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As Dante and Beatrice begin their ascent to the Empyrean in canto 3 of the *Paradiso*, they alight on the moon where they encounter pale spirits, not mere reflections but “true substances . . . assigned [there] for inconstancy to holy vows” (29–31).¹ Encouraged by Beatrice, Dante asks an eager soul identified as Piccarda Donati, a Poor Clare abducted from a Florentine convent by her brother and coerced into a politically expedient marriage, “through what warp she had not entirely passed the shuttle of her vow” (95–96). Like the followers of Saint Clare who “go cloaked and veiled on earth,” she replies, “As a girl, I fled the world to walk the way she walked and closed myself into her habit, pledged to her sisterhood till my last day” (98–99, 103–05). Disheartened by her family’s actions, Piccarda expired eight days after her unwanted nuptials.

Dante clearly expected his tale of breached cloister and broken vows to be understood as a failure of will; for the doubts he expressed concerning the justice of punishing those who were forced against their desire were resolved in his discussion on free will in the next canto. Yet for modern readers both Dante’s exemplum and his choice of language also elucidate the pervasiveness of attitudes that viewed the female gender as weak by nature. Dante locates the inconstant souls on the moon, the lowest of the celestial spheres and a secondary planet visible only by virtue of the reflected light of the sun, and he singles out a monastic woman who has slighted her vows, not because she is intrinsically evil, but because she exemplifies inherently passive beings who submit to a stronger force regardless of its sinfulness. While the families actually break the sanctity of the cloister in his poem, it is Suor Constantia, as Piccarda was called in the convent, who pays an eternal price for her frailty of will.²

Such cautionary tales have been instrumental in forming the historical perception of religious women in early modern Italy.³ For centuries, the themes touched upon by Dante in his story of Piccarda – female inconstancy, passivity, and submissiveness, as well as beauty and wiles capable of engendering masculine wrongdoing – have resounded in fields as diverse as history, literature, hagiography, and canon and civic law. When included at all in traditional histories of monasticism, women typically appear either as footnotes or as problems to the dominant male religious orders.⁴ More recent approaches in religion, history, and women’s studies have revealed that monastic women were not silent,

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however. They conversed among themselves and with others in letters, devotional treatises, prayers, plays, and sonnets. Current scholars have started to piece together the history of female monasticism as part of broader investigations into the education, labor, marriage, and familial responsibilities of Renaissance women; and as might be expected, their findings reflect the duality of the female experience historically. On the one hand, demographic studies based on tax records and public dowry funds by Molho, Kirschner, Klapisch-Zuber, and Herlihy imply that unmarried girls and wealthy widows were often coerced into nunneries for economic reasons. On the other hand, analyses of women's writings (letters, treatises, poetry, and plays) by Bynum, Foletti, and Weaver suggest a more problematic situation in which women often became nuns contrary to the wishes of their families for diverse motivations that ranged from a sincere religious vocation to a fear of marriage or childbearing.⁵ Studies of fifteenth-century female humanists such as King and Rabil's *Her Immaculate Hand* also indicate that convents were refuges for educated women who wished to pursue an intellectual life unavailable to them in the secular world.⁶ Art historians have been slower to respond to the challenges offered by female monastic history. Although Gilbert and Meier, among others, have examined visual art connected with Italian convents, it is only recently that scholars such as Roberts, Valone, Barzman, Rigaux, and Bruzelius have attempted to analyze the female voices embodied in those works.⁷

That the biases toward monastic women, as exemplified in Dante's tale, have endured at least in part because of male anxieties about the power of female sexuality is the common ground in the publications of these diverse academic disciplines. Indeed, by Dante's time, such fears had long been justified in theological and philosophical writings that promoted the "natural" moral weakness of women as a potentially dangerous source of temptation and sin. From the early years of the Christian era, assertive or independent religious women were urged to pattern their lives after the Virgin Mary and their sexuality was negated by vows of chastity and ascetic practices. As further insurance, medieval monastic rules required the perpetual enclosure of women in convents after their profession of what became the standard vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty.⁸ Often considered aberrant and holy at once, outspoken or otherwise exceptional religious women in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – such as Clare of Assisi and Catherine of Siena – were neutralized by stereotyped sainthood, while the founders of female monastic orders and the countless anonymous women who joined their communities were transformed into "consecrated virgins."⁹ The refashioning of Saint Clare, who established the female branch of the Franciscan order to which Piccarda belonged, and its effect on the nuns who embraced her brand of monasticism, demonstrates this process. For this female order attracted educated, patrician women who observed a strictly sequestered and stringently ascetic form of monasticism, and though aligned with the male branch established by Saint Francis, the female order was not dependent upon it.

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Map 1. Italy.

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Moreover, as the order flourished and expanded beyond the region of Umbria into Tuscany and the Marches at midthirteenth century, its nuns built and decorated numerous churches and convents (Map 1). What follows is a study of both the rich body of historical information and the visual imagery that survives for the Franciscan nuns; in examining this material, I also hope to provide a useful starting point for a reevaluation of Renaissance monastic women in general.

Saint Clare herself was born into the nobility of Assisi in about 1194, the third child of Ortolana and Favorone Offreduccio.¹⁰ In March of 1212, she fled her home to become a disciple of Saint Francis of Assisi, and after short periods at the Benedictine nunneries of San Paolo in nearby Bastia and Sant'Angelo di Panzo, she settled at San Damiano on the outskirts of Assisi, where she formed the first community of Franciscan women, originally called the Poor Ladies, but after her death known as the Poor Clares or Clarisse in her memory. Pope Innocent III cloistered the nuns in 1216, named Clare as abbess, and provided them with a monastic rule, one that Clare disputed for the next four decades because it infringed on the women's ability to practice Franciscan communal poverty. The *Privilegium Paupertatis* permitting the Clarisse to observe strict poverty, which was issued by Pope Innocent in 1216 and renewed by Pope Gregory IX in 1228, appeased Clare somewhat. Yet, undaunted by clerical opposition, she continued to battle for the rule that she had composed, finally receiving approval from Pope Innocent IV two days before her death on August 11, 1253.¹¹

Clare was widely acclaimed as a saint while she was alive, and her canonization, which was fervidly endorsed by the Holy See, local church and civic leaders, and the Franciscan Order, occurred only two years after her death in 1255.¹² The Process of Canonization, a transcript of the trial for sainthood in which witnesses responded to a series of questions from papal investigators, preserves the interrogation of the nuns who had lived with the saint at San Damiano.¹³ Under oath, they swore to Saint Clare's poverty, piety, humility, and virginity, to her fasting and hardships, to her visions, and, most frequently, to her thaumaturgical powers. Despite the precondition of testimony that seems designed to elicit conventional characterizations of holiness, the report clarifies what constituted Clare's saintliness in the eyes of the thirteenth-century nuns.¹⁴ The Poor Clares present their founder as a gentle, chaste recluse who spoke only of God, who sewed finely spun linen corporals as gifts for nearby churches, who practiced extraordinarily ardent and tearful prayer and pitiless self-mortification, and who cured illnesses of body and mind with the sign of the cross.¹⁵ According to the nuns, she was a compassionate abbess who continued to lead the community for forty-two years, even though she was bedridden for the last twenty-eight with a chronic illness induced by her extreme self-denial. Like many female ascetics in the late Middle Ages, Saint Clare espoused spiritual enrichment through strict fasting and almost complete neglect for even minimal physical needs or comforts; yet unlike many of these women who wasted away at an early age, she lived until she was about fifty-nine.¹⁶

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When he read his Bull of Canonization *Clara, claris, praeclara meritis* to the congregation assembled in the Cathedral of Anagni on September 26, 1255, Pope Alexander IV transformed the humble holy woman described by the nuns into a radiant saint.¹⁷ With lucid allusions to light and clarity inspired by the connotations of her name, he cast Saint Clare as a chaste *sponsa Christi*, elucidating her holiness according to a paradigm of female spirituality that dated back to the earliest days of Christianity.

O wondrous blessed clarity of Clare. . . . She shed light . . . while yet in the world; while in religion she shone above others; in her father's house, she was like a little ray, but in the cloister like the brilliance of lightning. In life she shone to a few; after death she shines on the whole world; on earth she was a clear light; now in heaven she is a brilliant sun.¹⁸

In the papal bull, "the sweet lily of her virginity" is a crucial component of Clare's sainthood. Prompted by her mother's name, Ortolana ("gardener"), floral and aquatic metaphors invite comparison with the paragon of female chastity, the Blessed Virgin.¹⁹ As Mary is the Lily of the Valley, the Cedar of Lebanon, and "a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up," Saint Clare is "the new woman of the Valley of Spoleto, who poured forth a new fountain of the water of life to refresh and benefit souls, a fountain which has since flowed in many streams through the whole of Christendom and watered many nurseries of religious life."²⁰ Like the Mirror of Justice, the Seat of Wisdom, the Spiritual Vessel, the Refuge of Sinners, and the Comforter of the Afflicted described in the Litany to the Virgin, Saint Clare is eulogized as "a vessel of humility, a shrine of chastity, a flame of love, the essence of kindness, the strength of patience, the bond of peace, and the source of loving unity in her community" in the bull.²¹ In addition to his eulogy of chastity in *Clara, claris, praeclara*, Pope Alexander praised Clare's poverty and humility and lauded her guidance of the community; nonetheless, his enrollment of Clare in the "Catalogue of Saintly Virgins" at canonization preempted her eminence as the founder of the Second Order of Franciscans.²² Instead of the nuns' image of their abbess in the Process of Canonization, it was the pope's classification of virgin sainthood and his lyrical gloss on Saint Clare's merits that inspired the author of her official legend and established the tone for the saint's cult that endures to this day.

Thomas of Celano, the Franciscan author of two celebrated lives of Saint Francis of Assisi, enlivened and popularized Clare's cult in his *Legenda Sanctae Clarae Assisiensis* of ca. 1255 by regaling his audience with recollections of her many miracles and fabulous cures.²³ Echoing Pope Alexander, he validated and molded perceptions of Clare's sainthood by framing his narrative according to customary notions about female sanctity. Her virtues of chastity, humility, and asceticism superseded what was most novel about her holiness – her commitment to strict Franciscan poverty.²⁴ Brother Thomas promoted Saint Clare as a feminine counterpart to Saint Francis, interpreting her endurance in the face of the self-imposed infirmities recounted by the Clarisse as a sign of her moral

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strength in order to set her up as a God-sent model for “the weaker sex.” Just as men could “follow the new heroes and disciples of the Word made Flesh; let the women imitate Clare, the footprint of the Mother of God, the new captain of womankind.”²⁵

This pairing of Saints Clare and Francis in the public mind was further enhanced by the interweaving of publicly decreed sainthood and hagiography with the visual arts.²⁶ At her canonization in 1255, as at Saint Francis’s in 1228, Saint Clare’s name was added to the litany of saints, her feast day (August 12) was entered on the church calendar, and an indulgence of one year and forty days was granted for visits to her tomb.²⁷ Thomas of Celano’s *vite* fostered the form both founders’ holiness would take, and his dramatic tales of posthumous miracles and cures worked by the *poverello* or at “the spot where the precious remains of the virgin reposed” fueled popular sentiments about their efficacy as intercessors and attracted crowds of pilgrims to their burial sites.²⁸ The construction of elaborate churches to house their tombs and the decoration of these buildings with paintings inspired by the legends also helped to shape public perceptions of their sanctity (Figs. 1 and 2). A mirror image of San Francesco, the church of Santa Chiara at Assisi was planned soon after Pope Alexander’s proclamation of Clare’s sainthood; actual construction began in 1257 and advanced so swiftly that by 1260 her body was interred in a simple rock-cut tomb below the high altar.²⁹ The translation of Saint Clare (that is, the formal endorsement of her relics), which was ordered by the pope in a bull of 1260, took place on the Vigil of Saint Francis (October 3) in a ritual that, like the architecture of her shrine, was clearly intended to evoke memories of her masculine counterpart.³⁰ The similarities between the churches of Saints Clare and Francis reinforced the notion that they were twin founders of the Franciscans; their sanctuaries glorified them in stone as the paired male and female exemplars praised in the *Legenda Sanctae Clarae*.³¹ And the magnificent frescoes and panel paintings, which commemorated the virtues of the two saints and were commissioned for both Santa Chiara and San Francesco, served as visible embodiments of their spirituality that would leave as vivid an imprint of their saintliness on the imagination of visitors as their blessed relics and capacious shrines would (Figs. 10 and 30).

Subsequent histories have upheld the connection between the two saints of Assisi, albeit at the expense of Saint Clare who has consistently been placed in the shadow of Saint Francis.³² Even in modern scholarship, Saint Francis’s founding of the order that bears his name has been studied as part of the religious, political, and social upheavals in thirteenth-century Italy, whereas Saint Clare’s contribution to monastic reform and societal change has largely been viewed in light of his activities, or treated as occurring outside of or apart from historical circumstances.³³ The simplification of Franciscan male and female roles and responsibilities in most historical accounts, whereby Saint Clare and her nuns exemplify the *vita contemplativa* and Saint Francis and his friars the *vita activa*, promulgates a separate but equal status that is inherently unequal

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Figure 1 (top). Church of Santa Chiara, Assisi, begun 1257 (photo: author).

Figure 2. Church of San Francesco, Assisi, begun 1220s (photo: author).

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– even deceptive – since the order as a whole has been characterized in terms of its begging, preaching, and missionary zeal, which excludes the cloistered sisters. Such automatic sanctioning of the monks' public activities over the nuns' private *formula vitae* effectively relegates the Clarisse to a second place in Franciscan spirituality.³⁴

Of course, there have been monographs devoted to Saint Clare over the years. Most are clustered around the anniversaries of her birth, her founding of the Poor Clares, and her death, and the majority have reinforced traditional views of her sanctity that vary little from those written at the time of her canonization, as in the numerous articles published to mark the seven hundredth anniversary of the order's foundation in 1912.³⁵ The publications in the early 1950s intended to commemorate the seven hundredth anniversary of Clare's death are much more satisfactory. Revised editions and multilingual translations of the *Acta* of Canonization, Thomas of Celano's *Legenda Sanctae Clarae Assisiensis*, and Saint Clare's writings (her monastic rule, letters, and testament) did much to augment our knowledge of the saint in her own right, especially Fasola Casolini's *Protomonastero di Santa Chiara in Assisi, 1253–1950* (1950), which discussed the convent in Assisi as well as the saint, and Nesta de Robeck's *Saint Clare of Assisi* (1951).³⁶ Since then, scholars in religious and intellectual history, literature, and women's studies have mined these texts to reexamine and reinterpret Clare's life and spirituality.³⁷ These studies have increased our knowledge of Saint Clare, and additional publications have considered other Clarissan saints, such as Saint Catherine of Bologna, or potential saints such as Blessed Battista da Varano.³⁸ Nonetheless, with the exception of Suor Chiara Augusta Lainati's two-volume *Temi spirituali dagli scritti del secondo ordine francescano*, the Order of Poor Clares itself has largely been ignored in Franciscan, social, and cultural histories of early modern Italy.³⁹ And until now, the art and architecture commissioned by the Poor Clares have remained virtually unexplored as sources of historical evidence, despite the fact that these monastic women belonged to a society that clearly comprehended the profound effects of visual imagery.⁴⁰ What follows in *Women, Art, and Spirituality* investigates the visual art created for and by the Poor Clares from the late thirteenth century until the end of the fifteenth, exploring in particular the linkages between the nuns' devotional and aesthetic attitudes.

The primary objectives of this study are to situate the art and architecture of Clarissan convents in their historical and religious contexts; to evaluate artistic production from sociological and intellectual perspectives; and to elucidate the discourse generated by the nuns' spirituality and their devotional and aesthetic practices, as formalized in the construction and decoration of their convents and in their mystical and didactic literature. My approach to the material is synthetic, drawing on the methodologies used in women's studies and in recent historical and literary theory; it is therefore indebted to much of the current scholarship cited above. From the standpoint of art history specifically, assimilating the new

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evidence that I have found concerning the patronage and the function of works of art made for the Poor Clares with contemporary religious, intellectual, and social research on monastic women emphasizes the participation of the visual arts in social practices.

My purpose in writing this book is not, however, to compile a comprehensive survey of all art and architecture produced for the Poor Clares in early modern Italy. Rather, case studies of individual convents build on one another to offer a multifaceted view of Clarissan art and spirituality. The five chapters concentrate on communities that are (or were) located in the areas where the Poor Clares originated in the thirteenth century and where the Observant reforms were initiated in the fifteenth century. The first chapter explicates the imagery of the earliest surviving painting of Saint Clare in light of ecclesiastical restrictions against the public activities of religious women and the promotion of an ideal of female holiness based on seclusion and submissiveness. It also reexamines the saint's cult through a close scrutiny of her surviving letters, testament, and monastic rule, as well as her official legend and traditional writings about female spirituality by churchmen. With particular attention to the nuns' *formula vitae* and the profound effects of claustration, Chapter 2 scrutinizes the construction and embellishment of Saint Clare's convent of San Damiano and her community's next home at Santa Chiara in Assisi, while Chapter 3 brings together the fragmentary documentary and artistic evidence surviving from the destroyed Florentine convents of Monticelli to suggest the Poor Clares' conscious promotion of their ideology to the secular society living beyond the convent walls. The remainder of the book examines Clarissan art and architecture during the Quattrocento reform era, when the women restored the observance of their founder's original rule. The fourth chapter analyzes the Observant reforms by evaluating the contributions of a kinship network of aristocratic Poor Clares, who as patrons, abbesses, and sisters supervised and often financed the construction and decoration of Clarissan convents throughout Umbria and the Marches. The last chapter focuses on the midfifteenth-century abbess and sisters of a single house, the Corpus Domini at Bologna, to study the affirmation of their spiritual and aesthetic attitudes in the art and literature that they created. In the epilogue, the pictorial and sculptural program at Santa Chiara Novella in Florence raises some final questions about the Poor Clares' public expressions of piety in the art commissioned for their churches. Coinciding numerically to the chapters, five appendices contain information about dates, attributions, condition, and the restoring or remodeling of Clarissan art and architecture; as such, they constitute a checklist of works intended to complement the interpretive discussions of the main text.

Throughout this book, explications of the writings and the visual images created by and for the Poor Clares attempt to recapture their vivid intellectual and spiritual lives for the modern reader, and to suggest their importance for understanding the society of early modern Italy. What will quickly become ap-

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parent is that neither the gentle “poor lady” nor the nuns of her order simply reflected the holy radiance of Saint Francis or the fervor of some of his Observant followers. Nor did Saint Clare falter in her vows like Dante’s inconstant Piccarda. Instead, her extraordinary perseverance to the original Franciscan ideology frequently shone like an isolated beam of light in a spiritual atmosphere too often darkened by divisiveness and clouded by power struggles within the order. And as we shall see, her example inspired generations of Clarisse to become beacons of sanctity as well.