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978-0-521-55082-6 - Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women

Elissa B. Weaver

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

In 1781 the nuns of San Clemente in Prato performed in their convent a well-known secular comedy written by the Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni.¹ News of the event scandalized Scipione De' Ricci, the Bishop of Prato and Pistoia. Not only did the nuns perform *La vedova scaltra* (*The Wily Widow*) for an audience that included Dominican friars and townspeople, but they performed “with such bravura that they were better than a troupe of [secular] actors!”² It was not the first De' Ricci had heard about convent theatre, nor was it the first time the nuns chose to perform a secular play, though this might have been news to the Bishop. The nuns of Prato had been involved in convent theatre since at least the early sixteenth century. By the eighteenth century some convent players had apparently become quite accomplished; and the nuns had come to rely on theatre for their entertainment, as an essential part of the educational program they offered the young schoolgirls in their care, and as a way of attracting the attention of the outside world. Clearly, not all convent theatrical productions were so professional; San Clemente was surely a special case. Yet another Prato convent closely associated with San Clemente, San Niccolò, had earned a reputation for its theatre more than two centuries earlier. In 1555 a Dominican nun and playwright of that house, Beatrice del Sera, noted how the secular public marvelled that “a woman who has always been enclosed, who hasn't studied or seen

¹ Goldoni's play was first performed in Modena in 1748 and soon after in Venice. It was first published in volume 1 of *Le Commedie del Dottor Carlo Goldoni Avvocato Veneto, ecc.* (Venice: Bettinelli, 1750).

² “con tanta bravura da superare una compagnia d'istrioni,” Scipione De' Ricci, *Memorie*, ed. Agenore Gelli (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1865), p. 97. The incident is cited by Alessandro D'Ancona, *Origini del teatro italiano*, II (Turin: Loescher, 1891² rev. and enl.; 1971 rpt.), p. 162n.

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the places and the ways of the world, can produce such things as they see coming from me.”³

This study of convent theatre will show that these were not two isolated instances. Theatre was an important feature of convent life beginning as early as the fifteenth century. This was true in Tuscany, throughout Italy, in Spain, and probably in all of Catholic Europe and its colonies. My study is largely limited to Tuscany, where I have found an extensive corpus of theatrical works of convent provenance, sufficient to allow me not only to argue for the widespread practice of theatre in the convents of that region but also to trace its more common characteristics.

I mention in this study many authors, secular and religious, of plays that were performed in the convents, but I concentrate my attention on the convent women writers and the plays they wrote. It is my hope, beyond making this tradition known, that I may also reveal something of the lives and works of many women of talent. Few details of their biography are known: family genealogies frequently omit the names of women who became nuns; and the profiles provided by convent obituaries, when they exist, often indicate little more than the number of years the nuns had spent in the convent and their presumed spiritual health at the time of death. Convent account books note the acceptance of girls for boarding, education, and monachization, and the payments made for their board and dowries; they sometimes mention parents, guardians, and benefactors; and they record convent expenditures and occasionally the officers who made them. But the information is scant and the records are incomplete; much has been lost. In the end we know very little about women religious who were not canonized or beatified. Yet in their plays convent women speak of their lives. They do so most often indirectly, through their particular language, the subjects they treat, and the characters they create. My study focuses on their self-expression and on what their writing tells us about their literacy and that of their audience. I seek also to show, where possible, how their lives and work intersect with secular society and literary culture.

The part played in this story by the feminine community that came together in the convents is fundamental. The tradition of convent

³ “. . . pare che metta meraviglia a molti che una stata sempre rinchiusa, senz’avere studiato o visto i paesi e maniere del mondo, facci quelle cose che di me si veggono nate,” Beatrice del Sera, *Amor di virtù*, ed. Elissa B. Weaver (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1990), p. 267. The quotation is taken from an afterword that del Sera wrote in her own hand and appended to the manuscript of her play, a spiritual comedy, written in 1548 or 1549.

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theatre in early modern Italy owes its existence to the needs of this community, which I believe we can call a feminine subculture. It was composed of convent women primarily but also of their female relatives, friends, and benefactors, who met regularly and shared interests that were often very different from the interests of men. Indeed, their community seems to have defined itself in some ways in opposition to the world of men. Lay women relied upon their convent relatives and friends for the education of their daughters and turned to them throughout their lives for edification and counsel, as well as comfort.⁴

The culture of the convent community, while heavily dependent on that of society at large, had characteristics peculiar to it that expressed the distinctive interests, experiences, needs, and talents of women, secular and religious. I contend that this community had an internal dynamic, which contributed to the development and permanence of its cultural forms and created within the convent a class of literate women, long before this was possible outside the walls. It was not enough for nuns to know how to write, nor even to have the necessary time and materials; they needed as well a reason to write. This was given them by the demands of convent women and their extended feminine community to be enlightened and entertained, to have a reason to come together, and to demonstrate their worth.⁵

To situate the phenomenon of convent theatre in its proper context, in the first chapter of this study I sketch a very general picture of urban convents in early modern Italy, their rapid growth in this period, and the reforms that were imposed on them following the Council of Trent, especially *clausura* (enclosure). I discuss convent women, their vocations, authentic and forced, their activities, literacy, and the general convent culture, literary and artistic, in which their theatrical tradition developed. I take for granted the faith of convent women, but their particular forms of spirituality are not a subject of this study, except very indirectly. My interest is in their theatre, an aspect of their culture that perhaps more than any other connected them to the secular world.

⁴ See Craig A. Monson, the “Introduction” to *Disembodied Voices: Music and Culture in an Early Modern Italian Convent* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), esp. pp. 7–12. Monson discusses the social networks of the women of the Bolognese convent of Santa Cristina della Fondazza. He argues the relevance to the situation of enclosed convent women of the notion of “women’s sphere” employed by modern feminist scholars.

⁵ My case in point will be the convent theatre tradition, though a similar argument could be made for other convent genres, especially historiography and biography, cultivated by convent women for themselves and for their relatives and benefactors.

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Convent theatre has rarely been mentioned in studies of the Italian drama.⁶ Since its public was restricted and comprised primarily of women, it was largely unknown or known only superficially outside the convents (though men expressed much curiosity about it and occasionally attended performances). While convent theatre was certainly influenced by secular theatre, there is not likely to have been much reciprocity. One may wonder, however, if the Jesuits, when they established their schools in the late sixteenth century and made drama a part of their educational program, were aware of and in any way influenced by the part theatre played in the education of young women in female convents, a tradition that was in place many years earlier, at least by the 1520s and 30s.

In my second chapter I provide general information about the history and practice of convent theatre in Italy, gleaned from the texts themselves and from other surviving sources of documentation. I review what is known about the playwrights, actresses, and audience, the occasions marked by performances, the plays, sets, costumes, and music, and I discuss the attitudes of the lay community and Church authorities towards theatre in the convents. It is an unexpected benefit of the general neglect of this tradition that very few plays were published: most remain in manuscript form and preserve in the margins precious information about the productions, of the sort that usually disappeared when theatrical texts went to press.

I have consulted a corpus of over fifty texts, nearly all of Tuscan provenance and held by the Riccardiana Library and the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence. My discussion follows criteria of genre and chronology, since it is my intention to write a literary history of Tuscan convent theatre to the extent the texts and my research will permit. There are serious obstacles to the project. Many (indeed most) of the convent plays I have identified are anonymous; the materials are often difficult to date; and there is enough variation within genres to defy easy classification. Feminist historians question the possibility of applying to women's lives and cultural products the chronology that has served rather well for the political, intellectual, and literary history of the dominant male culture. The corpus of convent plays and the problems of chronology it presents will provide fuel for that debate.

The Tuscan convent theatrical tradition evolved in many respects over time. As convent repertoires of plays grew, so did the experience on which the convent playwrights and players could rely. One develop-

⁶ See my Conclusion, note 3, for a list of the work of my few predecessors in the study of Tuscan convent theatre.

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ment was the increased participation in theatrical productions of the professed, or choir, nuns. In the early years and throughout most of the sixteenth century, the actresses seem to have been the novices. The prologues to many of the earlier texts mention them, apologize for their inexperience, and argue that the activity contributed to their education. Cast lists for some of the later plays list choir nuns in preponderance. Elsewhere in the peninsula the same change was under way. In 1660 a nun from a convent in Reggio Emilia explained that, while the actresses in a recent production were all choir nuns, the practice had been different in the past, when some superiors preferred to have the convent's young women perform in order to occupy their idle hours usefully.⁷

Many, but by no means all of the plays, follow developments in secular theatre. For example, over time the form of the prologue evolved, abandoning the announcing angel or the introduction by a single player in favor of dialogues and debates or brief skits that could stand alone and could be reused. By mid-sixteenth century the verse forms, especially the rhymed couplets and the *terza* and *ottava rima*, characteristic of the earlier texts, were for the most part replaced with unrhymed verse, and later still with prose or a mixture of prose and verse. By the mid-seventeenth century multiple plots were the fashion, music played an increasingly important role in the spectacle, and the tradition was becoming secularized. Some seventeenth-century plays in this corpus have a moral but no longer a religious message; some are simple farces. The performance of Goldoni's play at San Clemente in the eighteenth century suggests that secularization was not anomalous but part of a trend.

The central chapters of my study trace Tuscan convent theatre from the late fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, the period spanned by the corpus of texts I have identified. Chapter 3 treats the earliest playwrights and plays, the genre of the *sacra rappresentazione*, and other early forms of religious theatre. Chapter 4 focuses on the genre and the practitioners of spiritual or sacred comedy, a new form born in the early years of the sixteenth century, which in convents shared the stage with *sacre rappresentazioni* throughout most of the century. Chapter 5 takes up

⁷ “. . . la madre ha permesso di fare detta rappresentazione come hanno sempre fatto le altre de' tempi passati, anzi ve n'erano di quelle ch'avevono particolar cura d'applicare le monache giovane a queste rappresentazioni spirituali per impiegarle nelle ore oziose in cosa da essa stimata da qualche profito.” ASV, Cong. Vescovi e Regolari, Sezione monache, 1660, agosto-settembre, “Memorie in ordine delle monache di Reggio,” 21 Julij 1660, fol. [8r].

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the variety of seventeenth-century theatrical genres and the playwrights, some of whom made a reputation for themselves even in the secular world.

This study, I believe, will demonstrate that, despite the thick convent walls and the strict enclosure of nuns within them, women in convents throughout Italy and beyond shared a theatrical tradition and propagated it. The feminine subculture to which they belonged, the spiritual directors and confessors who passed from one convent to another, and the texts that circulated among the houses provided the means for its transmission. In a final chapter I discuss plays of non-Tuscan provenance to suggest some of the types of variation we can expect to find as we extend our investigation of this widespread and long tradition.

Having taken as examples a large number of plays, my treatment of each is necessarily partial. I often juxtapose discussions of plays from different convents, simply because they were nearly coeval or because they demonstrate formal or thematic similarities. Only in three instances have I found more than one play from a given convent. Moreover, the plays in this corpus are often separated in time, so that generalizations regarding preferred subjects, typical forms, and occasions associated with a particular convent or a narrowly circumscribed period are impossible to make. When I have no other information that connects them, I have preferred to let the plays speak for themselves. I have followed the practice of art restorers, leaving neutral spaces where color and detail have been lost.

The Bibliography contains a list of the plays consulted for this study. In the Appendix I have transcribed texts important to my arguments that were too long to incorporate in their entirety into my analyses of the plays.

Since my work on convent theatre began some twenty years ago, I have returned again and again to many of the plays and playwrights discussed in this study (see the Bibliography for a listing of my publications on convent theatre). Nearly all of this material, however, has been entirely rewritten for the purposes of this book. In some cases my interpretations have changed, though not dramatically, and I have continually sought to improve my translations of texts. Only the section in chapter 5 devoted to Maria Clemente Ruoti, originally published in the volume edited by E. Ann Matter and John Coakley, *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance* (1994), has remained substantially unchanged; I thank the University of Pennsylvania Press for granting me permission to reprint it here.

The subtitle of this book “Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women” is taken from the texts I have studied. Convent theatrical productions

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were justified as a pedagogical tool for the education of young women and as an important moment of relaxation and enjoyment for all the convent sisters. Nuns called it their “spasso,” that is, “fun,” and they insisted upon its value as “documento” or “learning,” a way of becoming “più perfetto” or “improving themselves.”⁸ Giovan Maria Cecchi, in the prologue to a spiritual comedy he wrote for the Dominicans of the convent of Santa Caterina da Siena in Florence, paraphrasing a passage from the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, explains the importance of relaxation: a crossbow that is cocked, ready to fire, for too long will lose its effectiveness; so, too, those in the religious life must not work and pray constantly or they will grow less strong, pray, and perform their duties less well. Everything and everyone must rest and relax in order to regain needed strength.⁹ According to Cecchi it is for this reason that convent authorities allow theatrical performances during Carnival, requiring only that the plays be “oneste” (above reproach) and apt to produce “spasso spirituale e documento” (spiritual fun and learning). He writes:

Questa nostra natura è così debole,
che se ella non ha qualche ristoro,
religiose ascoltatrici e pie,
ella non può durar nelle fatiche
del corpo e manco in quelle dello spirito.
Onde vedete che bisogna darle,
quanto al corpo, il suo cibo al tempo debito
e il suo sonno; poi, quanto allo spirito,
le sue recreazioni e sue vacanze.

[. . .] Da
questo, mi credo io, fùr mossi quelli
che fer i monasteri, a consentire
che le suore facessero, ne' tempi
che siamo adesso, le presentazioni
e le commedie, avendo sempre l'occhio
che le fussero oneste e da cavarne
spasso spirituale e documento.

(*L'Acquisto di Giacobbe*, vv. 1–9, 70–77)¹⁰

⁸ See chapter 2, note 46.

⁹ See the sayings of Abba Antonio, in the *Apophthegmata patrum*. I have consulted the French translation by Jean-Claude Guy, *Paroles des anciens. Apophthegmes des Pères du désert* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1976), p. 17.

¹⁰ I cite from the edition of the Prologue to Giovan Maria Cecchi's comedy *L'Acquisto di Giacobbe* published in *Le più belle pagine di G. M. Cecchi*, ed. Ettore Allodoli (Milan: Fratelli Treves Editori, 1928), pp. 5–8.

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[This nature of ours is so weak
 that, if she doesn't get some rest,
 my pious religious sisters,
 she cannot withstand the labors
 of the body nor those of the spirit.
 Whence, you see, we must give her,
 for the body, its food at the proper time
 and sleep; then for the spirit,
 its recreations and its rest.

[. . .] By

this, I believe, convent founders
 were inspired to allow
 the nuns, at this time of year,
 to perform short religious plays
 and comedies, mindful always
 that they be above reproach and provide
spiritual fun and learning.

(Italics mine)

The nuns took this privilege seriously, as I will show in the pages that follow.

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CHAPTER I

RENAISSANCE CULTURE IN ITALIAN CONVENTS, 1450 – 1650

However enclosed they might have been by walls and regulations, early modern convents were not isolated from the outside world. The urban institutions, especially, were in close and constant contact with the community that surrounded them. At the parlor and at the *ruota* (wheel in the wall for bringing items in and out of the convent) there was a continuous exchange of services and goods. Lay women visited relatives in the convents, they boarded and schooled their daughters there, and often as widows it was there that they retired. The social and political elite, the protagonists of public life, were patrons of the cultural life of the convents, and convent women too, who belonged to that same class, commissioned work from laymen, manual labor but also works of art. The cloister, of course, restricted the movements of the women it enclosed, but, freeing them from domestic cares it allowed them to engage in intellectual pursuits and cultural production in ways and to an extent not possible for most of their secular sisters. Women religious seized the occasions that their situation offered and enjoyed, even in the confinement of their convents, a cultural life closely allied to that of the surrounding community.

The following discussion of Italian convent culture concerns primarily the literacy of Italian nuns in the early modern period and their practice of the arts. It will provide a context for the study of the highly developed theatrical tradition that flourished in the women's religious communities of Italy and especially of Tuscany for nearly three centuries. The religious life of convent women, their rituals and particular forms of spirituality, concerns this study only insofar as it is reflected in the theatrical tradition.¹

¹ On Italian convents in the early modern period, see the seminal study of Gabriella Zarri, "Monasteri femminili e città (secoli XV–XVIII)" in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 9: La Chiesa e il potere politico dal Medioevo all'età contemporanea*, eds. G. Chittolini and G. Miccoli (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), pp. 359–429, and Zarri's many articles on specific

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To convey a picture of the general cultural level of the convents that housed upper-class women, and specifically the artistic excellence they would have expected to find in religious communities throughout Italy between 1450 and 1650, I will review some of the commissions of art made by and for those institutions and the evidence that has survived of the practice of the arts within their walls.² Although much of what once belonged to convents has been lost or drastically altered, historical accounts such as chronicles and guidebooks and a growing body of scholarly work can provide a glimpse of what was there. I will also discuss the literacy of convent women as it appears from written records they have left, especially their literary efforts, and the reports of their contemporaries. I make no attempt to give an exhaustive account of any aspect of convent culture, but only to point to evidence of a surprisingly high level of cultural expression in the urban convents of early modern Italy. First, however, it will be necessary to sketch a picture of the women religious themselves and of the relationship of the convents in which they lived to the secular world in this period. To appreciate the cultural achievements of early modern nuns we must first seek to bridge the gap that centuries and changes in society and in forms of spirituality have effected.

Convents were an important part of the urban landscape in Italy from the fifteenth century until their suppressions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even today the often imposing buildings that once held religious women still stand, yet they serve new functions which obscure their original use and significance. The thick walls that enclosed nuns now detain prisoners and house the military, and the spaces that for many years provided some education for women are appropriately the home today of institutions of learning, from nursery schools to

convents and convent traditions and on the social conditions, the culture, and spirituality of convent women cited in my notes and bibliography. An important overview of the scholarship on convents in early modern Italy and the state of the question today is provided by the articles of Zarri (for the sixteenth century), Francesca Medioli (seventeenth), and Paola Vismara Chiappa (eighteenth) in “*De monialibus* (secoli XVI–XVII–XVIII),” *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 33 (1997), 643–715.

² I do not mean to imply that all convents shared equally in cultural riches. Convents outside the city, those in small towns, and some convents in the cities were indeed poor, and all convents suffered a significant loss of income when enclosure was imposed on them in the latter part of the sixteenth century. There were, however, many daughters of the elite and of merchants striving to join the upper class for whom convents were built and whose convents were supported by their families. These convents, which grew in number throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, shared in many aspects of the culture of the outside world.