

# Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy

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# 1 | The creation of chronicles: contents and appearance

This book will analyse the manuscript chronicles or histories of their convents<sup>1</sup> written in the vernacular<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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;<sup>4</sup> the nuns of Le Murate were Benedictine.<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> Parts of the Venetian chronicle are in Italian, and parts in Latin.

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

<sup>4</sup> Dates have been modernised where necessary.

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> the chronicle of S. Domenico di Lucca<sup>8</sup> and Suora Bartolomea Riccoboni's chronicle of Corpus Domini in Venice.<sup>9</sup> Many others, for example Suora Cecilia Della Valle's chronicle of S. Chiara in Alessandria<sup>10</sup> and the chronicle of S. M. dell'Alto in Messina,<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> Even though so many convent chronicles written by

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Extracts from this chronicle were published by Michele Faloci Pulignani ed., 'Saggi della cronaca di Suor Caterina Guarnieri 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.

<sup>8</sup> Domenico Di Agresti, *Sviluppi della riforma monastica savonaroliana* (Florence, 1980), pp. xv, 127–8.

<sup>9</sup> 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).

<sup>10</sup> 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.

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

<sup>12</sup> 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,<sup>13</sup> whereas at others, nuns were required to bring with them into the convent the wherewithal to write.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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’.<sup>16</sup> 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

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Florence, Archivio Capponi delle Rovinate, filza VII (Mannelli e Benci), n. 19, which includes an inventory of objects taken by Virginia Benci into S. Felicità 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.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Guenée, ‘Histoires, annales, chroniques: essai sur les genres historiques au Moyen Âge’, *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 28 (1973), pp. 997–1016, and Elisabeth van Houts, *Local and Regional Chronicles* (Turnhout, 1995), p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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?<sup>19</sup> 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

<sup>17</sup> Guenée, 'Histoires, annales, chroniques', pp. 1013–14.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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: Fuentes 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

battle, and exhibits even less religious ‘orthodoxy’ than the previous parts. By comparing the Venetian chronicle’s approach to history with that of the Florentine and Roman chronicles, various degrees of religious affectedness across many features, from style to types of biography, can be ascertained.

### The chronicles as literary compositions

Nuns’ chronicles are heterogeneous in nature, but are sufficiently similar that they can be understood to constitute a genre of writing. As literary compositions, they range from excellent to barely competent. The best are sustained, sophisticated and fluent, with a coherent structure and an author able to visualise her audience. The least good are jottings, focusing on one event or on a list of nuns’ names. The appearance of these manuscript histories is telling. First of all, some preliminary remarks about nuns’ handwriting are in order. As might be expected, nuns from different social groups wrote in widely different hands, and in general handwriting often has a direct relationship to literary competence (but one has to beware of automatically assuming this because some nuns dictated their compositions). The diversity of hands was also related to education and to practice and, like everyone else’s handwriting, reflects its date, so that writing from the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century is immediately recognisable as different from that of the 1520s. None of the three chronicles under review was written in a recognisably ‘female’ hand, and all three scribes were obviously completely used to writing. Some nuns’ writing is so tortured, irregular and forced that it can only be assumed that the nun was not called upon to write very often.<sup>20</sup> The Venetian chronicle is written in the most ‘humanistic’ hand of the three, but this is probably primarily a result of the period in which it was written; the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries produced script of this sort, which had become much rarer by the turn of the sixteenth century. As Patricia Fortini Brown has noted, the visual presentation of history mattered in Venice, and the chronicler/compiler was obviously aware of this.<sup>21</sup> The Venetian hand is beautifully clear and regular, and the appearance of the script on the folio

<sup>20</sup> For a spectrum of nuns’ handwriting in the 1540s in Florence, see the submissions, usually in the abbesses’ hands, of the names of every nun in their convents, ordered by Duke Cosimo de’ Medici, Florence, Archivio di stato (hereafter ASF), Segretario del Regio Diritto 4892. Some, for instance those of S. Francesco dei Macci and S. Giuseppe, are cruder and less even than others, ASF, Segretario del Regio Diritto 4892, 12r and 14r.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio* (New Haven and London, 1988), p. 97.

seems to have been crafted to resemble the typeface on a printed page (see figure 1). The same scribe (who may or may not have also been the author of the whole or a part) penned the whole chronicle, with the exception of one section that appears to be in a different hand.<sup>22</sup>

The Florentine chronicle is also marvellously clearly written, in a bold and forthright cursive gothic script known as *mercantesca*. It is in fact the hand of a nun to whom Giustina Niccolini dictated her history.<sup>23</sup> She is named in a letter to the abbess and nuns of Le Murate from Agostino Rinuccini appended to the chronicle: ‘the said book by the same mother Suora Giustina was written by the hand of mother Benigna di Stiatta Cavalcanti’.<sup>24</sup> Suora Maria Benigna Cavalcanti is named elsewhere in the chronicle as one of three nuns whose relatives paid for the construction of separate cells for them during the abbacy of Suora Beatrice Benci in the 1590s.<sup>25</sup> It is fascinating that the most literate and literary account of the three was dictated rather than written; it shows that Niccolini must have had an excellent memory and an excellent prose style in order to sustain this method of composition at one remove. There are three full versions of Orsola Formicini’s chronicle,<sup>26</sup> the first two of which she penned herself. It can be assumed that then the arthritis in her hand became incapacitating and prevented her writing any more. But a third full contemporary or near-contemporary chronicle<sup>27</sup> exists, which is a faithful copy of her second version. It may be that she dictated this text, or that she oversaw its copying, but these remain hypotheses. The identity of the scribe of the third version/copy also remains unknown, but because this copy ended up in the Vatican, rather than at the Biblioteca nazionale centrale in Rome with the other two versions, it is more likely that the scribe was a man and not another nun in the convent. The third version/copy is written in a regular, late sixteenth-/early seventeenth-century hand, and

<sup>22</sup> The section in the second hand runs from 20r to 25r in Le Vergini.

<sup>23</sup> On the issue of dictation by women and questions of literacy, see Surtz, *Writing Women*, pp. 5, 147, n. 31. Giustina Niccolini’s decision to dictate her work was not related to questions of literacy.

<sup>24</sup> The letter is from Le Murate, 179r–v; the scribe’s name appears on 179v.

<sup>25</sup> Le Murate, 167v.

<sup>26</sup> On which, see P. Fedele, ‘Carte del monastero dei Ss. Cosma e Damiano in Mica Aurea’, *Archivio della Reale società romana di storia patria*, 21 (1898), pp. 459–534 at 484–5; Amedeo Quondam, ‘Lanzichenecci in convento. Suor Orsola e la storia tra archivio e devozione’, *Schifanoia*, 6 (1988), pp. 37–125 at 46–8; Joan Barclay Lloyd and Karin Bull-Simonsen Einaudi, *SS. Cosma e Damiano in Mica Aurea: architettura, storia e storiografia di un monastero romano soppresso* (Miscellanea della società romana di storia patria, XXXVIII: Rome, 1998), pp. 147–8. The first version is in BNCR, Fondi minori, MSS Varia 6, and the second in BNCR, Fondi minori, MSS Varia 5.

<sup>27</sup> The third copy/version is in Biblioteca apostolica vaticana (hereafter BAV), Vat. lat. 7847.





the volume is nicely bound in green leather with golden fringes. Because Formicini already had the second version from which to read (in order to produce a copy), it would have been substantially easier for her to dictate than for Niccolini to dictate a new work from scratch. The handwriting of the first two versions points to an author thoroughly at home with a pen in her hand. The writing, typical of its period in some ways but in others rather unpolished, looks more or less hurried, according to the passage (see figure 2), and although less clear than the other two chronicles, it remains legible at most times, except when acidic ink has corroded the folio, as is the case, for instance, with the first twenty or so folios.

The size, exterior decoration and length of the chronicles are also revealing. Both the Venetian and Florentine ones are large, and their bindings are impressive. It is not presumptuous to call these the master manuscripts, from which other copies could have been taken. They were undoubtedly also the convents' copies, and as such were required to reflect to inmates and visitors the value placed by the convents on their histories. The bindings quite straightforwardly signal the importance of the contents. The folio size of the Venetian chronicle is approximately  $43 \times 28.6$  cm and the binding is made of leather with silver studs. This chronicle stands out on account of the richness of the material on which it is written, for it is parchment ('carta reale'), a fact that is so unusual that it is even noted at the time,<sup>28</sup> whereas the others are on paper. However, it is considerably shorter than the other two chronicles, comprising only sixty-three folios of text, a significant number of which also include illustrations. The Florentine chronicle is smaller (although still relatively large), with the folios measuring  $34 \times 23$  cm, and the sumptuousness of the binding similarly indicates the inner riches of its contents, but the text is considerably longer, numbering 179 folios. The second version of Formicini's chronicle,<sup>29</sup> which is the one being used here, is much smaller in size, the folios measuring approximately  $22.7 \times 17$  cm, and it has a more workaday binding. The handwriting is also smaller, so that proportionately there are more words to the page, and there are 396 folios, including the final table of contents, a substantially greater number than either of the others. In terms of word length, the chronicle of Le Vergini is *c.* 60,000 words long. The chronicle of Le Murate contains over 100,000 words and that of S. Cosimato more than double this amount, with

<sup>28</sup> Venice, Archivio di stato (hereafter ASVe), Archivio delle corporazioni religiose soppresse (hereafter ACRS), S. M. delle Vergini (hereafter SMdV) 38, loose papers.

<sup>29</sup> Formicini's first idea was to write a history of the convent during the period in which she had known it, that is from 1556 (when she entered) to 1603, the date of composition of the first version.



2 Folio from Suor Orsola Formicini's chronicle of S. Cosimato in Rome, 1607. Rome, Biblioteca nazionale centrale Vittorio Emanuele II, Fondi minori, MSS Varia 5, 253r

c. 220,000 words. But it must be remembered that only a portion of this chronicle, comprising fewer than 100,000 words, deals with the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century narrative history of S. Cosimato (132r–306v).

Presentation of material upon the folio or ‘page’ varied. The Venetian chronicle was not uniform of presentation, because it was heavily illustrated, almost definitely by another canoness at Le Vergini, and possibly by the scribe or author(s) of the chronicle. One reason supporting this hypothesis is that some of the legends included in the miniatures, for example, on the two title scrolls at the start of the main narrative,<sup>30</sup> and some of the titles above or on the same page as the miniatures,<sup>31</sup> are in the same hand as the text of the chronicle. Others, however, seem not to be.<sup>32</sup> The miniatures interrupt the text at irregular intervals, and are of varying size, the largest being approximately 40 × 27.5 cm (and therefore occupying a full page) and the smallest roughly 11.8 × 10 cm.<sup>33</sup> In addition to the miniatures, the chronicler/compiler of Le Vergini (or her scribe) also varied her presentation of the text upon the page using several decorative and visual techniques, to create a more diverse appearance of the whole. She drew elaborate initials at the start of sections and paragraphs (the one on the first folio was her largest, taking up the space of fourteen lines and it even contained a parody of a face).<sup>34</sup> She clearly set out two lists of popes (starting with Alexander III and finishing with Adrian VI) and doges (starting with Sebastiano Ziano and ending with Andrea Gritti),<sup>35</sup> allotting a line to each incumbent, so that the regularity of the continuous text was offset by an equal but different regularity of a set-apart list. She invented an enormous and visually interesting annotated genealogical tree<sup>36</sup> leading from Adam and Eve to the Virgin Mary and Christ, with the names contained in circles.<sup>37</sup> Variation was achieved by the sometime use of capital letters for names when notarial documents are being copied into the text (in mimicry of the actual document),<sup>38</sup> occasional underlining (although this may not have been carried out by the author(s)

<sup>30</sup> Le Vergini, 10r. The left-hand one reads: ‘Incipit originale monasterii Sancte Marie Verginis de Venetiis’ (‘Here begins the master copy of the convent of S. M. delle Vergini’) and the one on the right-hand side reads: ‘Quicumque ipsum furatus fuerit vel titulum deleverit anathema sit’ (‘Whoever steals this or destroys the title page, let him be anathema’).

<sup>31</sup> Le Vergini, e.g., 46r.      <sup>32</sup> Le Vergini, e.g., 54v.

<sup>33</sup> The largest is on Le Vergini, 10r and the smallest on Le Vergini, 44v.

<sup>34</sup> Le Vergini, 1r. Occasionally there are blank spaces where these initials should be, e.g., 43v and 45r.

<sup>35</sup> Le Vergini, 1v–3r.

<sup>36</sup> On which, see Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *L’ombre des ancêtres: essai sur l’imaginaire médiéval de la parenté* (Paris, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> Le Vergini, 4r–9v.      <sup>38</sup> Le Vergini, e.g., 48v.

or the scribe),<sup>39</sup> the lining up of lists<sup>40</sup> and the judicious use of blank spaces. The margins at the side and the bottom of the page remained constant, except when miniatures were included, and in general, this is a beautifully presented and extremely regular text.

The Roman chronicler tried other tricks to embellish her 'page'. She had a special trick of her own, of which she appears particularly fond, that of centring the last words of several given sections in a V-shaped spiral.<sup>41</sup> It could almost be called her trademark. This was a device used in early printed books and it carries one step further the interaction and interplay between the two media of the written and the printed word. It is interesting to note the occasions when these manuscript chroniclers either copied the traditions of illuminated manuscripts or aped the newer conventions of the printed book.<sup>42</sup> Formicini's hand (which could appear rough) was in fact very regular and full of character, and she was interested in both embellishment and, in a simple way, design. The upward stroke of her pen (used by her for the contraction sign, as well as for crossing her 'f's) gave a lilt to the regularity. She paid attention to how she set out her lists – tables of contents, all the nuns' names, the incomings of the convent, month by month<sup>43</sup> – on the page, using blank and filled-in space to create visual as well as textual patterns. The illustrations in Formicini's chronicle are provided by 'cut-out' printed images of saints (for example, Santa Veronica)<sup>44</sup> or religious scenes, such as the beheading of John the Baptist,<sup>45</sup> which are often pasted in at the beginning of chapters. Occasionally there is a blank space left where there should have been a cut-out. These illustrations vary in size but often are seven to eight lines in length. The Florentine chronicle is the plainest in terms of presentation, possibly because it was dictated to a scribe. Even it, however, contains elaborate initials at the start of chapters, and the scribe often centres the chapter headings in spiral form.

The three chronicles under review represent different literary traditions, were produced in differing time periods and show varying levels of competence. The Venetian chronicle, written in the 1520s, is much less coherently structured than the other two, being in essence an amalgam of different sections merely run together, and it shows the joins between its sections rather too clearly. But it contains within its boundaries one extraordinary

<sup>39</sup> Le Vergini, e.g., 55r.    <sup>40</sup> Le Vergini, e.g., 42v.    <sup>41</sup> S. Cosimato, e.g., 133r, 253r and 326r.

<sup>42</sup> Brian Richardson, *Printing, Writers and Readers in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 5–9 discusses the continuities between manuscript and print.

<sup>43</sup> See S. Cosimato, 128r, 169r and 347r for examples of these three types of lists.

<sup>44</sup> S. Cosimato, 272r. This image was large and took up fourteen lines in length.

<sup>45</sup> S. Cosimato, 146r.

literary jewel: it includes the texts of twenty-one Latin orations given by its canoneses in a public forum in front of the doge between 1177 and 1516 upon the consecration of new abbesses. The Florentine chronicle is the best written and most assured, and its author maintains her narrative grasp throughout. The Florentine nun chronicler's work leads her to be judged the most literate and gifted writer of the three, able to stand outside her composition and to write with a measure of objectivity. She employs various literary devices and conceits, and manages not to be repetitive. Suor Orsola Formicini, the author of the Roman chronicle, is to be commended for effort and pride in her work because she wrote at least two (and possibly three) versions of it in an attempt to produce a final copy. Style is not her strong point, although her simplicity of narrative can make her descriptions 'come alive'. Her chronicle reveals her to be a less fluent writer than the Florentine, Suora Giustina Niccolini.

It is interesting that although all three authors are able to write, with varying degrees of fluency, it is not always clear what printed or manuscript texts they have had access to nor which authors they have read. In the main, whatever formative forerunners there may have been, they remain largely hidden and are not susceptible to reconstruction, as the libraries of all three convents, seemingly uncatalogued, have been dispersed and are now forever lost.<sup>46</sup> Given a convent's obvious focus on religious learning and spiritual models of life, it is surely theoretically likely that a convent library would not have contained any secular prose narratives or any classical historical texts by authors such as Plutarch. It is difficult to discern the influence of or traces of either of these types of source in the two late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century texts, although the Venetian chronicle does display classical learning, in various guises. Instead of overarching narrative, there seems to have been an emphasis on the span of a life, and on biographically centred composition. Most convents would also not have contained any copies of manuscript (or printed, in the case of those with access to printed material) chronicles of other convents and monasteries, so they would not have been able to glean knowledge of how to compose one by written example. This might provide one reason why the formats of chronicles can be diverse. On the other hand, copies of earlier chronicles or histories of their convents that had been written in-house would have been kept, and these are obviously used.

<sup>46</sup> For comparative purposes, see the sixteenth-century inventory of printed and manuscript books from Caterina Vigni's convent in Bologna in Serena Spanò Martinelli, 'La biblioteca del "Corpus Domini" bolognese: l'inconsueto spaccato di una cultura monastica femminile', *La Bibliofilia*, 88 (1986), pp. 1–21; and Danilo Zardin, *Donna e religiosa di rara eccellenza: Prospera Corona Bascapè, i libri e la cultura nei monasteri milanesi del Cinque e Seicento* (Florence, 1992).

The titles, title pages, *introits*, beginnings and endings of these chronicles help to place them both as literary compositions and as historical writings, and to define their contours. The Venetian chronicle has its title emblazoned in capital letters across its first folio: ‘Chronicle of the convent of Le Vergini of Venice’,<sup>47</sup> there is no separate title page, and the text starts immediately underneath. There is no author’s name. The Florentine title is longer and more complicated (for one thing, ‘chronicles’ appears in the plural rather than the singular): ‘Chronicles of the very venerable convent of Santa Maria Annuntiata of Le Murate of Florence of the Cassinese Order of the Glorious Father, Abbot and Patriarch Saint Benedict, in which are included everything that has happened since the beginning, the foundation and the building, as also every other occurrence concerning spiritual matters and other advancements in rule. 31 January 1597.’<sup>48</sup> This title appears on a homespun and monochrome title page (see figure 3), arranged as if it were an illuminated manuscript. The words of the title are framed illusionistically by an inner frame that is itself surrounded by a wide margin decorated with birds, flowers, fruit and butterflies. This in turn is edged by an outer frame drawn to resemble a real wooden and gilded frame. Some of the species are recognisable: birds are represented by a peacock, a parrot, a raptor, an owl and an ostrich (amongst others), flowers by a pansy. Although the drawings are not at all professional, they are pleasing, and the illusionistic framing devices are very skilfully conceived and executed in fine detail. This is one of only two pen and ink illustrations in the chronicle.

The Roman chronicle is the only one to include the name of the author in the title: ‘Book of the antiquities (*antichità*) of the convent of San Cosimato, executed by Suor Orsola Formicini’.<sup>49</sup> This gives a very important signal, and announces the seriousness of the undertaking and the importance of the writer. The title is written in red ink in four elegantly tapered lines across the top of a title page, while in the bottom half of the page lies a coloured image of Saint Clare. On the following folio is a fuller version of the title, providing additional information about how the material was collected, and

<sup>47</sup> Le Vergini, 1r: ‘Cronica del monastero delle Vergini di Venetia’.

<sup>48</sup> Le Murate (before the onset of foliation): ‘Cronache del VV. Monastero di Santa Maria Annuntiata delle Murate di Fiorenza dell’ordine Cassinese del Glorioso Padre Abate et Patriarcha San Benedetto, nelle quali si tratta di quanto è successo sino dal principio si della fondatione e ediftii come anco di ciasun altro negotio intorno alli ordini spirituali et altri promotioni di governi. A dì 31 gennaio 1597.’ The chronicle is dated according to the Florentine calendar, where the new year started on 25 March, so in effect the date should read 31 January 1598.

<sup>49</sup> S. Cosimato, 1r; ‘Libro dell’antichità del monastero di S. Cosimato fatto da Suor Orsola Formicini’.



3 Title page from Suora Giustina Niccolini's chronicle of Le Murate in Florence, 1598. Florence, Biblioteca nazionale centrale, II II 509



giving the start and end dates of the history – 889 (corrected to 847) to 1607 – but not the author’s name. It is noticeable that the three chroniclers each describe their work in a different way, as a chronicle (*cronica*), chronicles (*cronache*) or a book of antiquities (*libro del antichità*). The terminology of the activity of history writing had not been fixed in these circles.

Also important is the fact that the three versions or copies of Formicini’s work all have different titles, so drift of nomenclature was occurring even in relation to a single work. The first version, covering the convent’s history during Formicini’s membership of it (1556–1603), had a Latin title written in red ink on the first folio: ‘Book of the observant Clarissan nuns of S. Cosimato in Rome in the region of Trastevere’,<sup>50</sup> and a more extended Italian title, also in red ink, on the second.<sup>51</sup> The titles of the second version were discussed in the previous paragraph. So by the second version Formicini had dropped the Latin title, although she was still playing with having an abbreviated and an extended title on the first two folios. The extended titles of the two versions were slightly different, and of course contained different dates. The most striking change between the two versions is that it was only in the second version that Formicini included a reference to herself as the author of the work, a really significant change in presentation and views of ownership. The third version has the title ‘History of the convent of S. Cosimato’<sup>52</sup> written on the spine but no title or author is alluded to inside the covers. Formicini’s reluctance to use the more obvious words ‘chronicle’ and ‘history’ is in sharp contrast to her desire to grapple with historical methodologies, and is difficult to explain. Maybe she thought that the title of her own choosing was grander, or more distinctive; or perhaps she wanted the reader to know immediately that her historical work was more than usually ancient, and did not concern itself only with the recent past.

In the Venetian example, the *introit* is especially enlightening as the chronicler/compiler enunciates her motives in writing: ‘In order to satisfy all the readers and listeners (*audienti*) and out of necessity (*de bisogno*) [I write this so] that in this our book it is known how our most saintly Pope Alexander III came to Venice.’<sup>53</sup> It is slightly off-putting that the chronicler/compiler opens not with a general sentence on history writing, or on the history of the convent, but with a statement related to a pope, whose connection to

<sup>50</sup> BNCR, Fondi Minori, MSS Varia 6, 1r: ‘Liber monialium Sancti Cosmati de Urbe in regione Transtiberim de observantia sub regula sante Clare’.

<sup>51</sup> BNCR, Fondi Minori, MSS Varia 6, 2r. <sup>52</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 7847.

<sup>53</sup> Le Vergini, 1r: ‘Per voler satisfacer a tutti li lectori et audienti e de bisogno che in questo nostro libro si sapia in che modo vene a Venetia el nostro santissimo papa Allexandro III.’

the convent has not yet been announced. But the fact that she envisages both readers and listeners for her book, and that she says so in the very first sentence, is fascinating. In effect, this section at the start of the chronicle of *Le Vergini* is a fledgling preface, but is just not referred to as such. One marker of this is the use of the possessive ‘our’, which appears at regular intervals throughout the Italian text (thus ‘our abbess’ and ‘our church’<sup>54</sup>), and another is the fact that this is the only place in which the writer addresses her audience of ‘readers and listeners’. Suora Giustina Niccolini of *Le Murate* has a very different opening sequence, related straightforwardly to the very changed circumstances, beliefs and prejudices of the post-Tridentine period in which she was writing. In some aspects, the opening sequence was more professional, more book-like, but in others – for instance, in Niccolini’s denigration of her capacities – it revealed the rhetoric then expected because of the current degraded state of women and their writings. Her title already contained much more information than the Venetian chronicler’s; and the title, in the style of a printed book, was followed by a table of contents, listing the chapter or section headings, and providing the appropriate folio numbers. The table of contents was followed by a letter from Giustina Niccolini to the abbess and nuns of *Le Murate*, in which she described the conflicting emotions that had led to her deciding to write her history. She piously wanted to write because she wanted to reveal the deeds of *Le Murate*’s first founders, but she was overwhelmed by the difficulty of the task and by her own ignorance and lack of ability.<sup>55</sup> She signs the letter ‘Unworthy and least important sister in the Lord, Suora Justina Niccolini’.<sup>56</sup> This was a satisfactory device that allowed her to be seen to be acting with humility, whereas in fact it ensured that her name could be attached to authorship of the work. Although her name was not included in the title, it appeared in the last line of the folio before the preface. The gap between the chronicle of the 1520s and those of the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century can be observed here. The Venetian chronicle has no separate title page, no table of contents and no overt or stated preface. Instead the text starts immediately, but with an adversion to readers and listeners. Seventy or eighty

<sup>54</sup> *Le Vergini*, 28r and 61r.

<sup>55</sup> *Le Murate*, pre-1r: ‘Hanno tanto obligato il debole e pusillanimo animo mio li pii desideri che he scorto nello prudenti reverentie vostre di sentir esposte in luce l’opera egregio delle nostre prime fondatrice che io a gran lunga mi son lasciata traspostare a farlo troppo temeravamente ingannando me stessa delle molte mie imperfetione di quale certo confesso esser colma da ciascuna banda ou io mi volga. Onde non dovevo ardire di por mano a impresa in vero tanto difficile et però impossibile all’ignorantia mia naturale e basso intelletto il compirla.’

<sup>56</sup> *Le Murate*, pre-1v: ‘Indegna e minima sorella nel Signore Suora Justina Niccolini’.

years later, new conventions for histories must have become widespread, as manuscripts now copied the conventions of printed books. Separate sections, each with a prescribed function, had multiplied, and title pages, tables of contents, prefaces and main text were all required. Niccolini's preface<sup>57</sup> is written in the plural – 'we' think or do this or that – and the chronicler always refers to the convent as 'our' convent. The preface does not directly address the reader, although by the use of 'we', the readers and the nuns of Le Murate become conflated, one and the same. Instead, it explains more about the availability of source material, and pinpoints the principal part of the history of Le Murate, namely its foundation by the 'saintly mothers', that was a motivating factor, crying out for a written account. The text itself opens with another illusionistically framed image containing only a pen and ink drawing of a scroll with the names of Jesus and Mary. This is followed by a chapter heading: 'Of the two first mothers, founders of our convent of S. M. Annuntiata called Le Murate of Florence, on the Ponte Rubaconte, chapter 1'.<sup>58</sup> And the *introit*, in a dutifully pious opening manoeuvre, manages in one long sentence to mention (and therefore to link) God, St Benedict and the two founding mothers, Apollonia and Agata. The opening sentence contains one of the few figurative images of Niccolini's chronicle, of 'God wanting to plant a new little vineyard of our congregation in the garden of the sacred church'.<sup>59</sup>

Formicini's opening gambits reflect her professionalism and her desire to craft a manuscript that as nearly as possible resembled a printed book. She addressed her preface (she calls it a *prefazione* whereas Niccolini called hers a *proemio*) directly to her kindly readers ('alli benigni lectori'),<sup>60</sup> and proceeded to dazzle them with an elaborate simile, in which she compared an elephant seeing blood and becoming warlike with an unspecified 'we' who saw the traces of the religious past and were inspired to join the fight against 'the devil, the world and the flesh'.<sup>61</sup> Formicini starts with 'we' but soon moves to a first-person narrative. It sounds from the opening as though one reason for writing was to gain recruits, and this impression is strengthened at the end of the preface, when Formicini prays that God and the martyr

<sup>57</sup> The preface is in Le Murate, 1r to 2v.      <sup>58</sup> Le Murate, 3r.

<sup>59</sup> Le Murate, 3r: 'Volendo il Signore Dio piantare nel giardino di santa chiesa una nuova vignola di questa nostra congregazione'.

<sup>60</sup> S. Cosimato, 2bisr–3v. Unfortunately, the first folios of Orsola Formicini's second version of her chronicle are not legible due to ink corrosion, so I am using the transcription made by Pier Luigi Galletti from this second version (obviously before the corrosion became so damaging) in the eighteenth century. The Galletti transcription of the preface is in BAV, Vat. lat. 7933, 49r–51r. On Galletti's copy, see Quondam, 'Lanzichenecchi in convento', pp. 46–8.

<sup>61</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 7933, 49v: 'contro li nostri inimici demonio mundo et carne'.

saints will accept her little work ('piccol opera'), and will grant sufficient grace so that readers of it will be inspired to imitate S. Cosimato's saintly mothers. As a finale, she recommends her readers to the benign kindness of Christ. So history is being written for the age-old, classical reason that one can learn from and copy it, but the twist here is that the 'heroines' are nuns, and the writer, another nun, openly states that she wants her writing to inspire others to imitate former nuns in her convent. This is highly unusual and is an excellent example of Formicini's engagement with historical processes. She has taken a standard classical precept about history, and has altered it sufficiently to serve her purposes in extremely precise circumstances. Neither of the other two chroniclers is writing for this reason. There are other indications in the preface that Formicini imagines a potential audience outside the convent walls; for instance, she starts one sentence with the phrase: 'Whoever reads the present work.'<sup>62</sup> Like Niccolini, Formicini uses the space provided by the preface to allow the reader to enter her world of practical difficulties, changes of plan, the hunt for sources and her lack of ability, but her tone is more intimate. She tells the reader that she is old and unwell, that her eyesight is poor and her right hand is crippled,<sup>63</sup> that she has a 'crude style' and a 'weak intellect'.<sup>64</sup> So her preface manages to engage the reader at multiple levels: she starts with flair, she personalises her tale, she engages the reader's curiosity and sympathy, and she reminds the reader that a whole host of saints, and God, are on her side in this venture whose religious purpose is to inspire vocations.

The actual *introit* of the work, after the first chapter heading, is a telling explanation of how the reader can 'verify' the truth of what she has composed: 'And so that no one thinks that what I say and write are caprices of my brain, and in order that [the reader] believes all that is in this book, which is utter truth...'<sup>65</sup> She imagines a reader who thinks that what she writes is fantasy, and the most plausible explanation for this rather extraordinary fear is that she has already had some experience of this situation, and that, because of her gender, her credibility as a scholar has been questioned. In this respect, nun historians were at a similar disadvantage to all other females: their testimony was inherently unreliable and consequently their rendition of past events was suspect. The most famous example of this was the apostles' refusal to give credence to Mary Magdalene's testimony regarding the resurrection.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the first few sections of Formicini's chronicle

<sup>62</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 7933, 49v.      <sup>63</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 7933, 49v.      <sup>64</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 7933, 50v.

<sup>65</sup> BAV, Vat. lat. 7933, 51r–v: 'Et perchè niuno pensi che questo che io dico et qui pongo siam capricci del mio cervello et acciò si dia fede a tutto | quello serrà posto in questo libro, il quale è tutto verità...'

<sup>66</sup> Mark 16:10–11 and Luke 24:10–11.