Introduction

There are three underlying principles to this work on nuns' chronicles, of which the first is a desire to investigate texts in which women explain how they make sense of their lives. This principle dictates the kinds of material to be used – the emphasis is firmly on records (of whatever sort) written or generated by women. It is paradoxical that many studies of nuns and convents in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy have in the past concentrated on visitation and other episcopal records generated by precisely those ecclesiastical males whose agendas were most firmly fixed on notions of pre-ordained gender roles. While these records are of course interesting at one level, they embody the drawbacks of most prescriptive material. It is usual practice to start the study of institutions and the individuals comprising them by investigating the records of those institutions and individuals, not by working with the records of those attempting to exercise control over them and criticise them. Consequently, the study of nuns and convents should be based on the nuns' and convents' own records rather than on the records of the controlling organs of the catholic church. Alternative records generated both by convents as institutions and by individual nuns within these institutions are in abundance in most Italian state archives, and surely allow a very different picture to emerge from that constructed by male record-keepers in the Renaissance and Counter Reformation. It is a legacy of the hegemony of both the catholic church and nineteenth-century male historiography that the history of nuns and convents is still approached in this fashion.

The decision to study nuns' chronicles arose from an interest not only in the lives of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century nuns but also in their view of the past. Nuns' chronicles provide an ideal context within which to analyse the world of the nun, especially when used in conjunction with other convent documentation, because the nuns themselves are the authors of their own narrative histories, carried forward to the chroniclers' own times. In no other medium are nuns called upon to reflect on the past in the same way, and their version of the present also differs from that offered in diaries for it has to fit into a framework of continuum. Nuns' chronicles similarly were engaged in fashioning convent and individual identities, outlining the history of

traditions or creating nun heroines (praised sometimes for behaving like men, and sometimes for not behaving like men).

The second principle is a belief that similarity and difference can best be understood by comparison, thus dictating the methodology. Choosing chronicles from Venice, Florence and Rome bucks the localising insistence of Italian history. Working out the essence of the cultural similarities and differences between the convents forms the backbone of the study, which in the main examines what Robert Brentano termed 'connected differences',[1] using certain aspects of the chronicles and convent culture as criteria for comparison. Additionally, analysis is also dependent on the subjects and areas addressed by the nuns in their writings, although omission or silence can be as eloquent as inclusion or comment. A great deal that is previously unfathomable becomes clear when viewed through a comparative lens. For example, the extent of chroniclers' collusion in their own incarceration and the level of their assimilation of the beliefs of their male contemporaries creates difference of a further kind, which can be partially decoded by comparison with other chronicles.

The third principle is curiosity about the intellectual and imaginative achievement of women in the past, which informs the focus of the book. Peter Dronke alluded to neglect of this topic in his 1984 book on medieval women writers,[2] but the absence of printed editions for many women's works means that progress on new texts is slow. None of these three nuns' chronicles has been published but the hope now is that this study will show how much there is to be gained by taking their work seriously. The book takes a very wide definition of cultural creativity encompassing a great range of intellectual and imaginative achievements, from the writing of history to the commissioning of art to the construction of convent ceremonial traditions. It also addresses the question of whether convents by their very nature (by providing a space away from men) unintentionally aided self-expression for nuns. All-female communities required agency from their inmates in order to function, and decision-making in one sphere led to decision-making in other spheres. The absence of constant contact with men meant an upsurge in opportunity and possibility, offsetting to some extent the nagging physical restrictions imposed by the catholic church in order to keep nuns locked up out of sight of the harmful male gaze.

[1] Robert Brentano, *Two Churches: England and Italy in the Thirteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1968), p. vi.

[2] Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: a Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)* (Cambridge, 1984), p. vii.

PART I

History writing and authorship

1 The creation of chronicles: contents and appearance

This book will analyse the manuscript chronicles or histories of their convents[1] written in the vernacular[2] by three sixteenth-century Italian nuns. It will examine the chronicles themselves, their authors and the peculiarities of the convents from which they came in order to gain insights into and an understanding of the processes of female chronicle writing. Many aspects of convent culture between 1400 and 1600, either touched on in the chronicles of these three institutions or considered relevant to their composition, will also be investigated. The chronicles have been chosen to span the crucial Italian Renaissance cities of Venice, Florence and Rome, and to represent three different orders, so that the differentials of location and religious affiliation could be rotated. The chronicle of the convent of Santa Maria delle Vergini (also referred to as Le Vergini) in Venice was composed in 1523 either by one anonymous canoness, possibly Madonna Franceschina Giustiniani, or by a series of anonymous Augustinian canonesses,[3] of the order of S. Marco Evangelista di Mantova. The chronicle of the convent of Santa Maria Annunziata (known as Le Murate) in Florence was composed by Suora Giustina Niccolini in 1598;[4] the nuns of Le Murate were Benedictine.[5] And the chronicle of the Clarissan convent of Santi Cosma e Damiano (known as San Cosimato) in Rome written by Suor Orsola Formicini exists in three

[1] I am using the word 'convent' here, and throughout the book, in its English usage, to mean a female (as opposed to a male) institution, rather than in its technically correct religious usage, where the words monastery and convent denote male and female institutions belonging to different orders. Technically, monasteries are inhabited by male and female members of the monastic orders, that is Benedictines, Camaldolese, Vallombrosans, Cistercians, etc.; members of canonical orders, that is cathedral canons, etc.; and second-order members of the mendicant orders, that is female Augustinians, Clarissans, Dominicans, etc. Convents, on the other hand, are inhabited by the male members of the mendicant orders, such as Dominicans and Franciscans; and by members of the regular clergy, such as the Gesuiti and the Scolopi. On this, see the preface in Giuseppe Raspini, *I conventi nella diocesi di Fiesole* (Fiesole, 1982).

[2] Parts of the Venetian chronicle are in Italian, and parts in Latin.

[3] Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr (hereafter BMCV), cod. Correr 317. This chronicle will be referred to henceforth in the footnotes as Le Vergini.

[4] Dates have been modernised where necessary.

[5] Florence, Biblioteca nazionale centrale (hereafter BNCF), II II 509. This chronicle will be referred to henceforth in the footnotes as Le Murate.

versions, composed between 1603 and 1613.[6] The aim of the book is to provide a comparative cultural account of these three chronicles of famous convents and the contexts from which they sprang.

It has become clear that there are dozens of chronicles written in Italian by nuns in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries still extant in many different parts of the peninsula. Well-known examples include Suora Caterina Guarnieri da Osimo's chronicle of the Franciscan convent of S. Lucia in Foligno,[7] the chronicle of S. Domenico di Lucca[8] and Suora Bartolomea Riccoboni's chronicle of Corpus Domini in Venice.[9] Many others, for example Suora Cecilia Della Valle's chronicle of S. Chiara in Alessandria[10] and the chronicle of S. M. dell'Alto in Messina,[11] are now missing and may not have survived. These chronicles are (in the vast majority of cases) still in manuscript (in convent or state archives or local manuscript libraries), they are often of a considerable length, and they have not been seriously examined as a genre in their own right. One way of looking at them is to consider them as part of a generalised wave of chronicles, written or commissioned by almost all types of freestanding institution. In Venice, at least, chronicles of institutions were commonplace, if not mandatory. The male author of the 'Antiquario' or history of the convent of S. Servolo in Venice, written in 1543, justified his decision to take up his pen by claiming that such histories were 'normal' for noble families, congregations, monasteries and confraternities.[12] Even though so many convent chronicles written by

[6] The version I am using is the second one chronologically, written in 1607: Rome, Biblioteca nazionale centrale Vittorio Emanuele II (hereafter BNCR), Fondi minori, MSS Varia 5. This chronicle will be referred to henceforth in the footnotes as S. Cosimato.

[7] Extracts from this chronicle were published by Michele Faloci Pulignani ed., 'Saggi della cronaca di Suor Caterina Guarneri da Osimo', *Archivio storico per le Marche e l'Umbria*, 1 (1884), pp. 297–316. I am grateful to John Law for this reference. There is also a modern edition: Suor Angela Emmanuela Scandella ed., *Ricordanze del monastero di S. Lucia osc. in Foligno* (*cronache 1424–1786*), with G. Bocalli ed., *Appendice su altri monasteri osc. in Umbria* (Assisi, 1987). The manuscript of the chronicle is still in the hands of the nuns of S. Lucia in Foligno.

[8] Domenico Di Agresti, *Sviluppi della riforma monastica savonaroliana* (Florence, 1980), pp. xv, 127–8.

[9] The chronicle was published in Giovanni Dominici, *Lettere spirituali*, ed. Maria Teresa Casella and Giovanni Pozzi (Freiburg, 1969), pp. 257–94 and translated into English in Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: the Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395–1436*, ed. and trans. Daniel Bornstein (Chicago and London, 2000).

[10] Maria Bandini Buti ed., *Donne d'Italia. Poetesse e scrittrici* (2 vols., Rome, 1946), I, p. 220 and Carlo Novellis, *Dizionario delle donne celebri piemontesi* (Turin, 1853), pp. 97–8.

[11] Carmen Salvo, *Monache a Santa Maria dell'Alto: Donne e fede a Messina nei secoli XV e XVI* (Messina, 1995), p. 7.

[12] Victoria Primhak, 'Women in religious communities: the Benedictine convents in Venice, 1400–1550' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1991), pp. 181–2, 323–4.

nuns are known to have existed or indeed still exist, allowing nuns access to the physical act of writing (let alone the mental act of composition) was a contentious issue for the catholic church, especially after the Council of Trent. At a practical level, visitation records and rewritten constitutions draw attention to the fact that inkwells could be forbidden objects for nuns in some convents and locations,[13] whereas at others, nuns were required to bring with them into the convent the wherewithal to write.[14]

The first chapter will examine the chronicle as a category of writing. The first and most fundamental issue to be addressed is whether or not it is useful to try to discern a difference between histories and chronicles at this date, and if so, how this difference can best be characterised. Sophisticated attempts have been made to drive a wedge between the two, but the results have consistently shown the impossibility of keeping to fixed guidelines without negating the point of the exercise.[15] One credible difference lies in the degree of narrativity achieved; for various late twentieth-century theorists, chronicles 'aspired' to narrativity, but were unable to achieve it, whereas histories did achieve it. The reason for this failure was simple: chroniclers wrote their chronicles from 'the beginning' to the present, but in narrative terms the present was not a 'real' ending or conclusion, merely a 'termination'.[16] On the other hand, it was customary for members of religious orders, both male and female, to call their histories of their institutions chronicles, and sixteenth-century nuns followed the traditional path. Yet they also at other points referred to their chronicles as histories, and this very interchangeability of terms indicates that they believed the two categories of writing to be inseparable. So perhaps the question being asked is the wrong one. A more fruitful distinction can, however, be made in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries between a less regulated and more individual style of history writing in

[13] Massimo Marcocchi, *La riforma dei monasteri femminili a Cremona. Gli atti inediti della visita del vescovo Cesare Speciano (1599–1606)*, *Annali della biblioteca governativa e libreria civica di Cremona*, 17 (1966), p. 49 where decrees of 1601 for S. Giovanni nuovo in Cremona forbade nuns from keeping inkwells.

[14] Florence, Archivio Capponi delle Rovinate, filza VII (Mannelli e Benci), n. 19, which includes an inventory of objects taken by Virgina Benci into S. Felicita in Florence in 1568 – these included lined paper, an inkwell, a ruler and pens. I am grateful to Niccolò Capponi for allowing me access to these archives.

[15] Bernard Guenée, 'Histoires, annales, chroniques: essai sur les genres historiques au Moyen Age', *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 28 (1973), pp. 997–1016, and Elisabeth van Houts, *Local and Regional Chronicles* (Turnhout, 1995), p. 14.

[16] Hayden White has been very influential in this discussion. See his 'The value of narrativity in the representation of reality', *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), pp. 5–27, esp. p. 9. This article was reprinted in Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD and London, 1987), pp. 1–25.

Italian, and humanistic history writing, on a Ciceronian model, in Latin.[17] Style and choice of language indicated difference, and according to the humanists, only humanistic history was truly deserving of the name. Convent chronicles in the vernacular ignore classical rules governing the composition of history and forge a collective past for their community on their own terms. The nuns' empirically based manuscripts stand in direct opposition to the rhetorically devised accounts written by humanists, anticipating in many ways the detailed archival work that was later to become fashionable, but without the benefit of analytical rigour. From the nuns' point of view, naming their histories chronicles merely followed convention, yet for the humanists, who controlled the terminology of history writing, adopting this label was tantamount to admitting to an ignorance of historical know-how.[18] Therefore, at a very basic level nuns' chronicles could be safely ignored as historical writings because they were not correctly packaged and labelled. The crucial distinction lay between different types of histories, rather than between histories and chronicles.

Many of the most essential questions about nuns' chronicles revolve around considerations of the chronicles as 'literature' and as 'history'. The second question is therefore: what exactly is a nun's chronicle? What are its essential and/or defining features?[19] Is a chronicle of her convent written by a nun only the history of the convent, or can it be something more than this? Were chronicles written to record an individual's point of view, a collective point of view or an institutional point of view? Chronicles of convents do not, in the main, limit themselves to mere discussions of the internal affairs of convents, because so much of the life of a convent took place in negotiation or in partnership with organisations and people in the external world. Over the course of the two centuries under discussion, contact with the external world waxed and waned in conjunction with prevailing moods and views on what behaviour was suitable for nuns, and on how complete their break with the external world should be. In most time periods, nuns

[17] Guenée, 'Histoires, annales, chroniques', pp. 1013–14.

[18] Nuns were, however, conscious that they did not possess the knowledge and consequently the written authority of men. See Ronald Surtz, *Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain: the Mothers of Saint Teresa of Avila* (Philadelphia, 1995), p. 7.

[19] In the Italian context, there have been a couple of pioneering articles considering nuns' chronicles. See Silvia Evangelisti, 'Memoria di antichi madri: i generi della storiografia monastica femminile in Italia (secc. XV–XVIII)', in Cristina Segura Graiño ed., *La voz del silencio*, I: *Fuentas directas para la historia de las mujeres (siglos VIII–XVIII)*, (Madrid, 1992), pp. 221–49 and Elissa Weaver, 'Le muse in convento: la scrittura profana delle monache italiane (1450–1650)', in Lucetta Scaraffia and Gabriella Zarri eds., *Donne e fede: santità e vita religiosa in Italia* (Bari, 1994), pp. 253–76.

from the three convents maintained close links with family and friends (and nuns from one convent even managed to maintain contact with lovers), links that in some cases may have involved exits and absence from the convent. Even if contact with family and friends were maintained only within the parameters of the convent precincts, it was clearly close and news-centred enough to allow the nuns to feel that they had a stake in the fortunes of their city. And, leaving aside the all-important familial ties, convents and their inmates were part of the fabric of their locales: they employed local craftsmen and servants, they had neighbours, they paid local ecclesiastical taxes, they held semi-public services in their convent churches, they often owned local lands and properties. Convent chronicles therefore (although they are careful to omit scandal and nearly always try to present consensus) reflect these realities, and contain material on a vast array of subjects, relating both to internal and to external affairs. In a similar way, different chronicles give voice to different viewpoints.

In their guises as both literary compositions and historical writings, the chronicles' female aspect should not be forgotten, and attempts should be made to calibrate which of the distinctive peculiarities of the texts were dictated by gender. Above all, this analysis of three women's writings and institutions is an attempt to study women predominantly through the use of sources written by women. Nuns occupied a twilight zone between 'ordinary' men and 'ordinary' women. They had all the usual pressures on them to conform to standards set by men, and remained ultimately in the grip of male control, but membership of an all-female institution may have countered this to some extent. A single-sex lifestyle removed them from the damaging competitive gaze of men, and left them with the possibility of more freedom for creativity. During periods of repression by the church authorities, obviously this was not so (although reform, enforced or otherwise, seems sometimes to have been a catalyst for chronicle writing). In any case, all-female institutions spawned a plethora of female records, which are used here in conjunction with the chronicles.

Additionally, the religious overlay of these chroniclers and their chronicles must be taken into account in an analysis of these works. The authors were second-order religious, in two out of three cases living the lives of enclosed nuns. However, they had entered their convents not as adults with a vocation, but as children obeying the commands of their elders. Their personal inclinations cannot be known, but whatever their initial feelings, for the two enclosed nuns the only way forward was to accept the restraints of their life with a good grace, and to make the most of the situation in which they found themselves. That entailed them engaging with the religious milieu around

them, mastering its vocabulary, imbibing its rhetoric, immersing themselves in its moves and *mores*. But both Niccolini and Formicini also found the space to develop their historical interests, an activity that was allowed under their respective religious regimes. The most pertinent question regards the extent to which their identification with the religious context of convent life affected their writing of history. It is obvious that a history of the convent written by an outsider and not an inmate would be substantially different in tone, emphasis and detail, but would it also necessarily differ in approach, type of subject discussed, choice of nuns to hold up as 'heroines' or explanation of events? Much would depend in addition upon the ecclesiastical status of the writer. All of these topics will be scrutinised for religious input and potential clashes between secular and religious modes of causation and secular and religious models of successful or achieving women. One topic where the difference between the ecclesiastical and the non-ecclesiastical is clear is the inclusion in the chronicles of numerous examples of so-called mystical visions. Although most people in the sixteenth century accepted them as a sign of grace from God, they are given such weight in the chronicles as 'events' that a collection of them almost constitutes a new subject for historians. The third chronicle emerged from Le Vergini in Venice, which was inhabited not by enclosed nuns, but by noble conventual canonesses, living an existence in many ways surprisingly unencumbered by religious baggage. Their lives approximated far more closely (except without a husband and children) to the life of a married woman of their class in Venice. They lived in a community but were able to go out of the convent on occasion; they carried out liturgical functions and celebrated the offices in the convent church, but overall their world was not unremittingly religious in content. In all sorts of ways – dress, living quarters, possessions, property – Le Vergini canonesses maintained secular interests. The difference between the authors of the three works is therefore significant: not only was there a gap of seventy or eighty years (during which time the catholic church had tightened its control of convents in a vice-like grip), but Le Vergini remained to a much greater degree a part of the 'real' world. This difference in religious outlook is reflected in the way history is approached in the chronicles. The canonesses at Le Vergini were the beneficiaries of a convent tradition and heritage that was in a position to hold its own and operate without male permission, and the view of causation propounded in the chronicle is that not all events are susceptible to religious explanations. Sadly, the world and worldview of Le Vergini were about to be shattered for ever because at the end of the chronicle the struggle between the patriarch of Venice and the canonesses over the imposition of observance is recounted, a battle that was lost by the convent. The final section of the chronicle is driven by this bitter