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This paper examines the composition of convent libraries in Renaissance Europe, specifically Italy and Spain. While much research on monastic libraries has occurred, none has concerned convent libraries. They are unique because they include writing by and for women.

The author used previous historical research to form an overview of a convent library's composition. Examining monastic and Tridentine rules regarding literature collected and produced in convents allows one to understand if legislation restricted convent literature. From there, examining scribal work performed in convents, a few known convent holdings, and the works written by nuns themselves can illustrate other manuscripts and books in a convent library. These methods lead to the conclusion that convent libraries contained collections rich in social history and women's history because they contained some of the only literature by, for, and about women.

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Reading like a nun: The composition of convent
libraries in Renaissance Europe

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In 1497, Girolamo Savonarola, a Florentine monk, conducted a “bonfire of the vanities” in which he burned dozens of luxuries and worldly goods including playing cards, mirrors, works of art, and books. The Convent of San Marco in Florence had a large collection of books and works of art so they hired a guard to stand watch that night. Nevertheless, soon thereafter, the convent filed a report that a book, *Orthographia*, was stolen (Buhler, 1954, p. 96). One hundred years later, the abbess of San Cosimato in Rome hired a notary to organize and catalog the books in her convent (Lowe, 2003, p. 69). These two events are among only a few concrete mentions of convent libraries in Renaissance Europe, but the existence of such libraries was not unique. Some convents still count their Renaissance holdings as a part of their library collections; others have merely records of what they once possessed. Yet one can only conjecture as to the composition of most convent libraries. This essay attempts to do just that by examining monastic rules, Tridentine decrees, and scribal and literary activity within the convents.

Most nuns were literate in order to read the breviary and scripture and to say the hours their vocation required. Some further employed their literacy to write letters to friends and family or to write works for public and convent consumption. These works often referred to other writings within the convent, which ranged from administrative records and letters to religious work and humanist treatises. The authors were male and female, religious and laity. The libraries were often small – St. Katharina had only 45 volumes prior to 1428 but over 600 by the end of the fifteenth century – and had no formal collection development goals (Woodford, 2002, pp. 6, 19-20). The collections were unique because they contained unpublished manuscripts, personal letters, and documents pertaining to that specific convent; yet these collections were related, as

convents were the primary collectors of works both by and about women. Convent libraries served nuns' reading habits in addition to preserving social history and women's history.

Examining some monastic rules allows one to understand the primary duty of nuns. It also demonstrates that formal regulation did not condemn female literacy, contrary to popular opinion. From there, it is important to know that nuns, like monks, served as the primary scribes for the public. They had access to many genres of literature and often kept copies for themselves. These copies, in conjunction with convent records, purchased works, and manuscripts written by the women themselves, comprised the bulk of a convent library's collection. Convent libraries were not places of public service, like today's libraries, but they were repositories for books, manuscripts, and other documents. Their role was an amalgamation of present day library and archival functions, but their lasting value is that of a repository for female history.

Monastic rules – Their statements on reading and writing

Renaissance convents, like their predecessors and those today, were of many different orders. Orders' overarching missions make them unique, but many share the same basic set of monastic rules. These rules are based on those of male religious orders and have not changed over time despite altered circumstances. It was each order and convent's interpretation of the rules that allowed for differentiation, and it was through interpretation that the church hierarchy allowed convent women to read, write, and become generally educated. Rules defined the duties of nuns, outlined their days, and named a few key positions for the women – abbess, prioress, and cellaress among them. While the abbess ran the convent and the prioress was her second in command, the

cellaress was responsible for the acquisition and distribution of food, clothing, and other staples. One of her essential tasks was the keeping of financial records and other administrative books (Woodford, 2002, p. 21). Many other positions within a convent were decided based on convent need, and some might have had librarians or nuns who took a special interest in books (Woodford, 2002, p. 6). One can assume, however, that lacking the presence of such sisters, the cellaress would acquire responsibility for general convent books.¹ Monastic rules were just one of the documents that would have been in the library.

St. Benedict and St. Caesarius of Arles were the writers of two rules that Renaissance convents frequently used. While both rules have sections that could pertain to the keeping of a library, only one of these sections is common between the two. Both writers exhorted nuns to remain silent during mealtimes in order to hear and meditate upon the reading of scripture.² St. Benedict's rule (2004) also stated that religious men and women could own no personal property "including books, writing materials, and pens," yet this did not preclude the convent from owning these same items (p. 99). This rule also introduced the concept that *lectio divina*, or the daily reading of the scriptures with meditation and prayer, was essential for each person (St. Benedict, 2004, pp. 13-15, 155). St. Caesarius of Arles (1960) took this concept a step further by stating that each individual should silently read scripture for the first two hours of each day (p. 175).

During the Renaissance, women interpreted these rules to refer to the scriptures themselves as well as other edifying works such as the lives of saints or devotional tracts.

¹ "General" books being those books that are not related specifically to another facet of convent life such as the infirmary or kitchen. Presumably, the infirmary would keep medical books and the kitchen would keep recipe collections (Woodford, 2002, p. 21).

² In the Rule of St. Benedict (2004), this is chapter 38, number 1 (p. 105). In the Rule of St. Caesarius of Arles (1960), this is number 18 (p. 175).

In order to ensure that these items were readily available, as multiple women engaged in reading at the same time of day, convents created collections of such material.

Convents kept copies of official rules, such as those of St. Benedict and St. Caesarius of Arles, but they also purchased and borrowed detailed instructional books and pamphlets. Saints lives provided models for good behavior on a daily basis and offered concrete examples of virtuosity, something that religious rules did not do.³ The *Lima spirituale* by Francesco Rappi da Santerenzio was just one of a myriad of pamphlets available in the early sixteenth century that provided instructions on how to train a nun (Zarri, 2000, p. 81). Similar books detailed how to train a nun and how to conduct confession. Other books, such as Giovanni Pietro Barchi's *Specchio religioso*, listed punishments for various transgressions – it was a codification of the punishments that weekly chapter meetings within convents instituted (Zarri, 2000, p. 86). Such books supplemented monastic rules and aided abbesses in running a convent.

The Council of Trent forced *clausura* upon convents throughout Europe,⁴ and the women became disconnected from many outside sources, including printers and authors. But the council also released the statement that nuns were expected to read and write the breviary and scriptures, not just memorize them (Zarri, 1999, p. 108). Now religious decree expected every nun to be literate, not just those who were for their own

³ *Alcuni avvertimenti nella vita monacale* by Bonaventura Gonzaga da Reggio, a Franciscan monk, used various examples of self-discipline from the lives of various saints to advocate a similar virtue in nuns.

⁴ *Clausura* refers to the enclosure of women in convents from the outside, secular world. It was first introduced in a papal bull, *Periculoso*, years before the Council of Trent. The concept was that laypeople should not see nuns, as they were the “brides of Christ.” This made the exchange of ideas between nuns and laypeople more difficult as those who were not relatives or religious men were no longer allowed into the convent.

edification.⁵ This increased the number of books within a convent as nuns copied what they read, and it reinforced the thought that certain books – scripture, monastic rules, and devotional tracts –were necessary for convents.

Convent scribes – Writing to create a library

Prior to the advent of the printing press, scribes ensured the dissemination of literature and other written communiqués. In the Renaissance, monks and nuns often performed this duty as, for certain orders, it was the primary means of supporting their community (McNamara, 1996, p. 396; Strocchia, 1999, p. 8; Woodford, 2002, p. 7). No monastic rule explicitly promoted or condemned nuns being scribes, but it was a common Renaissance notion that females who wrote were ungodly. To justify their activity, particularly prior to the Council of Trent, nuns claimed that this was another form of “labor,” akin to planting, sowing, or stitching (Lowe, 2003, p. 298). Monastic rules endorsed labor as a means of achieving holiness, and this particular labor produced a tangible holy object when nuns copied liturgical texts. This labor not only created a new religious text that could be distributed, but it also familiarized nuns with various religious topics, enhancing their personal holiness and education.

Scribal nuns, unlike their male counterparts, often did not sign their work (Woodford, 2002, p. 27). Yet, we know that particular convents were famous for their copies of manuscripts. The Florentine Duomo account books from 1476 and 1478 mention the nuns of Le Murate as being responsible for copying certain texts for the church (Lowe, 2003, p. 290). Also in Florence, the nuns of Lapo sold many books to

⁵ Nuns learned to read by reading the psalms, other scripture, saint’s lives, and alphabet books (abecedario) written specifically to teach virtues alongside the alphabet (Ambrosini, 2000, p. 422; McKnight, 1997, p. 36).

maestro Domenico, a theologian at Santa Maria Novella (Strocchia, 1999, p. 8).

Strocchia (1999) also indicates that one abbess at Lapo, with the last name of Jacopa, signed her work (p. 7). From known Jacopa work, historians have found work created in a similar style, presumably from the same convent and period. These works indicate that the nuns wrote in a meticulous hand, somewhat stiff and Gothic, but distinct from the cursive of the time (Strocchia, 1999, p. 7). Because influential churches purchased work from each of these convents, one can surmise that their services were well known and regarded with respect. Furthermore, these convents did not copy only religious manuscripts. The nuns served as witnesses for legal documents and copied books on various subjects for wealthy patrons, often women of the city (Strocchia, 1999, pp. 7-8). Wealthy married women were known to support convents in their artistic endeavors; having a female scribe copy a book for them was another means of supporting female industry. One knows of these accomplishments not through the works themselves but through business contracts. Nuns were often loath to boast of their written accomplishments as scribal work was considered a means of glorifying God, not promoting one's skill.

Another Florentine convent, San Jacopo di Ripoli, was also a known center of publication in the fifteenth century (Lowe, 2000, p. 110). It published both sacred and secular books, one being Lorenzo de'Oppizi's *Miracoli della Vergine della Carcere*, a record of miracles performed by an image in Prato (Chavasse, 2000, pp. 141-143).

Records have survived indicating that it kept a copy of each work that passed through the scriptorium, thus enlarging its own holdings (Lowe, 2000, p. 110; Strocchia, 1999, p. 8).

When convents did not have their own scribes to copy texts, they often created

relationships with neighboring convents that did have scribes. Books copied for a paying customer would be copied for the convent itself and for all contracted convents for a small extra fee. These business relationships allowed many Renaissance convents to build substantial libraries of liturgical texts.

In convents with scriptoria, the space often became not only a place of production but also a place of storage. After a fire in 1498, Scolastic Rondinelli, abbess of Le Murate, rebuilt a scriptorium that she had originally constructed with the help of Lorenzo de' Medici. This scriptorium, which initially contained ten cubicles, came to have twenty-six by the end of the sixteenth century (Lowe, 2003, p. 289). The scriptorium was a convenient archive because it already housed books produced in the same space. It also often had natural divisions for organization as each scribe had her own cell. Scriptoria served as convenient locations for the production and collection of written works.

Convent scriptoria, initially a means of earning money, provided religious women with an opportunity to exercise their literary and creative skills. The copying of liturgical materials familiarized women with religious ideals, and the copying of secular material rounded out their knowledge base. It also allowed women contact with influential thinkers and families. Most pertinently, it created a more affordable way for convent libraries to sustain a collection. Some convents collected work written and copied by their own nuns. Others paid small fees to receive a copy of each work of importance that passed through a convent scriptorium. By having nuns as scribes, religious women guaranteed that they would continue to have access to the literature of their time.

Access to manuscripts in a convent

Women in convents generally had access to some form of literature, whether it was letters, scripture, monastic rules, or secular books, but the type and amount of available reading material differed greatly between convents. Monasteries generally owned a chained set of reference works because monks were generally theologians and needed to consult previous tracts (Woodford, 2002, pp. 19-20). Both convents and monasteries, as institutions, kept their charters, financial records, and legal documents. Presumably, the nuns could access these materials; Sister Paola Antonia Sfondrati of San Paolo of Milan, referred to using the bulls and charters of the convent archive while writing her *memorie* (Baerstein, 1994, p. 806).⁶ But the overall diversity of material in a female convent tended to be greater than that in a male monastery as convents often collected unpublished manuscripts, female writings, and works not in Latin (Cushing-Daniels, 2002, p. 31; Woodford, 2002, p. 21).⁷ The provenance of the items in a convent library was just as diverse as the collection itself. The inventory of Santa Caterina alla Chiusa in Milan lists 139 books published by a local publisher named Girardone (Stevens, 1995, p. 649); and, as has been illustrated previously, nuns often received books from scribes at a neighboring convent. During the Renaissance, and particularly after the invention of the printing press, most social classes and both genders could afford to purchase books; therefore, books that appealed to each sector of society were produced. The wide range of books publicly available and written in the convent contributed to collection diversity.

⁶ For further discussion on *memories*, histories, and convent chronicles, see *Chronicles – social histories*.

⁷ Sor Juana of Spain, for example, had over 4,000 volumes in her convent's library, and most of these were unpublished (Cushing-Daniels, 2002, p. 31). Unpublished manuscripts circulated between convents before publication, allowing women to be the first audience for many nuns' works. An Augustinian nun in Spain received a copy of Saint Theresa of Avila's *Libro de la vida* prior to its publication, and her diary stated that she was ecstatic to have access to such prolific writing (Cushing-Daniels, 2002, p. 34).

In general, most convents possessed copies of scriptures, rule books, and hymnals, but these were often not the only spiritual and practical resources that nuns used. Girardone, and other printers, often sold recipe and how-to books to convents alongside the catechisms (Stevens, 1995, p. 640). Hymnals and music sheets served a dual purpose as they enhanced spiritual growth while leading nuns through one of their duties – praise through song. Saints’ lives, patristic writings, and letters of moral advice became popular particularly after the Council of Trent when the church hierarchy encouraged nuns to read in order to enhance their connection to God and stay on the “path to spiritual perfection” (Kristeller, 1980, p. 94; McKnight, 1997, p. 87; Sperling, 1999, p. 119; Woodford, 2002, vii).⁸ Often, priests and humanists “wrote to [convents] and explained all the books that were needed for the office and for masses during the year” (Riccoboni, 2000, p. 37). Such direct instruction asserted male influence in the convent, but it also ensured that nuns maintained their knowledge of church development and popular sacred literature. While some of these titles were prolific for the time – the Convento Real de Santa Clara lists the *Brevarium Romanum* and Francisco de Osuna’s *Abecedario espiritual* – this type of book in general did not challenge the intellectual capacity of the sisters (McKnight, 1997, p. 87). Religious works were the most common type of literature available in a convent library. One should not assume, however, that nuns’ reading was restricted to the scriptures as other literary forms were considered just as important for their spiritual growth. To ensure that the nuns’ spiritual needs were satisfied, convents allocated money for books and received many books as gifts, each of

⁸ Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni of Corpus Domini in Florence often refers to letters from the founding father of the convent, yet she did not write her chronicle until at least twenty years after the convent’s foundation. Her references to such letters are extremely detailed, suggesting that the convent kept the letters (Riccoboni, 2000, p. 25).

which contributed to intellectual growth and often to the production of more literary material.

Because convents were the center of female education and female intellectual activity, their libraries often possessed secular material by both men and women. Some nuns' secular writings bore a resemblance to humanist writings, suggesting that nuns had access to such works (Weaver, 1999, p. 135). Sor María de Agreda wrote *Face of the Earth*, a cosmography that references and has a similar structure to Apianus, Isidoro de Sevilla's *The Etymologies*, and Peter Bienewitz's *The Book of Cosmography, which Present the Description of the World and Its Parts, Illustrated with Clear and Attractive Art Work, Supplemented by the Highly Learned Gemma Frisio*. One can surmise that she had easy and frequent access to these works and similar others (Colahan, 1994, p. 21).⁹ Likewise, the Convent Real de Santa Clara indicated that it owned Juan Eusebio Nieremberg's *Devoción y patrocinio de San Miguel príncipe de los ángeles* and works by Ignatius of Loyola (McKnight, 1997, p. 87). Yet the acquisition of secular works was difficult in convents because the topics were not focused on God, and women were supposed to do just that. To circumvent such restrictions, some nuns accessed books at nearby monasteries, others borrowed from well-connected friends, and still others broke their vow of poverty and brought their own books into the convent.

The influence of outside communication

Renaissance convents were a hotbed not only for female intellectual activity but also for political and social drama. Nuns hosted theater nights, luncheons similar to those

⁹ The full title of Bienewitz's book has been left in tact with capitalization and punctuation unchanged.

in French salons, and even partook in the political activities of the city. Such events fostered relationships between nuns and the influential men of the time. In Spain, nuns hosted and attended literary circles where they mixed with prominent humanists (Cushing-Daniels, 2002, pp. 7, 15-16). They were some of the only women allowed within this male-dominated setting; and as a result, their works often reflected the rhetoric that men used. One Spanish nun, Sor María de Agreda, corresponded with King Philip IV of France for over thirty years, advising him on various political, spiritual, and social issues (Cushing-Daniels, 2002, pp. 2, 98).¹⁰ In Venice, the nuns of Santa Maria delle Vergini participated in a symbolic wedding ceremony each year. The abbess of Le Vergini “married” the doge of Venice, symbolizing Venice’s control over the sea and its continued prosperity as a city (Sperling, 1999, p. 208). These women were neither the first nuns nor the last to participate in politics; Saint Catherine of Siena was influential in ending the schism of the Catholic Church and bringing the pope back to Rome from Avignon in the late Middle Ages. Convents kept political communiqués because they asserted the convent’s status and because the nuns, like many of their contemporaries and modern historians and archivists, were aware that letters have historical value.

Political correspondence was not the only form of communication that convents and individual nuns retained. Many nuns received letters from family, friends, and townspeople seeking advice. Some responses were personal letters – Sor Marcela de San Félix was a spiritual advisor to her father, Lope de Vega, as was Suor Maria Celeste to *her* father, Galileo Galilei (Cushing-Daniels, 2002, p. 9; Galilei, 2001). When

¹⁰ Philip IV was not the first monarch to seek a nun’s advice. His father, Philip III did so as well, but there is no record of the name of a specific nun or convent with which he formed a relationship (Cushing-Daniels, 2002, pp. 96-97).

relationships were not personal, nuns wrote general letters, devotional tracts, prayers, and sometimes even sonnets for the people (Wood, 1995, p. 263). These writings offered spiritual guidance, moral advice, and comfort to all. While some texts dealt with specific matters, many gave general advice that could be applicable for future townspeople, leaders, and even the nuns themselves (Prosperi, 1999, pp. 118-119). Because this guidance could aid future generations, convents often kept a copy. The prevalent thought during the Renaissance and Reformation was that women, in general, were incapable of strenuous intellectual activity; therefore, the church did not allow nuns to become theologians. Most people agreed, however, that nuns were in constant communication with God through prayer, fasting, and study. As a result, most people valued the exhortations of nuns, and even some theologians sought their advice (Arenal, 1989, p. 215; Prosperi, 1999, p. 118). Copies of these tracts remained at the convent, where they added to the devotional collections in place. While letters from family were not always kept, some convents kept personal letters because they were yet another proof of greatness for the entire convent.¹¹ Written communication was an important resource for nuns because it allowed them to exercise their intellectual capacity, and it was an outlet for self-expression. Incoming correspondence, like convent records, served as further means of recreating convent history.

Female writings in a convent library

¹¹ The letters from Galileo to his daughter were not kept as the convent feared possible retribution in the years following his trial. While Suor Maria Celeste is known to have cherished the letters as she says “I set aside and save all the letters that you write me daily,” it is thought that the abbess burned them after her death (Galilei, 2001, p. ix, 7).

While male-written works comprised part of a convent library's collection, the nuns themselves also contributed to the convent's holdings. Their contributions were not just in the form of transcriptions or daily records;¹² nuns wrote autobiographies and biographies, poetry, plays, histories, and discourses on higher thought. Such writing highlighted women's intellectual capacity, as women wrote in Latin as well as the vernacular about many topics. Furthermore, some nuns' writings followed the writing patterns of well-known humanists, proving that they had access to such works and that these women possessed a high intellect. Nuns' writings were at the core of the canon of female literature during the Renaissance because the writings were prolific, crossed genres, and dealt with issues both intellectual and popular (Cushing-Daniels, 2002, p. 11). Because such writings were the core of female literature and the convent audience was by definition female, convent libraries possessed large numbers of books by nuns.

Convents were organizations within the Catholic Church similar to both political institutions and businesses. They offered women a chance to serve in leadership roles as well as to manage a business. The position of abbess was similar to that of a bishop or a town magistrate, and the position of cellaress was similar to that of a large landowner. Convents conducted governmental activities such as issuing taxes or censuses, hearing legal trials, and minting currency (Kristeller, 1980, p. 94; Lowe, 2003, p. 54). They also were artistic patrons that funded paintings and buildings, social patrons that financed and assisted orphanages and hospitals, teachers for the local girls, and entrepreneurs who sold food grown on their land or crafts made within the convent (Strocchia, 1999, p. 3; Wiesner, 1998, p. 49). These pseudo-governmental and business activities generated

¹² For further information on transcription in convents and scribal work, see the section entitled *Convent scribes – Writing to create a library*.

paperwork and necessitated the keeping of detailed administrative records. When the nuns of San Zaccaria in Venice built a church 1458-1489, they kept a detailed record book about the expenses, builders, and contracts (Primhak, 2000, p. 94). Similarly, the nuns at Lapo in Florence recorded information about the girls studying at their convent – names, allowances, level of study, and family donations – and about the nuns themselves – names, dowries, and deaths (Strocchia, 1999, pp. 3, 7). When the Council of Trent imposed *clausura* on the convents,⁴ nuns could no longer allow outsiders to maintain their records. This, combined with the greater restrictions on all facets of the Catholic Church, resulted in an increase of governmental and business documentation within the convents (Zarri, 1999, p. 108). While records and account books do not highlight the depth of nuns' intellectuality, they do attest to the high level of literacy and business-savvy within a convent. Administrative records, as well as convent chronicles and necrologies, are invaluable to historians and genealogists as they trace convent routines and family lineage. They were also valuable to nuns during the Renaissance because they provided material for convent chronicles and functioned as essential documents.

Some convents kept an additional record book composed for in-house events. Few have survived, and only one has a definitive title: *Ceremoniale*.¹³ The *Ceremoniale* of San Zaccaria in Venice, like similar records, details procedures the nuns followed for various traditions and ceremonies (Primhak, 2000, pp. 99-100). These events ranged from the celebration of holidays to the election and consecration of an abbess to ceremonial interaction with the local town. By necessity, these writings were vastly different in their level of detail and events discussed, but most have been written in an

¹³ For ease of wording, the author of this paper will use the term *Ceremoniale* to refer to the individual book and *ceremoniale* to refer to the type of literature.

instructional tone. The *Ceremoniale* of San Zaccaria in Venice illustrates this tone in the following passage concerning the consecration of a new abbess.

In the public reception hall of the convent two tables as large as the capacity of the room are laid, one on one side on a platform, the other along the side of the windows, with table linens from Rheims over them, and silver goblets are filled with Muscat, malmsey and wine for the Marches, and fine pastries sugared abundantly. A chair is placed for the patriarch at the table on the platform, near the fireplace, and next to him on the platform sit *madona* the abbess and *madona* the prioress, and then on the benches outside elderly gentlemen are seated, relatives of the abbess if she has any, and then the prelates and other important people according to rank. Bowls are brought to the table full of sweetmeats and golden cakes made with pinenuts, and likewise for the other table by the window. The canons and parish priests and other worthy people are seated there. Four golden sweetmeat bowls are brought to each table...and golden marzipan...then silver bowls with golden goblets in great quantity, and large dishes are also brought...full with pastries. The prelates, canons and priests are served first, and then all those standing (Primhak, 2000, pp. 99-100).

This particular *ceremoniale* is exceptionally detailed, ensuring the exact replication of events in each generation and providing a colorful scene for historians. No one claims authorship of such books, so one can speculate that various nuns added to the *ceremoniale* over time as ceremonies changed and new traditions arose. Convent libraries would regard these books as another form of records.

The vast majority of women's writings within the convent were religious in nature – hagiographies, devotionals, commentaries on Scripture, commentaries on other religious works, and sermons. Hagiographies were a specific type of saints' lives, often graphic in their portrayal of suffering (Cushing-Daniels, 2002, p. 130). Religious men and women believed suffering led to holiness, and these stories allowed the living to suffer alongside the saints. Nuns rewrote the stories of saints lives because they were popular and an exercise in piety. Some devotionals, such as Teresa de Cartagena's about the spiritual benefits of illness, focused one's mind on this same theory that suffering resulted in sanctity (McKnight, 1997, p. 64). Conversely, other meditations focused on the positive aspects of religiosity. Anna Sophia of Quedlinburg published *Der treue Seelenfreund Christus Jesus*, a book of meditations that related the good deeds of biblical women to the lives of nuns in her convent (Wiesner, 1998, p. 61). These devotionals called nuns to a life of striving to do good works on earth, much as other women had. Devotionals and commentaries on scripture gave nuns a chance to express their theological viewpoint.¹⁴ Because they were not allowed to study theology like their brethren, they could not write a theological treatise. Scriptural commentaries and devotionals reached a wide audience however, and nuns would comment on the sacraments, morals, and the Catholic Church itself in these writings. Although nuns rarely gave sermons, these public declarations allowed prominent members of a convent another chance to promote their ideas, and nuns who spoke frequently in public recorded

¹⁴ Mariana de San Joseph of the Augustinian Recollect in Spain wrote a commentary on the Song of Songs (McKnight, 1997, p. 67).

their sermons for future reference (King, 1991, p. 94).¹⁵ These basic religious writings comprised the majority of nuns' works and those read by the widest audience. Many compositions were not innovative, but they reflect the importance of religion in the Renaissance and illuminate the changing foci of Catholicism.

After the Council of Trent, religious writings became less theological and more mystical; women focused on the miraculous deeds of God as opposed to commenting on political and moral issues (Sperling, 1999, p. 119). One reason for this was their decreased communication with secular society. More nuns wrote spiritual autobiographies, accounts of their visions of and interactions with God, his son, and the Holy Spirit. While most nuns wrote these narratives at the exhortation of their confessor, a priest or a monk, some used them as an outlet for their opinions about the Counter Reformation (McKnight, 1997, p. 19). Many of these *vida* portrayed an idealized but fictional account of the lives of nuns with stories of fasting, self-deprivation, constant prayer, and visions (Arenal, 1983, pp. 147-148). Even these surreal tales, however, have importance as they portrayed the model lifestyle for Renaissance nuns.

Nuns wrote religious treatises in a variety of styles – in Latin or the vernacular, in prose or in verse. Poetry, in particular the Petrarchist verse, was a popular mode of writing during the Renaissance. Nuns were not immune to the appeal of such writing, and they wrote sacred and secular works in verse in order to challenge their intellect and prove their capabilities. Nuns wrote religious poetry, love poetry, and poetry about society. The production of poetry sharply decreased after the Council of Trent

¹⁵ Sometimes only the convent kept a print copy of a sermon, but some sermons were printed for wider consumption, such as Maria de Santo Domingo's *Libro de Oración* (McKnight, 1997, p. 64).

condemned the writing of poetry (Weaver, 1999, p. 132). Convent libraries still contained poetry and works written in verse, similar to other collections of that period.

Another genre of literature composed within the convent was theater. Nuns wrote sacred and secular plays to perform for each other, for convent guests, and for the townspeople. Particularly in Italy, convent theater was one of the primary sources of entertainment prior to its prohibition at the Council of Trent (Sperling, 1999, p. 119; Weaver, 1999, p. 138). Nuns wrote *sacre rappresentazioni*, or plays with a lesson, for church festivals (King, 1991, p. 88). They adapted love stories, like Giovanni Boccaccio's *Filocolo*, and wrote romances with a spiritual perspective (Weaver, 1999, p. 139).¹⁶ Others wrote plays merely for entertainment – strictly superficial loves stories and comedies (Weaver, 1999, p. 130). Nuns not only wrote the plays, but also directed them, starred in them, made the costumes and props for them, and performed the music for them. Some plays record this information within the scripts themselves while others have accompanying books with performance details (Weaver, 1999, p. 138). Plays were the primary genre of secular literature that a nun wrote, and while a wide audience may not have read the script, they did see the performance. Nuns often wrote new plays, but convents kept the old ones and performed them regularly, particularly if a certain play accompanied a church or town festival.

A small number of nuns wrote secular histories and treatises. Ana de San Bartolomé and María de San José were contemporaries of St. Teresa of Avila and, after her death, continued to communicate with the church hierarchy in an attempt to reform

¹⁶ Beatrice del Sera wrote *Love of Virtue* based on Boccaccio's *Filocolo* as a love story with a moral (Weaver, 1999, p. 139; Zarri, 1999, p. 108).

the Carmelite order (McKnight, 1997, p. 67).¹⁷ Arcangela Tarabotti, a Venetian nun famed for being the author of *L'inferno monacale* (*The Monastic Hell*) and *La tirannia paterna* (*Paternal Tyranny*), likewise attempted monastic reformation. Her attempts were not aimed at a single order, however, but at the entire monastic system (King, 1991, p. 89; Tarabotti, 2004). Her published works, as well as her letters, use rhetoric to argue that *clausura* and forced monacation were wrong. While not all women disliked their vocation, many did, and some convents collected her works in open defiance of the Catholic Church. Some nuns communicated with humanists and, in turn, wrote their own humanist works. Maria de San Alberto and Cecilia del Nacimiento commented on humanist culture as a whole (Colahan, 1994, p. 18; McKnight, 1997, p. 67). Fiammetta Frescobaldi, a Dominican nun from San Jacopo di Ripoli in Florence, wrote histories, phase books, and scientific texts. She wrote an abridged version of Francesco Guicciardini's *History of Italy* as well as *Sfera dell'universo* (*Sphere of the Universe*), a multi-volume cosmography discussing the heavens, continents, countries, cities, and seas (Weaver, 1999, p. 129). Female-authored humanist works were rare, but nuns were proud of their sisters' accomplishments and kept copies of their works. Convents prided themselves on having a nun who wrote a well-received humanist text.

Nuns writings in convent libraries spanned genres and levels of literacy, intellectuality, and religiosity. Administrative records and *ceremoniale* presented the quotidian facts, sacred works enhanced spirituality, poetry was *de rigueur*, plays provided entertainment, and humanist works proved that nuns were intellectually equal with men. These writings illuminated various aspects of convent life, and each was an important

¹⁷ In a letter about the convent reformation, Ana de San Bartolomé predicts the defeat of the Spanish Armada in an attempt to warn the government (Arenal, 1989, p. 217).

piece in a convent library. Women's writings were scarce, and convent libraries were the best sources for "women's literature" because they had access to the authors themselves.

Chronicles – social histories

Convent chronicles, diaries, and necrologies presented a narrative of life in a convent.¹⁸ These writings were more personal than records and less challenging than humanist texts. Most convents had some form of a chronicle that captured a snapshot of the convent's history and the women in it. Chronicles did not circulate between convents, as they tended to depict life within a particular one; therefore, the chronicles, diaries, and necrologies differed greatly between locales (Lowe, 2003, pp. 9, 18; Weaver 1999, p. 135). Most were in the vernacular and combined literature and art through the formation of letters and lines (Lowe, 2003, pp. 17, 29). Chronicles covered a variety of topics depending on the author's preferences, but most addressed history as it affected the convent; and these histories "intersected with 'ordinary' history at a surprisingly large number of points" (Lowe, 2000, p. 107). Nuns used resources within the convent, conversations with visitors, letters from friends and family, and their own experiences to gather material for the chronicle. Because these narratives varied on many levels, one needs to examine a handful of them to understand better their content and importance.

Instead of considering a chronicle a type of history or a story, one can consider them a genre in and of themselves. Some chronicles contain just important dates and brief notes about that date while others presented a full narrative about the convent history and its external relations (Lowe, 2000, pp. 105-106; Lowe, 2003, p. 11).

¹⁸ In Germany, nuns referred to chronicles as *nonnenbücher* (Riccoboni, 2000, p. 22). This paper will use the term chronicle as it is more common in modern scholarship.

Chronicles, in reflecting current events, provided context to a convent's administrative records. The records illustrated the relationship between a convent and a town, but the chronicle explained how the relationship evolved and its nature (Lowe, 2003, p. 9). Chronicles rarely mentioned the religious aspects of life unless they affected the social history of the convent, but they did refer to biblical, historical, and mythological figures in the presentation of the foundation story or in the highlighting of a living nuns' good works (Lowe, 2003, pp. 44-46). In general, they depicted the convent foundation, traced how it arrived at the present, and delved into detail about current events.¹⁹ Chronicles did not have definitive endings indicating that the convent's tale was continuing (Lowe, 2003, p. 25). Diaries and necrologies, like chronicles, traced history; but diaries often related the *internal* convent history, and necrologies traced the deaths of the sisters (Lowe, 2000, p. 106; Riccoboni, 2000, p. 10). The distinction between these works, however, was often vague, and nuns did not differentiate between the three types of writings. It is therefore easier to consider them as a whole – comprising a unique part of a convent collection that referenced other resources from the convent library, such as letters and administrative records.

Chronicle compilation was a common activity at both convents and monasteries during the Renaissance, and although certain religious decrees forbade the presence of inkwells and pens in convents, women wrote chronicles because men were not present to do so (Lowe, 2000, p. 110; Lowe, 2003, p. 7; Riccoboni, 2000, p. 22). In tracing a convent's history, chronicles united sisters of the past with those of the present through shared experiences and ceremonies. These books gave convents an opportunity to

¹⁹ Some of these foundation stories are mythical and link the convent to a great religious event or person (Weaver, 1999, p. 136).

identify their purpose and goals, highlight their achievements, and assert their connections to families and influential figures (Lowe, 2003, p. 35). In Germany, Caritas Pirckheimer wrote *Denkwürdigkeiten* 1524-1528 to demonstrate how her convent defended Catholicism during the Reformation, a difficult task in the predominantly Protestant Germany (King, 1991, p. 99). A nun's own sisters, in the present and in the future, were the primary audience for a chronicle, as it was important that these women understood the institutional history and pride of their convent. Although some chronicles have been lost to the ravages of time and some convents have given theirs to state archives for better preservation, many convents still have their chronicles.

Fiammetta Frescobaldi, author of *Sfera dell'universo*, wrote both a chronicle and a diary for her convent covering the years 1576-1586.²⁰ Her chronicle discussed local geography, Florentine politics, and the history of the Order of Saint Dominic (1200-1579) while her diary traced the happenings within the convent walls for this period (Lowe, 2000, p. 109; Weaver, 1999, pp. 130, 133-134). The convent of Santissima Annunziata (Le Murate) in Florence had an unsigned *ricordi* covering 1522-1564 which mentioned the flooding of the Arno and the disputes between the friars of San Marco and Cosimo de'Medici (Weaver, 1999, pp. 132-133).²¹ Approximately thirty years later, Suor Giustina Niccolini wrote a history of this same convent, starting with the late fourteenth century (Lowe, 2000, p. 109). In Rome, Suor Orsola Formicini wrote *Book of the History of the Convent of San Cosimato* in the early seventeenth century about the history of her

²⁰ Other surviving chronicles include one from San Girolamo mentioning a severe convent fire, a series of "memories" from San Paolo in Milan covering 1586-1635 and about the founding mothers and the convent priests, a published chronicle of S. Lucia di Foligno 1468-1536 by Suor Caterina Guarneri da Orimo, and a chronicle by Lucia Pioppi of Modena (Baerstein, 1994, p. 806; Lowe, 2000, p. 109; Weaver, 1999, pp. 133-134).

²¹ A *ricordi* was another name for a chronicle.

convent's order, the Poor Clares, and about the convent building itself, formerly a Benedictine monastery (Lowe, 2000, pp. 112-113; Lowe, 2003, pp. 11-12; Weaver, 1999, pp. 135-136). When her chronicle arrived at the present, it started to mention the greater Roman community, providing a firsthand account of the sack of Rome. During the sack, the nuns of San Cosimato were forced to break *clausura*, walk across Rome, and seek shelter in another convent because theirs was along the city walls (Lowe, 2000, p. 109). A series of nuns at Santa Maria di Monteluca in Perugia wrote *Memoriale of Monteluca* 1448-1838 depicting the internal history of the convent, its artistic patronage, investitures and deaths of sisters, visits from popes and cardinals, and building projects (Weaver, 1999, p. 135; Wood, 1995, p. 266). In Venice, the nuns of Le Vergini had a chronicle that focused on a foundation myth where they claimed to be a continuation of a convent in Jerusalem that the Saracens had occupied and founded at the time of a peace treaty between the pope and the emperor Frederick Barbarossa (Weaver, 1999, p. 136). The breadth of information contained in these five chronicles is an example of the variety of topics contained in all convent chronicles. While unique and differently focused, each was important to a convent's identity and sense of internal history.

Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni of Corpus Domini in Venice wrote a chronicle and necrology in the late fourteenth century that has been translated into English. The first half of the chronicle discussed the impetus for beginning the convent in 1357, the building of the convent, its consecration in 1394, and the early years of the convent itself (Riccoboni, 2000, pp. 26-47). Riccoboni used interviews with the foundress and abbess, Lucia Tiepolo, interviews with other nuns, and letters from their confessor, Giovanni Dominici, to provide her with firsthand accounts of the early years of the convent. The

second half of the chronicle discussed the schism in the Catholic Church and the life of Pope Gregory XII whom the sisters greatly revered (Riccoboni, 2000, pp. 47-63). In reflecting both internal and external stories, Riccoboni shed light on nuns' opinions of historical events such as the schism and the Council of Constance. The convent nuns mimicked the rift within the Catholic Church, as the nuns divided along the lines of which pope they supported (Riccoboni, 2000, pp. 44-48). The end of Riccoboni's story was a necrology of approximately fifty nuns who died in Corpus Domini 1395-1436 (Riccoboni, 2000, pp. 64-101). Her necrology was exceptional because it did not merely list the name and investiture and death dates of a nun; instead, it gave a brief obituary for each nun, explaining how she died, extolling her virtues, and highlighting her achievements. Riccoboni says of Sister Felicitas Buonrio's death:

In 1403, on Saint Valentine's day, Sister Felicitas Buonrio passed from this life at the age of eighteen years. She was a purest virgin in her thoughts, as she also demonstrated by her actions. She was so gentle and gracious that she seemed like an angel. She inspired devotion in whoever looked at her, her life was prayer with holy meditation and true observance and obedience. Once while she was in the choir during the octave of Corpus Christi, when the little door of the sacrament is kept open, she was looking at the host and saw there a lovely child who seemed to rejoice and promise her life eternal. A few days later she fell sick and remained ill for a year, she was consecrated and received all the holy sacraments, and with highest devotion rendered her soul to her beloved spouse [Jesus] (Riccoboni, 2000, p. 68).

Riccoboni's complete chronicle reflected similarities to parts of other chronicles, but in its entirety was another distinctive work of a nun.

Chronicles were unique works that covered a variety of topics and demonstrated various levels of intellectuality and literacy. They, in combination with administrative records, kept track of a convent's history. These documents highlighted connections and achievements and were a source of pride for the convents themselves. Although they were not widely circulated, each convent treasured its chronicle and kept it in the library with other important texts.

Reasons for writing

Although nuns were not supposed to know Latin, have access to inkwells and pens, or understand theology, many did. Nuns learned Latin through religious readings and saying the hours, and their conversations and writings often reflected a theological viewpoint, despite lacking the background in scholastic theology, grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy like a priest or monk. Throughout the Renaissance, female literacy increased as fathers hired tutors for their daughters or sent them to convent schools, such as the one at Lapo. In the fifteenth century, humanist writers began encouraging female literacy, and the trend increased (Strocchia, 1999, p. 3; Weaver, 1999, p. 131). By the Council of Trent, nuns were required to be literate in order to partake in the reading of the breviary or mealtime scriptures. This increase in female literacy resulted in a female population wanting literature for themselves; nuns' writings filled this void.

Convents allowed women a place to exercise their intellectual capacity. It also provided a ready audience as the nuns constantly desired things to read. Although some

nuns wrote because their confessors or abbesses instructed them to do so, most wrote because they wanted to do so (Surtz, 1995, p. 131). These nuns received encouragement from their sisters, who wanted new reading material, and from the outside world, which valued their advice.²² Convents gave women the freedom to develop a personal viewpoint, a political awareness, and a group consciousness (Cushing-Daniels, 2002, p. 108). “They took pleasure in their work, and developed their own style. They were well educated, and had access to models for their writing, either in the form of texts from the convent archive, or writings by male clergy who had links with the convent” (Woodford, 2002, p. x). Furthermore, every woman in a convent had duties; many tried to make these responsibilities something that they enjoyed. For some women, this was writing.

Conclusion

Convent libraries collected works in many genres, by many authors, at many intellectual levels. Collections contained administrative records, cookbooks, hymnals and scripture, devotionals, stories, histories, plays, and science books. Even within these material divisions, works differed greatly in their scope and depth. Their commonality lies in the fact that they reveal details about nuns’ lives. Although nuns were not the largest female segment of the population, they left behind the greatest amount of material. By examining convent regulations, scribal work within a convent, outside work held by a convent, and work that nuns produced, one can greater understand the wealth of information contained within a convent library.

²² Because the nuns’ primary audience was their sisters or family, nuns’ writings are often addressed to women (Arenal, 1989, p. 218).

Appendix A

Known works in convent libraries

The following is list of works known to be contained in convent libraries of the Renaissance. They are by both men and women. The works are listed in alphabetical order by author, if known; if the author is unknown, the work is listed by title. If no title is known, a short descriptive phrase is given for the work. The name and location of the convent that possessed this work then follows along with the publication or writing date(s) if available.

Account books. San Zaccaria, Venice, 1458-1489.

Account books. Lapo, Florence.

Administrative records. Lapo, Florence.

Agreda, Suor María de. *Face of the Eath*. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

Avila, Saint Teresa de. *Libro de la vida*.

Barchi, Giovanni Pietro. *Specchio religioso*. 1609.

Besozzi, Giovanni Pietro. Treatise. 1576.

Bible.

Book of the Hours. Lapo, Florence.

Brevarium romanum. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

Cartagena, Teresa de. Treatise on the spiritual benefits of illness. Spain.

Castilla, Constanza de. Devotions. Spain.

Castilla, Constanza de. Liturgical offices. Spain.

Castilla, Constanza de. Prayers. Spain.

Ceremoniale. San Zaccaria, Venice.

Charter. San Paolo, Milan.

Chronicle. Le Vergini, Venice, 1500-1519.

Cruz, Juana de la. Sermons. Spain.

Decrees of the Council of Trent. 1561.

Devotionals.

Dominici, Giovanni. Letters. Corpus Domini, Venice.

Formicini, Suor Orsola. *Book of the History of the Convent of San Cosimato*. San Cosimato, Rome.

Frescobaldi, Fiammetta. Abridged version of Francesco Guicciardini's *History of Italy*. San Jacopo di Ripoli, Venice.

Frescobaldi, Fiammetta. Compendium to Francesco Guicciardini's *Storia d'Italia*. San Jacopo di Ripoli, Venice.

Frescobaldi, Fiammetta. *Cose prodigiose e calamitose del mondo*. San Jacopo di Ripoli, Venice.

Frescobaldi, Fiammetta. *Cronaca del sacro ordine di san Domenico*. San Jacopo di Ripoli, Venice, 1200-1579.

Frescobaldi, Fiammetta. *Diario*. San Jacopo di Ripoli, Venice, 1576-1586.

Frescobaldi, Fiammetta. History of the east and west Indies. San Jacopo di Ripoli, Venice.

Frescobaldi, Fiammetta. History of the kings of Persia. San Jacopo di Ripoli, Venice.

Frescobaldi, Fiammetta. History of the Venetian patriarchate. San Jacopo di Ripoli, Venice.

Frescobaldi, Fiammetta. *Prato fiorito*. San Jacopo di Ripoli, Venice.

Frescobaldi, Fiammetta. *Sfera dell'universo*. San Jacopo di Ripoli, Venice.

Frescobaldi, Fiammetta. Translation of Luigi Lippomano and Lorenzo Surio's 118

saints' lives. San Jacopo di Ripoli, Venice.

Galilei, Galileo. Letters to his daughter.

Gertrude, Saint. Book of revelations. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

Golden Legend.

Gradi, Basilio. Treatise for nuns on chastity.

Hagiographies.

Hymnals.

Jerome, Saint. Letters to Eustochium.

Jesus, Madre Isabel de. Spiritual autobiography. Spain.

Ledgers. San Girolamo.

Ley de Dios. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

Libro de capítulo. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

Libro de vista. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

Lives of the Holy Fathers.

Memoriale. Santa Maria di Monteluca, Perugia, 1448-1838.

Memories. San Paolo, Milan, 1586-1635.

Niccolini, Suor Giustina. History. Santissima Annunziata (Le Murate), Florence, 1300s

-1597.

Nieremberg, Juan Eusebio. *Devoción y patrocinio de San Miguel principe de los*

ángeles. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

Nonnenbucher. Unterlinden, Germany, 1300s.

Oppizi, Lorenzo de'. *Miracoli della Vergine della Carcere*. 1484.

Orimo, Suor Caterina Guarneri da. *Chronicle*. Santa Lucia di Foligno, 1468-1536.

Orthographia.

Osuna, Francisco de. *Abecedario espiritual*. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

Papal bull. San Paolo, Milan.

Pazzi, María Magdalena de. *Vida*. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

Periculoso. 1298.

Philip IV of France. Letters to Sor Maria de Agreda.

Pioppi, Lucia. *Diario*. 1541-1612.

Pirckheimer, Caritas. *Denkwurdigkeiten*. Saint Clare's, Nuremburg, 1524-1528.

Play based on Giovanni Boccaccio's *Filocolo*.

Quedlinburg, Anna Sophia of. *Der treue Seelenfreund Christus Jesus*. Quedlinburg.

Quedlinburg, Anna Sophia of. *Hymnals*. Quedlinburg.

Reggio, Bonaventura Gonzaga da. *Alcuni avvertimenti nella vita monacale*.

Riccoboni, Suor Bartolomea. *Life and death in a Venetian convent: chronicle and
necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395-1436*. Corpus Domini, Venice, 1395-1436.

Ricordi. Santissima Annunziata (Le Murate), 1522-1564.

Rule of Saint Benedict.

Rule of Saint Caesarius of Arles.

Rules of the Ursulines. 1569.

Saints' lives.

Samaniego. Letter. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

San Alberto, Maria de and Cecilia del Nacimiento. Autobiography. La Concepción, Valladolid.

San Alberto, Maria de and Cecilia del Nacimiento. Biographies of sisters. La Concepción, Valladolid.

San Alberto, Maria de and Cecilia del Nacimiento. Family histories. La Concepción, Valladolid.

San Alberto, Maria de and Cecilia del Nacimiento. Plays. La Concepción, Valladolid.

San Alberto, Maria de and Cecilia del Nacimiento. Poetry. La Concepción, Valladolid.

San Alberto, Maria de and Cecilia del Nacimiento. Scripture translations. La Concepción, Valladolid.

San Alberto, Maria de and Cecilia del Nacimiento. Spiritual narratives. La Concepción, Valladolid.

San Alberto, Maria de and Cecilia del Nacimiento. Theological treatises. La Concepción, Valladolid.

San Bartolomé, Ana de and María de San José. Chronicles of Saint Teresa of Avila. Incarnation, Avila.

San Joseph, Mariana de. Commentary on the Song of Songs.

Santerenzio, Francesco Rappi da. *Lima spirituale*. 1515.

Santerenzio, Francesco Rappi da. *Thesaurus di castità*. Le murate, Florence.

Santo Domingo, María de. *Libro de oración*. Spain.

Sera, Beatrice del. *Love of virtue*.

Sfondrati, Suor Paola Antonia. *Memorie*. San Paolo, Milan.

Spoleto, Cherubino da. *Regola di vita spirituale*.

Tarabotti, Arcangela. *Antisatira*. Venice.

Tarabotti, Arcangela. *Che le donne siano della spezie degli uomini*. Venice.

Tarabotti, Arcangela. *L'inferno monacale*. Venice.

Tarabotti, Arcangela. *Il paradiso monacale*. Venice.

Tarabotti, Arcangela. *Lettere familiare e di complimento*. Venice.

Tarabotti, Arcangela. *La semplicità ingannata*. Venice.

Tarabotti, Arcangela. *La tirannia paterna*. Venice.

Tommasini, Suor Isabetta. *Sermons*. Corpus Domini, Venice.

Vega, Lope de. *Letters to his daughter*.

Vida Christiana. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

Vigri, Caterina. *Book of devotions*. Bologna.

Vitae Christi. Convento Real de Santa Clara, Spain.

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