The untold story of Eleonora Montalvo’s pioneering role in girls’ education

In 2007, Associate Professor Jennifer Haraguchi (French and Italian, Global Women’s Studies, European Studies) arrived at a beautiful villa north of Florence, Italy, ready to spend a year studying the educational and creative writings of Eleonora Ramirez di Montalvo (1602–59). Montalvo was an educator, poet, playwright, and theologian who opened the first lay schools (schools not entirely administered by the Catholic Church) for girls in Florence. Though well-known in her day, Montalvo’s writing has remained untranslated and her influence on women’s education largely unknown outside of a group of nuns in Italy. Haraguchi has spent the last 16 years translating, researching, and contextualizing in an effort to change that. In 2025, Haraguchi will publish the first translation of Montalvo’s writing.

Haraguchi says, “When I was in graduate school, the professor that I was working with had a bunch of projects that she had started and would never have the time to finish. One of them was Eleonora Montalvo.” Haraguchi took over the project and made a preliminary trip to Italy to see what documents and information on Montalvo still existed. She was pleasantly surprised to find a great deal available. Montalvo soon became the focus of Haraguchi’s doctoral dissertation. With her professor’s help, Haraguchi applied for and received a Fulbright scholarship and subsequently spent a full year in Italy studying at the villa where Montalvo held her school for girls and searching out information in other archives in Florence. Haraguchi’s research shed light on the details of Montalvo’s personal life and professional accomplishments. She says, “I really liked the idea of bringing her out of obscurity and highlighting someone who’s gone unnoticed.”

POET, PLAYWRIGHT, EDUCATOR

From a young age, Montalvo expressed a desire to be an educator. She was born in 1602 to a wealthy family in Genoa, Italy. Like most girls in her social class, she attended school in a convent, where she learned from nuns. Though Montalvo expressed a desire to become a nun herself and educate other girls, her mother found a match for her, and Montalvo married Orazio Landi. However, Montalvo later separated from her husband, which very rarely happened in that time period. Haraguchi says, “They were friends up until he died. I think he realized that she wanted to be an educator.”

Soon after she left her husband, Montalvo began educating girls in her brother’s home. Haraguchi says, “As she gained a reputation for being a good educator, other people started sending their girls to her school.” When her class size outgrew her brother’s home, Montalvo moved her school for underprivileged girls, now called Il Conventino, to a location near the Church of San Lorenzo. Montalvo eventually opened a second school, La Quiete, in a villa outside of Florence proper, which originally served wealthier girls. Later, Montalvo combined the two schools so both wealthier and poorer students learned in the same class. “That was also unique for her time period,” Haraguchi explains. “It wasn’t very often that you mixed social classes.”
Regardless of their status, the girls at Montalvo’s schools received religious, moral, and cultural instruction. They were taught to read, memorize, sing, play the spinet (a historical instrument similar to a harpsichord), and perform religious plays, written by Montalvo herself.

Haraguchi says, “The fascinating thing to me is that she initially didn’t want them to perform plays; she thought it was kind of frivolous. But then later on she changed her mind. She wanted to do something that was both entertaining and instructive for the girls.”

Montalvo wrote poetry and plays that taught about the lives of saints and the virtues her students should exemplify, in addition to extensive instructions for teachers. These creative and administrative works appealed to Haraguchi because of her own interest in education and form the bulk of her translation project. “I’m interested in the practical day to day,” Haraguchi says. “How did she administer these students and the schools and the teachers? What kind of curriculum was she trying to use? We have very little to go on, except these plays and administrative manuals.”

**PRESERVING HER LEGACY**

After Montalvo died in 1659, many efforts were made to preserve her work and legacy. Montalvo herself never published any of her writing and only distributed it within the schools she founded and administered. Haraguchi says, “She wrote on scraps of paper, and then later, a priest transcribed all her writings in a nice book.” Her lay school, La Quiete, continued to educate students even after it was converted into a convent in 1939. The nuns there, called “Montalve,” see Montalvo as their founder and still recite one of the prayers that she wrote. The nuns continued the process of compiling Montalvo’s writing and eventually sent a copy to the Vatican as a case for her beatification within the Catholic Church, a process that would bring more attention to Montalvo’s educational and religious work.

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While Haraguchi studied at La Quiete, she learned that one of the manuscripts containing some of Montalvo’s creative works might still reside at the Vatican, since Montalvo’s beatification proceedings, beginning in 1925, were never completed (her case only reached the first step in the process, with the designation of “venerable”). With a request from the nuns that Montalvo’s work be returned, Haraguchi set off toward the Vatican archives in Rome.

She says, “I asked the archivist if he had anything left from that process, and he showed me a card catalog, saying that it was unlikely we would find anything. While we looked through the cards, he’s like, ‘Oh, there actually is a box.’” Haraguchi followed the archivist down to a basement full of huge shelves and stacks of documents. In the box containing Montalvo’s writings, they found a beautifully scribed manuscript edition of Montalvo’s creative works; the nuns had sent the best to the Vatican.

Haraguchi recalls, “I said, ‘I can take it back to the nuns in Florence,’ and he just hands the book to me! This book is a 17th-century manuscript; a similar copy of Montalvo’s work is found in the rare books library at the University of Pennsylvania. You’re supposed to have gloves to look at it, and I only had a pizza bag from lunch to put this in to protect it from the rain.”

Upon returning to Florence, Haraguchi delivered the manuscript to the nuns, who joked that Haraguchi’s book may just be the very miracle that will raise Montalvo to sainthood. She then began the long process of transcribing hundreds of pages of Italian from photos she took of Montalvo’s work, standardizing punctuation as she went. Only then...
could the translation into English begin. Of the translation process, Haraguchi says, “I’ve had to make choices about how many syllables, if I should rhyme or not. I’ve chosen to write in 10-syllable lines because that’s the closest in English that would mimic an 11-syllable line in Italian. I’m trying to keep a similar cadence to what Montalvo had.”

MONTALVO IN THE MODERN DAY
Haraguchi submitted her book proposal to The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe, a series of books in translation that seeks to publish the works of lesser-known writers, especially women writers, in English. The Other Voice’s website states: “In early modern Europe (about 1400 to about 1700), women began to write and sometimes publish in their native languages, and their writing established the presence of female voices for the first time in world history.” Though many of these authors, like Montalvo, enjoyed recognition in their day, they have since fallen into obscurity. Of the over 150 titles in the series, many are first translations and first publications. Haraguchi says, “For a lot of these authors, we would never have known they existed otherwise.”

Highlighting this piece of the history of women’s education has been Haraguchi’s project for almost two decades. After many years of work compiling, transcribing, and translating, Montalvo’s life’s work will finally be published and available for a wider audience of both English and Italian speakers. Haraguchi hopes to have her students perform Montalvo’s work just as it might have been performed in La Quiete several centuries ago. She says, “I hope to use her writing in my class, so when I teach [a class on] Italian women writers, we can do a reader’s theater of her plays.” Montalvo’s legacy of teaching continues through Haraguchi’s translation, which will allow students to interact with Montalvo’s work for the first time in centuries.