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LEARNING TO WRITE LETTERS IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE: EPISTOLARY FORMULAE IN THE CORRESPONDENCE OF LUCREZIA ALBIZZI RICASOLI*

1 INTRODUCTION

With historical letters having become the genre of choice in historical sociolinguistic investigations, epistolary formulae – 'formulaic strings found repeatedly in letters, and […] largely restricted to the language of letters', to use Rutten and van der Wal's definition (2014: 75) – have attracted more and more attention cross-linguistically. Not only do they complicate the view of letters as the 'next best thing to speech' (Nevalainen/ Raumolin-Brunberg 2012: 32). They also appear to have been used differently, and perhaps to different purposes, by individuals from different walks of life.

In fact, studies on the history of Germanic languages (Austin 2004; Elspaß 2005; Rutten/van der Wal 2012, 2014) and French (Große *et al.* 2016) have found that epistolary formulae – and in particular, those that were optional – were more used by individuals of low-status compared to high-status, and by women compared to men. Since literacy and schooling, historically, were socially stratified and gender-dependent, these studies have hypothesised that optional epistolary formulae served the primary function of reducing the writing effort: they would have represented a conventionalised 'safe option' (Rutten/van der Wal 2014: 129) that helped less experienced writers to compose a text and verbalise experiences. In this view, more experienced writers (i.e. high-status writers, male writers), who did not have the same difficulties in formulation, would use less formulae and resort to a higher degree of compositional creativity.

Other studies, however, have underlined the role that epistolary formulae could play in signalling in-group membership (e.g. Laitinen/Nordlund 2012; but see also Rutten/ van der Wal 2014: 185–187), even for writers who had a high level of writing experience (Conde-Silvestre 2016; Evans 2020: 75). In these works, formulae are viewed primarily as social conventions related to specific group practices. This interplay of

writing experience and community practices in the use of formulae is still unclear (Rutten/van der Wal 2012: 195). In this paper, I intend to investigate it in the context of sixteenth-century Florence, by presenting a case study focused on a corpus of letters written by a woman who might well have acquired literacy in adulthood, and whose writing experience was considerably low. Aiming to engage with the cross-linguistic debates that have arisen over the use and social functions of formulae in historical sociolinguistics, this work will also contribute to including women's language in Italian linguistic historiography.

After discussing why sixteenth-century Florence is interesting for investigating the use of epistolary formulae as well as women's language (Section 2), I will present the data and sketch a biographical and letter-writing profile of the letter writer in question (Section 3). The research questions are explicitly formulated in Section 4 and methodological issues are dealt with in Section 5, while the analysis, focusing on the superscription and the epistolary frame, is presented in Section 6. The paper closes with a discussion of the role of formulae for little experienced writers in sixteenth-century Florence and proposes directions for further research (Section 7).

2 LETTER WRITING, EPISTOLARY FORMULAE, AND WOMEN'S LITERACY IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE

The context chosen, that of sixteenth-century Florence, offers fertile ground to investigate the social functions of epistolary formulae: in this respect, Renaissance Italy stands out because here vernacular letter-writing was more intensely codified than in other traditions. This is testified by the numerous, widely circulating manuals for vernacular letter-writing – such as Bartolomeo Miniatore's *Formulario*, first published in 1485 and reprinted more than forty times in the sixteenth century – which offered model letters to be imitated and, frequently, lists of formulae to be used in specific situations. 'Real' vernacular epistolaries by famous people also enjoyed immense popularity from the late 1530s, following Pietro Aretino's initiative to print his own letters (1538), while anthologies of letters – not simply conceived as entertainment reading, but also intended as models of good style – were readily compiled by printers and polygraphs from the beginning of the 1540s.[1] What the success of this body of literature proves is that, in sixteenth-century Italy, a desire was felt for norms that would regulate letter-writing practices. Hence, this intensely normative tradition is an interesting one to investigate if we want to understand the relationship between the respective roles of writing experience and social conventions in writers' use of formulae.

Contrary to studies on other linguistic traditions, work carried out in the Italian context has not so far put forward a view of epistolary formulae as a 'safe option' for less skilled writers. If Telve's observation that semi-literate writers were, at times, surprisingly familiar with epistolary conventions (Telve 2019: 246) may be interpreted in this light, scholars in this tradition have usually tended to emphasise the role of formulae as social conventions, related to specific group practices (e.g. Barucci 2009: 10;

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1   For a seminal discussion of this production, see Quondam (1981).

d'Amelia 1999: 86–87). In a study on the use of a set of discourse-ending formulae in Michelangelo Buonarroti's own letters (Serra 2023), I have proposed that for this writer optional epistolary formulae functioned primarily as in-group conventions, rather than formulation aids, as their use was much more frequent in letters to family members, and did not decrease as the artist's writing experience grew. But does the same hold true if we look at the language of writers who were less experienced than Michelangelo? In this article, I ask whether, in a context where letter writing was becoming increasingly conventionalised, epistolary formulae functioned primarily as aids for formulation for writers with low levels of writing experience.

When it comes to writers of this kind, women are particularly interesting because sixteenth-century Florence was a decisive time in the progressive path towards female literacy. Until the late Middle Ages, laywomen (with a few notable exceptions) had been largely excluded from the writing world (Miglio 2008: 62) but, in the sixteenth century, female literacy increased as a result of political and cultural changes. Locally, these changes have been linked with the establishment of the Medici duchy and grand duchy, under which vernacular literacy gradually became a requirement for patrician girls who aspired to a place at court (Barker 2015: 124–125). More globally, an increase in women's literacy is to be viewed against the background of the expanding printing market (Plebani 2019: 58–63). By greatly reducing the price of books, the printing press had contributed to a democratisation of literacy and had progressively sought to make its products appealing to broader audiences, women included (Sanson 2011: 45–56). The press also launched the phenomenon of women writers in the public arena, which was of a magnitude unparalleled elsewhere in Europe (Kaborycha 2015: 13). While letter-writing manuals, epistolaries by famous authors, and books of letters by both men and women became one of the market's favourite genres, more and more women from the middle and upper classes began to actively participate in the practice of private letter writing, not just by delegating their writing to others – as had previously been the custom – but by taking up the pen themselves. This sharp rise in women's literacy makes letters by women particularly interesting for exploring the relationship between use of formulae and writing experience.

In this respect, while the language of the semi-literate and the selection of oral-like texts have concerned Italian linguists for decades,[2] the role of women in the linguistic history of Italian has attracted less attention. One reason behind this has to do with the difficulty of finding everyday texts produced by women, and this difficulty is greater for medieval and early modern times when the gap in literacy rates was wider (Balestracci [2004] 2010: 52). Documents penned by women also had a minor chance of being preserved. Even those that have come down to us are often invisible (Plebani 2019: 15), buried in family archives that might be summarily inventoried (if at all), and can only be discovered by browsing the actual letters contained in archival collections. Another element that has hindered the study of women's language historically is the difficulty in establishing autography. Authoriality is frequently given

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2   See, for example, D'Achille (1994) and Fresu (2014) for an overview on the language of the *semicolti* [semiliterate], and Telve (2014) and Serianni (2015: 138-154) on sources used to reconstruct speech.

primacy over autography in the context of historical and cultural studies on women (see, for instance, Kaborycha 2015: 17), but an assessment of autography is crucial for linguistic analyses.

However, over the last few decades several efforts have been made to include women in Italian language histories.[3] As regards the medieval and early modern period, most of this research has focused on the language of women who belonged to one of three major categories: low-ranking women, the most famous example being the autograph confession of the 'witch' Bellezze Ursini (Trifone 1988); religious women, such as Caterina da Siena (Fresu 2011), Caterina Paluzzi, Orsola Formicini (Fresu 2019), Margherita Lambertenghi (Brown 2021); and exceptionally prominent and learned noblewomen, widely known even among their contemporaries, such as the marchionesses Vittoria Colonna (Sanson 2016) and Isabella D'Este (Basora 2017, Vetrugno 2018), and the duchess Lucrezia Borgia (Fresu 2004).

Nevertheless, studies on the language of early modern laywomen from the mercantile patriciate, who were neither exceptional cases of low-status women able to write, nor noblewomen of wide renown, are rare. The most notable exception is represented by the letters of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi (c. 1408–1471), a Florentine widow who, in the late Middle Ages, corresponded with her exiled sons. These letters were first subject to a linguistic analysis by Trifone (1989) – who used them to discuss the duality of letters as both oral-like and stylistically crafted texts, as well as the relevance that family practice had as a writing 'school' for Florentines – and have recently been studied to track a series of changes that had occurred in fifteenth-century Florentine (Bersano 2022), as well as to ante-date a range of lexical items (Bersano 2023).

Whereas Alessandra Macinghi's letters have attracted interest perhaps because she was one of the first laywomen from the mercantile class to write many letters in her own hand,[4] less attention has been paid to the language of letters by 'ordinary' upper-class and bourgeois women in the sixteenth century – a time when, as I have mentioned, it became more common for women to write in their own hand. My article, therefore, zooms in on one such writer: Lucrezia di Matteo Albizzi Ricasoli, a widow from the Florentine elites who started to write quite late in her life, and might have been the first lay woman in her family to do so. Having largely relied on delegate writers in her youth, the first autograph letter I could retrieve by Lucrezia dates to 1539, a time when she was probably approaching her forties. For the next twenty-six years, she would correspond with her sons about a variety of private issues and business matters.

This corpus of correspondence, written by a woman with very little writing experience, but whose involvement in letter writing progressively grew with time, is well-suited for exploring the functions that epistolary formulae served in the first stages of Florentine women's acquisition of vernacular literacy and vernacular letter-writing. The aim of this case study is to assess whether, in the Italian context, epistolary

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3   For an overview of these studies, see Fresu (2008, 2019).

4   Earlier examples of female letter-writers from a mercantile background include Margherita Datini (c. 1360-1423), the wife of the famous businessman from Prato, Francesco Datini, and her mother Dianora: these letters (on which see Crabb 2007; James 2008) still await linguistic investigation.

formulae functioned as formulation aids for little-experienced writers, as was found to be the case in other linguistic traditions. In order to do this, I assess the extent to which Lucrezia relied on formulae that assisted her in composing a text, examine the degree to which such formulae were fixed, and investigate possible lifespan changes in relation to her progressive increase in writing experience.

3 THE DATA

The data analysed here consist of a corpus of twenty autograph letters written by Lucrezia di Matteo Albizzi Ricasoli. The letters are preserved in the fondo Ricasoli, a collection housed in the Florentine State Archive (ASF).[5] I came across this correspondence during my research in Florence, where I was looking for letters by sixteenth-century Florentine women across a number of family archives. I found a total of sixty-seven letters by Lucrezia, scattered across different folders. Since I did not examine all the letters in all the folders, it is possible that further research would yield even more letters.

The great majority of the letters (forty-six) are written by delegate writers. The twenty letters that I have selected and transcribed for analysis – listed in Table 1 – are the autograph ones, making up a corpus of 9321 words (modernising word division). In fact, the last letter (#r22) is only partly autograph:[6] it is begun in Lucrezia's hand but, around the middle, her daughter Maddalena takes over and finishes the letter in her mother's name.[7] For the purpose of this analysis, I have only included the part of the letter written by Lucrezia. In addition, I have found a small piece of paper containing an autograph message addressed by Lucrezia to a worker (ASF Ricasoli Filze 40–I-V, c. 141) but, since the relationship between writer and addressee was very different in comparison to the other letters, I have excluded it from analysis.

Each letter has been assigned an ID number within a bigger dataset that I have built, which from now on I will use to refer to each letter.[8]

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5   The fondo Ricasoli, once held at the Castle of Brolio in Chianti, is a vast family archive divided into three sections: an old section ('Parte antica'), a modern section ('Parte moderna') and a section ('Carteggio') that includes the correspondence of Bettino Ricasoli (1809-1880), Italy's second prime minister, and other documents that concern him and his brother. The part that concerns us here is the 'Parte antica', which is in turn subdivided into parchments ('Pergamene'), account books ('Libri di amministrazione'), and other documents which include the family's correspondence ('Filze'). This part of the archive is only summarily inventoried, so that only by physically browsing the documents can one learn which letters by which individual are in which folder.

6   As explained later, throughout the article Lucrezia's autograph letters will be cited by the ID numbers given in table 1.

7   There is no indication as to why, but in a culture where delegate writing was frequent, this was not uncommon. In the Ricasoli archive, I have come across other women's letters in which the hand changes without any explanation, for example a 1579 letter by Cassandra Anselmi to her brother-in-law Nicolò Anselmi (Ricasoli Filze 49-I-IV, c. 1), and a 1589 letter by Selvaggia Rucellai to her daughter Cassandra (Ricasoli Filze 49-I-IV, c. 3).

8   These ID numbers mirror the order in which I have catalogued the letters. I am using these numbers to make it easier to refer to the same document across multiple articles.

Table 1. Lucrezia's autograph letters, presented in chronological order. Dates have been modernised according to today's calendar (the Florentine year began on 25 March). The number of words was counted after modernising word division (and excludes the superscription). The label 'Archival location' specifies the letters' location within ASF, fondo Ricasoli, Parte antica Filze. It should be read this way: 46–I-IV means Filza 46, Fascio I, Fascetto IV.

ID number	Date	Addressee	N. words	Archival location
#r511	11/10/1539	Matteo	569	46–I-IV, c. 63
#r221	2/07/1542	Matteo	298	40–III-IV, c. 1
#r224	18/07/1542	Matteo	238	40–III-IV, c. 6
#r237	28/10/1542	Matteo	1857	40–III-IV, c. 38
#r240	20/11/1542	Matteo	921	40–III-IV, c. 45
#r242	4/12/1542	Matteo	427	40–III-IV, c. 48
#r243	14/12/1542	Matteo	574	40–III-IV, c. 49
#r246	2/01/1543	Matteo	1152	40–III-IV, c. 55
#r247	10/01/1543	Matteo	426	40–III-IV, c. 56
#r690	29/10/1549	Braccio	271	41–II-III, c. 72
#r271	1/02/1550	Matteo	470	40–III-VI, c. 37
#r691	13/08/1553	Braccio	379	41–II-III, c. 86
#r302	17/02/1554	Braccio	218	32–I-VI, c. 26
#r335	29/04/1554	Braccio	246	32–II-II, c. 93
#r16	3/09/1565	Matteo	393	40–II-V, c. 46
#r17	5/09/1565	Matteo	316	40–II-V, c. 47
#r18	7/09/1565	Matteo	188	40–II-V, c. 48
#r19	8/09/1565	Matteo	198	40–II-V, c. 49
#r20	8/09/1565	Matteo	89	40–II-V, c. 50
#r22 (partly autograph)	13/09/1565	Matteo	91	40–II-V, c. 52

The twenty autograph letters are all addressed to Lucrezia's sons, Matteo (sixteen) and Braccio (four). This makes them suitable to analyse for epistolary formulae, because the relationship between writer and addressee, which has been shown to significantly affect the amount and type of formulae used (e.g. Clarysse 2017), remains constant. The letters are also written across a time period of twenty-seven years, making an evaluation of lifespan change possible: in particular, I will draw a distinction between the nine letters written between the late 1530s and early 1540s (early block), the five letters written between 1549 and 1554 (middle block), and the six letters penned in 1565 (late block).[9]

As for the writer's identity and her letter-writing practice, Lucrezia was a patrician woman born into a very prominent Florentine family, the Albizzi. Considering that she married in 1513, and that Florentine women married early, she was probably born in

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9   This distinction was operationalised after inspection of the data, as the autograph letters I found seemed to cluster around particular time periods. The first of these represents a time at which Lucrezia had only recently begun to write letters in her own hand. A 6 year-long timespan separates letters from the early and the middle block, and a 10 year-long timespan separates letters from the middle and late block.

the last decade of the fifteenth century. Her father's name was Matteo (Passerini 1861: table 14), and the Ricasoli archive preserves letters by her mother Nanna[10] and her siblings Francesco,[11] Andrea[12] and Maddalena.[13] Given these clues, her parents must have been Matteo di Andrea degli Albizzi (b. 1459) and Nanna di Niccolò Tornabuoni (b. 1564/5), who, according to Litta (1876: table 2), were married in 1485, although Lucrezia's name does not figure in Litta's family tree.[14]

As was the norm for the Florentine aristocracy, Lucrezia married into another patrician family, the Ricasoli. The Ricasoli belonged to the old Florentine feudal aristocracy, but by the sixteenth century they had largely assimilated to the new ruling, mercantile elite (Moran 2017: 387). They owned vast properties of land in the areas of Chianti, Mugello, and southern Valdarno, and a significant part of their income was based on the exchange of the agricultural goods produced here.

Lucrezia had at least six children: Maddalena, Piergiovanni, Braccio, Matteo, Alessandra and Raffaello (Passerini 1861: table 14). Her married life was not an easy one, as her husband, Filippo di Piergiovanni Ricasoli, was exiled from Florence in 1523. Filippo returned to Florence as the Medici were driven out of the city in 1527, only to die in 1531, a few months after the capitulation of the Last Republic and the restoration of the Medici regime (Passerini 1861: 169). Lucrezia makes vague references to these difficult times in one of her letters, recalling the troubles endured while her husband was alive (#r237). Probably in her thirties at the time of her husband's death, Lucrezia did not remarry, and lived on until 1570.[15]

From Lucrezia's early autograph letters, written between the late 1530s and the early 1540s, it is clear that the family was undergoing financial difficulties. At that time, she was living in Florence with at least two of her younger children, Maddalena and Braccio, while her elder sons, Matteo and Raffaello, resided in Chianti, conducting a fashionable lifestyle that they could not afford and that left the family riddled with debts (#r237, #r243). Lucrezia's long letters repeatedly describe her frustration at having 'tutto el di deditori alucco ora loispelziale ora legrauezze ora labalia ora gouani chorssi ora elsermano ora questo ora quelo' [all day long creditors at the door, now the apothecary, now the taxes, now the wet-nurse, now Giovanni Corsi, now Sermano, now this one, now that one] (#r240).[16] It is at this difficult time that – it would appear – Lucrezia started to pen letters in her own hand.

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10   Ricasoli Filze 41-II-III, c. 6; 56-I-I, cc. 65, 83, 107, 169, 173.

11   Ricasoli Filze 32-I-VI, c. 2; 40-II-V, c. 2; 40-III-III, cc. 50, 54; 40-III-V, cc. 80, 82, 85; 56-I-I, cc. 24, 172.

12   Ricasoli Filze 56-I-I, cc. 13, 15, 35, 58, 135; 56-I-IV, c. 14.

13   Ricasoli Filze 41-II-III, c. 3.

14   If Litta's inclusion of the names of Francesco, Andrea and Maddalena among the children of Matteo Albizzi and Nanna Tornabuoni were not enough to demonstrate Lucrezia's belonging to this branch of the family, definite proof comes from a 1528 letter by Lucrezia's brother Andrea Albizzi who refers to 'Bancho n[ost]ro zio delli sp[e]t[tabi]li S[igno]ri Dieci' [Banco our uncle of the distinguished Ten] (Ricasoli Filze 56-I-I, c. 135). Matteo Albizzi's brother Banco was indeed part of the Dieci di Balia (the magistracy in charge of the conduct of war) during Florence's Last Republic (see, again, Litta 1876: table 2).

15   ASF Ricasoli Amministrazione 275, fol. π1r.

16   On the criteria adopted for transcripton, see Section 5.

Although I can only make hypotheses on the instruction she might have received in her youth, her graphic competence tells us that she had not gone beyond the first stages of education. Her script displays a large size, separate letters, and very few ligatures. There is no graphic variation that would characterise usual or professional levels of graphic execution. Although the lines she traces are fairly straight, and her hand relatively steady, she employs no shading, no punctuation and, contrary to what was common in merchants' letters, no paragraphs: everything, except for the signature, is written in one continuous flow. If we were to apply Petrucci's classification of handwriting into three different levels of graphic execution, Lucrezia's hand would fall into the lowest, called by Petrucci 'elementare di base' (Petrucci 1978: 167–168).
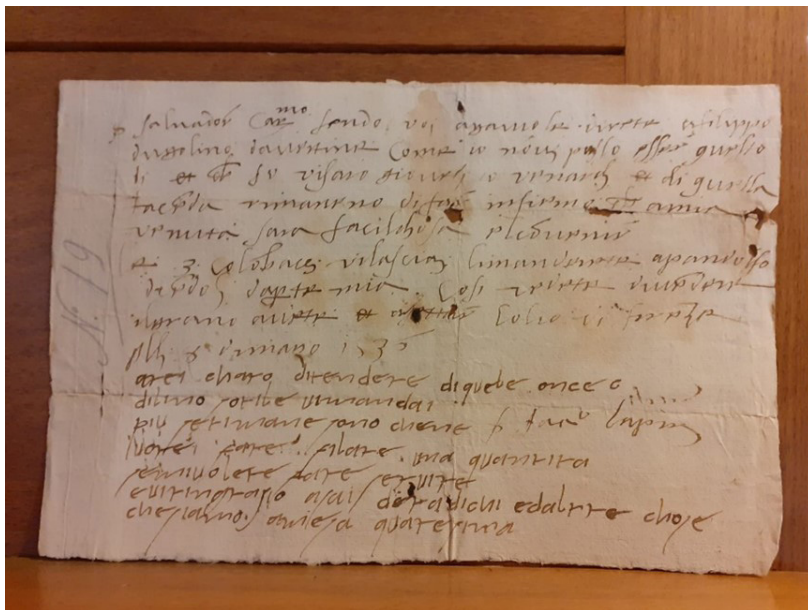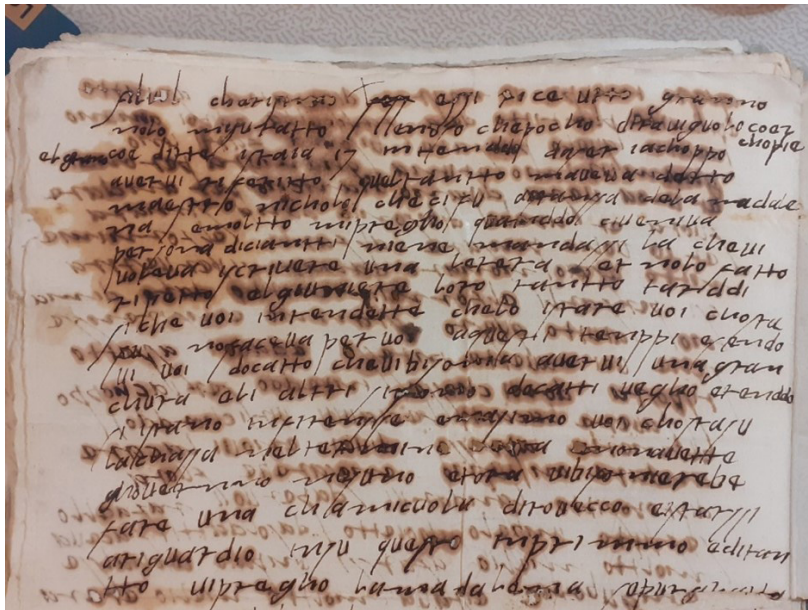
We also know that Lucrezia had real difficulties in reading her son's handwriting. Already in #r224, she apologises for not replying to everything that was asked of her 'perche odimentichato elegere uostre letere' [because I have forgotten how to read your letters]. She also repeatedly asks her son to write more clearly or to have someone else write for him (#r17, #r18). These requests are typical of semi-literate writers: a similar request, for example, is addressed by a semi-literate worker of the Ricasoli family to his employer (Ricasoli Filze 40–III-III, c. 75).[17]

All of this suggests that Lucrezia had not gone beyond the very first stages of graphic learning. As a girl from an elite family, she might have learned basic literacy in her own household, perhaps taught by a family member or by a servant (Sanson 2011: 26–27); or she might have acquired reading skills and some rudiments of writing, along with sewing and other 'virtues', in a convent (Strocchia 1999). Considering the availability of self-teaching manuals at her time (Plebani 2019: 16), however, the possibility that she might have taught herself to write also exists. It cannot be excluded that she learned in her adult life, considering that she apparently relied almost exclusively on delegate writers until around her forties. All but one of the forty-six allograph letters I have found date back to the period 1532–1542. Prior to 1539 – the date of her first autograph letter (Fig. 1) – I could only retrieve few autograph attestations dating from the previous couple of years: two postscripta, one of which added to a letter by the family's worker Jacopo Lapini in 1537 (Fig. 2), and the other added to a letter written in her name, again by Jacopo Lapini, in 1538 (Fig. 3); her signature, added to a 1538 letter by the same delegate writer (Fig. 4); and some notes on the receipt of goods scribbled at the back of a letter she received in the same year (Fig. 5). Over the following years, Lucrezia gradually abandoned the practice of delegate writing, so that from the 1550s and 1560s we have letters in her own hand almost exclusively.

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17 On similar requests by Margherita Datini, asking her husband to have a clerk copy his letter, see Crabb (2007: 1186).

Figure 1. Lucrezia's first autograph letter, dating 1539 (#r511).

Figure 2. Lucrezia's first autograph postscriptum, added to a 1537 letter signed by Jacopo Lapini (Ricasoli Filze 41–II-III, c. 19).
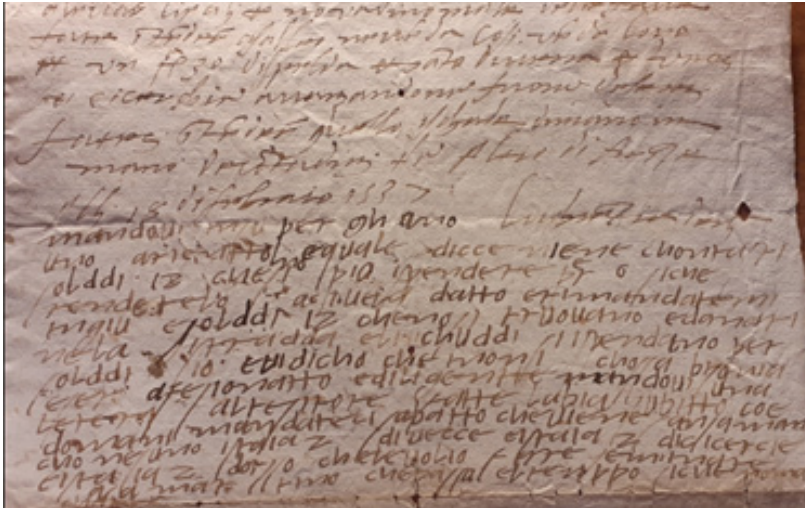
Figure 3. Lucrezia's autograph postscriptum added to a 1538 letter written by Jacopo Lapini in her name (Ricasoli Filze 32–I-VI, c. 10).
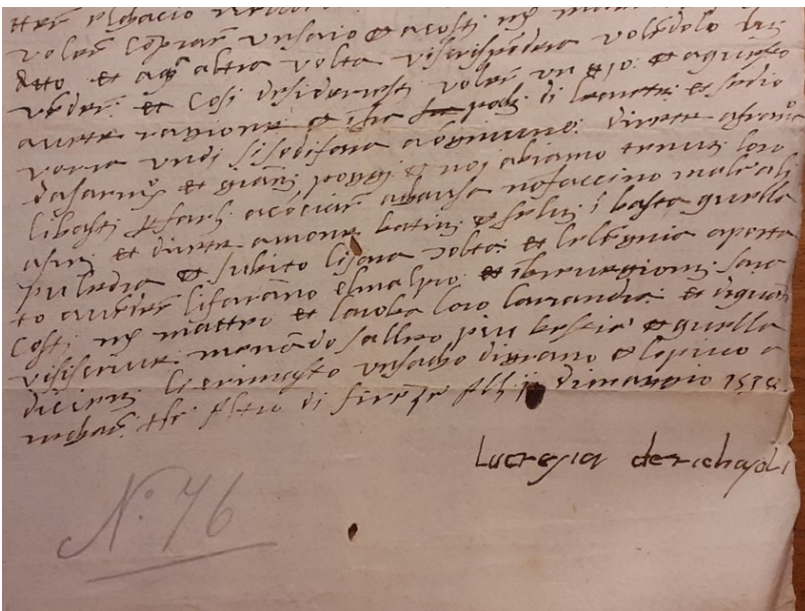

Figure 4. Lucrezia's autograph signature in an allograph letter written in 1538 (Ricasoli Filze 40–I-V, c. 76).
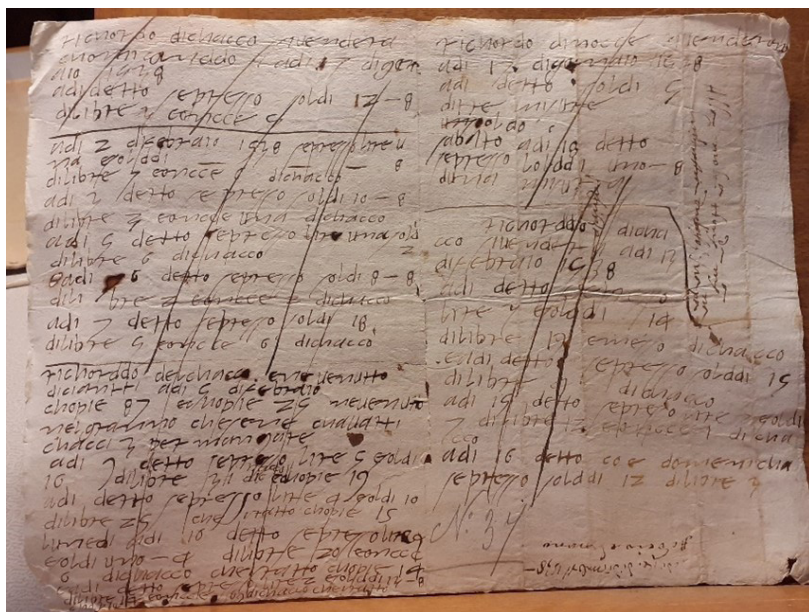
Figure 5. Lucrezia's autograph notes on the back of a letter she received in 1538 (Ricasoli Filze 32–II-II, c. 37).

As discussed earlier, Lucrezia's transition from delegate to autograph writing must be viewed in light of the changes that were taking place in Florentine and Italian society more broadly. However, practical necessities tied to her status as a widow might have also played an important role, as they had for Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi a century before. As would later be the case for her daughter Maddalena,[18] as a widow Lucrezia appears to have had an active role in the family's business. From her house in Florence, she would be the one to receive the Ricasoli agricultural products, coordinate their dispatch and sale, send regular reports to her sons, and make sure the family's workers received their payments. These tasks would obviously be facilitated by being able to write without intermediaries; and perhaps, being able to write was also a means to achieve more agency. Her desire to be more independent is reiterated in several letters, where Lucrezia complains about being kept in *seruit(t)u* [servitude] (#r511, #r237, #r221) and being left in the dark as to the family's economic activities (#r237, #r240).

Her difficult financial circumstances, forcing her to constantly deal with the family's creditors, might have been a further motive to acquire literacy. Lucrezia's letters reveal a constant struggle to keep up appearances, and acute feelings of shame for

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18 On Maddalena's involvement in the family business, see Moran (2017).

herself and her family:[19] in this sense, graphic abilities might have exerted an additional appeal, as argued by Strocchia (1999: 25), as an assertion of status.

As to the way Lucrezia might have learned her letter-writing conventions, some means of instruction would have been precluded to her. Clearly, the letter-writing training that was typical for boys from the minor aristocracy (D'Onghia 2014: 93) would not have been an option. From Florentine family books there is some evidence that the writing of vernacular letters was taught even at the level of elementary school (Witt 1995: 106–107), but it is unlikely that Lucrezia had attended school.[20] An influence from vernacular letter-writing manuals and printed letter books cannot be ruled out, as we have seen that this type of literature was flooding the printing market, especially from the end of the 1530s (the very years in which Lucrezia started to write).[21] However, her primary source to learn letter-writing conventions would undoubtedly have been the actual practice of correspondence. In his study on Alessandra Macinghi's letters, Trifone (1989) finds a striking similarity in terms of language and style in the letters by Alessandra and her relatives, which leads him to conclude that letter-writing – just like speech – was learnt within the family nucleus, by actually corresponding with one's family. To this family training, it should be added that Florentine merchant families were used to preserving their personal correspondence in family archives: letters received from outside the household might have also served as models for letter-writing.

4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this article is to explore the functions of epistolary formulae for little experienced writers in the context of sixteenth-century Florence. In particular, by analysing the case study of the correspondence of a semi-literate woman, Lucrezia Albizzi Ricasoli, the paper seeks to assess whether formulae functioned primarily as formulation aids for little experienced writers.

Rutten and van der Wal (2012) argue that it is formulae's holistic nature – i.e. the possibility to retrieve them as a whole from memory, without grammatically analysing them – that made them an ideal tool for less experienced writers: recurring to formulae as single, unanalysed chunks would have reduced the writing effort, just as the use of formulae in speech production has been shown to reduce the processing effort (Rutten/ van der Wal 2012: 182–183). In order to prove that formulae served as *Formulierungshilfe* (Elspaß 2005: 157), therefore, I first need to ask whether the formulae used by Lucrezia were holistic units or are at least compatible with an interpretation that views them as holistic (research question 1).

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19 These emerge, for example, when she describes having to send a servant to sell rags at the market because she has nothing else to sell (#r237), or when she is forced to be seen at the market buying the salt 'a libbra' [by pound], because 'lanecesita nonaleghe' [necessity knows no law/leagues] (#r246). The old, worn clothes she and her daughter Maddalena have to wear are an additional source of shame (#r237, #r246), as well as a growing cause of concern in relation to Maddalena's marriage prospects.

20 From a much-quoted excerpt from Giovanni Villani's fourteenth-century chronicle, we know that even in medieval Florence there were girls who went to school (Villani 1979: 208), but it seems unlikely that they were many. However, in his discussion of lay vernacular schools in late medieval Tuscany, Black cites the example of four female teachers who taught boys as well as girls (Black 2007: 203).

21 On women's access to texts in Renaissance Italy, see Richardson (2020: 149-224).

According to Rutten and van der Wal (2012: 186), the prefabricated nature of epistolary formulae is revealed by the fact that, in their Dutch letter corpus, these items are fairly fixed, and are combined in a discourse structure whose order also tends to be fixed (although one or more formulae may be left out). Fixedness of the individual formulae and of the larger discourse structure that they form will therefore be taken as evidence of the prefabricated nature of these elements. A range of other criteria can also be used to identify holistic units, including non-compositionality (see Wray 2002: 19–43). One criterion proposed by Hickey for formula identification in child language is that formulae 'may be used inappropriately, either syntactically or semantically' (Hickey 1993: 32). Another is that 'the utterance is grammatically advanced' compared to the rest of the language (Hickey 1993: 32), something also pointed out by Elspaß for epistolary formulae in German letters (Elspaß 2005: 170). These criteria will be used to assess whether epistolary formulae could be learned and retrieved by Lucrezia as prefabricated sequences.

After establishing whether formulae could function as holistic units, and therefore had the potential to facilitate Lucrezia's writing effort, I will assess whether her use of optional epistolary formulae decreased with an increase in writing experience (research question 2). Although Lucrezia's writing experience remained rather low even in her latest letters, it must have increased with time, since, as we have seen, she eventually stopped relying on delegate writers. Hence, if epistolary formulae served the primary function of aids for formulation, then it would be reasonable to expect their frequency to decrease with time, as Lucrezia's writing experience grew. On the other hand, if Lucrezia used formulae as conventions to style her social identity and conform to specific group practices, we would not necessarily expect their number to decrease.

Possible lifespan changes in Lucrezia's use of formulae over time could also reveal whether these elements were used to style her social identity. As mentioned before, an intensely normative pressure – proven by the popularity of printed letter books – increasingly formalised the practice of letter-writing in sixteenth-century Italy. This might have led writers to adopt more formulae, and/or more complex and elaborate ones, as the century went by, and might have led Lucrezia to adopt more formulae, and more complex formulae, as her writing experience grew. My third research question therefore asks whether the formulae used by Lucrezia changed over time and became increasingly more complex and elaborate. A positive answer would suggest that this writer used formulae to signal her belonging to specific group practices and was possibly influenced by an increasingly codified epistolary practice. Complexity, in this context, will be operationalised by relying on the word length of formulae. Szmrecsányi (2004) notes that using length as a proxy for syntactic complexity is probably the most frequently used method, and 'has the obvious advantage that this is a straightforward method which does not even necessarily involve manual coding' (Szmrecsányi 2004: 1033).

In summary, my article addresses the following research questions:
1) Were the formulae used by Lucrezia learned and retrieved as holistic units?
2) Did Lucrezia use more optional formulae in her early letters than in her late ones?
3) Did she adopt different and more complex formulae as the years went by?

Positive answers to the first two questions would lead us to hypothesise that formulae, for this writer, functioned primarily as aids to reduce the writing effort. A positive answer to the third question would instead lead us to hypothesise that, as Lucrezia's writing experience grew, she also relied on formulae to style a letter-writing persona and to signal participation in certain group practices.

5 METHODOLOGY

The twenty autograph letters Lucrezia wrote to her sons were transcribed following conservative criteria. I offered a semi-diplomatic transcription, meant to mirror as close as possible the original text: the only change implemented is a distinction between *s* and *z*, which in Lucrezia's hand are rendered through the same grapheme. Each letter was then tagged with metadata including date, addressee's name, sender's and addressee's location, archival location, along with an identifier that serves to locate the letter within a bigger dataset that I have built.

I chose to restrict the analysis to those formulae that were used in the superscription and in the epistolary frame, leaving out, for the time being, those used in the body of the letter. The term 'epistolary frame' (Bentein 2023: 433) or 'pragmatic frame' (Palermo 1994: 113) refers to the opening and closing, which represent the most ritualised and conventionalised part of the letter. This part is largely made up of fixed formulae and is characterised by a somewhat constrained thematic development, in opposition to the referential content, i.e. the part of the letter where formulae are much less frequent and where the thematic development is free (Palermo 1994: 113–119). This dichotomic structure that sees letters divided into an epistolary frame and a referential part has been adopted to describe the structure of Italian private letters, for example by Antonelli (2003: 59) and Magro (2014: 132–133), and was first proposed to describe Italian merchants' letters by Palermo (1994), who has argued that it would be fruitless to search, in this text type, something similar to the rhetorical subdivisions of *salutatio*, *exordium*, *narratio*, *petitio* and *conclusio* discussed in medieval treatises of *ars dictamini* (Palermo 1994: 113–114). In her study of Cassandra Chigi's sixteenth-century private letters, Fantini has argued the same, identifying the richly formulaic epistolary frame as the only recognisable rhetorical structure (Fantini 1999: 133).

The choice to restrict the analysis to the epistolary frame (as well as the superscription) was not only driven by the formulaic nature of this part. It was also dictated both by reasons of space and by the observation that the most frequent word strings in the body of Lucrezia's letters seemed more a reflection of orality than markers specific to

the letter genre – in other words, they looked like formulae, but not necessarily like epistolary formulae. For example, a very frequent word string used in the body of the letter, 'ui dicho (che)' [I tell you (that)] (forty-four occurrences), might be interpreted as a text-structural formula – i.e. a formula realising the transition from one part of the discourse to another (Rutten/van der Wal 2014: 82) – but is in fact almost exclusively used to convey emotionally charged information.[22]

The formulae used in the epistolary frame and in the superscription were then extracted through close reading and categorised according to their pragmatic func-tion, adopting the classification developed by Rutten/van der Wal (2014: 81–85). This classification distinguishes between text-type formulae – such as signature, address formulae and opening formulae – which identify the text as a letter and are obligatory elements, text-structural formulae, which realise the transition from one part of the discourse to another, intersubjective formulae – such as greetings and health formulae – which focus on the relationship between writer and addresse, and Christian-ritual formulae, which place the writer and/or the addressee under religious protection.

The formulae, extracted and categorised, were then tabulated in an Excel spread-sheet that allowed me to visualise them and to count their occurrences.

6 ANALYSIS

This section reports the results of the analysis for the superscription (Section 6.1), the opening (Section 6.2) and the closing (Section 6.3).

6.1 Superscriptions

As noted by Nevala (2007), superscriptions – formulae placed outside of the letter to identify the recipient and their location – are not private in the same sense that address formulae inside the letter are: they are intended to be read not only by the recipient but by other people too, for example the mail carrier, or other family members. Hence, compared to address formulae inside the letter, these formulae are more likely to dis-play negative politeness strategies, to follow normative schemes more rigidly, and to be influenced by letter-writing manuals (Nevala 2007).

Among the letters by Lucrezia that are entirely autograph, only two bear allograph superscriptions (#r511, #r246). It is probably not by chance that both are letters from the earlier block: while Lucrezia's writing experience was still limited, she might have felt it safer to delegate to others the less private part of the letter.

In those cases where the superscription is autograph, the letters from the early and middle block consistently display the same formula, with the empty slot filled by the name of Lucrezia's son, either Braccio, or Matteo (the latter, as the first-born son and head of the family, is the only one to be constantly attributed the title *messere*):

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22 See the following examples: 'uidicho che nouolio piuuiuere aquesto ghouerno' [I am telling you I don't want to live like this anymore] (#r237); 'uidicho setenette diquesti modi andrette irouina' [I am telling you if you keep these habits you will go broke] (#r237), etc.

Al (s)uo fig(l)uol(o) charisimo (meser) ____ de richasoli inciant(t)i [To her dear-
est son (messer) ____ de Ricasoli in Chianti]

This lack of variation suggests that this formula was learned holistically and re-
trieved as a whole from memory.

In letters from the late block, we find one instance of the old formula (#r20) and four
instances of a new variant, which slightly increases in complexity through the addition
of the deferential adjective *onorandd(o)*, coordinated with *charisimo*:

Al suo onorra(n)dd(o) e charisimo filiuol(o) meser ____ richasoli inciantti [To
her honourable and dearest son messer ____ Ricasoli in Chianti] (#r16, #r17,
#r18, #r19)

The superscription formula, therefore, shows some evidence of lifespan change to-
wards increasing complexity. This slightly more elaborate formula is, however, once
again used multiple times without any variation, suggesting that, like the previous for-
mula, it was also learned holistically.

6.2 The opening

The opening of Lucrezia's letters is made up of two obligatory, 'text-type' elements,
i.e. the address formula and the opening formula. These formulae are only missing in
one letter from the early block (#r221), which begins *in medias res* ('quando partisti di
qui …' [when you left from here …]) and where the only opening element is a visual
one, i.e. a cross (an ancient epistolary convention that is almost constant throughout
Lucrezia's correspondence).[23] In addition to these obligatory elements, in a minority of
cases the opening formula is followed by another formula which acknowledges receipt
of the information (#r240, #r271, #r16), performs a Christian-ritual function (#r237) or
realises the transition from the opening formula to the body of the text (#r302).

In all cases, the address formula is a two-word string, 'fil(i)uo(l(o)) charisimo' [dearest
son] (19 occurrences), which remains fixed throughout twenty-seven years. In line with
Nevala's (2007) finding that superscriptions tend to be more deferential and more subject
to normative pressure than address formulae inside the letter, Lucrezia's address formula
is more geared towards positive politeness – dispensing with titles such as *messere* or
deferential adjectives like *onorando* – and does not increase in complexity over time.

By contrast, opening formulae are more varied. In their study of French soldiers'
letters from the Great War, Große *et al.* (2016) note that opening formulae function
as a thematic starting point to establish communication and inscribe the letter in the
thread of epistolary exchange. Hence, they consider the sharing of information on mail
or health at the opening of letters as part of the ritual structure of the text. Opening
formulae are distinguished into responsive or declarative, on the basis of whether the
letter constitutes a response or initiates a conversation.

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23   Petrucci has noted that the *signum crucis* started to appear at the opening of letters between the third and fourth
     century AD (Petrucci 2008: 20).

In Lucrezia's letters, all opening formulae touch on the 'mail' theme – either the means of communication (i.e. the mail carrier), or letters or parcels received or sent. The most common formula that identifies the mail carrier is the following, with the empty slot filled by the name of the carrier:

e ariuat(t)o (qui) ____ [___ has arrived here] (#r237, #r240, #r246, #r247, #r691, #r302, #r19, #r20)

This formulation – occurring across eight letters – is not affected by lifespan change, appearing in early as well as late letters. In one case, the subject is plural while the verb inside the formula remains singular: 'eariuato qui giouani di domenicho emichele dimateo' [Giovanni di Domenico and Michele di Matteo has arrived here] (#r20). This suggests that this formula might have been memorised as a whole without being subject to analysis, although lack of agreement between verb and post-verbal subject is common in Tuscan varieties today (and not unheard of in old Italian; see Durante 1981).

Reference to the mail carrier is also made by means of other strategies:

- through the declarative formula 'per ___ ui/ti mand(d)o …' [By ___ I send you…] (#r335, #r17)
- through the responsive formulae 'per (le man de) ___ se autto' [through (the hands of)___ I have received] (#r242, #r18)

In other cases, what is referred to is the actual mail or goods, rather than the carrier. Most common in this category is a responsive formula acknowleding receipt of the letter (3 occurrences):

tengho una uostra [I have your letter] (#r224, #r271)
tengho lauostra ame ghratisima [I have your letter very dear to me] (#r16)

This formula shows some evidence of lifespan change towards increased complexity and conventionalisation: the first instance is used in letters from the early and middle block, the second and more complex one is found in a late letter. This is a widespread formula also found in printed books: 'ho riceuuta una uostra a me gratissima' [I have received your letter very dear to me] is found, for example, in the letters by Saint Osanna from Mantua, published in 1524 inside a devotional book by Girolamo da Monte Oliveto (fol. 147ᵛ).

In one case, reference to a letter received is made through a rather common formula that underlines the success of the communication effort: 'per una tua intenddo quanto di' [through your (letter) I have understood what you said] (#r690). In another, the opening states the receipt of goods: 'essi riceutto granno' [grain was received] (#r511). In another case, a declarative formula makes reference to the letter being sent: 'questa per farui intendere chome…' [This (letter) (is) to let you know that…] (#r243).

In a letter from the late block, the mail is referred to by combining two opening formulae, one responsive and one declarative, through co-ordination: 'oafare risposta adua letere eperdarui auiso chome' [I must reply to two letters and to let you know that…] (#r22). The result does not work syntactically, suggesting that Lucrezia was not analysing these formulae, treating them instead as holistic units.

6.3 The closing

Counting the number of formulae in the closing of Lucrezia's letters yields the results reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of formulae in Lucrezia's letter closings, classified according to type.

ID	Year	discourse-ending	health	greetings	take care formulae	location	date	total
#r511	1539	1	1			1	1	4
#r221	1542	1				1	1	3
#r224	1542	1	1			1		3
#r237	1542	1	1			1	1	4
#r240	1542	1	1			1	1	4
#r242	1542	1	1		1	1	1	5
#r243	1542	1	1			1	1	4
#r246	1543	1	1			1	1	4
#r247	1543	1				1	1	3
#r690	1549	1	1			1	1	4
#r271	1550	1	1			1	1	4
#r691	1553	1	1			1	1	4
#r302	1554	1	1			1	1	4
#r335	1554	2	1		1	1	1	6
#r16	1565	2	1	1	1	1	1	7
#r17	1565	2	1	1		1	1	6
#r18	1565	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
#r19	1565	1	1	1		1	1	5
#r20	1565	1	1	1		1	1	5

Keeping in mind that location and date were obligatory, 'text-type' formulae, visual inspection of this table shows that, in the letter closing, Lucrezia's use of formulae did not decrease with time. In fact it increased, and this increase is mostly accounted for by a duplication of discourse-ending formulae and – to a greater degree – by the addition of intersubjective formulae (especially greetings) in Lucrezia's late letters.

In all letters the closing is marked by at least one discourse-ending formula, i.e. a text-structural formula that realises the transition from the body of the letter to the closing (on which, see Serra 2023). The most ubiquitous discourse-ending formula consists in the two-word string 'ne/non altro' [nothing else], which is always used (eighteen

occurrences), except for #r221 where this is replaced by 'editantto uidicho' [and of this I tell you]. This formula marks the transition to the letter closing, beginning a sequence usually structured as follows:

> **closing-discourse formula** 'ne/non altro' [nothing else] – **health formula** 'ista(tte) sano' [stay healthy] – **location** 'di firenz(z)e' [from Florence] – **date** 'ali/di/adi di' + month + year

This sequence, in turn, is followed by the signature, although in early letters non-formulaic parts often intervene between this sequence and the signature (#r551, #r221, #r224, #r237, #r243), suggesting that at this time Lucrezia's textual planning was still quite limited.

Although a few letters depart slightly from this model,[24] this structure appears quite fixed, both in the individual formulae and in the order in which they are combined. This structure, therefore, represents the basic backbone of the closing of Lucrezia's letters, and this is true for the earliest as well as the latest texts.

However, the closing of Lucrezia's letters is subject to lifespan change. On the one hand, the addition of intersubjective formulae marks a clear distinction from the early to the middle and late block, as intersubjective formulae are rare in letters from the early block, appearing only once ('fateui uezzi' [treat yourself well], #r242). They sometimes appear in letters of the middle and late block in the form of a 'take care' formula, an optional element that is found before the closing sequence:

> abiateui chura situ esirafaello elsi liaatri echosi e bestiami [take care both you and Raffaello and so the others and so the cattle] (#r335)

> ingeniateui di riguardarui e farui uezzi [take care and treat yourself well] (#r16)

> fateui uezzi [treat yourself well] (#r18)

However, the element that marks the most important novelty is the greeting, absent from the early letters, but always present in the late block, where it is expressed by means of a recommendation formula (consisting in the verb *raccomandarsi* [to recommend oneself] + dative):

> a tut(t)i mi rachomando [to all I recommend myself] (#r16, #r18, #r19, #r20)
> eauoi ealaghostansa earafaello eabracco mirachomanddo [to you and to Gostanza and Rafaello and Braccio I recommend myself] (#r17)

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24 In #r224, the location is missing and the health formula is added after the date, probably as an afterthought. In #r242, an intersubjective element ('fateui uezzi' [take care]) is inserted between the discourse-ending and the health formula. The health formula is missing in two early letters, i.e. #r221 and #r247 (in the former, the discourse-ending formula 'ne altro' is replaced by 'editantto uidicho').

Within the fixed closing structure described above, accommodating these new elements posed some challenges. Their position oscillates, as Lucrezia does not seem quite sure where to place them, and whether these elements should precede, or follow, the closing.

One solution is to duplicate the discourse-ending formulae, so that greetings or other intersubjective formulae become encapsulated between these elements. This is what we find in #r335, where the formula 'ne altro' [nothing else] is repeated twice, and in #r16 and #r17, where the first discourse-ending formula is a much more complex alternative to 'ne altro': this alternative, 'ne saro piu lungha a(lo i)criuere faro fine' [I will not write longer, I will put an end to writing], is stylistically higher than the surrounding text and is in fact a combination of two discourse-ending formulae. However, it is used twice in the same formulation, suggesting that the whole macro-sequence was learned and retrieved as a unit, perhaps under the influence of some written model.[25]

> **ne altro** abiateui chura situ esirafaello elsi liaatri echosi ebestiami **nealtro** istatte sani difirenzze adi 29 daprille 1554 [Nothing else. Take care both you and Raffaello and so the others and so the cattle. Nothing else. Stay healthy. From Florence on the day 29 April 1554.] (#r335)

> **nesaro piu lungha alo icriuere faro fine** ingeniateui di riguardarui e farui uessi (…) **ne altro** atutti mirachomando istate sani di firenze adi 3 disetenbre 1565 [I will not write longer, I will put an end to writing. Make sure to take care and treat yourself well (…) Nothing else. To all I recommend myself. Stay healthy. From Florence on the day 3 September 1565.][26] (#r16)

> **nesaro piu lungha acriuere faro fine** eauoi elaghostansa earafaello eabracco mirachomanddo (…) **ne altro** istate sani di firenzze adi 5 di setenbre 1565 [I will not write longer, I will put an end to writing. And to you and to Gostanza and Raffaello and Braccio I recommend myself (…). Nothing else. Stay healthy. On the day 5 September 1565.] (#r17)

Another solution, adopted in Lucrezia's last three letters (#r18, #r19, #r20), is to accommodate the greetings at the very end of the closing sequence, as in:

> nealtro istate sani di firezze adi 8 di setenbre 1565 **eatuti mirachomando** [Nothing else. Stay healthy. From Florence on the day 8 September 1565. And to all I recommend myself] (#r19)

In summary, the closing of Lucrezia's late letters includes more epistolary formulae in comparison with her early letters: it makes space for intersubjective formulae such as

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25 This is not surprising, as the semi-literate are known to make use of prefabricated, prestigious formulae, which results in an uneven register (D'Achille 1994: 75).

26 Here, a further intersubjective element – 'atutti mirachomando' – breaks up the closing sequence.

greetings, and frequently contains more than one discourse-ending formula. While not abandoning the formulae she used in her early letters, Lucrezia complements them with alternative, semantically equivalent variants that are grammatically more complex, as seen in the case of the discourse-ending formulae.

7 CONCLUSION

Epistolary formulae mark private, everyday letters as written texts, drawing attention to the existence of genre-specific conventions. Their use – which has been shown to be abundant in texts by semiliterate writers – challenges the view of letters as the best approximation of speech (Elspaß 2005: 156–157).

In many respects, Lucrezia's letters reflect quite closely a language of immediacy. Words are often repeated or left out, the same concept is reprised multiple times, there are digressions and postscripts – all of which attests to a scant level of textual planning. Dialogue is sometimes reported by means of direct discourse (#r240), interjections are frequent, and idiomatic expressions are plentiful, as in Lucrezia's reminder to her son that 'cinosi misura nondura' [who does not measure themselves, does not last] (#r224, #r240). However, my analysis has shown that Lucrezia was not unaware of epistolary conventions. Possibly the first (lay) woman in her family to write a letter in her own hand, she made use of several epistolary formulae when opening and closing her letters.

Returning to the research questions set out in Section 4, I had first asked whether Lucrezia might have learned and retrieved formulae as holistic units, i.e. prefabricated sequences that are not subject to analysis. Indeed, many of the formulae used by Lucrezia are compatible with an interpretation that views them as holistic. First, most formulae were highly fixed, displaying very little internal variation or lexical substitution. For example, the address form used towards her sons remained the same throughout Lucrezia's twenty-seven years of letter-writing. The same holds true for the health formula 'istatte sano', for the discourse-ending formula 'ne altro', and for the formulae used to indicate location and date. As we have seen for the letter closing, the discourse structures in which these formulae were inserted could also be highly stereotypical. With time, as Lucrezia's writing experience grows, we see her adopt more formulae and more complex formulae. However, several of these new formulae – including the superscription, the greetings, the discourse-ending formulae – are also fixed, being repeated time after time with little variation. As seen for the closing, these new formulae needed to be accommodated into the rigid structure that Lucrezia knew, which resulted in a modified, but still stereotyped macro-structure.

Moreover, some of the formulae she used were employed inappropriately within the syntax of the broader sentence and, as seen before, inappropriateness of use is a criterion for the detection of holistic units (Hickey 1993: 32). This was the case for the opening formula 'e ariuat(t)o (qui)__' [__ has arrived here] which did not always agree with its subject (#r20), and for the combination of two opening formulae which yielded a sentence that did not work syntactically: 'oafare risposta adua letere eperdarui auiso chome' [I must reply to two letters and to let you know that…] (#r22). Finally, a further potential characteristic of prefabricated units is that they are grammatically advanced

compared to the rest of the text (Hickey 1993: 32). I found some evidence of this in the discourse-ending formula 'ne saro piu lungha a(lo i)criuere faro fine' [I will not write longer, I will put an end to writing] (#r16, #r17), which appeared to be a case of influence from above.

All of this suggests that formulae could be memorised by Lucrezia as single units and potentially serve her as a 'safe option' to compose a text. Now that it has been established that formulae could represent holistic units for this writer, I will turn to the second research question: given that Lucrezia's writing experience increased in the course of her life, did the number of optional formulae she used decrease with time? In this case, the answer is negative. If anything, the number of formulae slightly increases, mostly in the closing with the appearance of greetings that were absent from the earlier letters, and with a multiplication of discourse-ending formulae. This does not suggest a simple inverse correlation between level of writing experience and use of epistolary formulae, of the type that has been proposed for other linguistic traditions. It suggests instead that formulae might have been more than aids for formulation.

As for research question 3, i.e. whether the formulae used by Lucrezia show evidence of lifespan change and increase in complexity and elaboration, the answer is affirmative. We have seen this in the change of the superscription to a more elaborate formula geared towards negative politeness; in the replacement of the opening formula 'tengho una uostra' with 'tengho la uostra a me ghratissima'; in the adoption of an alternative, longer and 'bookish' discourse-ending formula; and in the writer's attempt to string together different opening formulae. This suggests that, as Lucrezia's writing experience grew, epistolary formulae were also a means by which she attempted to construct a letter-writing persona. In a society where letter-writing was becoming more and more codified, she seems to have relied on formulae more, not less, with the passing of time. This role of formulae as a means to signal participation in certain community practices, however, is not itself incompatible with them having a role also as a 'safe option' for formulation.

To explain these data, I hypothesise that the relationship between (low) writing experience and (high) use of formulae was not necessarily linear. A writer at the beginning of an acquisition process might simply not know many formulae: at extremely low levels of writing experience, a writer's reliance on formulae would thus be limited. This would have been the case for Lucrezia in the late 1530s and early 1540s, a time when she had just started to write: as seen before, her early letters showed evidence of a lower ability of textual planning, and in one of them (#r221) she even forgot text-type formulae that are usually obligatory – i.e. the address formula and the opening formula – beginning the text *in medias res*. The fact that, during these years, Lucrezia sometimes delegated to others the writing of the superscription is a further sign that she was insecure when it came to epistolary conventions. After this first stage, as a writer's experience slightly increases, familiarising them with letter-writing conventions, writers would start to rely on formulae more heavily, using them as a 'safe option' to compose a letter. It is important to stress that Lucrezia remains, until the end of her life, someone with limited writing experience, retaining a low level of graphic competence and

continuing to delegate to her son (Braccio) the writing of her account book (ASF Ricasoli Amministrazione 275). If a writer were to acquire even more writing experience, we might find that their use of formulae would again decrease, in keeping with what has been shown for other linguistic traditions. The formulae themselves might also become less fixed, as the ability to vary formulae has been observed to increase with increasing writing experience (De Blasi 1982: 35). Indeed, while Lucrezia's use of formulae was shown to increase over time, some elements that she added to the closing in her middle and late letters – especially the 'take care' formula – appear more subject to variation. These are hypotheses that I intend to test in future studies, where I will explore formulaic usage across subsequent generations of Ricasoli women who differed in their level of writing experience, thereby extending the analysis to the many letters that have come down to us by Lucrezia's daughter Maddalena and by her granddaughter Cassandra.

In conclusion, the results suggest that many of the formulae used by Lucrezia might have well been prefabricated units, retrieved as a whole from memory. As such, these formulae could have helped this little experienced writer as aids for formulation. However, tracking the use of these formulae over time has revealed that the relationship between the use of formulae and (low) writing experience was not necessarily linear. The fact that Lucrezia used more, and more complex formulae as time went by suggests that these elements also served other functions, related to group practices and social identities.

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Abstract

LEARNING TO WRITE LETTERS IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE: EPISTOLARY FORMULAE IN THE CORRESPONDENCE OF LUCREZIA ALBIZZI RICASOLI

In sixteenth-century Italy, more and more women began to actively participate in the practice of private letter-writing. This contribution presents the analysis of the language of twenty archival letters written in the Florentine vernacular by Lucrezia di Matteo Albizzi Ricasoli, a Florentine patrician woman who had a low level of writing experience. Lucrezia began to write quite late in her life and went on to correspond with her sons over the next twenty-six years (1539–1565). Focusing on the formulae she used in the epistolary frame and in the superscriptions, my analysis assesses the degree of fixedness of these elements, discusses the functions they might have played in her letter-writing process, and investigates possible lifespan changes in relation to her progressive increase in writing experience. Drawing from hitherto unknown archival material, this study offers a contribution to the historical sociolinguistic debates on the use and social functions of formulae.

Povzetek

KAKO PISATI PISMA V FIRENCAH V 16. STOLETJU: PISEMSKE USTALJENE ZVEZE V KORESPONDENCI LUCREZIE ALBIZZI RICASOLI

V 16. stoletju je v Italiji vse več žensk začelo pisati zasebna pisma. Prispevek analizira jezik dvajsetih pisem, najdenih v arhivih, ki jih je v florentinskem vernakularnem jeziku napisala Lucrezia di Matteo Albizzi Ricasoli, ženska iz florentinske patricijske družine, ki je imela s pisanjem malo izkušenj. Lucrezia je s pisanjem začela dokaj pozno in si nato naslednjih šestindvajset let (1539–1565) dopisovala s svojima sinovoma. Pričujoča razprava se osredotoča na ustaljene zveze, ki jih je Lucrezia uporabljala v uvodnem in zaključnem delu pisem ter v segmentu, namenjenemu identifikaciji naslovnika. Oceniti skušamo, do kakšne mere so ti elementi ustaljeni, in ugotoviti, kakšne vloge bi lahko imeli pri njenem procesu pisanja. Ukvarjamo se tudi z morebitnimi spremembami, povezanimi z njeno vse večjo izkušenostjo v pisanju. Na osnovi doslej neznanega arhivskega gradiva ta raziskava prispeva k razpravam o rabi in o socialnih funkcijah ustaljenih zvez s stališča historične sociolingvistike.