

Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

CONVENT THEATRE IN EARLY MODERN ITALY  
Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women

This book is a study of convent theatre in Italy, an all-female tradition. Widespread in the early modern period, but virtually forgotten today, this activity produced a number of talented women dramatists and works of unusual merit. Convent authors, actresses, and audiences, especially in Tuscan houses, the plays written and produced, and what these reveal about the lives of convent women are the focus of this book.

Convent theatrical productions were a pedagogical tool for the education of the young women and an important moment of relaxation and enjoyment for all the women. Secular women, and sometimes even laymen and clerics, attended performances which they often watched through the parlor grille. This unauthorized fraternization and the use of secular costumes by the nuns were severely criticized by Church authorities, who sought to curtail them and often to suppress the activity altogether.

Beginning with the earliest known performances of miracle and mystery plays (*sacre rappresentazioni*) in the late fifteenth century, the book follows the development in the convents at the turn of the sixteenth century of spiritual comedy and of a variety of dramatic forms in the seventeenth century. Convent theatre both reflected the high level of literacy among convent women and contributed to it, and it attested to the continuing close contact between the secular world and the convents even in the post-Tridentine period.

ELISSA B. WEAVER is Professor of Italian in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures and the College, University of Chicago.

Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN ITALIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

---

Edited by GIGLIOLA FRAGNITO, Università degli Studi, Parma

CESARE MOZZARELLI, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan

ROBERT ORESKO, Institute of Historical Research,  
University of London

and GEOFFREY SYMCOX, University of California, Los Angeles

This series comprises monographs and a variety of collaborative volumes, including translated works, which concentrate on the period of Italian history from late medieval times up to the Risorgimento. The editors aim to stimulate scholarly debate over a range of issues which have not hitherto received, in English, the attention they deserve. As it develops, the series will emphasize the interest and vigour of current international debates on this central period of Italian history and the persistent influence of Italian culture on the rest of Europe.

*For a list of titles in the series, see end of book*

Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

**CONVENT THEATRE IN  
EARLY MODERN ITALY**

SPIRITUAL FUN AND LEARNING FOR WOMEN

---

ELISSA B. WEAVER



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-55082-6 - Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and  
 Learning for Women  
 Elissa B. Weaver  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

**CAMBRIDGE**  
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of  
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521550826](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521550826)

© Cambridge University Press 2002

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
 no reproduction of any part may take place without the written  
 permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Weaver, Elissa, 1940–

Convent theatre in early modern Italy: spiritual fun and learning for  
 women / Elissa B. Weaver.

p. cm. – (Cambridge Studies in Italian History and Culture)  
 Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 55082 3

1. Convent theater – Italy – History.
2. Italian drama – To 1700 – History and criticism.
3. Italian drama – Women authors – History and criticism.  
 I. Title. II. Series.

PN3178.C64 W43 2001

792'022 – dc21 2001025770

ISBN 978-0-521-55082-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-03902-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of  
 URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication,  
 and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate  
 or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Oh! Tuoi, se ogni gatta vuole il  
sonaglio! Sino alle monache voglion  
far le commedie.*

[Oh! Wouldn't you know  
every cat wants a bell! Even the nuns  
want to put on comedies.]

(G. B. Gelli, *La sporta*, Act III, sc. 4)

*. . . pare che metta meraviglia a  
molti che una stata sempre rinchiusa,  
senz'aver studiato o visto i paesi  
e maniere del mondo, facci quelle cose  
che di me si veggono nate*

[. . . it seems to come as a surprise to many  
that a woman who has always been enclosed,  
who hasn't studied or seen the places  
and the ways of the world, can produce such things  
as they see coming from me.]

(Beatrice del Sera, *Amor di virtù*)

Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-55082-6 - Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and  
 Learning for Women  
 Elissa B. Weaver  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

## CONTENTS

---

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xii
<i>Note on texts and translations</i>	xiii
Introduction	I
1 Renaissance culture in Italian convents, 1450–1650	9
2 The convent theatre tradition	49
3 Plays and playwrights: the earliest examples	96
4 Spiritual comedies in the convents	128
5 From manuscript to print, from the convent to the world	170
6 Beyond Tuscany	216
Conclusion	238
<i>Appendix</i>	244
<i>Bibliography</i>	262
<i>Index</i>	291

Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## ILLUSTRATIONS

---

- Benedictine nun, from Vincenzo Coronelli, *Catalogo degli ordini religiosi della chiesa militante*, Venice, 1707. *Frontispiece*
- 1 Giovanni Antonio Guardi, *Il parlatorio*, seventeenth century. Venice, Ca' Rezzonico. Photo: Alinari. page 18
  - 2 A letter of petition dated 22 April 1529, containing autograph signatures of abbesses of Mantuan convents. Mantua. Archivio di Stato. Reproduced courtesy of the Archivio di Stato of Mantua. 35
  - 3 Suor Plautilla Nelli, *Cenacolo* of the convent of Santa Caterina da Siena in Florence, c. 1550. Florence, Refectory of Santa Maria Novella. Photo courtesy of the Soprintendenza per i beni Artistici e Storici di Firenze, Pistoia e Prato. 38
  - 4 Fra Angelico, *Pala di Annalena* or *Sacra conversazione* showing the Madonna and child with six saints, 1443. Florence, Museum of San Marco. Photo: Alinari. 43
  - 5 Andrea del Castagno, *Cenacolo* of the convent of Santa Apollonia, c. 1445–50. Florence, Museum of S. Apollonia. Photo: Alinari/Giraudon. 44
  - 6 Woodcut from the title page of the plays of Terence, Lyons, 1493. 77
  - 7 Anon., *Commedia di Judit*, sixteenth century, comic scene. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, cod. Ricc. 2976, vol. 4, fol. 16v. © Biblioteca Riccardiana. 142
  - 8 Donatello, *Giuditta e Oloferne*, 1456–60. Florence, Bargello Museum. Photo: Alinari. 146
  - 9 Cristofano Allori, *Giuditta*, 1616–20. Florence, Palazzo Pitti. Photo: Alinari/Giraudon. 147



Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

ix

- |    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 10 | Anon., <i>Commedia di Judit</i> , sixteenth century, invitations to the performance addressed to various members of the convent community. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, cod. Ricc. 2976, vol. 4, fols. 84v–85r. © Biblioteca Riccardiana.  | 149 |
| 11 | Beatrice del Sera, autograph sonnet that opens the <i>Amor di virtù</i> (1548 or 1549, copy 1555). Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, cod. Ricc. 2932. © Biblioteca Riccardiana.   | 156 |
| 12 | Fresco of the Crucifixion (detail), Prato, convent of S. Niccolò, 1509. The figure of the Virgin Mary seems to be depicted as a Dominican nun. Photo courtesy of S. Bardazzi and E. Castellani.   | 163 |
| 13 | Watercolor illustration for Beatrice del Sera's <i>Amor di virtù</i> . The initials are those of the author, and the lion's paw is an emblem from the del Sera family coat of arms. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, cod. Ricc. 2932. © Biblioteca Riccardiana.                            | 167 |
| 14 | Suor Maria Clemente Ruoti, <i>Natal di Cristo</i> , Florence, convent of Saints Girolamo and Francesco [called "San Giorgio"], 1658, scene with card game sung in recitative. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, cod. Ricc. 2783, vol. 7, fol. 33v. © Biblioteca Riccardiana.                | 189 |
| 15 | Suor Maria Clemente Ruoti, <i>Natal di Cristo</i> , Florence, convent of Saints Girolamo and Francesco [called "San Giorgio"], 1657, publishing privilege granted by Franciscan authorities. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, cod. Ricc. 2783, vol. 7, fol. 42v. © Biblioteca Riccardiana. | 191 |
| 16 | Suor Clemenza Ninci, <i>Sposalizio d'Iparchia filosofia</i> , Prato, convent of San Michele, mid seventeenth century, with a list of interlocutors and convent players. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, cod. Ricc. 2974, vol. 3, fol. 1r. © Biblioteca Riccardiana.                       | 207 |

Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

My thanks to the many friends and colleagues who have listened and have given me precious advice. Among these I owe a special debt of gratitude to Gabriella Zari, whose pioneering work on the history of convents has been indispensable to me, and also to Craig Monson, who, in the course of his research on convent music, generously collected information for me on convent theatre. I thank Anne Jacobson Schutte, Paul Gehl, Carolyn Valone, and Robert Atwan, who took the time to read all or part of my manuscript and to make valuable suggestions for its improvement. Many others over the years have helped and encouraged me. I thank especially Nerida Newbiggin, Maria Teresa Guerra Medici, Cesare Mozzarelli, Mary Beth Rose, and suor Geltrude Steinberg. There were those I disappointed by not completing this book in time for them to see it and to know how sincerely I appreciated the interest they took in my work: † Padre Raymond Creytens, O.P., † Padre Isnardo Grossi, O.P., † Madre suor Cecilia Vannucchi, O.P., and † Franca Trinchieri Camiz. Another whom I must thank is Sister Mary Annette, O.S.F., because, though she knows nothing of this project, her influence was surely fundamental. I have had generous support for which I am very grateful to the American Association of University Women, the Newberry Library, the Villa I Tatti (the Harvard Center for Renaissance Studies), the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the University of Chicago. I thank the directors and staffs of the many institutions where I have carried out my research, especially those of the Biblioteca Riccardiana, the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, and the Archivio di Stato in Florence, the Archivio Segreto of the Vatican, the Newberry Library in Chicago, and the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago. I thank, too, my colleagues Paolo Cherchi and Rebecca West for their encouragement and their friendship of many years.

This work is dedicated to my family: to my mother Florina, who first

Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

xi

took me to Italy, and my grandmother Elisa Rebuffoni, who brought Italy to me; to the memory of my father, John Owen Weaver, who loved languages and literature but wasn't too sure about nuns, and of his mother, Artie Espy Weaver, who was pretty sure, yet I think I might have changed her mind; to the grandfathers I hardly knew; to Fred and Marianne, and to my nieces Francesca and Jenny. *A voi con tutto il cuore.*

Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## ABBREVIATIONS

---

AAB	Archivio Arcivescovile, Bologna
AAF	Archivio Arcivescovile, Florence
AB	Archivio Buonarroti, Florence
ASB	Archivio di Stato, Bologna
ASF	Archivio di Stato, Florence
ASM	Archivio di Stato, Mantova
ASP	Archivio di Stato, Pistoia
ASV	Archivio Segreto Vaticano
AVP	Archivio Vescovile, Pistoia
BAB	Biblioteca Comunale dell' Archiginnasio, Bologna
BAV	Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana
BCR	Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome
BCS	Biblioteca Comunale, Siena
BLF	Biblioteca Laurenziana, Florence
BEM	Biblioteca Estense, Modena
BMV	Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice
BNF	Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence
BNR	Biblioteca Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele, Rome
BUB	Biblioteca Universitaria, Bologna
cod. Ricc.	Codice Riccardiano, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Florence
Corp. rel. sopp. Magl.	Corporazioni religiose soppresse, ASF Magliabechi manuscript, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence
Cong. Vescovi e Regolari	Sacra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari, ASV
Vat. lat.	Vaticani latini, Biblioteca del Vaticano

Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## NOTE ON TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

---

---

### METHOD OF TRANSCRIPTION

I have followed standard procedures for modernizing the orthography of literary texts, and I have corrected obvious errors. My purpose has been to render the texts easily readable to a modern audience without eliminating important evidence of the culture of the author. I have followed the general criteria outlined in the textual note on pp. 82–85 of my edition of the *Amor di virtù* of Beatrice del Sera (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1990). In the interest of consistency I have applied these criteria to all of the early Italian texts cited, including titles of plays (the list of titles in the Bibliography, however, conserves the orthography of the originals).

### NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

All of the translations in the text are mine unless otherwise indicated. When a quotation has documentary value, and especially when I have incorporated it into my discussion, I have generally given it in English translation and provided the Italian original in a footnote. In the many cases, however, in which the quoted text is taken from a work of literature whose artistic merit is of interest rather than its documentary value, if my purpose in quoting it is to discuss it as a work of literature, or if the expression is itself famous or proverbial, I have first given the Italian text and followed it with a translation. When the text is in verse, as is often the case, I have attempted to suggest its style through an English verse translation. All literary titles are given in the original and translated only at their first occurrence; names of characters in the plays are left in Italian and only explained in parentheses if they contain allusions that bear on the meaning of the character or the action. Similarly, Italian technical terms which do not have English equivalents are given in italics; they are defined in the text only at their first occurrence.

Cambridge University Press

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

Elissa B. Weaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Frontispiece Benedictine nun, from Vincenzo Coronelli, *Catalogo degli ordini religiosi della chiesa militante*, Venice, 1707.