

Primary Source Report: Deconstructing Female Subjectivity in Isabella Andreini's Epistolary
Performances

Logan Williamson

Dr. Sutherland

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This report undertakes a critical examination of Isabella Andreini's *Letters*, as presented in Volume 100 of "The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series," through a critical lens, focusing on the intricate interplay between performance, identity, and the construction of female subjectivity in the early modern period. The central hypothesis posits that Isabella Andreini's *Letters* can be read as a sophisticated engagement with the performative construction of early modern female identity, utilizing the epistolary form to both enact and subtly subvert the prescribed roles and limitations imposed upon women in the public sphere, particularly those associated with the often-ambiguous status of the actress. This report seeks to answer the following research question: How do the diverse voices and rhetorical strategies employed in Andreini's *Letters* negotiate the tension between the public persona of the celebrated actress and the private, intellectual self, and to what extent do these negotiations offer a critical commentary on the construction of early modern female subjectivity within the context of performance and literary culture?

Andreini's position as a renowned *commedia dell'arte* actress provides a crucial framework for understanding her epistolary endeavors.¹ In an era where the public visibility of women, especially those in theatrical professions, was often viewed with suspicion and moral ambiguity, Andreini's foray into the literary realm through her *Letters* becomes a significant act of self-representation. The collection's hallmark—the adoption of multiple fictional and gendered voices—can be interpreted not merely as a literary flourish but as a deliberate strategy to explore the fluidity and performativity of identity itself. In fact, Andreini's collection of letters stands out precisely due to its innovative use of multiple voices. As a celebrated actress of the *commedia dell'arte*, Andreini was adept at embodying different characters, and this theatrical

¹ *Commedia dell'arte* is an early professional, improvisational theater that emerged in the Italian peninsula during the Renaissance.

skill translates seamlessly into her writing. Drawing on contemporary understandings of the self as a social construct, we can analyze how Andreini, through her various epistolary personae, both embodies and potentially destabilizes the rigid gender roles prevalent in early modern Italian society. The very act of writing in a male voice, for instance, allows her to inhabit subject positions typically denied to women, offering a critical commentary on the limitations of female experience and expression. By adopting male, female, and anonymous perspectives, she creates a dynamic dialogue that transcends the limitations of a monological viewpoint. Examining the female voices within the collection, we often find expressions of intellectual capacity, emotional depth, and even a degree of agency that might have been considered unconventional for women in her era. While some letters may seemingly reinforce traditional roles, particularly in discussions of love and marriage, a closer reading often reveals underlying tensions or alternative perspectives that hint at a more nuanced understanding of women's experiences.² For instance, a letter written from the perspective of a young woman lamenting the constraints of marriage might simultaneously showcase her clever use of rhetorical pathos and her awareness of the limitations imposed upon her, thereby subtly questioning the patriarchal structures of the time.³

The *Letters* can be examined through the lens of early modern debates surrounding the “querelle des femmes,” the ongoing discussion about the nature and role of women.⁴ Andreini's engagement with themes such as love, marriage, motherhood, and female virtue, often explored

² Isabella Andreini, *Letters (Volume 100) (the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series)*, trans. Paola De Santo and Caterina Mongiat Farina (Toronto, Ontario: Iter Press, 2023).

³ Andreini, *Letters (Volume 100) (the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series)*, 222–24; the young woman in general, despite her father's insistence on the marriage, bravely expresses her refusal to marry Signor Valerio, stating her desire to remain with her father and mother for longer. She articulates her loyalty and past obedience but asserts her own feelings for the first time.

⁴ Andreini, *Letters (Volume 100) (the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series)*, 28; *querelle des femmes* translates as “dispute of women,” or simply “woman question” from French, refers to a literary and intellectual debate about the nature and status of women that occurred in the early modern period, with arguments for and against women's equality or superiority.

from multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives, suggests a sophisticated awareness of these debates; however, rather than offering definitive answers, her letters often present a polyphony of voices, reflecting the complexities and contradictions inherent in societal expectations of women. The intellectual acumen displayed in her writing, coupled with the performative nature of the epistolary form, allows Andreini to craft a persona that transcends the stereotypical image of the actress as merely a physical spectacle. Instead, she presents herself as a learned and thoughtful individual capable of engaging with complex philosophical and social issues, thereby challenging the prevalent dichotomy between the public performer and the private, intellectual woman.

Continuing the analysis of Andreini's *Letters* as a site for deconstructing early modern female subjectivity, it is crucial to further examine the nuances within the female voices she adopts. These are not monolithic representations of womanhood, but rather a diverse array of perspectives that reflect the complex realities and contradictions faced by women in this period. For example, letter from one person to another, female character expresses her joy over the birth of a daughter while addressing the male recipient's disappointment about the gender, challenges the idea that a daughter is in any way less valuable than a son, that a son might not always bring the expected joy, citing examples from Greek mythology, as "Oedipus' birth caused Laius' violent death, because Oedipus killed his father with his own hand [...] when Paris was born, so was the catalyst of Troy's fire."⁵ The letter reminds the recipient that women, like Sappho, Artemisia, and Penelope, have achieved greatness, and that a daughter could follow in their footsteps.⁶ Through these epistolary performances, Andreini probes the limitations imposed by

⁵ Isabella Andreini, *Letters (Volume 100) (the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series)*, trans. Paola De Santo and Caterina Mongiat Farina (Toronto, Ontario: Iter Press, 2023), 110–11.

⁶ Andreini, *Letters (Volume 100) (the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series)*, 112.

societal expectations, often highlighting the tension between prescribed roles and individual desires or intellectual capabilities. For instance, a letter penned by a woman engages in a philosophical dialogue that critiques the concept of free will and superficial love as espoused by a male speaker, arguing that true love requires unity, depth, and intellectual understanding, while rejecting the notion of loving many as shallow and unattainable, and uses metaphorical criticism of the sun and Love used by the male character to justify his views, claiming that such a metaphor overlooks the difference between cause and effect.⁷ Similarly, although on the other end of the rhetorical spectrum, a letter from a female character writes a sarcastic and mocking response to an older man who has expressed romantic interest in a woman much younger than him, that his desire is false or “feigned,” and describes how older men, desperate to reclaim their youth and dissatisfied with their own defects, gossip about women and spread false or harmful rumors about them, driven by bitterness and envy.⁸ These varied female voices, therefore, serve as a powerful tool for Andreini to explore the multifaceted nature of female identity and to implicitly critique the restrictive boundaries often imposed upon it.

The rhetorical strategies employed within the *Letters* further underscore this negotiation of public and private selves. The use of classical allusions, rhetorical flourishes, and the adoption of different epistolary styles depending on the persona suggest a conscious effort to engage with the dominant literary and intellectual traditions of the time. This demonstrates Andreini’s desire to be recognized not just as a performer but as a legitimate intellectual figure within her *Letters*. In a dedicatory letter to Don Carlo Emanuel of Savoy, Andreini suggests that her passion for knowledge is a natural gift and that, “since a most ardent desire for knowledge was born in me, I

⁷ Isabella Andreini, *Letters (Volume 100) (the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series)*, trans. Paola De Santo and Caterina Mongiat Farina (Toronto, Ontario: Iter Press, 2023), 152–54.

⁸ Andreini, *Letters (Volume 100) (the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series)*, 114–15.

wanted to nurture it as much as I could,” unlike other women of her time who “wish to tend to the needle, the distaff, and the spinning wheel,” she “managed to steal brief stretches of time from the demands of my laborious profession to dedicate myself to writing these letters.”⁹ The intimacy inherent in the letter format allows for a carefully constructed sense of personal revelation, even within the fictional voices. This carefully curated intimacy can be interpreted as a means of shaping her public image and asserting her intellectual authority in a society that often sought to confine women to domestic or purely performative roles. By strategically deploying different voices and rhetorical techniques, Andreini crafts a complex and multifaceted representation of female subjectivity that both acknowledges and subtly challenges the constraints of her era.

Andreini’s use of male voices provides an intriguing counterpoint. The inclusion and construction of male voices within Andreini’s *Letters* are equally significant for understanding her project of deconstructing female subjectivity. These male personas are not simply stock characters but are often imbued with complexities that reveal the underlying power dynamics and societal expectations shaping both male and female roles. By inhabiting a male perspective, Andreini gains a unique vantage point from which to comment on the construction of masculinity and its impact on women’s lives. Through these letters, she can explore male perspectives on love, relationships, and societal expectations, potentially revealing the inherent contradictions or limitations within these viewpoints as well.¹⁰ By placing these male voices alongside the female ones, Andreini creates a space for comparison and contrast, allowing

⁹ Isabella Andreini, *Letters (Volume 100) (the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series)*, trans. Paola De Santo and Caterina Mongiat Farina (Toronto, Ontario: Iter Press, 2023), 66–67.

¹⁰ In “On Taking a Wife (i),” a male friend warns his male friend against marriage, highlighting the struggles of domestic dissatisfaction, loss of freedom, and dealing with a proud or discontented wife. He argues that a wife, whether beautiful or poor, is a constant source of frustration (127–29). In “On Taking a Wife (ii),” the writer responds, defending his decision to marry. He outlines his approach to marriage, promising to be a respectful, loving, and reasonable husband while maintaining necessary boundaries and authority (132–33).

readers to consider the multifaceted nature of human experience beyond simplistic gender binaries. The various uses of sentimentalism from male voices, e.g., “the waters of the Exampaio spring are not as bitter as the frequent tears my eyes shed for you; and yet will the water of my tears ever suffice to soften the hard enamel of your scornful and harsh heart, so cruel toward me?,” to “lengthening the wretched days and the anguished nights with tears, sobs, and laments and pleasing you through my miseries” contradict masculinity in the early modern era, reflect a tension between the era’s expectations of stoic, rational male behavior and the emotional vulnerability these expressions reveal.¹¹ While early modern masculinity often celebrated strength, self-control, and rationality, the heightened emotional appeals in such sentiments challenge these ideals by depicting male vulnerability, passivity, and an exaggerated dependence on the object of their affection. Andreini’s skillful adoption of male voices allows her to dissect the societal expectations placed upon men and to demonstrate how these expectations, in turn, shape and constrain the lives of women. This deliberate crossing of gendered boundaries in her writing underscores the interconnectedness of male and female identities within the social fabric of early modern Europe.

The interplay between these male and female voices within the *Letters* is where the most profound insights into the deconstruction of fixed gender identities emerge. Andreini strategically juxtaposes contrasting perspectives, often highlighting the inherent biases and limitations within singular viewpoints. For instance, a passionate, flattery declaration of love from a male suitor, describing her beauty as God’s creation, is followed by a more pragmatic, even cynical, Neoplatonic response from a female character, who replies, “if you see any beauty in me, why do you praise me and not God, who gave me that beauty? Why do you love His gift

¹¹ Isabella Andreini, *Letters (Volume 100) (the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series)*, trans. Paola De Santo and Caterina Mongiat Farina (Toronto, Ontario: Iter Press, 2023), 108–9.

more in me than in Him, who granted it to me and is the one true source of the one true beauty?,” revealing the discrepancies in expectations and experiences within romantic relationships.¹² This dialogic quality, even within a collection of individual letters, allows Andreini to dismantle the notion of a singular, authentic gendered self. Instead, she presents a world where identity is fluid, negotiated, and often performed in response to societal pressures and expectations. The male voices, therefore, do not simply reinforce patriarchal norms; rather, through Andreini’s nuanced portrayal, they often serve as a foil to the female experiences, illuminating the power imbalances and the performative aspects of both masculinity and femininity.

Isabella Andreini’s *Letters* offer a rich and compelling case study for understanding the performative construction of early modern female identity. Through her innovative use of multiple voices and her engagement with contemporary social and intellectual debates, Andreini navigates the complex terrain between her public persona as a celebrated actress and her assertion of a private, intellectual self. This negotiation, enacted through the epistolary form, provides a critical commentary on the limitations and possibilities of female subjectivity within the context of early modern performance and literary culture, making her *Letters* a crucial primary source for feminist scholarship in the fields of early modern studies, literature, and performance history. Further in-depth analysis of the specific rhetorical strategies and thematic concerns within the collection will undoubtedly yield even more nuanced understandings of Andreini’s sophisticated engagement with the construction of female identity in her time.

¹² Andreini, *Letters (Volume 100) (the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series)*, 121–22.

Bibliography

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