Women of the Reformation

Vittoria Colonna
(1492-1547)

Chronology

• April 1492 — Vittoria is born near Rome in Italy, daughter of Fabrizio Colonna, grand constable of the Kingdom of Naples and his wife Agnese da Montefeltrò

• 1496 — at the age of 4, Vittoria is betrothed to Fernando Francesco d’Avalos on the order of the King of Naples; she consequently receives the highest education available to a woman, educated in both Latin and Italian

• December 27, 1509 - Vittoria marries Fernando d’Avalos; becomes Marchesa de Pescara. Her husband is an active, brilliant military officer serving Emperor Charles V; he was captured by the French in 1512, released, went back to war. Vittoria & Fernando rarely saw each other, but corresponded both in prose and verse. They had no children.

• December 3, 1525 - Vittoria’s husband dies of battle wounds at Milan. She wanted to enter a convent but her brother and Pope Clement VII both refused to give permission (perhaps hoping to arrange a political marriage for her). She devotes herself to writing poetry and corresponding with similarly minded people, like Marguerite of Navarre.

• 1536 — Cardinal Reginald Pole becomes one of her spiritual advisors

• 1537 — travels to Ferrara to establish a Capuchin monastery for the reforming monk Bernardino Ochino

• 1538 — meets Michelangelo Buonaroti; they become friends, spending time together, corresponding, writing poetry. He sketched her and produced works of art for her.

• February 25, 1547 — dies at the Convent of San Silvestro.

A sonnet complaining about war and papal corruption

When the breath of God that moved above the tide
fans the embers of my smoldering state,
and the winds of God begin to dissipate
the fetid stench of the church, his bride,
then the swaggering knights prepare to ride.
The war begins. They gloat and cannot wait.
They think they are the masters of their fate
and would display their valor fare and wide.
Then within they hear God’s trumpet blow,
and they, whose gods were goblets and a crest,
appalled by death, their headlong charge arrest.
They cannot lift the vizier to the rays
which penetrate the heart beneath the vest.
Would they but discard their gear and ways!
A letter to a friend reveals some feminist-leaning theology

“This morning my thoughts were directed to our Lady and in utter joy to embrace her Son. In the purest light I discerned a thousand knots binding them in the most ardent love. In her person, creature and creator are united. Through her immaculate conception and true redemption, she is able on the wings of her great merit, to rise above the celestial choirs. The glorious Lady is above the angels, who served her on the way to Egypt; above the archangels, who govern but a single kingdom, whereas she is the queen of all; above the power to work miracles and cast out demons, for she has conquered hell; above the principalities, which are but inferior lights, while she is the true light which illumines all the blessed; above the dominions, above the thrones, above the cherubim, above the seraphim. She rises to the light which is one and three. In this clear and pure crystal one beholds the light invisible, supreme. The Father is please to have shown in her his power. The Son rejoices in her wisdom and the Spirit is consoled to see reluctant in this most perfect bride her perfect goodness.”

Her opinion of Mary Magdalene (excerpts from a letter)

“Consider how Christ made this beloved woman the first to witness the resurrection and commissioned her to bear the news to the disciples. Was it not this redeemed woman who followed him with burning love to the foot of the cross? When others fled she stood with the queen of heaven and the Holy Spirit. She became the perfect herald of the word divine, and on the mount of penitence was visited by the radiant star with the highest love.”

Mary Magdalene

The damsel fair as she sat weighed by woe
felt the great yearning which dispels all fear.
Alone by night, disdaining sword and spear
in ardent hope she essayed to go.
Entered the sepulcher by grief bent low,
saw not angels, cast not for self a tear,
fell where she thought the Savior’s feet were near,
aflame with love no tremor could she know.
The men elected to enjoy such grace,
strong, though they were, together crouched from fright.
The light became a naked sprite or shade.
If then the true is not to error made
credit to the women goes goes by right.
They have the open heart and unaffrighted face.
A letter to Cardinal Contarini on behalf of Bernardino Ochino and the Capuchins
(a newly emerging offshoot of the Franciscan friars, devoted to preaching and ministering
among the poor and sick)

“The Capuchins are accused of being Lutherans. If St. Francis was a heretic, then call them
Lutherans. If to preach the liberty of the Spirit is a vice, when subject to the rule of the
church, what will you make of the text, ‘The Spirit gives life’? If those who trouble these
friars had seen their humility, poverty, obedience, and charity they would be ashamed. As
for obedience, they wish to restore the rule of St. Francis. They are not rebellious against
the clergy. They charge is made that they do not obey their own general, but he does not
reform. The pope should support them. They want freedom simply to follow the rule of their
founder, and I do not see why St. Francis should not receive as much favor at Rome as St.
Benedict. Francis did not enforce his rule by prisons and death, but by humility, poverty,
and love. I do not see why human arguments should supersede the divine, that new laws
should break the sacred constitution of the church. We should not follow our judgment, but
that of Christ and Paul. These Capuchins are not asking for greatness or riches. They ask
in the name of the stigmata of St. Francis and the wounds of Christ to be left in peace to
observe their rule. A cardinal inspired by God well said, ‘If you holiness does not approve of
this rule, you will have to deny the gospel of Christ on which it is founded…’”

Faith and Works

One cannot have a lively faith I trow
of God’s eternal promises if fear
has left the warm heart chilled and seer
and place a veil between the I and Thou.
Nor faith, which light and joy endow
and works, which in the course of love appear,
if oft some vile, deep dolor drear
injects itself into the here and now.
These human virtues, works and these desires
all operate the same, are but a shade,
cast as a shadow, moving or at rest,
but when the light descends from heaven’s fires
kindling hope and faith within the breast
then doubt and fear and dolor, these all fade.
The Woman at the Well

Oh blessed dame, to whom beside the fount
where you had come to fill your jar he spake,
at whose word the sea and mountains quake,
no more of old nor on the sacred mount,
with hearty faith we now our wants recount,
with sweet tears or bitter supplicate
the Father, who will inward wishes takes,
and silent prayers, as they were spoken,
count.

But then was they deep yearning met
when on they feel that burning vibrant ray
illumining Samaria and humankind.
In haste you ran thereat in each byway
that none this festive day should e’er forget
but honor him with heart and soul and mind.

A poem written after Vittoria’s death by Michelangelo

The sculptor’s hammer according to his will
gives to the rugged stone a human form.
The hammer of itself knows not the norm
and must be guided by the sculptor’s skill.
The hammer forged remains a hammer still.
There is a power that rides above the storm,
beauty alone creates, invests with form,
able to recreate and also kill.
The hammer, if the hand be lifted high,
descends with greater force upon the stone.
Mine upraised was snatched with her away.
Untouched about me now my carvings lie.
I know not what to do. I am alone,
unless the great Artificer will show the way.