

# Selected Letters of Alessandra Strozzi

Bilingual Edition

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY  
HEATHER GREGORY

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## Introduction

THE LETTERS OF Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi are among the richest and most revealing autobiographical materials to survive from fifteenth-century Florence. They reveal a woman who fought stubbornly to preserve her family's property and position in adverse circumstances, and who was an acute observer of the political and social life of Medicean Florence. They tell the modern reader much about social and political status in this society, and about the concept of honor (*onore*), which could link the destinies of members of the same extended family or lineage.<sup>1</sup> But perhaps their greatest importance lies in the fact that Alessandra Strozzi's letters enable us to trace her inner life over a period of almost twenty-three years, revealing with great immediacy the anxiety and resignation, pain and sorrow, and (more rarely) joy and triumph with which she responded to the events through which she lived.

The lives of most men and women who lived in Renaissance Florence are obscure by modern standards, and the details of women's lives in particular are often lacking. For this reason—and despite the fact that seventy-three of her letters to her sons are extant—there are many gaps in our knowledge of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi's life. Nevertheless, a fairly full picture of her life can be assembled, at least for the period after her marriage to Matteo Strozzi.

Alessandra Macinghi was born into the merchant patriciate, the elite class of Florentine society, probably in

1. The term lineage is used here to mean the largest kinship group, consisting of a number of households (between thirty and thirty-five in the case of the Strozzi, which was a large lineage) sharing a common family name and whose members were aware of their common ancestry. This is the body to which Alessandra Strozzi sometimes refers in her letters as the *casa*, or house.

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1408.<sup>2</sup> The Macinghi were a small lineage whose members seem to have lived mainly in the *gonfalone*<sup>3</sup> of Lion Bianco, in the quarter of Santa Maria Novella. The first member of the Macinghi family to hold the office of prior<sup>4</sup> did so in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, and so the Macinghi were still "new men" within the Florentine elite at the time of Alessandra's birth. But unlike the Strozzi, the family into which she was to marry, the Macinghi steadily improved their political standing during the sixty years of Medicean dominance, from 1434 to 1494.<sup>5</sup>

2. Filippo Strozzi stated, in a final entry in his mother's book of accounts, that she was sixty-three when she died in 1471, giving 1408 as her date of birth. This is likely to be correct, as both Filippo and Alessandra seem to have been careful in recording such information. Cesare Guasti, the nineteenth-century editor of Alessandra's letters, stated that her age was given as twenty-one years and two months in a *catasto portata*, or tax document of 1427: *Lettere di una gentildonna fiorentina del secolo XV ai figliuoli esuli* (Florence: Sansoni, 1877), XL. If correct, this would make her year of birth 1406. The only *portata* which I have seen for Matteo Strozzi's household for 1427 does not give Alessandra's age.

3. Each of the four quarters of the city was in turn subdivided into four *gonfaloni* or neighborhood districts. It was in these districts that the most basic processes of political eligibility for the high offices of the Florentine state were carried out.

4. The highest executive office in the Florentine state. The priors were "elected" (their names drawn from a bag containing name-tickets of citizens eligible for the highest political office) for a two-month period of office, this short period being designed to ensure that they could not entrench themselves in power.

5. See Dale V. Kent, "The Florentine *Reggimento* in the Fifteenth Century," *Renaissance Quarterly* 28 (1975): 626, 636, 637; and Ann Morton Crabb, "A Patrician Family in Renaissance Florence: The Family Relations of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi and her Sons" (Washington University, St. Louis: University Microfilms International, 1980), 17, for differing views of the Macinghi family and their political antiquity.

## INTRODUCTION

Alessandra's father was Filippo di Niccolò Macinghi and her mother was Caterina di Bernardo Alberti. Caterina died when Alessandra and her brother Zanobi were young children, and her father married again and had three more children (Antonio, Caterina, and Ginevra) with his second wife, Ginevra di Albertuccio Ricasoli. As an adult Alessandra had a close and affectionate relationship only with her full brother, Zanobi. Filippo Macinghi must have been wealthy, because even with five children to provide for, he managed to set aside a dowry of 1600 florins for his eldest daughter, a large sum by the standards of the early fifteenth century. He died in 1420, two years before Alessandra's marriage.

Alessandra married Matteo Strozzi on 10 June 1422. She was probably only fourteen at this time, the earliest age considered marriageable for girls of her class. Matteo was twenty-five and was of very good birth but only modest wealth. The Strozzi were one of the largest and most prestigious lineages in Florence, and they had enjoyed a leading position in politics and business since the end of the thirteenth century. Matteo was a member of one of the two wool merchants' guilds, but appears to have devoted most of his time to politics and fashionable humanistic studies,<sup>6</sup> and was a friend of some of the leading figures of Florentine politics and society at this time. This match would have been considered a very good one for a girl from the Macinghi family, whose members, while respectable and wealthy, were not particularly distinguished. The Macinghi and Strozzi were residents of adjoining *gonfaloni*; marriage alliances were common between such neighbors, and were considered politically useful.

6. See Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence: A Study of Four Families* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 38-52.

No portrait of Alessandra survives and it is unlikely that one ever existed, so her appearance is unknown. It seems probable that she was attractive in her youth, as physical beauty was considered important in a prospective wife, even one with a substantial dowry, particularly as she came from a family of lesser social prestige than that into which she married. The first four years of Alessandra and Matteo's marriage did not produce any children, but she then gave birth to three daughters and five sons in fairly rapid succession: Andreuola (1426), Simone (1427), Filippo (1428), Piero (1429), Caterina (1431), Lorenzo (1432), Lessandra (1434), and Matteo (1436). Five of these children survived to adulthood.

Alessandra and Matteo were separated by his extended absences from Florence on diplomatic missions during the early 1430s. Then, during 1433 and 1434, a bitter struggle for power took place in Florence. The city was officially governed by a guild regime, with most political offices reserved for members of the seven merchant or professional guilds. Although the constitution made political parties illegal, many citizens within the political class were in fact divided into two opposing factions. Most members of the Strozzi lineage belonged to the so-called Oligarchical faction, a loose alliance of various powerful patrician families, while the Medici faction was supported by the wealth of the Medici bank, the greatest in Europe at this time. In September 1433, the leader of the Medici faction (Cosimo de' Medici) and a group of his kinsmen and close associates were exiled from the city to prevent their anticipated assumption of power. A year later the Medici faction staged a far more successful coup d'etat, and in turn exiled many of their opponents. In November 1434 Matteo Strozzi was exiled to Pesaro, where he was treated as an honored guest by the ruling Malatesta family; three other Strozzi were exiled at this time, and the great majority of the lineage's adult male members had

their names removed from the lists of politically eligible citizens.

Alessandra joined Matteo in his exile, although she was not legally compelled to do so. Her husband died in Pesaro a little over a year later, in 1435 or early 1436, probably of the plague. Three of their children—Andreuola, Piero, and Simone—also died of the plague at this time. Alessandra then returned to Florence with her surviving children and remained there, except for occasional journeys, until her death on 2 March 1471. She did not remarry. Women who made a second marriage were usually very young when widowed, and often had no children, or at least no sons; it was considered to be against a boy's best interests to be raised in a stepfather's household. Also, both Christian doctrine and popular sentiment encouraged widows to remain chaste and devote themselves to their children and the management of their husband's estate. By remarrying, Alessandra would also have deprived her sons of the use of some of their inheritance, because the lands which (under Florentine law) represented her dowry, restituted to her after Matteo's death, would have passed to her new husband during his lifetime. She may also have followed her own inclination in not remarrying: a widow was much more her own mistress than a wife could ever be.

It would have been usual for a young widow in such circumstances to turn for help to her father-in-law or a brother-in-law, but Matteo had no brothers and Simone Strozzi had died before his son. Matteo's closest male kinsmen, his first cousins Jacopo, Filippo, and Niccolò di Leonardo Strozzi, had left Florence voluntarily in the years after 1434 and had established a very successful bank with offices in Bruges, Barcelona, and Naples. This branch of the Strozzi lineage was very cohesive, and Jacopo, Filippo, and Niccolò were willing to help their cousin's sons, mainly by taking them into their bank to

give them the training in business which Florentine boys of the merchant class usually received during their teenage years. There was an additional reason for Alessandra's sons to leave Florence: because their father had been a legal exile, their future prospects were considered poor if they remained in the city. Filippo and Lorenzo appear to have learned their business lessons well, and with the patronage of King Ferrante of Naples they went on to make an even greater fortune than their cousins', through their own bank and cloth warehouse in Naples. They were not legally exiled from Florence until 1458, when one of the periodic threats to Medicean dominance led to a range of restrictive measures against their opponents, actual or prospective.

Although Alessandra maintained some contacts with her own family, at least until the death of her brother Zanobi in 1452, she identified herself strongly with the Strozzi lineage, and after her return to Florence she had extensive dealings with her Strozzi kinsmen-by-marriage. She devoted herself wholeheartedly to the interests of her children, while much of her time was spent in the routine business of the Florentine property owner: managing tenants, collecting rents, and paying taxes. She was both literate and numerate, writing fluently in Tuscan and keeping household accounts. She had almost certainly been taught to read and write by her mother or another female relative, as girls were not usually taught by tutors. She wrote a "merchant" hand which was without any of the graceful and deliberate form of the humanist script which some Florentine boys of her class were learning at this time, but which is nevertheless as clear and legible as the handwriting of most of her contemporaries, male or female. While she had obviously received a basic education, Alessandra was not "lettered" in the contemporary sense of the word, being unable to read Latin, and her letters appear to be without literary allusions. She makes no ref-

erences to books, and if she possessed any they would probably have been devotional in nature.

Alessandra stated on various occasions that she did not enjoy using a pen and complained about how much she disliked writing letters, giving the strong impression that she wrote only out of necessity. But when she did write it was usually at far greater length and with far more detail than was needed. In fact there was little real need for her to write to her sons at all, as their brothers-in-law, Marco Parenti and Giovanni Bonsi, kept them faithfully informed about family business and Florentine politics. Alessandra wrote long letters because she wanted to, even though (so far as we can tell) this seems to have been rather unusual for a woman. She would also, no doubt, have preferred to dictate her letters to a secretary, professional or amateur.

The present translation of Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi's letters is based on the edition published by Cesare Guasti in 1877, entitled *Lettere di una gentildonna fiorentina del secolo XV ai figliuoli esuli*, with the addition of another letter published by Isidoro del Lungo thirteen years later.<sup>7</sup> From the seventy-three extant letters, thirty-five have been translated here, either in full or in part. The selection has been based on two main criteria. First, it was important that the letters included were those which carried forward the story of Alessandra's life, both because of its intrinsic interest and for the sake of comprehensibility.

7. Guasti, *Lettere di una gentildonna* (cited above); *Una lettera della Alessandra Macinghi negli Strozzi in aggiunta alle LXXII pubblicate da Cesare Guasti nel 1877* (Florence: Carnesecchi, 1890).

## Letters

### I

*This is the earliest surviving letter of Alessandra Strozzi. It was written to her eldest son, Filippo, to tell him about the marriage she had arranged for his sister Caterina, who was to be married to a young man called Marco Parenti, a silk merchant. The letter also deals with taxes, the education of Alessandra's youngest son, Matteo, and the need for Filippo to be suitably grateful to Niccolò Strozzi, his father's cousin, who had taken him into his business in Naples.*

In the name of God. 24 August 1447.

Dearest son, in the last few days I have received your letter of the 16th of July, which I will answer in this one.

And first I must tell you how by the grace of God we have arranged a marriage for our Caterina to the son of Parente di Piero Parenti. He is a young man of good birth and abilities and an only son, rich and twenty-five years of age, and he has a silk manufacturing business. And they take a small part in the government, as a little while ago his father was [an officeholder] in the College.<sup>1</sup> And so I am giving him one thousand florins of dowry, that is, five hundred florins that she is due in May 1448 from the Fund,<sup>2</sup> and the other five hundred I have to give him, made up of cash and trousseau, when she goes to her husband's house, which I believe will be in November, God

willing. And this money will be partly yours and partly mine. If I hadn't taken this decision she wouldn't have been married this year, because he who marries is looking for cash and I couldn't find anyone who was willing to wait for the dowry until 1448, and part in 1450. So as I'm giving him this five hundred made up of cash and trousseau, the 1450 [money] will be mine if she lives until then.<sup>3</sup> We've taken this decision for the best because she was sixteen and we didn't want to wait any longer to arrange a marriage. And we found that to place her in a nobler family with greater political status would have needed fourteen hundred or fifteen hundred florins, which would have ruined both of us. And I'm not sure it would have made the girl any happier, because outside the regime<sup>4</sup> there's not a great choice, and this is a big problem for us. Everything considered, I decided to settle the girl well and not to take such things into account. I'm sure she'll be as well placed as any girl in Florence, because she'll have a mother- and father-in-law who are only happy making her happy. Oh and I haven't told you about Marco yet, [Caterina's] husband, he's always saying to her "If you want anything ask me for it." When she was betrothed he ordered a gown of crimson velvet for her made of silk and a surcoat of the same fabric, which is the most beautiful cloth in Florence. He had it made in his workshop. And he had a garland of feathers and pearls made [for her] which cost eighty florins, the headdress underneath has two strings of pearls costing sixty florins or more. When she goes out she'll have more than four hundred florins on her back. And he ordered some crimson velvet to be made up into long sleeves lined with marten, for [her to wear] when she goes to her husband's house. And he's having a rose-colored gown made, embroidered with pearls. He feels he can't do enough having things made, because she's beautiful and he wants her to look even more so. There isn't a girl in Florence to compare

with her and she's beautiful in every way, or so many people think. May God give them his grace and good health for a long time, as I wish.

Nov. 3, 1448

Letter #2

I must tell you about Marco. He's a good young man and treats Caterina very well and behaves well to everyone and I'm very happy about it. He has great abilities but too much tax, eleven florins.<sup>8</sup> He is up to date with his payments and if it doesn't get any worse I'll be very happy about him. May God give him grace. Caterina isn't pregnant so far, which at present I'm glad about, but she stays thin<sup>9</sup> because she takes after her father. May God keep her well.

26 Dec, 1449

Letter #4

I gather you've heard from Marco that Caterina is pregnant and expecting the child in the middle of February. As that's the case I think we should take out some insurance so we won't lose the five hundred florins they're owed from the [Dowry] Fund,<sup>7</sup> as we could lose her and the money at the same time. We could lose it if God has other plans for her. I've discussed it with Antonio degli Strozzi and he thinks we should spend the 12 florins, which is what it would cost for insurance for these three months, that is for January, February and March. I'll wait for Niccolò, who'll be here soon, and do as he advises me. Marco thinks we shouldn't do it; he says that as she's keeping so well in herself we shouldn't throw away these few florins. It seems to me better to throw them away and be sure. For that reason [I won't] write to him about it, so he won't take it badly, because it's our business. I pray God will bring her through it at the proper time and healthy in body and soul, as I wish.

I'm thinking of going to Rome, God willing, later on in April for the Holy Indulgence.<sup>8</sup> If by any chance you could come too, so that I could see you again before I die, it would be a great comfort to me. You see there's nothing else I care about in this world except you, my three sons, and I've sent you away one after the other for your own good and not considering my own happiness. Now I am so sad at sending away this last one. I don't know how I can live without him, because I feel so unhappy and love him too much because he is just like his father.

21 April 1464

Letter #8

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*Two paragraphs: she has seen what Matteo di Giorgio Brandolini wrote to Filippo, and it pleased her, but it was unwise to place hope in mere words; she has heard the proposal of Filippo's friend,<sup>2</sup> and the answer which Filippo gave, which have also pleased her.*

Lorenzo's daughter [Marietta Strozzi] is still here but I haven't heard anything else about it. She's waiting here for her mother. The plague's a great inconvenience for girls because hardly any marriages are being arranged here. I see there's also some fear of an outbreak there and that some people have died from it already. This has upset me very much, more than the fact that it's here, and I'll go on being afraid of it. I do beg you as much as I can to be wise enough to watch out for it; don't wait until it boils over before you leave. Do be one of the first to go, and remember that everyone who's died in our family has gone of this disease, right up to my son Matteo. So keep this in mind. Lorenzo will be there soon and then you can both decide, if there's still plague there. May God and St. Sebastian save you from this and every other suffering, as I wish. It would be a good idea, so that you can go on making your living, to put business and making money to one side; death has wrecked more plans than anything else. Concentrate on living as well as you can. Piero Piaciti has died of the plague here, between Saturday at 5 p.m. and Monday at a quarter past three. He left an elderly mother and a pregnant wife and six children alone and without any spiritual guidance, and badly looked after in body as well. There was no one there except two nurses' aides from S. Maria Nuova.<sup>3</sup> There was no one to do them a good deed and no one would even cook their bread for them as everyone had run away. He [Piero Piaciti] had a boy,<sup>4</sup> but the Eight<sup>5</sup> had sent him away. It's hard to find out how they're getting on. May God help them.

Let. # 23

To Filippo in Naples

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In the name of God. 20 April 1465.

My last letter was on the 13th. Since then I've had yours of the 7th, which I'll answer as I need to.

I see that Lorenzo has told you that he thinks I still really want to come and live with you both, and [you say] nothing could give you more comfort, and that there is only the matter of the wife left to be settled. To which I say, for my part, that it's always been my dearest wish to be with you, but you saw how long it took to sell my property here, and once it was sold there was some hope of you coming back here, and the delay in getting you married came from that. And because of my age I became discouraged and lost any hope of ever having any comfort from you, except through letters. But after seeing Lorenzo and hearing that you want to get married and that you've made up your mind to do it, I think it's reasonable and my duty to stay here until it's all arranged. Then we'll have to see. I must say that [even] if it weren't for this business of finding you a wife I wouldn't have much hope of ever going to live with you, because there's always been something to stop me from having the comfort of living with you. And if it would be a big comfort to you, it would be a much bigger one to me, because in the natural course of things I love you and feel much more tenderness for you than you do for me. And the reason is because I can only do badly without you, but you can do everything without me. So you can certainly believe that I told Lorenzo the truth about what I want. Now I pray God to bring us whatever will be for the best.

*One paragraph: the Florentine ambassadors will have arrived in Naples, and Filippo will have talked to them and perhaps heard something useful.*

About finding you a wife, it seems to us and also to Tommaso Davizzi<sup>1</sup> that if Francesco di Messer Gugliel-

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mino Tanagli were willing to give you his daughter, it would be a good match for all seasons, and that out of those which are available, this has the most to recommend it. I liked the da Vernia match, but from what I've heard she is clumsy and looks like a peasant. Now I will talk about it with Marco, about whether there are any others who would be better, and if there aren't, about finding out whether he [Francesco] wants to give her to you; we have only discussed it among ourselves. Francesco is well thought of and he takes part in the government, though not in the more important positions. Still, he has held offices. And if you ask "but why would he give her to an exile?" there are many reasons why he might do so. First, there's a shortage of young men of good family who have both money and abilities. Second, she has only a small dowry, I think it's a thousand florins, which is an artisan's dowry; the Manfredi gave their girl two thousand florins to marry her into the Pitti family, and she is only fifteen, whereas she [the Tanagli girl] is seventeen.<sup>2</sup> So you see how it is. The third reason why I think he'll give her to us is that he has a big family and needs help to get them settled. This is the main reason why I think he'll agree. I'll find out more about it and if he doesn't want to, we'll find someone else. We will let you know.

I hear that you sent 80 pounds of flax to Mona Ginevra di Gino.<sup>3</sup> I am glad, as it will really seem as if you value the favor she did for you here.

I see that Mona Lucrezia di Piero<sup>4</sup> has sent you a fine letter for love of the flax you sent her. She would do well to reward you with something she doesn't have to spend anything on, apart from words, by speaking to Piero on your behalf, [to the effect] that he should return you to your family. I always thank God for everything, because he gives us our prosperity, and adversity to punish us for our sins. We should be thankful for everything, and I pray He may give us the grace to know the good things we receive from Him.

Letter # 24

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To Filippo 24 July 1465  
(letter continued on 27<sup>th</sup>)

It is now the 27th and Marco Parenti has come to see me. He has been talking to me about how we discussed finding you a wife a long time ago, and how we discussed the possibilities and where we thought we'd be able to go, and how it seemed to us that the best match, all other things being equal—if she had the right ideas and was beautiful, and wasn't rough or uncouth—was Francesco di Guglielmino Tanagli's daughter. We haven't heard of anything, up to the present, which would suit you better than this. And, to tell you the truth, we haven't discussed it too much, and you know the reason.<sup>5</sup> However we have looked into it secretly, and we've found that there aren't any girls [whose families would marry them] to an exile, who don't have some shortcoming or other, whether [lack of] money or something else. Now the least serious drawback is the money, and when the other things we want are there we shouldn't look askance at the money, as you've said to me a number of times. So on St. Jacob's Day, as Francesco is a great friend of Marco's and trusts him greatly, having already heard several months ago that we were willing to have a look at the girl, he asked Marco about it in a fine manner and choosing his words well. He said that if he [Marco] asked for her on your behalf, when we had made up our minds, she would come to us willingly, because you're a man of substance and [his family] having always made good matches, as he had little to give her he would sooner send her away to someone of substance rather than give her to whoever he could find here, someone who would have little money, and that he wouldn't want to lower [his family's status]. He wanted

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Marco to go with him to his house, and he called the girl down, and he [Marco] saw her, and he [Francesco] said that if Caterina or I wanted to see her at any time he would show her to us. Marco says she looks beautiful and that she seemed suitable to him. We've been told that she has the right ideas and is capable and that she runs the household to a large extent because there are twelve children, six boys and six girls, and according to what I hear she runs it all because her mother is always pregnant and doesn't do much. Those who know the household say she manages the house and that her father has trained her to do it, and he is very well thought of and one of the best-mannered young men in Florence. So as it seems to me that we will have to wait a long time, I don't think we should put off taking this step, so let us know what we should do. And it would be good, to my way of thinking, if you asked Pandolfo [Pandolfini] about it, as he is the closest contact we have with this girl, [and ask him] to tell us all about it, and about her father's circumstances. I wouldn't tell him that we haven't discussed anything, but [say] that we have the idea, and if he would give you advice about it. And if what he says to you is favorable, like what we've heard, I would believe it, and decide to stop all this thinking, because once the decision has been made all your suffering will be over. I'm sure you will hear all about this business from Marco in much more detail than you have from me, because he discussed it and understands it better than me. Get the jewels ready and let them be beautiful, because we have found you a wife. As she is beautiful and the wife of Filippo Strozzi, she will need beautiful jewels. Just as you have honor in other things, she doesn't want to be lacking in this.

Lorenzo isn't writing to me; I haven't heard from him since the 27th of June, which makes me think he isn't in a good frame of mind. Let me know how he is and if he has had an heir,<sup>6</sup> because Tommaso told me he was expecting

one. You'll both be unmarried for so long that you'll have a dozen of them. May God still give you a long life, as I wish. Nothing else occurs to me to tell you for now, except that you should try to stay well. May God keep you from all harm. From your Alessandra Strozzi, in Florence.



In this short letter to Filippo Alessandra describes the daughter of Francesco Tanagli—her name is not mentioned at any stage—who was being considered as a wife for him.

Letter # 25

In the name of God. 17 August 1465.

About that member of the della Luna family, I've heard that there's three thousand florins in dowry and one thousand five hundred in trousseau. If it's true then he's taken

a big step up the dowry ladder from what was mentioned at the start. He's nothing if not to blame in having married himself into a family of priests. And they also say that their business isn't profitable, perhaps they will fix it up this way. And they are building a beautiful house, at least it looks that way from the outside.

*One paragraph: the new Florentine ambassadors.*

I must tell you how, during the Ave Maria at the first Mass at Santa Liperata,<sup>2</sup> having gone there several times on feast mornings to see the Adimari girl<sup>3</sup> as she usually goes to that Mass, I found the Tanagli girl there. Not knowing who she was, I sat on one side of her and had a good look at her. She seemed to me to have a beautiful figure and to be well put together; she's as tall as Caterina or taller, with good skin, though it's not white, and she looks healthy. She has a long face and her features aren't very delicate, but they're not like a peasant's. It seemed to me, from looking at her face and how she walks, that she isn't lazy, and altogether I think that if the other considerations suit us she wouldn't be a bad deal and will do us credit. I followed her out of church and saw that she was one of the Tanagli, so now I know a bit more about her. I've never seen the Adimari girl, something which seems difficult because I've gone to all the places and she hasn't been there as she usually is. And going there with my mind on her, the other one came, who doesn't usually do so. I think God arranged it so I could see her, as I hadn't any thought of doing so. You've been told [about this] in other letters, by Marco and by me, and you say it's something where you need to use your brain, and I think so too. You've been told what she looks like, and what the disadvantages are. Think about it and take whatever decision you think is for the best; may God show it to you.

B 597 1465

Letter # 26

I'm not surprised that you're proceeding cautiously in this business of acquiring a wife; it is, as you say, very important, the most important thing you can do, because having a good companion is a comfort to a man, both in body and soul, and the opposite is also the case, if you have a wife who is silly or a sniveller, or like the one

Filippo<sup>1</sup> had, your life will be a burden to you. About the one Filippo had, it was said that when he was here he saw her and liked her extreme silliness so much that he wouldn't agree to marry anyone else, and he wanted to marry her, but her mother wouldn't agree to send her away [to Barcelona]. We found various other suitable girls for him, but he didn't want any of them. Then her mother happened to die, and Messer Manno<sup>2</sup> was her guardian. She carried on in such a way that it seemed like a thousand years before they could get rid of her, and she didn't have a dowry so they gave her to Filippo. There was no need to wonder at her, the wonder was at him, the silly old fool, that he let her do what she liked, and was so besotted with her that she brought shame on both herself and him. Men, when they have such a feather-brained wife, manage to hold them in check, and a man, when he is a real man, makes his wife a wife, and he can't do that if he is too infatuated with her. When in the beginning she makes little mistakes, he corrects them so they don't become bigger ones. And sensible people don't take any chances. There are plenty of women who, because there's no one to boss them about, make mistakes, so they should be picked up on every little thing and not allowed to let things slide. So, considering it from every angle, you tell me that the wise person must show his wisdom in important matters; you are one of those people who knows these things, and you show it in everything, which pleases me. Having looked at everything and judging by what we've heard, I believe she isn't a scatterbrain, because I've passed there many times, and sent a servant there, and you don't see her there all day at the window, which seems to me a good sign. And I've heard so much about her, I couldn't have heard more. I'm waiting for you to talk to Pandolfo about it, to see if he can add anything, because his wife can't, except that her mother isn't up to much and so her father has brought her up to do the house-

keeping and run the household. I know you well, and I haven't forgotten [what you're like]; if you marry her and she's the sort of girl I've been told she is, I think you'll be happy together. We don't know what's going to happen to people in the future, but for the present we can judge well. Now I've done my part; may God let you do whatever's for the best.

*Seven paragraphs: Filippo wanted her to order household linen; more about fennel; Bettino<sup>3</sup> had returned from seeing Giovanfrancesco, who spoke fairly but would act badly, and who was living in high style; there was a delay about a financial settlement; she hadn't written to Niccolò about the marriage negotiations; Filippo would need another slave in his household once he was married; someone who was more knowledgeable than she was would let Filippo know what was happening in Florence.*

I had finished writing this letter when Marco came to see me. He says he bumped into Francesco Tanagli, and that Francesco spoke about it [the projected marriage alliance] in a very unenthusiastic way, so I gather he's had second thoughts, and he says he wants to discuss it with Messer Antonio Ridolfi, his brother-in-law, who is [away] holding an office and has to be back by All Saints' Day [1 November]. And he said it was a big decision to send a daughter so far away, to live in a house which was almost like a hotel.<sup>4</sup> And he spoke in such a way that you could see he had changed his mind. I think this has happened because it has gone on for so long without us giving him an answer, because of the time you took to decide, and Marco as well. Fifteen days ago he [Marco] could have given him some reason to feel hopeful about it, but now he's taken offense and has some better prospect in view. It seems to me there's a great shortage of girls who have the qualities this one has. We will have to do without her because he will have found someone better, but we haven't found anyone better. I've been very upset by this busi-

ness, I don't know when I've been more upset, because it seemed to me that she suited us better than anyone else we might find. We'll never come across such a girl again, unless we get one of Cosimo's.<sup>5</sup> This one was just what we needed. I really regret the delays which made us lose her, and as I said to Marco, I really don't know where we can turn now, because there are only stupid girls available, and so far as I'm concerned I really don't know what we should do. Anyway, I won't have to find linen and you won't have to find jewelry, as I thought we would when it all seemed to be under way; but I still have to find a wife. May it all happen in God's name. Marco will have to let you know about something because this has knocked all the wind out of me, I've worked so hard and lost everything.

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*Alessandra's brother-in-law Niccolò Soderini had become Gonfalonier of Justice at the end of October 1465. As he was one of the leaders of the movement opposed to Piero de' Medici, it was widely believed that political changes would finally occur. Florentines usually rejoiced to have a close relative in this position of supreme honor, but Alessandra did not have a friendly relationship with Niccolò and could not ask him directly to help her sons. This letter is addressed to both Filippo and Lorenzo.*

In the name of God. 15 November 1465.

I wrote to you last on the 2nd and the 9th, and since then I've had four letters from you, of the 28th, 30th and 31st. I will answer you both in this letter.

I've gathered from your letters that you've made up your minds to take this step you've discussed so many times, and which I've wanted for so long. If you keep to your resolution and do so while I'm still alive, I think it will be a comfort to you and a great consolation to me. Having two sons who have worked so hard for so long, and not seeing any children of yours, sometimes makes me wonder "who are they doing all this work for? If they go on as they are they'll harden their hearts and stay as they are, and they'll keep me in all these negotiations for so long that I'll die!" And I've had many battles in my mind and for the last two months I've brought myself to the point of thinking that God, for my sins, doesn't want me to have this consolation. I've put myself in His hands and prayed to Him, and prayed continually (as you do) for Him to make up my mind and yours to take that decision, which must be best for our bodies and souls. Now, having your letters and hearing the decision you've made be-

tween yourselves, I believe it's God's will that you should take that decision, and I've been pleased by these letters of yours. And I'm hoping that you, Filippo, won't make any more difficulties and that you won't waste any more ink on it. And, as I said in another letter to Lorenzo, we know so much about what you both want, and we are people who care about both your pride and your pocket as much as you do, and we're more diligent than you would be, actually being here, so you should hope for the best and leave the details to us. More than anything else we want the qualities we've so often discussed, and beauty more than anything. I would still like Francesco Tanagli's daughter for you, Filippo, and the Adimari girl, who is younger, for you, Lorenzo. They're among the most beautiful girls there are, if we could get them, and both of them have good qualities, but as we have had discussions about both of them as a wife for Filippo, I don't know whether [her family] would want to change the arrangement and give her to you, Lorenzo. We'll sound all this out and if we can't have her we'll look for someone else. And those we think might be for you, like the Borghini [girl], we'll parade them all in front of you. With the Adimari girl's sister, nothing has been said about her and there may be something lacking there; she's sixteen, but from the beginning we gathered that the younger one is more beautiful and we set our heart on her, because if we can we would like to give you beautiful wives. It seems to me [Lorenzo] that you're still terrified of getting married, despite the decision you've come to, and you show how little inclined you are. You say that as soon as you decided a hundred different thoughts entered your mind, and I pray that God will help you with such fear, because if all men were so afraid of getting married the world would be empty by now. You must go ahead with your purchase, so that you can see that the devil's not as black as he's painted, and free yourself from this fear. You ask

me if I think you should wait a year or two longer to get married, and I tell you, in my opinion, no. And if Marco has your authority to do so, and if no new prospect turns up, we will let you know. About the cost, you'll do whatever's needed at the time and so will Filippo, and about the dowry settlement and everything, it will all be arranged as seems the best.

Don't be surprised if Marco hasn't taken up this matter with Francesco [Tanagli] again yet. For one thing, he doesn't have full authority to speak for you, and for another Messer Antonio Ridolfi hasn't come back from Pisa yet; he's expected any day now. Another reason is that everyone's mind is on what is happening in the Palazzo,<sup>1</sup> to put the government back on track and decide how we are going to live. They're discussing it all day and those who had their names taken out of the bags in 1458 are expecting to have them put back in.<sup>2</sup> Marco is working hard on this and so are the others who are putting it to the vote. They say it will be passed, and then they say that if this is done, they'll discuss allowing the innocent exiles<sup>3</sup> to return, although it's only the *popolani*<sup>4</sup> they're talking about doing this for. On Sunday, that is the 10th, Giovanni [Bonsi] left here, and he met Luigi Pitti on the way to Le Selve, and they talked about your affairs, and he [Luigi] said he had discussed your return with the Gonfalonier, and the Gonfalonier said it seemed to him a good thing to do for all those who were innocent. That seems to me to be good news, if he did say it. And I also heard that Francesco di Nerone<sup>5</sup> raised the matter in general terms the first time Niccolò called a group of leading citizens together to consult with him. So, this being the case, it might be a good idea if you, Filippo, sent a letter to your friends to remind them of your position and then sent the letters to Marco to send or not, according to what seems best to him, because sometimes things happen which we can't let you know about quickly. So the things that I've mentioned are holding up discussions about the marriage.

Letter # 30

In the name of God. 4 January 1466.

My last letter was on the 30th and in it I told you as much as I'd heard up till then from Marco about the business of the Tanagli girl, and since then I've heard nothing about

the Adimari girl, so I've got nothing to tell you about that here. Since then I've had your letter of the 17th which you kept until the 19th. So far as the business of finding wives is concerned, we have to wait and see what happens, as I told you in another letter, so I've no answers to give you here. But I'm of the opinion that if we look elsewhere for what we want, we should leave the Tanagli girl alone and buy the Adimari girl first and look for a second. I've seen her and I'm pleased with her and she doesn't seem so ordinary to me, unlike what someone told me; she's good meat with lots of flavor. When I hear anything else I'll let you know.

*Two paragraphs: Filippo has heard about the new Signoria and the new Gonfalonier,<sup>1</sup> who is a good man; she has spoken to Gostanza di Pandolfo [Pandolfini], who is considering whether she should send one of her sons to the court of King Ferrante of Naples.*

You gave Brunetto's son<sup>2</sup> food to eat and clothes to wear, and you gave him shelter and money and sent him back here; out of the seven acts of mercy you have performed three. You have done very well and you didn't hold what his father had done to you against him. God will help you prosper even more, because he who is charitable can only meet with good in return. And God may give you grace so that you may do the same thing for others who have done you harm, so you can help them and save your own soul and pay back good for bad. And there's no doubt about it, that when I hear about the blessings and wealth God has given you I take great comfort from it. You should acknowledge who has given them to you, and that you owe everything to God; when you compare your position with that of other exiles, who as well as being deprived of their homeland have been ruined financially, whereas you're in such a position that there are few outside the city who have a better reputation or

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a bigger fortune than yours. And even here there are very few better off than you are, which is a miracle. And they say that among those looking for a wife, and one with a big dowry, there aren't twenty young men of good birth who could lay their hands on more than 1500 florins.<sup>3</sup> So you see how well you stand. You must thank God that you have a reputation and financial circumstances different from those of these men who are in their own homes and their own country. God has given us this burden of exile, but he has given you so much else; you should be happy and so much more so when you have good friends to keep you company. May God prepare for you whatever is for the best, but He will do it deliberately, not in a hurry.

*Letter #31*

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In the name of God. 11 January 1466.

My last letter was on the 4th and since then I've had your letter of the 28th of last month. I see you're writing to me more often, not because you need to but so I can have the happiness of receiving your letters. You give me great pleasure by doing so while I can't see you in person. I thank God for everything, which may be for the best. I will answer your letter.

I told you in another letter what had happened about the Tanagli girl, and so far there's no more news about that, and you know we're not having any discussions about the Adimari girl until they sell off her older sister. Marco doesn't think there's anything else to do until we're clear about those two and what path they will take; depending on the time they have, they wouldn't want to delay too long in getting through with it. It's true that I want to see you both married, as I've said before, so that when I die I can feel that you've got to that stage that mothers want for their sons, to see them married, so that your children will benefit from all you've gained over a long time by your hard work and trouble. And for that reason I've

tried to keep what little I have, and I haven't done things I should have, either for my own soul or for those of our departed, and because I've hoped that you'll both marry and have children I've been happy to have done it. So this is my wish. Since I heard what Lorenzo had decided, that he wanted to get married for my sake, but that he would still be happy to put it off for two years before tying himself to a wife, I've thought about it many times, and it seems to me that it's not of any great advantage to us, [but] if we have the time to wait these two years it might be a good idea to do so, if some great piece of luck hasn't come our way. Otherwise it doesn't seem a particularly good idea to think about it now, and above all given the present

state of things. Young men here are happy to stay single; the country is in a bad way and men have never spent so much money on dressing their wives as they do now. If a girl doesn't have a really big dowry she wears it all when she goes out, what with silk and jewels, and that isn't what we need here. Although I haven't written anything to him about it, we're not looking for anyone for him: we're waiting to see if we have any success for you with either of the two we've had discussions about. If we managed to get the Tanagli girl for you we could sound out the possibility of the other one for him. And I can see he's happy to wait for two years more, as he tells me in every letter, so everything will be done in the fullness of time. Perhaps our minds will be at peace by then, and this way we'll be able to pursue other possibilities, [people] who wouldn't offer a wife without money, as they're doing now,<sup>1</sup> because it seems superfluous to whoever has to give it, giving a dowry to an exile. Marco has written to tell you that the Tanagli girl's father has had second thoughts about it, of the kind I wrote to you about. You say that so far as looking at [any prospective wife] and negotiations are concerned, you will leave it to us. For my part, I have done as much as I can, and I don't know how to do more than I have, and I've done it for your sake more than my own, because I haven't got much time left but you have a lot, it stands to reason. May it please God to let it be so. Marco is still giving it his best efforts; whatever is for the best, may God let it happen. Tell Lorenzo he needn't worry about getting married just yet.

## Notes

### Letter 1

1. He had held office in one of the two magistracies which constituted the "Colleges" of the Signoria, or Priorate, which assisted and advised the priors: the "Twelve Goodmen" and the "Sixteen Gonfaloniers of Companies," popularly known as the Twelve and the Sixteen.
2. The Dowry Fund was established in 1425, allowing parents of some means to deposit a sum on their infant daughters' behalf, to mature after a set term. This was paid to her husband after the marriage had been consummated or after the term of the investment was completed, if that was a later date.
3. If a girl died before her marriage, or after it but before a Dowry Fund investment matured, only the deposit was returned to her relatives.
4. The elite group who held high office and enjoyed real political power.
5. Filippo had raised the question of whether Matteo, who was eleven, should leave Florence to begin learning merchant practice in one of the branches (in Naples, Bruges, and Barcelona) of the bank of Niccolò, Filippo, and Jacopo di Lionardo Strozzi. They were first cousins of Alessandra's husband, Matteo.
6. The head tax.
7. That is, he was learning to write business letters, and also to write a clearer script.
8. The Florentine state or government.
9. Branches or divisions of the Florentine government, in charge of its various fiscal functions.
10. Filippo Maria Visconti, Duke of Milan (died 13 August 1447), had spent much of the previous three decades at war with Florence.
11. Alfonso I of Naples (Alfonso V of Aragon), ruled 1443-58.
12. In the Val d'Arno, about forty-five kilometers to the southeast of Florence.

### Letter 2

- ① The "plague" which is frequently referred to in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian sources has generally (but not universally) been considered to be bubonic plague and two variants, pneumonic and septicemic plague. The mortality rate among victims was high (between 60 and 90 per cent for bubonic plague), and death usually occurred within a week of symptoms appearing.
2. The *contado* or rural districts immediately surrounding and ruled by Florence.
3. That of her son-in-law, Marco Parenti.
4. Her second surviving son, Lorenzo; see below, Letter 8.
5. Instead of going into business for himself, as he did later.
6. This may be a reference to the fact that she no longer had access to politically influential friends or relations to help her in this area.
7. Filippo frequently sent flax to female relatives and friends in Florence, who spun it into linen thread as a pastime.
- ⑧ That is, he had to pay eleven florins each time the tax was levied, which happened as frequently as the government judged necessary.
- ⑨ Considered a sign of ill health and undesirable.

### Letter 4

1. A village to the southeast of Florence.
2. Formerly a business partner of Alessandra's husband, he now worked for Niccolò Strozzi and his brothers.
3. The Strozzi lineage.
4. Husband of Alessandra di Messer Filippo Strozzi, who was an aunt of the Filippo Strozzi whose death has just been mentioned.
5. A first cousin of Alessandra's husband.
6. To discuss the administration of their brother's estate.
7. This money belonged to Alessandra because she had paid Marco 500 florins of her own money at the time of the marriage.
8. Pilgrims to Rome could obtain a plenary or full indulgence which remitted all temporal punishment for their sins up to that time.

### Letter 23

1. A cousin of her husband, and also a relation of Tommaso Ginori.
2. Patrician girls were married at sixteen or even younger, if possible.
3. Probably the wife of Gino di Neri Capponi.
4. Lucrezia Tornabuoni, wife of Piero de' Medici.
5. Rinaldo and Carlo Mormino, members of Don Federigo's retinue.
6. Her doctor.

### Letter 24

1. The bank with which Filippo "corresponded" or did business in Florence.
2. The *condottiere* Jacopo Piccinino had been arrested and murdered in Naples, apparently on the orders of King Ferrante. Alessandra believed that this episode had damaged Ferrante's credit in Florence.
3. The three greater magistracies, the Signoria, the Twelve, and the Sixteen.
4. By the councils, which could ratify or veto certain decisions made by the magistracies.
5. Because they had hoped the sentence of exile would be lifted, following Don Federigo's visit to Florence.
6. Lorenzo had two illegitimate children, but it is not clear which of them was born on this occasion. His son Giovanluigi may not have survived infancy; his daughter Violante was married to Stefano di Cino, a shoemaker, in 1486.

### Letter 25

1. It was uncertain whether Francesco Sforza would allow the Neapolitan marriage of his daughter to go ahead, because of the murder of Jacopo Piccinino. If he did, Piero de' Medici would send his son Lorenzo to Naples to attend the wedding.
2. Santa Maria Reparata, the Florentine Cathedral.
3. Fiammetta Adimari.

### Letter 26

1. Filippo di Lionardo Strozzi, who married his second wife, Filippa Bischeri, in 1449, two years before his death.
2. Probably Messer Manno Temperani.
3. Bettino Ricasoli, a brother-in-law of Niccolò Strozzi.
4. This seems to be a reference to the fact that Filippo and Lorenzo had numerous employees who lived in their house with them.
5. There were no daughters of Cosimo de' Medici of marriageable age or status in 1465, so this is a definition of the

### Letter 29

1. The Palazzo della Signoria, the seat of the Florentine government.
2. In 1458 up to 1500 eligible citizens had had their name-tickets removed from the electoral bags, in a purge of possible opponents of the Medici regime. These could be restored by holding a new scrutiny or process of political qualification, which was now to take place.
3. Those who had been exiled for political reasons only.
4. Since the late thirteenth century there had been a division of the wealthy and powerful families of Florence into *grandi*, or nobles, and *popolani*, or those of non-noble origin, such as the Strozzi; by the fifteenth century this division was largely anachronistic.
5. Francesco Neroni, brother of Dietisalvi Neroni.

### Letter 30

1. Francesco Bagnesi.
2. I have not been able to identify this person.
3. By contrast, Filippo and Lorenzo began a new company in this year, with a joint capital of 16,000 ducats.

### Letter 31

1. A reference to Francesco Tanagli, who seems to have offered his daughter to Filippo almost without a dowry, at least by the standards of their class.
2. There was a fundamental division between those who wished to create a larger class of politically eligible citizens and those who did not. The Scrutiny Council (with more than 500 members initially) was also generally felt to be too large.
3. This "sickness" was probably the domination of the city's political life by an increasingly narrow circle of the Medici family and their close allies, to the exclusion of other patrician families such as the Strozzi.
4. Votes were cast with beans, black for yes and white for no.
5. Niccolò Soderini owned considerable property in the Tuscan Maremma, and this feud with the Counts of Maremma was originally over stock and grazing land.
6. Giovacchino Guasconi, a first cousin of Niccolò Strozzi and an employee of Filippo and Lorenzo.
7. A branch of the Strozzi lineage had been established in Mantua since the previous century. This information proved to be incorrect.