

My Writing Life



As winter settled on New England this week with below-zero temperatures and our first true snowstorm, my family and I are about to bring the Christmas season to a close this evening with a Bavarian ritual traditionally performed on the feast of the Epiphany. I hope your holidays have been as full and wonderful as mine, filled with family celebrations, laughter and abundant food.

In the sudden quiet of January I find myself leafing through summer memories and my sojourn on the island in the Tyrrhenian Sea where Vittoria Colonna spent most of her life. Read on as I share with you the path I walked in Vittoria's footsteps researching my novel about her life...

Journey to the Castello Aragonese

It was a spur-of-the-moment decision that brought me to the Castello Aragonese this summer. Our extended family was meeting in Bavaria to celebrate the 90th birthday of our matriarch, my mother-in-law. It was a trip and a celebration that had been planned for months, a reunion of several generations, first, second and third cousins, close friends and neighbors. It was only after the planning was complete, the invitations sent, and the menu selected that I noted how close to Italy I would be after the celebration and multiple-family reunion had taken place.



Why not? I thought. And so, with the extraordinary help of travel wizard Kathleen Guglielmo, I turned serendipity into reality. In a matter of days, Kathleen booked a hotel overlooking the harbor and the Castello (the photo under the title of the newsletter was taken from my hotel balcony) and found me a knowledgeable guide to lead me through the history of the Castello that was home to Vittoria Colonna for so many years.



Like Viola in *Twelfth Night*, who came from the sea to land on the shore of Illyria, I reached the coast of Ischia, fortunately not on a storm-tossed and ultimately shipwrecked vessel, but on a hydrofoil out of the port of Mergellina. I stood at the rail, waiting expectantly for a view of the iconic citadel rising atop the cliffs of the small island--the *isoletta*--upon which the Castello Aragonese had been built in the 15th century. Seeing it for the first time took my breath away.

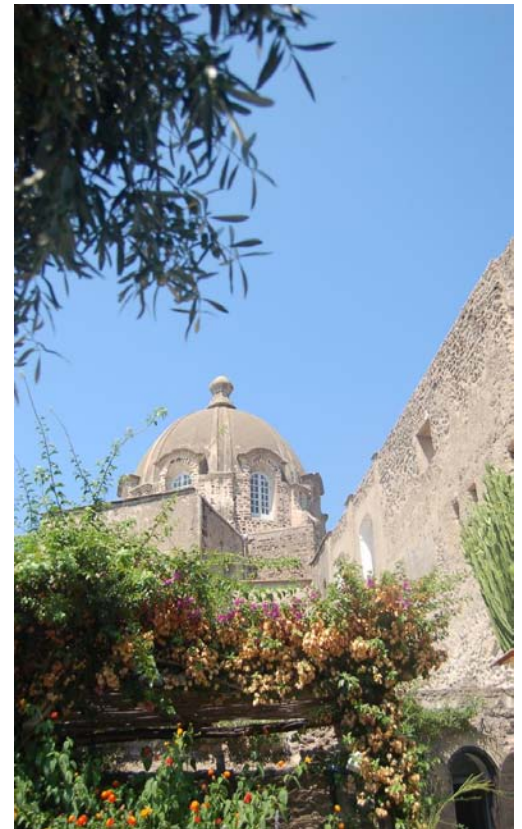
From the first moment that I stepped onto the footbridge that led from the village of Ischia Ponte to the Castello and began the climb to the citadel, I felt as if I were the ten-year-old

Vittoria arriving for the first time, exiled by war.



The first steps were through a dark, chill tunnel carved out of volcanic rock and sealed from the sea and potential enemies by a series of heavy wooden doors.

When we emerged from the tunnel into the open air, I felt the heat and brilliance of the sun, heard the waves lapping at the rocky beach far below and saw the vividly colored oleander spilling over the stone walls. Along the way I tasted a fig from a gnarled tree hanging over the path. Every step brought me closer to an understanding of how this isolated, beautiful rock had shaped the woman and poet who was Vittoria Colonna.



The journey was an extraordinary privilege, a departure from the dusty volumes of history that had been the source of my research up until that moment. I hope to bring to the page what I experienced on that shimmering August day.

Celebrations, Laughter and Food

The Christmas tree still dominates the family room in our home this Twelfth Night, its ten feet of branches laden with special ornaments that have marked the passage of time in our family. Unlike many of my neighbors, whose bare trees lay at the edge of the road waiting for the town pickup, we keep our tree up till mid-January, when we end the revels with my husband's birthday celebration. Between Christmas and January 14 we will celebrate Epiphany by marking all the external doors in our home with the following inscription:

20 K + M + B 13

The initials are those of the three kings--Kaspar, Melchior and Balthazar. The Bavarian tradition, carried by my mother-in-law to this country when she arrived here 60 years ago, is a form of benediction, blessing the house and all who enter it.



Our house was blessed many times over this season by the gathering of family and friends. My widespread children returned home from the nation's capital, the mountains of North Carolina and the fascinating streets of Seoul. Nieces and nephews from Florida, New York and New England congregated around our table, along with my husband's brothers and mother. A young friend, whose own family was too distant to reach in the short time she had, joined us as well. As you might expect, I fed them all. Every day from December 20 until January 1, I cooked for groups ranging in size from four to twelve and loved every minute of it. Here's just a sample of some of the foods that graced our table:



Steamed lobster for those homesick for the taste of New England; pot roast simmered in wine; chili-bacon breadsticks; deviled eggs; artichoke pie; pasta with homemade meatballs and sweet Italian sausage; roast goose with rosemary potatoes and steamed asparagus; Quorn roast for my vegetarians; poached salmon with risotto and steamed green beans; apple pie; and creme brulé.

Upcoming Event

February 5, 2013

"Vittoria Colonna--Poet, Heretic and the Only Woman Michelangelo Ever Loved"

Guest Lecture

Atalanta Club

Longmeadow, MA

Would your book club or women's group enjoy an author visit? Please contact me at linda@lindacardillo.com

Vittoria

An excerpt from my work in progress. . .

I rode between Ferrante and Alfonso at a pace that allowed me to absorb with all my senses the tumult and excitement of a city that seemed suddenly freed from the shadows and violence and neglect of its past. The election of Giovanni di Medici as pope was recognized as a turning point and the people meant to mark it accordingly. The day was punctuated by roars of approval as a particular family or spectacular float came into view. The air, which had wafted so crisply in the morning, was redolent with the mingled odors of food vendors, burning incense and gun smoke from the cannons being fired from the hills in celebration. The bells of every church in the city pealed in sequence. It was exhausting; it was exhilarating. By the time we arrived at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, it had been hours since we'd left the palazzo.

We dismounted in the piazza and entered the Basilica, from which the sacred notes of the *Missa Pange Lingua* resounded, the voices of the nuns of San Silvestro rising above the murmurs and greetings as one after another noble family arrived. . .

We had not long to wait before the procession of the cardinals led the new pope into the cathedral. A river of red silk accompanied by the hum of Latin prayers flowed in front of us. If there were those among the long line of prelates who would have rather been pope, they masked it well.

Giovanni di Medici moved slowly through the throng, smiling in genuine delight at his own spectacle, rather than in cunning at his accession to power.

"A very different man from Julius," my father commented to Ferrante, both of whom stood behind me.

"I don't think we'll see him leading troops to amass more land for the Papal States."

"But will he protect Italy from the French as fiercely as Julius did?"

My mother placed her hand on my father's arm, a subtle signal that to say any more in these surroundings might not be wise. He patted the hand and coughed loudly.

The air in the cathedral, already dense, became oppressive as the crush of thousands of bodies and the smoke from the candles and incense intensified. I could barely hear the prayers at the altar and caught out of the corner of my eye a flash of gold from the papal crown before my body gave way to fatigue. I felt myself crumple to the floor, the last thing I saw the inlaid red and green squares surrounding the red field of my family's coat of arms underfoot. The last thing I heard was my mother's gasp.

When I opened my eyes again I was in Ferrante's arms and we were moving through the crowd, which parted with curiosity as his commanding voice and warrior's body accepted no barrier. Despite his wounds, he forged ahead as if on the battlefield.

"Make way!" he shouted.

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Thank you for your continued enthusiasm for my work!

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