamo</i> [To __ I/ we commend myself/ourselves]	Andrea (3), Lucrezia (5), Braccio (1), Maddalena (6), Cosimo (2), Cassandra (4)
	(A __) (<i>per infinite volte</i>) <i>mi ofero e racomado</i> [(To __) (infinite times) I offer and commend myself]	Cassandra (5)
	<i>Raccomandatemi/ Mi racomanderete a __</i> [Commend me to __]	Andrea (3), Braccio (4), Maddalena (1), Cosimo (1), Cassandra (2)
	<i>Salutate __ (da mia parte/in nome mio)</i> [Greet __ (from my part/in my name)]	Braccio (3), Cassandra (9)
	<i>Vi piacerà di salutarmi</i> [You will greet __ from me]	Braccio (1)
	<i>Baca(te) (le mane a __) (da mia parte)</i> [Kiss (the hands of __) (from my part)]	Cassandra (2)
	<i>Vi baco le mane</i> [I kiss your hands]	Cassandra (3)
	<i>Ti baco e abraco</i> [I kiss you and hug you]	Cassandra (1)
	__ <i>si racomanda(no)/ono</i> [__ commend themselves]	Maddalena (3), Cassandra (10)
	__ <i>vi saluta</i> [__ greets you]	Cassandra (1)
	<i>*(e) così (fa) __</i> [(and) so does __]	Cassandra (6)
	<i>*e io per mille/infinite volte</i> [and so do I a thousand/infinite times]	Cassandra (3)
<i>*e (così) a __</i> [(and) so to __]	Andrea (1), Cassandra (1)	
Health	<i>Istà(tte) sano/i</i> [Stay healthy]	Lucrezia (16), Braccio (1)
	<i>Riuardatevi a questi caldi</i> [Take care of yourself in this heat]	Maddalena (1)
	__ <i>ista(nno) bene</i> [__ is/are well]	Maddalena (2)

Other intersubjective formulae	<i>Abiatevi chura</i> [Take care]	Lucrezia (1)
	<i>Dirai a __ che stia di buona voglia</i> [You will tell __ to stay in a good mood]	Andrea (1)
	<i>Fatevi/fati vezzi</i> [Treat yourself well]	Lucrezia (2), Maddalena (1)
	<i>Fate/farai vezi a __</i> [Treat __ well]	Braccio (3), Maddalena (2)
	<i>Fa(te) careze a __</i> [Make caresses to __]	Cassandra (3)
	<i>Se/quando (voi) volete/v'occorre/voledo nulla (da me) date aviso/avisate/scrivete</i> [If/when you need anything (from me) let me know/write]	Cassandra (12)
	<i>Se poso nulla/cosa nesuna per te/voi da aviso/avisate</i> [If I can do anything for you, let me know]	Cassandra (2)
	<i>Te(nete)mi in (bona) gratia di __</i> [Keep me in the (good) grace of __]	Cassandra (2)
Christian-ritual formulae		
	<i>(Che) Christo/Dio/Il Signore ti/vi guardi (da/di (ogi) male)</i> [May Christ/God/the Lord guard you (from (all) evil)]	Andrea (2), Braccio (6), Maddalena (6), Cosimo (1)
	<i>(Il) (nostro) Signore/Iddio vi felicitati/contenti</i> [May our Lord/God make you happy]	Maddalena (4), Cosimo (11)
	<i>N[ostro] Signore vi conceda ogni bene</i> [May our Lord give you every blessing]	Cosimo (1)
	<i>(Che) nostro Signore (Dio) vi/ti/la tenga/conservi (in sua (s[an]ta) gratia)</i> [May our Lord/God preserve you (in His (holy) grace)]	Maddalena (2), Cosimo (2), Cassandra (7)
	<i>(Che) il Signore Dio vi/gli conceda/doni la sua (s[an]ta) gratia</i> [May God give you His (holy) grace]	Cassandra (6)
	<i>Il Signore Dio vi conservi e vi dia la sua grazia</i> [May God preserve you and give you His grace]	Cassandra (2)
	<i>Preda Dio per me che n'ò bisogno</i> [Pray God for me since I need it]	Cassandra (1)
	<i>(Il Signore) Dio sia (senpre) (in) tuo/vostro auto</i> [May (our Lord) God (always) come to your help]	Braccio (2), Cassandra (3)
	<i>Il signore Dio sia quello che ci porga il suo auto</i> [May God be the one to give us His help]	Cassandra (1)
	<i>I(dio) (sia) con voi</i> [God (be) with you]	Braccio (5), Maddalena (5)
	<i>Che Dio ne conceda quanto desiderate</i> [May God grant you all you wish for]	Braccio (1)
	<i>Vi do la buona Passqua</i> [I wish you a happy Easter]	Cosimo (1)
	<i>Che Dio ce ne guardi</i> [May God guard us from it]	Andrea (1)

6. The analysis of women's letters: exploring the relationship between women's writing experience and use of formulae

This section presents a biographical and letter-writing profile of the Ricasoli women (Section 6.1) and explores the relationship between their level of writing experience and their use of formulae (Section 6.2).

6.1 Ricasoli women: assessing their writing experience

As outlined in Section 2, over the course of the sixteenth century Florentine women's literacy increased considerably thanks to a combination of political and cultural changes, including the spread of the printing press, which led women to take up writing and created many more women readers, and the establishment of the Medici duchy. Whereas in the early sixteenth century it was still rare for a patrician woman to write her own letters, by the end of the century writing skills had become a requirement among Florentine upper-class women. As I shall now explain, this trend is clearly visible in the corpus analysed here.

Since I did not have specific information on the education received by the women of the Ricasoli family, I have assessed each woman's degree of writing experience based on their graphic competence and on the information that could be gathered on their life and writing practices.

The woman from the first generation, Lucrezia (?–1570), was born – probably in the last decade of the fifteenth century – into the Albizzi family, a prominent family of the Florentine patriciate.¹⁶ In 1513 she married Filippo di Piergiovanni Ricasoli and went on to have at least six children (Passerini 1861: table 14). After her anti-Medicean husband died in 1531, Lucrezia found herself in financial difficulties. From her correspondence we learn that in the late 1530s and early 1540s she was living in Florence in a state of poverty, confronted by a constant stream of creditors. It was at this difficult time – at around forty years of age – that Lucrezia started to write in her own hand, whereas before she seems to have relied exclusively on delegate

16 As I demonstrated elsewhere (Serra 2024), her parents must have been Matteo di Andrea degli Albizzi and Nanna di Niccolò Tornabuoni who, according to Litta (1876: table 2), were married in 1485.

writers. The Ricasoli archive allows us to trace her first steps in letter writing, from her first autograph post-scriptum in 1537 (Ricasoli Filze 41-II-III, c. 19), to her first autograph signature in 1538 (Ricasoli Filze 40-I-V, c. 76) and her first autograph letter in 1539 (#r511). Over the following years, Lucrezia became progressively more accustomed to penning her own letters, and from the 1550s and 1560s we have almost exclusively holograph letters. Her active role in the family business, tied to her condition as a widow, her desire for economic independence, and her struggle to retain her reputation as a patrician – rendered all the more urgent by her poverty – might all have been factors that led her to take this step in adulthood (Serra 2024). At any rate, Lucrezia’s writing experience remained low throughout her life, as attested by the elementary level of graphic execution of her letters (see Figure 2),¹⁷ which would be classed as *elementare di base*, i.e. the lowest level of graphic execution according to the categorisation proposed by Petrucci (1978: 167–168). Further, Lucrezia had to repeatedly ask her son Matteo to write to her in a more readable hand (#r17, #r18):

E vorei, quando voi mi icrivette, mi icrivessi che io la intendesi bene.
[I wish, when you write to me, that you would write in such a way
that I understand it well.] (#r17)

Vorei mi icrivessi in moddo che la si intendessi melio. S’ i’ no
risponddo a oni chossa, la no si intendde. Chosì oni chossa dove^r^sti
fare iscivere a ser Antonio, cche si potessi rispondere a uelo che voi
iscrivette. [Please write to me in a way that I understand it better. If I
don’t reply to everything it is because I have not understood it. There-
fore you should have Antonio write everything, so that I could reply
to what you write.] (#r18)

¹⁷ Figures 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 are photographs I took at the Florentine State Archive. They are reproduced here with permission from the Ministero della Cultura (third-party reproductions are prohibited).

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 figlio chuzimo tangho una uotta anou
 ripondato molto par che odimanzicha
 ho chagata uotta parata joboo uidicho
 chato sono irata 29 anni benedati
 inuata chaya apolo uidicho chato
 mai co dutto poche ripo uidicho
 che la fanculla anel tempo aelfa quello
 cha puo nona tanto apata dutto
 auidicho noio dutto ritorno che in
 ro auadate tanto quanto 10 pto ghano
 noi parte di gli dichiara cha ubano
 lacha cha malata nona dilatto e de
 ho ghano tra apata la facenda
 cha apatta gli la par ud cavoi civa
 datti natarmi ma ionoco eie fa
 ca un'apugio chi uolata chero lo
 uadi la uolupataz da me nono alto
 emandata dice batita chel bua dacia
 ni uolupataz in pu chenuola la uota
 ra acha gli nona par da dagho parata
 afatica unbua pabola dato podere
 il uoti dieq detto batita dato podere
 mandia uolun bua chafara bjo ma
 un' o 6 di tanto remandiate chengato
 la laborata gli la uotta uera di chaf
 roa trovata uidicho chavoi tamatte
 chaf apatta auidicho chavoi tamatte
 uolun ma dutto chavoi miluta
 irata nono
 gli nona
 olio
 N. 6 uotta madra lucrezia

Figure 2. A letter by Lucrezia (#r224).

Lucrezia's daughter Maddalena – the writer from the second generation – was born on 1 February 1522.¹⁸ She married twice (in 1548 and in 1558), and after the death of her second husband in 1573, she moved to the house of her brother Braccio, who in the meantime had become head of the family following the death of his elder brothers (Moran 2017: 387). Here Maddalena, who had remained childless throughout her two marriages, took responsibility for raising Braccio's children, and especially Cassandra, to

¹⁸ San Giovanni baptismal records, reg. 227, fig. 316.

whom she was almost a mother after the death of Braccio's first wife (Moran 2017: 396). At the same time, she played an active role in administering the family business, coordinating the sale of the Ricasoli agricultural products. Examining Maddalena's letters and account books, Megan Moran has used her case to argue that Florentine women, contrary to the traditional vision that sees them entirely dedicated to domestic chores, could exert considerable agency in economic and commercial affairs, as Maddalena was recognised as a key figure in the Ricasoli family business by other family members, neighbours, and customers (Moran 2017: 395).

Maddalena's writing experience was a lot greater than that of her mother. She corresponded constantly with a host of family members, workers, and servants, leaving behind a sizable body of almost exclusively autograph letters.¹⁹ Whereas her mother's level of graphic execution could be classed as elementary, Maddalena's can be termed *usuale*, that is, typical of experienced, non-professional writers (see Figure 3). Moreover, for Maddalena, writing was a daily practice: while her mother Lucrezia had delegated the writing of her account book to her son Braccio (Ricasoli Amministrazione 275), Maddalena took care of her own account books, five of which still survive (Ricasoli Amministrazione 270, 271, 272, 273, 274).²⁰ A look at these texts shows that Maddalena was well aware of the genre conventions of the mercantile family book (on which, see Ricci 2005) and was able to employ them with ease. For example, the opening page of the book written between 1553 and 1564 (Ricasoli Amministrazione 270, c. 1^r) displays all the elements that have been identified as characterising the opening structure in this genre (i.e. consecration, dedication to God and the saints, prayer for one's soul and material goods, declaration of ownership, writing programme, naming of the book) (Ricci 2005: 36):

19 Of the many letters I have retrieved by Maddalena, only two letters, written in her old age in 1594 and 1595, were non-autograph (Ricasoli Filze 41-III-V, c. 35; 40-I-IV, c. 31).

20 I have checked the hand in the first book, dated between 1553 and 1564 (Ricasoli Amministrazione 270).

+ Al nome sia dello Onipot[en]te Idio e de la sua madre Vergine Maria e di tuta la celestia corte del paradiso, e quali pregino p[er] me ch[e] tute le mia fancende abino buono principio e mezo e fine, e con salute de l'anima. Q[ues]^{to} libro è della Madalena figuola di Filippo di Piergiovanni de Ricasoli e dona gà di Cosimo di Giovanni Acciaiuoli, dove iscriverò tuto quello mi acadrà giornalmente s[oprascr]ip^{to} a[nno], e camasi memorale comicato q[uest]^o dì 7 di gungo 1553.

[In the name of the Almighty God and the Virgin Mary and all the Heavenly celestial court, may They pray for me that all my affairs will commence, progress, and conclude favourably, and with salvation of my soul. This book belongs to Maddalena, daughter of Filippo di Piergiovanni de Ricasoli and widow of Cosimo di Giovanni Acciaiuoli, where I will write everything that will happen to me daily in the aforementioned year, and its name is *memoriale*, begun this 7 June 1553.]

We do not know whether Maddalena had received the same education as her brothers, but her account books and correspondence tell us that she had achieved a similar level of writing experience. It was telling, in this respect, to discover in the archive two business letters in which Maddalena served as delegate writer for her brother Braccio in October 1581, while the latter was ill (Ricasoli Filze 32-I-III, cc. 14, 16). At this time, it was uncommon for a woman to serve as a delegate writer for a man.²¹

21 In my research I have only come across one other instance when this happened (ASF, Acquisti e doni 70, c. 127).

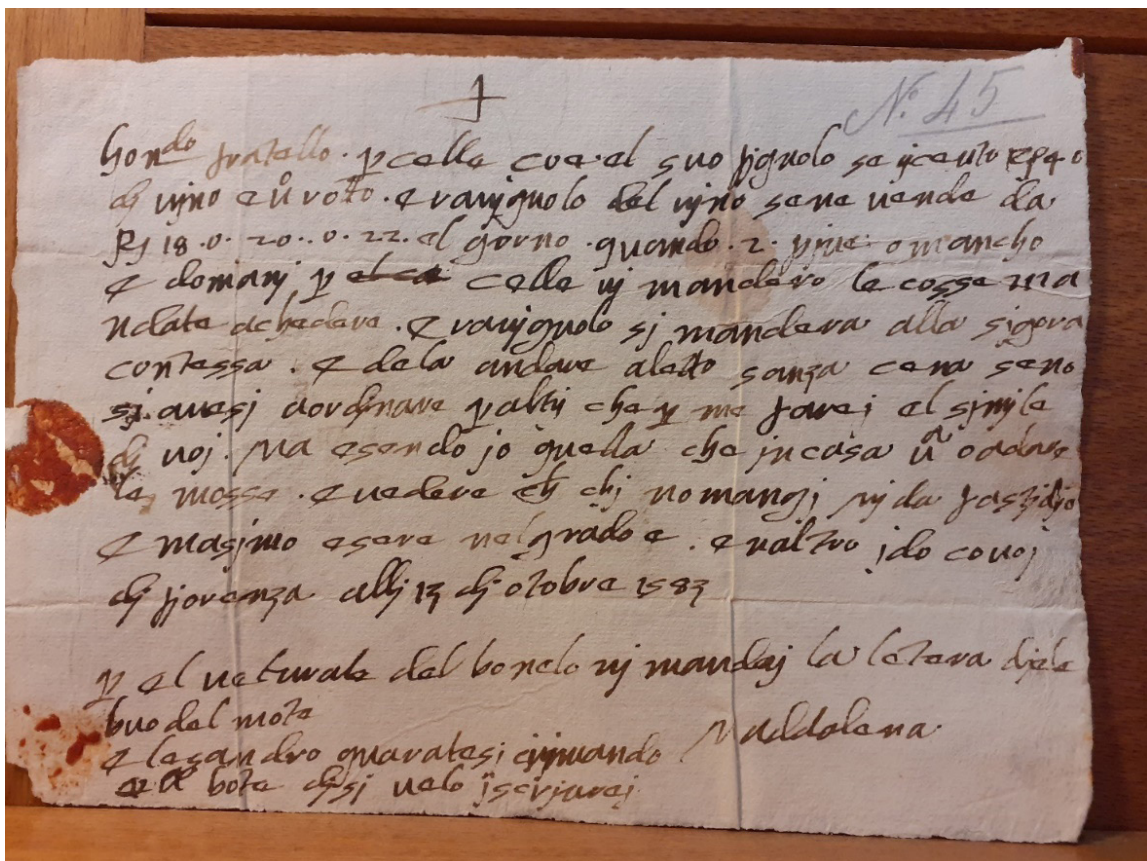


Figure 3. A letter by Maddalena (#r158).

As for the third generation, Maddalena's niece Cassandra was born on 3 November 1566²² from Braccio Ricasoli's first marriage to Costanza di Alberto Gualterotti. In 1591 (Moran 2018: 189), she married the Florentine patrician Piero di Lionardo Tornabuoni, eventually bearing two children, Virginia and Lionardo (Litta 1836: table 2). She does not seem to have participated as actively in the economic life of the family as her aunt Maddalena had done, although she was sometimes led to move beyond the domestic sphere in her youthful desire to procure fashion items (Moran 2018).

Cassandra's graphic competence could be termed *usuale*, like that of her aunt. At the same time, her letters seem to show a somewhat more deliberate attempt at calligraphic writing (see Figure 4). The letters she sent to her younger sister Lucrezia²³ in 1589 also reveal the importance that she

²² San Giovanni baptismal records, reg. 232, fig. 127.

²³ According to Moran (2018: 188), this Lucrezia would have been Cassandra's half-sister, born in late 1582 or early 1583 out of Braccio's second marriage. However, Marchesin (2019), making reference to some genealogical charts drawn by Braccio

attributed to a woman's ability to write, as they invariably open with words of encouragement for her sister's progress in letter writing. In the first letter (#r604), Cassandra asks Lucrezia to write in her own hand and assures her that she will not reprimand her for any mistakes: 'Scrivimi di tua mano se tu voi, se tu puoi, rispetto a' pedignoni,²⁴ ch[e] a me no[n] inporta se farai qualch[e] castrone' [Write to me in your own hand if you want, if you can; concerning errors, I don't mind if you make some mistakes]. Her second and third letter similarly open with praise for her sister's writing progress:

Ho riceuto la tua a me grata p[er] essere di tua mano, ch[e] no[n] sta se none bene rispetto ch[e] è poco ch[e] comica[s]ti. Seuita, ch[e] farai bene. [I have received your letter which is dear to me because it is in your own hand which is nothing but good, considering that it is not a long time that you have started (to learn), keep it up that you will do well.] (#r606)

Ho riceuto la tua a me grata, p[er] la quale mi di' ch[e] l'afetione ch[e] io ti porto mi fa pacere e tua castroceli. Se no[n] fusi ch[e] io no[n] voglio ch[e] tu dica ch[e] io abia alterato il gusto, direi ch[e] questi fusino meglio. [I have received your letter which is dear to me, by which you tell me that the affection I bring you makes me like your mistakes. If it weren't that I don't want you to say that I have faulty perceptions, I would say that these (mistakes) have improved.] (#r607)

Cassandra's fluent hand and her proud role as a writing 'coach' for her little sister set this writer miles apart from her grandmother's first letter-writing efforts. This generational trajectory seems to mirror, on the micro-scale of one individual family, the increase in women's literacy that was occurring across the Florentine patriciate more broadly.

himself which I have not been able to locate, claims that Lucrezia was Cassandra's full sister. I could not find her name in the baptismal records of San Giovanni.

24 The term *pedignone* indicated chilblains on the feet, but the historical dictionary Battaglia reports the idiomatic expression *avere i pedignoni nella lingua* (lit. 'to have chilblains in the tongue') with the meaning of 'to speak with difficulty', 'to stammer' (Battaglia & Bárberi Squarotti 1961–2002, s.v. *pedignone*).

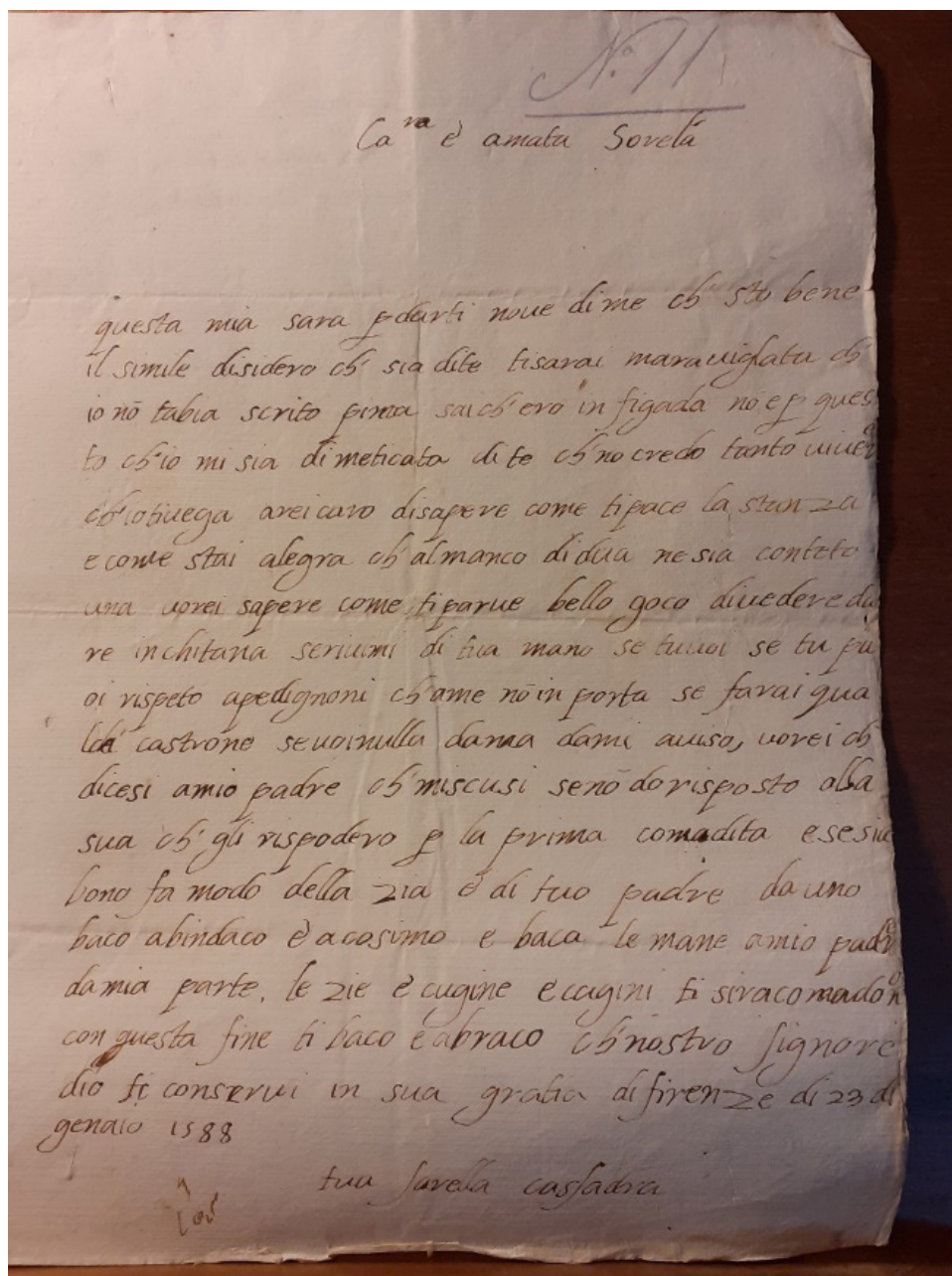


Figure 4. A letter by Cassandra (#r604).

When it comes to writing experience, we can, therefore, identify a sharp divide between the woman of the first generation, Lucrezia, whose graphic competence was very low, and the women of the second and third generations, who were much more experienced writers. On this basis, an interpretation of formulae as *Formulierungshilfe* would lead us to expect a higher use of optional formulae by Lucrezia, compared to Maddalena and Cassandra.

6.2 An analysis of the Ricasoli women's use of formulae

Table 8 reports the average number of optional formulae used by Lucrezia, Maddalena, and Cassandra in their letter closings (classified according to the pragmatic typology of formulae introduced in Section 5.1). The number in parenthesis refers to the number of variants employed by each woman for any given type of formula.

Table 8. Number of optional formulae used by Lucrezia, Maddalena, and Cassandra.

Pragmatic category	Types of optional formulae	Lucrezia	Maddalena	Cassandra
Text-structural	Discourse-ending	20(2)	21(5)	24(5)
Intersubjective	Health wishes	16(1)	1	0
	Health statements	0	2(1)	0
	Greetings	5(1)	10(3)	47(12)
	Other	3(2)	3(2)	19(4)
Christian-ritual	Christian wishes	0	17(4)	20(6)
Total		44	54	110
Average no. optional formulae		2.4	3	6.1

The results show that while the average frequency of optional formulae is not too dissimilar in Lucrezia's and Maddalena's letter closings (2.4 and 3 respectively), Cassandra uses a lot more (6.1). As for the variation of the formulae within each pragmatic type, Lucrezia had fewer options between which to choose than either Maddalena or Cassandra. I will return to the discussion of these results after presenting an analysis of the various types of formulae used.

Table 9. Discourse-ending formulae.

Writer	Formula	Number of occurrences	Occurrences
Lucrezia	<i>né altro</i>	18	#r511, #r224, #r237, #r240, #r242, #r243, #r246, #r247, #r690, #r271, #r302, #r335 (twice), #r16, #r17, #r18, #r19, #r20
	<i>non sarò più lunga a(lo i)crivere farò fine</i>	2	#r16, #r17
Maddalena	<i>né altro</i>	16	#r334, #r555, #r336, #r337, #r44, #r45, #r512, #r513, #r514, #r157, #r158, #r160, #r496, #r163, #r166, #r169
	<i>*non avendo altro che dire</i>	2	#r513, #r519
	<i>altro no so che mi dire</i>	1	#r163
	<i>fo fine</i>	1	#r513
	<i>*no mi ocorendo altro</i>	1	#r167
Cassandra	<i>*con questa/tale fine</i>	11	#r484, #r485, #r604, #r42, #r606, #r607, #r487, #r489, #r493, #r204, #r495
	<i>non sarò più lunga (per non infastidire)</i>	7	#r484, #r485, #r42, #r488, #r490, #r412, #r14
	<i>*non m'ocoredo altro</i>	4	#r484, #r42, #r606, #r487
	<i>farò fine</i>	1	#r487
	<i>non dirò altro</i>	1	#r360

Discourse-ending formulae (see Table 9) are the only text-structural formulae used in the closings of the Ricasoli women's letters. Their frequency is quite similar across the different writers (20 for Lucrezia, 21 for Maddalena, and 24 for Cassandra). However, Lucrezia displays much less variation in these formulae than either Maddalena or Cassandra, as she employs only two variants. In all but one letter she uses the same bigram *né altro* [nothing else] and in two of her latest letters she duplicates this discourse-ending formula by using, alongside *né altro*, a more elaborate, 'bookish' item, *non sarò più lunga a (lo i)crivere farò fine* [I will not write longer, I will put an end to writing]. This is a combination of two formulae, but the fact that this string is used twice in the same wording strongly suggests that it had been learned as

a holistic unit, i.e. as a prefabricated, memorised sequence that was retrieved and used without subjecting it to analysis. As I explained in Serra (2024: 292), this formula appears more advanced than the surrounding text and points to an influence ‘from above’ which can characterise the writings of the semi-literate. By contrast, Maddalena and Cassandra resort to five variants each. Unlike Lucrezia, they often recur to formulae that cannot stand on their own, but that need to be combined with other formulae: this is the case for *non avendo altro che dire* [not having anything else to say] (Maddalena), *no mi ocorendo altro* [not needing anything else] (Maddalena and Cassandra), and *con questa/tale fine* [with this end] (Cassandra).

Finally, Cassandra emerges as the most creative. Although in her letters the discourse-ending formula *non sarò più lunga* [I will not write longer] is most often completed by the string *per non infastidire* [not to annoy you], in one case this string is replaced by a more personal, non-formulaic explanation: ‘Non sarò più lunga che non ò pena bona tanto che no farei se none castroni’ [I will not write longer because I do not have a good pen so I would only be making a mess] (#r485). In another case, Cassandra makes use of a creative reformulation (which I have not considered a formula, in keeping with my original definition), so that the stereotypical *Non sarò più lunga per non infastidire* is turned into ‘Io sono stata tanta lunga credo vi verò a fastidio, abate pazieza’ [I have written so long that I will annoy you, have a little patience] (#r491).

Table 10. Health formulae.

Writer	Formula	Type of formula	Number of occurrences	Occurrences
Lucrezia	<i>ista(tte) sano/I</i>	health wish	16	#r511, #r224, #r237, #r240, #r242, #r243, #r246, #r672, #r271, #r302, #r335, #r16, #r17, #r18, #r19, #r20
Maddalena	<i>riuardatevi a questi caldi</i>	health wish	1	#r169
	<i>__istanno bene</i>	health statement	2	#r163, #r166

As for intersubjective formulae, following Rutten and van der Wal (2014: 114–118) I distinguish between health statements – i.e. formulae that communicate the health of the writer and/or of third parties – and health wishes. Both are shown in Table 10. Health statements are rare in the closings of the Ricasoli women’s letters, since they tend instead to be concentrated in the opening.²⁵ Only Maddalena uses them twice, announcing the good health of third parties through the bigram *__ istanno bene* [*__ are well*] [#r163, #r166]. However, health wishes are frequent in the closings of Lucrezia’s letters (sixteen occurrences). To wish the recipient good health, she consistently resorts to the same formula, i.e. a simple bigram with no insertions or lexical substitutions: *ista(tte) sano/i* [*stay healthy*]. Health wishes are almost non-existent in the letters by Maddalena and Cassandra, but this function seems to be fulfilled by Christian-ritual formulae instead (see Table 11).

Table 11. Christian-ritual formulae.

Writer	Formula	Number of occurrences	Occurrences
Maddalena	<i>Idio ti uardi (di (ogi) male)</i>	6	#r334, #r555, #r336, #r337, #r45, #r159
	<i>Idio con voi</i>	5	#r158, #r160, #r496, #r163, #r169
	<i>Idio vi contenti</i>	4	#r512, #r513, #r514, #r157
	<i>el nostro sigore (Idio) vi conservi in sua gratia</i>	2	#r166, #r167

25 To give a couple of examples, see the opening of two letters by Maddalena and Cassandra respectively: ‘tengo 2 vostre e p[er] dete intendo voi istare tuti bene. El simile ène di noi, Ido laudato’ [I have two letters from you and from them I hear that you are all well. The same goes for us, praise be to God] (#r513); ‘ho riceuto la vostra a me gratisima d’avere inteso il vostro bene istare. Il simile di noi, p[er] Dio gratia’ [I have received your letter which is very dear to me for having heard of your good health. The same goes for us, thank God] (#r42).

Cassandra	<i>che nostro/il signore (Dio) vi/ti/la tenga/conservi in sua (santa) gratia</i>	7	#r484, #r485, #r604, #r42, #r607, #r487, #r14
	<i>che il signore (Dio) vi conceda/doni la sua (santa) gratia</i>	6	#r488, #r489, #r490, #r491, #r492, #r495
	<i>(il signore) Dio sia (sempre in) tuo/vostro aiuto</i>	3	#r606, #r493, #r204
	<i>il signore (Dio) vi conservi e vi dia la sua gratia</i>	2	#r412, #r491
	<i>il signore Dio sia quello che ci porga il suo aiuto</i>	1	#r360
	<i>preda Dio per me ch[e] n'ò bisogno</i>	1	#r606

In fact, aside from one formula in which the writer, Cassandra, asks the addressee to pray for her (#r606), the Christian-ritual formulae found in the Ricasoli letters wish God's grace and protection on the recipient (and sometimes on the writer alongside the recipient). These Christian-ritual 'wishes' are not used by Lucrezia, but are employed very frequently by Maddalena and Cassandra. This is best explained by considering them in the same category as health wishes. Their function is similar since, by invoking God's protection, they entail a wish for the addressee's health and happiness. Under this interpretation, the frequency of health or Christian-ritual wishes used by the three Ricasoli women is comparable, as Lucrezia, as we have seen, employs 16 health wishes, Maddalena uses 17 Christian-ritual wishes, and Cassandra employs 20.

Once again, while Lucrezia's wish consisted of one fixed bigram, Maddalena and Cassandra employ more variants (4 and 5 respectively). These variants, in turn, allow for a certain degree of lexical substitution and insertions: for example, the formula *che nostro/il signore (Dio) vi/ti/la tenga/conservi in sua (santa) gratia* [may (God) our Lord keep/preserve you in His (holy) grace], employed by Cassandra, allows for the alternation of the verbs *tenere* and *conservare* and for the optional insertion of the adjective *santa* [holy]. Cassandra even strings together two formulae, *che il (nostro) signore (Dio) vi/ti/la tenga/conservi in sua (santa) gratia* [May (God) our Lord keep you in his (holy) grace] and *che il signore (Dio) vi conceda la sua (santa) gratia* [May (God) our Lord give you his holy grace], to obtain *il signore Dio vi conservi e vi*

dia la sua gratia [May God our Lord keep you and give you his grace], a novel string that itself becomes a formula, since she employs it in multiple letters.

Table 12. Greetings.

Writer	Formula	Number of occurrences	Occurrences
Lucrezia	<i>a __ mi raccomando</i>	5	#r16, #r17, #r18, #r19, #r20
Maddalena	<i>a __ mi raccomando</i>	6	#r336, #r44, #r45, #r512, #r513, #r514
	<i>e così mi raccomandate a __</i>	1	#r513
	<i>__ vi si raccomanda(no)</i>	3	#r166, #r167, #r169
Cassandra	<i>a__ mi racomado</i>	4	#r606, #r607, #r487, #r493
	<i>racomandatemi a __</i>	2	#r360, #r204
	<i>__ si raccomanda(no)</i>	10	#r484, #r604, #r42, #r607, #r488, #r489, #r412, #r412, #r491, #r492
	<i>*(e) così (fa) __</i>	6	#r42, #r606, #r488, #r489, #r493, #r14
	<i>*e io per infinite/mille volte</i>	3	#r412, #r491, #r492
	<i>*e __ a</i>	1	#r412
	<i>(per infinite volte) mi ofero e racomado</i>	5	#r488, #r490, #r204, #r495, #r14
	<i>vi baco le mane</i>	3	#r484, #r485, #r42
	<i>ti baco e abraco</i>	1	#r604
	<i>saluta(te) __ (da mia parte/in nome mio)</i>	9	#r485, #r606, #r487, #r488, #r412, #r491, #r492, #r204, #r495
	<i>bacia(te) (le mane a) __ da mia parte</i>	2	#r484, #r604
	<i>__vi saluta</i>	1	#r14

Greetings (see Table 12), another important intersubjective element, are used much more frequently by Cassandra than by her aunt and her grandmother. Whereas Lucrezia employs 5, and Maddalena 10, there are 47 occurrences in Cassandra's closings. Once again, Lucrezia's greetings are highly fixed, as

she only uses one unvaried formula. Maddalena's greetings display more variation than her mother's, with three different alternating constructions built around the verb *raccomandare* [commend]. Cassandra's numerous greetings display by far the most variation, with the use of 12 different types. If some of this variation may be explained by her need to accommodate different addressees (for example, an informal *ti bacio e abbraccio* [I kiss you and hug you] in a letter to her sister alternates with a more formal *vi baco le mane* [I kiss your hands] in letters to her father), many equivalent formulae are used when addressing the same individual. Once again, Cassandra's formulae frequently allow for insertions and lexical substitution: for example, in formulae built around the verb *raccomandare*, the phrase *per infinite volte* [infinite times] may be left out, and *infinite* alternates with *mille* [a thousand].

Table 13. Other intersubjective formulae.

Writer	Formula	Number of occurrences	Occurrences
Lucrezia	fati/fatevi vezzi	2	#r242, #r18
	abiatevi chura	1	#r335
Maddalena	farai/fate vezi a __	2	#r334, #r513
	fati vezi	1	#r337
Cassandra	se/quando volete/ v'occorre/voledo nulla (da me) date aviso/avisate/ scrivete	12	#r484, #r485, #r604, #r42, #r606, #r487, #r412, #r490, #r491, #r493, #r204, #r495
	se poso (p[er] te/voi) cosa nesuna/nulla da aviso/ avisate	2	#r607, #r489
	fa(te) careze a __	3	#r484, #r42, #r606
	te(nete)mi in (bona) gratia di __	2	#r42, #r606

When it comes to other types of intersubjective formulae (Table 13), Cassandra again uses significantly more of them (19) than Lucrezia (3) and Maddalena (3). In particular, she frequently uses a formula that reassures the addressee that the writer is ready to respond to their requests (14 occurrences). This

element, which I have termed a ‘service formula’, finds no counterpart in Lucrezia’s or Maddalena’s letters.

6.3 Discussion

The data reveal that Cassandra uses more than twice as many formulae as Maddalena and Lucrezia. This increase is largely accounted for by Cassandra’s higher use of intersubjective formulae. We witness the emergence of a new intersubjective formula, which I have named a ‘service formula’, and most of all we see a significant increase in the number of greetings.

As for the variation in the formulae used within each pragmatic type, Lucrezia had consistently fewer options between which she could choose, and this holds true across the different categories of formulae. This is not surprising, as stylistic variation in early modern times was largely dependent on the repertoire one was able to accumulate by means of instruction and practice (Auer 2015: 154): although not much is known about these women’s education, Lucrezia certainly had less practice in letter-writing than her daughter and granddaughter. Moreover, her use of each variant tended to be highly fixed, so it is likely that she had learned formulae as holistic units. By contrast, Maddalena and Cassandra had more options at their disposal (Maddalena usually had more than Lucrezia, but less than Cassandra), and these options allowed for more internal variability. Out of the three writers, Cassandra emerged as the most creative, as she sometimes reworked existing formulaic strings to produce novel expressions.

Going back to the first research question formulated in this paper – i.e. whether women of later generations used fewer formulae – the answer is negative. Contrary to what would be expected on the basis of studies on other linguistic traditions, Cassandra, the writer from the third generation, used far more formulae than either her aunt or grandmother. Moreover, even though Maddalena’s degree of writing experience was more similar to Cassandra’s than to Lucrezia’s, Maddalena’s and Lucrezia’s letters were more similar in the number of formulae used than Maddalena’s and Cassandra’s were. This suggests that formulae, in this case, did not serve primarily as a ‘safe option’ for less experienced writers.

7. A comparison between women and men

Although women's language has received increasing attention in Italian linguistic historiography, studies systematically comparing the language of men and women are still rare (but see Bianconi 1987; Fresu 2003). Yet, placing women's usage in the context of male usage can help clarify further the relationship between gender, formulae, and writing experience. We have already seen that, in the private letters of the three Ricasoli women, the use of optional formulae did not inversely correlate with writing experience, as the woman with lower writing experience used fewer formulae, and the frequency of formulae was radically different between two women with comparable writing experience. The question asked here is whether we can at least prove that these women used more optional formulae than their well-educated brothers, as has been found in the case of English and Dutch.

In order to study the correlation between usage and gender across the different generations, I compared letters by the Ricasoli women with those written by their brothers, as explained in Section 4. Whereas Florentine women's writing experience increased significantly over the course of the sixteenth century, we have no reason to assume such an increase for the patriciate's men, as their writing experience would have been high even at the beginning of the period considered. However, as I did for the women, I first provide a brief biographical profile for each man, reflecting on the factors that might have impacted on their writing experience, and especially delving – when this was possible – into their education and literary interests (Section 7.1). I then present an analysis of the formulae they used (Section 7.2).

7.1 Men's biographical and letter-writing profiles

Lucrezia's brother Andrea di Matteo Albizzi (1486–1534), for whom, as previously mentioned, I could only retrieve four letters sent to close family members, was born on 6 March 1486 (1485 *more fiorentino*), so he was probably around ten years older than his sister.²⁶ Proving successful in politics

²⁶ San Giovanni baptismal records, reg. 5, fig. 130. The date of birth reported in the genealogy given by Litta (1876: table 2), i.e. 6 May 1485, is incorrect.

and business, he became a close friend of two Medici popes and engaged extensively in trade between Rome and France (Litta 1876: table 2; Shearman 1960). According to Litta 1876 (Table 2), he was made a French subject by King Louis XII in 1513, and Clement VII appointed him governor and castellano of Orvieto.²⁷ Art historians have proposed that Andrea is the subject painted in Andrea del Sarto's *Portrait of a Young Man* at Alnwick Castle, a work that once belonged to the Albizzi family (see Figure 5) (Shearman 1960). It is serendipitous that, in the painting, he is portrayed in the act of holding a folded letter.²⁸



Figure 5. Andrea del Sarto, *Portrait of a young man, possibly Andrea di Matteo degli Albizzi*, 1510 (oil on panel), collection of the Duke of Northumberland, Alnwick Castle. The reproduction licence for this image has been purchased from the Bridgeman Image Library (NTE6371401).

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- 27** One of Andrea's letters included in the corpus (#r385), sent in 1528, is indeed from Orvieto.
- 28** The name 'Andrea', spelt out on the letter, is one of the reasons behind the identification.

Unlike his sister, we can assume that Andrea had received a sophisticated education, which would have also included training in vernacular letter writing, as was customary for boys from elite families (D'Onghia 2014: 93). He might even have been instructed by a private tutor, a practice that had become a status symbol in fifteenth-century Florence: the Albizzi were among the families who are known to have hired such tutors (Black 2007: 440–441). It is telling (but not surprising) that the script Andrea employs distances itself from a *mercantesca*, which would have been typical of monolingual writers schooled in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Florence, and embraces elements of humanistic handwriting (see Figure 6).

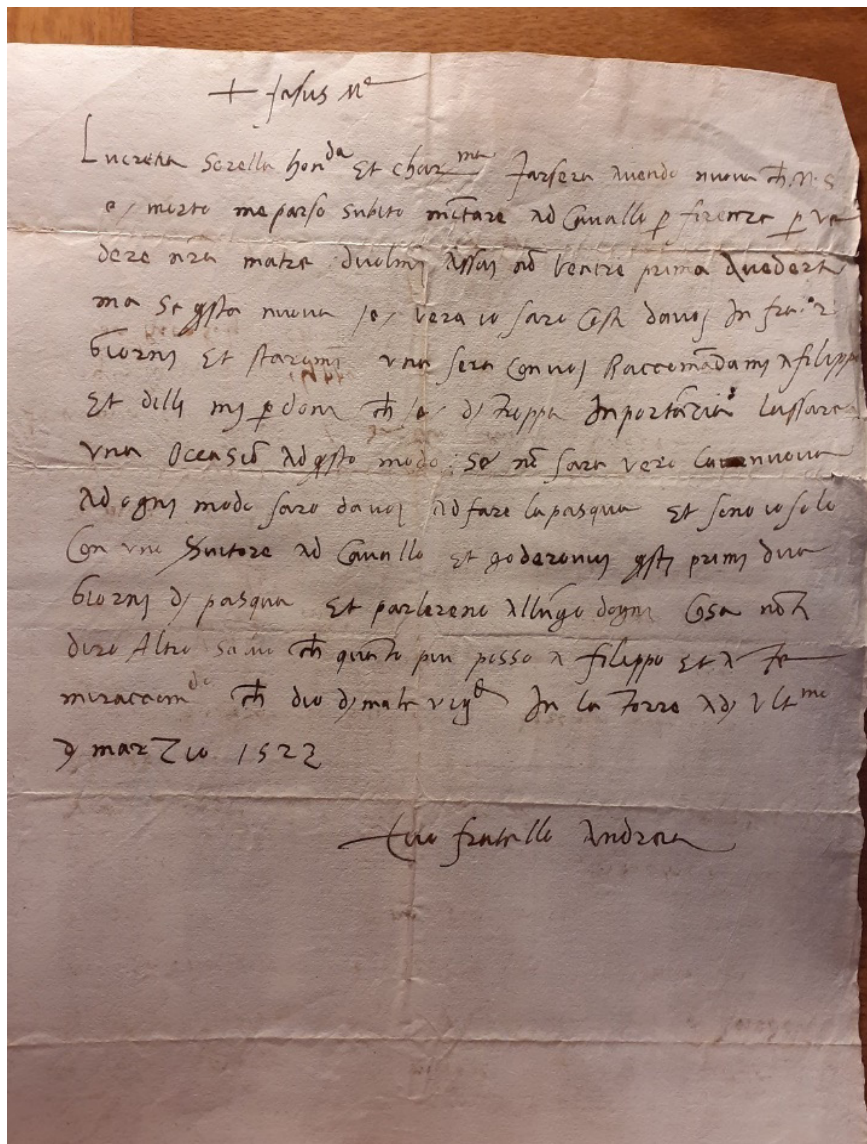


Figure 6. A letter by Andrea (#r321).

Moving to the second generation, Maddalena's brother Braccio (1525–1589) was born on 25 August 1525,²⁹ and was therefore three years younger than his sister. In his youth, he contemplated becoming a friar at the Badia Fiorentina (Ricasoli Filze 40-III-IV, c. 48), but with the death of his elder brothers he eventually became head of the family, married twice, and had at least eleven children. Passerini tells us that contemporaries considered him a learned scholar and philosopher (Passerini 1861: 170), and we have evidence of this from several sources. For example, Braccio features among the protagonists of an early, little-known dialogue written in 1548 by the man of letters Vincenzo Borghini, *De romaniis familiis*, preserved in one autograph manuscript at Florence's Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale. We also know that, given his interests in the vernacular, in 1571 Vincenzo Borghini proposed him as one of the members of the *Accademia generale della lingua*, a new language academy envisaged by the grand duke Cosimo de' Medici, a project that was eventually abandoned (Marchesin 2019: 8). An analysis of Borghini's *De romaniis familiis* has pointed out that Braccio must have been learned not only in the vernacular but also in Latin literature, and has hypothesised a possible study period at the monastery of San Marco (Marchesin 2019: 74). A look at his private letters (one of which is shown in Figure 7) further enriches this picture, revealing that he was educated in Greek too,³⁰ and giving us a further idea of his readings: his correspondence is filled with requests for books, including vernacular works by authors such as Francesco Berni, Luigi Alamanni, and Ugolino Martelli, and works of Greek philosophy and literature including by Aristotle, Xenophon, Themistius, Theocritus, Euripides, and Sophocles (#r103, #r28). This correspondence also highlights Braccio's relationship with important intellectuals of his time, and especially with Piero Vettori.³¹ All of this leads us to hypothesise, for Braccio, an outstanding education beyond that received by most of his peers.

29 San Giovanni baptismal records, reg. 9, fig. 94.

30 Braccio's letters enable us to pinpoint the moment when he probably began to study this language in the winter of 1542 (#r676).

31 See, for example, Braccio's description of his journey to Rome with Piero Vettori on the occasion of the election of Pope Julius III, and of the oration delivered by the latter as Cosimo's ambassador, in a letter sent to his brother in April 1550 (#r26).

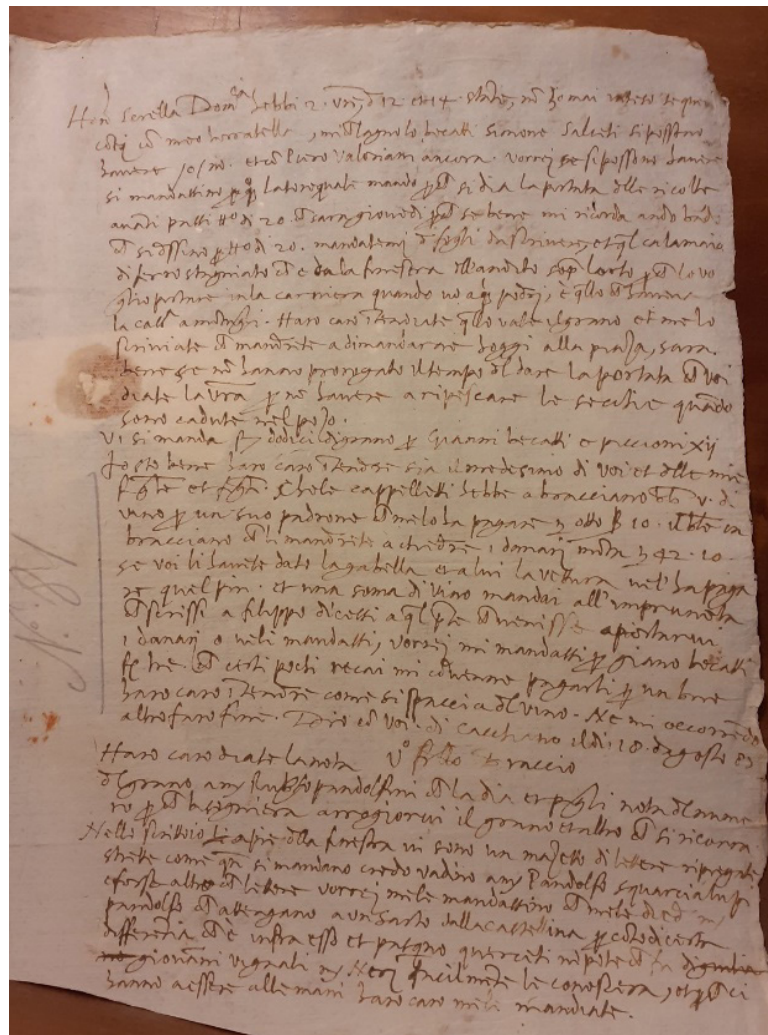


Figure 7. A letter by Braccio (#155).

As for the third generation, very little is known about Cassandra's half-brother, Cosimo. His name does not even feature among Braccio's numerous progeny in Passerini's genealogical tables (Passerini 1861: table 14), and I could find no information on him in the secondary literature. He was, however, born on 17 July 1586 out of Braccio's second marriage,³² and was therefore twenty-two years younger than his sister. Unlike his brother Bindaccio, who became a member of the Accademia della Crusca,³³ and unlike his father Braccio, Cosimo does not seem to have distinguished himself for his learning. However, given his social standing, it is likely that he would have also received a sophisticated education (for a sample of his handwriting, see Figure 8).

³² San Giovanni baptismal records, reg. 18, fig. 97.

³³ See the Crusca's Catalogo degli Accademici at <https://www.accademicidellacrusca.org/> (last accessed 3 Oct 2023)

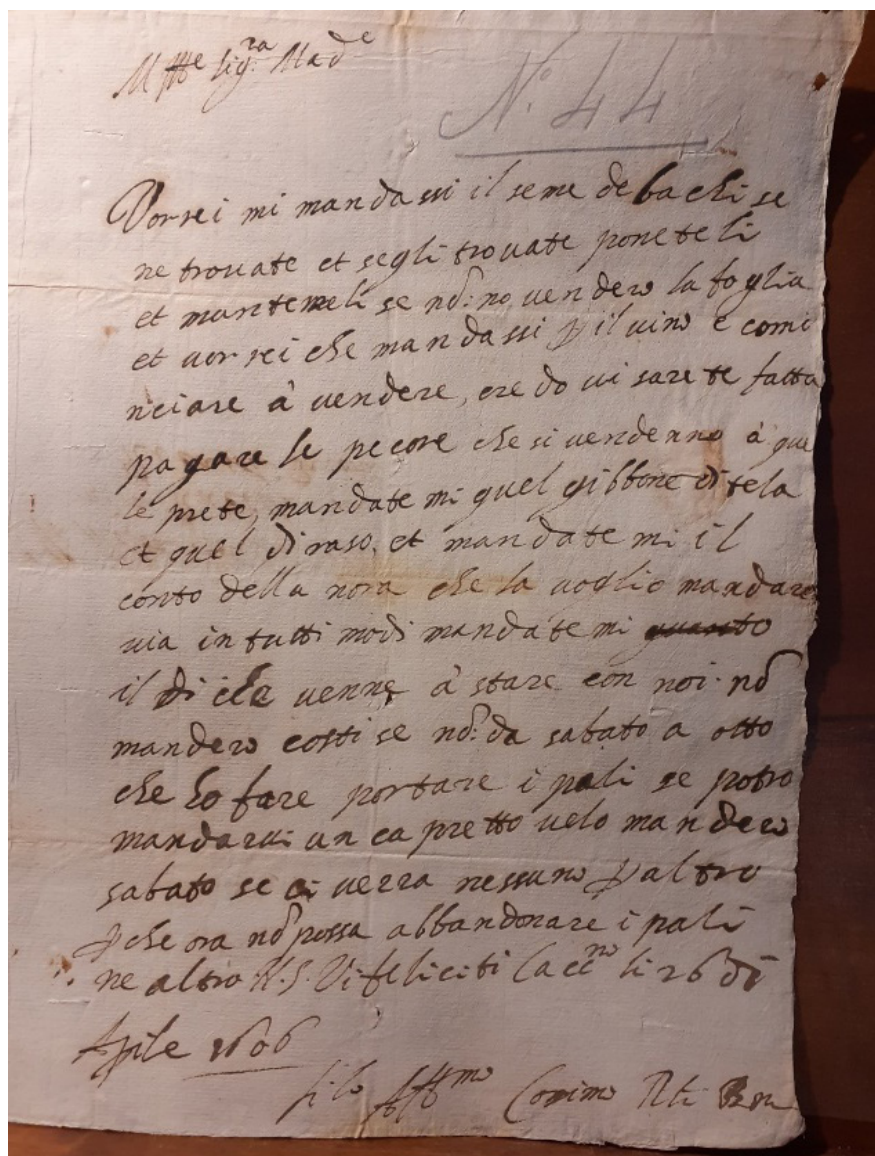


Figure 8. A letter by Cosimo (#r464).

In summary, all three Ricasoli men, as exponents of the Florentine patriciate, can be assumed to have received an excellent formal education. This education would have been superior to that received by their sisters. We know that Braccio especially was very learned in the classical languages and the vernacular alike, and that he was deemed an authority in the vernacular by the major Florentine intellectuals of his time.

7.2 An analysis of the Ricasoli men's use of formulae

Table 14 reports the average number of optional formulae used in letter closings by Andrea, Braccio, and Cosimo (categorised according to pragmatic

type). The number in parenthesis refers to the number of variants employed by each writer for any given type. It should be kept in mind that there are only four letters by Andrea, whereas for Braccio and Cosimo I selected the same number of letters that I selected for the women (eighteen). Since the number of letters by Andrea is so low, I did not calculate an average number of formulae, as I did for Braccio and Cosimo.

Table 14. Number of optional formulae used in letter closings by Andrea, Braccio, and Cosimo.

Pragmatic category	Type of optional formulae	Andrea	Braccio	Cosimo
Text-structural	Discourse-ending	4(2)	21(5)	19(3)
Intersubjective	Health wishes	0	1	0
	Health statements	0	0	0
	Greetings	7(3)	9(4)	3(2)
	Other	0	3(1)	0
Christian-ritual	Christian wishes	3(2)	14(4)	16(5)
Total		14 (4 letters)	48 (18 letters)	38 (18 letters)
Average no. optional formulae			2.7	2.1

The trend highlighted for the women, i.e. an increase in the use of formulae as the generations progress, is not visible for the men. If anything, Cosimo used fewer formulae than Braccio (an average of 2.1 versus 2.7). The differences highlighted across male writers, however, were nowhere as clear-cut as those separating Cassandra from the women of the earlier generations. As I did for the women, I shall now look more closely at the various types of formulae, before providing a more general comment.

Table 15. Discourse-ending formulae.

Writer	Formula	Number of occurrences	Occurrences
Andrea	<i>non (ti/vi) dirò altro, salvo...</i>	3	#r321, #r613, #r385
	<i>né in altro mi distenderò, salvo...</i>	1	#r400
Braccio	<i>no[n]/né altro</i>	12	#r227, #r676, #r237bis, #r103 (three times), #r104, #r300, #r138, #r144, #r357, #r156
	<i>altro (per hora) no[n] iscade</i>	3	#r300, #r622, #r26
	<i>farò/fo fine</i>	3	#r28, #r137, #r155
	<i>*no[n] mi occorrendo alt[r]o</i>	2	#r137, #r155
	<i>*altro no[n] havendo ch[e] dire</i>	1	#r28
Cosimo	<i>né/non altro</i>	10	#r456, #r457, #r458, #r459, #r460, #r461, #r462, #r463, #r464, #r465
	<i>altro non mi occor(r)e</i>	8	#r188, #r189, #r192, #r190, #r191, #r193, #r194, #r195
	<i>ora no[n] posso badare</i>	1	#r465

As far as text-structural elements are concerned (Table 15), consistently with his higher level of education, Andrea used different discourse-ending formulae than his sister Lucrezia, always stringing them together with other clauses through the connector *salvo* [except]. Meanwhile, Braccio's use is strikingly similar to that of his sister. Not only do Braccio and Maddalena use the same number of discourse-ending formulae (21) and the same number of variants (5), but 4 out of 5 variants – i.e. *né altro*, *non avendo altro che dire*, *fo fine*, and *non mi occorrendo altro* – are common to the two siblings. Cosimo, on the other hand, uses slightly fewer formulae (19 compared to 24) and fewer variants (3 compared to 5) than his half-sister Cassandra. In this case, there is no overlap in the variants used.

Health formulae are found only once in the men's letter closings: the health wish *state sano*, which was so common in Lucrezia's letter closings, is only used once by her son Braccio (#r277).

Table 16. Christian-ritual formulae.

Writer	Formula	Number of occurrences	Occurrences
Andrea	<i>(che) Dio di male vi guardi</i>	2	#r321, #r613
	<i>che Dio ce ne guardi</i>	1	#r400
Braccio	<i>Christo/Dio da/di male ti/vi guardi</i>	6	#r227, #r676, #r103, #r104, #r28, #r137
	<i>Dio (sia) con voi</i>	5	#r144, #r357, #r149, #r155, #r156
	<i>Dio sia in vostro aiuto</i>	2	#r138, #r142
	<i>che Dio ne conceda quanto desiderate</i>	1	#r477
Cosimo	<i>il/Nostro Sig[no]re/Iddio vi felicitì</i>	11	#r456, #r458, #r459, #r460, #r461, #r461, #r188, #r464, #r465, #r189, #r190
	<i>nostro Signore/Iddio vi conservi</i>	2	#r192, #r193
	<i>n[ostro] S[ignore] vi conceda ogni bene</i>	1	#r195
	<i>Il Signore vi guardi</i>	1	#r463
	<i>vi do la buona Passqua</i>	1	#r191

On the other hand, Christian-ritual formulae (Table 16) are more common. While his sister Lucrezia consistently employed health wishes, Andrea uses Christian-ritual formulae. Conversely, Maddalena and Braccio are once again similar in the frequency of Christian-ritual formulae (14 for Braccio and 17 for Maddalena) and in their degree of variation, with each of them using 4 variants, two of which – *Dio di male vi guardi* and *Dio con voi* – overlap. The latter especially is an item I have not found in other writers, so the fact that it is shared by the two siblings is striking. Cassandra and Cosimo are comparable in the frequency of formulae they use (20 and 16 respectively) and in their degree of variation (6 and 5 variants respectively), but there is no overlap in the formulae themselves.

Table 17. Greetings.

Writer	Formula	Number of occurrences	Occurrences
Andrea	a__ mi raccomando	3	#r321, #r400, #r385
	*così a __	1	#r400
	mi racom[andi]/racom[andatemi] (anchora) a__	3	#r613 (twice), #r400
Braccio	raccomandatemi/mi racomanderete a __	4	#r676, #r103 (twice), #r300
	salutate __ (da mia parte)	3	#r26, #r149, #r156
	a__ mi raccomando	1	#r104
	vi piacerà di salutarmi __	1	#r26
Cosimo	a__ mi raccomando	2	#r461, #r188
	raccomandatemi a __	1	#r460

The greetings used by the three Ricasoli men (Table 17) are quite similar, consisting of alternating constructions built around the verb *raccomandare* and, in the case of Braccio, *salutare*. Andrea used more greetings than Lucrezia (7 greetings in 4 letters, vs 5 greetings in 18 letters), while Braccio and Maddalena are again similar in the frequency of greetings (9 and 10 respectively) and in the number of variants (4 and 3 respectively), with two overlapping variants. Cassandra and Cosimo, on the other hand, are radically different, as Cassandra uses many more greetings than Cosimo (47 greetings with 12 variants, compared to only 3 greetings with 2 variants).

Finally, out of the three men, only Braccio makes occasional use of other intersubjective formulae, employing three times the item *fate/si faccia vezzi a__* (#r477, #r142, #r149). Cassandra's high use of service formulae finds no counterpart in Cosimo's writing.

7.3 Discussion

The increase in the frequency of formulae detected for the women was not repeated among the men: Cosimo, as we have seen, used somewhat fewer formulae than either Andrea or Braccio. Going back to the second research question formulated in Section 3 – i.e. whether women used more optional

formulae than their brothers – the answer depends on the generation in question.

In the case of the first generation – the one where the gap in writing experience was wider – the woman, Lucrezia, used fewer formulae (on average 2.4) than her brother Andrea, who used around 3 or 4 formulae per letter closing, suggesting that formulae in sixteenth-century Florence were not simply a ‘safe option’ for less experienced writers. In keeping with these siblings’ different involvement in written culture, Andrea also had more variants at his disposal, and he used formulae differently from Lucrezia, combining them at times with non-formulaic elements to create more complex structures, for example in ‘Né i[n] altro mi distenderò, salvo p[re]garvi fuggiate q[ue]sta peste ad ogni modo’ [I will not write anything else, except to pray you flee this plague at all costs] (#r400).

The letters by the man and woman in the second generation, by contrast, turned out to be very similar in the frequency of formulae (2.7 and 3 respectively) and in their degree of variation. There was also a strong overlap in terms of the formulae themselves and one formula, *Dio con voi* [God with you] even seemed idiosyncratic of these two siblings. Apparently, it did not matter that Braccio had a fine education in the vernacular and in the classical languages, most likely not afforded to Maddalena. In the practice of private correspondence, the very close cooperation between these two siblings resulted in strikingly similar formulaic language.

Among the writers of the third generation (who, as half-siblings and born twenty-two years apart, were nowhere as close as Braccio and Maddalena), Cassandra used three times as many formulae as Cosimo (6.1 versus 2.1): hence, the trend highlighted for the first generation has completely reversed in the third.

What to make, then, of the fact that the use of formulae increases so sharply in the woman writer of the third generation, but that this increase is not detectable in the man of the third generation? Of course, it cannot be ruled out that the differences between Cassandra and Cosimo were simply idiolectal.³⁴ However, examining a few letters by Cosimo’s siblings (and Cassandra’s half-

³⁴ On the relevance of idiolectal differences in the use of epistolary formulae, see Elspaß (2005: 195).

siblings) Bindaccio and Virginia appears to confirm this pattern of gender differentiation in the third generation. Each of the three letter closings I examined by Virginia, written in 1612 and 1613,³⁵ includes two greetings, one Christian-ritual formula, and at least one discourse-ending formula; moreover, two closings include a ‘service’ formula, and one contains two health formulae. Conversely, the two letter closings I examined by Bindaccio contain hardly any optional formulae: there is one in a letter written in 1602,³⁶ and no formula at all in a letter written in 1606.³⁷ Bindaccio’s limited use of formulae, therefore, is closer to Cosimo’s, while Virginia’s abundant use of formulae is closer to Cassandra’s.

Based on these admittedly limited data – which will need further confirmation from analysis of other corpora – it seems that women’s letters were moving towards a more polite writing style, whereas men’s letters were not. In Section 8, I shall propose some hypotheses to account for this differentiation and indicate avenues for further research.

8. Conclusion

My first research question was whether women with a lower degree of writing experience used more formulae. A positive answer would have supported the idea that formulae were primarily a safe option for less experienced writers, as has been found in other traditions.

In a publication exploring lifespan change in the letters of Lucrezia Ricasoli (Serra 2024), I showed that the frequency of formulae she used increased over time, as her writing experience grew. I had hypothesised that this finding might have been due to a non-linear relationship between use of formulae and (low) writing experience. That is, a stage in which a semi-literate writer uses few formulae (because they have not yet acquired them) would be followed by an increase in the number of formulae, which would go hand in hand with an increase in writing experience. As a writer’s experience rises even more, however, we might expect the use of formulae

35 See n. 6.

36 Ricasoli Filze 41-III-IV, c. 22.

37 Ricasoli Filze 41-III-IV, c. 45.

to decrease again as the writer's need for formulation aids diminishes. Such an explanation would still have been compatible with a view of formulae as primarily a safe option for little experienced writers.

However, this explanation does not tell the whole story, as it does not explain the generational pattern highlighted in this paper. It is striking that the number of formulae rises sharply from the second-generation woman to the third-generation woman, despite these writers being more similar to each other, in terms of writing experience, than either was to Lucrezia. This is proven by the fact that, as seen before, both Cassandra and Maddalena were able to vary their formulae much more than Lucrezia. On these grounds, it does not appear that formulae, in this tradition, were only – or even mainly – aids for formulation. I propose that this increase in the use of formulae by the woman of the third generation can instead be ascribed to a shift in genre conventions.

In this respect, Armando Petrucci has noted that the medieval *lettera mercantile* – i.e. the genre of vernacular letters exchanged between merchants – was highly functional and practical in character, and that one of its defining characteristics was an extremely reduced formulary, with a text devoid, for example, of elaborate greetings (Petrucci 2008: 55). Petrucci also noted that, especially within merchant and bourgeois family circles, this minimalism in formulaic expressions – along with several other features – had spread from the *lettera mercantile* to the genre of private letters (Petrucci 2008: 54).

Scholars have identified the sixteenth century as the time of an epistolary 'revolution' (Petrucci 2008: 86), since vernacular letter-writing spread as a social practice through strata of newly literate writers and boomed at the same time as a literary genre. This revolution would have triggered a change in epistolary conventions: the letter-writing manuals and letter books that enjoyed such success in the printing market, if not directly responsible for this shift, at least attest to and reflect its existence. I propose that Maddalena is still anchored to a model of private letter informed by the *lettera mercantile*, whereas Cassandra, born more than forty years later, would have been more receptive to the new polite and elaborate epistolary style that was being promoted in polite society and letter books alike. With reference to seventeenth-century letters, and specifically to letters by women, Zari has noted that correspondence, from a genre that was once conceived as

responding to practical and functional needs, had become an element and tool of a *civil conversazione* (Zarri 1999: xvi). Cassandra's frequent use of epistolary formulae could perhaps be explained in this light. It has been suggested that similar changes took place in other traditions too: in letters written in early modern English, Elsweiler & Ronan (2023: 2) detect an increase in the complexity of closings throughout the sixteenth century.

Strikingly, however, this increase in the use of formulae across the generations was not detected in the letters by the Ricasoli men. Although idiolectal differences cannot be ruled out, as I explained in Section 7.2 the examination of a handful of letters by two other siblings, Virginia and Bindaccio Ricasoli, seemed to confirm the same tendency. At the turn of the seventeenth century, it would seem that women's private letters were moving towards a more polite writing style with an abundance of formulae (at least in the letter closing), whereas men's letters were not.

Several hypotheses might be formulated in this regard, although all must remain speculative at this stage. With the new polite model of the *lettera familiare* [private letter] gaining currency thanks to the circulation of printed letter books, one might posit the existence of a progressive 'gendering' of genres. In other words, with an increase in women's literacy, this polite model would have become available to all women from the upper classes, while the mercantile letter model might not always have been available to them. It would, however, have remained very much available to the men of different generations, since all of them had to deal with business. In fact, it might not be a coincidence that Cassandra, the writer who used more formulae, was not involved in the family business in the same way that her aunt Maddalena or her grandmother Lucrezia were, so mercantile conventions might have been less relevant to her as a reference model. This would have made her more likely to turn to the new model of private letters promoted in printed books and polite circles.

However, alternative explanations are also possible. One is that women were more likely to adopt innovative, overtly prestigious features spreading from above. This is a finding that has been repeatedly obtained in present-day societies (Trudgill 1972: 179), but historical sociolinguistic studies have so far cast doubt on the universality of this principle. In the history of Germanic languages, men were consistently found to lead the changes

originating from the high spheres of learning and professional usage, such as the spread of multiple negation and of *which*-relativiser in English (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 128–131) and the change from *d*- to *w*-relativisation in Dutch (Rutten & Van der Wal 2014: 302).³⁸ In other words, women could not lead the adoption of features that were unavailable to them due to educational barriers. However, the case presented here might represent a historical context in which prestige features were at last becoming available to (high-status) women, since, as we have seen, letter writing was becoming a common social practice for Florentine patrician women. The turn of the seventeenth century, then, could have been a time in which women took the lead as innovators when it came to prestige features, just as they do today. If this explanation were true, then the men of subsequent generations would be expected to eventually pick up these formulae too.

In present-day sociolinguistics, various factors have been proposed for women's preference for prestigious features: these range from linguistic insecurity (Labov 1966: 335; Trudgill 1972: 183) and the value of linguistic resources as symbolic capital (Eckert 2000) to cultural differentiation rooted in early socialisation practices within same-sex groups, groups in which – probably as a result of power dynamics – women would more often resort to linguistic resources that foster cooperativeness over competitiveness (e.g. Maltz & Borker 1983; Tannen 1990).³⁹

A hypothesis that may be formulated for the context of early modern Florence, tied to a view of gender differences as cultural differentiation, is that as more women were developing a writing network – forming, therefore, a community of practice of their own – they went on to develop their own conventions: a higher use of intersubjective formulae might be viewed as constituting an alternative style of interaction, based more on cooperation and back-channelling than men's style. This style might have simply reproduced politeness strategies that were more expected of women in society, or might have resulted from women having a heightened receptivity to new, overtly

38 Comparable results have been observed in the evolution of English spelling (Sairio 2009: 312). For further discussion of this issue in historical sociolinguistics, see Sairio & Palander-Collin (2012: 631).

39 For an overview of this debate, see Schilling (2011).

prestigious norms in historical settings too. These are hypotheses that I leave for future studies.

In conclusion, the results obtained in this paper strongly suggest that optional epistolary formulae were not simply a ‘safe option’ for less experienced writers in the Italian tradition. They point to the importance of considering the use and frequency of formulae as specific elements of a discourse tradition, which could change following developments in social practices. Epistolary formulae, in Renaissance Florence, functioned as social conventions related to specific group practices and textual traditions. Although further investigation on larger corpora is needed to confirm this, the comparison between men’s and women’s letters also suggests that even in the past, women might have been more sensitive to innovative, overtly prestigious features, once these features became available to them through sufficient exposure to (and involvement in) written culture. I propose that in this context, formulae might have also come to serve as tools of cultural differentiation. **N**

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