

8. Young Women Negotiating Fashion in Early Modern Florence

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Abstract

This essay examines how young women negotiated their position in family life through participation in the larger world of Florentine clothing and fashion. Although young women were far from independent agents, they could take active roles in assembling a dowry and trousseau and later, as wives and new mothers, in arranging clothing for themselves and other family members. Two case studies of correspondence from the mid to late sixteenth century of Florentine women in the Spinelli and Ricasoli families suggest that daughters and young wives engaged with fashion and the consumption of apparel, before and after marriage, for their households.

Keywords: youth, gender, clothing, fashion, Florence

For sixteenth-century patrician Florentines, clothing was a potent marker of status and identity. Acquiring and wearing fine clothing and accessories in conjunction with marriage made young women unusually visible. An extended period beginning with plans to make a match for a girl, and often not ending until she was the mother of babies, marked a special time in a Florentine woman's life. Although, like most family members, young women were far from independent agents, they could have active roles in assembling a dowry and trousseau and later, as wives and new mothers, in arranging clothing for their households. Their success in these tasks reflected well on their families. Women's letters from two sixteenth-century families allow us to glimpse young women at this work. Patrician women learned how to navigate the clothing trade and pursue fashion as a special function, and pleasure, of female youth. Family correspondence shows that young

women were intricately engaged in negotiating both inside the family and in a larger circle of domestic suppliers.

For affluent Florentines, marriage was central to family strategies, and clothing women was a centrepiece of making good marriages. Every bride needed a dowry that consisted of a large sum of cash and/or land and an expensive trousseau that included clothing, jewellery, sheets, handkerchiefs, and shoes as well as assorted personal items such as books or devotional objects. The wedding dress was the focal point of the bride's wardrobe as 'their display-conscious families lavished money on multiple bridal outfits to enable their daughters to display the honor of their lineage on their backs'.¹ Handsome and fashionable goods enhanced the family honour, but there was always a tradeoff in high costs. Money often did not stretch. Furthermore, laying out too much could earn a family the reputation of being spendthrift and blemish its *fama*, or public renown. Sumptuary legislation sought to constrain patrician families' purchases of expensive clothing and jewellery. These laws tried to slow dowry expenditure as well as encourage humility and moral behaviour for women whose lavish clothes could, according to moralists and theologians, lead them and the men around them into temptation. Nevertheless, enforcing these laws proved difficult in Florence.²

In this essay, two case studies of young Florentine women from the mid to the late sixteenth century – Lisabetta Spinelli and Cassandra Ricasoli – show unmarried daughters and young wives in lively correspondence about clothing and accessories with a wide variety of male and female relatives, before and after marriage. As women prepared for marriage and became wives, youth functioned as a transitory stage between childhood and full adult maturity.³ Most Florentine brides were between the ages of fifteen and twenty, and so, in the early years of marriage, wives and mothers were still quite young.⁴ For patrician families, the combination of marriage as a means to preserve a legitimate patriline and as a tool for social, economic, and political advancement ensured that male interests dominated the process. Patrician families had to raise large dowries for their daughters

1 Frick, *Dressing*, 107. More broadly, on Florentine marriage strategies and dowries, see Molho, *Marriage Alliance*.

2 Killerby, *Sumptuary Law in Italy*, 133.

3 Taddei, 'Puerizia, Adolescenza', 15, 22 lists a variety of overlapping terms for both male and female children and youth; *infante*, *putto*, and *bambino* generally applied to babies, while *fanciullo*, *adolescente*, *giovane*, *garzone*, and *ragazzo* referred to either children or adolescents. Once women married, the terms signalled that status more than age.

4 Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, 202–31.

in order to attract powerful alliances. Therefore, scholarship has debated whether young girls had any voice at all in arranging their futures. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has described fifteenth-century wives as mere 'passing guests' in their husband's families.⁵ Yet family letters from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy suggest more active and flexible roles for women in kin relations. Both Lisabetta and Cassandra especially valued links with their mothers, sisters, and aunts. Recent studies reflect similar dynamics for women in early modern Rome.⁶

During their youth, women – single and married – recognized that clothing and accessories helped define their role, status, and reputation in Florentine society. The clothing chosen by and for young women carried multiple meanings. The cut, colour, and fabric signalled its economic value. Adherence to current fashions and accessories reflected the social standing of the woman and her family. Wearing the right clothes to a banquet, dinner party, wedding, or other public event placed the woman's body on display. Children mostly wore smaller versions of their parents' clothes, often with an apron overtop to protect the garments.⁷ These aprons constituted everyday wear in the household, but they could be refashioned for public display through embroidery and ornamentation. Lining the border of cloth for sleeves, shirts, dresses, or aprons with fringe, lace, and ribbons as well as gold and silver threads was common practice.⁸ These embellishments allowed for some choice and fashionable expression by preteen and teenage girls, who sometimes practised their own needlework skills by decorating clothing.

Because of its large public impact and commensurate costs, the preparation of wedding finery involved many family members, including women. Historian Carole Collier Frick highlights a gendered division of labour where:

[T]he men of the family busied themselves with the highly adorned externals of marriage display provided by the dowry money and the appraised trousseau, while its female members oversaw the craftswomen who made the more intimate, personal items of the unappraised trousseau, which would rarely have been seen outside the private realm, being nearly invisible under the bride's clothes.⁹

5 Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual*, 118.

6 Baernstein, 'Regional Inter-marriage', 201-19; Castiglione, *Accounting for Affection*, 3-6.

7 Frick, *Dressing*, 164.

8 Currie, 'Fashion Networks', 484.

9 Frick, *Dressing*, 137.

The Spinelli and Ricasoli letters, however, suggest an even broader role for female relatives who also negotiated for external apparel, jewellery, and accessories that were very much supposed to be seen. Women, including young ones, not only worked with second-hand goods dealers who recycled used clothing, but also contacted the family tailors to order brand new items.¹⁰ Wives and mothers had access to finances necessary for the consumption of household goods and textiles.¹¹ Family heads still held the purse strings, but correspondence suggests that men often relied on women, even young ones, to manage the selection and purchase of clothing and household goods. Networks of female kin facilitated introductions and offered training for girls to learn how to operate in the clothing market as they moved from trainee to expert. Women's engagement in acquiring clothing and other accessories took on a variety of forms: asking the head of the household for items or money; backing the requests of other women, often with older women advocating for garments and accessories for their younger female kin; acquiring cloth and materials; negotiating with tailors and craftswomen; and, finally, wearing of clothes in public view.

In Renaissance Florence clothing and textile goods for the household were mostly custom made by a variety of workers, both male and female.¹² For affluent families, routine goods such as undergarments and bedding might be made at home by domestic servants, spinners (*filatrici*), or other needleworkers employed from time to time.¹³ For finer goods, including clothing made of expensive materials, production was commissioned in stages from more specialized hands, such as tailors or nuns. Wealthy households usually employed one or more tailors regularly over a period of years. By the mid-sixteenth century clients also engaged tailors to choose cloth and collect materials for the garments they ordered.¹⁴ Nuns usually served as suppliers of basic linens for elite households, but they also produced luxury goods featuring embroidery with metallic thread and silk or other ornamentation.¹⁵ Fancy trimmings might be made by professionals, nuns, or by daughters of the family trained to display their skills for the marriage market. Since good cloth was relatively expensive and made to last, there was also a major secondary market in recycling and refurbishing items of

10 Currie, 'Diversity and Design', 156; Matchette, 'Credit and Credibility', 225.

11 Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance*, 225.

12 Frick, *Dressing*, 32–56.

13 Frick, *Dressing*, 40–42.

14 Currie, 'Diversity and Design', 156–57.

15 Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 116–19; Ray, 'Letters and Lace', 53.

apparel or repurposing their materials.¹⁶ Both women and men worked as used-goods dealers who operated either officially through the guilds or unofficially at the door and in the streets.¹⁷ Though guilds tried to restrict the flourishing unofficial trade,¹⁸ these female peddlers and dealers were integral to the consuming practices of elite women.¹⁹

Personal letters show women's varied engagement with fashion and the consumption of apparel. By the sixteenth century, most patrician women could read and write.²⁰ Letters were typical forms of expression for Italian patrician women, and family archives are filled with their correspondence.²¹ In the Spinelli family, Lisabetta could and sometimes did write her own, although only one letter survives, addressed to her father, Benedetto, in the year after her marriage in 1540. Prior to her marriage, Lisabetta's voice comes to us through the letters of her mother. Mattea Mellini Spinelli's 22 autograph letters to her husband Benedetto in the 1530s conveyed messages from their daughter about clothing, and particularly jewellery for her trousseau. For Cassandra Ricasoli, 27 letters, written in her own hand, range from her teenage years in the 1580s to her mid-twenties by the 1590s. Before marriage, these letters were addressed to several family members: her younger half-sister, Lucretia; her father, Braccio Ricasoli; and her widowed aunt, Maddalena. After marriage, most of Cassandra's letters addressed her aunt.

As in other affluent families, the Spinelli women paid close attention to clothing in their letters. The year after her first husband, Giuliano Guidetti, died in 1521, Mattea Mellini married the silk merchant and banker Benedetto Spinelli. By 1534 she was a mature wife, approximately 28 or 29 years old. Benedetto oversaw the family accounts, but Mattea had areas of initiative in managing the family's interests. In the 1530s her letters regularly discussed the selection and purchase of clothing for her three children: Lisabetta, Tommaso, and Giovanni Battista. In particular, she and other female kin functioned as powerful allies in acquiring apparel and accessories toward the trousseau of her daughter.

Mattea's letters show the young Lisabetta's own participation in the project of her marriage. In 1534, Mattea wrote frequently to Benedetto, who was absent from Florence while serving the new Medici regime as

16 Currie, 'Diversity and Design', 157.

17 Matchette, 'Women, Objects, and Exchange', 246–47.

18 Frick, *Dressing*, 38.

19 Matchette, 'Women, Objects, and Exchange', 247.

20 D'Amelia, 'Lo scambio epistolare', 80.

21 Baernstein, 'In My Own Hand', 140.

Podestà in the town of San Gimignano. No fewer than 22 letters concerned items for the trousseau of their twelve-year old daughter, Lisabetta. In this correspondence, Mattea strikingly chose to represent requests as coming from the young girl, although the older women doubtless supported or even initiated this campaign. Lisabetta's first recorded attention to clothes and accessories appears in requests to her father, forwarded by Mattea, for several lengths (*braccia*) of cloth, a hair net, and, most notably, a chain (*catena*).²² This last item, probably of gold, could have been used as a necklace or as decoration on the bodice of a dress. The wish for a chain figured in every letter. Highlighting the emotional bond between father and daughter, Mattea suggested several times that Benedetto had forgotten his daughter by disregarding her requests: 'Lisabetta reminds you [about] the chain and she says that she is starting to lose her faith in you'.²³ A subsequent missive more openly berated him:

Lisabetta sends her greetings to you. I am asking that you remember that promise you made to her [and] that you respond to her because she thinks you have forgotten her since you are so far from her eyes she thinks you are also [far] from her heart.²⁴

Gifts of clothing and accessories signalled affection in Florentine families, where these items held great economic and social value.²⁵ Mattea encouraged Benedetto to demonstrate his affection for his daughter through this gift of a chain.

The push to include the chain seems to have been a strategy of the Spinelli women to add lustre and value to Lisabetta's trousseau in Florence's competitive marriage market. Mattea notes:

It appears to Lisabetta that you have forgotten her chain and she doubts her faith [in you]. She begs you to start a collection of household goods

22 Benedetto Spinelli recorded the birth and baptism of Lisabetta, in December 1522; she would have been twelve years old in 1534. Archivio di Stato di Firenze (hereafter, ASF), Pezzo 71, Debitori e Creditori e Ricordi di Benedetto di Guasparre Spinelli della 1519 al 1542, 86v–87r.

23 Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (hereafter, BRML), Spinelli Family Papers I (hereafter, SFP I), Box # 129, Folder # 2685. 'La Lisabetta vi richorda la chatena e dice che voi cominciate a manchare di fede'.

24 BRML, SFP I, Box # 129, Folder # 2685. 'La Lisabetta si rachomanda a Vostro Signore preghando quella si degni di richordassi di lei della promessa e che voi gli rispondiate che pensa voi l'abiate dimentichato di lungi da occhi pensa anche da cuore'.

25 O'Malley, 'Pair of Little Gilded Shoes', 76.

[*masseritia*] for her trousseau. She suffers very much as she needs a new pair of slippers. She says that in order to complete this collection she will need the chain.²⁶

Another letter reiterated: 'Lisabetta would like for you to make this collection of household goods and she reminds you about the chain for her. Then she is done and she will not ask you for anything else'.²⁷ By invoking his daughter's name, Mattea may have thought Benedetto would be inclined to respond favourably. A female relative on her father's side, cousin Gostanza Soderini, also reminded Benedetto: 'Lisabetta asks that you remember her collection of household goods for which she wants the chain'.²⁸ Lisabetta's own motives are difficult to discern as her mother wrote in her name and there are no extant letters from her at this age. Possibly Lisabetta or her mother knew other young girls in their social circle who were sporting gold chains as part of a current Florentine fashion. According to Susan Stuard, fashion 'flourished where inspiration took hold: glimpsing some feature of dress that could be echoed, imitated, mocked, parodied, or surpassed by others fed the trend'.²⁹

Ultimately, Lisabetta and her mother Mattea did not succeed in their pursuit of this fashionable and flashy addition to the trousseau. A dowry inventory in 1539 listed no chain. The record included basic items such as 70 lengths of linen for thin shirts, handkerchiefs, socks, two pairs of shoes and two pairs of slippers, several pairs of sleeves, three new dresses, and assorted other goods. There were also some more fashionable items: one grey damask dress, two hats made of crimson silk, two hats made of crimson leather, one pair of *collettini* (a form of collar with a thin silk covering on either side of the dress to veil a low neckline)³⁰ lined with silver, and two silver rings.³¹ Though certainly not as extravagant as some elite Florentine girls' dowries, Lisabetta's did include some items reflecting the fashionable

26 BRML, SFP I, Box # 129, Folder # 2686. 'La Lisabetta gli pare voi metterete la chatena nel dimentichato dubita della fede preghavi faciate masseritia che patisce di un paio di pianelle per fare masseritia e desiderà questa chatena'.

27 BRML, SFP I, Box # 129, Folder # 2684. 'La Lisabetta vorrebbe che voi facessi masseritia che vi ricorda una chatena per lei a poi fa fine e non vi chiederà poi altro'.

28 In the 1530s when Gostanza Soderini's male relatives were banished for opposition to the Medici regime, Gostanza visited Benedetto Spinelli, her cousin once removed, and his wife Mattea. BRML, SFP I, Box # 129, Folder # 2672. 'La Lisabetta vi priegha che voi facciate masseritia che vuole quella chatena'.

29 Stuard, *Gilding the Market*, 10.

30 Landini and Niccoli, *Moda a Firenze*, 250.

31 BRML, SFP I, Box # 14a, Folder # 276. Scritta della donora di Lisabetta Spinelli.

trends of her day. Benedetto may have deemed the chain unnecessarily expensive, inappropriate, or both. With an eye on the family finances, his resistance likely reflected a concern with the price of the item and the cost of the whole marriage offer.³² The timing of dowry payments also mattered, as it was not unusual for dowries to be paid out over time. The father may have preferred to pay in instalments. His disregard of the request for the chain could also have demonstrated a concern about sumptuary laws. In 1472, Florentine sumptuary rules clarified new prohibitions against the wearing of buttons or chains as ornamentation on the neckline of gowns or as jewellery.³³ Thus, the trousseau list suggests perhaps some level of compromise between Benedetto and the women of the family.

As a wife, Lisabetta may have had somewhat more power to speak for herself. In 1540, the newly married seventeen-year-old wrote to her father in Florence from her husband's home in Ancona.³⁴ As a young bride in a new city, Lisabetta turned to clothing and fashion as a way to express her identity. In her letter, she called on her father to 'fulfil his promise' to supply her with high-quality Florentine cloth:

I would like you to send two lengths of grey silk as well as one white and one red. Also, two pairs of white shoes and two pieces of uncut cloth for the soles per pair as well as a little more of the grey silk.³⁵

At the end she wrote, '[p]lease tell me how much you spend and I will send a response'.³⁶ Lisabetta invoked familial obligation to access her father's connections to the cloth trade in order to secure good-quality materials from Florence. With her detailed order, she designated the cut and colour of the cloth for her clothing and shoes. The term she used for the grey silk (*feltro*) marked a turn from the more negative terms used for darker cloth in the fifteenth century to the 'new evocative and fashionable names' given in the

32 After experiencing financial difficulties in the mid-sixteenth century, Benedetto dismantled the Spinelli bank, but recovered and served in posts for the Medici government. Jacks and Caferro, *The Spinelli of Florence*, 3.

33 Frick, *Dressing*, 190.

34 Benedetto Spinelli recorded Lisabetta's marriage to Luca di Piero Filippo Salucci in 1539, when she would have been seventeen years old. ASF, Pezzo 71, Debitori e Creditori e Ricordi di Benedetto di Gasparre Spinelli della 1519 al 1542, 87v–87r.

35 BRML, SFP I, Box # 129, Folder # 2683. '[V]orrei mi mandassi 2 braccia di feltro 1 bianco e 1 rosso e così 2 paia di scarpette bianche per me a 2 suola intagliate 1 paio 1 poco minore de l'altro e vi ringratio per mille volte'.

36 BRML, SFP I, Box # 129, Folder # 2683.

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³⁷ With the promise to reimburse her father, she suggested her access to financial resources in her new household.

Several decades later, the letters of Cassandra Ricasoli show how, both before and after marriage, young women acquired clothing and household goods not only for themselves but also for others. Cassandra's father, Braccio Ricasoli, came from a distinguished noble family with estates in Chianti. In 1588–1589, when Cassandra was about seventeen years old, he left for a posting as the Commissario of Pistoia, a town about 26 miles from Florence, where he represented the interests of the Medici Grand Duke.³⁸ Much of his family accompanied him, including Cassandra's stepmother, Cassandra Rucellai Ricasoli, her widowed aunt, Maddalena Ricasoli, and several younger half-siblings: Lucretia, Cammilla, Cosimo, Bindaccio, and Virginia. Aunt Maddalena had already served Cassandra as a substitute mother figure to whom she often turned for advice and support.³⁹ This time, however, the teenaged Cassandra stayed behind in Florence.

Cassandra Ricasoli assisted her family, among other things, in choosing, acquiring, and paying for clothing for her father and half-siblings while they were away. At seventeen, Cassandra was on the verge of marriage and already trained in domestic duties as a future wife and mother. The adults in her life – father, stepmother, and aunt – trusted her to act as an intermediary in their absence. High-quality cloth from Florentine tailors would be especially important in this prominent setting, as the Ricasoli family represented Medici interests in Pistoia.⁴⁰ In a letter to her father, Braccio, in December 1588 Cassandra informed him: 'I will send the books you asked about this week with the three [lengths] of taffeta that Messer Ruberto sent for you here'.⁴¹ Her father's money paid for the purchase, but the daughter managed the monetary exchange and delivery of the cloth from Florence to Pistoia. Cassandra also contributed to the making of

37 Frick, *Dressing*, 177.

38 Cassandra's exact birth date was not recorded. Letters from the girl's grandmother, Cassandra Gualterotti, to her daughter Costanza, Braccio's first wife, mention little 'Cassandrina' in 1571 (although she may have been born slightly earlier). Thus, she would be seventeen years old in 1588.

39 When her aunt Maddalena moved back into the family house after her husband's death in 1578, Cassandra was seven years old. She was nine years old when her mother, Costanza, died in 1580.

40 New legislation under Cosimo I, in 1562 and 1568, permitted those in administrative positions and their families to dress more extravagantly. Currie, 'Diversity and Design', 155.

41 ASF, Ricasoli Parte Antica (hereafter, RPA), Filza 41, Fascio III, Fascetto V, lettere n. 18. 'La madre di Mona Cassandra che mandato a vedere come stavi costa su e tornata di villa martedì e stave bene e libri avete mandato ach(i)edere ve lo manderò di questa settimana con tre di taffeta ch' messer Ruberto mandato'.

garments for her father. In January 1588 she explained: 'I finished the fringe. It is very difficult now to send it to you and I do not know if I will be able to or if the tailor who comes tomorrow will be the bearer of this [cloth]'.⁴² Thus, Cassandra had direct contact with the tailor as she coordinated the delivery to Pistoia. On the same day, she confirmed in a letter to her aunt Maddalena: 'I have finished the fringe. I do not know if I will send it myself or by the tailor'.⁴³ Her own needlework for the garment likely served as a gift for her father and a display of her own talents. The design process was collaborative as her father chose the material, the tailor cut the cloth, and Cassandra added the embellishments to complete the outfit.⁴⁴

Girls learned very young that their clothing could carry social and political significance. Cassandra's clothing choices may have influenced her own visibility and marriage prospects. She also arranged apparel for her much younger half-sisters – Lucretia (age six) and Cammilla (age four) – while they were in Pistoia.⁴⁵ A letter from the teenaged Cassandra to the child Lucretia described one such gift: 'I made two aprons, which I will send to you. I am afraid that they are too short because I have been told that you are taller'.⁴⁶ Her letter also thanked Lucretia for the gift of decorated aprons to wear for the wedding of Grand Duke Ferdinand de' Medici to Christine of Lorraine in 1589: 'I will send them [the aprons that Cassandra made] to you and a box in exchange for those which you sent me for the wedding of the Grand Duke'.⁴⁷ Another letter, dated June 1588, offered to find Florentine cloth for a new dress for the other little girl, Cammilla. Cassandra found a tailor for the work in Florence, but suggested to Lucretia that 'if Cammilla would like her cloth made up, then she should write a letter to the tailor

42 ASF, RPA, Filza 41, Fascio III, Fascetto V, lettere n. 20. 'Io o finite le frange e ora o mille difficoltà a mandale non so le poterà il sarto ch' ve ne costasu domatino che sarà la portatore di questa'.

43 ASF, RPA, Filza 41, Fascio III, Fascetto V, lettere n. 19. 'Io o finite le frange non so se me le manderò per sarto'.

44 Currie notes the collaborative nature of the clothing market, but rarely documents the involvement specifically of a young daughter. Currie, 'Fashion Networks', 493.

45 Braccio married his second wife, Cassandra Rucellai Ricasoli, in 1581. Their first child, Lucretia, was born in either late 1582 or early 1583, which would have made her five or six years old in 1588. Lucretia married Giovanni di Giannozzo Manetti in 1598, when she was fifteen or sixteen years old. Cammilla was approximately two years younger than Lucretia, which would make her about four years old in 1588. She died several months later, in September 1588. Passerini, *Genealogia e storia della famiglia Ricasoli*, 412.

46 ASF, RPA, Filza 49, Fascio I, Fascetto VI, lettere n. 13. 'Ho fato dua grenbiuli tegli ma(n)derò non se setistano bene o paura che non ti se corti che me deto che tu sei grande'.

47 ASF, RPA, Filza 49, Fascio I, Fascetto VI, lettere n. 13. 'Mi pare mille ch' io non o veduto io ti ma(n)derò un paio e una scatola per cambio di quelle che tue mi ma(n)dasti [...] del noze de grande duca'.

because I am not able to do this' without the accurate measurements.⁴⁸ Here, given Cammilla's very young age, Cassandra almost certainly meant that her stepmother should contact the tailor concerning the dress. Notably, however, both girls, Lucretia and Cammilla, were addressed by their older sister as already being participants in a female culture of correspondence about clothing.

After Cassandra married, her letters to her aunt Maddalena reflect a sustained interest in fashion, as she ordered and purchased clothes for her new household. When her father, Braccio, died in Pistoia in 1589, Cassandra's marriage prospects faltered, due most likely to complications concerning her dowry. Three years later, however, in 1591 she married the Florentine Piero Tornabuoni.⁴⁹ At 20 years old, Cassandra was still young, if slightly older than the more usual teenaged brides. Her letters display the experience she gained in her youth. She bought many of the daily garments necessary for her children, such as a 'cap and handkerchiefs' for her baby, Lionardo.⁵⁰ She continued to embellish garments to match trends in style. In a letter dated October 1597 she discussed the purchase of *sengaletti* (laces for the bodice of gowns) as well as ribbons and silver lining for her children's clothes. She reported: 'I made the ribbons and silver for the children as the tailor has not provided these'.⁵¹ Her interest in fashion appeared, too, in the purchase of clothes for her husband. She wrote to her aunt: '[i]t would be better if they [the pieces of cloth] are blue and white as I know that you remember it is for Messer Piero. I will buy it and you do not have to spend [the money]'.⁵² She later reflected, 'I think it will be better if it is made of taffeta'.⁵³

Cassandra also continued to supply her aunt and young half-sisters, now living at the Ricasoli villa of Cacchiano in the Tuscan countryside, with superior Florentine cloth and tailoring. In 1595 she explained to her aunt

48 ASF, RPA, Filza 49, Fascio I, Fascetto VI, lettere n. 14. 'Racomandomi a Bindaccio e Cosimo e di Camilla ch' se la v(u)ole ch' le sua tela si fac(ci)a scriva vostra lettera al tesitore che io non posso conduci nessuno'.

49 Her young half-brother, Cosimo Ricasoli, and older uncle, Lorenzo Ricasoli, brokered the match with Piero Tornabuoni. Her dowry of 920 florins from her father's will was paid out in instalments in 1591–1592. ASF, RPA, Filza 40, Fascio II, Fascetto VI, lettere n. 1.

50 ASF, RPA, Filza 40, Fascio II, Fascetto VI, n. 1. '[L]a cuffia e fazoletto'.

51 ASF, RPA, Filza 41, Fascio I, Fascetto IV, lettere n. 61. '[O] fato del stringe e argenti per fanciulle se sarto non asetati'.

52 ASF, RPA, Filza 40, Fascio II, Fascetto IV, lettere n. 34. '[S]i fare meglio che sia possibile se si potrà fare che io o che sono azuri e bianchi so che voi aveva memoria di Messer Piero comperò e non avete a spendere e si potrà e più presto'.

53 ASF, RPA, Filza 40, Fascio II, Fascetto IV, lettere n. 34. '[I]o credo che sarebbe meglio farà di taffeta'.

Maddalena how 'the sleeves have been made according to your style and the cloth is for the young girls'.⁵⁴ She praised the tailor's abilities and noted that the cloth came from Ottavio Carducci and 'cost 2 *lire* and 30 *soldi* per length'.⁵⁵ The purchase from the Carducci shops, owned by Cassandra's maternal aunt and uncle, reflected a common practice among elite families who strengthened social ties through business associations.⁵⁶ When in 1594 her half-sister Virginia, then probably six or seven years old, needed new clothes, Cassandra dealt directly with the tailor.⁵⁷ She explained to Maddalena:

I will see the tailor and hear what he says, if meanwhile you decide anything about the dress. As for the *zimarra* [a long overgown]⁵⁸ for Virginia: about Laura, I will ask the tailor what is best. I have been told that Madonna Cassandra [her stepmother] has arranged that one be made by Laura the spinner.⁵⁹

In loose, convoluted grammar, the youthful Cassandra contributed to a multi-sided conversation involving her aunt and her stepmother about clothing, and about the young Virginia's in particular. She planned to consult with the tailor about the order, to seek his advice on whether to use Laura for the work, and presumably to relay that advice at least to Maddalena.

Cassandra regularly did business with many of the same tailors, spinners, and used-goods dealers as did her aunt Maddalena.⁶⁰ For example, their correspondence discusses a second-hand dealer named Grezia. In a letter Cassandra reported, 'yesterday Grezia bought me a *staia* [weight] of cloth for bed sheets. I wanted to have the cloth for them from Florence rather

54 ASF, RPA, Filza 41, Fascio III, Fascetto V, lettere n. 41. '[O] care che le maniche sieno state a vostro modo e panni per fanciulle'.

55 ASF, RPA, Filza 41, Fascio III, Fascetto V, lettere n. 41. '[N]on sono ancora tanti che il sarto non a potuto si farono quegli d'Ottavio Carducci [...] e costa di 2 lire e trenta soldi il braccia'. *Lire* and *soldi* were units of currency.

56 Currie, 'Fashion Networks', 487.

57 Virginia married Andrea di Galeotto Compagni in 1609. She was born before 1589, likely in 1587 or 1588, and so was approximately five to seven years old at the time of the letter in 1594.

58 Frick, *Dressing*, 319. The *zimarra* became a common fashion at the Medici court in the mid- to late sixteenth century: Cox-Rearick, 'Power-Dressing', 57–58.

59 ASF, RPA, Filza 41, Fascio III, Fascetto V, lettere n. 40: '[I]o vedrò di veduto il sarto e quello che dice, in tanto se vi risolvete a nulla [...] per conto della vesta, in quanto al zimarra per la Virginia, e per Laura ne dimanderò il sarto questo che sarà meglio; me stato detto che Madonna Cassandra a ordito in fare una per la Laura di filatrice'.

60 Currie, 'Diversity and Design', 156.

than those brought from outside [the city]'.⁶¹ Cassandra also tapped into Maddalena's longstanding connections with the nuns at Santa Appolonia.⁶² In 1595, Suora Agnesa Davanzati wrote to Maddalena about a discrepancy in the price set for Cassandra's order of cloth:

I have had some cloth for bed sheets [ordered] by Cassandra, your niece, and for these she says she wants them made for 4 *lire* and 16 *soldi*. To us this appears to be too much as you have paid 4 *lire* and 12 *soldi* for your cloth. [...] I care about you and want to do this as a service for you. I also have two beautiful pieces of cloth for shirts at the price that you said.⁶³

Cassandra gratefully noted the discounted price of 4 *lire* and 12 *soldi* in her own letter to Maddalena.⁶⁴ Ten years after her marriage, Cassandra's letters in 1603 reflect how she ever more confidently bargained for better prices and shopped around for good deals on cloth. Then, a letter to her aunt complained about the practices of 'these merchants who charge 7 *lire* for a *staia* of wool'.⁶⁵ Her role as a consumer expanded along with her maturity as a wife and mother. However, her activities did not differ in substance from those she learned in her youth.

The letters of Lisabetta Spinelli and Cassandra Ricasoli demonstrate how the youthful appetite to look good and dress fashionably offered patrician girls a place to negotiate in family life. As young women in their late teens, both before and after marriage, they selected, ordered, and purchased clothing, accessories, and household goods. These consuming activities taught girls about finances and brought them outside the domestic interior and into direct contact with local producers and purveyors, both male tailors and female spinners and sellers of used goods. Female kinship networks aided young girls. Lisabetta's mother, Mattea, advocated for her daughter

61 ASF, RPA, Filza 41, Fascio III, Fascetto V, lettere n. 45. '[I]eri per la Grezia me stato che staio de panno de lenzuola io o voglia di meteri in Firenze una tela di quelle che sono di f(u)ora'.

62 Maddalena's sister, Maria Ricasoli, entered the convent at Santa Appolonia. Maddalena's account book reflects her numerous business dealings with the nuns. ASF, RPA, Libri di amministrazione, Pezzo 270, Giornale e Ricordi di Maddalena Ricasoli, 1553–1564.

63 ASF, RPA, Filza 41, Fascio I, Fascetto IV, lettere n. 41. '[Q]uesta avrà saraper dirvi come o avuto una tela da lenzuola dalla Cassandra vostra nipote et cosi dice ne volete quattro lire e sedici soldi della tela che a noi pare troppo cara e sulla date a quattro lire e dodici soldi la tela [...] avevo charo delle vostre e fare questo servitio a voi e 2 tele bellissime da chamicie questo prezo che dite voi'.

64 ASF, RPA, Filza 41, Fascio III, Fascetto V, lettere n. 45.

65 ASF, RPA, Filza 41, Fascio III, Fascetto V, lettere n. 56. '[Q]uesti mercanti che lana 7 lire da staio'.

and, in doing so, she tellingly invoked Lisabetta's happiness to persuade her husband. Cassandra's widowed aunt, Maddalena, provided support and contacts for her niece, and the niece in turn helped her aunt. Cassandra also took on a similar role for her younger half-sisters.

However, there were limits and no assurance of success. Though older female relatives sought to aid the young women, neither mother Mattea nor aunt Maddalena acted autonomously without consultation from the male head of the household. An adamant patriarch or changing family circumstances – a downturn in business, the death of a parent – constrained women's and girls' negotiating power. Nevertheless, attention to youth as a female life stage that spanned the marriage process complicates the standard picture of Italian households. Scholarly studies have predominantly focused on what young women could *not* do, either from family strategies that privileged male bloodlines and patriarchal power or, with reference to clothing, from the restrictions of sumptuary legislation. Though decisions were never independent of family interests, the letters of Lisabetta Spinelli and Cassandra Ricasoli show instead what clothes and accessories girls wanted, bought, or tried to buy for themselves and others. Both these young women negotiated their positions in family life by participating in the larger Florentine world that shaped identities through clothing and fashion.

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