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Community Identity and Personal Salvation in 16th
Century Florence: The Meaning of Miracles in the
Chronicle of Le Murate

Rosa Margaret Martorana
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Abstract

This thesis explores the purpose of the miraculous in the convent Chronicle of Santissima Annunziata delle Murate. Scholarship has largely tended toward accepting miracles in this and other chronicles as trope of female monastic history writing in the sixteenth century. I argue instead that miracles are a central mechanism by which the Chronicle seeks to achieve its communicative aims and serve at least two purposes. The first is to establish and reinforce a divinely approved communal identity for the Chronicle's contemporary audience. This is evident by the occurrence of miracles at key moments in the convent's history, and the emphasis placed upon them by the Chronicle author. Miracles also have a spiritual pedagogical purpose, as they are used to highlight exemplary women within the community. Furthermore, miracles show how a nun who is not following the ideal model, can be reformed and re-join her community. This discussion demonstrates that miracles are essential to our understanding of the purposes of this Chronicle, and other female monastic histories written in the early modern period.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:

Print Name: Rosa Margaret Martorana

Date: 12/03/2021

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Introduction

The Chronicle of the female convent of Santissima Annunziata delle Murate, hereafter referred to as Le Murate, is well-known amongst scholars of Renaissance Florence and beyond. The 179-folio work, written in the vernacular, is a fascinating retelling of the convent's history from its initial foundation in 1390 to January 1598, the present day of the Chronicle's author, Sister Giustina Niccolini.¹ Within the text there are over fifty miracle stories pertaining to the nuns and their convent. This thesis is driven by the question of what miracles were for in early modern religious culture. I argue that miracles are a central mechanism by which the Chronicle of Le Murate met a number of its key communicative aims. Specifically, they helped to form and reinforce a communal identity that was unique to Le Murate. They were also employed for a spiritual pedagogical purpose. They modelled when behaviours were, or were not, appropriate for a Le Murate nun and helped guide the nuns on their path to individual salvation.

Florence in the Sixteenth Century

The political and spiritual environment of Florence was turbulent in the late fifteenth and sixteenth-centuries. Before the Tridentine reforms associated with the Catholic Reformation, Florentine convents were theoretically enclosed, however, convents and their inhabitants were active participants in the politics of the city.² Lorenzo de' Medici, for example, became a patron of Le Murate after their convent was devastated by a fire.³ His patronage, F. W. Kent argues, was in part politically motivated as Le Murate was located in the Santa Croce quarter, a part of the city which "had traditionally been hostile" towards the Medici and their allies.⁴ For the nuns, Lorenzo's

¹ The chronicle records its completion as January 1597. At this time the Florentine year started on March 25, marked by the Feast of the Annunciation, so January 1597 is January 1598 in modern dating. Throughout this thesis I have used the modern dating.

² Sharon Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) 20.

³ Sister Giustina Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, ed. trans. Sandra Weddle (Toronto: Iter Inc. & the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011), 108-10.

⁴ Francis W. Kent, *Lorenzo de' Medici and the Art of Magnificence* (London and Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 66. For more on Lorenzo's early patronage of Le Murate see Francis W. Kent, "Lorenzo de' Medici,

patronage enabled them to re-build the fire damaged kitchen and laundry rooms.⁵ It also meant that Le Murate became known as pro-Medicean convent.⁶ There were concerns that the familial allegiances which existed outside the convent would impact the community within.⁷ The Chronicle itself attends to the challenges posed to community cohesion by bringing multiple women into the convent from diverse backgrounds at this time. In the context external turbulence, Medici patronage could be both useful and disruptive.

Ecclesiastical and spiritual turbulence followed in the wake of political disturbance. In April 1492 Lorenzo de' Medici died. Lorenzo was succeeded by his eldest son Piero, who ruled until the Medici were expelled from Florence in 1494, after Piero's botched negotiations with Charles VIII of France during the early period of the Italian Wars (1494-1569). After the Medici exile, the radical Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola, with much popular support, sought to re-instate a Florentine Republic and revivify Florentine virtue.⁸ In May 1495, he publicly accused the nuns of Le Murate of vanity for their scribal and needle work.⁹ The outcome of his campaign, however, led to an increased civic and spiritual turbulence in the city. For instance, a contemporary diarist, Luca Landucci, wrote that the rioting which followed Savonarola's death spilled into the convent and resulted in a fire in the scriptorium.¹⁰ Neither his criticism, nor this attack, however, were

Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli, and the Politics of Architectural Patronage at the Convent of Le Murate (1471-72)," in *Princely Citizen: Lorenzo de' Medici and Renaissance Florence*, ed. Carolyn James (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 105-31.

⁵ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 109.

⁶ Sandra Weddle, "Introduction," in Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 13.

⁷ This concern was so great that by 1517, the Archbishop of Florence Giulio de' Medici, permitted only two women from a single family to enter the same convent. See, Richard Trexler, "Celibacy in the Renaissance: The Nuns of Florence," in *Power and Dependence in Renaissance Florence*, volume 2 of *The Women of Renaissance Florence* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993), 20.

⁸ Savonarola's life and rule are well documented in the historiography of Florence, as is his decline, excommunication and eventual execution in the Piazza della Signoria in May 1498. See, Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), Lorenzo Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Movement in Florence, 1494-1545* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹ Sandra Weddle, "Introduction," in Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 13.

¹⁰ The Chronicle notes that the fire was the result of an unattended candle. See, Luca Landucci, *Diario fiorentino di Luca Landucci dal 1450 al 1516*, ed. Iodoco del Badia (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1883), 172.

mentioned in the convent Chronicle; an interesting omission in itself, which perhaps speaks to its orientation to an internal audience.

There was still much support for Savonarola and the ideals he espoused after his death. However, the 1512 return of the Medici family to Florence curbed some of this support. The Medici remained in power until 1527, when they were once again exiled, returning only after a ten-month siege of Florence (October 1529-August 1530) backed by the second of four Medici popes, Clement VII, and Emperor Charles V. Although it was not always explicitly addressed, the wider political and civic context of Florence was the backdrop against which all of the convent's activities, including the production of the Chronicle, took place.

[Protestant Reformation, Catholic Counter-Reformations and the Council of Trent.](#)

During this period of instability in Florence, there were also number of religious reformations sweeping across Catholic Europe. In 1517, Martin Luther famously wrote his Ninety-five Theses acting as the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent Catholic Counter-Reformations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Ninety-five Theses, along with Luther's other writings and preaching, led to his excommunication by Pope Leo X, the first of the four Medici Popes, in 1521. By 1545, after much internal disagreement amongst the Pope and bishops about the council, the first meeting of the Council of Trent was held, with the final session taking place in 1563. Many of the sessions of the Council sought to address challenges put to the Catholic faith by Protestant Reformers.

When considering the Council in relationship to the history of Catholic nuns and other female religious, most scholars turn their attention to a section of the twenty-fifth and final session, which explicitly deals with the enclosure of women. In the case of Le Murate, the Chronicle recounts that the archbishop of Florence visited the convent in 1567, four years after the close of the

council, with the purpose of communicating the decrees of this session relating to the nuns and their enclosure. It is evident from the description in the Chronicle that these decrees had, in theory if not always in practice, a significant impact on the life of the women.¹¹ The twenty-fifth session also addressed a point of contention between Protestants and Catholics, and one which affected the nuns of Le Murate as well: miracles. While the decrees relating to the miraculous are not mentioned directly, the treatment of miracles in the Chronicle implies an understanding of the caution with which miracles must be treated in the post-Protestant Reformation period, as will be discussed further in chapter 1.

Le Murate

During the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as Florence was experiencing these social, religious and political upheavals, the community of Le Murate was rapidly growing in number, and reputation. In 1413, the women numbered 7, before peaking at around 211 in 1551. By the time the Chronicle was completed in 1598, there were just under 200 women living in the convent.¹² The Chronicle, as well as other contemporary sources, report that Le Murate was admired in Florence and beyond and was a desirable community into which elite families chose to send their daughters and widows. The sisters were commended by contemporaries for their piety, as well as for the exquisite gold-thread needlework they produced and the high quality of the manuscripts they copied on commission to support themselves economically.¹³

The Chronicle of Le Murate was produced at a time when concerns about the appropriateness of writing as an activity for religious women were common. Early modern convent records show that

¹¹ See chapter 41 of the Chronicle. Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 213-18.

¹² Saundra Weddle, "Introduction," in Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 8-9.

¹³ For more on the commissioning of texts and monastic scribal activity see, Rebecca A. Sigmon, "Reading Like a Nun: The Composition of Convent Libraries in Renaissance Europe," *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 10, no. 3-4 (2011): 81-102. Kate Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 140, 288-93.

in some instances inkwells were banned in convents, while in others it was compulsory for incoming women to bring writing paraphernalia with them.¹⁴ Rebecca Sigmon cites a common concern in the early modern period that women who engaged in scribal work, including the composition of original works, were open to criticism as being “ungodly” or putting themselves at risk of a “spiritual crisis.”¹⁵ As Lowe has identified, these factors made the writing of chronicles by nuns a highly “contentious” issue that came under close examination after the Council of Trent.¹⁶

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many convents, particularly in the Italian peninsula, nevertheless engaged in this work, either as copyists, or writers of original texts. The attitude of local ecclesiastical authorities to this work varied. Religious women’s writing took place sometimes at the request of their ecclesiastical superiors and sometimes in defiance of instruction not to write.¹⁷ To address contemporary concerns, nuns often compared the act of writing to other manual labours, like sewing or planting, which were approved parts of the daily routine of monastic life.¹⁸ At Le Murate, scribal work was undertaken as labour, producing texts both for external and internal use. Sister Giustina Niccolini, the composer of the Chronicle, had served as a scribe in the convent’s scriptorium prior to taking on this new project.

At the time of writing, Sister Giustina was following a tradition of chronicle writing in the community, citing earlier chronicles in her own work.¹⁹ She had been a member of the convent for at least thirty years when she finished the task in January 1598. Sister Giustina tells her audience that she was compelled to dictate the text, as she was bedridden with an illness that kept her from

¹⁴ Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 6-7.

¹⁵ Sigmon, “Reading like a Nun,” 84.

¹⁶ Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 6.

¹⁷ Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 6.

¹⁸ Sigmon, “Reading like a Nun,” 84.

¹⁹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 132.

participating in her other duties within the convent.²⁰ She implies in the prologue that it was the convent's abbess who initially inspired the project that she had brought to fruition: "to the Venerable Abbess... your pious desires to bring to light the excellent work of our first foundresses have so compelled [me]... that I have been moved to do it..."²¹

The scholarly consensus is that the text was produced for an internal audience, as the Chronicle itself states, though it does include aspects of Florentine history that would have been of interest to external parties.²² At a time of religious reforms and the renewed concern around the enclosure of professed nuns, the content of the nun-authored history of such a prestigious Florentine convent likely required the approval of a male ecclesiastical superior. We know that the chronicle was read in its final form by the convent confessor, as Sister Giustina tells us in her epistolary preface, "...Father Xenofonte Petrei, our current prior and confessor, who with his usual diligence has reviewed it [the chronicle] from beginning to end."²³ We can therefore assume that, at the least at the level of their confessor, the history of the nuns, including their many divine encounters, was authorised by the nuns' religious superiors. This was significant given the tension which existed regarding nuns' writing, particularly in the years after Trent.

The Chronicle

The Chronicle is divided into seventy-seven chapters, although chapter fifty-nine is skipped by the author or scribe, so the final chapter is seventy-eight. It opens with an introductory letter and a preface, before beginning the history of the community, and ends with a concluding letter written by the scribe to whom Sister Giustina dictated her work. Just over half of the chapter titles, forty

²⁰ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 42.

²¹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 42. See also Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 22.

²² Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 28.

²³ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 42.

of the seventy-seven, directly mention a woman.²⁴ Twenty-four of those women are abbesses, while twelve are female patrons or visitors to the convent. The final four are noteworthy sisters, each of whom experienced a miracle, or miracles, which are recounted in the Chronicle. The chapters cover significant events in the convent's history, such as the development of patronage networks, building projects and the deaths and elections of abbesses. As Sandra Weddle notes in the Introduction to her translation of the Chronicle, the text also includes "stories of visions, miracles, and other saintly displays [which] confirm the community's devoutness and show its eagerness to follow the model presented by these women."²⁵ I argue that these miraculous encounters not only show an "eagerness to follow the model" of their predecessors, but that they show the nuns *how* to follow this model, no matter where they are on their spiritual journey.

As is typical of the genre, the Chronicle of Le Murate follows a roughly linear timeline, beginning with the foundation of the community as a sort of beguinage, or informal community of women dedicated to spiritual life, on the Rubaconte Bridge in 1390 and concluding with the date 1598. There are, however, very notable and deliberate interruptions to this chronology, particularly in the recording of miraculous experiences. The Chronicle recounts more than fifty miracle stories, many of which are taken out of their chronological order and grouped together to show divine approval of a decision made by the community, or to highlight the importance of cultivating particular virtues for the nuns. The use of the miraculous in this way will be discussed further in chapters 2 and 3.

In his work on Florentine historical writing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Mark Phillips has argued for a distinction between classical, humanist histories and the vernacular style. He

²⁴ The English translation includes the names of women mentioned in chapter titles, with exception of two – chapters 1 is shortened to exclude the names of Sisters Apollonia and Agata, and chapter 10 excludes the name of Sister Benedetta.

²⁵ Weddle, "Introduction," in *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 24.

points out that vernacular chronicles were seen as a way of remembering events, often witnessed by the chronicler, and thus were more individual in style.²⁶ Classical histories, on the other hand, were “composed linear narratives that were clarified and augmented by reference to broad moral and political lessons.”²⁷ By aligning their work with the classical history writing style, humanists sought to distance their histories from the works of their vernacular chronicle predecessors, though they still relied on the earlier chronicles to inform their histories.²⁸

The Chronicle of Le Murate was written in Tuscan vernacular, and is not a highly regulated text in terms of its relationship to classical norms. However, this should not be taken to mean that it could not have political or moral lessons to teach, as might be implied by Phillips’s taxonomy. As Kate Lowe has argued, drawing a distinction between the genres of chronicle and history is not necessarily beneficial for the study of nuns’ chronicles. This is, in part, because of the difficulty in asserting what makes each genre distinct, given that they share many similarities, and also because often in nuns’ chronicle writing the terms are used interchangeably.²⁹

The Chronicle of Le Murate tends towards the “less regulated and more individual” style of history writing discussed by Lowe and Phillips, in the sense that it is not tied to classical models of writing. This is something that Sister Giustina may have been commenting on in the Chronicles’ preface when she remarked that she was not an historian, despite the fact that she was dealing with the convent’s history. She wrote,

Regarding privileges, buildings, alms, the succession of abbesses, and various occurrences culled from the old writings, we will put them in their place with all possible brevity and clarity, despite our weakness, with a simple, inarticulate style and without the necessary order, not being – as I have said – a historian, able to take on such a task.³⁰

²⁶ Mark Phillips, “Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and the Tradition of Vernacular Historiography in Florence,” *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 1 (1979): 87.

²⁷ Phillips, “Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and the Tradition of Vernacular Historiography in Florence,” 87.

²⁸ Phillips, “Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and the Tradition of Vernacular Historiography in Florence,” 87.

²⁹ Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 7.

³⁰ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 46.

She makes it clear to her audience that for the Chronicle to be a history, it would need to be written in a different style and order. While the Chronicle was not regulated by principles of composition such as the Ciceronian model or other classical principles, it was still carefully constructed and regulated. As will become clear, its structural features were no less significant for being original.

There is a rich historiography of monastic chronicle and history writing, much of which examines the connection between the monastic and civic worlds. Shannon McHugh argues that a history of a Dominican convent in Bologna, written in 1575 by Sister Diodata Malvasia, and a history of a miracle working painting of the Madonna housed in the convent, “demonstrate how Malvasia and her sisters persuasively traded on their education and position of spiritual privilege to advance their agenda within networks familial, religious, civic, and cultural.”³¹ McHugh has chosen to examine the writings of Diodata Malvasia by asking what the texts can reveal about the nuns’ networks with those outside the convent. Relatedly, F. W. Kent found the Chronicle useful as evidence for the monastic patronage activities of Lorenzo de’ Medici.³²

Saundra Weddle in her PhD thesis used the Chronicle of Le Murate to recreate the architectural site of the convent and consider its relationship to the built environment of Florence. She suggests that the contents of the Chronicle,

... provides an account of the architectural development of the convent, the spatial and functional relationships between the buildings and rooms within the enclosure, the donations made by its patrons, and the nuns’ observance of monastic enclosure.³³

Weddle argues that the nuns of Le Murate used the convent architecture to promote an appearance of strict monastic enclosure in the wake of Tridentine reforms, but that in reality their boundaries

³¹ Shannon McHugh, “Authority, Religion, and Women Writers in the Italian Counter-Reformation: Teaching Diodata Malvasia’s Histories,” *Religions* 9, no. 4 (2018): 2.

³² Kent, “Lorenzo de’ Medici, Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli, and the Politics of Architectural Patronage at the Convent of Le Murate (1471-72),” in *Princely Citizen*, 105-31.

³³ Saundra Weddle, “Enclosing Le Murate: The Ideology of Enclosure and the Architecture of a Florentine Convent, 1390-1597” (PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1997), 16.

were much more porous than they appeared.³⁴ Both the approaches of McHugh and Weddle offer an insight into these convents and female monastic writing, however they do so in such a way that tends to be framed by the nuns' place in the context of their civic environments.

The fullest scholarly examination of the Chronicle is in Kate Lowe's *Nuns' Chronicles*, in which she discusses examples from Venice, Rome and Florence. Lowe's principal concern is with nuns' chronicles as evidence of women's agency.³⁵ She reads them as evidence of the women's interest in the creation and maintenance of patronage networks beyond the cloister, electing abbesses and directing their own administration, and the texts and performances that formed part of their engagement in cultural production.

One aspect of the nuns' chronicles that Lowe, and others, have not fully considered is the spiritual purpose of chronicles for their monastic audiences. As Lowe herself points out in passing, nuns' chronicles include miracles with such frequency and emphasis that "...a collection of them almost constitutes a new subject for historians."³⁶ In her discussion of the Chronicle of Le Murate, however, she frequently omits to mention that miracles were presented as part of a given episode that she elects to analyse. Lowe is not the only scholar to notice the miraculous contents of nuns' chronicles without probing their potential spiritual meaning. Weddle, for example, discussed the miraculous Madonna of Le Murate in relation to the convent's negotiations with ecclesiastical authorities, most notably the Archbishop of Florence, concerning the nuns' access to it after it became lodged in an exterior wall after a flood removed it from the dispensary.³⁷

³⁴ Weddle, "Enclosing Le Murate," 2.

³⁵ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 396.

³⁶ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 11.

³⁷ Weddle, "Enclosing Le Murate," 178.

Scholarship on the Le Murate Chronicle has thus given us a well-grounded understanding of the women's independent agency, and their management of political and pragmatic relationships to the outside world, all questions of importance in feminist historiography. It has not, however, probed the spiritual lives of the women with the same success. In this thesis, I take the miraculous as a serious and important element of the composition of the Chronicle of Le Murate. Given that the miraculous occurs with such frequency and accuracy as Lowe asserts, it must be purposeful in its inclusion by the Le Murate Chronicle author. Rather than examining this as a subject of analysis separate from other topics, I argue that we should consider the miraculous as an essential part of how we understand the text's overall purpose.

Thesis Structure

This thesis takes a cultural history approach to miracles and the miraculous at Le Murate, as expressed in its Chronicle. Chapter 1 establishes the cultural milieu in which the nuns' understandings of the miraculous were formed. It examines the contentious nature of the miraculous in the sixteenth century for both Catholics and Protestants, and discusses the context in which miracles could have been interpreted by the nuns of Le Murate, drawing on both the ecclesiastical politics of the Reformation and Tridentine reforms, and the texts and other examples that the women would have had access to that influenced their interpretation of miraculous events.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore two key purposes of the miraculous that I have identified in the Chronicle. Chapter 2 takes up Brian Stock's concept of *textual community*, critiquing and refining it, before applying it to the analysis of miraculous episodes in the Chronicle. It focuses on the communal identity-forming aim of miracles, examining how miracles helped construct an account of the community's development and values while also generating a reference text *for* those values and the identity of community formed through them. Chapter 3 examines miracles which have spiritual pedagogical aim, designed to aid nuns on their individual spiritual journey. It draws upon

recent developments in understanding medieval and early modern sermons as a framework for understanding the power of miracles as *exempla*.

Taken together, this analysis charts a new way of reading nuns' chronicles, which is attentive to their meaning for the individual and collective spiritual formation of their contemporary audience. I show that the miraculous is integral to the purpose (or purposes) of the Le Murate Chronicle, and therefore that the miraculous must be integral to understanding the purpose of women's monastic writing in the sixteenth century more broadly.

Chapter 1: Miracles and the Miraculous in the Sixteenth Century

The Protestant reformation created a crisis in the miraculous. Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin sought to differentiate their new movements from traditional Catholic church practices by expressing scepticism about the frequency and nature of miraculous events and by defining them more narrowly. The Catholic response was to reiterate the continued occurrence of miracles, an issue addressed at the Council of Trent (1545-1563).¹ This was the religious climate in which Sister Giustina composed her 1598 *Chronicle of Le Murate* and populated it with more than fifty miraculous encounters. Why did the *Chronicle* include so many miracles, and what purposes were they held to serve? This chapter examines the arguments, ideas, texts and experiences that likely shaped the Le Murate nuns' understanding of the miracles they experienced within their community.

Miracles and the Legacy of Augustine

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* first published in 1536, John Calvin celebrated the signs and wonders recorded in the New Testament, whilst simultaneously cautioning against the alleged truth of miracles in the modern age. In his dedication to King Francis I of France, which preceded the first volume of the first edition of *Institutes*, Calvin wrote,

...it is wrong to esteem those as miracles which are directed to any other end than the glorification of the name of God alone. And we should remember that Satan has his wonders, which, though they are juggling tricks rather than real miracles, are such as to delude the ignorant and inexperienced. Magicians and enchanterers have always been famous for miracles; idolatry has been supported by astonishing miracles; and yet we admit them not as proofs of the superstition of magicians or idolaters. With this engine also the simplicity of the vulgar was anciently assailed by the Donatists, who abounded in miracles. We therefore give the same answer now to our adversaries as Augustine gave to the Donatists, that our Lord hath cautioned us against these miracle-mongers by his prediction, that there should arise false prophets, who, by various signs and lying wonders, 'should deceive (if possible) the very elect.'²

¹ *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* 2nd edition, ed. trans. Rev. H. J. Schroeder, O.P. (Charlotte, North Carolina: TAN Books, 1978), 218-220.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 5th edition, ed. trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1844), 27-8.

In this passage Calvin accepted that miracles existed, but he challenged the validity of miracles oriented to any purpose other than the glorification of God. The dedication framed this critique especially in relation to the sin of idolatry. Calvin also represented the Catholic position on miracles as heresy. In the closing section, he placed himself in the role of Augustine denouncing and the Donatists, a fifth-century schismatic group of Christians who believed they were the “...true heirs to pre-Constantinian Christianity...” and argued that they followed the path laid down by the Christian martyrs persecuted by Diocletian.³ At a synod in Carthage in 411, called to decide whether the Catholics or Donatists should be followed as the rightful Christian Church in North Africa,⁴ Augustine and his fellow bishops had been successful in arguing against the Donatist position.⁵ Through this metaphor, Calvin likened himself to Augustine, fighting for the ‘true’ church, and the Catholics, holding onto their miracles, to a heretical sect.

The metaphor of the Donatists also enabled Calvin to align himself with Augustine as one of the early fathers of the Catholic church. Throughout his *Institutes*, Calvin used the church fathers as a means to support his opinions against Catholics and other reformers.⁶ He also used their theology to demonstrate how the ideas of the Protestant reform movements had ties back to the earliest forms of Christianity, and indeed represented a return to a pure faith.⁷ By choosing Augustine in particular as his pillar against the Catholic continued belief in miracles, Calvin was writing himself into a narrative that was extremely significant for the Catholic faith. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Augustine was the first to attempt a formal framework for understanding the

³ Collin Garbarino, “Augustine, Donatists and Martyrs,” in *An Age of Saints?: Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity*, eds. Peter Sarris, Phil Booth, and Matthew Dal Santo (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 49.

⁴ Maureen A. Tilley, “Dilatory Donatists or Procrastinating Catholics: The Trial at the Conference of Carthage,” *Church History* 60, no. 1 (1991), 7.

⁵ Tilley, “Dilatory Donatists or Procrastinating Catholics,” 7-8.

⁶ Esther Chung-Kim, “John Calvin’s Use of the Fathers in the *Institutes* and New Testament Commentaries,” in *Inventing Authority: The Use of the Church Fathers in Reformation Debates over the Eucharist* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011), 34.

⁷ Chung-Kim, “John Calvin’s Use of the Fathers in the *Institutes* and New Testament Commentaries,” 35.

miraculous.⁸ Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, the writings of Augustine still underpinned the Catholic understanding of the miraculous, and his theology was used by both Protestants and Catholics to make a case for, and against, miracles in the modern age.⁹

Like other Protestant figures, Calvin also critiqued those who accepted miracles too easily as “ignorant” and “inexperienced.” He argued in his *Institutes* that miracles in the modern world were far more likely the work of magicians, enchanters, or the Devil, rather than the work of God. Many of the early Church fathers with whom reformers allied themselves agreed that the Devil and demons could try and deceive the faithful, an argument the reformers used in their attack on Catholic miracles.¹⁰ Calvin implored his readers to consider these deceptive forces as the far more likely culprits of the ‘miracles’ they were experiencing or witnessing. In doing so, he was attacking an important part of the Catholic experience.

Despite their differences of opinion, both Catholic and Protestant ideas of the miraculous derived from common origins, ultimately taking their cues from Augustine. He had been the first to offer a formal framework for defining and understanding the miraculous; studies have suggested that the authors of the Gospels, for example, did not have a developed conception of ‘miracle’, despite the fact that many of Jesus’s own miracles became topoi of subsequent hagiographical writing.¹¹ The conceptualisation of miracles in the medieval period and beyond was largely drawn from four

⁸ Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000-1215* 2nd edition (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987).

⁹ Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 3.

¹⁰ St Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. trans. J. W. C. Wand (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), book X, chapter IX, 165.

¹¹ Peter Harrison, “Miracles, Early Modern Science, and Rational Religion,” *Church History* 75, no. 3 (2006): 493. For a detailed timeline of the development of understanding the miraculous see: Michael Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders: The Development of the Concept of Miracle, 1150-1350* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000-1215* 2nd edition (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987); Yair Zakovitch, *The Concept of Miracle in the Bible* (Tel-Aviv: MOD Books, 1991); André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Ronald C. Finucane, *Contested Canonizations: The Last Medieval Saints, 1482-1523* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

Augustinian texts: *De Genesi ad Litteram*, *De Trinitate*, *De Utilitate Credendi*, and *De Civitate Dei*.¹² In these texts Augustine explained miracles as “...wonderful acts of God shown as events in this world...as a drawing out of the hidden workings of God within a nature that was all potentially miraculous.”¹³

It was Augustine’s belief that miracles in his time could act as a means of communication between God and the saints, interventions in the daily lives of his followers, which sought to affirm their faith.¹⁴ These divine interventions also served another purpose, that is, to convert non-Christians to the Christian faith. Why then, by the time of writing *City of God* in the early fifth century, did there appear to be fewer miraculous events than in the time of Jesus and his apostles? Augustine poses, and addresses, this question, stating; “I might reply that they [miracles] were necessary before the world believed in order to make it believe.”¹⁵ Augustine’s method of conceptualising miracles was adapted and developed throughout the medieval period and beyond, influencing, for example, Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard, Gerald of Wales and Thomas Aquinas,¹⁶ and, as we have seen, Calvin and his fellow reformers.

Augustine argued that the miraculous had reduced in frequency in his own day because the truth of Christianity had already been successfully spread, so there was less need for miracles to stimulate conversion.¹⁷ This allowed reformers to use Augustine to support their assertion that miracles were part of the historical past, and therefore any miracles recorded in their own time were far more likely the work of the Devil. When Protestants such as Calvin used Augustine as the foundation of their works, they emphasised his characterisation of miracles as an aid to the conversion of

¹² Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 3.

¹³ Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 3.

¹⁴ St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, ed. trans. J. W. C. Wand (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), book XXII chapter VIII, 394.

¹⁵ St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, book XXII chapter VIII, 394.

¹⁶ Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 3-19.

¹⁷ St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, book XXII chapter VIII, 394.

individuals.¹⁸ Reformers also held to Augustine's assertion that, while angels or holy persons were able to intercede with God on behalf of the faithful, any miracles channelled through them were truly the work of God and he alone should be venerated.¹⁹ While Augustine did agree that demons or the Devil *could* perform supernatural acts in an attempt to deceive the faithful, he reiterated that true miracles were still very much a part of the Christian experience.²⁰ He also warned against excess scepticism towards the miraculous, and the assumption that all contemporary miracles were the work of malign forces. Indeed, Augustine cites at least two miracles in *The City of God* that he witnessed during his life, neither of which were miracles of conversion.²¹

As in both Augustine's own work and its early modern reception, much of the scholarly discussion of miraculous encounters also centres around their value to the individual experience of faith through conversion or intensification. As Michael Goodich has noted,

The sense of wonder and surprise voiced by both those who experience and witness a miracle remained a *sine qua non* of a credible miracle and was to become the central feature of those miracles which were intended to convert the non-believers or strengthen the faith of penitent Christians.²²

As early as Augustine, however, another layer of meaning was also implicit in the miraculous, one that focused on the effect and meaning of miracles for the whole community of faith, but also on local communities of practice, such as a city, an Order, or a convent. For example, Augustine reported the gathering of faithful to hear miracle stories read aloud.²³ Peter Brown identifies this as a reflection of the contemporary fifth-century Christian longing for an "...intimacy with a protector with whom one could identify as a fellow human being," which helped further the

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 5th edition, 29.

¹⁹ St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, book X, chapter XII, 167.

²⁰ Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 127; St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, book X, chapter XI, 166-7.

²¹ St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, book XXII chapter VIII, 395.

²² Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*, 8.

²³ St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, book XXII chapter VIII, 395.

growing popularity of the cult, and miracles, of saints and martyrs.²⁴ Brown's statement hints at a recognition of the place of miracles in the formation and maintenance of communities of faith and worship without quite making it available to conscious analysis. Brown is a pivotal figure in modern historiography of saints, and their miracles and cults, but his work, tends to discuss the cult of saints in an abstract way and he treats the cult of saints more as a system of symbols rather than a community of believers. The approach of Peter Brown has influenced generations of scholarship on Christian communities and their relationship to holy and miraculous figures.²⁵ In light of the social turn in religious studies of recent decades, we can now contextualise this system of ideas and symbols within the history of living communities of practice and faith.²⁶ This thesis contributes to that work.

When Calvin and his fellow reformers ridiculed miracles as false, and their believers as gullible, they were attacking the "...Catholic culture of miracles," which had come to influence so many parts of the Catholic faith.²⁷ Miracles were generally understood by the Catholic faithful to be the work of God, sometimes acting through saints, angels or other holy persons. The awe inspired by miracles encouraged Catholics to venerate God.²⁸ As scholars like Benedicta Ward have shown however, people's understanding of the miraculous varied greatly and was "intimately associated with the society within which they take place."²⁹ Indeed, the miraculous had a complex relationship

²⁴ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61.

²⁵ See for example, Paul Antony Hayward, "Demystifying the role of sanctity in Western Christendom," in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, eds. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 115-42. Claire Walker

²⁶ See for example, C. Annette Grisé, "The Textual Community of Syon Abbey," *Florilegium* 19, (2002): 149-62.

Claire Walker, "Recusants, Daughters and Sisters in Christ: English Nuns and Their Communities in the Seventeenth Century," in *Women, Identities and Communities in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Stephanie Tarbin and Susan Broomhall (Burlington, VA: Ashgate, 2008) 61-76.

²⁷ Alexandra Walsham, "Miracles and the Counter-Reformation Mission to England," *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 4 (2003): 782.

²⁸ Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*, 8. For more on the Christian understanding of the miraculous see: Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). D. L. D'Avray, *Medieval Religious Rationalities: A Weberian Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000-1215* 2nd edition (Hampshire: Aldershot, 1987). Benedicta Ward, *Signs and Wonders: Saints, Miracles, and Prayer from the 4th Century to the 14th* (Hampshire: Aldershot, 1992).

²⁹ Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 215.

with the fabric of Catholic devotion in sixteenth-century Florence. Miracles were part of the formal canonisation process; they also generated new cults and centres of pilgrimage, and renewed the popularity of old cults and centres.³⁰ Although vernacular attitudes to the miraculous were not without their critics within the Catholic church, veneration of miracle-performing people, objects or images generally emerged from popular practice, before becoming integrated into and regulated by church authorities.³¹ For example, image cults made their way into everyday devotional practices from the late-thirteenth century onwards, reaching a peak in the sixteenth century, which saw the establishment of at least twenty-eight new image cults in Florence alone.³²

Miraculous images, like miracles generally, were of particular relevance to the nuns of Le Murate. As scholars like Megan Holmes have noted, miracle stories traditionally had “...a gendered dimension...with nuns figuring prominently among the protagonists in miracle stories.”³³ Furthermore, half of the newly-founded miraculous image cults in sixteenth-century Florence were in female monastic houses,³⁴ and almost one third of the miracles recorded in Le Murate’s Chronicle were linked to a miraculous image or statue.

In practice, then, miracles had taken on a number of supplementary purposes in Catholic communities beyond those of glorification of God and conversion to the faith, especially for enclosed communities of women. Indeed, as chapters 2 and 3 will show, the miracles recorded in the chronicle of Le Murate highlighted the spiritual health of the nuns and their convent, reaffirmed the faith of its members, challenged and reformed poor behaviour and fostered a sense

³⁰ Abigail Brundin, “Miracles,” in *The Sacred Home in Renaissance Italy*, eds. Abigail Brundin, Deborah Howard and Mary Laven (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 249-287.

³¹ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, 4-6.

³² Megan Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 41; Sandra Cardarelli and Laura Fenelli eds., *Saints, Miracles and the Image: Healing Saints and the Miraculous Images in the Renaissance* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017). Robert Manuria, *Art and Miracle in Renaissance Tuscany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³³ Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, 91.

³⁴ Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, 62. One of the new image cults was built around a bas-relief of the Virgin and child held by Le Murate.

of communal identity and belonging. This broad range of purposes and practices around the miraculous was the target of Protestant critique, but also a focus of regulation by Catholic authorities, who had an ambivalent relationship to local practices, which did not always conform to theologically accepted definitions. They were anxious to denounce those that seemed to bring the Church into disrepute, but could be passively tolerant and sometimes enthusiastically active supporters of miraculous objects or episodes that increased devotion and promoted (or did not undermine) ecclesiastical authority. A challenge facing any record of local miracle traditions was to ensure its appropriately orthodox presentation, and this was a challenge Sister Giustina herself faced.

Among the responses of the Catholic Church to the Protestant critique of the miraculous was a decree at the Council of Trent. While the Council of Trent responded to the Protestant reformation, it also belonged to a much longer tradition of ecumenical councils attempting to regulate the practice of the Catholic faithful and reinforcing Church doctrine.³⁵ It was in this context that it responded to contemporary practices and understandings of the miraculous among the Catholic faithful. The twenty-fifth, and final session (1563), of the Council articulated its most direct response to the criticism of the miraculous. This decree particularly focussed on the veneration of images and relics; this responded to the continued criticism concerning idolatry, but it also defended the miraculous more generally.

By issuing a decree on the invocation, veneration, and relics of saints, and on sacred images, the Catholic Church demonstrated and approved a continued belief in miraculous encounters channelled through saints and other holy persons, and articulated an orthodox approach to discussing and authorising them. The role of saints as mediators between heaven and earth was

³⁵ The Council of Trent was the 19th ecumenical council.

reiterated. The Council stated that offering prayers to saints through their images or relics was a “...legitimate use of images...” by the faithful, and that the purpose of doing so was to ask for a saint to intercede with God on your behalf.³⁶ According to the Council, it was the responsibility of the ecclesiastical authorities to verify any new miracle-working images or relics, in order to regulate the new cults that were appearing around these objects.³⁷ This therefore encouraged the Catholic faithful to continue to pray for miraculous intercessions, albeit with tighter regulations around these practices. It also encouraged bishops and other clergy to be accountable for teaching their flock about miracles in order that they not be deceived by false miracles.³⁸ The Council did, however, caution against placing one’s faith in the images themselves, lest they commit the sin of idolatry.³⁹ This session would prove to be of special importance for the nuns of Le Murate and their fellow religious women in Latin Christendom, as it also famously called for a renewed emphasis on the strict enclosure of nuns and regulars. By association, the Church’s regulation of miracles and its regulation of women were linked.

The Miraculous at Le Murate

The nuns of Le Murate were aware of the teachings of Trent. In 1567 the archbishop of Florence Antonio Altoviti visited the convent of Le Murate. According to the Chronicle itself, the purpose of this archiepiscopal visitation was to verbally convey the decrees of the Council that had significance for the nuns.⁴⁰ In Altoviti’s sermon to the nuns, he urged them to “...continue to observe the holy rule and the Council of Trent, whose chapters pertaining to women religious he would send after visiting all the other monasteries.”⁴¹ After Sister Giustina finished narrating the archbishop’s visit, she recounted that they did indeed receive a copy of the chapters from the

³⁶ *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* 2nd edition, 218.

³⁷ *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* 2nd edition, 220.

³⁸ *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* 2nd edition, 218.

³⁹ *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* 2nd edition, 219.

⁴⁰ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 214.

⁴¹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 214.

archbishop. The only explicit discussion of the decrees of the Council within the chronicle centres on the chapters concerning the enclosure of nuns, however, awareness of other decrees is implicitly present. For instance, the Tridentine attitude to purgatory is demonstrated in a miracle in which a sister experiences a vision of purgatory and the utility of prayer and intercession for souls within it.⁴²

It is also clear from the Chronicle's descriptions of miraculous encounters and their legitimation that the attitudes of Trent concerning the credibility and verifiability of miracles had permeated the convent. For example, according to the Chronicle author, the nuns of Le Murate were blessed by many more miracles than are recounted in the Chronicle, but she chose not to include them all, as it would have been excessive to include every miracle that they experienced.⁴³ This humility was part of female religious practice generally, and the reluctance to discuss the miraculous also reflected the caution advocated by Trent concerning boastful discussion of miracles.

It was not only from the decrees of Trent that the nuns learned how to interpret miracles. Despite the injunction to remain silent, in fact Sister Giustina's own understanding of miraculous events from the convent's past was partly informed by her sisters who directly witnessed miracles. The Chronicle represents itself as part oral history, part documentary analysis of past texts. Le Murate was a wealthy convent with a large library, although no record of its holdings is extant. It also had a large scriptorium, and the nuns were well-known for their scribal activity.⁴⁴ The status and number of its patrons suggests that it had the capacity to stock its shelves with a wide variety of common and useful texts.⁴⁵ Convent libraries in Renaissance Europe often contained a vast array of works including the rule of their Order; copies of letters sent by ecclesiastical authorities,

⁴² This miracle is discussed further in chapter 3.

⁴³ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 78.

⁴⁴ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 288-9.

⁴⁵ Sigmon, "Reading Like a Nun," 87-90.

patrons and benefactors; saints' lives, record books and so on.⁴⁶ There is also evidence that networks of nuns and monks exchanged works to be copied and kept, as a means of preserving and distributing important texts.⁴⁷ The Le Murate library could have contained many texts in which miracles were discussed in learned theological treatises or presented as examples for meditation.

As a Benedictine convent, Le Murate was particularly charged to perform meditative reading and listening as a devotional practice.⁴⁸ The nuns' daily routine involved an appointed reader who was tasked with reading aloud from a chosen text during mealtimes. In such moments, the nuns would have encountered miracle stories from texts such as saints' lives, martyrologies, and perhaps even the convent's own Chronicle. The convent was also active as a centre of manuscript copying. Sister Giustina tells us that the convent had ten desks for copyists in her time.⁴⁹ We can assume they had a significant library of models from which to copy, or access to copies of key texts. The works of great Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Anselm, Abelard and Aquinas may have been among these. Indeed, by the fifteenth century there were at least two manuscript copies of *De Civitate Dei* in female convents in Florence; one at the Franciscan Sant'Onofrio and the other at the Augustinian Santa Lucia de' Camporeggio.⁵⁰ The work of Katherine Giles Arthur has highlighted not only that nunneries held copies of *De Civitate Dei* but, in at least one other instance, produced annotated vernacular copies of the text as well.⁵¹ In any case, the nuns of Le Murate need not have relied solely on access to texts of this nature for models or discussions of the miraculous and its interpretation.

⁴⁶ Sigmon, "Reading Like a Nun," 83.

⁴⁷ Sigmon, "Reading Like a Nun," 83.

⁴⁸ Daniel Marcel La Corte and Douglas J. McMillan eds., *Regular Life: Monastic, Canonical, and Mendicant Rules* 2nd edition (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), 69.

⁴⁹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 141.

⁵⁰ Katherine Giles Arthur, "'Feminizing' Saint Augustine's City of God: Sister Veronica, the library and scriptorium at Santo Spirito, Verona," *Renaissance Studies* (2019): 2.

⁵¹ Arthur, "'Feminizing' Saint Augustine's City of God," 1-24.

For the nuns of Le Murate, their mental landscape of the miraculous was founded not only on formal theories, like that of Augustine, but also derived from a range of experience and exposure to models and texts. The framework for the nuns' understanding of miracles was influenced by the Bible, as well as by important theologians, preachers, canon lawyers and statements of Catholic doctrine. Tales of the intervention of God, the Virgin, Jesus, saints and angels also appeared in many other texts. Hagiographies, sermons, miracle collections, the writings of mystics, annals, chronicles and letters were among the sources of miraculous accounts that the nuns would have had access to. Miracles appeared visually in many forms including as paintings, sculptures, as part of altarpieces, and in manuscripts illustrations, and the convent had its own miracle-working statue of the Madonna.⁵² Embedded within these many influences were both of the layers of meaning inherent in Augustine's original formulation of the miraculous. Like many Florentines, Le Murate nuns were exposed to meanings of the miraculous that had relevance for both individual conversion and faith, and the formation, cohesion and meaning of Christian community. They even had a varied vocabulary for discussing it. Not all stories use the word *miracolo* despite clear indications that Sister Giustina is narrating a miracle story. It seems that nuns did not have to necessarily name something as a miracle, for it to fit within the definition of *miracolo*. The linguistic ambiguity itself implies a richer and more complex understanding of what constituted a miracle at Le Murate than contemporary orthodox Catholic teaching might appear to suggest.

The genre of text, verbal or written, or the visual representation in which miracles appeared, impacted the ways in which the wonders were understood. As Zakovich highlights, "it appears that each genre that describes miracles deserves its own definition,"⁵³ and although Zakovich is referring here to biblical miracles and different literary genres such as fantasy, the same argument should be applied to the texts being produced during the medieval and Renaissance periods. A

⁵² Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 232-8.

⁵³ Zakovich, *The Concept of the Miracle in the Bible*, 9.

miracle appearing in a convent Chronicle had a different purpose, and audience, than one recorded taking place at a saint's shrine or described in sermon or written in a petition for canonisation. All these records of miracles helped to inform the nuns' conceptualisation. Therefore, I will now briefly explore some of the key genres through which nuns of Le Murate would have been exposed to the various tropes, functions and meanings of miracle stories.

Sources for the Miraculous in the Sixteenth Century

The Bible, and in particular the Gospels, are the original source for miracle stories in the Christian tradition and they offer templates for how to understand and recognise divine intervention. Even before entering a monastic life, Christian lay people in the medieval and early modern periods would have been exposed to the miracles of the Gospels through textual, visual, and oral representations. This connection would have been strengthened upon joining a monastic community, as much of their time was devoted to engagement with, and meditation upon, the Scriptures and other liturgical texts.⁵⁴ There are therefore parallels between biblical miracles and some miraculous episodes recorded in the Le Murate Chronicle. For instance, Sister Colomba performs a number of miracles during her life, some of which share similarities with the feeding the multitudes miracles in the Gospels.

In the feeding the multitudes miracles, Jesus provides food for a crowd of thousands by looking to heaven, and then dividing loaves of bread and fish. From the number of loaves and fish, there should not have been enough to feed everyone, but the gospels report that there was food left over after it had been distributed to the gathered people.⁵⁵ In one of the miracles performed by Sister Colomba, a pan of food is broken and only a small amount of the meal is able to be saved. Sister Colomba makes the sign of the cross above the remaining food, and it “multiplied so that

⁵⁴ Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life 1450-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 3-4.

⁵⁵ The ‘Feeding of the 5,000’ appears in Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9:12-17 and John 6:1-14. The ‘Feeding of the 4,000’ appears in Matthew 15:32-39 and Mark 8:1-9.

there was plenty of food and some left over.⁵⁶ This story closely mirrors the feeding the multitudes miracles, in the gospel miracles, Jesus looked to heaven before breaking the bread and fish and in the Chronicle miracle Sister Colomba made the sign of the cross before miraculously producing more food. In both cases there was enough to satisfy everyone, with food left over. Parallels to miracles in the Gospels recur frequently throughout medieval and early modern religious texts, such as hagiographies, miracle collections at shrines and so on.⁵⁷ This kind of miracle was therefore easily recognisable by communities of Christians, and the nuns of Le Murate would have been aware of the parallels in the story of Sister Colomba and the miracles of Jesus.⁵⁸

The nuns of Le Murate would have been familiar with the miracles of the Bible, not just from within the text itself, but also in visual representations. Biblical miracles were depicted in artworks in private residences, public spaces and in religious buildings. Prior to convent life, the nuns would already have been familiar with visual representations of miracles, particularly as many of the women came from wealthy families of Florence and greater Tuscany, and therefore would have been exposed to the magnificence of the visual culture of early modern Florence.⁵⁹ Upon entering the convent, the nuns would further be exposed to works illustrating key Christian stories and miracles, including an altarpiece showing the Annunciation.⁶⁰ There may have been other works specifically illustrating miracles, as these kinds of illustrations were common in other convent and monastic spaces in Florence.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 104.

⁵⁷ Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*, 10-11.

⁵⁸ I will return to the miracles of Sister Colomba, and their additional layers of meaning, in chapter 3.

⁵⁹ For more on the visual culture of Renaissance Florence see, Jill Burke, *Changing Patrons: Social Identity and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Florence* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2004). George Bent, *Public Painting and Visual Culture in Early Republican Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Megan Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁶⁰ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 74

⁶¹ See, Anabel Thomas, *Art and Piety in the Female Religious Communities of Renaissance Italy: Iconography, Space, and the Religious Woman's Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Alongside visual depictions of historical miracles, liturgical objects and images could also perform miracles. From the late thirteenth century onwards, images which performed miracles began to figure centrally in devotional practice in Florence.⁶² These miraculous images were found in convents, both male and female, in church frescoes, altar paintings and statues, and at saints' shrines. Visual culture was an important part of religious practice for a number of reasons, not least because it was accessible to almost anyone, even if they were not literate, in a similar way to preaching.⁶³ The increase in the number of recorded miraculous images in Florence proved to be particularly relevant for female religious houses in the sixteenth century because "...half of the newly venerated miraculous images were located in nunneries."⁶⁴ The Le Murate convent had at least four miracle working objects in their possession; a painting of the Virgin, a bas-relief of the Virgin and child, a tabernacle depicting Saint Michael and a crucifix.⁶⁵ For the nuns of Le Murate, the miraculous was central to their religious lives, and even before they entered the cloister, they were surrounded by visual representations of divine intervention.

Sermons frequently included miracles, whether from sources like the Gospels, the lives of saints or from collections of *exempla*. The nuns of Le Murate were exposed to sermons in their religious life, and they were one of the ways which helped the women to learn the habit of how to interpret the miraculous. As the Chronicle recounts, the nuns heard sermons from a number of Florentine archbishops, including Antoninus (r. 1446-59) and Antonio Altoviti (r. 1548-73).⁶⁶ One of the purposes of miracles in sermons was to help explain how a story should be interpreted, and how that interpretation should inform lived Christian practice.⁶⁷ For example, sermons celebrating newly canonised saints tended to emphasise the "moral virtues" of the saint which inspired the

⁶² Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, 39.

⁶³ Peter Howard, "Preaching Magnificence in Renaissance Florence," *Renaissance Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2008): 326.

⁶⁴ Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, 62.

⁶⁵ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 58, 59, 92-5, 97-8, 99-102, 106, 152-4, 198-200, 232-3, 237-9, 326-7.

⁶⁶ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 213.

⁶⁷ There were instances in which miracles were the central focus of sermons, such as with sermons exploring the miracle of the Eucharist.

miracle they experienced or performed, rather than focussing on the miracle itself.⁶⁸ This offered a model of behaviour for the Christian faithful to emulate, even if the ultimate goal was not for every person to become a saint. As I will argue further in chapter 3, miracles in the convent Chronicle were used for a similar purpose, that is, to signify when a particular virtue should, or should not, be cultivated.

Martyrologies have long been part of female, and male, monastic libraries, both as stand-alone texts or as part of compilations, such as in chapter books.⁶⁹ In some convents and monasteries, martyrologies were part of a group of liturgical texts which were read aloud during mealtimes.⁷⁰ These martyrologies often differed in which saints and martyrs they celebrated, depending on the location of the convent or monastery, and to which order it belonged. They include accounts of their lives and deaths, organised as a calendar indicating on which day to celebrate the feast of that holy person. The accounts often included references to the miracles associated with the martyr or saint. In January 1584 Pope Gregory XIII announced that the newly revised Roman Martyrology, commissioned in 1580 and first published in 1583, would replace all previous works as the official martyrology for the Catholic Church.⁷¹ The edition commissioned by Gregory was based on a martyrology composed in the ninth century by the Benedictine monk Usuard.⁷² This revision of the text, and creation of a single martyrology designed to be used by all in the Catholic Church, was a part of the “systematic centralisation campaign” of liturgical reforms happening the wake of the Council of Trent.⁷³ At least as early as 1598, when the Chronicle was completed, the nuns of

⁶⁸ Goodich, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 31.

⁶⁹ Eric Palazzo, *A History of Liturgical Books from the Beginning to the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 163. Teresa Webber, “Reading in the Refectory at Reading in the Twelfth Century,” *Reading Medieval Studies* XLII, (2016): 63.

⁷⁰ Webber, “Reading in the Refectory,” 63-4.

⁷¹ Gabriele Marino, “Approaching the *Martyrologium Romanum*. A semiotic perspective,” *Lexia Rivista di Semiotica* 31-2, (June 2018): 185.

⁷² James F. White, *Roman Catholic Worship: Trent to Today*, 2nd edition, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003), 6.

⁷³ Marino, “Approaching the *Martyrologium Romanum*. A semiotic perspective,” 183.

Le Murate had access to a copy of the Roman Martyrology, as it is named in the closing letter of the Chronicle.

Throughout the Roman Martyrology living virtuously is frequently connected to a saint or martyr's ability to perform miracles. Saint Benedict's entry in the Martyrology, for example, describes him as a "man of great vertue...whose life was renowned for sanctity, and miracles."⁷⁴ Saint Eugendus' "lyfe shined with virtues and miracles,"⁷⁵ Saint Maurus was "renowned for vertues and miracles,"⁷⁶ and Saint Amatus was "greatly renowned for the virtue of abstinence and miracles."⁷⁷ These are just a few examples of the consistent connection made between virtue and miracle in the Martyrology. While martyrologies are certainly not the only texts which highlight the link between living virtuously and the miraculous, we know that the nuns of Le Murate had access to the Roman Martyrology, and possibly other martyrologies, which would have informed the way they understood the miraculous. The link between virtue and miracle is evident throughout the Chronicle text. Miracles are often used as signs of confirmation that a nun is on the right path towards salvation, or alternatively, they are used to show a nun how to return to a virtuous way of living. The relationship between virtue and miracles in the Chronicle will be discussed in chapter 3.

The extraordinary lives of saints were recorded in hagiographies in far more detail than in texts like martyrologies. Hagiographical texts detailed the individual saint's life, virtuous nature and the miracles they performed, both alive and posthumously. In conjunction with the account of the life and miracles of a particular saint or would-be saint, hagiographies also reflected the "...societies'

⁷⁴ Usuard, *The Roman Martyrologe according to the reformed calendar faithfully translated out of Latin into English*, ed. John Wilson, trans. George Keynes (Cambridge: The English College Press, 1627), 87, https://monash.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/MON:au_everything:catau51412129870001751.

⁷⁵ Usuard, *The Roman Martyrologe*, ed. John Wilson, trans. George Keynes, 2.

⁷⁶ Usuard, *The Roman Martyrologe*, ed. John Wilson, trans. George Keynes, 251.

⁷⁷ Usuard, *The Roman Martyrologe*, ed. John Wilson, trans. George Keynes, 164.

ideal types” at a particular point in time.⁷⁸ While saints’ lives may not necessarily have been instructional – in that not every Catholic could become a saint – they did however offer modes of behaviour which resulted in divine intervention in the form of miracles and could eventuate in the canonisation of an individual. As nuns and monks so often acted as scribes and copyists for these types of texts, and Le Murate was well-known for its scribal activity, the nuns of Le Murate would have been acquainted with a large range of saints’ lives.

Indeed, after the narration of a miracle story involving a nuns’ journey to, and return from, purgatory, Sister Giustina refers her reader to a specific collection of local Tuscan saints’ lives. *The Lives of the Saints and Blesseds of Tuscany*, written by Camaldolese abbot Don Silvano Razzi (c. 1527-1611/3) in the later decades of the sixteenth century, is one of the few texts specifically named in the Chronicle. The text is written largely in the vernacular Italian, with some passages in Latin. In his introduction to the book Razzi, while not criticising the Roman Martyrology, suggests that even in that comprehensive text, the details of the lives of some saints are lacking.⁷⁹ Drawing from, and expanding upon, the Roman Martyrology and other textual and oral sources, Razzi records the lives, miracles, and deaths, of holy persons, local to the Tuscany region.⁸⁰

Saint Galgano is one such saint for whom Razzi provides a more detailed narration of the saint’s life. Galgano Guidotti was born in Chiusdino in modern day Siena, in 1148 and died in 1181. He experienced visions of Saint Michael for years which finally culminated in his decision to live an eremitic life in c.1180, a year before his death. Saint Galgano is significant for the nuns of Le Murate, as he features in a miraculous episode experienced by a nun named Sister Antonina. In

⁷⁸ Patrick Geary, “Saints, Scholars, and Society: The Elusive Goal,” in *Saints: Studies in Hagiography*, ed. Sandro Sticca (Binghamton NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1996), 3.

⁷⁹ e finalmente rimane a dirsi che in quello libro mancano le vite d’alcuni santi, eziandio nominati dal Martirologio Romano... Silvano Razzi, *Vite de Santi e Beati Toscani* (Florence: Nella stamperia de Sermatelli, 1627), xii, <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=DA87TPtEDtC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

⁸⁰ Razzi also refers to the History of Florence written by Villani. Razzi, *Vite de Santi e Beati*, 16.

this episode, Sister Antonia pleads with Saint Galgano to intervene on her behalf so that her soul may be returned to her body, and that she may redeem herself for her lack of virtue and poor behaviour she had been displaying in the convent.⁸¹ Sister Giustina recommends the *Lives* to any reader who may want to know more about Saint Galgano's life, and she specifically mentions his conversion inspired by his visions of Saint Michael. Saint Michael too had a special connection with the convent, as he was the patron saint of Le Murate. He features in the Chronicle in a miraculous vision in which he is seen hovering above the convent in full armor protecting the women during a time when Florence was "occupied by the Spanish," a possible reference to the 1529-30 Siege of Florence.⁸²

In naming *The Lives of the Saints and Blesseds of Tuscany* and its author so explicitly, Sister Giustina is encouraging her sisters to acquaint themselves with the lives, and miracles, of their other local saints, as detailed in Razzi's two-volume work. For Sister Giustina to recommend that her audience, that is the nuns reading the Chronicle, read the *Lives* suggests that the convent had a copy of the work in its library. Razzi, as an abbot and prolific writer, was a respected authority on the lives of saints, having already written a number of works before compiling the *Lives*, including a biography of Saint Antoninus of Florence c.1589.⁸³ This life of Antoninus was edited and included in the *Lives*.⁸⁴ In reading the *Lives*, the nuns would be familiarising themselves with works that informed Razzi's writing, such as the Roman Martyrology or Giovanni Villani's history of Florence, two texts that Razzi explicitly makes reference to. In this way, the nuns are participating in "polytextual reading" in which the reading of one text, becomes "a process of reading multiple

⁸¹ This miracle story is discussed in depth in chapter 3, 69-75.

⁸² Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 59.

⁸³ Sally J. Cornelison, *Art and the Relic Cult of St. Antoninus in Renaissance Florence*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 32-3.

⁸⁴ Cornelison, *Art and the Relic Cult of St. Antoninus in Renaissance Florence*, 33.

‘virtual’ texts.”⁸⁵ Therefore the nuns’ encountering miracles in Razzi’s text are also interacting indirectly with a number of other textual sources for the miraculous.

Conclusion

By the sixteenth century, the existence and recognition of miracles was contested by both Protestant and Catholic communities. The contentious nature of miracles was clear in the works of contemporary authors like Calvin, who argued that miracles were primarily for the glorification of God, and that those promoting miracles for other purposes were “false prophets.”⁸⁶ However, since as early as Augustine, there have been, at least implicitly, other legitimate purposes for the miraculous. The function of miracles in the Chronicle was considerably more complex than the affirmation of belief, or the praise of God, though it did also serve these purposes. None of the existing medieval or early modern theories of the miraculous, or the current historiography, adequately explains the functions that miracles served in this Chronicle, or why Sister Giustina selected and arranged them as she did. In the following chapters, I will argue that the most important functions of the miraculous in the Chronicle were to form and confirm a communal identity and to use the power of exemplarity to teach the habits and virtues of a proper Le Murate nun.

⁸⁵ Sylvia Huot, “Polytextual Reading: The Meditative Reading of Real and Metaphorical Books,” in *Orality and Literacy in the Middle Ages: Essays on a Conjunction and its Consequences in Honour of D.H. Green*, ed. Mark Chinca and Christopher Young (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 203.

⁸⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 5th edition, 28.

Chapter 2: Miracles and the Shaping of a Textual Community

Sometime shortly after 1413, an anonymous young girl from the Le Murate community miraculously learned to read. She subsequently taught her sisters, “so that in a short time they celebrated the Offices perfectly.”¹ This moment marked a fundamental change in the nature of the women’s community. They had moved from an unregularised group of holy women to a convent of professed Benedictine nuns, able to celebrate the canonical offices as required. They also moved from an orally constituted group to a textual community. Both of these changes would be foundational to their identity thereafter. As the Chronicle states, having become literate, the community was founded “principally with the holy virtue of internal and external obedience and humility, a rigorous way of life, and infinite mortification of the flesh.”²

In this chapter, I will argue that one of the Chronicle’s important purposes was to articulate and promote the identity laid down at this foundational moment, and further developed during the reign of Abbess Scolastica (r. 1439-75).³ The Chronicle served to bind a textual community similar to that first described by Brian Stock. His interest in the figure of the charismatic interpreter as the centre of such communities meant that he never fully developed a theory of how texts themselves generated and were intended to generate community identities.⁴ In this chapter, I examine the

¹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 53.

² Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 53.

³ As Brubaker and Cooper have shown, identity is used by scholars in a number of diverse, and sometimes contradictory, ways. They argue that, while problematic, identity can still be a useful conceptual and explanatory term. One of the uses Brubaker and Cooper note is as a “collective phenomenon, ‘identity’ denotes a fundamental and consequential *sameness* among members of a group or category... This sameness is expected to manifest itself in solidarity, in shared dispositions or consciousness, or in collective action.” This notion of a group feeling a sense of sameness is something being promoted in the Chronicle, inasmuch as the text attempts to connect the nuns to a shared history and throughout tries to provide models of behaviour for the nuns to follow. See, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1-47.

⁴ Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the 11th and 12th Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 90.

mechanism by which the Chronicle served this purpose, and the place of miracles within it for the community.

Textual Communities

Textual communities, as outlined by Brian Stock, are "...microsocieties organized around the common understanding of a script."⁵ Stock's concept was developed in a period when the debate about the degree of connection between literacy and orality was occupying scholars of pre-modern society.⁶ Stock argued that for a textual community to exist there needed to be (at least) one literate member, who could facilitate the interpretation and oral communication of text to the non-literate members.⁷ By a "process of absorption and reflection" the behaviour of the individual members of the group was altered, creating a more cohesive community with a shared set of values.⁸ Stock's earlier work *The Implications of Literacy* examined a number of reform and heretical movements in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. He focused on groups who "resorted to textual precedents for justifying deviations from... ecclesiastical norms."⁹

In his later work *Listening for the Text*, Stock turned his attention to the Waldensians, a Christian sect founded in 1173 and declared heretical by 1215. As a consequence of his concern with the interaction between literacy and orality, Stock's interest was primarily in the group's founder and textual interpreter, Peter Waldo, rather than the text itself, or its precise interpretation. Similarly, in his exposition of reform movements, Stock explored the "interaction between literacy and

⁵ Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 23. Stock first introduced the concept of textual communities in Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the 11th and 12th Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 90.

⁶ See, Dennis H. Green, *Medieval Listening and Reading: The Primary Reception of German Literature 800-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 3 (1963): 304-45; Ruth H. Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1998).

⁷ Stock, *Listening for the Text*, 23.

⁸ Stock, *Listening for the Text*, 23.

⁹ Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, 88.

group experience,” rather than the text and its interpretation.¹⁰ In a model where the “common understanding of a script” is what defines the community as textual, Stock neither explained what shared interpretation of the scriptures the Waldensians agreed upon, nor how it affected their behaviour and sense of community. Indeed, Stock argued that what actually defines the community was not their interpretation of the scriptures, but how they arrived at that interpretation through a practice of public preaching.¹¹ He further argued that Waldo’s followers “modelled their behaviour on his”, rather than on an agreed textual interpretation, as the textual community model ostensibly outlines.¹² As Stock’s emphasis is often on the role of interpreter, he thus leaves several questions unanswered, including the mechanism by which a text creates a sense of communal identity.

Many scholars of the medieval and early modern periods have been stimulated by Stock’s concept of a textual community. However, Stock’s model has been applied across different times and places, without an interrogation of how it might need to be adapted, or whether it was a suitable model for a specific community. It seems that, for some scholars, the only necessary criterion for a textual community is that a community has a connection to a text(s). The label of textual community is therefore often applied without fully interrogating the original model, and exploring how, or if, the community in question fits within it. “Textual community” is therefore often a nominal rather than analytical category.

Bedos-Rezak, for example, was an early adopter of Stock’s textual community model and was interested in the coexistence of, and interrelationship between, text and oral communication in the

¹⁰ Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, 151.

¹¹ Stock, *Listening for the Text*, 27.

¹² Stock was somewhat more explicit in placing emphasis on the role of the interpreter over the interpretation of the text itself in his earlier work. See, Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 522.

formation of cities in Northern France.¹³ Her concern was the connection between civic identity and civic records, especially in the shift from ecclesiastical to lay production contexts. She did not examine how the content or interpretation of these texts might be constructive of cities' identities. Rather, she focused on how written records captured and reflected those identities as they developed. Ketelaar, like Bedos-Rezak, attempted to apply Stock's theory to a city, in this case to fifteenth century Ghent. Ketelaar was interested in how texts were shared orally in order to build and maintain a sense of shared identity, through the interpreter-audience relationship, rather than the contents and interpretation of text.¹⁴ However, unlike Stock, both Bedos-Rezak and Ketelaar examined texts that were generated by the communities themselves. Neither Bedos-Rezak nor Ketelaar interrogated the appropriateness of Stock's model for their case studies, although Ketelaar admitted "it is perhaps bold" to use Stock's model on fifteenth century Ghent. Nonetheless, he defended himself by citing Bedos-Rezak as having previously applied it to a context outside Stock's original case studies, before continuing with his analysis.¹⁵

Scholars such as Emma Cayley have argued that while useful, Stock's model has limitations outside the context he describes, particularly in communities which generate their own identity-forming texts.¹⁶ Unlike Bedos-Rezak and Ketelaar, Cayley attempted explicitly to adjust Stock's model to the context to which she was applying it. She examined a group of humanists in late fourteenth and early fifteenth century France, and argued that their sense of community cohesion was generated both from an interpretation of the *Querelle de la Rose*, but also from an epistolary debate around that interpretation.¹⁷ Cayley posited that "readers of the same text who bring the same

¹³ Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, "Civic Liturgies and Urban Records in Northern France, 1100-1400," in *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, eds. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Kathryn L. Reyerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 34-55.

¹⁴ Eric Ketelaar, "Records Out and Archives In: Early Modern Cities as Creators of Records and as Communities of Archives," *Archival Science* 10, no. 3 (2010): 202.

¹⁵ Ketelaar, "Records Out and Archives In," 202.

¹⁶ Emma J. Cayley, "'Tu recites, je replique; et quant nous avons fait et fait, tout ne vault riens': Explorations of a Debating Climate in Early Humanist France," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 48, (2004): 37.

¹⁷ Cayley, "'Tu recites, je replique,'" 37.

interpretative strategies” to a particular text are part of the same community, while those who use different strategies belong to a different community.¹⁸ Cayley’s use of Stock is thus more theoretically engaged with the question of what ‘textual community’ can do, and what it might mean for scholars. What she, Bedos-Rezak and Ketelaar do not address, however, is whether these ‘communities’ actually understood themselves as such.

As a critical component of ‘textual community’, it is important to articulate the nature of the community being examined. Scholars such as Miri Rubin, John H. Arnold, David G. Shaw, and Claire Walker have argued that the concept of community, and what ‘makes’ a community, needs to be interrogated closely.¹⁹ Arnold suggested that one important consideration is the extent to which members of a community are “conscious of their collective identity.”²⁰ In both Bedos-Rezak and Ketelaar’s work, cities in which individuals live within close proximity to one another are treated as communities. But the extent to which city inhabitants understood themselves as a community, having a shared sense of identity, is unclear.²¹ It is similarly unclear whether Cayley’s French humanists understood themselves as a community. Furthermore, in the case of Stock’s examination of heretical groups, there is now scholarly dispute over whether heretics such as the Waldensians understood themselves as a group in the way that their detractors did.²² Stock’s case study of the Waldensians and other heretical groups, and the work of Bedos-Rezak and Ketelaar, which admittedly deals with very different contexts, applied the concept of textual community to groups which do not evidently have self-awareness as a community. This must necessarily generate

¹⁸ Cayley, “Tu recites, je replique,” 56.

¹⁹ Miri Rubin, “Small Groups: Identity and Solidarity in the Late Middle Ages,” in *Enterprise and Individuals in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Jennifer Kermode (Gloucester: Sutton, 1991), 134. John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 105-42. David G. Shaw, *The Creation of a Community: The City of Wells in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Claire Walker, “Recusants, Daughters and Sisters in Christ: English Nuns and their Communities in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Women, Identities and Communities in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Stephanie Tarbin and Susan Broomhall (Burlington, VA: Ashgate, 2008), 62-63.

²⁰ Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 106.

²¹ For more on the concept of communal identity see, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1-47.

²² See for example, Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 106.

different answers to the question of the relationship between *text* and *community* from cases in which the community's self-awareness of its identity is clear.

Just as the type of community influences the nature of the textual community, so too must the nature of the textual community vary depending on the text in question. In Stock's formulation of the model when used the Waldensians as his case study, he described them as organising themselves around an understanding of Scripture. This was a text neither unique to, nor generated by, their community. Stock does not probe what this might mean for the relationship between the Waldensians as a community and the text which he posits as the centre of their identity. In the studies of Bedos-Rezak and Ketelaar cited above, the texts of interest are civic records generated as a by-product of civic activities, rather than for the purpose of creating a shared identity. The extent to which the record generating activities explored by Bedos-Rezak, in particular, affected or merely accidentally reflected a communal identity is in question. In Ketelaar's study of Ghent civic records, he attempted to address this by examining the performance of these records by city authorities. However, none of these studies directly probes the question of how the nature or content of the texts they examine might be factors in the nature of the textual communities they are held to produce.

Monastic communities, by contrast, offer examples in which the nature of communities and texts are much more clearly delineated. They can therefore confidently be interrogated as textual communities, particularly in communities where they generated their own identity-forming texts. A monastic community, like Le Murate, was one which people chose to join, and in doing so deliberately took on a new and fundamentally different identity. Furthermore, as we have seen, monastic communities in the medieval and early modern periods belonged to a long-standing

textual tradition that was “grounded in Scripture, exegesis and liturgy.”²³ In addition to such formal textual foundations, many communities also produced their own texts which constructed and reinforced their unique identities. In her case study of Syon Abbey, a double monastery in England founded in the fifteenth century, Catherine Annette Grisé employed Stock’s model to examine the relationship between text and the female religious community who resided there.²⁴ Grisé is predominantly interested in the differences in ceremonial practice, recorded within the official Bridgettine Rule and the *Syon Additions for the Sisters* which was unique to the community. The *Additions* was written soon after the community’s foundation and became part of a young woman’s entrance to the monastery. The “novices heard the rule and the statutes that would govern them at Syon,” upon entrance and swore to uphold the values recorded in those texts.²⁵ In Grisé’s view, this practice both sealed a novice’s “obedience to the written word” while also showing them what it meant to become a Syon nun, through the representation of a unique identity carefully constructed in the written word.²⁶

Le Murate shares similarities with Syon Abbey; it is a female monastic community that produces its own identity forming text, the Chronicle. Like Syon Abbey, we can confidently consider Le Murate a textual community given its self-awareness as a community, and its particular relationship to its Chronicle. As such, the framework of textual community is a useful tool with which to ask questions about how a text was designed to shape a community and what kind of community it tried to shape by doing so. Nevertheless, we cannot assume that the mechanisms by which the Chronicle of Le Murate operated as a text in relation to its textual community were identical with that underpinning the *Additions* as a text for the Syon Abbey nuns. In what remains of the chapter,

²³ Barbara Newman, “The Visionary Texts and Visual Worlds of Religious Women,” in *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, eds. Jeffery F. Hamburger and Susan Marti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 151.

²⁴ Grisé, “The Textual Community of Syon Abbey,” 149-62.

²⁵ Grisé, “The Textual Community of Syon Abbey,” 151.

²⁶ Grisé, “The Textual Community of Syon Abbey,” 152.

I consider how the Le Murate Chronicle was intended to construct the convent as a textual community. I argue that miracles function as one of the key mechanisms by which the text connects to, and seeks to shape, its community and the community's identity.

Becoming Benedictine

The Chronicle records several foundational miracles which took place early in the development of the community and were central to its construction of Le Murate's identity.²⁷ These miracles confirm that the early decisions of the community which would shape their devotional practices, such as adopting the Rule of St Benedict, moving to a larger site on via Ghibellina, and completing construction of their church, were divinely approved. These decisions were intrinsically linked specifically to the identity the community developed after they became Benedictine nuns in 1413, having initially been founded in 1390. These early instances of divine intervention during the foundation of the convent are one of the ways that the Chronicle establishes itself as a uniquely identity-forming text for this textual community.

The Chronicle acknowledges the existence of the community of women who were committed to a religious life before they adopted the Rule. The miracle with which I began this chapter is not the opening of the Chronicle. However, it is the first miracle in the text, recounted in chapter 2. Prior to the miracle of literacy, the Chronicle recounts how the founders initially adopted a form of religious life similar to that of beguines. They lived a life of seclusion between 1390 and 1413, and their holy intention is noted and commended. Nevertheless, nothing of miraculous significance is reported in the Chronicle in the period before the women became Benedictines.

²⁷ Miracles signifying important moments of foundation are not unique to the Le Murate community. For example, in the convent chronicle of Corpus Domini, a Venetian convent founded in the fourteenth century, the convent's foundress Sister Lucia Tiepolo experiences a miraculous vision in which Jesus tells her she must found a new convent, and that the convent will be divinely protected. See, Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: The Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395-1436*, ed. trans. Daniel Bornstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 26-7.

According to the Chronicle, when the women adopted the Rule, they needed one of their girls to learn to read, so they could perform the liturgy after they became regular nuns. As none of the original seven women were literate, they intended to have their chaplain teach one of them to read and write. That person would then instruct her sisters. The chronicle recounts,

... they had a girl, who had come to them at age four, learn to read. Their chaplain taught her from the altar, and she miraculously learned at the grate where they heard Mass, something that seemed impossible because of the difficulty of understanding the letters from there.²⁸

After this initial miracle, the Chronicle recounts a tradition of miraculous encounters which continued throughout the convent's history.²⁹

What is striking about the first miracle in the Chronicle, is that the encounter seems to be a fairly banal moment which is interpreted and presented as divine intervention. The Chronicle's awareness that the episode was also open to other interpretations is evident from the effort that it goes to in order to explain why it should be read as miraculous. The unnamed nun is described as being taught to read by the convent's chaplain. However, the Chronicle also tells us that given the physical distance between the two, her success in becoming literate was miraculous. As it coincided with the nuns' decision to become a regular community, the miracle seems to have been received as a sign of the rightness of this significant decision. As Peter Harrison has discussed, in the early modern period particularly, miracles were often understood as a form of evidence highlighting when a correct choice has been made, in just this way.³⁰ For the audience of the convent Chronicle in the sixteenth century, this miracle signified the first time the nuns received divine approval. Significantly, this initial miraculous endorsement was associated with the decision to become a

²⁸ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 53.

²⁹ This story in which the nun learns to read is recounted by Kate Lowe in a discussion about cultural production and creativity in convents. She argues that becoming a regularised community forced the nuns to become literate, which in turn allowed them to interact with, and produce, texts. The texts they produced, like the Chronicle, were an expression of the convent's unique identity. In recounting this story, Lowe does not refer to the miraculous episode at its centre. See, Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 263.

³⁰ Harrison, "Miracles, Early Modern Science, and Rational Religion," 499.

Benedictine women's community. It established a pattern by which the Chronicle continued thereafter to associate momentous decisions and developments that affected the community's identity with miracles.

The purpose of this first miracle as confirming the decision to become Benedictine is made clearer by the repeated structure of stories early in the Chronicle. In the years before the women became regularised, a young, betrothed woman joined the community. She was later she was removed by her fiancé against her will. As the Chronicle tells us, although the women sought legal intervention to keep their colleague, they were offered no legal protections because they were not yet a regular community. This was the catalyst for the decision to adopt the Rule of St Benedict and, immediately afterwards, they experienced the first miracle of literacy. Shortly after this, in the same chapter as the adoption of the Rule and literacy miracle, the Chronicle recounts a reverend father at San Miniato whose prayers are interrupted by a vision of light hovering above the nuns' dwelling. Following the light down to the bridge, the reverend father is confronted with a "disheveled young boy" who is attempting to enter the convent but is being miraculously prevented from doing so.³¹ In many ways, this miracle mirrors the tale in which the woman is "violently forced to leave" by her fiancé, but with one crucial difference: this man is unable to enter their dwelling.³² The structure of the Chronicle, placing these two tales together separated by the decision to become Benedictine, demonstrates how a physical and spiritual risk that previously could not be averted, is now miraculously prevented. It is clear that the decision to become Benedictine offered the women protection that they did not previously have, and reinforced that it was the right direction for the women to make.

³¹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 54.

³² Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 52-3.

There is a second miracle of protection in which, once again, a man is prevented from entering the convent grounds. In this tale, a certain Mariano had remained in the convent's church when his prayers, like the reverend father from San Miniato, were interrupted by another man trying to, and being miraculously prevented from, entering the convent. This miracle shares many similarities with the first miracle of protection; a devout man's prayers are interrupted by a miracle preventing an undesirable man entering the convent. This second miracle of protection is the closing tale in the chapter which also narrates the adoption of the Rule, the literacy miracle and the first miracle of protection. The two protection miracles, narrated so closely together, are clearly a reflection of the earlier story in which the woman's fiancé was able to violate the boundaries of the community and remove one of their members. In both cases, after the women adopt the Rule, the boundaries of the convent are divinely protected.

The Chronicle, while grouping these tales together, tells its reader that the second story actually took place many years later, in 1424, after the nuns had moved from their original location to via Ghibellina. In a text which is for the most part chronological, the placement of these miracles together indicates a deliberate decision by the Chronicle author. Taking this episode out of its chronological context is likely intended to reconfirm that the adoption of the Rule, which was already divinely approved in the literacy miracle, was the right decision by the community. That the two protection miracles took place at different dwellings suggests that no matter the community's location, the women would always be protected. It further implies that both these moments – the original adoption of the Rule and subsequent move – were significant moments of foundation and re-foundation of the convent's identity, within the text. These early miracles, recorded in a careful and deliberate structure, offer the women a new divinely approved identity. The position of these foundational decisions, and the miracles embedded within them, establish the framework through which the nuns are meant to encounter the rest of what follows in the text. It also suggests that these decisions were supposed to shape the relationship to the text of

the nuns who encountered the text in the sixteenth century and beyond. The careful structure of the miracles constitutes a core element of the mechanism by which the Chronicle positions itself as a foundational identity text for the community of Le Murate.

An Identity for a Growing Community

There are conspicuous concentrations of the miraculous in certain periods of the convent's development within the Chronicle. Following the early miracles associated with the adoption of the Rule of Saint Benedict, the next concentration of miracles occurs during the reign of Abbess Scolastica Rondinelli (r.1439-75), a period that saw a large number of women joining the convent.³³ Rondinelli's reign as abbess lasted 36 years until her death in 1475 and was the longest in the convent's history at the time the Chronicle was completed in 1598. The Chronicle states that her election to the position of abbess was, in part, "because the nuns knew her to be a woman of great spirit, [and so] they resolved to give her the duty of the abbacy."³⁴

As Kate Lowe has argued, the foundation of Le Murate took place in a number of stages, and she points to two key moments of foundation.³⁵ The first was in the early years between 1390-6 when Apollonia settled on the Rubaconte Bridge, and was joined by another woman named Agata, and the second in 1413 when they adopted the Rule of St Benedict, as the Chronicle signaled through miraculous intervention, noted above. As well, it seems clear that the Chronicle establishes Scolastica as a re-foundation figure, whose reign was fundamental to the formation of the ideal identity of Le Murate nuns within the sixteenth century community. One of the ways the Chronicle places Scolastica in this role, is by recounting miracles which occur at significant moments during

³³ See for example, Kate J. P. Lowe, "Female Strategies for Success in a Male-ordered World: The Benedictine Convent of Le Murate in Florence in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries," *Studies in Church History* 27, (1990), 211.

³⁴ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 73.

³⁵ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 108; 112.

her reign, sometimes explicitly noting this coincidence. In fact, the second of the foundation miracles of protection described above takes place in the reign of this important abbess.

The Chronicle recounts that the second miracle of protection, in which a man is prevented from entering the convent, happened sometime during Scolastica's tenure. As discussed above, this miracle was taken out of its chronological context and placed together with other miracles relating to the convent's foundation. It is also specifically identified as taking place during Scolastica's reign, and it is the abbess herself who verifies this miraculous encounter. The naming of Scolastica as the abbess who ruled at the time of this miracle, paired with its deliberate placement at the early foundation of the convent, suggests that she was to be seen as important as the original foundresses of the convent. Indeed, this was the first miracle to be recorded at the new convent site on via Ghibellina, despite Scolastica being the third abbess elected there.

Scolastica Rondinelli has attracted significant attention from historians, largely due to her pragmatism and development of patronage networks. Scholars such as Kate Lowe, Bill Kent and Sandra Weddle, amongst many others, have examined Scolastica's tenure and the impact she had on the convent.³⁶ Her tenure coincided with the largest influx of women joining Le Murate; there were 36 at the start of her rule, and this number increased to 198 during her life.³⁷ The rapidly growing population required an expansion of the convent site, which was funded through the development of new and long-lasting patronage ties that Scolastica developed and maintained.³⁸

³⁶ Weddle, 'Introduction,' in *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 25. Kent, "Lorenzo de' Medici, Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli, and the Politics of Architectural Patronage at the Convent of Le Murate (1471-72)," in *Princely Citizen*, 105-31. Kate J. P. Lowe, "Elections of Abbesses and Notions of Identity in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Italy, with Special Reference to Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly*, no. 2, (Summer, 2001): 389-429. Lowe, "Female Strategies for Success in a Male-ordered World," 209-221. Kate J. P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³⁷ Lowe, "Female Strategies for Success in a Male-ordered World: The Benedictine Convent of Le Murate in Florence in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries," 211.

³⁸ Francis W. Kent, "Lorenzo de' Medici, Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli, and the Politics of Architectural Patronage at the Convent of Le Murate (1471-72)," in *Princely Citizen: Lorenzo de' Medici and Renaissance Florence*, ed. Carolyn James (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 105-31.

Kate Lowe has accurately described Scolastica as Le Murate's "most resourceful abbess," for her role in expanding the convent's patronage ties and reputation in Florence and beyond.³⁹

While some scholars have noted Scolastica's attention to the convent's spiritual health in passing, often citing a list of constitutions she produced to guide the nuns as evidence of her attention, the majority of the scholarship has not developed this idea further.⁴⁰ In fact, Lowe has suggested that Scolastica's authoritarian and punitive constitutions, "do not fit comfortably with what else one knows of Rondinelli" and are "surprisingly strict."⁴¹ Lowe's analysis of the constitutions suggests that her understanding of Scolastica is not one that allows for the abbess to have been both pragmatic *and* equally concerned with the spiritual health of the Le Murate nuns.⁴² Yet, it seems important not only to recognise that spirituality could coexist with pragmatic concerns, but that it might constitute the goal of the pragmatism Scolastica famously expressed.

Using the Chronicle in conjunction with other sources, the tenure of Scolastica has been prominent in histories that seek to connect the convent and its nuns to the wider history of Renaissance Florence. Insofar as this historiography is concerned with identity, it is largely with an external focus. Scholars like Weddle have highlighted that Scolastica was involved with the formation of Le Murate's identity, in particular as it was tied to the development of the convent's patronage networks in the wider community.⁴³ Weddle, Lowe, and others have shown that Scolastica's astute networking built Le Murate's connections to many powerful Florentine families, improving its financial position and encouraging new members.⁴⁴ The ever-growing cost of marriage dowries, combined with the lowering costs of dowries to enter convents, led to a

³⁹ Lowe, "Female Strategies for Success in a Male-ordered World," 219.

⁴⁰ Weddle, 'Introduction,' in *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 25-6.

⁴¹ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 189.

⁴² Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 189.

⁴³ Weddle, "Enclosing Le Murate," 124-51.

⁴⁴ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 151-2. Weddle, "Enclosing Le Murate," 124-59

general increase in the female monastic population.⁴⁵ Within this, Le Murate especially flourished. Scholars have argued that Scolastica herself influenced the number of women joining Le Murate, as she was more accepting of “girls of diverse social status” than other convents, leading to more families sending their daughters there.⁴⁶ Such discussion has demonstrated Scolastica’s important place in establishing Le Murate’s identity reputation among Florentines, and its place in the patronage economy that was so important in Florentine civic identities.

This historiography points to a number of enormous challenges to maintaining community identity, most notably the substantial influx of women, that converged in the reign of Scolastica. The population increase presented practical challenges which have been identified and discussed in the scholarship, such as the need to increase the convent’s physical space.⁴⁷ Lowe has recognised that the increase in women presented another type of challenge, suggesting that “the possibility of maintaining such close surveillance” required to ensure the nuns were following the rules of the convent and order became increasingly difficult.⁴⁸ Building on Lowe’s point, the difficulty in policing behaviours presented a real and immediate threat to the convent’s spiritual health. The development of the nuns’ spiritual identity at this time of great change is something often overlooked in the scholarship, despite the central focus placed on it by the Chronicle.

While it is clear that Scolastica was a remarkable woman, both from her representation in the Chronicle and from other sources, the Chronicle is more concerned with decisions Scolastica made which established and fortified the community’s identity at this particularly challenging time than with her pragmatic success in managing finances or patronage. The decisions and practices established under Scolastica’s guidance are shown, through association with the miraculous, to be

⁴⁵ Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence*, 10.

⁴⁶ Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence*, 20.

⁴⁷ See for example, Weddle, “Enclosing Le Murate,” 124-51. Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 151-3.

⁴⁸ Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 190.

the ideal template for the spiritual identity of Le Murate nuns. This suggests that Scolastica's spirituality was a crucial element of what made her, and the convent, so successful. The Chronicle uses all the tools at its disposal, especially but not exclusively the miraculous, to signify that the community identity established under Scolastica's leadership was the identity that the nuns wanted, and should want to perpetuate in the sixteenth century and beyond.

Through miracles, the Chronicle links the challenges of Scolastica's reign and her response to them, with the ideal formation of Le Murate's community. Following a brief introduction of Scolastica and a description of her election to abbess in chapter 9, chapter 10 describes the practices Scolastica introduced to the convent, and the decisions she made, that were fundamental to the establishment of a Le Murate's identity, both for her contemporaries and future sisters of the community. These chapters are the source of a number of episodes that have been discussed by other scholars as important behavioural innovations for the nuns, in isolation from their miraculous content.⁴⁹ Within chapter 10, there are a number of miracles which are specifically associated the decisions related to the formation of this identity.

The chapter opens with one of the first notable achievements in Scolastica's reign: the enlargement of the convent's church. Scolastica was compelled to complete this enlargement project by the number of new women joining the convent. After the completion of the church, the Chronicle tells us that Scolastica, "inspired by the Lord," decides that the nuns should sing psalms in pairs, rotating so that they were continuously singing.⁵⁰ The newly instituted liturgical practice of continuously signing psalms in the church choir introduced by Scolastica immediately manifests in a miraculous encounter. As soon as the first pair begin singing, a nun named Sister Benedetta has a vision of a fruitful vine connecting the convent's church to the skies above. This miracle

⁴⁹ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 213.

⁵⁰ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 75.

suggests a direct connection between heaven and the convent, and the image of the fruitful vine is one that has its roots in Scriptures.⁵¹

As discussed above, behaviour is an important element of building community identity, including among textual communities. Stock and others have argued that a shared set of behaviours within a group is fundamental in creating a unified community in which members feel a sense of belonging.⁵² The new behaviour introduced by Scolastica is part of what shapes the convent's unique identity, a particularly important task given the number of new women joining during her tenure. As this behaviour is shown to be divinely approved, so too is the identity of the convent, both when the singing of psalms is introduced but also in the present day of the convent, as the practice was still maintained in Sister Giustina's time. Kate Lowe has used this practice, something that was unique to Le Murate, as an example to support her argument that "each convent must have prayed and celebrated slightly differently."⁵³ It was surely therefore an important part of how the nuns understood their own unique identity as a community. In using this story to support her argument about the convent's identity, Lowe does not discuss the miracle associated with the singing of psalms. Similarly, Lowe recounts the story of the young nun becoming literate without discussing the miracle associated with this moment.⁵⁴ Lowe's reading of these episodes reveals them as significant to the convent's identity but her interpretation suggests that they are purely behavioural turning points, ignoring their consistent association with miraculous signs that deepen and multiply their meanings.

The miracle of the vine, like so many in the Chronicle, has many layers of meaning. The miracle acts as a sign that the practice of singing in pairs is a divinely approved activity. It also demonstrates

⁵¹ See for example Psalm 128:3.

⁵² Stock, *Listening for the Text*, 23. Grisé, "The Textual Community of Syon Abbey," 151.

⁵³ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 213.

⁵⁴ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 263.

approval of the community of women who join the convent under Scolastica's guidance, as the practice of singing psalms would not have been possible without a larger number of nuns. And further, the miracle is approving of the completion of the enlargement of the church, something that allowed for the nuns to sing together in the choir. Therefore, the miracle is also indirectly approving of the space in which the community resides.

Beyond this, the miracle of the vine is an important moment in the formation of the community's identity, because of how the Chronicle author uses it to connect her sisters to their past, present and future. Reciting the psalms in pairs "immediately after the celebration of the canonical hours" was a practice that the Le Murate nuns continued in the sixteenth century, and as such the origins of the practice of singing pairs in the choir would have been especially significant to the present-day audience of the Chronicle.⁵⁵ This practice, the Chronicle recounts, was "very vigilantly" overseen by each abbess who came after Scolastica, up to and including the convent's current abbess.⁵⁶ Not only does this tradition link the current sisters to the past community established under Scolastica's tenure, but the singing of psalms is directly linked by the Chronicle author to the divine protection the convent received throughout their history. Sister Giustina writes,

God would mercifully provide the necessary nourishment and, even though the city had long been burdened by war and other problems, the convent nevertheless would be preserved, unaffected by any danger...Of course, it was the result not of our merits but rather of those of our good predecessors, who had recited psalms with much spirit and goodness.⁵⁷

Here we see a reminder of the goodness of the past community, who established this tradition. Furthermore, it encouraged the nuns of Le Murate who encountered this story in the Chronicle to continue this practice, divinely approved through the miraculous vision, so that their future sisters would benefit from the same protection.

⁵⁵ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 76.

⁵⁶ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 76.

⁵⁷ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 76.

The formation of the identity of the community is a central theme of the chapter which opens with the miracle of the vine. The structure of what follows in chapter 10, and the placement of the miraculous within it, shows the generation of a cohesive community of nuns from a diverse group of incoming women. It further demonstrates that the collective formed in this way has divine approval. Following the opening miracles of the chapter, the Chronicle recounts a vision in which a number of sisters saw "...a cart coming to this convent full of many girls, dressed in various habits."⁵⁸ The Chronicle tells its readers how to understand the vision, stating:

Such a vision was interpreted in this way: the cart was God's love, which gently governs the soul... and the diversity of habits and fashions represented the different places of origin and variety of heritages that have been and are here; people from every part of the world have come to our religious community.⁵⁹

The nuns, from a diverse range of backgrounds, are characterized here as united in God's love. The image of the women in this cart, together, yet visually distinct from one another, is symbolic of the journey the new nuns were embarking upon. They were leaving behind the communities they grew up in, and joining a new one, where they would wear the same habits and follow the same liturgical practices. By coming together in this way, the nuns, guided by Abbess Scolastica, are shown as joining and building a community with its own unique identity. It is significant that the Chronicle draws explicit attention to the diversity of the women joining Le Murate by including a miraculous episode in which despite their different origins, the nuns unite in pious purpose and enjoy divine approval of the communal identity being forged at this time.

The diversity described in the vision of the cart does not only represent women joining from different places, but also from different stages in their lives, such as widowhood or betrothal, and from different religious backgrounds. The Chronicle recounts that there were Jewish converts who joined them in the fifteenth century, two during Abbess Scolastica's reign and two in the years after her death. After introducing the four converts and commending their commitment to the

⁵⁸ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 76.

⁵⁹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 76-7.

“holy works” they performed as sisters of Le Murate, the Chronicle states that the vision of the cart could also refer to the “variety” of different circumstances from which the mothers and sisters joined the community.⁶⁰ Once again, the miraculous vision of the cart is used to draw the audience’s attention to this moment as being an important moment in the convent’s history, with regards to their identity formation. Widows, such as Abbess Scolastica, and even betrothed women were also included as part of the diversity of the convent’s community. The Chronicle pauses after introducing these women and their many, often unconventional paths into the convent, telling its readers that these women were exceptional in their piety: “...one could call them the greatest religious in God’s service,” and “...the Lord showed them many miraculous signs of his virtue and grace.”⁶¹

One such miraculous sign was shown to a young woman named Smeralda Venturi who was married, but entered the convent before the union was consummated. The Chronicle tells us that Smeralda was “inspired by the divine chariot” to “abandon secular life and become a nun.”⁶² Sister Giustina uses the word *carro*, the same word with which she describes the vision of the cart, noted above. While this has been translated by Sandra Weddle as both cart and chariot in her English edition of the text, it was, in fact, another reference to the unifying vision of the cart in which all the nuns were passengers. For Smeralda, the vision showed her an alternative path to marriage that she, or more likely her family, had chosen. Describing her decision as inspired suggests that she was compelled to join the convent, rather than it being a case in which she abandoned the responsibilities of her marriage. This is confirmed by the miraculous way in which she enters Le Murate.

⁶⁰ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 77.

⁶¹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 78.

⁶² Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 79.

Smeralda leaves her paternal home at dawn one morning and, unbeknownst to her, is led to the convent by St Peter who is disguised as a Florentine gentleman. Before arriving at the convent St Peter, still in his Florentine attire, tells Smeralda exactly which bed she should take in the convent's dormitory. When they reach Le Murate, Smeralda turns to thank the Florentine man, but instead sees St Peter before her. The Chronicle recounts that Smeralda interpreted this moment as confirmation that leaving her husband was divinely approved. Smeralda says to St Peter "Truly, I know the Lord sent his angel to release me from the earthly prison..."⁶³ before she is accepted into the convent. Once inside, Smeralda tells the women which bed in the dormitory is to be hers, based on the instruction of St Peter. The bed she chooses once belonged to a nun who had the same name as her. The nuns recount this story, and the journey of Smeralda to the convent, to Abbess Scolastica who confirms that the women had "witnessed something marvelous."⁶⁴ Irrespective of her background, the Le Murate nun encountering and reflecting on this episode, was encouraged to see herself abandoning her previous identity and entering into a special state of divinely approved and protected unity with her sisters.

As in the Chronicle's treatment of the initial foundation of the Le Murate community as a Benedictine convent, chapter 10 also features miracles in a significant structural role that reinforces their identity-forming function. The chapter opens and closes with miracles experienced by the same nun, Sister Benedetta. In the miracle of the vine, which opens the chapter, Sister Benedetta sees the fruitful vine connecting heaven and earth. In the final section of the chapter, the Chronicle author recounts the number of women who have lived in the convent since its establishment, until her time of writing in 1598. Immediately following this passage, the final story of the chapter is recounted, in which a sick nun asks Sister Benedetta for cherries, a request she could not fulfill because of the season. Nevertheless, Sister Benedetta prays for them and, one night after hearing

⁶³ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 79.

⁶⁴ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 79.

a magpie chirp, finds a bowl of ripe cherries which she takes to the sick nun. This episode is deemed miraculous by the Chronicle author.

Sister Benedetta, who witnesses both of these miracles, is in fact “one of their old mothers from the bridge” who made the journey to the new convent site in 1424.⁶⁵ Not only does Benedetta have a connection to the original site of the convent, but she is also the niece of the first woman who joined Apollonia on the Rubaconte bridge, Agata. Sister Agata, sometimes referred to in the Chronicle as one of the original founders of the convent, was also the first nun to be elected abbess after they adopted the Rule of St Benedict in 1413. By specifying a link to the Rubaconte bridge, where the community first existed, the Chronicle builds an association between the identity established under Scolastica and expressed in chapter 10, and the original impulse of the women to gather as a spiritual community, connecting the community through time. The Chronicle’s attention to Benedetta’s status among the founding mothers of the community while recounting this miracle reveals a concern to make the temporal and spiritual continuities of the community clear at this critical moment of identity formation and approval.

It is fitting too that the nun who witnesses such an important miracle shares the name of St Benedict, in the female form of Benedetta. As Sharon Strocchia has argued, the taking of a name in a convent, particularly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was a powerful way of connecting a woman to the saint or sister after whom she was named.⁶⁶ Significantly, Scolastica too had a name which was connected to the community, as her monastic name honoured St Benedict’s twin sister. This was yet another implied connection between herself, and the identity of the community cultivated under her rule, and the founding mothers.

⁶⁵ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 75.

⁶⁶ Sharon T. Strocchia, “Naming a Nun: Spiritual Exemplars and Corporate Identity in Florentine Convents, 1450-1530” in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 216.

The Chronicle cares deeply about what happened during Scolastica's reign, but its emphasis is not only on Scolastica's abilities as an excellent leader and manager of the community. The Chronicle is specifically interested in the communal identity that is established by Scolastica, as she was confronted by the challenges of a rapidly growing community. Among the characteristics of the identity that this chronicle constructs for Le Murate by the use of miraculous events, is one in which women were drawn into a unified community. This community centred on unique liturgical performance, commitment to Benedictine forms of observation, and was dedicated upholding the way of life established by the sisters of the past. The Chronicle seeks to make its audience aware of their membership of this divinely protected and approved community, as well as their responsibility to maintain its way of life into the future. The identity that Scolastica built for the community properly upheld the original intention of the women who gathered on the bridge, as demonstrated by the connection of Sister Benedetta to the original community, and as witness to significant miracles which occurred during Scolastica's tenure. The Chronicle author seeks to encourage all the nuns who encounter the stories of Scolastica's reign through the Chronicle to continue to commit themselves to this identity and uphold it into the future.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a question about the mechanisms by which texts, specifically those in textual communities as described by Stock, could both establish and encourage its members to establish a single identity. One of the mechanisms the Chronicle employs to develop and promote communal identity is through the use of the miraculous. Miracles are employed as a structuring device that signals important moments, both in time and in the Chronicle itself, as well as in the association of miraculous events with particular expressions of an identity that the chronicle wants to promote, such as the establishment of new liturgical practices. In Stock's model, the role of interpreter and the interpretation they promoted was central to the process of creating a textual

community, more so than the content of the text itself.⁶⁷ In Grisé's analysis of Syon Abbey, a double monastery in England founded in the fifteenth century, the text, rather than an interpretation of it, created and promoted communal identity. She suggested that at Syon,

The *Rennyll* and the other regulatory texts and documents would govern all conduct, thoughts and actions at Syon. Furthermore, the emphasis on the institutional identity suggests that individual nuns and abbesses could come and go, but Syon—its community, identity, and texts— would continue.⁶⁸

The Chronicle of Le Murate, like the *Rennyll* and other key texts at Syon, was central to the formation of a communal identity. Indeed, I argue that one of the overarching purposes of the text was to generate an identity for the nuns in the sixteenth century, based on the community established under Scolastica's reign.

Miraculous stories are used throughout the Chronicle as a means of signifying the way that the community's identity *now* should function and how it has deep roots in the history of the community which has always been divinely approved. This is particularly evident in the early chapters of the Chronicle which recount the community's transition from an unregularised group of women, to a Benedictine community which flourished under the rule of Scolastica. Miracles such as the miracle of the vine which demonstrated divine approve of the newly instituted liturgical practices of singing in pairs, highlight to the Chronicle audience what made their community unique and special. Furthermore, it reminded the nuns that it was their duty to commit to, and uphold, these traditions and practices, as a connection to their sisters past and to ensure the continuation of their established communal identity in the future. As Stock and others have argued, one of the key ways in which a cohesive community is formed, is through a shared set of behaviours and ideals. The challenge in a community as large as Le Murate, was how to ensure individual members were following the ideal behaviours of their community. In the following

⁶⁷ Stock, *Listening for the Text*, 23.

⁶⁸ Grisé, "The Textual Community of Syon Abbey," 152.

chapter, I argue that miracles were also used in the Chronicle in a didactic way, in order to teach nuns about their individual spiritual formation and journey within the community.

Chapter 3: Virtue Exemplarity and the Miraculous

Sister Daniella Niccolini joined the convent of Le Murate as an eighteen-year-old woman in 1503. Upon her admittance, Abbess Elena Bini assigned Sister Daniella the role of cellarer. The convent Chronicle records that this duty normally lasted a year, after which time the abbess would select a different nun for the office.¹ Sister Daniella found the role “...tedious and bothersome...” and was disappointed when, each year, Abbess Elena reappointed her.² Sister Daniella was seen crying in frustration by her sisters, but rather than refuse to complete her assigned tasks, she sought comfort in prayer. Sister Daniella often prayed at the foot of a crucifix located by the refectory door. In one such time of prayer, the Chronicle recounts that she heard the voice of Jesus, who praised her obedience, which greatly comforted her.³ From that day forth, Sister Daniella completed her duties joyfully, regretting her previous attitude and behaviour. The abbess, and fellow nuns, noticed the shift in Sister Daniella’s demeanor and after they enquired about this sudden change, she revealed the miracle she had experienced.

Unlike some of the other stories in the Chronicle which involve reform of attitude or behaviour, Sister Daniella was neither punished nor chastised.⁴ Rather, in this story, Jesus’s miraculous intervention praising her outward obedience, a virtue fundamental to monastic life and emphasised in the Benedictine rule, allowed Sister Daniella to realise her error and choose to reform her internal attitude.⁵ As the Benedictine Rule states, obedience is only pleasing to God when it is not “...cringing or sluggish, or half-hearted”, for the Benedictine nuns of Le Murate, therefore,

¹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 106.

² Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 106.

³ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 106.

⁴ For more on miracle collections and the modelling of behaviour see, Ward, “Monastic Miracles,” in *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 192-200.

⁵ Chapter 5 in *The Rule of St Benedict* stresses the importance of obedience, as does the prologue. See, Saint Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. trans. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 29-31; 15.

obedience in behaviour alone was not enough.⁶ The nuns needed to be obedient in attitude as well. The miraculous appearance of Jesus in response to Sister Daniella's prayers persuaded her to embrace an inward obedience that matched the outward performance of her role. The Chronicle records that after Sister Daniella heard the voice of Jesus, she continued to pray to the same crucifix, and was often found by her sisters kneeling before it, in a deep state of reverie.⁷

In chapter 2, we encountered stories in the Chronicle, in which miracles were the culmination of a narrative signaling divine approval of the community and its identity. For example, a young nun's miraculous acquisition of literacy affirmed the recent adoption by the convent of the Rule of St Benedict.⁸ In such stories, the miraculous often served as a focal point and culmination of the tale. The story of Sister Daniella, and the other stories discussed in this chapter, do not conform to this template. Instead, the miracles occur in the midst of stories focused on the behaviour and/or attitude of a particular nun who is represented as exemplary. Rather than functioning as signs of approval coming at the end of narrative development, they act as catalysts for reflection, signaling a pivotal moment in a nun's continuing progress to salvation. Owing to the distinction in the structure and nature of these miraculous episodes, I will refer to the tales in this chapter as exemplary stories, rather than miracle stories, as I did in the previous chapters.

Exemplary stories, like that of Sister Daniella, were intended to demonstrate to the Chronicle's audience how a nun could reflect upon and reform her own behaviour on the path to salvation. Sister Giustina, the Chronicle author, explains in the last line of the chapter ending with Sister Daniella, in which several other sisters' miraculous experiences are also described, that these stories could be used to "...inspire and move the souls of everyone who want[ed] to follow the example

⁶ Saint Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 29.

⁷ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 106.

⁸ See chapter 2, 41.

of our former holy and venerable mothers.”⁹ In this chapter, I interrogate the Chronicle’s use of the miraculous in such stories as part of a pedagogical strategy that taught both how to cultivate one’s own virtue, and how one’s path to virtue was intimately entangled with the that of the community as a whole. I argue that exemplary stories in the Chronicle share key features with the ethical pedagogy of sermons and *exempla*, focused on the development of monastic virtues. Both demonstrate virtue being cultivated by the individual, whilst also highlighting the individual’s place within the community, her duties toward it and the community’s responsibilities to the individual. The Chronicle demonstrates that the path to virtue and salvation involves the nuns in interactions with others and serves to model the perfect relationship between an individual nun and the wider Le Murate community. In the case of Sister Daniella, for example, not only is her inner devotion reformed by her miraculous encounter, her place in the community is changed by the experience. Nuns who encountered the tale were encouraged by its message to consider their place in the convent and their responsibilities as a member of that community, and to realise that individual virtue contributed to the spiritual health of the whole convent community.¹⁰

Signalling Virtue: Obedience, Humility and Patience

Many of the exemplary stories in the Chronicle are concerned with virtuous living. In the Christian tradition there are seven primary virtues. Prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance comprise the cardinal or moral virtues, while faith, hope and charity are the theological or divine virtues.¹¹ The theological virtues were considered gifts of God, in that the “...justifying power of the Holy Spirit cause[d] them to come about in the believer.”¹² Before the fourth century the four cardinal virtues were referenced sparingly in Latin Christian literature, and it was predominantly the works of

⁹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 106.

¹⁰ G. A. Loud, “Monastic Miracles in Southern Italy, c. 1040-1140,” *Studies in Church History* 41, Signs, Wonders Miracles: Representations of Divine Power in the Life of the Church (2005), 109.

¹¹ Romanus Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* 2nd edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 12.

¹² Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, 4.

Ambrose of Milan (340-397), Jerome of Stridon (c.347/8-c.419/20), and Augustine of Hippo (354-430), that initially re-introduced and developed Christian virtue ethics from their non-Christian origins.¹³ Ambrose in particular introduced into the Latin Church for the first time the idea that “...the cardinal virtues, if interpreted in accordance with the faith...secured the salvation of the soul,” a theme we see recur throughout the exemplary stories in the Chronicle.¹⁴ By the early modern period, the cardinal virtues had come to be seen as qualities that could be nurtured through learning and practice.¹⁵

As Christian virtue ethics were developed, other virtues were also recognised as being imperative to the salvation of one’s soul, working together with the cardinal virtues.¹⁶ For example, obedience, humility and patience, whilst not technically part of the primary virtues, were nonetheless considered important for cultivating the cardinal virtues. Obedience was often associated with prudence and justice, while humility and patience accompanied fortitude and temperance.¹⁷ These subsidiary virtues of obedience and humility, and to a lesser extent patience, rather than the principal cardinal virtues, explicitly recur throughout the Chronicle in exemplary tales.

As Anne Holloway has recently argued, scholastic commentary on the cardinal virtues, which organised them into structures supported by subsidiary virtues such as obedience, humility and patience, lacked the capacity to teach individual Christians how to live virtuously on a practical

¹³ István P. Bejczy, *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages: A Study in Moral Thought from the Fourth to the Fourteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 11-28. These non-Christian origins included the works of Plato and Aristotle. For more on the non-Christian origins of virtue ethics see, Andreas Hellerstedt, ed., *Virtue Ethics and Education from Late Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Bejczy, *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages*, 17.

¹⁵ Bejczy, *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages*, 1.

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) dedicates part of the second book of his *Summa* to fifty virtues (and their opposing vices), which included obedience, humility and patience. See St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae Secunda Secundae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/18755/pg18755.html> St Antoninus also dedicates book 4 of his *Summa* to a discussion of the virtues, which included obedience, humility and patience.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas addresses these in the second book of his *Summa*, see St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae Secunda Secundae*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/18755/pg18755.html>

level.¹⁸ In order to make these abstract theories more accessible for the faithful, preachers, for example, used exemplary stories within their sermons to bridge the gap between the lived practice of Christian life and the abstract conceptualisation of virtue according to the scholastic model.¹⁹ There are more than 60,000 sermons which have survived from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries.²⁰ These sermons were delivered to a wide range of people, including men and women living in monastic houses, lay audiences as well as other preachers. Sermons allowed preachers to instruct on “...every sort of theological, moral or political problem,” that had relevance for their specific audience.²¹

One of the tools that preachers employed to engage with their audiences, particularly from the late twelfth century onwards, were *exempla*, stories that were represented as true accounts and used by preachers to “enliven and explicate” sermons.²² They were designed to be relatable and memorable for the audience so as to demonstrate “...a right and wrong way of behaving,” and the consequences of acting with virtue or with vice.²³ In showing these consequences, there was a level of interpretive work already built into the story, which allowed the audience to comprehend the moral of the tale and the likely outcome if they behaved in a particular way.

One of the reasons for their success in explaining the complexities of the theological, moral and political problems was that *exempla* “...came from a reference point that they [the audience] understood on an emotional level.”²⁴ Exemplary tales allowed people hearing the sermon to imagine themselves in the story, and help them to reflect on how a particular moral, virtue or other

¹⁸ Anne Michelle Holloway, “*Early Dominican Exempla Collections: Defining a Method of Ethical Pedagogy*” (PhD thesis, Monash University, 2015), 1.

¹⁹ Holloway, “*Early Dominican Exempla Collections: Defining a Method of Ethical Pedagogy*,” 18.

²⁰ Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*, 29.

²¹ C. Delcorno, “Medieval Preaching in Italy (1200-1500)” trans. Benjamin Westervelt in *The Sermon*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 451.

²² Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 22-3.

²³ Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 23.

²⁴ Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 22-3. Holloway, “*Early Dominican Exempla Collections: Defining a Method of Ethical Pedagogy*,” 18.

similar idea could play out in real life. When the *exempla* were gathered into collections, the interpretative work was not always explicit, but preachers using them would adapt the stories for multiple purposes, articulating the interpretation to be applied in each case.²⁵ The author of the Chronicle also offered her audience a means to interpret the exemplary stories by presenting them in a three-part structure. The opening of the exemplary story introduced the nun and the virtue(s) that would be central to the story. The miracle which either inspired the nun to reform herself or highlighted her exemplarity then followed and a closing passage reiterated the virtue of the tale's protagonist.

Exemplary Stories as Ethical Pedagogy

As I will argue below, the exemplary stories in the Chronicle of Le Murate shared characteristics with the *exempla* used by preachers in their sermons and served a similar purpose. In some instances, the stories which highlight the exemplary nature of a nun, mimic stories from texts like *The Golden Legend*, which we know preachers in the medieval and early modern periods used as *exempla* in their sermons to demonstrate right and wrong ways of behaving and to offer examples for people to follow in their own lives.²⁶ The Chronicle constructs several nuns from the Le Murate community as *exemplars* for their sisters, recounting stories which either prove the nun's virtue, or demonstrate how lack of virtue was corrected, returning the nun in the story to a more virtuous way of living. The miracles do much of the interpretive work for the nun encountering the story, acting as signifiers of virtuous living and encouraging the reader or listener to reflect on her own virtue.

Scholars such as Simon Yarrow who have studied medieval miracle collections have made similar observations about their exemplary function for lay audiences, while Stefano Mula has examined

²⁵ Holloway, "Early Dominican Exempla Collections: Defining a Method of Ethical Pedagogy," 18.

²⁶ As Lowe has identified, Sister Eugenia Benedetta is one such nun whose story shares similarities with that of her namesake nun, whose life is recorded in *The Golden Legend*. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 167.

the growing popularity of exemplary collections, which included miracle stories and visions, for Cistercians in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²⁷ They were designed to foster a sense of community identity and belonging, through the promotion of shared communal ideals of behaviour.²⁸ Benedicta Ward has come to similar conclusions in her studies of miracle stories written by and for religious communities.²⁹ Using *De Miraculis*, a collection of sixty miracle stories composed in the twelfth century by the abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, Ward connects the purpose of these collections to preaching.³⁰ She notes that the miracles in *De Miraculis* are most often visions which either reward or punish the receiver, much like the accounts of miracle used in sermons, many of which came from collections of exemplary stories.³¹

Ward further argues that *De Miraculis* was produced as a form of propaganda, designed to foster a sense of unity and community cohesion after the schism of Pons in the 1120s.³² By labelling *De Miraculis* as propaganda, Ward implies that the stories included within the text were designed to tell the audience what to think and how to act, rather than to show them how to change their thoughts and behaviour. Although Ward identifies the connection between the kinds of miracles used in sermons and those in *De Miraculis*, her analysis does not examine the mechanism within these stories that guide an audience to know *how* to live more virtuously. In his analysis of the twelfth and thirteenth century exempla collections written for Cistercian monasteries, Mula examines the mechanism that made these types of story useful tools for building a sense of community belonging and argues that the reason they were effective was because the narratives were designed to be engaging and interesting to their specific audience.³³ These narratives also had

²⁷ Simon Yarrow, "Narrative, Audience and the Negotiation of Community in Twelfth-Century Miracle Collections," *Studies in Church History*, vol. 42: Elite and Popular Religion (2006): 75-6.

²⁸ Stefano Mula, "Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Cistercian Exempla Collections: Role, Diffusion, and Evolution," *History Compass* 8, no. 8 (2010), 906.

²⁹ Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 192-200.

³⁰ Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 194.

³¹ Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 194.

³² Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, 194.

³³ Mula, "Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Cistercian Exempla Collections," 906. See also, Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 22-3. Holloway, "Early Dominican Exempla Collections: Defining a Method of Ethical Pedagogy," 18.

the added purpose of reiterating the Rule of the Cistercian order, and the practices that were specific to each monastery, much like the exemplary stories in the Chronicle of Le Murate.³⁴

Just as one of the roles of the preacher was to give his audience the tools to interpret the exemplary tales in their sermons, the Chronicle author provides the tools for her future sisters to understand the purpose of including exemplary stories. After detailing a miraculous encounter with St Benedict experienced by Sister Eugenia, whose story will be recounted later in this chapter, the Chronicle author tells her audience that one of the reasons for including this tale was so that "...there will always be a glorious memory among our future sisters, to whom *she will be an example...*"³⁵ In fact, when we look at all of the exemplary stories in the Chronicle concerned with the virtue of individual nuns, they share common structural features: The introductory statement specifies the virtue(s) about to be discussed, an interpretive framework is then provided and the story concludes with a statement which reiterates the interpretive message.

The exemplary stories in the Chronicle also share modes and habits of reception with sermons.³⁶ As a sermon is received aurally, the preacher has to consider how best to construct the message for his listeners. One of the ways he did this is was by utilising *exempla* collections and structuring sermons in a way that made them accessible and memorable. Whilst individual nuns could read the Chronicle for themselves, it is likely that they also listened to passages being read aloud during mealtimes in the refectory, in the choir and in the chapterhouse.³⁷ As in the case of sermons, the way the interpretive work is embedded in the story is suggestive of aural reception and listeners were primed to think about the stories in the Chronicle in the same meditative way as the *exempla* in sermons.

³⁴ Mula, "Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Cistercian Exempla Collections," 906

³⁵ Niccolini, *Chronicle*, 133. Emphasis my own.

³⁶ For more on sermons in the medieval and early modern periods see, Beverly Mayne Kienzle, ed., *The Sermon* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000).

³⁷ Webber, "Reading in the Refectory at Reading in the Twelfth Century," 65.

Virtue Highlighted Through Miracle

The behaviour of the nuns, rather than the miracles they experienced, was the focus of virtue exemplarity in the Chronicle. The virtues highlighted in exemplary stories of individual significance were always related to the cardinal virtues and their subsidiaries, that is, virtues which a person could cultivate and improve upon.³⁸ One of the purposes of the miraculous in these stories was to draw attention to the moment in which the virtue was confirmed or the lack of virtue was corrected. The miracle was never described as giving a nun a particular virtue, in cases where a nun's behaviour was reformed. Rather it was a catalyst for the nun to recognise her own lack of virtue (where you are in relation to the virtue you are trying to achieve) and implement steps to change. In the story of Sister Daniella, who we met at the start of this chapter, her lack of internal obedience to the role of cellarer was realised through a miraculous encounter with Jesus. After the miracle, Sister Daniella resolved to approach the office without complaint. The miracle was thus the catalyst for a radical change in her attitude and behaviour.

Indeed, every exemplary tale in which a lack of virtue was corrected demonstrated how a nun could grow and develop virtuous behaviour through self realisation and self-reflection. Kate Lowe has argued that female monastic chronicles often represented their sisters as “heroines,” deliberately constructing a particular identity for individual nuns.³⁹ In some instances this may be true, however, the Chronicle of Le Murate reveals many exemplary tales in which the nun is not represented as a heroine. Rather, some nuns are shown struggling with the various practical or spiritual responsibilities of their vocation. These stories reveal to their audience that while one might not necessarily be able to emulate a truly remarkable nun, or have miraculous experiences, everyone has the capacity to reflect, reform and improve. The stories suggest that the divine can

³⁸ Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* 2nd edition, 12.

³⁹ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 2; 395.

be part of the journey to salvation, but they also contain a pathway to achieve it, even if the miracle part never happens.

The two most common subsidiary virtues that recur in exemplary stories in the Chronicle are obedience and humility. Augustine, most notably in his *Confessions* and *City of God*, emphasised the centrality of humility to living a good Christian life.⁴⁰ Following this tradition, St Benedict too argued for the place of humility, in this case in monastic life. In his *Rule*, Benedict sets out the steps of humility one should follow and argues that following these steps on earth would lead to praise in heaven.⁴¹ Later writers like Aquinas also offered a comprehensive argument for the place of humility as a virtue. Humility, Aquinas argued, was both a secondary part of the moral virtue of temperance, whilst simultaneously being a virtue important in its own right, as it allowed the faithful to “...receive other gifts from God, including growth in [other] virtues.”⁴²

As virtue ethics developed, obedience was increasingly emphasised and for those living a monastic life it had an added layer of importance as one of the three solemn vows. For the Benedictine nuns of Le Murate, obedience was fundamental, since the *Rule of St Benedict* stated that obedience precedes humility as a virtue and pointed out that one cannot be humble without first demonstrating obedience. Benedict writes in the opening line of ‘Chapter 5: Obedience,’ “The first degree of humility is obedience without delay...” and he goes on to comment that true obedience is demonstrated, not just through action, but through thought and attitude as well.⁴³ Prior to the composition of the Benedictine rule, men and women living in religious communities practiced obedience to their superiors, that is their abbess or equivalent. However, Benedict suggested a

⁴⁰ Kent Dunnington, *Humility, Pride, and Christian Virtue Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 29-30.

⁴¹ St Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. trans. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 29.

⁴² Nicholas S. J. Austin, *Aquinas on Virtue: A Causal Reading* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017), 10.

⁴³ St Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 29-30.

hierarchy of obedience: It was due first to the rule and then to the superior.⁴⁴ He emphasised these virtues as essential to the individual's path to salvation and also as an important part of community cohesion.⁴⁵

In what remains of this chapter I want to draw out how miracles in the Chronicle of Le Murate had meaning for the individual's path toward salvation and for her place in the convent community. The virtue of obedience is strongly emphasised in the Rule, as is that it is one of the hardest virtues for a person to develop.⁴⁶ This is especially true for the women who joined convents against their own wishes, as was increasingly the case in early modern Florence.⁴⁷ Obedience is also one of the most challenging virtues to encourage someone to follow. For this reason, many of the exemplary stories in the Chronicle which dealt with the virtue of obedience, did so through models of correcting some degree of disobedience. Either the exemplary stories addressed internal disobedience, that is the correction of attitude, or they addressed external disobedience which was usually manifested in a nun not following the orders of her abbess or other superior. Sister Antonina Bancozzi was one such nun whose story, narrated in a chapter dedicated to four nuns whose exemplary tales centred around obedience, detailed how she was able to recognise and reform her disobedience.

In 1501, the thirteen-year-old niece of Le Murate's future abbess, Speranza Signorini, joined the convent. According to the Chronicle, during the early years of her aunt's rule (r. 1504-24), Sister Antonia experienced a "frightful and horrible" miracle which was the catalyst for her to reflect on and ultimately to reform her disobedience.⁴⁸ That it is described as frightful and horrible suggests

⁴⁴ Julie Ann Smith, *Ordering Women's Lives: Penitentials and Nunnery Rules in the Early Medieval West* 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 121.

⁴⁵ St Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 15; 29-31; 32-38.

⁴⁶ Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, *Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency and Identity in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 34.

⁴⁷ Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence*, 3-4.

⁴⁸ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 168.

that not only was Sister Antonina's experience unpleasant, it was not an experience to be envied by the nuns who read the story in the Chronicle. The element of fear was not new in exemplary tales, and was often a part of what made the story memorable for its audience.⁴⁹ Although we are told that Sister Antonina began her religious life as a burden to her sisters, after she experienced the "frightful and horrible" miracle, she became a model of obedience and other virtuous behaviour. In the closing passage of the story of her miracle, the Chronicle summarises Sister Antonina's post-miraculous behaviour: She was "...always very attentive to the rules...for the rest of her life [and] was a mirror and model of every virtue, a living example to everyone who observed her."⁵⁰

The Chronicle describes how the nuns took pity on Sister Antonina because of a shoulder deformity she was born with. Her sisters even exempted her from certain physically demanding tasks, and they took on the extra work on her behalf. Rather than accepting the kindness of her sisters and applying herself to the tasks she was capable of completing, Antonina instead became "...neither very devoted nor composed," and disobeyed the orders she was given to complete less strenuous tasks.⁵¹ Sister Antonina's fellow sisters saw "no way of making amends" for Antonina's behaviour, despite their best efforts to help her, and it was at this point that Sister Antonina fell into a feverish state of fitting for the next three days, after which time she awoke to tell of her miraculous encounter.⁵²

After waking from her fever, covered in bruises, but otherwise recovered, and at the command of her abbess, Sister Antonina told of the miracle she experienced. She described her soul's journey through hell and purgatory, which ended at Christ's tribunal, where she was judged for her sins.

⁴⁹ Mula, "Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Cistercian Exempla Collections," 906.

⁵⁰ Niccolini, *Chronicle*, 171.

⁵¹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 168.

⁵² Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 168-9.

During her ordeal, Antonina saw a relative suffering in hell, and it was this moment that allowed her to realise her own sinful behaviour. When she reached Christ's tribunal, she begged for St Benedict to plead her case, so that her soul could return to her body and she could make amends. After Benedict refused, the Chronicle tells us that Saint Galgano, a local Tuscan saint, stepped in and advocated on her behalf. Sister Antonina's soul was then returned to her body after three days of fitting, and she recounted her experience at the request of her abbess to her sisters. Her body is described in the Chronicle as looking like it had been "beaten with a bat". The physicality of this description may have been intended to show that there could be both spiritual and physical consequences of disobedience.

Sister Antonina tale follows a three-part structure shared by all the exemplary tales in the Chronicle. The first part introduces Sister Antonina to the reader, offering details of her admittance into the convent and her behaviour as a new nun. Sister Antonina was born, the Chronicle records, with a shoulder deformity which led her family to place her in the convent, rather than trying to arrange her marriage. The young girl "rebelled against" her fate, an element of the story that likely had resonance for nuns who were also placed in the convent by their families against their own wishes.⁵³ The second part of the story describes the miracle which triggers self-reflection in the nun. Yet, it is important to note that the miracle is never described as giving a person a particular virtue. It is always the nun herself who comes to the realisation that she must reform, or continue on her path to salvation, rather than through being gifted virtue through the divine encounter. The final part of the exemplary story highlights how the nun became, or continued to be, a model for

⁵³ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 168; As Anthony Molho has identified, physical health was an important consideration for contracting a marriage during this period, as physical weakness or deformities were thought to affect a woman's ability to bear children and therefore made these women less desirable candidates. Instead, many of these women joined nunneries, sometimes against their will. Anthony Molho, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence*, (Cambridge, Mass. And London, England: Harvard University Press, 1994), 132; 136-8. David Herlihy, 'Some Psychological and Social Roots of Violence in Tuscan Cities,' in *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200-1500*, ed. Lauro Martines (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 146-7. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence*, 3-4.

her sisters, both contemporary and future, to follow.

As mentioned above, Sister Antonina's story is the first within a chapter that collects four exemplary tales together. The chapter, originally entitled *Di quattro nostre Madri miracolosamente illuminate dalla Divina Gratia* (Of our four Mothers miraculously illuminated by Divine Grace), shows four nuns at different stages of their journey on their path to virtuous living and ultimately towards individual salvation. All four of the stories describe nuns whose obedience is in some way lacking and their need for self-reflection and reform. Sister Antonina is described as the most disobedient, both in her internal commitment to her vocation and her external actions. The following three tales foreground nuns whose disobedience is evident, but each story describes a nun less disobedient than the last. Taken together, the exemplary stories in this chapter develop a continuum of virtue, placing the four nuns at different stages on their journey towards virtuous living. The same pattern is evident in Cistercian monastic exemplary stories of the twelfth and thirteenth century. As Stefano Mula shows, these tales are best understood when they are considered as a collection since they provide a more complete picture of what it meant to be an ideal Cistercian.⁵⁴

Although the Chronicle follows a roughly linear timeline, there are points at which this chronology is interrupted and the four exemplary stories summarised above constitute one of those occasions. This rupture suggests a deliberate departure from Sister Giustina's chronological arrangement of materials. The first two stories of Sisters Antonina and Laurenziana fit within the chronological structure, as both stories happened in the early sixteenth century and probably within the reign on Abbess Speranza (r. 1504-24). They are preceded by chapters that describe the Abbess's rule, and

⁵⁴ Mula, "Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Cistercian Exempla Collections," 909.

the following chapter details her death in 1524. The chronology is interrupted by the two stories which follow Sisters Antonina and Laurenziana, which the Chronicle author tells us occurred during the reign of Abbess Scolastica (r. 1439-1475).⁵⁵ In selecting these stories from outside the chronological structure of the Chronicle, the author curates a collection of stories that she intends to be read together. The arrangement of these four stories as a continuum that describes an ascending order of virtue with respect to obedience therefore seems to have been a deliberate strategy.

A similar arrangement occurs in chapter 14 *Di alcuni altri segni miracolosi occorsi a piu nostre Venerabili Madri* (Of some other miraculous signs that happened to our most Venerable Mothers) which collects five stories of exemplary nuns, each story again emphasising foremost the virtue of obedience alongside humility. As with chapter 27, the stories show nuns on a continuum of virtue, each at different stages on their journey, this time arranged in descending order of virtue. Chapter 14 opens with the nuns behaving with the most virtue and closes with the nuns who most needed to reform. The last story in the set of five in chapter 14 is that of Sister Daniella, the reluctant cellarer who we met at the start of this chapter. Placing these stories in groups, rather than in the chronological order in which they happened, is significant for the nuns' reception of them. Exemplary stories were intended to be consumed as collections, rather than on their own, so that the message about virtue existing on this continuum could be made apparent. Although there are some instances in which exemplary stories appear on their own, rather than in a grouping, this is only in instances where the nun is truly exceptional, such as Sister Eugenia Benedetta, whose story I will discuss later in this chapter.

⁵⁵ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 172.

The exemplary story which directly follows Sister Antonina in chapter 27 is that of Sister Laurenziana. This exemplary story also highlights her disobedience, reflection and ultimate reform, albeit her disobedience is of a different kind to that practiced by Sister Antonina. The latter's disobedience, both internally, and externally was demonstrated by her behaviour. She was a burden to her sisters, and, despite their kindness towards her, she actively chose to, in the words of the Chronicle author, "tyrannise" her sisters with "deceptive intention."⁵⁶ Sister Laurenziana, on the other hand, was not so willfully disobedient and did not actively burden her sisters. Her disobedience was not related to the specific tasks of her vocation, or to the directions given by her abbess, as was the case with Sister Antonina. Rather it was related to her identity as a Benedictine nun.

Sister Laurenziana, who lived in the convent from 1510-66, was one day struck down by a high fever which, according to the Chronicle, caused her to vomit blood. She was confined to bed and chose to remove her scapular during the day when it was warmer, replacing it at night when she slept. On one evening she forgot to replace her scapular and was visited by St Benedict who appeared to her in a vision. The Chronicle records that St Benedict was "very irritated" with Sister Laurenziana and verbally chastised her whilst physically beating her with his staff.⁵⁷ Beatings administered by saints recorded in miraculous encounters as a form of punishment were relatively common, and usually signified a failure "...to show due devotion" by the individual.⁵⁸ Benedict himself reportedly hit a monk with his staff for repeatedly leaving the chapel during prayer.⁵⁹ The description in the Chronicle suggests that the removal of her scapular, the symbolic identifier of her as a Benedictine Le Murate nun, was an act of disobedience, despite her innocent intentions.

⁵⁶ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 168.

⁵⁷ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 172.

⁵⁸ Yarrow, "Narrative, Audience and the Negotiation of Community in Twelfth-Century Miracle Collections," 75-6. See also Patrick J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 122.

⁵⁹ Gregory the Great, *Life and Miracles of Saint Benedict: Book Two of the Dialogues*, trans. Odo J. Zimmermann and Benedict R. Avery (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 18.

For the nuns encountering the story of Sister Laurenziana the message was clear: you must always remain obedient to your vocation. Once professed, you cannot choose when to be a Le Murate nun, it is something you must always embody. It is significant that the removal of her scapular, the garment that both visually and symbolically identified her as Benedictine nun, inspired a vision in which Benedict himself reprimanded the nun. It is one of only four times Benedict appears in a vision to one of the sisters.⁶⁰

Sister Laurenziana confided in her sisters about the vision, so that "...the holy father's advice and will were noteworthy and profitable not only to her, but also to others..."⁶¹ After she shared her experience, she heard one of her sisters condemning her "defects" and rather than engage with this sister, she "...rush[ed] to the work at hand, and she left without a word, showing her humility."⁶² This excerpt shows Sister Laurenziana following the hierarchy set out in the chapters of the *Rule of St Benedict*.⁶³ Chapter 5 relates to Obedience, represented by Sister Laurenziana attending to the tasks assigned to her. Chapter 6 discusses Restraint of Speech and Chapter 7 Humility, both of which Sister Laurenziana demonstrates by not engaging with the sister who was discussing her defects. By embodying these fundamental principles of the *Rule*, Sister Laurenziana becomes a model for her sisters to follow. The implicit association with the *Rule* situates it within the Chronicle, allowing for the reader to practice what Sylvia Huot has termed 'polytextual reading', whereby the reading or listening of one text becomes "a springboard for the recollection and reconsideration of many texts."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ St Benedict first appears in the vision of Sister Eugenia in Chapter 19, where he helps her escape a prison. The second and third appearances are in Chapter 27, where he refuses to advocate on behalf of Sister Antonina and then in the next exemplary story he berates Sister Laurenziana for removing her scapular. His final appearance is in Chapter 28, in which Abbess Speranza sees him on her death bed handing the keys of the convent to Sister Bonifazia Risaliti, who was soon after elected abbess inspired by this vision.

⁶¹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 172.

⁶² Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 172.

⁶³ St Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 29-38.

⁶⁴ Huot, "Polytextual Reading: The Meditative Reading of Real and Metaphorical Books," in *Orality and Literacy in the Middle Ages: Essays on a Conjunction and its Consequences in Honour of D.H. Green*, 203.

The final two stories in this grouping of four involve two unnamed nuns, who lived sometime during the reign of Abbess Scolastica (r. 1439-75). Despite the names and exact times of these events being forgotten, the Chronicle author Sister Giustina reassured her readers that, "...we have heard of them from mothers who verify that they heard them from their predecessors, so that they are certain of what happened."⁶⁵ With this reassurance, Sister Giustina structures the last two exemplary stories in the same manner as those which came before them. She introduces the nuns, describes the miracle they experienced as inspiring a moment of self-reflection and finally details how the nuns behaved after this period of reflection.

In the last two stories, the nuns are described as being both virtuous and devoted to their vocation. In each case, the Chronicle author points to two transgressions that were leading the nuns away from the right path. The first nun found reasons not to celebrate the canonical hours and instead performed other tasks which, whilst still being beneficial to the running of the convent, were not more important than celebrating the hours. The transgression of the second nun is not made clear, however the author states that despite the nun's "good judgement," she was found to be "...misdemeaned and committed some blunders."⁶⁶ In both these instances, there is a sense that the nuns' transgressions were based on a belief that they were doing the right thing, rather than intentionally being disobedient. This sentiment is echoed in the same manner as Sister Laurenziana, who forgot to replace her scapular, but whose intentions were good, unlike Sister Antonina.

In each of these stories, the miracle offers an insight into the severity of the nuns' mistakes. Sister Antonina, for example, is the most in need of reform. In her story, she is taken through hell, where

⁶⁵ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 172.

⁶⁶ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 174.

she sees a family member suffering, then to purgatory and finally to Christ's tribunal where the founder of her order, St Benedict, refuses to advocate for her. All of this takes place over a period of three days, in which time her body is fevered and convulsing, and when she awakens her body appears as though it has been beaten. The severity of the miracle she experienced was a sign, both to Sister Antonina and anyone reading the story, of her level of culpability in relation to her disobedient behaviour. Sister Antonina is far more willfully disobedient and therefore more in need of reform than the other sisters discussed here.

In contrast to Sister Antonina, Sister Laurenziana and the two unnamed nuns were far less willfully disobedient, and therefore the miracles they experienced were less severe. Sister Laurenziana was verbally and physically chastised for removing her scapular by St Benedict, because her disobedient behaviour still demonstrated a need for reform. However, the vision she experienced was, in contrast to Sister Antonina's three-day fitting and journey through hell, purgatory and her final judgement, less extreme. In the exemplary tale of the first unnamed nun, it is actually one of her sisters who had a vision of God telling her to communicate to the unnamed nun that she must repent for her behaviour, "otherwise, she [the unnamed nun] would be sent to hell."⁶⁷ In the final example, after the nun had been reprimanded by her abbess she strove to become a more obedient sister, which was confirmed in a vision of Jesus who told her that he "considered her worthy" to be his spouse.⁶⁸ Just as this chapter develops of continuum of virtue with respect to obedience, it also describes a 'continuum of the miraculous' through which nuns encountering the stories are encouraged to recognise their own need to reform. The four examples, grouped together by the Chronicle author, offered the Chronicle's audience a range of exemplary stories with which to identify in a similar way to the pedagogical exemplars in sermons.

⁶⁷ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 173.

⁶⁸ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 175.

Sister Eugenia Benedetta

In this chapter thus far, I have explored exemplary stories which are collated together in chapters. These stories were intended to be read together as a collection, for the nuns to see the comparisons between the tales and use these comparisons as part of a reflective pedagogical engagement. There are also stories that operate alone. These tales are clearly exceptional because they are isolated in a chapter entirely of their own, marked out structurally in the Chronicle for special attention, presumably for the nuns to reflect on that single story. Sister Eugenia Benedetta is one of these exceptional nuns. There are a number of ways in which she, and her story, are exceptional, not least among them that the Chronicle tells us she is given the name Benedetta, in honour of the founder of their Order, by her sisters in response to her remarkable exemplarity.⁶⁹ Whilst there are other nuns from Le Murate who took 'Benedetta' as their name upon entering the convent, there are no other accounts in the Chronicle in which the nuns gave this name to another sister as an addition to their religious name.⁷⁰

Structurally, nevertheless, Sister Eugenia's story resembles in general terms those that we have already encountered in this chapter. Her story has an early period that sets out a problem, a catalytic moment of reflection stimulated by a miraculous experience and the playing out of the consequences of that experience that demonstrate how she emerges as an exemplary figure for the community. As with the other stories, Sister Eugenia's ends with a reiteration that she was a woman worthy of veneration and emulation.⁷¹ It also shares a number of similarities with the life of her namesake saint in *The Golden Legend*, again providing a connection to the tradition of

⁶⁹ Benedetta is the female form of Benedict in Italian.

⁷⁰ There are two other nuns named Benedetta who are first introduced in the tenth chapter of the Chronicle. The first is named Sister Benedetta, the niece of the first abbess of the convent. The second was a Jewish convert named Sister Maria Benedetta, though there is no indication in the Chronicle that Benedetta was a name given to her in the same manner as it was attached to Sister Eugenia's name.

⁷¹ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 138.

exemplarity discussed above.⁷²

Eugenia entered Le Murate in 1450 at the age of 33 but, soon after her consecration, but before her profession, she was expelled from the convent by a priest. Eugenia, the Chronicle records, felt that the priest assigned to her "...what she considered to be extraordinary acts of humiliation and penance..." after hearing her confession, and she complained to her sisters about her treatment.⁷³ Eugenia rejects the tasks of humiliation and penance given to her by the priest, a figure of authority, which is an indication to the reader that she is a nun in need of reflection and reform. The priest, we are told, without consultation with anyone, forged a letter from the Archbishop of Florence Antoninus (r. 1446-59) declaring that Eugenia was to be removed from the convent immediately with no recourse for appeal. In the alleged letter from Antoninus, Eugenia is explicitly refused the opportunity to learn, and to be reformed, in the way that all of the other nuns in the exemplary stories were. Her story goes on to recount that in fact, despite this, she was able to reform herself.

Although Eugenia did not agree with the decision to expel her from the convent, and her sisters did not want to part with her, she immediately left, requesting only that she keep the letter from Antoninus. She travelled to Rome, where Antoninus currently was, and met with him. Antoninus confirmed the letter was a forgery and wanted Eugenia to return to Le Murate. He also wanted to punish the priest in question. Eugenia, however, since leaving the convent, had forgiven the priest and asked to be released instead. She promised "...to complete her life with purity of mind and body in God's service..."⁷⁴ Antoninus agreed and, with his blessing, Eugenia left. Rather than

⁷² The story of Saint Eugenia (d. c. 258 CE) is recorded in the chapter dedicated to Saints Protus and Hyacinthus, who were responsible for her conversion to Christianity. See, Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, ed. Eamon Duffy, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 551-3.

⁷³ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 128.

⁷⁴ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 129.

return to the convent and see the priest who had falsely removed her punished, Eugenia chose to follow the original order of the priest and not re-join her community. For Eugenia, the process of her reflection and reform towards obedience began sometime between being expelled from the convent and meeting with Antoninus. The miracle she experiences later in her life, which will be discussed below, served to signal her achievement and accelerated her reintegration into the community as an exemplary member. This is part of her exceptionality as an exemplary nun.

After leaving Rome, Eugenia dressed herself in men's clothing for ease of travel, and soon found herself at a male Franciscan friary, where she took the habit. One day, Eugenia accidentally reveals her identity by referring to herself with a feminine pronoun, and quickly leaves the friary. She travelled to another country, where she once again joined a male friary. The Chronicle described Eugenia as being proficient at tasks "...typically performed by men" as well as work more traditionally associated with women, such as cooking, laundry and caring for the sick. It was this last role, caring for the sick, that again revealed Eugenia's gender, as one of the infirm suspected her due to her kindness and manner of speaking. Once again Eugenia left the friary. This time, rather than join another, she decided to go on a pilgrimage on her own to the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. On her way to Jerusalem, Eugenia was captured and imprisoned. She was only able to escape, the Chronicle records, with the help of a miraculous intervention by St Benedict, to whom she prayed. After her escape, Eugenia arrived in Jerusalem where she founded a hospital for the sick to be treated and for pilgrims to sleep. More than forty years after her expulsion from Le Murate, Eugenia decided to leave her hospital in Jerusalem and establish one in Rome, however in c. 1492, the ship carrying Eugenia was blown off course and landed closer to Florence. Eugenia interpreted this as a sign from God that she should return to Le Murate, which she did. Eugenia finally became a professed nun, and remained at Le Murate until her death in 1504.

Sister Eugenia's life, and exemplary qualities which I will discuss further below, were understood as exceptional by the Chronicle author, who dedicated an entire chapter, divided into two parts, to her. Sister Eugenia is also understood as exceptional in the historiography of the convent, as she is one of the few nuns who belong to this category of virtue exemplarity who are discussed in the secondary literature. In a 1990 article examining male/female interactions and how these relationships helped build and shape the Le Murate community, K. J. P. Lowe commented on Eugenia's case. Given her focus, Lowe did not make reference to some of the key moments in Sister Eugenia's story which point to her being an exemplary nun, including the miracle in which St Benedict helped her escape prison. Nevertheless, she asserted, "Eugenia's story could almost be used as an advertisement for the qualities to which Le Murate's nuns were expected to aspire," even if the events of her life would have been impossible to emulate.⁷⁵ It is not completely clear whether for Lowe these 'qualities' are those of a virtuous nun, or those of gendered interactions that concern her elsewhere in her argument, however her argument is not focused on virtue *per se*.

Subsequently, in her comprehensive monograph *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy*, Lowe returned to the story of Sister Eugenia.⁷⁶ She argued that convent chronicles often included models of the ideal nun for their sisters to emulate, but that amongst these role models, there were "dissidents" who escaped "...the confines of the ideal..." such as Eugenia.⁷⁷ Lowe suggests that when Eugenia adopted male attire and joined the Franciscan friaries, her story became part of,

...a tradition of legendary female transvestite saints... whose linking features were their refusal to conform to expected female behaviour and their use of apparent sex change to facilitate escape at difficult periods of their lives.⁷⁸

Lowe argues that Eugenia was transgressive, suggesting that she lived a life somewhat in

⁷⁵ Lowe, "Female Strategies for Success in a Male-ordered World," 216.

⁷⁶ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 50; 165-8.

⁷⁷ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 165.

⁷⁸ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 167.

opposition to the “...observant ideology pedalled by the convent in the late fifteenth century...” but that despite her seemingly dissident ways, she was “...in Niccolini’s eyes...a convent heroine.”⁷⁹ Lowe implies that Niccolini’s fondness for Eugenia, or perhaps admiration for her independent spirit, outweighed the unorthodox nature of her life, so much so that Niccolini chose to include the story where others may not have.

Saundra Weddle, in her 1997 PhD thesis, also categorised Sister Eugenia as a woman who did not fit the ideal of a Le Murate nun. Weddle asserted that Eugenia was unhappy with her decision to join Le Murate, suggesting that her displeasure manifested in her disobedience towards the orders of penance and humility assigned to her by the priest.⁸⁰ Weddle interpreted Eugenia’s refusal to return to Le Murate at the request of Antoninus as a further act of disobedience, rather than a desire for Eugenia to follow the original order of the priest and an attempt to spare the priest from punishment. Weddle, like Lowe, interpreted the story of Sister Eugenia as transgressive. In the time between completing her PhD thesis in 1997 to producing the critical edition and translation of the Chronicle in 2011, Weddle amended her view of Sister Eugenia, portraying her as far less wilfully disobedient than previously. It seems likely that the reason this exemplary story has garnered modern attention is because of its apparent transgressive nature.

Certainly, in some respects Sister Eugenia does not fit the model of an ideal nun. She leaves the convent, albeit against her own wishes, travels to Rome, Portugal and Jerusalem amongst other places, takes on male clothing and persona to enter Franciscan friaries, before returning to the convent and finally professing the vows. There is no doubt that this is not the usual trajectory of a Le Murate nun’s life. However, whilst she is an extraordinary example, Eugenia is not necessarily as unorthodox as Lowe suggests.⁸¹ As I argue below, Lowe’s earlier assertion, that Eugenia

⁷⁹ Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 168.

⁸⁰ Weddle, “Enclosing Le Murate,” 285.

⁸¹ Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 165-8.

embodies aspirational qualities for her sisters, is more indicative of the message of the story, provided we read her exemplarity as pertaining to virtue, rather than deeds.⁸²

Confirmation that her story can be read as one of orthodoxy, rather than transgression, is evident in the miracle Eugenia experiences. Eugenia was captured on her pilgrimage before she reached Jerusalem, on the night of the feast of St Benedict. Eugenia prays to the saint to release her from prison, a prayer which Benedict answers by helping her to unlock the cell door. Benedict then guides Eugenia out of the prison, where she was able to pass by the guards unseen, and on to Jerusalem. It is important to note that at this point Eugenia had never professed the vows to become a Benedictine nun, but had twice been accepted into Franciscan friaries. However, the Chronicle recounts Eugenia chose to pray for the intercession of Benedict because, despite entering these friaries, Eugenia always wore the habit of St Benedict underneath her clothes.⁸³ Despite outward appearance, Eugenia internally remained a Benedictine, and her commitment to the Benedictine Order is recognised in a way that no other nun's was in the Chronicle; with the divine approval of Benedict himself. This miracle provides an interesting contrast with the exemplary story of Sister Laurenziana, the nun who removed her scapular and was subsequently reprimanded by St Benedict.

That Eugenia's story is one of ethical pedagogy, rather than transgression, is also evident through its parallels with elements of her namesake saint's *vita* as recorded in *The Golden Legend*. Lowe emphasises the similarities as a possible indication that either Le Murate's Eugenia adopted part of her namesake saint's life and integrated them into her own life story, or that over time, the nuns of Le Murate simply confused the two stories and blended them together.⁸⁴ Lowe's discussion

⁸² Lowe, "Female Strategies for Success in a Male-ordered World" 216.

⁸³ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 130.

⁸⁴ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 167.

therefore centres around who was responsible for developing this parallel, since she is concerned to establish the credibility of the story and the agency of its production.

In contrast, my concern is with the work that the story and its parallel does in the Chronicle. Neither the credibility of the story, nor the persons responsible for introducing or amplifying the parallels between the two Eugénias, are relevant for the importance of the exemplary story as a tool of virtue pedagogy. As Benedictine nuns, the sisters of Le Murate would likely have been familiar with the story of Saint Eugénia in the *Golden Legend*, a collection of tales known to have been used for sermons instructing people in virtue. Consequently, when they encountered the story of Sister Eugénia in the Chronicle, the sisters would have done so through a polytextual moment where they are reflecting on the story of Saint Eugénia and sister Eugénia at the same time.⁸⁵ The meaning of the tale for learning about and reflecting on virtue and one's progress in it through life is therefore even more amplified than in other exemplary tales of the Chronicle.

The Role of the Abbess in Virtue Exemplarity

One of the shared features of all the exemplary stories detailed in this chapter, whether of an individual story or those that are grouped together, is that they offered models of virtue for nuns to follow, based on their past sisters' experiences. An aspect of these exemplary stories that I have yet to discuss is the role of the abbess in virtue exemplarity. As a text aimed at the edification and instruction of sisters, rather than a manual for abbesses, the Chronicle does not trouble to construct abbesses as figures worthy of particular emulation through exemplary stories. Nevertheless, we often find reference to abbesses modelling the virtues being encouraged in these

⁸⁵ For the concept of polytextuality, see Huot, "Polytextual Reading: The Meditative Reading of Real and Metaphorical Books," in *Orality and Literacy in the Middle Ages: Essays on a Conjunction and its Consequences in Honour of D.H. Green*, 203-22.

stories, or conversely, they are described as punishing nuns not behaving virtuously in an attempt to reform them. The stories therefore gesture towards the importance of the abbess for the virtue of the whole community. According to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, it was the role of the abbot, or in this case abbess, to know the one of the tasks they have undertaken is "...directing souls and serving a variety of temperaments, coaxing, reproofing and encouraging them as appropriate."⁸⁶ The abbess therefore, like the sister in the exemplary story, also had an important role to play in the individual's path to salvation.

In the stories of exemplary nuns, we often find the abbess as a guiding influence toward virtue, either through direct involvement in the story, or due to her influence on the spiritual environment she cultivated for her spiritual daughters. For the purpose of this chapter, I have chosen briefly to examine the role of two of Le Murate's abbesses in exemplary stories. The first is Abbess Scolastica Rondinelli (r. 1439-75) whose virtue is reiterated throughout the Chronicle and who, as I argued in chapter 2, was almost seen as a second foundress of the convent after its initial foundation, because of the spiritual identity she promotes during her tenure.⁸⁷ It was during her reign that the first grouping of exemplary stories appeared in the Chronicle, in chapter 14. Two of the stories in the collection in chapter 27 were also said to have taken place in Scolastica's time. The second important abbess was her direct successor, Abbess Caterina Ubaldini (r. 1475-97), during whose abbacy Sister Eugenia Benedetta, one of the most remarkable exemplary nuns, rejoined the convent and lived out the rest of her life. I have highlighted these two abbesses in particular, as their remarkable abbacies were marked by their own type of miracle in the Chronicle. After death and burial, both Scolastica and Caterina's bodies were found to be "intact" and "fragrant," a common theme amongst bodies of deceased saints during this period.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ St Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 24.

⁸⁷ See chapter 2, 85.

⁸⁸ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 116; 139.

During the abbacy of Scolastica Rondinielli we are given an example of the role of the abbess in cultivating virtue in the exemplary story of Sister Colomba. The story emphasises three important points relating to role of the abbess. The first was that the nuns should always follow the order of their abbess. The second was that the abbess will only ask of them things which are pleasing to the Lord.⁸⁹ And finally, that the abbess has the responsibility to keep her daughters on the path toward virtue, which can involve administering punishment. In the case of Sister Colomba, the abbess asked her "...by virtue of holy obedience..." to obtain wine from the cellar, which was flooded.⁹⁰ Although it may not have been immediately evident to Colomba, or her sisters, how she was going to retrieve this barrel, she nevertheless approached the cellar as instructed by the abbess. As Sister Colomba reached the flooded cellar, a barrel floated to the surface at which point Colomba made the sign of the cross, and it miraculously appeared at her side. The Chronicle recounts several other occasions in which Sister Colomba was called on by the abbess when the community was in need of some kind of miraculous intervention. In order to stop Colomba from becoming "vain" the abbess repeatedly chastised Colomba so that she would remain humble.

Conclusion

I have shown in this chapter that a fundamental function of the exemplary stories in the Chronicle was to serve as ethical pedagogy for the nuns who encountered them. The stories allowed Le Murate nuns to meditate on the virtues presented and reflect on how they too could put these virtues into practice in their own lives. Ultimately, the appropriate practice of these virtues was an important part of ensuring a nun was on the path toward individual salvation. The exemplary stories analysed in this chapter offered nuns a model of living according to the three key virtues

⁸⁹ St Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 24.

⁹⁰ Niccolini, *The Chronicle of Le Murate*, 104.

of obedience, humility and patience which helped to create a community with the same values, as was discussed in chapter 2. Many of the stories recorded in the Chronicle also offer an insight into the responsibilities of the community to its members. As Brian Stock has noted, by reading or hearing texts like the Chronicle and by reflecting on them, "...behavioral norms...were eventually altered," at an individual level, and a group could therefore become more cohesive through the altering of these behaviours.⁹¹ While the stories of exemplary nuns emphasised the individual's path to salvation, they also highlighted her responsibility for the salvation of her community and for its cohesion and identity, since, ultimately, the community was only as strong as its weakest member.

⁹¹ Stock, *Listening for the Text*, 23.

Conclusion

This thesis has been concerned with miracles and the miraculous in a sixteenth-century nuns' chronicle. Miracles were common in the writings of religious women in the medieval and early modern periods. In addition to the Chronicle of Le Murate, examined here, they appear in the near contemporary chronicles of Le Vergini (1523) and San Cosimato (1607) examined by Lowe in *Nuns' Chronicles*.¹ Miracles also feature in the writings of Diodata Malvasia, another near contemporary of Sister Giustina, who wrote a history of her convent in Bologna (1575) and an account of a miracle working painting of the Virgin Mary (1617).² Earlier histories too recount miraculous encounters, such as the 1436 chronicle of Corpus Domini in Venice.³ The frequency with which miracles and the miraculous appear in nuns' writings might lead us to regard them as tropes of the genre. However, this thesis has shown that they were central to institutional identity and very important as pedagogical tools.

As chapter one demonstrated, miracles were a contentious issue in the late sixteenth century. There were questions about the nature and purpose of the miraculous, both within Catholic and Protestant communities. The very definition of what constituted a 'true' miracle was a live issue, and consensus was hard to come by. Although the orthodox Catholic position supported a belief in the continued intervention by God and the saints, there was a renewed pressure for miracles to be appropriately verified.⁴ The presence of the miraculous in a contemporary chronicle cannot therefore be treated as a mere trope. This study has shown that miracles were incorporated selectively and purposefully, responding both to external debates and the internal needs of the

¹ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 38; 76; 133; 215; 330-1; 335; 340-1; 367.

² Sister Diodata Malvasia, *Writings on the Sisters of San Luca and their Miraculous Madonna*, eds. trans. Danielle Callegari and Shannon McHugh (Toronto: Iter Inc. & the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2015).

³ Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: The Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395-1436*, ed. trans. Daniel Bornstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁴ As Peter Burke has argued, the role of saints as intercessors working on behalf of God was something which drew increased criticism during the Protestant Reformation particularly in the process of canonisation. See Peter Burke, "How to Become a Counter-Reformation Saint," in *The Counter Reformation: Essential Readings*, ed. David Luebke (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), 131.

community. They are important in building a holistic understanding of the Chronicle in its time and for its audience.

Scholarship has shown that even from within the confines of a convent, nuns were still very much engaged with the world outside their walls.⁵ This included their well-documented patronage networks, but also an awareness of the ecclesiastical politics of the day and its impact upon their way of life. We know from the convent Chronicle, for example, that the Archbishop of Florence personally visited the convent of Le Murate orally to deliver the decrees of Trent that related to the nuns and their convent. I argue that Sister Giustina's decision to feature miracles prominently in her writing must therefore have been a deliberate one, drawing upon and integrating the many sources that influenced her own, and her sisters', understanding of the miraculous to craft her Chronicle. Her writing shows that miracles could, and did, have purposes beyond the glorification of God, which was the emphasis of so much contemporary theological discussion, and later scholarship.

The primary audience for the Chronicle of Le Murate was undoubtedly the nuns themselves.⁶ Miracles are a fundamental part of how we should understand the purpose of the Chronicle of Le Murate for this audience. As this thesis has demonstrated, miracles were not merely decorative elements, but in fact served as one of the key mechanisms by which the Chronicle sought to achieve at least two of its communicative aims. One of these aims was the formation and promotion of a unique communal identity. The deliberate placement and construction of miraculous episodes at important moments of the community's foundation, and re-foundation under the tenure of Scolastica Rondinelli, promoted an identity which was, and always had been,

⁵ See amongst others, Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture*, 383-94. Weddle, "Enclosing Le Murate," 84-105. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence*, 39-71. Kent, "Lorenzo de' Medici, Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli, and the Politics of Architectural Patronage at the Convent of Le Murate (1471-72)," 105-31.

⁶ Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 28.

divinely approved. In this respect, miracles acted as a mechanism by which the Chronicle text shaped the textual community of the convent: highlighting critical elements of the identity to which its members were expected to commit themselves, and making clear the ways in which this identity linked them to the holy women of Le Murate's past, and future.

Miracles were also used to encourage the nuns encountering the stories to reflect on their own spiritual journey as part of the Le Murate community. Miracles acted as exempla in the Chronicle: they signalled when a nun was living virtuously, or they acted as a catalyst which inspired the nun to reform her behaviour. Miracles showed the nuns of Le Murate that every soul could be reformed with effort. Examples from within their own community were available to illustrate every stage of the journey towards virtue, with a special emphasis on the monastic virtues of Obedience and Humility. Both the structural placement and the interpretive apparatus of the miracles that Sister Giustina chose to include were intended to guide the nun who read or heard the Chronicle, in the difficult spiritual work that this reflection and interior conversion would involve, just as a preacher's sermon would guide the audience in the work of interpreting exemplary stories.

Scholarship on the Le Murate Chronicle has largely been concerned with what it can reveal about the convent's relationship to the wider history of Florence. But while the Chronicle has much to reveal about the pragmatics of convent life and its connections to the world beyond, the Chronicle itself was not principally concerned with this external view. Looking at miracles, as this thesis has done, provides a fuller understanding of how particularly *monastic* chronicles expressed and related to a monastic way of life. This thesis has emphasised just two of the ways in which the miracles of the Le Murate Chronicle were important for the monastic life and vocation of the sisters and there were likely more purposes for the miraculous in the Chronicle than I have demonstrated here. This richness suggests that a close reading of the miraculous as it functions in other convent chronicles would also be fruitful, perhaps further illuminating the unique identity and practices of

each community. Centering the spiritual and acknowledging the miraculous in our analysis of such texts is a vital part of achieving a holistic understanding of their function and meaning in their contemporary context, and for their intended audience.

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