Crafting the Merchant's Wife's Tale: Historians and the Domestic Rhetoric in the Correspondence of Margherita Datini (1360-1425)

Joseph Byrne

Almost forty years ago, Iris Origo introduced the English-speaking public to Francesco di Marco Datini, the "Merchant of Prato."[1] This self-made man, who lived from 1335 until 1410, was orphaned in the Black Death, made a fortune as a young merchant in the papal city of Avignon, and returned to his hometown of Prato to live out the last thirty years of his life. Here he established the center of a network of commercial enterprises through which he bought and sold goods from England to the Black Sea. He also built a fine urban palazzo that still stands today. This houses the Datini Archive, the collection of some 500 account books and 150,000 sheets and scraps of paper on which were written the notes, commands and letters that flowed incessantly through the palazzo's doors. He himself kept everything, and insisted that his associates do likewise: the resulting cache is the most complete record of an Italian merchant's activities we have from the later middle ages or early Renaissance. Serendipitously, the whole lot was simply bundled and hidden away in the palazzo, to be discovered only by accident when the house was renovated in 1880.[2]

Without a doubt, the main reason why the cache remained untouched for so long is that the Datini palazzo was placed under the care of the city of Prato immediately after Francesco's death in 1410. In his will he had bequeathed virtually his entire fortune,

including the palazzo, to the charitable foundation that bore his name. Some of the businesses he had established were still in operation, and no one dared disturb any of the documents. Normally, of course, a man in Datini's position would have willed the bulk of his estate to his male children, having dowered off any daughters, and having ensured that his wife received back her own dowry, along with any additional largesse he chose to bestow. His wife, Margherita, had come to Datini without a dowry, however, and he died without their ever having given life to any children. His heirs were thus the poor of Prato, who, it is said, continue to benefit from his great gift; and he did choose to leave Margherita in comfort, to live out her remaining 15 years as a single widow.[3]

Their relationship had begun nearly 35 years earlier when they met as members of the Florentine merchant community in Avignon. Her father had been executed as a traitor to his home city just before her birth and the family lived as poverty-stricken exiles.[4] In letters to his foster-mother back in Tuscany, the forty-year old merchant described his bride-to-be (of about 16 years of age) in terms of her noble Gherardini lineage and, ironically, of the fecundity of her mother and older, married sisters. In the end Francesco accepted the girl even without the obligatory dowry.[5] Within a few years, in the midst of a retinue of servants and associates, the couple returned to Prato to build up businesses and a household. The **casa** became Margherita's realm, and the far-flung offices that Francesco established often kept him away from his home. Thus the two corresponded by letter, of which correspondence some 425 pieces remain, spanning the years from 1383 to his death in 1410. Although these are often little more than a few lines in length, taken together they provide us with a rare and often detailed portrait of a woman and husband on the eve of the Renaissance.

Despite this unique resource, scholars of women's history have not been kind either to Margherita or her letters. This article is intended to serve as a brief introduction to her correspondence and an overview of the anglophone scholarship that has drawn upon it. Her letters to Francesco were all transcribed by Valeria Rosati and published as a series in the *Archivio Storico Pratese* nearly twenty years ago, and in 1979 as a special edition of the archive's journal.[6] None the less, they appear in no bibliographies of late medieval or Renaissance women's studies of which I am aware, and have rarely been used even in recent scholarship that specifically discusses Margherita.

The first detailed treatment of Margherita was Enrico Bensa's now 60 year-old, and in any case very cursory, article in the Pratese archival journal.[7] She came to life only in 1957 in the study of Francesco Datini by the expatriate Englishwoman Iris Origo.[8] Origo had depended, however, on the research skills of two native Italian scholars, Aviano Marinai and Gino Corti, the latter of whom is still aiding needful young scholars in the Florentine state archive. While this ensured a high level of accuracy in the transcription of documents, it meant that the author was not in direct contact with her sources. It also made for a very sloppy scholarly apparatus in the original edition, cleaned up quite a bit in the 1986 American edition from Godine Press.[9] Since its first publication in 1957, *The Merchant of Prato* has had a profound effect on late fourteenth-century Italian social history in general, and overwhelmingly in Datini studies. Both American and European scholars have relied almost exclusively on both Origo's interpretation of Margherita and on the excerpts from the letters that Origo included in her work.

This was glaringly obvious in the chapter devoted to Margherita in Frances and Joseph Gies's *Women in the Middle Ages*, published in 1978.[10] Ten years later the couple put out a

book on medieval marriage and the family, in which the Datinis appear several times.[11] Oddly, the Gieses quote directly from an 1880 edition of letters from the archive, but when dealing with Margherita or her letters, they rely upon Origo. An exception to this rule is one of their sources, James Bruce Ross's "The Middle Class Child in Urban Italy."[12] Printed in 1976, before Rosati's transcriptions were available, it cites Datini archival material, including Margherita's letters, along with material drawn from Origo.

About the same time that Valeria Rosati was publishing Margherita's letters in the *Archivio Storico Pratese*, the American scholar of Renaissance Italy, Lauro Martines, published an article on the sources for Italian Renaissance women's history.[13] His comments on Margherita have their roots firmly in Origo: "many of the same sorts of jobs [i.e. aspects of household management] governed the life of Margherita ... [Francesco's] letters to her rain in tasks and commissions, and her replies patiently list her carrying out of them."[14] This picture of Margherita's obedient patience has about the same validity as the false stereotype of the patience of Job. While Origo carefully and rather accurately characterized the stresses and tensions within the household and between the spouses, Martines simply alludes to the fact that Francesco made certain requests and/or demands, and Margherita carried out the epistolographic task of informing her husband that they had been seen to. The rich texture of the source is utterly ignored.

Sixteen years after Martines, in 1990, the esteemed medieval historian David Herlihy wrote a chapter for a book on medieval women's history.[15] In fact, there was little difference between Herlihy's and Martines' surveys, and Herlihy dutifully mentioned Margherita. Despite the fact that he was an

acknowledged and enthusiastic expert on Tuscan social history, his remarks show no awareness of Rosati's publications of the correspondence, which should certainly have appeared in his bibliography or footnotes (though, of course, Origo does, as do other untranslated collections of Italian documents). He in fact mischaracterizes the entire collection by using a level of detail that appears definitive: "The Datini archives located at Prato, the largest of all the collections of private mercantile records, include from 1381 exchanges between Francesco di Marco Datini, then in Pisa, and his wife Margherita." To even the careful reader this may sound like simply a handful of letters from 1381, and no more, rather than the 450 letters that span the period 1383 (not 1381) to 1410. Though failing to cite the publication of the correspondence, which might lead the interested reader to the documents themselves, Herlihy goes on to comment, "These letters are an exceptional source in recapturing the spirit of a medieval Italian marriage."[16] And on to the next source for medieval women's history, having failed even to suggest that they might be useful in helping us to define the character and concerns of a real live medieval woman, and not just the marriage to which she was a partner.

This is extremely important in medieval women's studies because most of the original sources we have to rely upon are either theoretical treatises or prescriptive essays by churchmen. In a recent study of the women and children of the Datini household I noted the extent of the problem by means of an example: in her excellent monograph *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, from 1990, Shulamith Shahar includes a chapter devoted to wet nursing; most of her 118 footnotes are to primary sources, but only three of these were written by women, one of whom is the nun Hildegard of Bingen. The other two female authors are Margery Kempe, certainly an expert in her own right, and Christine di Pizan. The

issues and realities of medieval child nursing are largely left to male authorial voices.[17]

Margherita's letters are of enormous value to us not only for their female authorship, but also for their form and content, and the light these shed on interpersonal relationships at the dawn of the Renaissance. Recent scholarship, such as that contained in the 1993 collection *Dear Sister*, edited by Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus[18], makes a powerful argument for the position that the most authentic voice we have for the medieval woman is that expressed in her epistles. This is especially true if the medievalist Giles Constable is correct when he asserts "The letter was thus regarded as half of a conversation or dialog between the sender and the addressee, and it involved a quasi-presence and a quasi-speech between the two."[19]

Elizabeth Goldsmith, in her introduction to *Writing the Female Voice*, considers letter-writing to be "an extension of the private moment," rather than a mere message bound up in a rhetorical wrapper.[20] A student of medieval Englishwomen's epistolography, Diane Watt, sees the written word as an "extension of orality" that is shaped by the unaffectedness of everyday speech rather than more formal considerations. Her conclusions stem from study of the famous collection of the English Paston Family correspondence, somewhat later than that of the Datinis, but many of whose letters are comparable in form and function.[21]

Indeed, the Datini correspondence has a feel that is quite intimate and an immediacy that seems to put the lie to Giles Constable's conclusion that "in the middle ages it is doubtful that there were any private letters in the modern sense."[22] Privacy was clearly a matter of concern for Margherita early in her correspondence with her husband. In a letter of 20 January 1385/6[23] she warns her husband against speaking too freely

about his "melancholia" since "the mama, the little girl and those who work at the fondaco (office) and everyone else reads your letters." To underline her own desire for privacy Margherita closed her missive "burn this letter, I pray you, after you have read it."[24] Luckily for us he did not.

Three days later, on 23 January 1385/6 she wrote to Francesco in Pisa:

> you have said to me in two of your letters, and have written about it to Piero, that I should not have dictated these letters to anyone other than Piero. Begging your pardon, but he [the actual amanuensis] did not compose the letters for me, neither he nor anyone else; you give me little credit just because I don't believe that I ought to dictate my letters to him [Piero]. When I don't have Simone, I go to Niccolo di Ammanato [her brother-in-law] since he seems to me more suitable than Piero, or to Lorenzo, to these two I tell my secrets, and not to anyone else.[25]

'Piero' was probably Piero di Giunta, Francesco's aged foster father and business partner.[26] Francesco may well have thought that he could trust the old man to be true to both him and his relatively young wife. "Simone" may well have been Simone Bellandi, a young buck who had only recently learned how to write under Datini's tutelage in Pisa, and who soon found himself shipped off to Datini's new office in Spain.[27] One can easily see why the oft-absent merchant might not want his 24-year old wife relying upon him! Which of the several Lorenzos around Prato this one was is anyone's guess, though I like to think it was the young boy Lorenzo Sassoli, son of an apothecary, who would later, with Datini's help, finish medical school at Padua and serve

as the merchant's personal physician.[28] The whole issue would be resolved when Margherita learned to write her own letters.

The point at which this occurred is difficult to determine without examining the original letters to compare handwriting. Datini and his circle usually employed the verb "scrivere" when referring to the writing of letters, but Margherita uses forms of "dettare", which can mean either writing or dictating. Thus, the phrase "ho dettato questa lettera" could mean either that she wrote it with her own hand, or, perhaps more likely, that she dictated it. All of her letters are simply headed "Al nome di Dio," that is, 'in the name of God,' and dated. The closings, however, differ widely: in the last years the letters end simply "monna Margherita, in Prato," 'monna' being the formal title of a married woman, roughly equivalent to Mrs. The earliest letters are usually devoid of any signature. Eventually the phrase "per la vostra Margherita" emerges, and later the less formal "la tua Margherita." Variations include "per la sua donna Margherita," "per la sua monna Margherita," and simply "per la Margherita." The variety may suggest different hands filling in the perfunctory closing after having taken the dictation of the body, but closer analysis, at this point in its infancy, reveals that the tone of the letter is related to the nature of the closing: indeed, it seems that the more formal and serious the body, the more formal the closing. It appears that she is more likely to use the less intimate "la vostra," or remind her husband that she is his wife by referring to herself as "monna Margherita" when in the body she is chiding, nagging or scolding Francesco. Reliance on published copies rather than the originals may be frustrating, but can lead to the posing of interesting questions and the elicitation of even more interesting answers.

In any case, it is clear that the course of the letters reveal a developing rhetorical style that Margherita employs in her

dealings with Francesco. Diane Watt referred to the English Paston family's use of a "rhetoric of household correspondence,"[29] and this notion can certainly be applied to Margherita's letters. Francesco wrote letters incessantly, and in general his style is laconic and to the point.[30] As the years stretch out behind him, however, he becomes more reflective and even defensive. In addition to writing Margherita, he also corresponded with his best friend, the notary Lapo Mazzei, a fine stylist and one who, like Margherita, both had Francesco's best interests in mind and did not hesitate to suggest how these might be advanced.[31] Rather differently from her husband, Margherita wrote letters almost exclusively to one correspondent -- that we know of -- her husband. Her oft-expressed wishes that he greet friends or relatives who are near him lends credence to this notion. This perhaps implies that in her letter-writing form and function are wedded.

It is in the early letters that we find the real evolution of Margherita's rhetoric, a style that seems to flow quite naturally in later years. The couple had been married nearly a decade when the earliest surviving letters were written, so it may be expected that there would be a certain ease in communication. Nonetheless, her letter of 23 January 1385/6 shows how the form of communication can influence the message:

> Francesco, I know that I have written you very extensively and have shown too much "signoria" against you in telling you the truth ... yet I am still in favor of telling you the truth, insofar as I know it.

She went on to say, however, that "had I been with you I would have spoken with a smaller mouth."[32] There is a clear tension

between the intimacy of the form and the physical distance making it necessary. In his absence she felt freer to express in rather arrogant terms -- the force of the term "signoria" in this instance -- her disagreement with him. As most of us have no doubt experienced, we can more easily express difficult sentiments or thoughts on paper than when in the other's presence. I should further say that this adds to the value of letters as authentic women's voices, since they are not merely "extensions of orality", but also extenders of self-expression. This willingness of Margherita to confront her husband, and the potential for his embarrassment, may well have been another reason why Datini preferred to control who it was that recorded his wife's sentiments before she did so herself.

Much else did go unwritten, it should go without saying. "I will not respond to you, because I hope to be with you very soon and I will say in person what is on my mind." Variations on this theme abound. What was transmitted in private, "bocca a bocca," is long gone, but the letters record a full range of issues and matters of concern. As Martines correctly suggested, she was often called upon to see to household management, including the disciplining of wayward servants and slaves, the maintenance of good relations with important Pratesi, the distribution of charity, the care of sick friends and relations, but the correspondence is far richer. From very early on Margherita decided that it was her place to preach and moralize to her husband about everything from eating right and sleeping well--and alone[33]--to attending church and looking after his spiritual life. When doing so she often resorted to the preacher's formal and plural second person pronoun "voi" when remonstrating with Francesco: this lent weight and measure, and thus authority to her statements and exhortations. Margherita's remonstrations are often both reflexive and reactive, especially when it

came to her fifty-year-old husband's health and his promises to slow down and enjoy what he had accumulated. On 16 January 1385/6 she wrote to Pisa from Florence, where she was staying with her sister:

> I have been outside very little, because of the water and because I haven't felt well, and if it hadn't been for Mone Lapa, I'd have gone out even less. You tell me that I ought not always be a little girl, and that we will succeed at that which we do well: you speak the truth. And it's been quite a while since the years I left my childhood behind; but I should wish that you would not always be Francesco, as you have been ever since I have known you: who has never done anything without tormenting first your soul and then your body. You say, always preaching, that you will gain a beautiful (*bella*) life, and every month and every week it goes this way. You have been saying this for ten years now [the length of their marriage] and there seems to be less rest than ever. This is your fault. God has given you the knowledge and power and has done for you things that he hasn't for a thousand men....If you wait too long you will never seize this beautiful life; and if you wish to say 'but look at the misfortunes that befall me every day, one can never live in the world without these'--this is not the reason you have never gained a beautiful life for your soul and body; and it would certainly seem fitting to curse whoever is responsible for keeping you in Pisa. About this I'll say no more.

She clearly changed her mind:

> Vainly I remind you that you (voi) are nearly fifty years old, just like Monte, and you have always served the world: this would be the hour to begin to serve God. I don't want you to think I am just saying this to comfort myself. I do not consider to be a good person one who does not love his friend, the soul, as the body. And it would be as with those who throw money into the sea because [they] can't do what [they] want: so it is to do so with you. If I have said anything that has displeased you, I pray that you might pardon me: a great love makes me speak this way. You send to me to tell me that I should enjoy myself and have a good time. And that you stay up until morning and have lunch at mid-night and have dinner at Vespers: I will never enjoy myself and never rest easy if you don't take to some different life. (Letter of 16 January 1385/6)[34]

Twelve days later she again took up the theme:

> You believe ... if you take your hand away [from your affairs] they will fall apart. And you send to me to say that I should enjoy myself and have a good time: I [have] nothing in the world with which to give myself a good time. You can give me this good [time?], if you wanted to, but you don't want to, neither for yourself nor for anyone else. Every night when I go to bed I remember that you have to work until morning, and then that I'm supposed to have a good time ... but if I were lord, I would free myself from so many concerns.

Despite the strength of her arguments and forcefulness of her language, she closed her discourse in what may seem to us an embarrassingly conciliatory tone: "I am always content to do whatever you want."[35] This assurance of acquiescence or support may have served both to redress any dialectical imbalance caused by her forthright speech, and to remind her mate that the impact of his activities, however personal they may have seemed to him, reverberated throughout the family ("this touches me like nothing else touches me..."). Her duty was, after all, to love, honor and obey, though only after she had her say.

Back in Prato, Margherita sat at the center of a community of women, her "brighata." These included her sister and niece, the wives of business partners and associates, and servant women. Many of these were well known to Francesco, and she kept him apprised of events in their lives. Early on he had asked her for news and to pass on greetings, but quickly she automatically included tidbits she felt would be of interest to Francesco, and his requests trickled and then disappeared.

The Margherita that emerges from a close reading of the letters is a woman who grows into her position in the household and the community. I would say that her nagging grew out of a genuine concern for her husband's well-being and was quite natural in that time of such uncertainty in the affairs of everyone's lives. Insecurity on her part was heightened by his marital infidelities, which resulted in at least two illegitimate children, one of whom Margherita helped raise. I am certain that as my investigation of this marvelous source continues, as I move from rather superficial discoveries to deeper insights, uncovering patterns and codes that mark the sophistication of communication between the spouses, Margherita's voice will speak ever more loudly and clearly for all of her sisters whose voices have been muted by custom and time.

Notes

1. Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato* (London, 1957); the most recent edition is that of the Godine Press (Boston, 1986), and yet another is rumored.

2. On Datini, his career and his archive see, beside Origo: Cesare Guasti, *Lettere di un notaro ad un mercante del secolo XIV*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1880); Federigo Melis, *Aspetti della vita economica medievale* (Siena, 1962); Bruce Cole, "The Interior Decoration of the Palazzo Datini," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz* 13 (1967): 61-82; Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1980) pp. 132-158; Joseph Byrne, "Francesco Datini, 'Father of many': Piety, Charity and Patronage in Early Modern Tuscany," PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1989; Joseph Byrne, "The Merchant as Penitent: Francesco di Marco and the Bianchi Movement of 1399," *Viator* 20 (1989): 219-231.

3. On Datini's 1410 will and its terms see the transcription in Guasti, II pp.273-310; for a translation see Byrne, pp. 339-377; for an excellent discussion see Philip Gavitt, *Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence: The Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410-1536*, (Ann Arbor, 1990), Chapter One.

4. Margherita was the last daughter of Domenico Bandini, a minor nobleman who was executed for his role in a plot against the Florentine government in 1360 (Gene Brucker, *Florentine Politics and Society*, (Princeton, 1962), 185-6). His family's exile and resulting impecunity account for Margherita's lack of a dowry. Margherita's mother was of the noble Gherardini clan, which prompted her on one occasion to pull social rank: "I have a little of the Gherardini blood, though I do not overvalue it much; but I don't know what your blood is!" (Letter of

Margherita Datini to Francesco di Marco, Florence to Pisa, 23 January 1385/6).

5. Interestingly, our knowledge of this fact comes only from Datini's will, in which he was forced to note that he had no obligation to return any dowry to Margherita.

6. Valeria Rosati, "Le lettere di Margherita Datini a Francesco di Marco," *Archivio Storico Pratese* 50 (1974): 3-92; 52 (1:1976): 25-152, 2: 83-202; Rosati, *Le lettere di Margherita Datini al suo moglie Francesco* (Prato, 1979). Rosati transcribed the letters in the course of completing her *These* at the University of Florence. Francesco Datini's 182 surviving letters to his wife were also published by the Prato archive, under the editorship of Elena Cecchi, *Le lettere di Francesco Datini alla sua moglie Margherita (1385-1410)* (Prato, 1990).

7. Enrico Bensa, "Margherita Datini," *Archivio Storico Pratese* 6 (May 1926): 1-14.

8. See especially Part 2, Chapter One, "Husband and Wife."

9. This is true of the archival citations, though no mention is made of the scholar who performed this service. This is not true of the secondary sources, the journal citations among which remain without volume or page numbers.

10. Frances and Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages*, (New York, 1978); Chapter 7, "Margherita Datini: An Italian merchant's wife."

11. Frances and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1987); see esp. 287.

12. James Bruce Ross, "The Middle-class Child in Urban Italy, Fourteenth to Early Sixteenth Century," in *The History of Childhood*, ed. Lloyd de Mause (London, 1976).

13. Lauro Martines, "A Way of Looking at Women in the Italian

Renaissance," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1974): 15-28.

14. Martines, 17.

15. David Herlihy, "Women and the Sources of Medieval History: The towns of northern Italy," in *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*, ed. Joel Rosenthal (Athens, Ga., 1990), 133-154; reprinted in Herlihy's *Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical Essays, 1978-1991* (Providence, 1995), 13-32.

16. Herlihy, "Women and the Sources," (1995), 28.

17. Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1990), 53-76.

18. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia, 1993).

19. Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter Collections* (Turnhout, 1976), 13.

20. Elizabeth Goldsmith, ed., *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* (Boston, 1989), Introduction.

21. Diane Watt, "No Writing for Writing's Sake: The Language of Service and Household Rhetoric in the Letters of the Paston Women," in Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, 122-138.

22. Constable, 11.

23. Since the new year began on 25 March, the dates from 1 January to 24 March bore the previous year's annual date, hence, 1 February 1386 arrived two months after 1 December 1386 in the contemporary calendar. For clarity's sake, I use the annual designation 1386/7 (for example) for dates falling between 31 December 1386 and 25 March 1387.

24. Letter of 20 January 1385/6, Florence to Pisa; Rosati, 24-25. Letter of 23 January 1385/6, Florence to Pisa; Rosati pp. 25-6 (all references are to the 1979 edition of the letters; all translations are mine).

26. On Piero di Giunta see Origo (1986), 5, 51-2, 244.

27. On Bellandi see Origo (1986) 119.

28. On Sassoli, see Origo (1986), 339-340.

29. Watt, 133.

30. That this was not always the point is mentioned by Margherita in her letter of 20 January 1385/6, in which she claims that the office staff are complaining of the "Bibles" of three and four pages that Datini is sending them: the men have to close up the shop at mid-day just to prepare their replies.

31. On Lapo and his relationship to Francesco see: Armando Sapori, "Lapo Mazzei" *Archivio Storico Pratese* 26 (1950): 3-16; Guasti, *op. cit.*, for transcriptions of Lapo's 156 letters to Francesco; Trexler, *op. cit.*, on the "instrumental friendship" between the two.

32. Letter of 23 January 1385/6, Florence to Pisa; Rosati p. 26.

33. "I wish to know whether you are sleeping alone or not; if you are not sleeping alone, I need to know who is sleeping with you. If you tell me who, and you wish to know the reason why [I need to know], I'll tell you." (Letter of 30 January 1385/6, Florence to Pisa; Rosati, 31.)

34. Rosati, 21.

35. Rosati, 22.