During the Italian Renaissance, laywomen and nuns could take part in every stage of the circulation of texts of many kinds, old and new, learned and popular. This first in-depth and integrated analysis of Italian women’s involvement in the material textual culture of the period shows how they could publish their own works in manuscript and print and how they promoted the first publication of works composed by others, acting as patrons or dedicatees. It describes how they copied manuscripts and helped to make and sell printed books in collaboration with men, how they received books as gifts and borrowed or bought them, how they commissioned manuscripts for themselves and how they might listen to works in spoken or sung performance. Brian Richardson’s richly documented study demonstrates the powerful social function of books in the Renaissance: texts-in-motion helped to shape women’s lives and sustain their social and spiritual communities.

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WOMEN AND THE CIRCULATION OF TEXTS IN RENAISSANCE ITALY

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Preface

One of the most fertile developments in book history in recent years has been the study of the connections between books and the social contexts in which they originated and were used. This social turn is linked closely with the inaugural Panizzi Lectures given in the British Library by Don McKenzie in 1985. In this landmark series, entitled ‘Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts’, McKenzie challenged a traditional view that bibliography is concerned only with signs written or printed on paper or vellum, and not with their meaning. Rather, he proposed, bibliography should comprehend ‘not only the technical but the social processes’ of the transmission of texts, ‘the human motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission, and consumption’. In short, it should take account of ‘the role of human agents’. 1 As far as early modern culture is concerned, a few examples of the varied ways in which awareness of the social and human faces of bibliography and palaeography has shed new light from around the 1970s onwards are: Armando Petrucci’s studies of modes of written transmission; Natalie Davis’s essay on books as gifts; Harold Love’s groundbreaking book on scribal publication; Roger Chartier’s studies of how the forms that transmit texts help to create meaning in conjunction with the ‘rebel inventiveness’ of readers and listeners; Margaret Ezell’s work on social authorship in relation to manuscript and print; Diana Robin’s investigations into the print publication of verse by sixteenth-century Italian women; and Antonio Castillo Gómez’s research into the social history of written culture in Spain. 2 As a further

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demonstration of the vitality of books after their manufacture, along the dimensions of both space and time, there have been a number of studies of annotations made by readers.3

The last few decades have also seen a flourishing of new approaches to the study of the lives of women during the Renaissance. In an essay first published in 1977, the American feminist historian Joan Kelly asked the challenging question, ‘Did women have a Renaissance?’ Using a sample of evidence drawn primarily from courtly culture, she herself answered with a negative: ‘there was no renaissance for women – at least, not during the Renaissance’. The period, she argued polemically, saw a relative contraction of the powers of secular women of the courtly and patrician elite as measured by certain criteria, so that the relation of the sexes became for the most part ‘one of female dependency and male domination’.4 Since Kelly’s essay, we have learned more about the nature and extent of the social and legal constraints imposed on women’s lives across all social classes, from childhood to adulthood, in the patriarchal society of this period. We are now also aware that Kelly’s partial, blunt and pessimistic assessment needs to be nuanced considerably in view of all that women achieved in spite of their subordination to men and their relative lack of opportunities in public life. From the perspective of historians of Italian culture, it is particularly striking that, as Virginia Cox has commented in one of her outstanding studies of this topic, secular women emerged in the sixteenth century ‘as cultural protagonists in a quantity and with a prominence unprecedented in the ancient or medieval world’. This shift, Cox argues, was accompanied by positive new male and female attitudes towards the merits of women, including their capacity for erudition, and it was enabled and promoted by a flow of pro-feminist discourses.5

University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), quotation from p. 1; Margaret J. M. Ezell, Social Authorship and the Advent of Print (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Diana Robin, Publishing Women: Salons, the Presses, and the Counter-Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy (University of Chicago Press, 2007); Antonio Castillo Gómez, Dalle carte ai muri: scrittura e società nella Spagna della prima Età moderna, trans. by Laura Carnelos (Rome: Carocci, 2016), and other studies.


5 Virginia Cox, Women’s Writing in Italy, 1400–1650 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. xi–xiii (quotation from p. xiii). See also Cox, The Prodigious Muse: Women’s Writing in
The intersections between the study of the book in society and the study of women’s lives in the Renaissance can shed light on each area of research. On the one hand, the evidence of book history can tell us more about the private and social lives of women: how their writings and those of men were disseminated to others in their own circles and beyond them; their agency in the manufacture and even the commerce of books; what and how they read; and what the places of texts were in women’s lives. On the other hand, to look specifically at women’s involvement in the production and circulation of books can broaden our understanding of these processes, which have tended to be considered in terms of the predominant and much more visible roles of men. We can ask how activities related to books looked through the eyes of the women of the period. How and how far was it possible for them to participate in making and distributing books, and to do so for their own ends? How far, in concerning themselves with the circulation of books, did they act independently and how far did they collaborate with men, in supporting or leading roles?

Some important recent studies have addressed such questions. To take just two examples concerning Italy, Luisa Miglio has written on the uses that women across all social classes made of handwriting during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and Tiziana Plebani’s study of the ‘gender’ of books includes an informative chapter on women’s diverse involvement in book production.6 There have been several investigations into women’s roles in the circulation of texts in other countries of Europe, and some of these will be mentioned in the Conclusion. The present work shares many of the broad aims and methods of such research. Its focus is on texts on the move: especially texts that were embodied in the tangible forms of the manuscripts and printed books that contained them, but also, in the third chapter, those that were transmitted, at least in part, orally. The texts studied include poetry and literary, historical and religious prose works, as well as correspondence that was not intended only for a single reader, but they do not include practical writings such as account books.


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In order to study the circulation of texts from person to person, it has been very helpful to make use of the communications circuit first proposed in 1982 by Robert Darnton (Figure 0.1).7 Communication through books, in Darnton’s scheme, begins with the nexus of interactions between the author, as the creator of the text, and the publisher – in other words, the person or the set of persons responsible for managing the creation and diffusion of the resulting book. It then moves clockwise to encompass printers and their suppliers, shippers, booksellers and finally readers. The circuit is closed by a broken line returning to the author, because authors may well be influenced by the favourable or unfavourable reactions of past readers, and by their anticipation of the reactions of future readers.

Writing some years later within a collection of essays that sought to describe ‘the mutual and interdependent exchange between the press and the society that feeds and depends upon it’,8 Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker proposed an alternative ‘model for the study of books considered as historic artefacts and as a function of social history’. They felt that Darnton’s scheme was ‘well adapted to the needs of the history of the book in general, allowing as it does for the interplay between external forces and the various processes through which it goes’. However, ‘from the point of view of serving the history of the book’, it had in their view a weakness, ‘that it deals with people, rather than the book’. They proposed a scheme that shows ‘the whole socio-economic conjuncture’. At its centre lies a cycle, not of six persons or groups, but of five events in the life of a book – publishing, manufacturing, distribution, reception and survival. Four separate ‘indirect forces’ act on all these stages: intellectual influences; political, legal and religious influences; commercial pressures; and social behaviour and taste. These forces are placed outside rather than inside the cycle. In this scheme, ‘[t]he text is the reason for the cycle of the book: its transmission depends on its ability to set off new cycles’.9 Robert Darnton, in turn, commented that the circuit of Adams and Barker is more adaptable to conditions after the early nineteenth century, whereas he had in mind primarily publishing between 1500 and

Figure 0.1 Robert Darnton’s communications circuit. From Robert Darnton, ‘What Is the History of Books?’, *Daedalus, 111.3* (Summer 1982), 65–83 (p. 68). Reprinted courtesy of The MIT Press
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1800, and that Adams and Barker’s circuit underplays the role of authors.10 For the present study of the roles of women in the circulation of texts, it is sensible to make use of Darnton’s model as a starting point precisely because it foregrounds the activities of individuals; indeed, Darnton explicitly includes women alongside men as subjects of book historians.11 At the same time, it is important to note the point, made by Adams and Barker, that the text, rather than the author in person, is the essential trigger for the initiation of a cycle of communication. This factor allows us to account for successive and possibly diverse cycles of publication of the same text. It also allows for cycles in which an author plays no active part; indeed, he or she may belong to a previous generation or may have written in a language other than that of the specific cycle in question.

Darnton intended his circuit to apply only to books that are printed.12 In the context of the Renaissance we also need to consider manuscript culture. This mode of communication is especially important in evaluating the involvement of women with book production because it was harder for them, in comparison with men, to participate actively in the world of print, which was driven to a much greater extent by commerce than that of manuscripts. We thus need to have in mind, alongside the circuit for printed books, a parallel scheme that maps the circulation of handwritten texts. A possible circuit of this kind is shown in Figure 0.2. There are three main points of difference from Darnton’s circuit. First, those responsible for the initial publication of works in manuscript were not necessarily professionals, and the author often acted as publisher. The publisher might well select an individual to be the first person to receive a copy as a dedicatee, and this person would be named in any further copies, thus lending his or her prestige to the work. Second, the physical work of reproduction was of course carried out by scribes, and they, too, could be amateurs, including perhaps authors. Third, handwritten texts could be diffused informally, as well as sold, by anyone who possessed a copy. The dedicatee, if there was one, might be the only person to have received a copy from the author, especially if the work was of a personal nature, and he or she might be closely involved in any further diffusion. In this process, booksellers might play a role, but this was probably a less

11 Ibid., pp. 496, 502.
12 Ibid., p. 502.
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important one than that of networks and communities. Certain kinds of texts, whether libellous, seditious or official, might be diffused in copies, handwritten as well as printed, that were displayed in public places. The three general sets of influences at the centre of the circuit can be seen as broadly similar to those suggested by Darnton, except that publicity in support of sales is of negligible importance and that, in the period with which we are concerned, we need to take account of sanctions imposed by the Church.

The three chapters of this book look at Italian women’s involvement at key points in the communications circuits from around the mid-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century. The first chapter focuses on the earliest stage: the nexus of the publisher and the author, or at least of the publisher and the author’s text, if the author was deceased or not involved in the process of circulation. The chapter considers the extent of women’s agency

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in diffusing texts that were in their possession, whether composed by themselves or by men, and it then asks to what extent and for what reasons women played distinctive roles as dedicatees of published texts. In the second chapter, we move to the next two points in the circuits of manuscript and print and look at the hands-on participation of laywomen and nuns in producing texts, as scribes or as printers, and in selling books. The final chapter considers how women readers gained access to texts, whether by acquiring copies through their social connections or by other means, or by hearing them in performance. In this last context, the chapter will outline a possible third communications circuit that accounts for oral transmission.

A theme that runs through this book, binding together the topics of textual culture and of women’s lives, is that of the relationship between the written (and, to some extent, oral) circulation of texts and communities of different kinds. A helpful broad definition of community in the early modern period, offered by Karen E. Spierling and Michael J. Halvorson, is ‘a group of people who perceived themselves as having common interests and, thus, a common identity or self-understanding’. The communities with which this book is concerned range from tight-knit organizations whose members knew each other personally, such as a princely court, a religious house or a family, to more open-ended groupings, not bounded by one location, of those who shared kindred interests. In many instances, the members were both male and female, but in the case of religious houses the primary members of the communities considered here were female. All their members interacted with one another, even if they were not always directly acquainted, and they were bonded, to a greater or lesser degree according to the cohesiveness of the groupings, by a sense of shared identity and a solidarity of purpose.

Phil Withington and Alexandra Shepard have written that one of the constituent parts of a community, understood as ‘something done as an expression of collective identity by groups of people’, is ‘the acts and artefacts – whether communicative or material – which defined and constituted it’. The circulation of texts in oral or written form

16 For the example of the construction of memory within female religious communities, see Memoria e comunità femminili: Spagna e Italia, sec. XV–XVII, ed. by Gabriella Zarri and Nieves Baranda Leturio (Florence: Firenze University Press; [Madrid]: UNED, 2011).
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belongs to this aspect of the concept. Of course, in the Renaissance written circulation could regularly take place within a market economy, open to anyone with the necessary resources, and this became the norm in the case of print culture. However, the circulation of manuscripts and even of printed books could also take place partially or solely in the contexts of social, cultural and spiritual communities. Books of all kinds both formed part of and enabled social interactions. In manuscript culture, an author often published a text socially, starting with the presentation of a copy to a dedicatee or friend, which could be followed by further social circulation. Authors could present copies of printed editions to specific readers, typically to ones who were prestigious in terms of their rank and social status. Receiving books as gifts and borrowing them were important means of acquiring texts of all sorts, sometimes the only means of doing so. Many texts were published with letters of dedication that had the effect of linking the work, or an edition of the work, with a person who was generally described as playing some kind of social role. Since copies of some texts were rare, perhaps because their circulation was restricted by the author or because their message was contentious, exclusive or near-exclusive possession of them bestowed prestige on their owners in the eyes of others. Such prestige also stemmed from the ownership of finely produced copies of texts in manuscript or print. In short, the circulation of books was influenced in many ways by social as well as by economic factors. This was especially true in the case of women, since their opportunities to exercise financial power were more limited than those of men. Their access to sociable textual culture was also important because they were largely unable to play any significant part in the lives of the academies that were constituted by Italian men from the mid-1520s onwards. As Virginia Cox has written,

Even in those few cases where women were elected as members, their status was marginal and their presence in the academies tended to be virtual, rather than actual; they were corresponding members, rather than actually attending meetings, which would have raised issues of decorum.18

Most of the texts with which this book is concerned were composed in the vernacular or in Latin, but obstacles stood in the way of women’s access to forms of language other than their own spoken tongue during the Renaissance. In a politically fragmented peninsula, most works composed

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in the vernacular made at least some use of a language that was based on the written word: the Florentine used by three great authors of the fourteenth century, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. The linguistic influence of the last two grew markedly stronger during the sixteenth century. However, their variety of the vernacular differed to a greater or lesser extent from the vernaculars of the Renaissance Italian states, even from those of Tuscany. All readers therefore needed to learn to understand the written literary vernacular, and it required close study on the part of those who wished to use it as authors. Latin was predominantly the province of men: it was the language studied in the formal educational curriculum, which was intended mainly to benefit boys. Nevertheless, as we shall see, some women were engaged as scribes or compositors in the diffusion of Latin texts, some became proficient authors in this language and a few of them translated Latin works into the literary vernacular.

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This book is based on the three Panizzi Lectures delivered at the British Library in London in October 2012. It was a great honour to be invited by the council of the Panizzi Foundation to follow the distinguished scholars who have given these lectures in the past, and I am very grateful to its members and David Pearson for giving me this opportunity. I was closely supported by the late Chris Michaelides of the British Library: he assisted in many practical ways and he acted as a friendly and reassuring guide during the process of planning and giving the lectures. Many others helped me as I prepared the lectures and then wrote this book. Virginia Cox and Helena Sanson offered very valuable advice. I also thank colleagues who generously provided information, especially Bonnie Blackburn, Elena Bonora, Luca Degl’Innocenti, Filippo de Vivo, Cristina Dondi, John Gagné, David and Penny Hartley, the late Anthony Hobson, Francesco Lucioli, Melissa Moreton and Clara Stella. Another version of the section on Isabella d’Este in Chapter 3 was published as ‘Isabella d’Este and the Social Uses of Books’, La Bibliofilia, 114 (2012), 293–325.

In transcriptions of Renaissance texts and book titles, original spelling has been preserved, except for the distinction between the consonant v and the vowel or semivowel u, the expansion of abbreviations, the transcription of ‘&’ as ‘et’ and some changes to word division, punctuation and accentuation in line with modern practice. Translations are mine unless indicated otherwise. In the currency of account of Renaissance Italy, 1 lira = 20 soldi = 240 denari.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASF</td>
<td>Florence, Archivio di Stato</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASMn</td>
<td>Mantua, Archivio di Stato</td>
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<tr>
<td>BAM</td>
<td>Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana</td>
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<tr>
<td>BAV</td>
<td>Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana</td>
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<tr>
<td>BLF</td>
<td>Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana</td>
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<tr>
<td>BNCF</td>
<td>Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale</td>
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<tr>
<td>BRF</td>
<td>Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana</td>
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<tr>
<td>DBI</td>
<td><em>Dizionario biografico degli Italiani</em> (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960–)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GSLI</td>
<td><em>Giornale storico della letteratura italiana</em></td>
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<td>LB</td>
<td><em>La Bibliofilia</em></td>
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