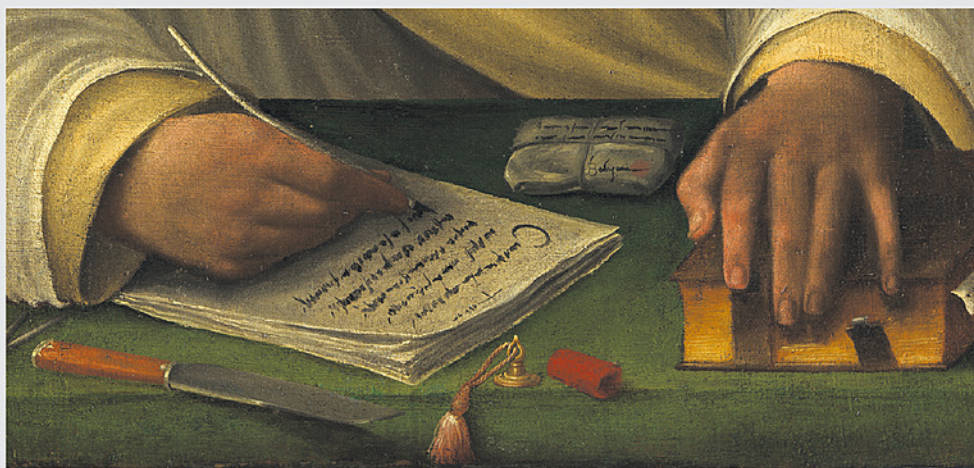


Between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*

Epistolary Forms of *otium*
in Early Modern Italy

Edited by
Andrea Guidi and Judith Frömmer



Otium.

Studien zur Theorie und Kulturgeschichte der Muße 28

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der Muße

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INTRODUCTION

Between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*: On Letter Writing and Epistolary Culture in Early Modern Italy

Judith Frömmer / Andrea Guidi

Letters cross boundaries: They overcome the limitations of space and time, but they also pass through different literary genres, disciplines, and sectors of life. They are historical sources as well as literary artifacts and are in both cases embedded in traditions and conventions, which are nonetheless constantly adapted to different contexts. As a written text the letter is dependent on materiality, which at the same time it overcomes, for example in the sense that it is often conceived of and practiced as “conversation between absent friends”, as Cicero and other writers of antiquity put it.¹ Consequently, correspondence is not constituted by physical presence alone. Being part of a virtual form of communication, which is transitory, but which might even continue after the deaths of the senders and recipients, the meaning of letters does not only depend on the ephemeral material basis of the concrete words on paper but is constructed and transmitted in a complex semiotic and cultural network of signs and their interactions and translations.²

From a contemporary perspective one might consider letter writing a practice of *otium*, which compared to our current forms of instant messaging is characterized by a fundamental deceleration, i. e. a slowing down of the pace of communication which nowadays, with increasing frequency, takes place in real time.³ However, in their very shifting between private and professional forms

¹ On this topos in ancient literatures see Wolfgang G. Müller, “Brief”, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, Vol. 2, ed. by Gert Ueding et al., Tübingen: Niemeyer 1994, 60–76, esp. 61.

² Echoing Umberto Eco’s theory and concept of “Encyclopedia”, for instance, it is worth remembering that on a structural semantic level tools, vocabularies, and rhetorical techniques used in writing relate to certain political, social or ideological affiliations: see Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale*, Milan: Bompiani 1975, 140–182.

³ For a media history of the letter see Armando Petrucci, *Scrivere lettere. Una storia plurimillennaria*, Rome: Laterza 2008. On the relationship between *otium* and epistolarity see especially the introduction by Franziska C. Eickhoff, *Muße und Poetik in der römischen Briefliteratur*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2021, esp. 1–2 et passim.

and functions, letters have always been an essential part of both *otium* and *negotium*, of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. As the essays in this volume are intended to illustrate from different angles, they often provided useful forms of mediations between the demands of public and professional life on the one hand and the social as well as private and personal realms of *otium*, leisure, and meditation on the other. Epistolary writing could thus be conceived of as a practice of *Muße*, of a kind of ‘otiose leisure’ in its transgressive or even paradoxical forms of “active inactivity” or “productive unproductivity”.⁴ Several research projects of the Collaborative Research Center 1015 *Otium* have shown, that the German concept of ‘Muße’ goes beyond binary distinctions between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*.⁵ The perspective of ‘Muße’ might thus provide new insight into letter writing from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives.⁶

Nowadays, when letters are almost disappearing or, rather, when they seem to be replaced by contemporary, virtual forms of communication such as email, text messages, chats, or tweets, one might ask if they are dependent on a literary form which is not only old-fashioned, but obsolete and therefore gradually going out of use. However, letters are and have always been an anachronic mode of communication⁷, which eludes contemporaneity being subject to the displace-

⁴ On conceptions, forms and practices of *Muße*, a notion which might imply idleness, leisure, or *otium* and, thus, has positive as well as negative implications, – see Burkhard Hasebrink/Peter Philipp Riedl (eds.), *Muße im kulturellen Wandel: Semantisierungen, Ähnlichkeiten, Umbesetzungen*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2014; Jochen Gimmel/Tobias Keiling et al. (eds.), *Konzepte der Muße*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2016 and Monika Fludernik/Thomas Jürgasch (eds.), *Semantiken der Muße aus interdisziplinären Perspektiven*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2021. For a resourceful application of the different English translations see Monika Fludernik, “Spectators, Ramblers and Idlers: The Conflicted Nature of Indolence and the 18th Century Tradition of Idling”, *Anglistik* 28, 1 (2017), 133–154.

⁵ See Gregor Dobler/Peter Philipp Riedl (eds.), *Muße und Gesellschaft*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2017, and especially the introduction by Gregor Dobler and Peter Philipp Riedl (1–17) as well as the contributions of Linus Möllenbrink (“*inter negocia literas et cum literis negocia in usu habere*. Die Verbindung von *vita activa* und *vita contemplativa* im Pirckheimer-Brief Ulrichs von Hutten [1518]”, *ibid.*, 101–139), Peter Philipp Riedl (“Rastlosigkeit und Reflexion. Zum Verhältnis von *vita activa* und *vita contemplativa* in Goethes Festspiel *Pandora* [1808]”, 243–265) and Burkhard Hasebrink (“*Otium contemplationis*. Zu einer Begründungsfigur von Autorschaft im *Legatus divinae pietatis* Gertruds von Helfta”, 291–316).

⁶ On a certain “predisposition” of epistolary genres towards *otium* and leisure in Antiquity see Franziska C. Eickhoff/Wolfgang Kofler/Bernhard Zimmermann, “Muße, Rekursivität und antike Briefe. Eine Einleitung”, in: *Muße und Rekursivität in der antiken Briefliteratur*, ed. by Franziska C. Eickhoff, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2016, 1–11.

⁷ Our anachronic conception of the letter as a literary genre is inspired by Jacques Rancière’s notion of “anachronie”. According to Rancière “anachronies” are “des modes de connexion [...]: des évènements, des notions, des significations qui prennent le temps à rebours, qui font circuler le sens d’une manière qui échappe à toute contemporanéité, à toute identité du temps avec ‘lui-même’. Une anachronie, c’est un mot, un évènement, une séquence significative sortis de ‘leur’ temps, doué du même coup de la capacité de définir des aiguillages temporels inédits, d’assurer le saut d’une ligne de temporalité à une autre”

ments and non-simultaneity of literary tradition and transferal. Notwithstanding its asynchronous production and reception(s), the writing and reading of a letter often hinges upon the illusion of an intellectual presence. In their confinement to and transgressions of the limitations of time and space, letters share essential characteristics of *otium*.

For that very reason it seems appropriate to once again scrutinize the social practice of epistolary writing, especially its mediations between the public and the private realms of correspondence. What is it we commit to when we write letters and why do we (still) write or read them? Moreover, how are these circumstances and motivations of epistolary writing related to professional and political contexts on the one hand and the realms of privacy, leisure and intimacy on the other? What contents do letters convey and how and what kind of meta-poetic reflection and media philosophy do they imply? What relationships do they establish between writers, messengers, and readers from different times, spaces, and cultures and what are their roles and affordances in different societies? In a nutshell, what kind of practice is letter writing and how is it connected to our ways of thinking, feeling, believing and building communities? Are these intellectual, spiritual and social dimensions related to the divisions and segregations of the private and the public life and, hence, to the respective conceptions of *otium* and leisure and their counterparts?

In order to develop both conceptual and historically informed perspectives on these questions, we turn our attention towards what has recently been analyzed as the “Renaissance of letters” in Italy⁸: a period and culture which saw an explosion and acceleration of letter production in both manuscripts and print.⁹ Epistolary practices were not only a manifestation of the humanist “cult of antiquity”¹⁰, but an opportunity to examine and reconsider the relationship between communication and community. In perhaps no other period and cultural context were the pragmatic, philosophical, and poetic dimensions of letter writing so closely intertwined.¹¹ Letters were a vital and essential part as well as “a tan-

(Jacques Rancière, “Le concept d’anachronisme et la vérité de l’historien”, *L’inactuel: Psychanalyse & Culture* 6 (1996), 53–68, here: 63–64.

⁸ Cf. Paula Findlen/Suzanne Sutherland (eds.), *The Renaissance of Letters: Knowledge and Community in Italy 1300–1650*, London/New York: Routledge 2020.

⁹ Cf. Laura Fortini et al. (eds.), *Scrivere lettere nel Cinquecento. Corrispondenze in prose e versi*, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura 2016.

¹⁰ Cecil H. Clough, “The Cult of Antiquity: Letters and Letter Collections”, in: *Cultural Aspects of the Italian Renaissance: Essays in Honour of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. by Cecil H. Clough, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1976, 33–67.

¹¹ See also the prolific contributions in: Marie Isabel Matthews-Schlinzig et al. (eds.), *Handbuch Brief: Von der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2020, which take early modernity as a starting point for a comprehensive systematic and historical study of epistolary practices, with a stress on the German literatures though.

gible representation of the continuous cycle of writing, reading, and communication that became important by the mid-fifteenth century.”¹²

In early modern Italy, letters were classified as a literary genre in order to reconnect with the past and develop new modes of writing, thinking, and exchange in the present and for the future times. They are omnipresent across communal and private archives, in diplomatic and friendly exchange, in collections and books (most prominently the so-called *libri di lettere* which were collections of exemplary letters on a particular subject or by a specific author¹³), and in the visual arts. The humanist trust in linguistic competences enhanced the cultural capital of literacy and letter writing.¹⁴ Letters were not only a means to an end, i. e. a device to convey messages and contents or to promote political causes or careers, they also had important pedagogic, philosophical, and poetic functions. Letter writing became a vital part of cultural practices of learning, thinking and creating. They are, as the essays in this volume reveal, an indispensable part of the active life of the Christian, citizen, and friend, but at the same time a medium to gain distance from public and everyday life and to enable contemplation. This holds true for the writing, the reading, and even the visual perception of letters. Not only can their contents and intellectual properties become subjects of study and meditation, but also their representation as material objects in paintings and still lifes.¹⁵

In early modern Italy, the letter reflects ancient traditions and modern trends. Several influences resulted in the letter gaining greater relevance among various social groups and in very different contexts. One can mention, for instance, political and collective processes, the emergence of the secular states and the novel kinds of bureaucracy involved, the influence of secretaries and clerks, the literary cultures and the cult of humanism, and the concepts of authorship and intellectuality involved. And yet, given that writing was still an erudite and rather elitist medium, letters were part of generic traditions and thus highly codified

¹² Paula Findlen, “With a letter in hand: writing, communication, and representation in Renaissance Italy”, in: *The Renaissance of Letters: Knowledge and Community in Italy 1300–1650*, ed. by Paula Findlen and Suzanne Sutherland, London/New York: Routledge 2020, 1–27, esp. 1.

¹³ Cf. Gianluca Genovese, *La lettera oltre il genere: il libro di lettere, dall’Aretino al Doni, e le origini dell’autobiografia moderna*, Rome: Antenore 2009; Lodovico Braida, *Libri di lettere. Le raccolte epistolari del Cinquecento tra inquietudine religiose e “buon volgare”*, Rome: Laterza 2009.

¹⁴ Cf. Claudia Ortner-Buchberger, *Briefe schreiben im 16. Jahrhundert. Formen und Funktionen des epistolaren Diskurses in den italienischen libri di lettere*, Munich: Fink 2003, 7–56 et passim.

¹⁵ See Suzanne Sutherland’s survey and analysis of the letter-rack still life: “Lives full of letters: from Renaissance to Republic of Letters”, in: *The Renaissance of Letters: Knowledge and Community in Italy 1300–1650*, ed. by Paula Findlen and Suzanne Sutherland, London/New York: Routledge 2020, 318–327.

and standardized, e.g. by the rules of the *ars dictaminis*.¹⁶ On the one hand, the diversity of correspondents and their motivations finds its expression in a variety of contents, styles, forms and formulas; on the other hand, letters are often part of literary conventions and codes which sometimes operate independently of the propositional content that a letter is intended to convey and regardless of the relevant historical writing circumstances. Some of the letters analyzed in this volume might be characterized by early modern forms of “Stilmischung”, which according to Auerbach developed from late antiquity onwards in the wake of the Christian ideal of *sermo humilis* and reached a temporary climax in the Romantic and Realist rebellion against the hierarchy of styles and genres which had been prescribed by ancient rhetoric and classicism.¹⁷ In humanist Italy, the rhetoric system predominant in Antiquity is, of course, far from obsolete, nor are medieval conventions of writing, arguing, and disputing¹⁸; the practice of letter writing, however, has to adapt itself to multiple tasks and recipients. Therefore, it evades classification by the simple chronological logic of periods or literary modes and the standards and values ascribed to them by historians and critics.¹⁹ Especially the rise of modern diplomacy in the early modern Italian city-states called not so much for a standardized *ars dictaminis* but rather for more flexible routines of epistolary art and craftsmanship which allowed navigation between different political interests and between secular and spiritual powers.

As a vital part of cultivating relations of patronage and friendship, polymorphic and sometimes protean practices of letter writing reconfigure the demarcations of the public and the private spheres. This also concerns the relationship between the sexes and offers insights into the nature of gendered epistolary strategies.²⁰ As recent scholarship has shown, early modern letters establish and undermine gender roles by (de)constructing material and spiritual bonds between different individuals and groups.²¹ Several articles in this volume point out the

¹⁶ Cf. the contributions in: Carol Poster/Linda C. Mitchell (eds.), *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press 2007.

¹⁷ Cf. Erich Auerbach, “Sermo Humilis”, *Romanische Forschungen* 64, 3/4 (1952), 305–364; Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, Tübingen/Basel: Francke 1946.

¹⁸ Cf. Ronald G. Witt, “Medieval ‘Ars Dictaminis’ and the Beginning of Humanism: A New Construction of an Old Problem”, *Renaissance Quarterly* 35 (1982), 1–35.

¹⁹ For a critical approach to early modern writing and thinking challenging the established teleologies see e.g. Anita Traninger, *Disputation, Deklamation, Dialog. Medien und Gattungen europäischer Wissensverhandlungen zwischen Scholastik und Humanismus*, Stuttgart: Steiner 2012.

²⁰ For a general overview of the approaches of gender studies regarding the analysis of epistolary writing and the relevant research see Marlen Bidwell-Steiner’s chapter “Gender Studies” in: *Handbuch Brief: Von der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. by Marie Isabel Matthews-Schlinzig et al., Berlin/New York: De Gruyter 2020, 141–159.

²¹ Cf. Maria Luisa Doglio, *Lettera e donna: scrittura epistolare al femminile tra Quattro*

heterogenous gender implications of epistolary agency and contemplation in its complex relations to eroticism, romance, male bonding, and to family relationships and their legacies as well as to artistic conveyances of spirituality and faith. In each of the case studies of this volume it becomes obvious that the divisions of the active or professional and the contemplative or more 'otiose' parts of life do not follow conventional binary oppositions between a private, intimate, and rather female realm of friendship, love, and meditation as opposed to the public, professional, and more or less masculine realm of politics and institutions.

Letters represent cultural practices of societies, communities, and other collective entities as well as of individuals from different backgrounds. The scattered and polycentric political landscape of late medieval and early modern Italy, the urban culture of its city-states and the enhancement of writing and printing called for the development and constant training of literacy in all sectors of life. The literary cultures of ancient Rome gained particular relevance with the re-discovery of Cicero's letters by Petrarch, who himself became an important epistolary model for succeeding humanists. Although Cicero distinguishes between letters of an informative kind, those of the "genus familiare" and those of the "genus severum" (Cic.fam. 2,4)²², his own as well as early modern writing often evades distinctions of this kind.²³ Epistolary exchange on politics, religion, or commerce is embedded in complex networks of power and multi-directional exchange by different actors.

Therefore we believe that the research questions of the Collaborative Research Center 1015 *Otium. Societal resource. Critical potential* might offer a fresh approach to the rich and complex field of letter writing in early modern Italy. The focus on the social impact of *Muße* as a sort of 'otiose leisure' or 'productive idleness', which was the subject of investigation across several research projects conducted by the members of the interdisciplinary center²⁴, resonates with parts of the discussions and performances of the respective value of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* which, according to several scholars and specialists, become a topos of the "Renaissance Self-Fashioning" (Greenblatt) and the social perception of both individuals and communities.²⁵ An essential part of this debate is carried out via letters: by humanists and intellectuals, but also by noble-

e Cinquecento, Rome: Bulzoni 1993 as well as several articles in: James Daybell/Andrew Gordon (eds.), *Women and Epistolary Agency in Early Modern Culture, 1450–1690*, London/ New York: Routledge 2016.

²² Quoted from: Cicero, *An seine Freunde/Epistulae ad familiares*, Latin-German, ed. by Helmut Kasten, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2013 (Sammlung Tusculum).

²³ Cf. Eickhoff, *Muße und Poetik*, 87–160 and the respective bibliographical references as well as Gregory Hutchinson, "Muße ohne Müßiggang: Strukturen, Räume und das Ich bei Cicero", in: *Muße und Rekursivität in der antiken Briefliteratur*, ed. by Franziska C. Eickhoff, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2016, 97–112.

²⁴ Cf. www.sfb1015.uni-freiburg.de/en (last access on 01.03.2023).

²⁵ For a detailed bibliography see Brian Vickers (ed.), *Arbeit – Muße – Meditation*:

women, diplomats, lovers, artists or widows. However, as a genre which mediates between pragmatic and literary forms of writing, between political, social or commercial activities on the one hand, and religious meditation, philosophical reflection, artistic practice or erotic romance on the other, the letter reflects the repeated and constant (re-)evaluations of the active and the contemplative lives in early modern communication and communities by reenacting these oscillatory movements in textual form.

With the articles collected in this volume we bring together different voices and performances of the active and the contemplative lives and their various guises and representations. The heterogeneity of the correspondents, their subjects and approaches are to some extent mirrored in the different disciplines, methods and languages of the contributors. They cover a wide range of texts and other media, from Petrarch to Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, from Vittoria Colonna to Machiavelli, from manuscript and printed letters via Renaissance music to Michelangelo's drawings and sculptures. Read from the perspective of the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* dichotomy and its epistolary (de)constructions and transgressions, letters do not only represent action and contemplation while performing political as well as intellectual and sometimes spiritual enterprises, but they also constitute a pervasive social practice which transcends the boundaries of textuality: by creating and changing its contexts as well as by taking on other medial forms e. g. in the visual arts.

Studying the networks, contents and forms of early modern letters we learn that they often stage the literary activity of correspondents who wish to stress the social importance of contemplation as essential to civic virtue and political commitment. Paolo Rigo's reading of selected letters from the seventh book of the *Familiare*s examines Petrarch's apologia of the humanist's need for solitude and contemplation as a precondition for any political commitment. This apologetic strategy implies a distinction between different types of *otium* and leisure and particularly the critique of asocial forms of retreat as well as of the idleness of ruling elites and courtiers devoid of political responsibility. Petrarch's discourse on *ozio*, according to Rigo, hinges upon a republican theory of liberty. The mutual interdependence of *otium* and political liberty also sheds new light on Petrarch's complex and controversial relationship with his patrons on the one hand and Cola de Rienzo on the other. In the careful combination of factual and fictional narration in the *Familiare*s Petrarch stages his biography as a plea for the contemplative life of the humanist, whose reading and writing become civic practices and even a service and duty to civilization. Petrarch's *Letters on Familiar Matters* perform acts of contemplation essential to society and politics.

Studies in the Vita activa and Vita contemplativa, Zurich/Stuttgart: vdf/Teubner²1991, xvii–xxii, 15–19 and the bibliographical references in the chapters.

While Petrarch's eulogies on contemplation and liberty depend on the material freedom guaranteed by patronage and political order, the correspondence between Vittoria Colonna and Michelangelo examines artistic activity within a no less existential framework, i. e. the theological debates on grace and justification. In her intermedial analysis of the "intense exchange" of 'gifts' ("doni") between the poet and the artist, Maria Serena Sapegno puts the focus on the relationship between art, spirituality and faith. She presents the mutual donations of letters, poems and drawings as part of a sophisticated discussion on the nature of the gift reflecting the contemporary debates on the role of divine grace. Most interestingly, the theological debates on the relationship between faith and deeds find their expression in figures: of speech, of art, and particularly in female figures who, like the Virgin Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalene or Catherine of Alessandria, are also representations of the dialectical confrontation of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. In the correspondence between the poet and the artist, faith proves to be dependent on religious contemplation and on apostolic activity, both performed and enacted by Vittoria Colonna's and Michelangelo's works of art. The epistolary exchange of the artists establishes this link between meditation and expression of religion.

Different to humanist study, religion, or art, politics is, as it is often considered, an activity which is rather detrimental to contemplation. This view is apparent throughout ancient philosophy as well as in Christian thinking and also in Petrarch's writings, as Paolo Rigo notes in his contribution. According to the Cambridge School of political thought, however, early modern civic humanism is characterized by a significant re-evaluation of the *vita activa*, whereas 'otiose' and contemplative practices are increasingly regarded as corruptive and demonstrating anti-social tendencies.²⁶ The former political secretary Niccolò Machiavelli seems to provide an excellent example of this early modern enhancement of and plea for the active life of the prince as well as that of the citizen of a republic. Indeed 'otiose leisure' and contemplation seem to play minor roles in Machiavellian writings, which evolved from a situation of forced *otium*. The two contributions on Machiavelli in this volume, which present results of a subproject carried out in the context of the Collaborative Research Center 1015 *Otium*, present a somewhat different Machiavelli. Stefano Saracino analyzes Machiavelli's friendships with Francesco Vettori, with the members of the Orti Oricelari cycle and not least with his lover, "La Riccia". In his microhistorical investigation, he emphasizes the political functions of seemingly 'idle' practices and leisure activities: Social gatherings and erotic relationships enhanced and staged by letters, the art of conversation, or comedy are part of a social network of pa-

²⁶ Cf. the chapter "Vita Activa and the Vivere Civile", in: John G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, With a new afterword by the author, Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press 2003, 49–80, as well as parts of the introduction in: Brian Vickers, *Arbeit – Muße – Meditation*, 1–19.

tronage and clientelism, which, later on, was probably decisive for Machiavelli's partial rehabilitation by the Medici. Hence, political activity cannot be separated from new forms of contemplation as an essential part of civic humanism in early modern Florence.

In Machiavelli's correspondence with Francesco Guicciardini, contemplative activity is itself under scrutiny, although often in a highly ironic way. Judith Frömmer and Andrea Guidi examine the forms of contemplation depicted, enacted, and staged by the epistolary exchange on the occasion of Machiavelli's mission to the Franciscan monastery of Carpi in May 1521. In the realm of contemplation, constructed by the ingenious correspondence between the ex-secretary and the successful governor, politics relies on a resourceful and practical interaction of facts and fictions, of materiality, intellectuality, and even spirituality. The monastic context of the mission evokes religious forms of contemplation, but also reveals the legate's task to find a suitable preacher for the Lenten Service in Florence. From the perspective of these and other "Machiavellian missions" in Carpi, contemplation turns out to be a radically political activity which can produce and cement, but also challenge and undermine social structures and hierarchies in both purely imaginary and substantial ways.

By contrast, the corpus investigated by Davide Cosi presents reflections on the relationships between the active and the contemplative life, which focus on everyday life and might therefore be typical of less erudite forms of pragmatism in early modern Florence. In the letters of the noblewoman Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi to her sons, contemplative elements are clearly subjected to the economic goals and the prosperity of the family. Alessandra's crafty and often crude balancing of practical advice and moral admonition shows her readers a world where spiritual and material values are entangled in a pragmatic economy of family affairs carried out and transmitted by the letters.

In Anthony Cummings's study on the contemplative functions of Renaissance music, the 'otiose' qualities of compositions and performances appear not only on the level of content, i. e. as subjects of letters which present them as (re-)creations of ancient leisure activities or theorize about music in general. Especially in their written tradition, pieces of music – similar to poems, comedies or other works of art which often traveled by post – constitute a kind of epistolary practice. Hence, from the point of view of a broader definition of "metaphoric epistolarity" letters not only consist in communications about music, but musical notation might constitute a similar or even equivalent instrument of communication to be decoded and used by its recipients. There are, of course, significant differences between epistolary correspondence in the traditional sense and the exchange of compositions or performances of music, the transmission of which typically involves multiple actors (such as composers, performers, audiences and individual listeners) – a factor that might alter the messages it conveys. However, in early modern academic settings, the performances of outsider

musical compositions (e.g. those sent as part of anthologies) often possessed a metaphoric epistolary character and were intended to enhance the leisure of the actors involved in transposition. The same holds true for songs that circulated among the Medici and their friends, which complemented their diplomatic and political activities, or the genre of the madrigal in the early sixteenth century, which as a dialogue sung by male and female voices, might take up characteristics of written correspondence.

As the articles in this volume demonstrate, settings of ‘otiose leisure’ produce forms of epistolarity that reach out beyond the medium of the written letter. Nonetheless, these actual or virtual spaces of *otium* and contemplation, which are necessary for the traveling of epistolary forms and their receptions, adaptations, and modifications in different contexts²⁷ have important functions in the realm of public life. Not only do they complement the *vita activa* of politicians, diplomats, artists or the members of the Church, but they are also inseparable from and essential to social and political action. From the vantage point of the dialectical interaction of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, the study of letter writing opens up prolific perspectives of a broader notion of epistolarity: a traveling form, which might even outlast the traditional letter and, hence, stand the test of time.

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²⁷ For the notion of ‘traveling forms’ see Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Princeton/London: Princeton University Press 2017 and the website of the Nomis-research group of the same name: <https://www.uni-konstanz.de/forschen/forschungseinrichtungen/nomis-forschungsprojekt-traveling-forms/> (last access on 01.03.2023).

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