As the trials of Anna Colonna suggested, life in a Roman aristocratic family could pose dilemmas for its women and men. While ostensibly under the direction of the highest-ranking cleric of their families, such dynasties were also (by necessity) populated by brothers who married and generated the continuation of the lineage. Relations between brothers could be tense, exacerbated in the seventeenth century by the pressures of economic difficulty and the necessity of conspicuous consumption in a society crowded with many micro-courts of power, with ancient families anxious to bolster their prestige, and with newcomers bent on advancing their fledgling status. In a city run by a theocracy and open to newcomers, the bifurcated structure of Roman families promoted dynastic success but family members could not escape the dilemmas of such arrangements. Who had the final say in a family organized along these lines? And what were the other family members to do with their resentments toward those who governed the bifurcated Roman aristocratic dynasty?

Aristocratic families maneuvered amidst divergent ideas about rule and the appropriate exercise of power in the seventeenth century. One paradigm that gained adherence was absolutism, referred to in family sources as the “padrone assoluto” or absolute padrone of the family. It implied that the male head of the dynasty was ultimately responsible for the family’s decision-making and direction. Concomitant with the political spread of absolutism was the practice of primogeniture, the legal restriction that concentrated most of the inheritance in the hands of one son. The pattern had come late to Rome, firmly established among the Barberini only in 1685. Alongside primogeniture emerged the emphasis on restricted marriage – the practice of allowing only one or two children in each generation to wed. The rest typically professed
religious vows. Such practices could potentially reinforce the absolute *padrone* as the head of the *casa*, except that the Roman aristocratic family had two de facto *padroni* – its ecclesiastical and its married brother, a fact that complicated how the model worked in Rome. Primogeniture placed much of the family’s property off limits from sale, if an ancestor had successfully legally entailed it. The same legal maneuver that ostensibly increased the prestige of the recipient simultaneously imposed further restrictions on his freedom to do with his inheritance as he would like.¹ In the face of financial doom, the activities of the absolute *padrone* had to run in the direction of careful accounting and more judicious expenditure, if the family were to survive precarious times. Another master of the family was the master ledger, and by law, the man who exercised primogeniture was subject to its reckoning. By the terms of primogeniture, he was to leave the family fortune improved, not diminished at the time of his passing. Accountants busied themselves with such tallies as Roman men passed from this life to the next.²

One woman who ruminated upon these paradoxical terms of family governance was Olimpia Giustiniani Barberini (1641–1729).³ Olimpia faced similar dilemmas to those of her predecessor (and mother-in-law), Anna Colonna Barberini (1601–58), when it came to the governing of the aristocratic *casa*. Olimpia had ample time in which to think about such issues. Her marriage in 1653 to Maffeo Barberini (1631–85) had occurred when she was only 12 years old; her spouse was about 12 years her senior (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Some 75 years later, when Olimpia was in her eighties, she was still involved in family controversies, namely, the dispute over the custody of the Barberini granddaughter, Cornelia.⁴ Olimpia had begun bearing children in her mid-teens – first two girls, Costanza (b.1657) and Camilla (b.1660), and then three boys, Francesco (b.1662), Urbano (b.1664), and Taddeo (b.1666). Olimpia’s greatest challenges can only be glimpsed here and there in fragmentary correspondence that survives her. Since for much of her life she was not physically separated from those closest to her, she left a faint epistolary record compared to that of Anna Colonna. Olimpia expressed in writing her feelings of isolation during her early years as a mother. Then 16 years old, Olimpia longed for childcare advice from her grandmother, Olimpia Maidalchini.⁵ Olimpia went on to successfully navigate many such pitfalls, raising five children to adulthood. By the time Olimpia reached her early forties she was engaged in the task of making marriages for her offspring, a key role for women of her caste. That same decade saw the loss of her husband, Maffeo, who died in 1685 when he was only in his early fifties, throwing Olimpia into widowhood with only one of their